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Dr. Condoleezza Rice Interviewed by Jim Lehrer

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Q The President's defense of National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice today came at a critical time. A week ago, her chief deputy, Stephen Hadley, acknowledged he had been warned by the CIA in two separate memos that the Agency would not stand by information suggesting Iraq was trying to buy uranium in Africa to reconstitute a nuclear weapons program. That claim made it into the President's State of the Union speech, and CIA Director George Tenet took the blame.

But with Hadley's admission, new questions emerged. If he knew about the error in advance, who else did? Was it overlooked simply because the administration was anxious to bolster the case for war?

Here to answer these, and other, questions, is National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. Welcome, Dr. Rice.

DR. RICE: Thank you, nice to be with you.

Q So the first question becomes the ones I just posed. Did you know, or should you have known that the information that went into the President's State of the Union speech regarding the purchase, or the efforts to purchase uranium in Niger, or from Africa, another country in Africa -- did you know that that information was not correct?

DR. RICE: When the line was put into the President's State of the Union address and cleared by the Central Intelligence Agency, when I read the line, I thought it was completely credible and that, in fact, it was backed by the Agency.

What happened here is that we're really talking about two different processes. The State of the Union was put together, the speech went out for clearance. But the speech that the President had given in Cincinnati in October had also been sent out for clearance and --

Q That's the speech where he made the case for war?

DR. RICE: Well, this is one of the speeches in which he made the case for war. And in that speech, a line had

been there about the uranium issue and Saddam Hussein seeking uranium in Africa. And Director Tenet had called Steve Hadley and he told him, in no specifics, he told him, I don't think you should put that in the President's speech because we don't want to make the President his own fact witness. Both Steve and Director Tenet remember the conversation in that way.

What we learned later, and I did not know at the time and certainly did not know until just before Steve Hadley went out to say what he said last week, was that the Director had also sent over to the White House a set of clearance comments that explained why he wanted this out of the speech. I can tell you, I either didn't see the memo, I don't remember seeing the memo -- the fact is, it was a set of clearance comments, it was three-and-a-half months before the State of the Union. And we're going to try to have a process now in which we don't have to depend on people's memories to link what was taken out of the speech in Cincinnati with what was put into the speech at the State of the Union.

Q Should you have seen the memo?

DR. RICE: Well, the memo came over. It was a clearance memo, it had a set of comments about the speech. It had already been taken out of the speech, from my point of view and from the point of view of Steve Hadley. Steve Hadley runs the clearance process. And when Director Tenet says, take something out of a speech, we take it out, we don't really even ask for an explanation. If the DCI, the Director of Central Intelligence, is not going to stand by something, if he doesn't think that he has confidence in it, we're not going to put that into a presidential speech. We have no desire to have the President use information that is anything but the information in which we have the best confidence, the greatest confidence.

And so when Director Tenet said, take it out of the speech, I think people simply took it out of the speech and didn't think any more about why we had taken it out of the speech.

Q Do you feel any personal failure or responsibility for not having seen this memo and flagged it to anybody else who was working on this speech?

DR. RICE: Well, I certainly a personal responsibility for this entire episode. The President of the United States has every right to believe that what he is saying in his speeches is of the highest confidence of his staff -- that's why we go through a clearance process, that's why the process is so rigorous.

In this one case, the process did not work. We did have a clearance from the agency, but, frankly, looking back, perhaps we should have remembered that it was taken out of the Cincinnati speech. We simply didn't.

And what I have assured the President, and what I want to assure myself, is that our future processes will be ones in which we double check to make sure that something has not been taken out of a speech, in which perhaps we get an affirmative answer from the principals that they, in fact, will stand behind an element of a speech as important as the State of the Union.

But what I feel really most responsible for is that this has detracted from the very strong case that the President has been making. There are people who want to say that somehow the President's case was not strong, the intelligence case was not strong. I've read a lot of intelligence cases over my almost 20 years now in this field, and this was a very strong case. The Director of Central Intelligence put together a National Intelligence Estimate, that's a disciplined document in which he takes the views of all of the various agencies and then delivers a consensus view to the President.

Q But a disciplined document which concluded, in many ways, that there wasn't enough of a case to be made on this nuclear option.

DR. RICE: No. In fact, when the judgments -- the key judgments in the NIE are quite the opposite from that. It says, for instance, that left unchecked Saddam Hussein would possibly have a nuclear weapon by the end of the decade. I don't know what the President of the United States is supposed to do with that, except to say, I have to have a policy prescription for dealing with that circumstance.

Five of the six intelligence agencies believed that he had an active program of reconstitution of his nuclear weapons program. And one has to remember that this is against the context of someone who had in 1991, at the end of the Gulf War, been proven to be much closer to a nuclear weapon than the International Atomic Energy Agency had thought. He had been seeking nuclear weapons for a long time, this didn't happen in a vacuum.

In that context, judgments by the intelligence community that he was reconstituting his programs, that he had an active procurement network, that he was gathering together nuclear scientists, that he had several designs for a nuclear weapon and that, left unchecked, he might be able to have a nuclear weapon by the end of the decade -- that's the judgment on which the President was going, and not the question of whether or not he was trying to acquire yellow cake in Africa.

Q James Schlesinger, who, as you know, served in several previous administrations, and was at one point at least, Pentagon Secretary, he said on this program last week that George Tenet was forced to fall on his sword. If that's the case, do you regret that?

DR. RICE: Director Tenet, George Tenet said what he believed. And that is that his Agency cleared the speech, that he was responsible for the clearance process of his Agency. That's what George Tenet said. And he was describing a process by which we clear Presidential speeches. And that is that we go both to the experts to clear specific parts, and we go to the principal to say, do you clear this speech?

But George Tenet, like all of us, would never want to see anything in a presidential speech in which the Director of Central Intelligence doesn't confidence.

And so of course I feel responsible for this. It should not have happened to the President. And I'm doing everything that I can to try and make sure that it won't happen again. We needed to make a connection between a set of clearance comments that were sent to us -- on many matters, by the way, not just clearance comments on this specific issue, but on many matters -- clearance comments that were sent to us in October, and this line appearing in the State of the Union.

What we have to do is to go back and make certain that we don't have to depend on someone's memory in order to make that connection. But I want to say, again, Gwen, the thing that is concerning here is that the intelligence case against Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction is a broad and deep case for multiple sources over 12 years, from many different intelligence agencies, from the United Nations, itself, from the United Nations inspectors.

And we are now in Iraq in a way that we will be able to find out precisely what the case was here with his weapons of mass destruction program. It's going to take some time. A very able former inspector, David Kaye, has an army of -- he'd probably object to that, he probably doesn't have enough resources -- but he has a lot of people in Iraq who are going through miles of -- literally, miles of documents who are interviewing

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Q The President --

DR. RICE: We will know precisely what happened to Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

Q Let me ask you about David Kaye, because the President said today that he met with David Kaye yesterday.

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q Did he provide him with any new information about the search for weapons of mass destruction?

DR. RICE: What the President said to David Kaye is, take your time; do this in a comprehensive way; do this in a way that makes the case, that looks at all of the evidence, and then tells us the truth about this program.

What David Kaye did say to me and to others is that this is a program that was built for deception over many, many years. Saddam Hussein was under weapons inspections for a period of time, he was under sanctions. He got to be very good at making certain that no one would be able to uncover the truth of his programs.

And so it's not surprising that it's going to take some time to really put this picture together. And the thing that the President most wanted David Kaye to know is that we are patient in finding that out.

Q So David Kaye did not bring the President new information about new discoveries at that meeting yesterday?

DR. RICE: David Kaye is going to put this together in a way that is coherent. I think that there is a danger in taking a little piece of evidence here, a little piece of evidence there. He is a very respected and capable weapons inspector. He knows how to read the Iraqi programs.

And what he will do is to take these many, many documents, he'll also interview people. If you remember, back at the time of the Hans Blix mission, we wanted very much to have scientists interviewed outside of Iraq, because we knew that people would not talk openly in this totalitarian country in which people's tongues were cut out for dissent.

We now have an opportunity to interview these people. But even now, it is taking some time for people to get accustomed to the fact that they can be interviewed, and their families will not be harmed. But we will put this case together.

What we knew going into the war was that this man was a threat. He had weapons of mass destruction. He had used them before. He was continuing to try to improve his weapons programs. He was sitting astride one of the most volatile regions in the world, a region out of which the ideologies of hatred had come that led people to slam airplanes into buildings in New York and Washington. Something had to be done about that threat. And the President was not prepared to simply allow this brutal dictator with dangerous weapons to continue to destabilize the Middle East.

Q And what you said going into the war, using very stark language, I believe you were the one who said that

you couldn't afford to stand by and watch a -- looking for a smoking gun which could become a mushroom cloud.

You made only -- not only this case about the potential for purchasing uranium yellow cake from Niger, you also said that there were aluminum tube purchases, which indicated that the reconstitution of the nuclear program be underway. You also said there were satellite photos that showed that buildings were being rebuilt in places where there had been a nuclear program before.

Taken together, this was all to make the point that Saddam Hussein was possibly on the verge of reconstituting a nuclear weapons program. Is that, in retrospect, supportable?

DR. RICE: It's absolutely supportable. And listen to the list that you just gave. What this was, was a description of his procurement network. We knew that he had, as Colin Powell talked about in his presentation at the United Nations, an active procurement network to procure items, many of which, by the way, were on the prohibited list of the nuclear suppliers group. There's a reason that they were on the prohibited list of the nuclear suppliers group -- magnets, balancing machines, yes, aluminum tubes, about which the consensus view was that they were suitable for use in centrifuges to spin material for nuclear weapons.

Q That's something the International Atomic Energy Agency did not agree with.

DR. RICE: Well, the DCI, the Director of Central Intelligence, the consensus view of the American intelligence agency, was that given the specifications, given that they had -- this had been Saddam Hussein's kind of personal network, given the expense that they had gone to get these tubes, that they were, most likely, for this use. But there were other elements, as well, facilities that were being rebuilt.

It was a case that said, he is trying to reconstitute. He's trying to acquire nuclear weapons. Nobody ever said that it was going to be the next year. But the question was that if it was possible that he might have one by the end of the decade, and if it was possible, as the National Intelligence Estimate said, that if he acquired fissile material, it might be far sooner than that, was it a threat that you could allow to sit unanswered? And I'd just like to say one other thing, the nuclear case, yes, was an issue, but there was also a very robust biological weapons issue.

Biological weapons are also extremely dangerous, as we found with just a small amount of anthrax on Capitol Hill and at various news outlets in the United States. There was the fear that he might be able to use chemical weapons. This was a bad regime, an extremely tyrannical regime with a history of using weapons of mass destruction, with a 12-year history of everybody in the international community -- including three administrations of the United States -- President Bush, the first President Bush; President Clinton; and President Bush, the current President Bush -- believing that he had weapons of mass destruction. And when you look at that picture, and you look at this picture in the Middle East, this incredibly volatile region, and you look at his ambitions, Saddam Hussein's ambitions for power in the Middle East that were demonstrated in what he did in Iran and what he would later do in Kuwait, this was a threat that had been out there too long. And as the President said today, we wanted the international community to deal with it.

Q Well, I --

DR. RICE: But it had sat there and sat there. It was time to deal with it.

Q I want to take the opportunity to move on beyond the Middle East, even though staying on the nuclear issue, because you say there's the -- the case was made that Saddam Hussein had the possibility of possessing nuclear weapons, or reconstituting nuclear weapons. In North Korea, there seems to be evidence -- at least we don't know what to make of it; I'm hoping you can help us with that -- that the North Koreans not only have the possibility, but actually have reprocessed nuclear fuel rods, actually have weapons-grade plutonium in their possession. Why aren't we as poised to act on North Korea as we were in Iraq?

DR. RICE: Well, first of all, the North Korean example is a very good case of why you don't let this continue over long periods of time. The North Koreans have been trying to acquire nuclear weapons since probably the late 1960s or early 1970s, and their program has gotten quite advanced because nothing has been done ultimately to stop it.

Now, we went down a road in 1994 that I think at the time seemed like a perfectly reasonable road, which was to sign an agreement with the North Koreans that in exchange for certain benefits to them, like help with building nuclear reactors so that they could take care of their fuel needs, that they would freeze and eventually dismantle this defective nuclear program.

Q Which didn't happen, as we know.

DR. RICE: They lied, as we know. Not only -- before the ink was dry on the agreement, they were seeking another route to a nuclear weapon, a highly enriched uranium route. It only goes without saying that it doesn't make sense to go down that road again, because you can't trust the North Koreans in a bilateral arrangement of that kind.

Q Do you believe their claims right now that they actually possess these nuclear --

DR. RICE: I think that what we have to do is to kind of take at face value some of what they're saying. We've known that this is a pretty advanced program. But what we're trying to do this time is to use the pressure of the neighbors, the international community and the neighbors, to have a process with the North Koreans which might actually this time succeed in the dismantling of the program. And the key to that is that Japan, South Korea and even China understand that a nuclear peninsula -- Korean Peninsula -- is not in their interest. That will bring far greater pressure on the North Koreans than the United States could bring on its own.

Q I want to touch briefly on two other issues, the 9/11 report that has the 28 -- 27 pages of blanked-out material which the Saudis believe is really about them, they're very concerned about it. They came to the White House yesterday, asked that it be declassified. But, yet, when Prince Faisal came out yesterday, he said he understood the reasons why that wasn't going to happen. What are the reasons? And have you heard from anybody on the Hill asking that it be declassified directly?

DR. RICE: Well, of course, a number of people have called for its declassification. But the President explained to Prince Saud the same thing that he explained to the American people earlier in the day, which is that this is a document of 900 pages, almost all of which was made -- we made it possible to have it declassified. But in this section, there are ongoing investigations that need to be protected. There are ongoing operations in which sources and methods need to be protected. And the President's most important responsibilities are, first and foremost, to try and make certain that another attack does not happen against the United States, thus the importance of the ongoing war on terrorism and doing everything that we can to chase these people down.

And the President is determined to try and bring to justice those who might have been associated with the attacks on 9/11, thus the importance of protecting investigative information on this.

Q Sources.

DR. RICE: And received from Director Tenet and Director Mueller a recommendation that this not be declassified.

Q And as far as you're concerned, it remains secret?

DR. RICE: As far as we're concerned, it remains secret.

Q Final question or final line of questioning on Liberia. Charles Taylor, the President of Liberia -- the President has said that the U.S. will go in and help logistically only if he leaves. Charles Taylor gave an interview to Newsweek today in which he said he would like to step down, but not leave. Is that an acceptable alternative?

DR. RICE: No, Charles Taylor needs to leave the country. And we've been in touch with the regional states. We were in touch with the President of Nigeria, President Obasanjo, earlier today. I think we're moving forward. As you know, the President has ordered that American -- the American MEW, the 26th MEW will be deployed off the coast of Liberia to help ECOWAS get in. It now looks as if there is already an advanced element in Monrovia, and that soon after Nigerian troops will be able to begin to deploy over the next week or so. So this is moving.

Charles Taylor needs to keep his promise to his people, on whom he's wreaked a lot of havoc over the years, to leave the country and allow a constitutional transfer that will ultimately lead to a political process that will help to stabilize Liberia. But for America, the key will be to try to assist ECOWAS in getting in and to try to help create conditions in which humanitarian assistance can begin to flow again so that the needs of the Liberian people can be met.

Q Condoleezza Rice, thank you very much for joining us.

DR. RICE: Thank you.

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