



Interview on ABC's This Week With George Stephanopoulos

Secretary Colin L. Powell

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MR. STEPHANOPOULUS: But, first, Secretary of State Colin Powell returned at 1 a.m. from a trip to the Middle East where he met with Syrian President Bashar Assad, and Secretary Powell joins us now from our Washington studios.

Good morning, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY POWELL: Good morning, George.

MR. STEPHANOPOULUS: You know, there has been some confusing reporting this morning on the outcome of your trip to Syria. Early reports said that Syria had shut down the offices of three Palestinian groups: Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. But a new report just out from quotes of Hamas officials say he knows nothing about it. What can you tell us about the closing of these offices?

SECRETARY POWELL: I had a very long conversation with President Bashar Assad. And in that conversation, I told him it was a new strategic situation that both sides had to take a look at, our side and his side. With the change in the government in Iraq, and with the beginning of the Middle East peace process again, with the appointment of Prime Minister Abu Mazen, the Palestinian Authority, we had the need to review all of the outstanding issues between our two countries.

I made it clear to him that one of the most important of those outstanding issues was the fact that terrorist organizations housed in Damascus continue to undertake activities that are destructive to the peace process. President Bashar Assad said that he was taking action to close down these offices, and that he would restrict their ability to communicate. We had some ideas of other things that could be done to make sure that Syria was no longer seen as a location for terrorist activities to be -- how should we say -- organized from, and he took all of that aboard.

But it is not what he says, it's what's actually happened, what actually happens on the ground. And what I said to him is that we would be watching and we would measure performance over time to see whether Syria is prepared now to move in a new direction, in light of these changed circumstances.

And so a question a few hours or an observation a few hours after our conversation is might or might not be totally indicative of the action he plans to take, but what counts now is performance.

MR. STEPHANOPOULUS: But Syria has double-crossed you in the past. A couple of years ago, President Assad promised to stop the flow of oil, Iraqi oil, through the Syrian pipeline, and then the flow continued. How can you be sure that President Assad will keep his word this time?

SECRETARY POWELL: I don't -- it's not a matter of me being sure. It's a matter of him performing. I reminded him at our meeting yesterday of his promise two years ago that was not kept, and that we would be measuring performance this time and not assurances.

MR. STEPHANOPOULUS: I know the United States has also been very concerned about the Syrian support for Hezbollah, and Hezbollah put out a statement today saying that they are confident that Lebanon and Syria will to bow U.S. demands.

SECRETARY POWELL: If Syria continues to serve as the transit point for equipment and military equipment and weapons and armaments that might be heading to Hezbollah in Lebanon, then we will have continuing difficulty with Syria. And Syria will not find that it is on the path to a better relationship with the United States, and it would not be in their interest in -- as a result of that. And we also made that clear to President Bashar Assad.

The clear message to President Bashar Assad was that there is a new situation in the region with the end of the Hussein regime, and with a commitment on the part of the United States and President Bush to go forward with the Middle East peace plan and to table a roadmap, and he can be a part of positive developments in the region if he chooses to do so.

So this isn't a question of accepting his assurances, or accepting statements that he makes. This is a question of laying out an agenda for him, things we would like to see movement on, and we will measure whether or not he moves on them or not, and that will be an indication of whether he wants a better relationship or not.

MR. STEPHANOPOULUS: What are the consequences if Syria doesn't respond? I mean, many in Congress now are calling for tightened sanctions.

SECRETARY POWELL: I pointed out to President Bashar Assad that performance is important. Some in Congress are calling for the passage of a Syria Accountability Act. And, of course, the Patriot Act also provides some sanctions against countries that do not support our efforts with respect to freezing terrorist assets and finances. And President Bashar Assad and I talked about the kind of actions that might be forthcoming if he does not make new choices compared to the choices that Syria has made in the past.

I also had a good conversation with him about the Middle East peace process. I made it clear to him that we are committed to moving forward on this roadmap, and we are looking for a comprehensive settlement of all issues in the region -- not just between the Israelis and Palestinians -- but, ultimately, a solution that would include Syrian interest and Lebanese interest as well. And if he wants to see us move in that direction, then we are looking for a new attitude on the part of Syria, we are looking for changed behavior.

MR. STEPHANOPOULUS: And if they have that new attitude, is the United States prepared to offer more benefits to Syria -- for example, to take them off the terrorist list?

SECRETARY POWELL: That all is something to be seen, to be examined in the future, George. Obviously, if their behavior changes and if they now show a willing attitude to work with our teams in Iraq, for example, to make sure they do nothing that undercuts in any way the efforts underway now to build a new Iraq, with the government firmly in the hands of people who have been selected by their own citizens, if they are supportive of that effort, if they keep their borders sealed, if they don't harbor anybody who might be still trying to get out of Iraq. In other words, if they behave in a new and more positive way, and if they also do not play a spoiling role or allow others in Syria or Lebanon to play a spoiling role as we move forward down the roadmap, then, obviously, there are advantages to them and there are new options

on the table that might benefit them.

QUESTION: Before your trip, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich called your trip to Syria "ludicrous" because of Syria's record. Do you think he's going to be proven wrong?

SECRETARY POWELL: I don't pay attention to that kind of comment. It was the President's decision to send me to Syria. It was the right thing to do. How do you deliver strong messages to people? How do you let them know what is expected of them if you don't talk to them, if you don't engage?

And so I spent three hours with President Bashar Assad yesterday and they were a profitable three hours. He understands clearly the message that I delivered. It was a candid, forthcoming message. And I also listened to him so that I could report back to the President what President Bashar Assad thinks of these changed circumstances and his desire to see a better relationship with the United States.

But there is no illusion in his mind as to what it will take to move us in this more positive direction.

QUESTION: Finally, sir, you're going to be heading back to the Middle East later this week to push that roadmap for peace in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinians. Already, we've seen attacks in Israel, attacks on the roadmap, and many are calling for changes. Are you open to amending the roadmap, or must it be implemented as is?

SECRETARY POWELL: The roadmap is a very solid document. We finished work on it in December. We have presented it to the two parties. We have presented it to other interested parties around the world. The important thing now is not to get caught in a circle of arguing about the words in the roadmap. Let's begin performance on the elements of the roadmap. People can comment on it. The Israelis have already provided some comments. The Palestinians have not; they have accepted it as written. And let's get a dialogue going between the two sides and let's get performance.

One would have expected, and what we have seen, is that at the very beginning of the roadmap process there are those who want to thwart it. They want to make sure it doesn't go anywhere. And we're got to keep pressing forward. President -- Prime Minister Abu Mazen has made some strong opening statements with respect to his commitment to end terrorism, to end violence, in the occupied territories, and Muhammad Dahlan, the new Minister of State who will be in charge of security efforts I think is likewise committed.

The violence and the actions of those committed through the Intifada have not produced a Palestinian state, peace for the Palestinian people or any movement toward their goals. So it's time to end that and move on down this roadmap and with performance on the part of both sides, I think we can get somewhere.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you very much.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thank you, George.

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