



Press Gaggle Aboard Air Force One

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

En Route Moscow, Russia

May 8, 2005

Released by The White House Office Of The Press Secretary

3:38 P.M. (Local)

MR. McCLELLAN: Your Secretary of State is going to give you a preview of tonight's meeting.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the President will have an opportunity to meet with President Putin tonight. There will be a meeting, and then he's going to have a private dinner with President Putin and the First Ladies.

And they'll have an opportunity to talk about the whole range of issues in U.S.-Russian relations, they'll have a chance to talk about Iran, where they've have recent discussions about Iraq, about the Middle East. I'm sure the President will look forward to hearing about President Putin's recent trip to the Middle East, and of course there's a Quartet meeting tomorrow at the foreign minister's level tomorrow to talk about the Middle East. So I think the Middle East will probably be an area of considerable discussion.

They'll talk also about the economic relations between the two. We continue to try and help Russia toward WTO accession. We have a number of other economic issues that we're trying to resolve, some kind of normal trade disputes. I've always said that when the United States and Russia get to the place that it's normal trade disputes, that's not a bad thing. But we do have a number of those to discuss. And, of course, they will talk about issues concerning the continued march of democracy in Europe and also in Russia.

I think that this whole meeting takes place in the context of a trip that the President took to honor those who ended the specter of Nazi domination of Europe by defeating Adolph Hitler's armies, and of course the Russian people have a great deal to be proud of in what they did to end Hitler's domination on the eastern front, in alliance with the forces of the United States and Great Britain and others on the western front. In fact, I was just talking -- just talked to Sergei Ivanov a little while ago, who told me that he just met with some American veterans. And so I think there's an effort here to honor those who ended Nazi domination -- the prospect of Nazi domination in Europe.

It's also been a trip in which he's been able to acknowledge that this has been a painful history for many, a painful history for the Balts. When the President acknowledged yesterday that Yalta had, in fact, contributed to the division of Europe, I think he was trying to make clear that nobody doubts the intentions of the American leadership in 1945, which was clearly to end the war and to have free elections in Eastern Europe. You may remember that the plan was to have free elections in Poland, followed by free elections in the rest of Eastern Europe. It didn't turn out that way, and, unfortunately, people were consigned to a divided Europe.

But the President also views this opportunity, while acknowledging the painful lessons of history, to say that it is extremely important to move on, and to -- while taking the lessons of history, to move on to integrate minorities into societies fully. This is one of many times that I've heard the President do this from a position of considerable humility, given our own history with minorities in the United States. But acknowledging that it's extremely important that minorities feel welcome in a democracy, that the protection of minority rights is critical to any democracy -- it's an extremely important element of human rights -- to then acknowledge that minorities also have an obligation to be contributing citizens to the societies that they are trying to build.

The President, this morning, in meeting with some young people in The Netherlands, was able to talk to them about some of the essential lessons of history. But probably the biggest lesson being that tyranny can no longer ever be accepted again, because all people have a right to live in freedom. And so whenever you have an anniversary like this, it reminds you of the great sacrifices that people have made on behalf of freedom. To see the elderly -- now elderly American veterans who were there, American and Dutch veterans who were there, who probably were 18 or 19 years old when they helped to liberate Europe, it's just a reminder of freedom's price but of the worth.

QUESTION: The President has said that he's going to bring up a lot of what might be contentious issues with President Putin, that he's going to remind him that the Baltics were not free and talk about Soviet repression. Is he going to ask or suggest that President Putin offer an apology for the past, for the Soviet past?

SECRETARY RICE: I think we've now been through this history. Everybody has had a chance to talk about the history. And you know the American position on this is a position that was held for almost 50 years, that the Baltic States were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, and that should not be recognized. I think the President made a very good case that while we need to acknowledge the painful history, it's now time, also, to honor the memories of those who sacrificed by moving on and building strong, free democracies.

And he made the point to the Baltic Presidents, as well, that they're now members of NATO, they're now members of the European Union, they're now trying to build strong democracies, and that that's really the most important task for them. So I suspect that most of the meeting with President Putin will be really about the forward-looking agenda.

QUESTION: Did your counterpart have anything to say about Mr. Bush's speech yesterday?

SECRETARY RICE: No, this was a -- what I was referring to was before.

QUESTION: Have you heard anything from Moscow about the speech?

SECRETARY RICE: No, I'm sure that -- I haven't read the Russian press, for instance, or whatever, but I would hope that it would be seen that the President had a very clear-eyed view of what had happened in the past, but also a very clear-eyed view of what needs to happen in the future, and that is that the zone of democracy needs to continue to spread; that it is a prospect and a set of events that will be stabilizing, not destabilizing, and that in a part of the world where very often in the past -- 60, 70, 80 years ago -- difference was a license to kill, you now have the amazing fact which is a Europe that is largely at peace. And we tend to forget that, that the European project, the European Union, the unification of Europe, as well as the end of the Soviet Union and the spread of democracy eastward has led to a very different Europe than anybody would have imagined on the ruins of 60 years ago.

QUESTION: The President and Mr. Putin have been both very forthright over the past few days in offering what amount to very different versions of history. And I'm wondering, do you think it's possible that this won't be a source of tension in their meetings?

SECRETARY RICE: I think it's highly unlikely this is going to be a source of "tension" in their meetings. I've watched them together, and they are friendly, their wives are going to be at this dinner; President Putin went out of his way to invite the President for a private dinner. Everyone understands that what happened prior to the spread of -- at the end of World War II and the beginning of the communist era in Eastern Europe was a tragedy for those people. I would remind, for instance, that the Russians themselves, of course, succeeded in ridding Russia of communist rule, when those people went into the streets in 1991, in front of the white house, and Boris Yeltsin led the Russian people to throw off communism and to develop, now, in a completely different way that brings them closer to Europe.

And so I don't think that there is, certainly from our point of view, any sense in which the period of communism was a happy one for the people of Eastern Europe or for the people of the Baltics. But we are now in a situation that I think could not have been foreseen just a few years ago, and that is you have democracies throughout this part of the world, they're trying to build toward prosperity for their people. And what the President did was to use this time, when he wanted to acknowledge what had happened, to also say, here's what the task ahead is. And I think that's what they'll spend their time talking about.

QUESTION: But he said, when I'll see President Putin, I'll talk to him about this. And he's been saying that for the last couple days.

SECRETARY RICE: What he talks to him about the Baltics is the need to recognize that he has democratic neighbors -- independent, democratic neighbors now, with whom Russia should want and have good relations, is going to have extensive trade relations, because they are neighbors and they have a long history. It's really, at this point, more about the -- you acknowledge the history, but you talk about the future of Baltic and Russian relations. And the future of Baltic and Russian relations should not be one of tension. And I think that's the message that the President will deliver.

We've been trying to encourage a conclusion of these border treaties that they are trying to sign. But the real key here is, have good relations with democratic neighbors. And I think when he talks about the Baltics, it will be in that context: the experience of the Baltics with the Soviet Union was an unhappy and tragic one. The experience of the Baltics with Russia does not have to be, and indeed, is showing every signs that it shouldn't be.

QUESTION: Secretary Rice, on the Middle East, and the conversations that the President will have with Mr. Putin. Mr. Putin has proposed a summit in Moscow. Will there be any discussion about the possibility of that? Do you expect any kind of agreement on something like that to be discussed?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the Russians have said that they didn't say "summit," that they were talking about the prospect for possibly even some expert-level meeting. I think we just have to wait and see where we are after the disengagement takes place. Everybody wants very much to move the process forward, and we have a really good chance to move the process forward. But many times when it comes to the Middle East, we've missed the opportunity right in front of us by looking too far ahead.

And now, this time, we have a chance for the Israelis to leave the Gaza and those four West Bank settlements peacefully, for the Palestinians to take over that territory and begin to administer it; to begin to rebuild, in terms of reconstruction and development, the Gaza, which is a very desperate place for the Palestinians. There's international help for that -- General Ward, working with the security forces, Mr. Wolfenson, working on the reconstruction side. And so the next four-or-so months are just going to be enormously important that we get it right. Now if we -- that the Israelis and the Palestinians get it right. If they get it right, then we will have the foundation for accelerated progress, I don't think there's any doubt about that. And so at that point, I think we can discuss what other international efforts might be useful. And I'm sure I'll hear more from the Russians at the Quartet meetings.

QUESTION: Have you heard about President Putin's comments in the 60 Minutes interview, when he's talking about -- says something to the effect that the United States shouldn't be lecturing others about democracy; look at its own problems with the electoral college, points out that President Bush's election was determined by the courts.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I haven't seen that interview, obviously. I guess it would be tonight.

QUESTION: I saw a transcript.

SECRETARY RICE: Let me say a couple of things about that. First of all, in President Putin's speech, he emphasized that Russia needed to move toward Europe, as he put it, which I think meant European values. Everybody completely agrees with that. He also said that Russia had to find its own way to democracy. The President has said many, many times that democracy has to be indigenously born, but that there are a few things that everybody can agree on as the basis for democracy: free press, the balance of power between various forces in the government, the ability of people to speak their minds, freedom of worship and so forth.

So no one is -- and I want to just really emphasize this -- this is not an issue of lecturing Russia, it is that the United States and Russia have a deep and broad relationship. We'd like it to get deeper and broader. And the issue of common values and how Russia's democracy progresses is one of the issues on the agenda, an important issue on the agenda.

Now as to the electoral college, and so forth, I think there's not much confusion out there that the United States has a very strong separation of powers, that we have an independent congress -- I don't think I need to remind anybody of that, that we have a Supreme Court that is independent of the judiciary -- independent of the executive -- I don't think that we have to remind anybody of that. The United States is a mature democracy.

QUESTION: Are there any concrete steps that Putin has taken any time recently to further democracy in Russia, or is it all just rhetoric on his part?

SECRETARY RICE: I thought the speech was very interesting. We'll see what the Russians do, but I thought it had several rather interesting aspects. I would hope that they'd follow up on the idea that NGOs are important for the development of civil society, I would hope that they'd follow up on the point that was made there that the Russian people need objective, and I can't remember the other term, but objective and varied sources of information -- I'm paraphrasing. I thought that the notion that political parties need to develop was an interesting one.

The President said in his speech in Latvia that the Russians have made a lot of progress in 15 years; we have to acknowledge that and recognize that. And it's only because we want to see the further deepening of our relationship, based on common values, that we have this kind of discussion. And I've not found the Russians defensive about it, I've found them willing to talk about it. And when they have questions, like, what about your electoral college, the President is perfectly happy to talk about that, too.

QUESTION: Have they complained in the past about the treatment of ethnic Russians in Latvia?

SECRETARY RICE: This is a long-standing problem, or dispute --

QUESTION: Are they complaining to you or to Mr. Bush about it?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, they've talked about it with all of us. And this is a long-standing dispute with a couple of the Baltic States, particularly Latvia. And I think without getting into the details of that dispute, or trying to become a factor in it, I think the President stated an important principle, which is that minorities ought to be fully integrated into democracies; that that's one of the obligations of democracy.

QUESTION: One more question. In the same speech that you talked about, Putin also said that the fall of the Soviet Union was one of the great catastrophes of the century. How do you square that with the positive view that you have with the rest of his speech?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm not going to try and second-guess President Putin on this. I do know that it was traumatic for many people to see the Soviet Union

collapse. That's not surprising. I think, quite clearly, the fall of the Soviet Union has led to some very good things, including democracies throughout Eastern Europe and Central Europe and three Baltic states. But that it was traumatic for Russians -- for some Russians, I don't doubt that, although I would just remind the Russians, themselves, had a hand in the end of the Soviet Union.

END 3:56 P.M. (Local)

Released on May 9, 2005

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