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Interview With CNN's Wolf Blitzer

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Washington, DC

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QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thanks very much for joining us.

SECRETARY RICE: Pleasure to be with you, Wolf.

QUESTION: Let's talk about Iran right now. The number three diplomat at the State Department, and indeed, the man whose office we're sitting in right now is meeting this weekend with high-ranking Iranian officials. Now until now, the U. S. position was there would be no such meeting on nuclear issues until the Iranians stopped enriching uranium, which they're still doing. Why the change?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let me be very clear that the U.S. demand for a precondition for the suspension of uranium enrichment and reprocessing prior to negotiations stands. And in fact, what Bill Burns will do is he will go to demonstrate the unity of the P-5+1, as we call it, Russia, China, and the three European countries. He will go to demonstrate that we are unified. He will go to affirm that the United States fully backs the package. By the way, I signed the letter transmitting that package. And he will receive the Iranian answer.

He will also make very clear that there will be no negotiation in which the United States is involved until there is a suspension of their enrichment and reprocessing.

QUESTION: So is this just a one-shot deal?

SECRETARY RICE: This is. This is.

QUESTION: He will just sit in this meeting, listen, deliver his little message, receive a response and that will be it?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, of course – of course, he will be listening intently to see if the Iranians demonstrate that they are ready to accept the condition, the demand – and by the way, it's not a U.S. demand. It is now a demand that is enshrined in three separate Security Council resolutions. And he will listen. And if Iran is ready to suspend, then the United States will be there. But it's very important to recognize that this is to reinforce a position that we have held since 2006.

QUESTION: But you acknowledge this is a change?

SECRETARY RICE: I acknowledge that what we've done is to make a step that we think demonstrates to everyone our seriousness about this process. But what has not changed is that the United States is determined to have negotiations only when Iran has suspended its enrichment and reprocessing. That's when the United States can join.

QUESTION: This is what you said back on June 3rd: "If Iran suspends its enrichment and reprocessing activities, I will join my UN Security Council colleagues. I'll meet with my Iranian counterpart. I'll do it anytime, anywhere."

Now could you envisage your doing what the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs is now doing? In other words, listening in, receiving, not negotiating, but meeting?

SECRETARY RICE: We have one chance to receive the Iranian response. That's going to be on Saturday when Bill receives that response. I am prepared to go and talk to my counterpart anyplace, anytime, anywhere. But there really must be a suspension, a verifiable suspension, of their enrichment and reprocessing.

QUESTION: What about just participating in a meeting and --

SECRETARY RICE: No, no. Wolf, this --

QUESTION: -- listening in along the lines of what the Under Secretary is doing?

SECRETARY RICE: I think everybody understands, and we've talked to our counterparts in the P-5+1, that this is an opportunity for Iran. Very often we hear, Wolf, well, we're not sure that the United States is really behind this. Well, I signed the letter. Now, Bill will go to receive the response. It's a bookend. I transmitted the proposal. He will receive the response. That should give the Iranians every indication of how strongly the United States supports this package.

QUESTION: So this is really designed as an incentive to them to do, from your perspective, the right thing?

SECRETARY RICE: That's right, that's right. And it is, by the way, a very clear message also that there is complete unity on both tracks, because, of course, we've submitted this proposal to the Iranians, but we've also designated Iranian banks and other entities. Just a few weeks ago, a couple of weeks ago, the Europeans designated Bank Melli, a major Iranian bank. Major companies are pulling out of Iran like Total, which has pulled out of gas and oil deals there.

And so the world is sending Iran a message on both tracks. First of all, there are consequences for continuing to defy the will of the international community: continued economic isolation, continued isolation that is leading to an ever-worsening economic situation in Iran; and on the other hand, a pathway out, suspend and negotiate.

QUESTION: Because the Iranians are sending, sort of, mixed messages as well. They got their missile test that we all saw only the other day. They're continuing, by your account, to enrich uranium. John Bolton, who was your United States Ambassador to the United Nations, he said this on Thursday. He said, "This is a complete capitulation on the whole idea of suspending enrichment. Just when the Administration has no more u-turns to pull, it does another."

SECRETARY RICE: Look, John is a private citizen. He can say whatever he wants. But the issue here is sending the Iranians a strong message about American policy and the unity with our allies. That has been our policy since 2006.

Now, as to their missile test, we have an answer for that, too. It's called missile defense. And we have the very strong work that we are doing to secure our allies in the Gulf. We have the very strong statements the President and others have made. The Iranians know that we will defend our interests. They're not confused about that.

QUESTION: Well, the Israelis, as you know, are especially nervous right now. The Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, said on July 10th, "Israel is the strongest country in the region, as proved – and has proved in the past that it won't hesitate to act when its vital security interests are at stake." If Israel deems it's necessary to protect its vital security interests, would the U.S. go along with a preemptive Israeli strike?

SECRETARY RICE: I think you know, Wolf, that I'm not going to speculate on things that haven't happened. I can tell you that we have consistently talked with the Israelis. We consult about policy toward Iran. We are all committed, as the international community is committed, to a diplomatic path. The President keeps all of his options open concerning Iran. But we believe that there is pressure growing on Iran to do the right thing, as you put it.

Now, the Iranians may choose not to do the right thing. And if they choose not to do the right thing, then we'll continue to look at other measures, including potentially going back to the Security Council.

QUESTION: I want to move on to a couple other important issues. But are the Iranians still building a nuclear bomb right now?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the Iranians are certainly building capabilities that would allow them to have a nuclear weapons program, should they choose. So the enrichment and reprocessing is, in fact, the long pole in the tent for a nuclear weapons program. Look, the Iranians have been – it's been demonstrated to Iran, we've told Iran, if you want a civil nuclear program, if you're concerned for some reason about energy, there are plenty of ways to have a civil nuclear program as long as you don't enrich and reprocess, the so-called fuel cycle. We've supported the Russian effort to have a civil nuclear plant there where there's a fuel take-back provision. We've supported an idea that the Russians had and that the IAEA has had about perhaps assured fuel supply. It's an idea the President put on the table. There are lots of ways for Iran to have a civil nuclear program, and enrichment and reprocessing isn't necessary.

QUESTION: But you believe they're building a bomb?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I am concerned, as, by the way, the IAEA is concerned because they haven't been answering the questions about their activities, that Iran is determined to acquire the capabilities, the technologies, that could lead to a nuclear weapon. And I just have to add, of course, they continue to improve their delivery systems, as we have

recently seen.

QUESTION: The United States has not had a diplomatic mission in Tehran since 1979. All of us remember those 444 days when American diplomats were held hostage in Iran. But now, there is word that you and the Bush Administration are thinking of establishing a diplomatic interests section, a diplomatic mission with American diplomats in Tehran, the first time since then. Is that true?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm not going to get into our internal deliberations. We are always looking for ways to reach out to the Iranian people. We believe very strongly that the Iranian people are – they harbor no animosity toward the United States, and we certainly harbor no animosity toward them. We would like to find ways to reach out to them, to make it easier for them to come to the United States, to have access to the United States. But we're always looking for ways to do that.

QUESTION: It sounds like the answer is yes, though.

SECRETARY RICE: I said we won't talk about our internal deliberations. We'll look at all the options and then we'll let you know.

QUESTION: A sensitive internal deliberation question. The Vice President Dick Cheney – is he onboard with all of this outreach that we've been seeing towards Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: I'm not going to get into our internal deliberations. But of course, the Vice President is a very important part of the national security team. The Vice President and I talk all the time. We talk all of the time with the President about these issues. And ultimately, of course, it's the President who sets the direction.

QUESTION: So – but he's with you? You – can we say that?

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, it is the President who sets the direction. But the Vice President and I are on very good terms about – about this issue. We meet frequently about it. He, like I, am concerned that Iran is a dangerous country, that Iran is clever in the use of asymmetric warfare. But I think we also understand, too, that Iran has its vulnerabilities, and we're beginning to systematically exploit those vulnerabilities.

QUESTION: Do you believe there are different schools, different camps, in Iran right now? There are the hardliners led by the President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, but there are others who are more receptive to working with you and the United Nations Security Council?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, far be it from me to try to read internal Iranian politics, but I do know that there are mixed voices these days coming out of Iran, that there appears to be debate about the policies of President Ahmadi-Nejad, that there are those who are publicly saying that Iran's policies are costing it in terms of isolation, in terms of its own economic troubles. And obviously, while I'm not going to spend time looking for moderates in Iran, if there are reasonable people who would like to see on Iran – Iran on another course and who would be more responsive to the needs of Iran's people, that would be worth pursuing. The way for Iran to show that, of course, is to suspend its enrichment and reprocessing.

QUESTION: Let's talk about Iraq right now. There is word, as we speak right now, of what Bush Administration officials are now calling an agreement between the U.S. and the Iraqi Government for a "general time horizon for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq." Now, that's an ambiguous phrase, but it sounds like something you've opposed for a long time, which would be a deadline or a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops.

SECRETARY RICE: I think you will find, Wolf, that in anything that we talk about with the Iraqis and anything that is agreed that we and the Iraqis are going to want to be sensitive to the conditions. We certainly have views about how well the Iraqis are starting to do. They are taking over security responsibility in the provinces. The day is coming when American forces will step back more and more from combat roles. The day is coming when we will be doing more in the way of training and less in the way of fighting. Those goals are being achieved now, as we speak.

And so, it's not at all unusual to start to think that there is a horizon out there in the not-too-distant future in which the roles and responsibilities of the U.S. forces are going to change dramatically and those of the Iraqi forces are going to become dominant.

QUESTION: Is this – is that a euphemism for a timeline for withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: I think that you will find that both the United States and Iraq want to be very attentive to what is actually going on on the ground. And to the degree that you can turn over provinces to the Iraqis because they are stronger, because their enemies are weaker, because political and economic activities are taking hold, of course, you'll want to do that. And there is no problem in having an aspirational, if you will, time horizon for doing that.

QUESTION: *The Washington Post* reported the other day that it was now unlikely that you'd be able to negotiate what's called a Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqis before your Administration ends and that that would probably be left to the next Administration. Are they right?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we will find a way with the Iraqis to have a basis for our forces to continue to do what they need to do for Iraq. Iraq wants that as well. A Status of Forces Agreement may be a complicated arrangement to make. One of the things that's happening is that the Iraqis want to do more and they're asserting their sovereignty and we're trying to be sensitive to their sovereignty.

QUESTION: They say they want a timeline.

SECRETARY RICE: They have just said that what we want is a kind of aspirational time horizon, which allows us to look out into the future and say, here's what we expect in terms of American forces and their roles and responsibilities and those of combat forces.

QUESTION: But if they say the United States should leave, what would the U.S. do?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we're there at the invitation of the Iraqi Government. But I think you will find that the Iraqis recognize that they need and want a partner. What we have to recognize is that we have achieved an enormous amount over the last year -- really, since the surge -- a lot. Violence is down, the Iraqi political system is

beginning to function, you have Sunni leaders coming back into the government. And I think we would be foolish and they would be foolish to put at risk those gains by too rapid a decline in the American forces there.

But we can look at the situation, we can have an aspirational time horizon, we can look at the changing roles and responsibilities of Iraqis and Americans. Those are all perfectly logical things to do.

QUESTION: Here's what John McCain said back on May 30th in Milwaukee. He said this: "I believed for four years, nearly, that the strategy that was employed in Iraq was wrong and I fought against it. It was a flawed and failed strategy and I fought against it."

Now you've been involved in the strategy from day one as the National Security Advisor, now the Secretary of State. Is he right, that for four years, there was a failed strategy in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: I believe, Wolf, that we were making progress in Iraq until, really, 2006, when conditions changed and they changed a lot. They changed as a result of a new strategy by the then-leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, Zarqawi, who was determined to set Iraqis against Iraqis in civil conflict. And frankly, with the bombing of the Golden Mosque, he succeeded. And it is true that the strategy that we were pursuing was not going to improve the situation in Iraq, had we stayed with it. And that's why the President ordered a review of that. That's why the President ordered an increase in American forces. That's why we went to a more classical counterinsurgency strategy. It's why we had a civilian surge, including increasing the number of Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Yes, we did make a change in strategy at the end of 2006, the beginning of 2007, because as the President said, it wasn't working. Now, when you know something isn't working, when you know conditions have changed, of course, you need to make an adjustment, but the President made that adjustment.

QUESTION: Let's talk about Afghanistan and Pakistan right now. The new government in Pakistan, are they doing everything you want to do to go after the Taliban and al-Qaida in those tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan?

SECRETARY RICE: It's very clear that more has to be done to stabilize that border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. More has to be done.

QUESTION: So they're not doing everything?

SECRETARY RICE: More has to be done.

QUESTION: And you've conveyed that? Because the United States provides a lot of aid.

SECRETARY RICE: More – more has to be done. But more has to be done not just because of Afghanistan's security, not just because of concerns about threats to American interests, but because of threats to Pakistan. We're talking about a place in which militants have killed Benazir Bhutto. They've carried out attacks near the Red Mosque. They've carried out attacks on Pakistani soldiers. And so, Pakistan has a very strong interest and a very strong stake in dealing with the places that the militants are able to gather and train and carry out their activities.

QUESTION: Here's what Senator Obama said on Tuesday about this issue: "I will take the fight against al-Qaida, the Taliban, I will make" – excuse me – "I will make the fight against al-Qaida and the Taliban the top priority that we should – that it should be. This is a war that we have to win. I will send at least two additional combat brigades to Afghanistan and use this commitment to see greater contributions with fewer restrictions from NATO allies."

Is he right?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, I'm not going to comment on what Senator Obama says. Let me just comment --

QUESTION: But on the substance about --

SECRETARY RICE: Let me talk about the substance. The circumstance is – it's clear that we do need better action on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is also the case that the Taliban has come back somewhat stronger. But the Taliban is actually being defeated when they come back in as military organizations. The problem is that they've taken to acts of terrorism, which terrorize the population and make it difficult for the government to extend its writ out into the more remote parts of the country.

So it's a combination of military strategy, reconstruction and development, better governance in these areas that will help to improve the situation in Afghanistan. And that's the strategy that we are pursuing.

In terms of restrictions on NATO forces, those have been dropping more and more. But I will tell you, it's going to be very difficult for some of our NATO forces – our NATO allies to drop restrictions. They also have parliamentary systems. They also have publics that have views about Afghanistan. We've worked on this issue very hard. Some have dropped caveats. I suspect that others will not.

QUESTION: Last November, the President met with the leaders of Israel, the Palestinians, and – among others, and he said this: "We agree to engage in vigorous, ongoing, and continuous negotiations, and shall make every effort to conclude an agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians before the end of 2008."

Now, flash forward to now. We're getting close to the end of 2008.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, not that close. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Is --

SECRETARY RICE: We're about halfway there.

QUESTION: Well, do you believe that this is still doable?

SECRETARY RICE: I think it is still doable. We're about halfway there. The parties are negotiating and they're negotiating seriously. I've had a series of bilateral discussions with them. The Palestinians were just here this week. I also am having a series of trilateral discussions with them. They are doing this in a way that they don't go to the cameras

every day and say what has or has not been agreed. I think that's really appropriate because these are very delicate issues.

And let's look at where we are. A year ago, we had no process, and the peace process is now underway. They're talking about the most delicate issues. And I think they still have a chance to get an agreement. It won't be easy. There's no guarantee. Because, to be frank, if this had been easy, somebody would have solved it a long time ago. And as close as people have supposedly come, they've never gotten it across the finish line. So we will keep working. I think they've got a chance. But these are really hard issues.

QUESTION: Good luck to you on that one.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

QUESTION: If you achieve that, that would be quite a little legacy for yourself.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'll tell you, I won't achieve it, and it won't have anything to do with my legacy. But it will --

QUESTION: Well, you would certainly help.

SECRETARY RICE: But I'll tell you, the achievement will be Palestinian and Israeli leaders who are able to take difficult choices. And the real benefit will be to the Palestinians and the Israelis.

QUESTION: We're out of time. But a quick -- a couple of political questions.

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah.

QUESTION: You've made it clear you don't want to be Vice President --

SECRETARY RICE: Right.

QUESTION: -- of the United States.

QUESTION: How clear have you made it? In other words, have you told the Republican nominee, in effect, you know what, don't even consider me?

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, I tell everybody who will listen, you know, through you and everybody else. Look, I've done my part. And I've got six months to sprint to the finish, and then I have other things that I want to do. I want to go back to California. I want to write a serious book about American foreign policy. There are issues that have come to concern me greatly, some that I was concerned about before I came here, like the state of education in the United States, which I think is at the root of our competitiveness, it's at the root of our confidence, and therefore it's at the root of our international leadership. I'll go back and work on issues like that. And it'll be time for somebody else to take the stage.

QUESTION: Does John McCain know that?

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, I've said it to everybody who will listen.

QUESTION: Including --

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, I've said it to everybody who will listen.

QUESTION: I assume he probably knows that. One final question. Your immediate predecessor, Colin Powell, I interviewed him many times. But he said this to Tavis Smiley back in January about this race and about the phenomenon of Senator Barack Obama. He said this: "Let's enjoy this moment, where a person like Barack Obama can knock down all of those old barriers that people thought existed with respect to the opportunities that are available for African Americans. And my congratulations to him."

Now, you grew up in the segregated South. You know what racism is in our country. The fact that Barack Obama is now the Democratic presidential nominee, what does that say to you?

SECRETARY RICE: I think it's great and I think it's great for our country. And I do think it says that we've come a long way. But it's interesting that it's from Colin Powell. He knocked down a few barriers of his own.

QUESTION: And you did, too. You, obviously, as well.

SECRETARY RICE: He knocked down the barrier as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He knocked down the barrier as the first black Secretary of State. Yes, I've knocked down a few, too. It just shows that our country's been doing this for a while. And it's great that this last barrier, perhaps, has also come down.

QUESTION: Have you decided who to vote for?

SECRETARY RICE: Wolf, I -- yes.

QUESTION: Do you want to tell us?

SECRETARY RICE: No.

QUESTION: Okay, you don't have to.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, it's been a pleasure.

SECRETARY RICE: A pleasure, too.

QUESTION: We're counting on you to achieve some of those goals in these last six months.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm going to do my very, very best. And it has been a great – it will have been, at that time, a great honor to have represented this great country. It's an extraordinary country. And when I'm out representing it, what resonates with people is not our great power or our great prosperity, but it is the extraordinary values that are exhibited by this country. And I couldn't have had a better job for the last several years.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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