

Interview on NBC's Meet the Press with Tim Russert

Secretary Colin L. Powell

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MR. RUSSERT: Secretary Powell, good morning. Let me show you the headline that greeted Americans and people around the world yesterday: "Powell Says Troops Would Leave Iraq if New Leaders Ask." What happened to staying the course?

SECRETARY POWELL: We are planning to stay the course, and we expect that the Iraqi interim government that will come into place on the 1st of July would certainly ask us to remain and help them stay the course. But basically, what we are anxious to do is return sovereignty. But it's a long way between that initial return of sovereignty and national elections. We're confident that we will stay the course. This was in response to a specific question as to what sovereignty meant.

MR. RUSSERT: But, Mr. Secretary, if you look at a poll taken by our own government, the Coalition Provisional Authority says four to five (sic) Iraqis report holding a negative view of the U.S. occupation authority and of coalition forces. In the poll, 82 percent said they disapprove of the U.S. and allied militaries in Iraq. This was before the allegations of prison abuse. If a government is in power in Iraq, is responsive to its people, why wouldn't they say to the U.S., get out?

SECRETARY POWELL: Because there is still a need for the U.S. to remain. They need our financial support. They need the reconstruction effort that is underway. And, frankly, they need the U.S. armed forces and the other coalition forces that are present to help create an environment of security and stability so they can get on with the process of rebuilding their country and preparing themselves for national elections.

We don't want to stay one day longer than we have to, but we know they want us to remain long enough so that they have their own security forces built up and in place, and that will take some time.

MR. RUSSERT: John McCain said this the other day, Mr. Secretary, "If we fail in Iraq, we will have taught our enemies the lessons of Mogadishu, only 100-fold. If you inflict enough pain, America will leave. Iraq will then descend into chaos and civil war.

Warlords will reign. There will be bloodletting. We will have energized the extremists and created a breeding ground for terrorists, dooming the Arab world." Do you agree?

SECRETARY POWELL: We certainly are not going to cut and run. The President's made that clear. And, quite the contrary, as you see from what Secretary Rumsfeld and John Abizaid, General Abizaid have done, we are stabilizing our force at a higher level than we thought we would at this point. Why? Because there is still danger there. Why? Because the work is not finished? Why? Because we need to help the Iraqi interim government, as it is established, create an environment of security.

So we're not going to walk away. We're not going to cut and run. We're going to stay and help the Iraqis do what we know the Iraqi people want, and that is to have a democracy based on free elections. It takes time to get there, and we are on our way with the creation of an Iraqi interim government.

Over the past several weeks, we have set up 11 Iraqi ministries that are now freestanding, not connected to the Coalition Provisional Authority. Of course the Iraqis want the occupation to end. They want the Coalition Provisional Authority to cease its work. And that's what's going to happen when this Iraqi interim government is established. But they need our troops there for some considerable period of time in the future to provide the security environment needed so that they can have free, open and fair elections and have the time to build up their own security forces.

MR. RUSSERT: In those free, open and fair elections, if the Iraqi people choose an Islamic theocracy, similar to what we have in Iran, we would accept that?

SECRETARY POWELL: We will have to accept what the Iraqi people decide upon. But right now, I think most Iraqis understand that in order to live together in peace, as a single nation, they have to have a nation which understands the role of a majority, but respects the role of minorities within a country.

And they know they have to have, for international acceptability, a country that preserves human rights, that is founded on democracy, that respects the rights of all individuals, that respects the rights of women, that respects basic tenants with respect to hope and speech and meeting fundamental needs of the people and the fundamental standards of human rights that all of us believe in.

MR. RUSSERT: But, Mr. Secretary, if the Iraqis opt for an Islamic theocracy, which could easily become a haven for terrorists, how then do we explain to the 782 who died, or the nearly over 4,000 who were wounded and injured, that this was worth the fight?

SECRETARY POWELL: I don't think that's going to be the case. I think that those who have given their lives in the cause of freedom for the Iraqi people will see that the Iraqi people are interested in creating a democracy. If you'll look at the same kind of polling that you mentioned earlier, that's what they are interested in. That's what they're looking

for.

If you talk to some of the Shia leaders, such as Mr. Sistani and others -- Ayatollah Sistani -- they are talking about openness and freedom. Surely everybody understands it is a nation that rests on the faith of Islam, but they also know that in order to be successful as a 21st century country, they have to respect the rights of all individuals and not allow a purely fundamentalist regime to arise in the country. My sensing of what the Iraqi people want is a democracy with a majority, but with respect for all the minorities, all working together to create the kind of country they'll be proud of.

MR. RUSSERT: Bob Woodward reports that on August 5, 2002, you met with the President and warned him about Iraq, that, in your words, "You break it, you've bought it." In light of the fact that we have miscalculated being greeted as liberators, miscalculated the number of troops needed, miscalculated the extent of weapons of mass destruction, do you wish the President had followed your advice?

SECRETARY POWELL: My advice to the President was that we had to be sure that we understood the difficulties of managing this country once we took it over if that's what it came to. The advice I gave to the President was that we should take it to the international community, to the United Nations, to see if there was a diplomatic solution before we resorted to the use of force; and if we had to resort to the use of force, we had made the effort with the United Nations so that we could get coalition partners to join us. The President followed that advice.

My advice to the President was to make sure that we understood all the consequences of the actions that we were about to take. He took that advice, and he responded to that advice by going to the United Nations. We went to the United Nations. We knew that it would either be solved diplomatically or through the use of force; and we knew that if it was the use of force, we would be in for a challenging time. We would be responsible for the fate of 25 million Iraqis.

The President understood that, and we are acting on that responsibility. We have 138,000 troops there providing security; we have provided \$18 billion for reconstruction, and we're helping now the Iraqi people develop a democratic system. We're putting in place ministries that are functioning, and we're going to be moving forward to elections. And so, yes, the place was broken after the war, and we're well on our way to fixing it.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you the video of Nicholas Berg with the terrorists behind him, who are about to behead him. When you see that picture, and then what happened to Mr. Berg, are you satisfied with the level of outrage that exists in the Arab world, the level of outrage that has been formally announced by Arab leaders?

SECRETARY POWELL: I think that should be a higher level of outrage. Notwithstanding what people think we did at the prison, there can be no comparison to the actions of a few who are going to be punished and brought to justice as a result of what happened at

Abu Ghraib. But what we saw with this horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible murder of Mr. Berg should be deplored throughout the world. It is an outrage. And the terrible thing about it is these individuals are yet to be brought to justice. They have no concept of justice. They have no concept of right. What a horrible thing for them to have done. But as the President said, we will do everything we can to bring all of these people to justice so they can pay for this horrendous crime.

MR. RUSSERT: Why this silence from the Arab world about Mr. Berg?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, I don't know, Tim. I wish I could explain that. There ought to be outrage. There is anger in the Arab world about some of our actions, but that is no excuse for any silence on the part of any Arab leader for this kind of murder. This kind of murder is unacceptable in anyone's religion, in anybody's political system that is a political system based on any kind of understanding and respect for human rights. And so I would like to have seen a much higher level of outrage throughout the world, and especially the Arab world, for this kind of action.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you a picture of a United States soldier holding an Iraqi prisoner by a dog leash. That, too, was seen around the world. This morning Seymour Hersh reports, "The roots of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few army reservists, but in a decision approved last year by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to expand a highly secret operation which had been focused on the hunt for al-Qaida to the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq. According to interviews with several past and present American intelligence officials, the Pentagon's operation known inside the intelligence community by several code words, including 'Copper Green,' encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq." Your reaction?

SECRETARY POWELL: I haven't read the article, and I don't know anything about the substance of the article. I've just seen a quick summary of it. So I will have to yield to the Defense Department to respond. I think the initial response from the Defense Department is that there is no substance to the article. But I will have to yield to the Defense Department to handle any further comment, Tim.

MR. RUSSERT: But, Mr. Secretary, *Newsweek* reports that on January 25, 2002, the White House Counsel, Alberto Gonzales, wrote a memo to your Department which said, "In my judgment, this new paradigm of terrorism renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitation on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions, the Geneva Accords." And it is reported that you hit the roof when you saw that memo to scale back, in effect, on the rules governing the treatment of prisoners. Is that accurate?

SECRETARY POWELL: I don't recall the specific memo, and I wouldn't comment on the specific memo without rereading it again. But I think I have always said that the Geneva Accord is an important standard in international law and we have to comply with it, either by the letter, if it's appropriate to those individuals in our custody that they are really

directly under the Geneva Convention, or if they're illegal noncombatants and not directly under the Convention, we should treat them, nevertheless, in a humane manner, in accordance with what is expected of us by international law and by the Geneva Convention.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Secretary, you met with the International Red Cross on January 15. In February, they released a report which said that, amongst the other allegations, male prisoners were forced to wear women's underwear. Prisoners were beaten by coalition forces, in one case, leading to death. The coalition forces fired on unarmed prisoners. And then in May, you and others in the Administration said you were "shocked" by the allegations about U.S. forces' treatment of Iraqi prisoners. Didn't you have a heads up on this whole problem?

SECRETARY POWELL: In January, when I met with the head of the International Committee for the Red Cross, Mr. Kellenberger, he said to me that a report would be coming and it would outline some serious problems with respect to the treatment of prisoners in Iraq. We were aware of that within the Administration. He also met with Dr. Rice and with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz.

And then in early February, the actual report was presented to our authorities out in Baghdad, both to Ambassador Bremer's office and to General Sanchez's office. By then, of course, an investigation was already underway as a result of a soldier coming forward in the middle of January and outlining specific cases of abuse. And so an investigation was well underway by the time the report was made available in February to the command. I first saw the report in March, when it was made available, eventually, to us in Washington.

MR. RUSSERT: But you're a military man. Do you believe that national reservists would go to Baghdad with hoods or dog leashes and actually undertake that kind of activity without it being devised by someone higher up?

SECRETARY POWELL: I wouldn't have believed that any American soldiers would have done any such thing, either on their own volition, or even if someone higher up had told them. I am not aware of anybody higher up telling them. But that's why Secretary Rumsfeld has commissioned all of these inquiries to get to the bottom of it.

What these individuals did was wrong. It was against rules and regulations. It was against anything they should have learned in their home, in their community, in their upbringing. So we have a terrible collapse of order that took place in that prison cellblock.

Let's not use this to contaminate the wonderful work being done by tens of thousands of other young American soldiers in Iraq. We'll get to the bottom of this. Justice will be served. The command responded properly. Court marshals are already scheduled. And I know that the President wants to make sure that we follow the chain of accountability up,

to see if there was anybody above these soldiers who knew what was going on, or in any way created a command climate in which such activities might, in some bizarre way, be found acceptable.

They were not acceptable in any way. And one soldier stood up and said, I know this is wrong, reported it to his chain of command, and the chain of command responded the very next day with the launching of an investigation that became the General Taguba investigation.

MR. RUSSERT: Finally, Mr. Secretary, in February of 2003, you placed your enormous personal credibility before the United Nations and laid out a case against Saddam Hussein citing --

(Interruption to interview.)

SECRETARY POWELL: He was still asking me questions.

Tim, I'm sorry. I lost you.

MR. RUSSERT: I'm right here, Mr. Secretary. I would hope they would put you back on camera. I don't know who did that.

SECRETARY POWELL: It's really --

MR. RUSSERT: I think that was one of your staff, Mr. Secretary. I don't think that's appropriate.

SECRETARY POWELL: Emily, get out of the way. Bring the camera back, please.

I think we're back on, Tim. Go ahead with your last question.

MR. RUSSERT: Thank you very much, sir. In February of 2003, you put your enormous personal reputation on the line before the United Nations and said that you had solid sources for the case against Saddam Hussein.

It now appears that an agent called "Curve Ball" had misled the CIA by suggesting that Saddam had trucks and trains that were delivering biological-chemical weapons. How concerned are you that some of the information you shared with the world is now inaccurate and discredited?

SECRETARY POWELL: I'm very concerned. When I made that presentation in February 2003, it was based on the best information that the Central Intelligence Agency made available to me. We studied it carefully. We looked at the sourcing in the case of the mobile trucks and trains; there was multiple sourcing for that. Unfortunately, that multiple

sourcing over time has turned out to be not accurate, and so I'm deeply disappointed.

But I'm also comfortable that at the time that I made the presentation, it reflected the collective judgment, the sound judgment of the intelligence community; but it turned out that the sourcing was inaccurate and wrong, and, in some cases, deliberately misleading, and for that I am disappointed and I regret it.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Secretary, we thank you very much for joining us again, and sharing your views with us today.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thanks, Tim.