

## Interview on ABC's This Week with George Stephanopoulos

**Secretary Colin L. Powell**

Dead Sea, Jordan

May 16, 2004

(11:30 a.m. EDT)



**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Mr. Secretary, thank you for joining us.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Thank you, George.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** In your speech yesterday, you said you were shocked by what you saw, the pictures at Abu Ghraib. Yet, you were briefed by the Red Cross and other human rights groups several times over the last year. You said you briefed the President on them, as well. Why did it take so long to take action?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We took action as soon as the information was made available to us by the Red Cross. The information went directly to our commanders, and when the specific incident of Abu Ghraib was known -- it was reported by a soldier to his chain of command -- and the very next day, General Sanchez began an investigation.

But nothing quite shocked us all the way the pictures did. We knew that something bad had happened, was being investigated, General Taguba was doing the investigation, but just the images shocked us, got the attention of the world, and outraged all of us.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Senator Kerry says that, "the failure to get it earlier shows a kind of indifference," those are his words, at the very top in the Administration. How do you respond to that charge?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, how could it be indifference when a commander hears about something and the very next day he says, this is serious, let's get an investigation going. And he takes a General out of, essentially, a command position, an important position, and says, you do nothing but work on this. And so the next month, that's what General Taguba did. And that's what you do in a situation like this, you get a report ...

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Before the photos?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Before the photos, we -- the photos existed, and the investigators had access to those photos, and they looked at those photos, realized the seriousness of the matter. That's what General Taguba did, and he reported back to the command. When he reported back to the command, the command immediately started issuing letters of reprimand where they were appropriate, or letters of admonition, and began taking court martial action against the individuals who were directly responsible. And courts martial are going to be held this coming week.

So that shows a prompt response on the part of the command. That's how the chain of command is supposed to function.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** You know, a lot of us looked at these pictures and said there is no way that low-level prison guards could have ever gotten this idea to have this kind of sexual humiliation of Arab prisoners which was so deeply offensive in their culture. This had to come from higher up, didn't they?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** No, I don't think that's the case at all. I mean, some of the individuals who were involved said that they did not get any such instructions from higher up. Now --

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Many have said they did.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, we have to find out the truth of this. And so that's why Secretary Rumsfeld has launched a number of additional investigations and another series of panel reviews to find out the truth. What we want to do, and what Secretary Rumsfeld, the President and all of us want to do, is follow this up the chain.

We know that these individuals did it. Were there circumstances in the command climate -- did the command climate suggest to them that this was acceptable behavior? But, you know, I don't sense that that is the case yet. And General Taguba says that does not appear to be the case.

But even so, young soldiers know that they have a responsibility to take care of people who are entrusted to them, such as prisoners; and there is no excuse for this kind of action. I don't see yet any indication that there was a command climate problem higher up. That's what General Taguba said. And let's find out, as a result of the rest of these investigations that are underway.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Do you think there is a need for an independent investigation? Some have suggested bringing in outside human rights groups to go through all the prisons, both in Iraq, Afghanistan, around the world?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I don't know that that's necessary. The ICRC has access to all

of our facilities around the world. They've been to Guantanamo. They have been to our facilities in Iraq. They have been to our facilities in Afghanistan. And they have given us a steady stream of reporting.

As to their reports, those reports initially go right to the people on the scene, right to the people on the ground, for corrective action; and then, eventually, those reports make their way up to us. And as we receive them back in Washington, we saw what was being said by the ICRC, we had discussions about it among the principals, the President was kept informed of what the ICRC was saying, and a number of inquiries were started.

And we have answered a number of the questions that were raised by the ICRC. We didn't ignore the ICRC. In fact, in my conversation with the head of the ICRC, Mr. Kellenberger, week before last, he made the point to me: make sure, as you are going through this, that you let everybody know that you took action on many of the things that we raised to you. And so, I don't see right now a need for an outside --

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** But the interrogation rules were only changed on Friday.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Beg your pardon?

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** The interrogation rules were only changed on Friday.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, I don't know about the details of the interrogation rules. And I don't think that the specific ICRC complaints dealt with interrogation rules that they weren't aware of -- that they were or were not aware of. They commented about specific conditions, and to make sure that we were not doing anything that put these prisoners under unusual duress or in any way compromised their rights under the Geneva Convention. And that's what we were working on.

I can't comment on a specific set of interrogation rules. I'll have to yield to my friends at the Pentagon.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** I was in the audience yesterday when you gave your speech. It didn't go over very well with many Arabs in the audience. And I wonder if you think there is a need now for a more dramatic gesture, a razing of the Abu Ghraib prison, perhaps the resignation of Secretary Rumsfeld.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We'll have to decide what's the best action. Now, everybody is outraged about Abu Ghraib. And what I did yesterday was say to the audience -- and I, frankly, have gotten a different set of reactions from people that I have spoken to -- what I said to the audience is that we were devastated. We were outraged by what we saw at that prison and that justice will be served and those responsible will be brought to justice.

But there is no question that this incident has given us a black eye throughout the world, in the Arab world. Americans are outraged at what they saw. And what I was saying to them, both as a soldier and as a diplomat, this is not the kind of behavior that we will tolerate; and it is not typical of the behavior of the tens upon tens of thousands of American soldiers who have served over many years, bringing peace to places and helping people set up democracies; and it is not typical of the tens upon tens of thousands of American soldiers who are in Iraq now, not doing things of the kind you saw at Abu Ghraib, but quite the contrary, helping the Iraqi people rebuild their sanitation system, rebuild schools and hospitals, helping them get on a path to democracy, helping them create a society that they will be proud of, that the world will be proud of.

So while we are devastated by what happened at this prison, let's keep our eye on the ball. And our eye on the balls says, let's keep moving forward toward return sovereignty to the Iraqi people. And let's give credit to those wonderful young men who are serving their nation so proudly in Iraq and who are serving the Iraqi people so proudly: our troops.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Let me turn to Iraq. You said just the other day that the provisional government that takes office after June 30 will be free to kick out the U.S. troops, if they so choose. But you said you're confident that they won't. And I guess I'm wondering, how can you be so sure?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I'm --

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** The poll -- let me just finish -- the poll that was taken for the CPA showed that 82 percent of Iraqis disapprove of the occupation forces. If a new government is truly representative, won't it want those troops to leave?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We'll see what the new government says, rather than what you say the new government will say. I'm quite confident that the interim government -- that will be an appointed government, it will not yet be a government that's been elected by the people. It will be coming in with ministries that are now independent, and its principal job will be to serve as a caretaker government for a period of seven or eight months until we can have elections for a National Assembly.

The security situation is such that I'm confident that these new leaders will want us to remain in order for them to serve in that caretaker capacity. They know that Iraqi forces -- the Iraqi army, or the Iraqi civil defense force, Iraqi police forces -- are just now being built. They are not yet ready to assume full responsibility for security.

And so I am confident that over the next six weeks, as we get ready for the transfer of sovereignty, we can make arrangements with the new leadership that will make it clear that it's best for us to stay. But I had to be absolutely clear in response to the questions that were being raised: are we really returning sovereignty? And the answer is, yes.

And so the polls that you cite, where they want the occupation to end, well, guess what. The political occupation is going to end when this new interim government takes over. But we're going to stay there with a powerful embassy that will be an embassy, not the government. It is the interim government that is replacing Ambassador Bremer and the CPA.

The responsibility for the running of the country will be back in Iraqi hands. We have money to help them with the reconstruction effort, and we will have troops there that will help them secure their country while they are stabilizing the country and getting ready for elections.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** I wonder if you could help clear up some confusion about how this government is actually going to be chosen. Ambassador Brahimi has the lead, but he'll be consulting with both the Governing Council -- Iraqi Governing Council that's in place now, and the United States. Will the United States have a veto over who is chosen?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** He is consulting widely. I think that, based on what we have heard from Ambassador Brahimi and the kinds of individuals he is looking at, I don't think there is going to be a problem in coming into consensus as to who these individuals should be.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** But the U.S. does have a check off?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** He is consulting not just with the Governing Council; he is consulting with individuals throughout Iraq. He wants to make this a broad-based consultation. At the end of the day, we will have to see who he comes up with, and hopefully it will be a consensus. And then, when we present this government to the world, I hope it will be able to draw, and I'm confident it will be able to draw, the support of the United Nations through a resolution at the Security Council.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** You say there will have to be a consensus. That does suggest the United States has a veto over who is chosen.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, I think we have some say in who should be receiving governmental authority. We now have governmental authority under the Coalition Provisional Authority. Before we yield that, we have to have some level of confidence of the individuals to whom we are giving the country back are prepared to act in the best interest of the Iraqi people.

But I don't sense there is going to be a great fight over this because the kinds of individuals that we would find acceptable -- based on the fact that they have standing in this society, they have a commitment to democracy and freedom -- these are the same

kinds of individuals that Ambassador Brahimi is looking to.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** But then doesn't that mean that this coalition government, the provisional government will have the same problem that the IGC has now, that it -- the perception is that it's hand picked by the United States.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, the fact of the matter is that it is going to be selected by Ambassador Brahimi in consultation with Iraqi figures, in consultation with us, in consultation with other coalition partners. We're starting on a process. We have not yet reached the point in political development in Iraq where we can have a full, free, open election where we can get the benefit of legitimacy from an election.

So we have to get started. And the way to get started is with this interim government of selected individuals who have standing in this society. What will make this government work is if we select individuals, collectively, select individuals who have acceptability with the Iraqi people. The Iraqi people will look at them and say: We trust these individuals. We know them. We believe that they will serve our interests for this caretaker period of six or seven months until we can organize ourselves for election; then we have the election at the end of the year in January 2005, a National Assembly is selected; and then that National Assembly picks a transitional government that replaces this caretaker government.

So you've got to get started somewhere, and this is a good place to get started.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** But many who are watching now say, let's accelerate the whole process. Senator McCain and Senator Lieberman, in this morning's *Washington Post*, joined a chorus of people who say the best thing to do right now, because no provisional government is going to have legitimacy, is to move quickly to elections, have elections this fall, rather than next winter.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, say you had elections. What's the difference between this fall and next winter? We're talking about a difference of --

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** You skipped a step.

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We're talking about a difference of a couple of months. But right now, we believe it is important, as people have been saying to us, it's important to get Iraqi faces in charge. And the political transition is already taking place. Eleven ministries, 11 governmental ministries have already been turned over completely to cabinet ministers.

And so, who's in charge of the foreign ministry of Iraq right now? It's Foreign Minister Zebari, not Ambassador Bremer. So the political transition is taking place. And we are, you know, torn between this desire to have full elections and the desire to get something

going now. We believe that Ambassador Brahimi has come up with the right model. He came to Iraq earlier in the year. He studied it carefully. He did not believe that we could have elections of the type we'd like to see in the near-term, so let's get on with an interim government, and let that interim government work with the United Nations in setting up an election that can be held at the end of the year, or early next year.

In the meantime, let's not just keep going with an occupation authority; let's transfer sovereignty to these individuals who will be, hopefully, seen, and I'm confident will be seen, as responsible individuals who are committed to democracy and freedom, will be supportive of our continued presence there to provide the security envelope and the security umbrella that will be needed, as we organize the country for elections.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** You met yesterday for the first time with Abu Alaa, the Palestinian Prime Minister. After the meeting, I was speaking with the Palestinian Foreign Minister, and he said of the whole meeting, he said, "It was beautiful music, but no lyrics." And what he said he meant by that is you came with nothing new to the table. And he said what Secretary Powell should have done is come proposing a mutual ceasefire by a date certain, offering monitors to monitor that ceasefire and to help train the Iraqi force -- I mean, the Palestinian forces. Why didn't you do that?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Why would I do that just because he said that's what I should do? That may have been his expectation. It was not mine nor was it our plan. It's easy to say, let's just have a mutual ceasefire. We've seen these ceasefires before that last a few weeks, and then because there is no security apparatus in place on the Palestinian side to enforce it, any terrorist can come along and blow it all up and we're right back to where we started.

So we've seen this before, and it hasn't worked effectively before. What I need from the Palestinians is for them to get themselves ready, to exercise solid political control over Gaza when it's turned back to them, and to put in place security forces that can do that. What they need to do is to wrest control from Chairman Arafat --

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** (inaudible).

**SECRETARY POWELL:** -- of control of the security forces. Otherwise, then, how can they say, let's have -- let's get a mutual ceasefire right away?

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Who can do that?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** Well, who can do it? The Palestinian leaders can do it, and the leaders of the Arab world can do it by saying to Chairman Arafat that your policies have not been successful. Your leadership has not been successful in moving this process forward.

What did I bring to this meeting? What I brought to this meeting was a proposal that we have been working on with Prime Minister Sharon, and that the Israeli people, as we saw in demonstrations yesterday, as we've seen in polling in Israel, the Israeli people now want to move forward and remove the 21 settlements from Gaza and begin removing settlements from the West Bank.

Now this is the actual elimination of settlements, what people have been asking for for all these years. And what I need the Palestinians to do is get ready for that transfer, get ready to take responsibility for Gaza, and some -- and security responsibilities in Gaza, and get ready to reengage in the roadmap so that we can get toward those final status issues that are so important and which must be mutually agreed upon between the parties.

So it's easy to wish for: let's have a ceasefire, and let's monitor the ceasefire, and then everything will be well, we can go onto the roadmap. What we are presenting instead is an opportunity to get going on the actual removal of settlements. And this is an opportunity that I think should not be lost.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** One final --

**SECRETARY POWELL:** We're waiting for Prime Minister Sharon to figure out how to move forward with his vision, but so far he has not abandoned his vision of moving out of Gaza and moving out of some of the settlements in the West Bank as a way of getting the process started again.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** One final question on that. If Prime Minister Sharon does pull out of Gaza, would he be justified in deporting Yasser Arafat to Gaza?

**SECRETARY POWELL:** I don't know that that's an issue on the table right now. And what I think we have to do is take it one step at a time. It is a major breakthrough to have an Israeli Prime Minister, particularly one who was so instrumental in the creation of the settlements throughout Gaza and the West Bank, to now say it is time to evacuate these settlements in Gaza, think about evacuating, first, for openers, four settlements in the West Bank.

Let's pocket that. Let's use that. Let's use that as a way of getting into the roadmap. Let's use that as a way of moving forward and not keep wishing for something that isn't there or hoping that some other magic bullet will come along, like a ceasefire, and everything will be well.

**MR. STEPHANOPOULOS:** Secretary Powell, thank you very much.