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From: Sullivan, Jacob J [mailto:SullivanJJ@state.gov]
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FYI

From: Rhodes, Benjamin J. [mailto:]
Sent: Wednesday, February 29, 2012 07:05 PM
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Subject: Fw: Interview of the President by Jeff Goldberg

B6

Close hold. This is going to run friday morning

From: Suntum, Peggy (Contractor)
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THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

Internal
Transcript

2012

February 29,

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT
BY JEFF GOLDBERG

Oval Office

3:21 P.M. EST

Q Well, thanks for doing this. I thought I would start with some specific and then move to the general, and then go to the metaphysical.

THE PRESIDENT: Once we get to the metaphysical I may get a little --

Q No, I'm looking forward to the metaphysical part. From what we've read -- and I don't know if it's true or not what we've read -- the Prime Minister of Israel is coming here to ask you for some specific enunciations of red lines, of specific promises. And what I wanted to understand from you first is -- on this very specific level -- what is your message to the Prime Minister? What do you want to get across to him? It seems like this is a very -- maybe they're all crucial meetings, but this seems like a particularly --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, I think it's important to say, I don't know exactly what the Prime Minister is going to be coming with. We haven't gotten any indication that there is some sharp ask that is going to be presented.

I think both the United States and Israel have been in constant consultation about a very difficult issue, and that is the prospect of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon. This is something that has been one of my top five foreign policy concerns since I came into office. We immediately, upon taking over, mapped out a strategy that said we are going to mobilize the international community around this issue to isolate Iran, to send a clear message to them that there's a path they can follow that allows them to rejoin the community of nations, but if they refused to follow that path, that there would be an escalating series of consequences.

And three years later, we can look back and say that we have been successful I think beyond most people's expectations -- that when we came in, Iran was united and on the move, and the world was divided about how to address this issue. Today the world is as united as we've ever seen it around the need for Iran to take a different path on its nuclear program, and Iran is isolated and feeling the severe effects of the multiple sanctions that have been placed on it.

At the same time, we understand that the bottom line is, does the problem get solved? And I think Israel, understandably, has a profound interest not just in good intentions but in actual results. And in the conversations that I've had over the course of three years, but over the course of the last three months, and three weeks, what I've emphasized is that preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon isn't just in the interest of Israel, it's profoundly in the security interest of the United States; that when I say that we're not taking any option off the table, we mean it; that we are going to continue to apply pressure until Iran takes a different course.

Q Go back to this language, "all options on the table," because you've probably said it in one form or another 50, 100 times. And a lot of people believe it. The two intended main audiences, meaning two

individuals, the Supreme Leader of Iran and the Prime Minister of Israel, you could argue don't entirely trust that -- the intention behind that. I mean, that's -- the impression that I get from the Israelis -- I haven't talked to the Supreme Leader of Iran lately -- is that it's such a vague expression at this point and maybe it's been used for so many years -- I mean, is there some ramping up that you can give him that --

THE PRESIDENT: I think the public understands it. I think the Israeli people understand it. The American people understand it. I do think the Iranians understand it. It means a political component that involves isolating Iran. It means an economic component that involves unprecedented and crippling sanctions. It means a diplomatic component in which we have been able to strengthen the coalition that presents to Iran various options through the P5-plus-1 and ensures that the IAEA is robust in evaluating Iran's program. And it includes a military component. And I think people understand that.

Now, I think the Israeli government recognizes that as President of the United States, I don't bluff. I also don't -- as a matter of sound policy -- go around advertising exactly what our intentions are. But I think both the Iranians and the Israeli government recognize that when the United States says that it's unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say.

And let me describe very specifically why this is important to us. In addition to the profound threat that it poses to Israel, one of our strongest allies in the world, in addition to the outrageous language that has been directed towards Israel by the leaders of the Iranian government, if Iran gets a nuclear weapon, it runs completely contrary to my policies of nonproliferation. The risks of a Iranian nuclear weapon falling into the hands of terrorist organizations are profound. It is almost certain that other players in the region would feel it necessary to get their own nuclear weapon, so now you have the prospect of a nuclear arms race in the most volatile region in the world that's rife with unstable governments and sectarian tensions. And it would provide Iran the additional capability to sponsor and protect its proxies in carrying out terrorist attacks because they are less fearful of retaliation.

Q If you removed Israel from this picture, in other words --

THE PRESIDENT: It would still be a profound national interest of the United States to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. And --

Q Why has it become such a binary in a way?

THE PRESIDENT: Meaning?

Q Meaning it's always defined now as it's Israel versus Iran, how do we stop Israel from preempting, how do we stop Iran from --

THE PRESIDENT: You know, I think --

Q -- maybe it's Bebe talking about it for --

THE PRESIDENT: I think it has to do with a legitimate concern on the part of Israel that they are a small country in a tough neighborhood, and as a consequence, even though the U.S. and Israel very much share assessments of how quickly Iran could attain breakout capacity, and even though there is constant consultation and intelligence coordination around that question, Israel feels more vulnerable. And I think the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense and others feel a profound historic obligation not to put Israel in a position where it cannot act decisively and unilaterally to protect the state of Israel.

I understand those concerns. And as a consequence, I think that it's not surprising that the way it gets framed at least in this country, where the vast majority of people are profoundly sympathetic to Israel's plight and potential vulnerabilities, that articles and stories about it get framed in terms of Israel's potential vulnerability.

But I want to make clear that when we travel around the world and make presentations, that's not how we frame it. We frame it as this is something in the national security interests of the United States and in the interests of the world community. And I assure you that Europe would not have gone forward with sanctions on Iranian oil exports -- which are very difficult for them to carry out because they get a lot of their oil from Iran -- had it not been for their understanding that this is in the world's interest to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

China would not have abided by the existing sanctions coming out of the National Security Council, and other countries around the world would not have unified around those sanctions, had it not been for us making a presentation about why this is important to everybody, not just one country.

Q I'm now going to commit the sin that I was just talking about by bringing you back to Israel, and asking you, is it possible that the Prime Minister of Israel has over-learned lessons of the Holocaust?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that the Prime Minister has a profound responsibility in protecting the Israeli people in a hostile neighborhood. And I am certain that the history of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism and brutality directed against the Jewish people for more than a millennia weighs on him when he thinks about these questions.

I think it's important to recognize, though, that the Prime Minister is also head of a modern state that is mindful of the profound costs of any military action. And in our consultations with the Israeli government, I think they take those costs and potential unintended consequences very seriously. So --

Q Do you think Israel could cause itself damage in America by preempting militarily?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know how it plays in America. I think --

Q Well, America is its main benefactor and ally.

THE PRESIDENT: I think we in the United States instinctively sympathize towards Israel, and I think political support for Israel is bipartisan and is powerful.

In my discussions with Israel, the key question that I ask is, how does this impact their own security environment? I've said it publicly and I say privately, ultimately, the Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Ministers and others in the government, they have to make their decisions about what they think is best for Israel's security. And I don't presume to tell them what is best for them. But as Israel's closest friend and ally, and as one that has devoted the last three years to making sure that Israel has additional security capabilities, and has worked to manage a series of difficult problems and questions over the last three years, I do point out to them that we have a sanctions architecture right now that is far more effective than anybody anticipated, that we know is having an impact on Iran, that we have a world that is about as united as you get behind those sanctions, and that our assessment, which is shared by the Israelis, is that Iran does not yet have a nuclear weapon and is not yet in a position to obtain a nuclear weapon without us having a pretty long lead time before we know that they are making that attempt.

In that context, our argument is going to be that it's important for us to see if we can solve this thing permanently as opposed to temporarily. And the only way, historically, that a country has ultimately decided not to get nuclear weapons without constant military intervention has been when they themselves take it off the table.

That's what happened in Libya. That's what happened in South Africa. And we think that without in any way being under illusion of Iranian intentions, without in any way being naïve about the nature of that regime, they are self-interested and they recognize that they are in a bad, bad place right now.

It is possible for them to make a strategic calculation that, at minimum, pushes much further to the right whatever potential breakout capacity they may have. And that may turn out to be the best decision for Israel's security.

Now, these are difficult questions. And, again, if I were the Prime Minister of Israel, I'd be wrestling with them. And as President of the United States, I wrestle with them, as well.

Q Could you -- it would be interesting for you to shed some light on your relationship with the Prime Minister. You met with him more I think than any other foreign leader. It's assumed -- and maybe you correct the record -- that you have somewhat of dysfunctional

relationship. And I'm wondering if you could just sort of talk about what it's actually like as opposed to these -- all the filters we get.

THE PRESIDENT: I actually think the relationship is very functional, and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I mean the fact of the matter is we've gotten a lot of business done with Israel over the last three years. I think the Prime Minister, certainly the Defense Minister, would acknowledge that we've never had closer military and intelligence cooperation; that when you look at what I've done with respect to security for Israel -- from joint training and joint exercises that outstrip anything that's been done in the past, to helping to finance and to construct the Iron Dome program to make sure that Israeli families are less vulnerable to missile strikes, to ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge, to fighting back against the de-legitimization of Israel -- whether it's in the Human Rights Council or in front of the U.N. General Assembly, or during the Goldstone Report, or after the flare-up involving the flotilla -- the truth of the matter is, is that the relationship has functioned very well.

Q Are you friends? Do you talk about things other than the business --

THE PRESIDENT: You know the truth of the matter is both of us have so much on their plate -- our plate that there's not always a lot of time to have discussions beyond business.

But having said that, look, I think what is absolutely true is that the Prime Minister and I come out of different political traditions that --

Q Your early experience with Jabotinsky is more limited. (Laughter.) That's clear.

THE PRESIDENT: This is one of the few times in the history of U.S.-Israeli relations where you have a government from the right in Israel at the same time that you've got a center-left government in the United States. So I think what happens then is that a lot of political interpretations of our relationship gets projected onto it.

But the one thing that I found in working with Prime Minister Netanyahu is we can be very frank with each other, very blunt with each other, very honest with each other. And for the most part, when we have differences, they're tactical and not strategic. Our objectives are the same. Our objectives are a secure United States, a secure Israel, peace, the capacity for our kids to grow up in safety and security and not have to worry about bombs going off, and being able to promote businesses and economic growth and commerce. And so we have a common vision about where we want to go.

At any given moment, as is true, frankly, with my relationship with every other government and every other leader, there's not going to be a

perfect alignment in terms of how we think the best way to achieve those objectives are.

Q Let me bring it a little bit to Iran for a second and it's a Bebe related question, in a way. I interviewed him three years ago right before he became Prime Minister, and he described Iran as being run by a "Messianic apocalyptic cult." Last week, General Dempsey referred to the Iranian leadership as rational actors, or some formulation like that. And I'm wondering, just a real interest, where you fall on that continuum -- if you feel that these people are so irrational that they might not act in what we would understand their own best interest to be, or somewhere else on that continuum?

THE PRESIDENT: I think you're right to describe it as a continuum. I think there is no doubt that they are isolated. They have a very ingrown political system. They are founded and fueled on hostility towards the United States, Israel, and to some degree, the West. And they have shown themselves willing to go outside of international norms and international rules to achieve their objectives, all of which makes them dangerous. They have also been willing to crush the opposition in their own country in brutal and bloody ways. And so I think it's entire --

Q Do you think that they are Messianic or --

THE PRESIDENT: I think it's entirely legitimate to say that this is a regime that does not share our worldview or our values. I do think what probably General Dempsey was referring to is that as we look at how they operate and the decisions they've made over the last three decades, that they care about the regime's survival and they are sensitive to the opinions of their people, and they are troubled by the isolation that they're experiencing, and they know that, for example, when these kinds of sanctions that we're seeing right now are applied, that it puts a world of hurt on them. And they are able to make decisions based on trying to avoid bad outcomes, from their perspective. And so if we are -- if they are presented with options that lead to either a lot of pain, from their perspective, or, potentially, a better path, then there is no guarantee, but it is conceivable that they can make that (inaudible) decision.

Q It seems unlikely that a regime built on anti-Americanism would want to appear to succumb to an American-led sanctions effort.

THE PRESIDENT: I think the question here is going to be, what, exactly are their genuine interests? Now, what we've seen, what we've heard directly from them over the last couple of weeks is that nuclear weapons are sinful and un-Islamic. And those are formal speeches from the Supreme Leader and their Foreign Minister.

Q Do you believe his sincerity?

THE PRESIDENT: My point here is not that I believe the sincerity of the statements coming out of the regime. The point is that for them to prove to the international community that their intentions are peaceful

and that they are, in fact, not pursuing weapons is not inconsistent with what they've said. So it doesn't require them to knuckle under to us. What it does require is them to actually show to the world that there is consistency between their actions and their statements. And that's something they should be able to do without losing face.

Q Can I flip this entirely and just ask the question on the opposite end, which is why is containment not your policy? In the sense that we contained the Soviet Union, North Korea --

THE PRESIDENT: It's for the reason I described -- because you're talking about the most volatile region in the world. It will not be tolerable to a number of states in that region for Iran to have a nuclear weapon and them not to have a nuclear weapon. Iran is known to sponsor terrorist organizations, so the threat of proliferation becomes that much more severe.

The only analogous situation is North Korea. We have applied a lot of pressure on North Korea as well and, in fact, today found them willing to suspend some of their nuclear activities and missile testing and come back to the table. But North Korea is even more isolated and certainly less capable of shaping the environment than Iran is. And so the dangers of an Iran getting nuclear weapons that then leads to basically a free for all in the Middle East is something that I think would be very dangerous for the world.

Q Do you see as an issue the accidental nuclear escalation?

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q Talk about that for a minute because that's an interesting, unexplored piece.

THE PRESIDENT: Look, the fact is I don't know exactly -- why don't you refine your question? I don't think any of it would be accidental. I think it would be very intentional. If Iran gets a nuclear weapon, I won't name the countries but there are probably four or five countries in the Middle East who say, we are going to start a program and we will have nuclear weapons. And at that point, the prospects of miscalculation in a region that has that many tensions and fissures is profound. You essentially then duplicate the challenges of India and Pakistan fivefold or tenfold.

Q Right, with everybody pointing at everybody else.

THE PRESIDENT: With everybody pointing at everybody else.

Q What I'm getting at specifically is -- that is a component of it -- the other component is Israel. Let's assume there's a Hezbollah attack on Israel. Israel responds into Lebanon. Iran goes on some kind of a nuclear alert and then one, two, three --

THE PRESIDENT: The potential of escalation in those circumstances are profoundly dangerous, and in addition to just the potential human costs of a nuclear escalation like that in the Middle East, just imagine what would happen in terms of the world economy. The possibilities of the sort of energy disruptions that we've never seen before occurring and the world economy basically coming to a halt would be pretty profound.

So this is -- when I say this is in the U.S. interest, I'm not saying this is something we'd like to solve. I'm saying this is something we have to solve.

Q One of the aspects of this that is so interesting to me is that it's about you in a way. I mean, I don't know if you know this or not, but I've been in the camp of people arguing that it's plausible that Barack Obama would use military power to stop Iran for the following three, four reasons: The Republicans are trying to make this an issue -- and not only the Republicans -- saying that this man, by his disposition, by his character, by his party, by his center-left outlook, is not going to do that. I wanted to just sort of tease out a little bit this subject. It's flummoxing a little bit --

THE PRESIDENT: I guess -- look, if people --

Q What does a guy got to do?

THE PRESIDENT: Look, if people want to say about me that I have a profound preference for peace over war, that every time I order young men and women into a combat theater and then see the consequences of some of them, even if they're lucky enough to come back, and that weighs on me -- I make no apologies for that. Because anybody who is sitting in my chair who isn't mindful of the costs of war shouldn't be here, because it's serious business. These aren't video games that we're playing here.

Now, having said that, I think it's fair to say that the last three years I've shown myself pretty clearly willing, when I believe it is in the core national interest of the United States, to direct military actions, even when they entail enormous risks. And obviously, the bin Laden operation is the most dramatic, but al Qaeda was on its heels well before we took out bin Laden because of our activities and my direction.

In Afghanistan, we've made very tough decisions because we felt it was very important in order for an effective transition out of Afghanistan to take place for us to be pushing back against Taliban momentum.

So aside from the usual politics, I don't think this is an argument that gets a lot of legs. And by the way, it's not an argument that the American people buy. They may have complaints about high unemployment still and that the recovery needs to move faster, but you don't hear a lot of them arguing somehow that I hesitate to make decisions as Commander-in-Chief when necessary.

Q I want to loop back finally to -- back to Israel in a second. But can you just talk about Syria for a second as a strategic issue? Talk about it as a humanitarian issue, as well. But it would seem to me that one way to weaken and further isolate Iran is to remove or help remove its only Arab ally.

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q And so the question is, what else can this administration be doing?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, look, there's no doubt that Iran is much weaker now than it was a year ago, two years ago, three years ago. The Arab Spring, as bumpy as it has been, represents a strategic defeat for Iran because what people in the region have seen is that all the impulses towards freedom and self-determination and free speech and freedom of assembly have been constantly violated by Iran. They're no friend of that movement towards human rights and political freedom. But more directly, it is now engulfing Syria, and Syria is basically their only true ally in the region.

And it is our estimation that Assad's days are numbered. It's a matter not of if, but when. Now, can we accelerate that? We're working with the world community to try to do that. It is complicated by the fact that Syria is a much bigger, more sophisticated, and more complicated country than Libya, for example --

Q You saved me a question, thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: -- that the opposition is hugely splintered; that although there's unanimity within the Arab world at this point, internationally, countries like Russia are still blocking potential U.N. mandates or action. And so what we're trying to do -- and the Secretary of State just came back helping to lead the "Friends of Syria" group in Tunisia -- is to try to come up with a series of strategies that can provide humanitarian relief. But they can also accelerate a transition to a peaceful and stable and representative Syrian government. If that happens, that will be a profound loss for Iran.

And by the way, this is part of --

Q Is there anything you could do to kick it faster?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, nothing that I can tell you because your classified clearance isn't good enough. (Laughter.)

But this is part of, by the way, the context in which we have to examine our approach towards Iran, because at a time when there is not a lot of sympathy for Iran and its only real ally is on the ropes, do we want a distraction in which suddenly Iran can portray itself as a victim, and deflect attention from what has to be the core issue, which is their potential pursuit of nuclear weapons?

That's an example of factors that when we are in consultation with all our allies, including the Israelis, we raise because this is a game of many dimensions that we're playing here, and we have to make sure -- scratch game. This is a strategy --

Q An issue.

THE PRESIDENT: -- an issue with many dimensions, and we've got to factor all them in to achieve the outcome that hopefully we all want.

MR. RHODES: We've got time for one more.

Q Okay, all right. I'm rounding third.

Go back to the Israelis, for a second. A, off this last question, do the Israelis understand that? When you talk to -- I'm trying to get some insight into why -- and there have been obviously disagreements between Israel and the U.S. before, but this is coming to a head about what the Israelis see as an existential issue.

And you're right, it's not about the ultimate goal. It's about, it seems like, timing and method. But in those details are sort of the entire dilemma. And so the question is, in your mind, have you brought arguments to Netanyahu that have so far worked well? Or are you worried that you're going to have another meeting where he's going to listen to all of your rational pleas for time and space, and say, history is weighing on me and I have to go do this now?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, look, the --

Q You've become an expert on Israeli psychology.

THE PRESIDENT: I think that in the end, Israel will make -- Israel's leaders will make determinations based on what they believe is best for the security of Israel, and that is entirely appropriate.

When we present our views and our strategy approach, we try to put all our cards on the table, to describe how we are thinking about these issues. We try to back those up with facts and evidence. We compare their assessments with ours, and where there are gaps, we try to narrow those gaps. And what I also try to do is to underscore the seriousness with which the United States takes this issue. And I think that -- I think Ehud Barak understands it. I think that Prime Minister Netanyahu, hopefully when he sees me next week, will understand it.

Q How serious --

THE PRESIDENT: And one of the things that I like to remind them is that every single commitment I have made to the state of Israel and its security I have kept. I mean, part of your -- not to put words in your mouth, but part of, I think. the underlying question is, why is it that

despite me never failing to support Israel on every single problem that they've had over the last three years, that there are still questions about that?

Q That's a good way to phrase it.

THE PRESIDENT: And my answer is, there is no good reason to doubt me on these issues.

Some of it has to do with the fact that in this country and in our media, this gets wrapped up with politics. And I don't think that's any secret. And if you have a set of political actors who want to see if they can drive a wedge not between the United States and Israel, but between Barack Obama and a Jewish American vote that has historically been very supportive of his candidacy, then it's good to try to fan doubts and raise questions.

But when you look at the record, there's no "there" there. And my job is to try to make sure that those political factors are washed away on an issue that is of such great strategic and security importance to our two countries. And so when I'm talking to the Prime Minister, or my team is talking to the Israel government, what I want is a hardheaded, clear-eyed assessment of how do we achieve our goals.

And our goals are in sync. And historically, one of the reasons that the U.S.-Israeli relationship has survived so well and thrived is shared values, shared history, the links between our peoples. But it's also been because it's been a profoundly bipartisan commitment to the state of Israel. And the flip side of it is that, in terms of Israel politics, there's been a view that regardless of whether it's a Democratic or Republican administration, the working assumption is we've got Israel's back. And that's something that I constantly try to reinforce and remind people of.

Q I mean, in three of our words, is that your message to the Prime Minister -- we've got Israel's back?

THE PRESIDENT: That is not just my message to the Prime Minister, that's been my message to the Israeli people, and to the pro-Israel community in this country since I came into office.

It's hard for me to be clearer than I was in front of the U.N. General Assembly when I made a full-throated defense of Israel and its legitimate security concerns than any President in history. Not, by the way, in front of an audience that was particularly (inaudible) --

Q Not Hadassah.

THE PRESIDENT: -- to the message.

So that actually won't be my message. My message will be much more specific about how do we solve this problem.

All right? Thanks, Jeff.

Q Thank you. I appreciate it.

END
4:05 P.M. EST