

Interview on CNN with John King

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thank you for joining us.

SECRETARY RICE: You're welcome.

QUESTION: I wanted to begin with the Iraq war debate here at home, which as you know has become quite intense and partisan in recent days. There's a disconnect, if you follow this debate. The President has consistently said he will make his decisions based on what the generals in the field tell him. But if you listen to Congressman Murtha, he says bring the troops home in six months; and he says he's spoken to all the Generals and they tell him, you can't win militarily. If you listen to Senator Biden yesterday, who eviscerated the Administration's policy, he says he's spoken to the Generals, and they think the policy is struggling. Even Senator McCain, a Republican who has taken several trips to Iraq, every time he comes home, he says the Generals – says the Generals tell him they need more troops. Why the disconnect? Are these critics making it up?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm certain that there are many voices that are speaking to many people but the President takes his advice directly from General Casey. He's on a SVTS, a videoconference with General Casey once a week. And when General Casey talks, he talks about the progress they're making in training the Iraqi forces. He talks about how it is important that Iraqi forces be able to hold on to territory once the territory has been cleared. For instance, the city of Mosul or the city of Tal Afar, which the people have been cleared from and then Iraqi forces -- we now have enough Iraqi forces to go in and hold that territory. And then you can build, and build provincial leadership and economic reconstruction.

So the President listens to General Casey. I'm quite certain, John, that what is happening here is that Iraqi forces are getting more capable. They are able of carrying out more functions. It doesn't mean that coalition forces are no longer needed because there are still certain functions that they're not capable of doing; but the number of coalition forces is clearly going to come down because Iraqis are making it possible now to do those functions themselves.

QUESTION: Clearly going to come down, when? Senator Biden says bring maybe 50,000 home next year. I understand there's a plan circulating within the Administration

that could bring, assuming conditions on the Iraq ground improve, as many as 60,000 home next year. How many and when?

SECRETARY RICE: I think what the President will want to assess is when can we safely bring down our level of forces so that Iraqis are really capable of achieving the results and the effects that you want rather than having some artificial timetable. I suspect that the American forces are not going to be needed in the numbers that they are there for all that much longer because Iraqis are continuing to make progress in function, not just in numbers but in their capabilities to do certain functions like, for instance, holding a highway between the airport and the center of the city, something that our forces were doing just a short time ago, they're now doing. I think that's how the President will want to look at this.

QUESTION: I see. A couple more questions about the debate here at home. You were with the President in Asia when Congressman Murtha laid out his plan. The initial White House statement compared his position to the liberal filmmaker Michael Moore. Then there was a very quick turnaround, both the President and the Vice President coming out and saying, we think he's wrong but the Congressman is a fine man, a patriot, an ex-Marine. You were there. Who made that mistake?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I know Congressman Murtha and the President knows Congressman Murtha. And he's someone who's always cared for American men and women in uniform. He wore the uniform himself with distinction. And this really should have been and is really an issue about a respectful disagreement about the timing for American withdrawal and whether there ought to be a specific timetable --

QUESTION: So that initial statement was a mistake?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, John, the President speaks for the U.S. Government; and when the President said that he respects the Congressman, respects his views, in fact, respects that we have a debate going on in this country -- It's perfectly legitimate to have a question about whether or not the removal of Saddam Hussein at this point in time was the right decision; whether removing him after 17 Resolutions was the right decision; whether removing him so that he could no longer carry out his policies of torture and rape and mass graves. But people can have different views about this.

What is important is that our men and women in uniform -- and I was just out -- I was just on the ground in Iraq and I know that they know that they are engaged in an extremely important mission -- that they believe they are making America more secure by helping the Iraqis to achieve a stable and decent form of government, that they are contributing to a different kind of Middle East where the extremist ideologies that led people to fly airplanes into buildings are no longer going to flourish because they're being challenged by democracy. Our people in uniform need to understand that America supports them, and I think they do know what their mission is.

QUESTION: I wanted to talk, in just a second, about what comes next in Iraq but another aspect of the debate here at home has been this whole quabble over the pre-war intelligence and whether, as some Democrats say, the President exaggerated it. I don't want to get into that debate, but one of the issues is the Administration says they had the same intelligence. You were the National Security Advisor then. They had a lot of intelligence, but they don't get the same exact intelligence that the President received at the time or that you received at the time, do they?

SECRETARY RICE: They have the intelligence that made the case that Saddam Hussein had reconstituted his biological and chemical weapons, was at least on the way to reconstituting his nuclear weapons. There was some debate -- was it reconstituted or not reconstituted -- but the same intelligence that said that if left unchecked, he would have a nuclear weapon in ten years. The same intelligence that said that his procurement network was feeding this with money that was being skimmed from the Oil-for-Food. All of that intelligence was available. And I can tell you that we relied principally on the national intelligence estimate, something certainly available completely to the Intelligence Committees. The briefings that were done by the intelligence community -- yes, the White House was -- I was often there, Steve Hadley was there -- but the intelligence professionals were available to the Congress. And probably most importantly, John, it was the same intelligence that the United States Government had been building its Iraq policy on since the end of the war in 1991. It was the same intelligence that led President Clinton to call American forces to strike Iraqi targets in 1998.

So yes, it was the same intelligence that had those assessments that led us to believe that Saddam Hussein was this particular kind of threat.

QUESTION: The Administration has consistently pointed to deadline set, deadline met, in terms of the political transition in Iraq, whether it's holding elections, writing the constitution. If that has been effective in your view, why not have the same when it comes to training Iraqi forces, set some dates and some goals so that there is a date certain when the Iraqis are due to take over their security?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm quite certain and I do know that the Iraqi Government and General Casey, the Defense Minister and General Casey, are working from goals that they would like to train X-number of Iraqi forces by Y-timeframe. They do have those metrics, and they review them every day, and from time to time the President gets a chance to review them. But again, the numbers will not tell the whole story. The issue is, what are Iraqis really capable of doing, and they are capable of doing more and more.

Now, we had some false starts in the training of security forces. Everybody knows that. But I do think there's a general agreement that the Iraqis are now capable of doing things, like holding on to cities, that they were simply not capable of doing even several months ago.

QUESTION: The Iraqi factions, who don't always get along, have been meeting with the Arab League and others as they prepare for next month's elections. A statement they did agree on says that they recognize the legitimate right of Iraqi citizens to resist the occupation forces. How do you explain that to the parent or the spouse of an American serviceman or woman on the ground in Iraq, getting shot at every day, that the people they're fighting for, the people they're trying to protect to bring these elections and this democracy about, say that the people who are shooting at them have a legitimate right to do so?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, that's not how I read the statement, John. I do think there were many, many voices at this conference -- and by the way, the Iraqi Government was there, but so were many, many people who were not -- and the purpose is to try to give all Iraqis a sense of stake in their future. But the line about resistance was very quickly followed by, but of course we condemn terrorism and of course violence should not be sanctioned. I think what they were trying to do was to get a sense of political inclusion while recognizing that violence and terrorism should not be a part of resistance. After all, do Iraqis really want to -- any Iraqi, sitting around that table, want to suggest that killing an innocent Iraqi child standing at a bus stop is legitimate? Or that killing Iraqi soldiers who are lining up at recruitment centers is legitimate? Or even that multinational forces -- who by the way are there under a UN mandate -- are somehow legitimate targets?

I don't think that that was what was being communicated. But I would just remind people that this was a really broad range of voices, and the Iraqis who have governed themselves by violence and coercion are now trying to do it by compromise and politics.

QUESTION: Why is it, if you look at polling -- the President says he's not guided by polling -- but 60 percent of the American people say it's not worth it, that it was not worth going to war in Iraq.

SECRETARY RICE: John, we don't look at polling. I think you have to look at --

QUESTION: But you govern in a democracy, and 60 percent of Americans saying it's not worth it.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, you govern in a democracy, and a lot of it is how you ask a question and what the context is. I'm a social scientist, and I'm myself quite skeptical of polls. I've said that a thousand times. I really mean it. I am a social scientist; I think they are -- it's very hard to read polls. But are the American people concerned about what they're seeing? Absolutely. Are they worried about the loss of life that we are experiencing there, and does that tear deep at them? Absolutely. And it does add -- us, too, those of us in the Administration and certainly the President who has to make the lonely decision to send forces into battle. I think you're seeing some of that reflected in some of the -- to the degree that you want to look at polls -- you're seeing that sense of unease. And I would say to the American people, this is a big and historic and difficult project. And big historic changes tend to be difficult, they tend to be violent, and they

tend not to go in a straight line.

Now, the comfort that we can take is that Iraqis are now stepping up to their own future. They have risked their lives. They were threatened by the terrorists in January, and they went out and voted eight and a half million strong. They were threatened by terrorists in the October referendum, and they went out and they voted ten million strong. They're going to vote again in December. They are demonstrating that they know what is at stake. They're demonstrating that they do want a democratic future. And they're demonstrating that they have an opportunity to build a different kind of Iraq, which will make us safer and more secure because it will anchor a different kind of Middle East, where the extremist ideology that led people to fly airplanes into buildings will not have a place.

QUESTION: And we're about out of time and I want to touch on a couple of other things very quickly, starting with this question: The President is not only your boss, he's your friend. This has been the toughest year of his Presidency. His domestic agenda -- the signature issue, Social Security, died in Congress; a number of Republicans are now questioning his leadership; the war is unpopular in the country right now and a very difficult challenge ahead. You spend a lot of time with him. Share some anecdote that tells us something we don't know about how the President deals with this. Is he mad?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the President is focused. He's focused on doing this job right. The President believes that Americans are very often the only country in the world that will stand fully and foursquare for the promotion of democracy abroad. He also understands, by the way, that even though we've sometimes been the only country, this time around we have friends and allies. And I don't just mean Great Britain but --

QUESTION: He's not frustrated about where he is and gets kicked around?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, no, John, John -- I watched in Mongolia where this small, new democracy has sent people to Iraq. I today had Bosnians here who suffered ten years ago a horrible massacre at Srebrenica. They have forces in Iraq. What the President sees is that he is heading a coalition that shares this ideal that it is the responsibility of those who are on the right side of history, that is who share in the blessings of liberty, to extend those blessings to those who aren't so lucky, and that by doing so we will be safer. But the President, like every -- like many of us, was changed by September 11. We all were. Recognizing that a policy that tried to prop up a status quo that was crumbling and on the bones of it were becoming this extremist ideology, that that wasn't an option.

And so he knows that this is hard. He mourns every loss of life. And I think he knows that the American people are concerned. But we just -- he and we have to keep making the case to the American people that nothing of value is ever won without sacrifice. And we sacrificed in World War II, we have a permanent peace in Europe. We sacrificed in World War II in Asia, we have a permanent democratic friend in Japan. We sacrificed in the

Korean War, we have a democratic South Korea. We're sacrificing in Iraq, sacrificing in horrible ways for Americans, for the people who were lost there; but we're going to have a better, stable and more democratic Middle East.

QUESTION: You receive credit for hanging out in the Middle East, doing some shuttle diplomacy to reach agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians on Gaza. Many were expecting -- what comes next? Now, Ariel Sharon has taken this political gamble. What does it mean for the peace process?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's certainly an interesting turn of events, and the Israelis will have to sort all of this out. I think what's very interesting here is that the Palestinians and the Israelis, I think for the first time, really do view each other as partners. Now, it's fragile and as the shuttle diplomacy showed, it can break down and come back and break down and come back. But what I really saw in those rooms were people who want this peace to last. They want this peace to work. That means the Palestinians under Abu Mazen, who realize that they need to give up on armed struggle and find a peace with Israel. That means for a Prime Minister like Ariel Sharon, the father in many ways of the settlement movement, that he understands that they're going to have to share the land.

It's not surprising that monumental changes that are taking place all around them in the Middle East -- in Iraq, in Lebanon, all around the Middle East -- are also causing monumental changes in the psychology of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and causing monumental changes in the politics of both the Palestinian territories and in Israel. We'll see how it comes out, but this is a time where there is no status quo.

QUESTION: I want to close with a personal question. I know you from another environment, up the road at the White House. If you look at the polling -- I know you're not guided by it -- the President's in a tough sled right now, the Vice President is in tough sledding right now. And when Condoleezza Rice is introduced, whether it's here in the United States or whether it's in an air force base in South Korea, the crowd goes wild. Why?

SECRETARY RICE: John, don't worry, it'll change -- (laughter) -- I don't know. I'm very fortunate right now to be the country's chief diplomat at a time when, I think, diplomacy has some opportunities before it. But I want to be very clear: It's only because of hard decisions that have been taken over the last four years that we have the opportunities that we may have in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; that we had the opportunity to get Syrian forces out of Lebanon; that we have the chance to have a stable Afghanistan that is democratic, not a terrorist haven; that Pakistan has turned away from extremism; that Iraq is no longer in Saddam Hussein's tyranny over both his people and his neighbors. The President took really hard decisions, and I think now we're getting an opportunity to build on some of those; and I'm very fortunate to come along at this point in time.

QUESTION: Very diplomatic answer about your own personal popularity. I've taken way too much of your time. Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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