



Interview by Michael Smerconish of WPHT Radio, Philadelphia

Secretary Colin L. Powell

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MR. SMERCONISH: Good morning, sir.

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, thank you very much, Michael. Great to be with you and with my friends in Philadelphia.

MR. SMERCONISH: I am, I'm honored as an American to have you as our Secretary of State, and I want to tell you that up front because I've looked forward to the opportunity to convey those thoughts to you.

MR. SMERCONISH: Well, thank you, Michael; that's very kind. And I'm honored to be the Secretary of State serving this President, serving the American people once again, sort of in uniform.

MR. SMERCONISH: I need your help, and I need your help in the following respect, Secretary Powell. A recurring issue that comes up from callers to the program -- critics of the Administration -- when the subject is Iraq -- is the WMD -- and they say to me, "You're a supporter of Colin Powell, you're a supporter of the Administration." From the time of that presentation in the UN Security Council, you said because of the WMD that we needed to do this. What's the answer to those who say we didn't find anything and therefore, we should not have gone in?

SECRETARY POWELL: What we found was a regime that had every intention to develop weapons of mass destruction, a regime that has used weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein gassed his own people, killed 5,000 people in 1988 on a Friday morning at the market that year. There's no question he had the intention. There's no question he had the capability, and no question he had the programs.

Now, where there is a question is, why haven't we found more stocks? That work is continuing. What we did when we made our presentation at the UN was, we said that there are a lot of unanswered questions, and he will not answer these questions. And it was not just a judgment made by the United States and President Bush and this Administration. It's the same judgment that President Clinton made and caused him to bomb Iraq in 1998 and declare that regime change was U.S. policy. It's the same judgment almost all of the serious intelligence organizations throughout the world had made, and it was the basis for a dozen or more UN resolutions.

Saddam Hussein failed to answer questions put to him. And what President Bush and Prime Minister Blair and others decided was that he had been given one last chance to come clean; when he didn't come clean, we should not take the risk of him having weapons of mass destruction, using them against his neighbors as he had done previously against his own people, or letting those weapons get into the hands of terrorists. And we acted, and we acted properly.

MR. SMERCONISH: One of my callers, moments before Secretary Powell joined me this morning said, "Will you please ask him, 'What's his level of concern if the WMD have ended up in Syria?'"

SECRETARY POWELL: That is always a possibility, but I have seen no hard evidence to suggest that is the case, that suddenly there were no weapons found in Iraq because they were all in Syria. I don't know why the Syrians would do that, frankly; why it would be in their interest. They didn't have that kind of relationship with Iraq, but it is an open question, but I've seen no hard evidence to suggest that's what happened.

MR. SMERCONISH: Is there any aspect of your presentation to the UN Security Council that, if you had it to do over, you would have deleted? Something you wouldn't have said that you did say, or something you wish you had communicated?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, you know, a year later, you'd always want to go back and tone it, but for the most part, that presentation was solid. I didn't make it up. It wasn't written in the State Department. It was written with the help of the best intelligence analysts at the CIA.

I spent four days and three nights at the CIA getting the best information, with Director Tenet and his Deputy Director, all the senior analysts from DOD, from the CIA and elsewhere sitting there with me. And what I presented with Director Tenet sitting behind me, Director of the CIA, was our best assessment, and I stand behind it.

MR. SMERCONISH: Mr. Secretary, and our guest is Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, and we're privileged to have him; I remember well watching your presentation to the UN Security Council, and before I would sit behind a microphone, I used to try cases as a lawyer in Philadelphia. I know what it's like to stand up and make a presentation and have butterflies in my stomach, but I can't imagine what it must have been like for you, literally with the eyes of the world on you on that particular day. What was running, you know, through your mind as you were about to take the microphone?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, I've done a number of public things over the years and I kind of know how to put on--

MR. SMERCONISH: Understood.

SECRETARY POWELL: -- know how to put on a game face. And I was on the speaking circuit, as you know, for many years so I get those butterflies the night before, the morning of, but then I kind of look in the mirror and say, "Okay, it's show time," and then the butterflies tend to go away.

But when I went out there that morning, I mixed with the other delegates so I wouldn't look like I was sort of nervous. I mixed with the other delegates, and I made sure George Tenet was there, sitting with me. And we had rehearsed it through 10 o'clock in the evening.

But what I knew more than anything else was that everything I said would be scrutinized to a fare thee well. Anything I said that the Iraqis could shoot down that day, they would shoot down that day. Anything I said that could be undercut that day would be undercut that day. And so I carefully selected what I would say. I made sure that it was substantiated. I gave the presentation for about an hour and thirteen minutes, and nobody was able to come forward and say, "That's not right, a lie, or that's a miscalculation, or you got that wrong." In fact, the Iraqis could just fuss and fume for a bit, but that presentation has stood the test of time.

Why we haven't found stocks, we can't answer that. We're still looking. Is it because they were destroyed, as they knew we were coming or something else happened to them? I don't know. The reason I'm confident about what we did, Mike, is that I've been to the city, the town of Halabja, in northern Iraq.

I've been to the memorial of 5,000 people who were gassed on a Friday morning. I met with their families. I hugged widows. I hugged mothers who lost children. And they lost those kids because on that morning, Saddam Hussein used VX, other terrible nerve gases to murder all these people.

Now, this is many years later. Should we assume that we had given up the intent and capability and he would never do it again once he was released from UN sanctions? That's what he was trying to do -- break free of the sanctions, break free of the will of the international community; and he almost did it. But President Bush wouldn't let him do it. Prime Minister Blair wouldn't let him do it. Prime Minister Howard. Prime Minister Berlusconi of Italy. So many leaders came together. This was an international effort; and now we are broadening that effort by going to the UN and asking Kofi Annan, the Secretary General, to help us as we help the Iraqis put in place a political process that will lead, lead to a democratic government.

MR. SMERCONISH: I thought, Mr. Secretary, that the President had a great line last night where he almost asked rhetorically, you know, there are some who think we need to internationalize the effort in Iraq, and then he rattled off -- and it took him a while to do it, and he didn't even list all the countries that are involved.

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, he got interrupted. And we -- and there were 17 others we, we said then, "You can't, you can't go on that long listing countries."

MR. SMERCONISH: (Laughter.)

SECRETARY POWELL: But people, for example, will say to me, Michael, "Well, why isn't NATO involved?" Well, NATO consists of 26 North Atlantic nations, several of whom are just about to be formally inducted into the alliance -- we say it's 26. Of those 26 nations in the NATO alliance, 18 of them have troops in the Gulf; have troops in Iraq with us. So is that not NATO-involved or is it NATO-involved?

Now, it may not be as an alliance with all 26, but 18 of the 26 said, "We're with you, America." And those who are not with us, well, watch. They'll come along as we try to get NATO involved later this year to take over some of the responsibility in Iraq.

MR. SMERCONISH: My listeners have asked me to put to Colin Powell the following question: "The Saudis, friends or foes?"

SECRETARY POWELL: The Saudis are friends. We have been friends with the Saudis for many years, and we want to remain friends with the Saudis.

Now, there are certain policies they have that we are not happy with. I mean, they have a different form of government. They have a different culture, a different society than ours -- things they do that would not be acceptable to us.

We have talked to the Saudis about how the 21st century is going to require changes in their society, but we do it as friends, and we don't do it to beat them up or lecture them. We do it as friends.

Frankly, we need their partnership. We need their friendship.

MR. SMERCONISH: Did we -- did we cut them too much slack in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and I refer to the reports of bin Laden family members who were sort of given safe passage to be rounded up and flown out of the United States?

SECRETARY POWELL: No. My understanding of what happened is that the Saudis were concerned that they had a number of their citizens throughout the country who felt uneasy and, for a variety of reasons, wanted to return to the Kingdom; and the Saudi Embassy arranged a flight to take these individuals back. But all of this was known to the United States back then.

We know who got on those airplanes and they essentially were known to us or by us before they left the country.

MR. SMERCONISH: What can be done about the way in which young Arab children -- and I'm thinking of Saudi Arabia -- are educated with a message of hate towards the West, and Israel in particular?

SECRETARY POWELL: We have been talking not only to the Saudis, but to other Middle Eastern leaders and Muslim leaders around the world, and made it clear to them that Islam is a great religion. But they also have to be educating their youngsters not just in the tenets of Islam and the Islamic religion, but they have to educate their youngsters for the demands of the 21st century. They've got to give them skills. They've got to teach them to read and write. They've got to teach them Science and Math and all the other things that are necessary for societies to be successful in the 21st century.

And if they're just going to take their young people and put them in these madrasas, these schools that do nothing but indoctrinate them in the worst aspects of a religion, then they are shorting themselves, they are leaving themselves back as well as teaching hatred that will not help us bring peace to the region, and will not help their societies. And we're working on them on -- in this regard. We have the Middle East Partnership Initiative. We're helping them to learn how to educate youngsters for the 21st century. And I think that the President has made it clear that democracy is not just a political form of government for the West. It can apply to any nation, any society; no matter what the religion is. And why shouldn't it apply to these democracies that'll work best in the 21st century?

MR. SMERCONISH: How exasperated does Secretary Colin Powell become in dealing with the French? And have you been asked that question before? (Laughter.)

SECRETARY POWELL: Let me put this in -- France and the United States have had a long relationship. They have been with us through thick and thin. They were with us when we fought for our independence 229 years ago. But we have had disagreements with the French. The French are a proud people that have strong views about things, and from time to time, yes, they have annoyed me. And I'm sure from time to time I have annoyed them.

MR. SMERCONISH: Do you get to tell them so? Do you get to tell them so?

SECRETARY POWELL: Oh yes, yeah. I have very good relations with my French counterpart, Dominique de Villepin. And Minister de Villepin and I have the most candid and direct conversations about what we do that annoys the other.

And in the lead-up to the war, the French were adamant that it was not something we should do and they fought to see if they could avoid the war. And I made it clear to Dominique de Villepin in the meeting that we finally, I said, "Dominique, I understand your position, and I know that you are strongly against this, but let me give you our position, and that is if the UN doesn't deal with this, President Bush will." And we did.

And now we are moving on, and the French and the Germans and all those who opposed our actions are positioning themselves to see how they can best help us as we reconstruct Iraq and give the Iraqi people a better life.

We all are united in that regard. There's nobody who does not want to see us succeed in Iraq now, but it's in the interest of the Iraqi people; and frankly, it's in the interest of the world for the United States and its coalition partners to succeed in Iraq. And as the President said last night, we will. We have no choice and we will be successful.

MR. SMERCONISH: Apart from national security issues, folks in my audience in Philadelphia were upset about the French coddling a guy named Ira Einhorn, who murdered a co-ed in Philadelphia named Holly Maddux. And he was living openly. The French wouldn't return him because of our stand with regard to the death penalty.

As I left Philadelphia to come to Washington to do this program, there's a presumed murderer who's just been apprehended in France, and I sure hope that they hand him over because there's a dead woman in the Philadelphia suburbs as a result, allegedly, of this guy's conduct. And that's the sort of thing that upsets us.

SECRETARY POWELL: It is the sort of thing that upsets you. The European Union, as you know, has a prohibition against the death penalty. Many countries do. Well, we believe in the death penalty, we have for centuries. And we work with our friends to make them understand that justice must be served.

MR. SMERCONISH: Final question. How's your health? What's your future?

SECRETARY POWELL: My health is terrific. I had cancer. I'm a cancer survivor. I had prostate surgery five weeks and two days ago. I'm feeling great and I encourage all men, especially black men, to do the screening for prostate cancer. It is a very serious disease. It's widespread. I'm glad I caught it in time, but it's out. I'm feeling great, and I serve at the pleasure of the President.

MR. SMERCONISH: I have two things to say to Colin Powell. 0-8. 0-8, baby.

SECRETARY POWELL: (Laughter.) Thank you, Michael.

MR. SMERCONISH: All right? Thank you for being with us in Philadelphia. I really respect you.

SECRETARY POWELL: Let me thank Philadelphia for the friendship they've shown me over the years and what they did a few years ago when we launched America's Promise, the Alliance for Youth, at the summit in Philadelphia. It was a day I remember well.

MR. SMERCONISH: A privilege having you on the Big Talker 1210. Colin Powell, the Secretary of State.

SECRETARY POWELL: Now where's my cheese steak?

(Laughter.)

2004/57

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 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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