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NIGHTLINE A CONVERSATION WITH CONDOLEEZZA RICE

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CONDOLEEZZA RICE, NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

We will find what the weapons of mass destruction, what he destroyed and what he didn't.

TED KOPPEL, ABC NEWS

Sketching in the answers to unresolved issues abroad is her job.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

None of us know precisely what has happened to Osama Bin Laden.

TED KOPPEL

And in Iraq, many questions were unanticipated.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

The fact that we have terrorists coming into Iraq is, of course, disturbing.

TED KOPPEL

And many of the answers remain incomplete.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

We're getting forces.

TED KOPPEL

From?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Well, we are clearly building very quickly, the capacity of the Iraqis to be involved in their own security.

graphics: a conversation with Condoleezza Rice

TED KOPPEL

Tonight, "A Conversation with Condoleezza Rice", on point for the President.

graphics: ABC NEWS: Nightline

ANNOUNCER

From ABC News, this is "Nightline." Reporting from Washington, Ted Koppel.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) So, here's a thought, if Saddam Hussein was so despised by so many of his own people while he was in power, why, nearly six months after US troops toppled his government, is he still at large? Remember, there's also a \$25 million bounty on his head. Here's another thought, those weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, they were either there before the war or they weren't. Let's assume that they were. One of the main goals of the US invasion was to keep those chemical and biological weapons out of the hands of terrorist organizations. If the weapons are no longer in Iraq, could they have been smuggled into Syria, Iran, Jordan, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia, where terrorists now have access to them? Unless they were destroyed before the war, they have to be somewhere. Somebody needs to be patrolling Iraq's borders with all those neighbors. That might have been a job for the country's 400,000-man army. But the US disbanded it right after the war. In retrospect, was that a smart idea? Just a few of the questions I'll be taking up this evening with the President's National Security Adviser, Dr. Condoleezza Rice. She and I sat down earlier this evening in the executive office building next to the White House.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Last week, Dr. Rice, we saw and heard kind of a m'lange of videotape and audiotapes from Osama Bin Laden. Has intelligence figured out yet whether he is still alive? Is that figure-out-able from what you got there?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

We assume, because it's the safest assumption, that he is alive. And we continue to pursue him, continue to pursue other members of al-Qaeda. And of course, most importantly, pursue his lieutenants and his field generals. And we've been able to arrest or kill two-thirds of the al-Qaeda leadership. So, Osama Bin Laden may or may not be alive. But we are doing a very good job of rounding up and disabling the al-Qaeda leadership.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) We have heard from intelligence sources that at various times, some 20,000 to 30,000 people passed through the al-Qaeda training camps. Is that more or less consistent?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Yes, or possibly even a little higher than that.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Even higher?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Possibly even a little higher.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) When you -look at the number of terrorists or would-be terrorists who are filtering into Iraq, where do you put that number? Do you have any sense? In the hundreds, in the thousands?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Well, I've seen, Ted, estimates of anything from several hundred, high hundreds to a couple of thousand. I think we really don't know the true numbers. But there are clearly a number of foreign fighters, non-Iraqis, who are in the country. And they're clearly trying

to get to the fight because Iraq has become the central front in the war on terrorism. But let's be very clear. You talked about these terrorist training camps that al-Qaeda produced. These are hard-core, trained terrorists. These are not people who are sitting around drinking tea and somehow decided, "oh, my goodness, the Americans have gone into Iraq, we now have to fight the Jihad." They would have been fighting and committing terrorists acts some place in the world. They've now drawn to Iraq, where frankly, we are in a position to confront them and to disable them. And so, indeed, these are people who were committed Jihadists, who were part of the war on terror. These are not somehow people who were just sitting around living placid lives and were somehow motivated to terror because we are in Iraq.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) As you look back now, was it probably not the smartest thing to have disbanded the entire Iraqi army? I mean, those 40,000 troops could have been helpful along the borders of Iran and Syria and Turkey and Jordan and Saudi Arabia. You need manpower. Maybe a bad idea?

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

Well we do need manpower. Choices had to be made. We had to make some choices at the outset. And there was a concern that in the armed forces, we needed to get rid of Baathists. We needed to deal with the fact that the.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) I'm sorry for smiling. But this terrible pun, I mean, is it possibly that you threw the baby out with the Baathists, here?

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

That is a terrible pun, Ted. But I'll allow it at this point. No, look, we, clearly, the de-Baathification is extremely important. It's important to the future of the Iraqi people. It's important for the Iraqi people to know our sincerity because they suffered so, at the hands of the Baathists.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) But you need troops on those borders.

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

And we're getting forces.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) From?

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

Well, we are clearly building, very quickly, the capacity of the Iraqis to be involved in their own security. We've gone from,

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) So, we're going to where you could have been a few months ago if you hadn't disbanded the army.

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

We're having an opportunity to vet people. We're having an opportunity now that we know the country better, to get intelligence on who's good and who isn't. A lot of the bad guys who might otherwise have remained organized are disorganized. And we're hunting them down in small groups rather than in whole units. But, we obviously are going to draw on people who have security experience in Iraq, including some former members of the army. But the army, as an institution, couldn't be allowed to exist in its current form.

We will get to a reformed, new Iraqi army that will be representative of the new Iraqi state.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) I want to pick up on that just a little bit when we come back. Talking with Dr. Condoleezza Rice. We'll be back in a moment.

graphics: Nightline

ANNOUNCER

This is ABC News "Nightline." Brought to you by ...

commercial break

graphics: Nightline: a conversation with Condoleezza Rice

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) And I'm back once again the executive office building with the President's National Security Adviser, Dr. Condoleezza Rice. Does it surprise you, because you have made much, and appropriately so, of how despised Saddam Hussein's regime was. Does it surprise you, here we are, six months into the post-war period, \$20 million bounty on his head and we still can't find him?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Well, it's a little less than six. But the point is well taken.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) A little less than? Oh, six months. Okay, five and a half.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Yes, the point is well-taken. We did get his sons. And.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) I understand. Focus on Saddam for, we don't have him. We don't have Osama Bin Laden. Both, presumably, could have been handed over and, you would think with the money on their heads, would have been handed over a long time ago.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

That will happen. But Saddam Hussein has been the survivor in that country for a long time. He is probably using networks that he developed a long time ago. But, we're getting closer to him. We've been close to him. We will get him.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Dr. David Kay is going to be coming back from Iraq very soon. I understand he's going to have to report to the President before you report to the nation. But, is there any reason to believe that he's coming back with news of any weapons of mass destruction that have been found?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

When the President met with David Kay when he was here earlier in the summer, he told him one thing. He said, "I want you to take your time. And I want you to do this in a thorough and complete way." And so, we have not spent every waking hour asking what David Kay's finding. He's not going to have a full accounting when he does come back because he is going through miles of documents. He is interviewing hundreds of people. He is running down leads on many pieces of physical evidence. And what he will do is he will put this all into a coherent picture so that we can determine precisely what happened to the unaccounted-for weapons of mass destruction, which we cited. And which the United Nations cited in their final report in 1999.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) You still believe those weapons were there? In other words, I don't expect you to be spending every waking moment, and I don't think anyone in the American public expects you to be spending every waking moment. But prior to the war, you expended a good deal of energy and a good deal of political capital and a good deal of diplomatic capital on saying, "those weapons of mass destruction, in the hands of this man, constitute a threat to the United States of America."

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

And indeed it did. And would have today, had we not acted against him.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Let me get you on the tense there. When you say "would have," you don't know where they are. For all you know, they are now in the hands of the very terrorists that you were trying to avoid them falling into in the first place.

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

I think we have every reason to believe that we will have a full accounting of what happened to these weapons of mass destruction. I think, most importantly, we have to go back to that time, when we were talking about the threat. We were talking about large stockpiles of unaccounted for weapons. Large stockpiles cited by the United Nations.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) And you firmly believe those were there?

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

They were unaccounted for.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) But you firmly believe those were there?

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

I do. But they were unaccounted for and that in itself was a danger. We also knew that this was a person, Saddam Hussein's regime, that had relentlessly pursued weapons of mass destruction over a long period of time. Biological weapons, chemical weapons, nuclear weapons. And had indeed used chemical weapons. And so, we will know the true state of his programs, how far along were these programs? How was he concealing and deceiving?

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Let me stop you on the one point. You talk about the use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein. To the best of my knowledge, that happened once in a major fashion. That was in the inner City of.

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

Actually twice, yeah.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) In the city of Hallubjah in 1988. When the US Congress tried to pass a resolution.

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

And on the Iranians.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) And on the Iranians.

CONDOLEEEZZA RICE

Iranians and on his own people. So, twice.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Exactly. But, all around the same time. When the US Congress, at that time, tried to pass a resolution condemning Saddam Hussein, that's all they were going to do. Not going to go to war against him. The White House, which at that point had President Ronald Reagan, Vice President George Bush, this President's father, the White House prevented them from doing that. Jaw-boned them into not doing it. What became so -much more dangerous about Saddam Hussein between 1988 and 2003?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

First of all, the Gulf War. When we learned that this was not a man who, just as brutal as he was, was willing to brutalize and intimidate and attack his own people. And not just brutal and intimidating one neighbor, but actually tried to eliminate Kuwait from the face of the map. And seemed -quite determined to keep moving, if necessary, toward Saudi Arabia.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Although, even in the face of that, Dr. Rice, again, President Bush, in this case, the elder, opted against driving all the way into Baghdad and overthrowing Saddam Hussein.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Because the United Nations resolution under which we operated at the time and the goal of that war, the war of 1991, was to push him out of Kuwait, to re-establish the sovereignty of Kuwait. And then to put him under a set of sanctions that would take care of his weapons of mass destruction, that would keep him from brutalizing his people. And there were a whole set of resolutions that Saddam Hussein himself signed onto in order to stop the war.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Precisely my point.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

But, Ted, you asked me what changed.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) What changed?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

And what changed after '88 and '89 is he attacked Kuwait and looked as if he had, and we had every reason to believe and I still believe, wider ambitions for Middle East than had been understood. He was getting all kinds of illegal money from illegal oil imports, that went from, in, maybe 1988, \$500 million to \$3 billion. He was continuing to shoot at American aircraft on a regular basis in the no-fly zones that had been established to keep him from attacking his own people and to keep him from attacking his neighbors. He was actively pursuing weapons of mass destruction and hiding them from the United Nations, refusing to cooperate with the United Nations. A lot happened in the 12 years between 1991 and 2003 to show that this was not somebody who could be contained or certainly not trusted.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Of those things, what was it that caused you and the President to believe that Saddam Hussein constituted a direct and imminent threat to the safety of the United States?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Well, the President talked about a direct threat. And a threat that might materialize at a

certain time. And after the experience of September 11th, the question of what is imminent is a different question because, at any time a threat that has been brewing, a threat that has been developing, can suddenly strike you from the blue. And this President resolved that we were not going to allow threats to gather and wait until a threat had come to us. Instead, we were going to destroy that threat. And what Saddam Hussein, who is, in many ways, a quite unique case, you had a bloody dictator, clearly with ambitions in the Middle East, beyond his neighbors. Clearly with an appetite for weapons of mass destruction and the means to get them, very wealthy country. Spending the money, not on the infrastructure, by the way. Not on water for his people, not on health care for his people, but on weapons of mass destruction programs and on palaces for himself. And this combination of factors, in the world's most volatile region, a region from which the 9/11 threat emerged. I think the President decided that was a threat he was no longer going to tolerate.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Let me stop you on that note. "The region from which the 9/11 threat emerged." Now, if you're using region in the broadest sense.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Yes, region in the broad sense.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Afghanistan being part of that region.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Well, Afghanistan being part of that region. And let's be very clear, the Middle East being, in many ways, the homeland.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Are you saying that there was any connection between 9/11, because, as you know, 61, 62 percent of the American public actually believes that Saddam Hussein had a direct responsibility for 9/11, for which there is no evidence whatsoever.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

And we have never claimed that Saddam Hussein had either, that Saddam Hussein had either direction or control of 9/11. What we have said is that this was someone who supported terrorists, helped train them. But most importantly, that this is someone who, with his animus towards the United States, with his penchant for and capability to gain weapons of mass destruction, and his obvious willingness to use them, was a threat in this region that we were not prepared to tolerate.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) And we've got to take a short break. When we come back, I'd like to enlarge your views or get some of your views on the rest of the region. Back with Dr. Rice in a moment.

commercial break

graphics: Nightline: a conversation with Condoleezza Rice

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) I'm back once again with Dr. Condoleezza Rice. If weapons of mass destruction, which you are convinced were there before the war, are not there now, is it not reasonable to assume that one of the places they may have gone is that Saddam, before we invaded, may have distributed those to some of the very people that we were most concerned about, the terrorists? The people in Iran, the people in Syria.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

There are always theoretical possibilities. But, Ted, nothing was going to keep Saddam Hussein from distributing weapons to terrorists if that was his intent. And he had enough links with terrorists that if he wanted to do that, he didn't need our threat to invade him in order to do it.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) If we can't find the weapons in Iraq, they've got to be some place else.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

The weapons were unaccounted for. And we will, through interviews and through the documentation that we found, we will find what the status was of these weapons of mass destruction, what he destroyed and what he didn't, what he hid and what he didn't. And we will have a full accounting. We now are in the country in a position to do that. Prior to the war, we were not in a position to know what had become of these weapons of mass destruction. And with Saddam Hussein in charge, it was simply a much more dangerous world. With anything in his hands, given his ambitions, given the way that he hated the United States, just not a threat that you could let emerge. You know, Ted, the President of the United States doesn't have the luxury of ignoring what might be a very bad case. An analysis that said he had, intelligence assessment that he had a biological weapons program that was getting more sophisticated in which he was putting a lot of resources.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) You're saying he had that?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

This is the intelligence estimate on which the President acted. An intelligence estimate that said that, left unchecked, he might have a nuclear weapon by the end of the decade. These were facts that could not be ignored.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) End of the decade? At one point there, members of this Administration were suggesting it could happen much sooner than that.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Well, the intelligence estimates said that it could happen much sooner, under certain circumstances. And let's also remember that this is the kind of thing that is always underestimated. The International Atomic Energy Agency went into Iraq in 1991, they found a program much further along than they had thought.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) You made the point, and it's an unarguable point, that the President cannot afford to wait too long if he sees dangers building. Are the dangers building in Syria these days? Are the dangers building in Iran these days?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Clearly, there are dangers in a number of places.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) How about those two?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

In Iran. We have just had, really, a very big victory in the International Atomic Energy Agency, where the world has rallied around a position that the Iranians have to give a full accounting for their program, their nuclear program, by October 31st.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) And it's not all together clear yet that they're going to do it.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

And it's not. In fact, they walked out of the meeting. It's very interesting because we were, not completely alone, but fairly lonely in our assessment earlier on that the Iranians were using civilian nuclear programs to cover military uses for nuclear weapons. And, slowly the President, working very hard with the Russians, working very hard with the Europeans, I think has brought the world around to a point of view that Iran is a country that needs to be watched, that needs to be, where verification measures have to be tougher. Where the burden of proof has to be on Iran, not on the rest of the world. And we're very pleased that this has -finally come about.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Since we have limited time, you have limited time, let me get you to comment quickly on Syria.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Syria is a country with which we continue to have a number of problems. We got some cooperation on closing the border to Iraqi figures who were trying to get out shortly as the war was ending. But we are constantly reminding the Syrians that they have obligations to make certain that their border is not used for terrorists to cross. That they have obligations to disclose anything that they might be doing with weapons of mass destruction.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) You don't feel they're really meeting the mark here?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

We don't really feel they're meeting the mark. But we continue to press the Syrians.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) Dr. Rice, always a pleasure. Thank you so much.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Pleasure to be with you, too.

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) I'll be back in a moment.

commercial break

TED KOPPEL

(Off Camera) And that's our report for tonight. I'm Ted Koppel in Washington. For all of us here at ABC News, good night.

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COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (94%); IRAQ (94%); SAUDI ARABIA (79%); IRAN (79%); TURKEY (79%); JORDAN (79%); SYRIA (79%);

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