



Interview On The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

Secretary Colin L. Powell

Washington, DC

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MR. LEHRER: Mr. Secretary, welcome.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thank you, Jim.

MR. LEHRER: Are you going to Damascus to talk to President Assad of Syria?

SECRETARY POWELL: I have made no plans yet, but I expect that as I travel a little bit later on in the spring there will be an opportunity, I hope, to visit Damascus and have conversations with President Assad, yes.

MR. LEHRER: But there's no specific plan to go in the immediate future?

SECRETARY POWELL: No, no.

MR. LEHRER: But what happened? There were stories out the last 24 hours that, my goodness, you were going to go. What happened?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, I was asked about it and I said that I would expect in the future, in the near future, to have an opportunity to speak to my Syrian colleague and to President Assad, and suddenly that became I'm leaving tomorrow morning. But that was not what was said and it's not the case.

MR. LEHRER: So you don't see it as an urgent matter to talk to him?

SECRETARY POWELL: No, I've been to Syria twice and I am in regular contact with the Syrian Foreign Minister, and so I think that as we move into the spring, and now that Iraq is -- the military part of it is over and as we get ready to release the roadmap that will get us jumpstarted in the Middle East peace process, there will be an opportunity for me to travel to the region in the not too distant future. And I would expect, as part of those travels, I would ask to see President Assad, and I look forward to it.

MR. LEHRER: The recent remarks from the President, from you and Secretary Rumsfeld, were they, in fact, designed to create this storm that has come up the last few days?

SECRETARY POWELL: They were designed to point out some rather straightforward truths and facts: one, that Syria has sponsored terrorism over the years; it is considered one of the states that do sponsor terrorism; it's on our list of such states. And that's always been a concern to us, especially the support they provide to Hezbollah. We have also stated clearly over the years that we believe Syria is developing weapons of mass destruction and we are concerned about, especially, their chemical weapons program.

I think what highlighted it at this point in time, however, is the changed situation in the region. We have been successful in Iraq. There is a new dynamic in that part of the world. And we wanted to point out strongly to the Syrians that this is a time for you to take another look at your policies.

And then the additional element that perhaps gave it such visibility is we had evidence that there was still material going across the Syrian-Iraqi border into Iraq, and we were concerned that fedayeen were coming from Damascus to participate in the conflict against coalition soldiers, and we did catch people heading back into Iraq carrying -- back into Syria from Iraq, carrying large sums of money who had gone to engage in this conflict.

And we also have some concerns that senior leaders of the former Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein's family members and close associates and others, might be trying to find a safe haven in Syria.

So all of that sort of came together and suggested that we should make it rather clear to the Syrian Government that this would not be satisfactory behavior in light of these changed circumstances, and we hope they'll respond.

MR. LEHRER: Well, as you know, this has been read in the Arab world, and also in some places in Europe and elsewhere, the United States as saying, "Hey, Syria, look next door at what happened to Iraq. If you don't get your act together, the same thing could happen to you."

Is that a correct message? Is that the message the U.S. wanted to send?

SECRETARY POWELL: It's not a message the United States has delivered. The President hasn't spoken in those terms. Neither have I, and, for that matter, neither has Don Rumsfeld or Condi Rice.

But, clearly, what's really happened in Iraq is that a regime that did sponsor terrorism, that did terrorize its own people, that was developing weapons of mass destruction, was in violation of standards that had been imposed by the United Nations is no longer there. So there is a changed situation and Syria is about to have a neighbor that is going to be democratic, it's going to have a representative form of government, it's going to use the wealth of its people -- the intellectual wealth of its people, the human capital of that country and the oil of that country -- to benefit the people. And so, hopefully, this is a new dynamic that Syria will take note of.

MR. LEHRER: But, as you go through your list just now, the checklist that led to military action against Iraq, Syria almost meets the same checks, does it not?

SECRETARY POWELL: Not entirely, because there were 12 years' worth of UN resolutions that had been imposed upon Iraq, so I think it's different. Iraq had recently invaded its neighbors, had used weapons of mass destruction against its own people and its neighbors, and as recently just as a few months ago, in total violation of UN Resolution 1441, once again told the international community that we're not paying any attention to you. And therefore, serious consequences flowed and those serious consequences got rid of the regime of Saddam Hussein.

But as I have said previously, and the President has certainly indicated in his own remarks, there is no war plan on anyone's desk right now to go marching on Syria.

MR. LEHRER: But it may not be on the desk, but it's not off the table, is it?

SECRETARY POWELL: The President has a full range of options and a toolbox full of tools to deal with various foreign policy challenges and issues, and you just don't reach for one tool every time. You look at each situation -- whether it's North Korea, Syria, Iran, and Iraq -- and you use the tools that are appropriate.

Right now, we think we have clearly pointed out to the Syrians aspects of their policies and behaviors that we think they should reconsider in light of changing circumstances in the region.

MR. LEHRER: White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, on Monday, referred to Syria as being a "rogue nation." Is that how you see Syria, too?

SECRETARY POWELL: We have always described Syria as a nation that has been a state sponsor of terrorism and that is developing weapons of mass destruction. It has a form of government that we believe is not, perhaps, best for the people of Syria.

I haven't used the term "rogue nation" but it certainly has those sorts of aspects. And it is no secret that we have felt this way towards Syria, but it is also no secret that we have an Ambassador in Syria, we have diplomatic relations with Syria. I meet regularly with the Syrian Foreign Minister and I have visited President Bashar al-Assad twice since I've been Secretary of State.

So there are ways to deal with a country such as Syria and the leadership of Syria that don't involved reaching into a toolbox and pulling out an invasion plan.

MR. LEHRER: What do you say to those in the Arab world who say, "Wait a minute. Here Israel has weapons of mass destruction. U.S. policy clearly is that the United States trusts Israel with weapons of mass destruction, but does not trust any Arab nation with the same."

Is that a correct reading of U.S. policy?

SECRETARY POWELL: We believe that weapons of mass destruction -- let me put it this way. We believe that there should be no weapons of mass destruction in that part of the world, and that has been a U.S. policy and goal for many, many years and remains so.

MR. LEHRER: But Israel, does, in fact, have them.

SECRETARY POWELL: We believe that that part of the world would be better off if there were no weapons of mass destruction, and we hope that through our efforts to move the peace process further along, and the President is ready to fully engage in moving the peace process along once the Palestinians have confirmed their new Prime Minister. And if we get to that place that we all want to get to, where there will be a comprehensive peace between Israel and Palestinians, a comprehensive peace that includes Lebanon and Syria, then maybe the motivation for having such weapons will be gone.

MR. LEHRER: Do you have any sympathy at all for those in the Arab world who say the United States has a double standard?

SECRETARY POWELL: I think the United States has demonstrated, and will demonstrate even more forcefully in the months ahead, that our standard is one; we want all the people of the region to live in peace with one another -- Israelis and Arabs, Palestinians and Israelis -- and that is what the President has committed to in his June 24th speech which laid down a clear vision, two states living side by side in peace. And if we can achieve that vision over the next several years, as the President hopes to, then a lot of this concern about what America believes and what America supports and who America supports, does not support, will be dealt with.

The President has as much concern about the welfare of every Arab, and especially every Palestinian, as he does about the welfare of every Israeli. They are all human beings. And we are trying to find a way to help them arrange a political settlement between them so that we can create a Palestinian state that can live side by side in peace with Israel. And when that situation has been created and you add to it a change in Iraq, which we now have caused to come about, and if the other nations in the region would realize that supporting terrorism and starting on weapons of mass destruction will not improve the situation, then, hopefully, we can arrive at the vision that the President laid out and the Arabs themselves laid out in the Arab League statement last year which followed upon Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's vision.

MR. LEHRER: So we might get to a point where the United States would turn to Israel and say, "Get rid of your weapons of mass destruction"? That could happen?

SECRETARY POWELL: We would, hopefully, get to a point where we're executing on the roadmap that we will be releasing pretty soon. And that roadmap deals with a comprehensive settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, which we hope will then lead to a comprehensive settlement of issues outstanding with Lebanon and Syria. The roadmap does not deal with weaponry and the peace plan does not deal with weaponry.

MR. LEHRER: Syria said officially that they do not have weapons of mass destruction. They completely flat deny the U.S. charge that they are making or possess or are testing chemical weapons. Do we have proof otherwise?

SECRETARY POWELL: The intelligence that's available to me from the very sophisticated intelligence agencies that we have -- make it clear to me and to us that they do have programs of that nature.

MR. LEHRER: They also deny that they are harboring Iraqi leaders. Do we have proof otherwise?

SECRETARY POWELL: We have provided them some information concerning specific named individuals that I would hope they will look into.

MR. LEHRER: Well, as you know, Mr. Secretary --

SECRETARY POWELL: And I also want to make sure, if I may --

MR. LEHRER: Sure.

SECRETARY POWELL: We also want to make sure that they seal their border. They say they have closed their borders to this kind of movement and we hope that they keep that border sealed; and if any of these individuals who are associates, affiliates of the former Hussein regime turn up, the Syrians will do the correct thing, the right thing, in our judgment, and return them back to Iraq so they can stand before justice administered by the Iraqi people.

MR. LEHRER: A non-diplomat would look at this and say, wait a minute, somebody's not telling the same -- somebody's not telling the truth, just to be straight here. I mean, is it that kind of confrontation? Is it a confrontation over facts or is it a confrontation over interpretation, or what are we talking about here?

SECRETARY POWELL: We're talking about just what you said, Jim: a disagreement. And I have discussed this, these areas of disagreement -- terrorism, weapons of mass destruction -- with my foreign minister counterpart, Foreign Minister Shara and with President Bashar Assad previously, and we'll continue to do so. And they will have to make judgments as to how much value they think these kinds of activities and programs have for them in a geographic part of the world that is rapidly changing, with the end of the Hussein regime and, hopefully, progress on the Middle East peace plan.

MR. LEHRER: Speaking of getting messages, is it your belief that what happened in Iraq led North Korea to change its view on how they were willing to negotiate with the United States?

SECRETARY POWELL: I'm sure they didn't ignore what was happening in Iraq over the last several weeks and the buildup to that, but the concept that is before us now of a trilateral, a multilateral meeting, was put in motion before the war. We have been in contact with our friends in the region -- Japan, South Korea, China and Russia -- about the need for there to be comprehensive discussions with the North Koreans, not just U.S.-North Korea discussions, because all the countries in the region are affected.

So, for the last several months, we have been in touch with our friends, and especially with the Chinese, to see if they could persuade the North Koreans that this was in their interest. So it had been going on for some time before the war. I'm sure the war also was noticed and lessons drawn from the war. And I hope that we will get these conversations started very soon.

MR. LEHRER: Next week, right?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, we hope so.

MR. LEHRER: Questions about -- I mean, there are discussions about discussions?

SECRETARY POWELL: Yes, what we want to do is begin these discussions with the three countries -- North Korea, China and the United States -- full participants in the discussions. We're coming with no conditions or preconditions. Let's sit and start to exchange views. And let's do it at a fairly moderate level. Let's not raise it to the highest level yet, just to start the discussion and see where these discussions take us.

MR. LEHRER: Should this be interpreted, Mr. Secretary, as a breakthrough of some kind; that this means it is possible, more so than it was before this period was at least, to resolve this through negotiations without having to rattle any more sabers, without even having to even talk about possible military action?

SECRETARY POWELL: You know, the President has said from the very beginning, from last October, when the story broke, that he was interested in a diplomatic solution. He was interested in discussion. A lot of people tried to push the President to immediately do something with the North Koreans or to start rattling sabers. The President never did.

The President said repeatedly, despite all of the criticism that was directed at the administration, that we will handle this diplomatically, and we will handle it in a multilateral order, in a multilateral way. It's not a word that is usually attributed to the policies of our administration, but in this instance it was accurate. That is what we wanted to do, involve others in the region in the solution to what was a regional problem with North Korea. And I hope that North Korea continues to view this as an opportunity for them to present their case.

We have items we want to present to them, and we want to hear from the North Koreans. The Chinese want to hear from the North Koreans. The Chinese have a point of view. The Chinese position is that the peninsula should be denuclearized. And so I think this is an opportunity to lower tensions, and for parties in the region to begin a dialogue that will continue to lower tensions. And I hope the North Koreans approach this meeting in that sphere.

MR. LEHRER: On Iraq, Mr. Secretary, before the UN Security Council, you made a much covered, dramatic presentation to the Security Council about weapons of mass destruction that were in Iraq, and you were very specific. You talked about mobile labs and you talked about tons of nerve gas and missiles with chemical warheads. Have any of those things been found?

SECRETARY POWELL: Not yet. But if they were to be easily found, the inspectors would have found them. But we are quite confident of our intelligence. And I spent four days and nights of my life in the days before my presentation in February with the intelligence community, at the highest levels, going over everything that I was to present to make sure that the entire community agreed on that information, and they did.

And so we think it's pretty solid information. And we are quite confident that, as the coalition forces complete their combat operations, turn to stability and security, make sure we've got the humanitarian aid flowing, and we are trying to restore life back to normal, as much as we can, then they will turn their attention to talking to people who have knowledge about these kinds of programs and searching out sites. There are thousands of sites that will have to be looked at and there are hundreds and hundreds of people who have knowledge who will have to be interviewed.

MR. LEHRER: What if they don't find them?

SECRETARY POWELL: They will find them, and that I'm reasonably sure of.

MR. LEHRER: So, in other words, you are not worried that one of the major premises for going to war against Iraq might not prove valid?

SECRETARY POWELL: I am not worried about that, no. There was a huge intelligence collection effort with all of our agencies working together to come up with the body of knowledge that we took to the UN and that we had been presenting before the world for a long period of time.

MR. LEHRER: Another premise, of course, and you made the point that there -- you suggested that there was a connection between the Saddam Hussein regime and al-Qaida. Has any evidence, further evidence, of that turned up since the war?

SECRETARY POWELL: There is some additional information concerning who might have been living in Baghdad who had a connection to terrorist organizations, and, among those terrorist organizations, al-Qaida. And so we are pursuing all of those leads. And then you look suddenly, we captured Abu Abbas, a terrorist. Now, not al-Qaida.

MR. LEHRER: Not al-Qaida, right.

SECRETARY POWELL: But somebody who has been in hiding in Baghdad for all of these years. And he killed an American, Mr. Klinghoffer, by throwing him off the Achille Lauro. And now we have got him, and he will be brought to justice. So there is no question that Iraq has been a nation that has not only terrorized its own people under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, but has been a haven for other terrorists.

MR. LEHRER: Well, I guess what I am actually getting at is this, Mr. Secretary. When it's all said and done, if the only really verifiable premise turns out to be -- and there is no debate about this -- that Saddam Hussein is an evil man, he was a dictator and he oppressed his people, would that be enough justification by itself for what happened in Iraq over the last three or four weeks?

SECRETARY POWELL: I suspect that many of the people that we are seeing in television now, who are welcoming the coalition forces, and who are even now demonstrating against coalition forces in some instances -- democracy is a wonderful thing, you can start to start to speak out again -- I think they would say it was sufficient justification.

The justification we used was a comprehensive set of charges beginning with violation of UN resolutions over the years, many of them, possession of weapons of mass destruction. It was a terrorist state, and in its terrorist action was in violation of the UN resolution. So I think the case that we made to the world was that they were in violation of many obligations they had under UN resolutions.

And the most important of those obligations, and the one that formed the basis for Security Council Resolution 1441, was possession of weapons of mass destruction. They never accounted for them. They never told us what happened to the anthrax, and the other horrible chemicals and biological agents that they were developing. They never accounted for the missiles that we knew they had, and they knew they had. So they did not 'fess up. They did not comply. They did not do what they were supposed to do. And that's why they suffered the serious consequences that followed.

And I think when this is all said and done, when the searching is all over and the evidence comes forward, this will raise -- this conflict will rest on a solid foundation of fact, with respect to the reason that we went into conflict.

MR. LEHRER: Finally, as the principal representative of the United States of America, we have talked about a few of them, but there are all kinds of other things all over the world where you are going to represent our country. Are you completely comfortable with what the United States did in Iraq, and the message that goes out from that to the rest of the world, and delivering the message, and explaining to the world -- I mean, explaining the message and defending the message?

SECRETARY POWELL: Absolutely. We removed a dictatorial regime that was developing these horrible weapons and oppressing its people, and we have freed a Muslim people. We freed Muslim people in Kuwait 12 years ago. We saved a Muslim people in Kosovo a few years ago. In Afghanistan, we got rid of a terrible regime that was oppressing Muslim people, the Taliban. We removed a terrorist organization, al-Qaida. There are remnants of it there and we are fighting those remnants of al-Qaida in Afghanistan. We've put in place a government that is representative of the Afghan people.

So the argument I will take to the whole world, especially the Muslim, world, when you look at what the United States has done over the last 10 or 12 years, stand back a little and take a look. What we have done is come to the assistance, to the rescue, of Muslims who were desperately in need, who were being terrorized and were being oppressed; and, in every instance, we removed that oppression, we helped them to a better life and put them on the road to a better future, and we are not staying around. We want to finish the job and come home. It's a powerful message. It's a message that is consistent with American values and it is what we have done so many times over the last 50 or 60 years. The charges you hear about the United States being a nation that is only going to use a preemptive strategy and we're going in everywhere, I sometimes josh with my European colleagues; you ought to look at your own history over the last 100 years or so before you suggest that this is our strategy.

Our strategy is to live by our values, hope that the values we live by give inspiration to other peoples around the world. Our values include principles that we believe in strongly. And when it's necessary to go to war because we can find no peaceful solution, which is always our first preference, we can find no diplomatic solution -- part of our first preference -- when it's necessary to go to war, we do it, we do it well, we do it in a way that minimizes loss of civilian life or destruction of private property or public property, and then we put the people of that country on to that path to a better future. And then we come home. There is no 51st state in waiting out there. There is no American colony about to be created. Our record is good and our record is solid, and I can take that case anywhere in the world.

MR. LEHRER: Mr. Secretary, thank you very much.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thank you.

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