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Condoleeza Rice
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BLITZER: Dr. Rice, thanks for joining us on this Sunday as usual.

Is Iraq's regime of President Saddam Hussein right now a clear and present danger to the United States?

CONDOLEEZZA RICE, NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER: There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein's regime is a danger to the United States and to its allies, to our interests.

It is also a danger that is gathering momentum, and it simply makes no sense to wait any longer to do something about the threat that is posed here. As the president has said, "The one option that we do not have is to do nothing."

BLITZER: Well when you say you can't wait much longer, how much longer, in effect, can you wait?

RICE: We've waited a very long time. It has been, after all, 11 years, more than a decade now, of defiance of U.N. resolutions by Saddam Hussein. Every obligation that he signed onto after the Gulf War, so that he would not be a threat to peace and security, he has ignored and flaunted.

We know that in the last four years there have been no weapons inspectors in Iraq to monitor what he is doing, and we have evidence, increasing evidence, that he continues his march toward weapons of mass destruction.

No one can give you an exact time line as to when he is going to have this or that weapon, but given what we have experienced in history and given what we have experienced on September 11, I don't think anyone wants to wait for the 100 percent surety that he has a weapon of mass destruction that can reach the United States, because the only time we may be 100 percent sure is when something lands on our territory. We can't afford to wait that way.

BLITZER: Exactly one week ago right now, on this program, the Iraqi deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, denied any such intentions on the part of his government. Listen specifically to what Mr. Aziz said.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

TARIQ AZIZ, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER OF IRAQ: The United States and everybody in the world should know that there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: All right, what do you say to his blunt, flat statement?

RICE: This is a regime that has lied and cheated. It is a regime that refused to admit anything to weapons inspectors until defectors came out and pinpointed where certain programs were taking place.

I don't think anybody can take the word of Saddam Hussein and his regime, and certainly an American president and allies who are obligated to worry about the safety and security of our countries, cannot take the word of this dictator, who lies, pathologically lies.

BLITZER: Well, it's not just Tariq Aziz and Saddam Hussein. **Scott Ritter, a former United Nations weapons inspector, today addressed the Iraqi National Assembly and basically made the point that there are no problems as far as Iraq is concerned. Listen specifically to what he said in his speech.**

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SCOTT RITTER, FORMER U.N. WEAPONS INSPECTOR: My country seems to be on the verge of making an historical mistake, one that will forever change the political dynamic which has governed the world since the end of the Second World War, namely the foundation of international law as set forth in United Nations charter, which calls for the peaceful resolution of problems between nations.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: I wonder if you want to respond to what Scott Ritter directly said, there are no serious threats to the United States from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program?

RICE: Well, I'd very interested to know how one can dismiss a weapons of mass destruction program that was well documented before 1991, when the inspectors actually arrived, what they found in 1991; that was being documented until 1998 when the inspectors left; that continues to gather momentum.

It's not just the United States that's making this case. This case is being made by independent analysts, as well, as to the forward march of the weapons of mass destruction programs of Saddam Hussein.

This is a man who has attacked his neighbors twice, who represses his own people, who's tried to assassinate a former American president, who pays \$25,000 to Hamas bombers -- by the way, some of whom blew up Hebrew University and, with it, five Americans. He has a long history.

And it's not true that the United Nations charter refers only to peaceful resolution. The United Nations charter actually has teeth, and Article VII does permit that there can be necessary means taken.

And it was, after all, under U.N. auspices that Saddam Hussein was finally challenged in 1991, that he was defeated in the Gulf War, and that he was made to sign onto a series of commitments to make sure that he could not be a threat to peace and security, commitments that he has broken and broken and broken.

So that simply isn't the case that this is a peace-loving man who's just wanting to be left alone. That simply isn't the case.

BLITZER: So your bottom line is that the U.N. charter does endorse the strategy of preemptive strikes that the president outlined in his West Point commencement address earlier this year?

RICE: The U.N. charter certainly endorses self-defense. And the U.N. charter -- it is under the U.N. charter that the resolutions were put together that are supposed to constrain Saddam Hussein and to disarm him so that he is not a threat to peace and security.

The United Nations and Security Council have teeth. And in 1991, they bared those teeth to try to deal with this real threat. Saddam Hussein has been in a decade of defiance against the very United Nations that tried to constrain him.

He is the one who is responsible here. He is the one who has to answer. The burden of proof is on him to show that he has disarmed, not on the United States, not on Great Britain, not on the members of the international community.

BLITZER: Based on what you know right now, how close is Saddam Hussein's government -- how close is that government to developing a nuclear capability?

RICE: You will get different estimates about precisely how close he is. We do know that he is actively pursuing a nuclear weapon. We do know that there have been shipments going into Iran, for instance -- into Iraq, for instance, of aluminum tubes that really are only suited to -- high-quality aluminum tools that are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs.

We know that he has the infrastructure, nuclear scientists to make a nuclear weapon. And we know that when the inspectors assessed this after the Gulf War, he was far, far closer to a crude nuclear device than anybody thought, maybe six months from a crude nuclear device.

The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.

BLITZER: The bottom line therefore is what, your assessment, six months, a year, five years? How much longer do you believe, given the intelligence information you obviously have, it will take for Saddam Hussein's government to have a nuclear bomb?

RICE: Well, we're going to be laying out for the American people and for the Congress in appropriate hearings and at the U.N., all of the available evidence that we can make available as to his progress.

But I want to just caution, it is not incumbent on the United States to prove that Saddam Hussein is trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction. He's already demonstrated that he's trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

It is incumbent on Saddam Hussein, who, after all, signed on to an obligation to disarm, to convince the world that he is not trying to. And every piece of experience with him, all of the available evidence is simply that he continues down this road.

We do not want to be surprised again. History shows that you are always surprised about how quickly someone acquires a terrible weapon. We were surprised that the Soviet program was as far along as it was. We thought it would be 1955, it was 1949. Saddam Hussein was almost six months from acquiring a crude nuclear device in 1991.

The problem is that we can't afford to be surprised. We know he has the infrastructure. We know he has the desire. We know his procurement network has been very, very active. How long are we going to wait to deal with what is clearly a gathering threat against the United States, against our allies and against his own region?

BLITZER: Should the United Nations Security Council formally give the Iraqi government one last chance, one last effort to allow U.N. weapons inspection teams back in before the United States makes any decision about military moves?

RICE: Well, the president is going to address the United Nations on Thursday. He has been in consultations with members of the Perm Five. Those are going to continue -- the permanent five Security Council members -- those are going to continue. And we will see what is required here.

Let's be very clear that the absence of resolutions is not the problem. There have been 16 resolutions, all of which Saddam Hussein has ignored. So the president is gathering the information. He's looking at his options, and we'll see.

BLITZER: So, you're just waiting right now to determine whether or not another, in effect, ultimatum to the Iraqi government would be worthwhile?

RICE: Well, there's been plenty of ultimatums, and one thing that we better be very clear is that we can't continue to have the kind of defiance of the United Nations, the defiance of the international community that we've had.

The president reserves his right to deal with this problem on behalf of the United States, if necessary. He has said that he wants to seek international support, that he'll go to the United Nations. But we make a mistake whenever we just allow problems to continue to sit, problems to continue to fester and when we don't act.

The one decision that the president has made, and he's supported in that decision by others including Prime Minister Blair, is that we don't have the luxury of doing nothing.

BLITZER: Last week when I interviewed Tariq Aziz, the deputy prime minister of Iraq, he said that any resumption of U.N. weapons inspections inside Iraq under the leadership of Hans Blix, who's the current chief weapons inspector, is a non-starter because they don't trust Hans Blix.

Would the U.S., do you believe, and other members of the Security Council be willing to go back and take a look at the composition of these U.N. inspection teams and remove Mr. Blix as the leader for them?

RICE: It is high time that the international community tell Saddam Hussein and his regime that this is not an issue of negotiation with the U.N. about obligations that they undertook in 1991.

They lost the war, a war of aggression that they started that tried to take over Kuwait. They lost that war. As a result, the United Nations put in place an inspections regime that was aimed at disarmament. It was not, after all, an inspection regime that was an end in itself. Disarmament was the goal here. And Saddam Hussein signed onto all of these obligations.

And it is absolutely true that for 11 years now he has negotiated with the U.N. as if he won the war. The fact is, he lost the war. The U.N. understood that he was not trustworthy, understood that there needed to be a way to monitor his programs and to make sure that he was destroying weapons of mass destruction.

No, nobody is going to negotiate anything with this regime.

BLITZER: As far as chemical weapons are concerned, does the Iraqi military currently have the capability of launching missiles, ballistic missiles, Scud missiles, or other medium- or even longer-range missiles with a chemical or a biological warhead?

RICE: We know that there are unaccounted-for Scud and other ballistic missiles in Iraq. And part of the problem is that, since 1998, there has been no way to even get minimal information about those programs except through intelligence means.

So, we know that he has stored the biological weapons. We know that he has used chemical weapons. And we know that he has looked for ways to weaponize those and deliver them.

I can't give you a definitive answer on how he would mate the ballistic missile programs that he has developed and continues to develop to chemical and biological weapons, but we do know that he wants to do it. And I assume that he will eventually be able to do that, probably sooner rather than later.

BLITZER: When I spoke with Tariq Aziz, I asked him if the U.S. attacked Iraq, would he in turn, would Iraq in turn attack Israel? Once again, you remember, the Iraqis launched 39 Scud attacks against the Israelis during the Gulf War.

This was his response when I asked him whether they would attack Israel with Scud missiles. Listen to what he said.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

AZIZ: We don't have them. They were all destroyed, and they were all accounted for by the international -- by the U.N. inspectors.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Is that true?

RICE: No, it is not true. The fact is that the -- that they didn't -- we don't believe that they destroyed them all. And Iraq has a history of lying about everything. This is not a regime that can be trusted.

Now, the fact that they attacked Israel after the -- during the Gulf War should tell us something. This is a regime that is very -- that very much wants to blackmail us, wants to blackmail us, the United States, because our interests clash. It wants to blackmail its neighbors, and it will eventually want to blackmail the entire international community.

If we wait until that blackmail includes the ability to blackmail with a nuclear weapon, we will have made a grave mistake.

BLITZER: If the Iraqis were to strike at Israel, would the U.S. discourage the Israelis from retaliating, as was the case, as you well remember, during the Gulf War?

RICE: Well, I think it's best not to get into hypotheticals here. We should do everything to dissuade Iraq from threatening any of its neighbors under these circumstances. It has a history of threatening its neighbors. But I think it's probably not best to get into hypotheticals here.

BLITZER: I assume you're not going to tell us, then, if you would cooperate with the Israelis and provide friend and foe identification signals to them if they were to respond so that their aircraft would not be in danger. As you remember, during the Gulf War, the U.S. decided not to give that kind of information to the Israeli air force.

RICE: As I said, Wolf, I think it's better not to get into hypotheticals. We're getting ahead of ourselves. The president has not made a decision that the use of military force is the best option. He is reviewing all of his options and he is talking to people about them.

The one thing he has determined, though, is that we can't do nothing. We simply can't afford inaction at this point.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

BLITZER: We have to take a quick commercial break. When we return, I'll ask President Bush's national security adviser if the president has the international support he needs to launch a preemptive strike against Iraq.

More of my interview when we come back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: Welcome back to LATE EDITION. We return now to my exclusive interview with President Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: When will you ask Congress for a resolution endorsing potential use of military force?

RICE: We'll want to have discussions with the congressional leadership and with others about the timing of this. But I believe that the president thinks it's best to do this sooner rather than later and in this session of Congress. This is a problem...

BLITZER: Excuse me for interrupting.

RICE: Yes?

BLITZER: You mean before the congressional recess in advance of the elections, within the next month or so.

RICE: Yes, that's right, before the congressional recess, before the congressional recess. I think the president has made clear that he would like to have a full debate and a resolution, but we're going to discuss this with the members of Congress.

BLITZER: There's a lot of explaining that members of Congress insist you still need to do. The president -- there is a new poll, a CNN-USA Today Gallup poll that was released on Thursday. "Has President Bush done enough to explain why U.S. might take action in Iraq?" Thirty-nine percent say yes, 58 percent say no. Is the president just beginning this explanation process right now?

RICE: We're just making the case.

In fact, the case has been around for some time. Let's remember that in 1998 when things came to a head with the Iraqi regime about their treatment of inspectors, the United States Congress overwhelmingly passed a law called the Iraqi Liberation Act that said Saddam Hussein's regime is a threat to peace and stability and ought to be removed.

At that time, a number of senators, including people like Senator Daschle, talked about the fact that this was a major threat, that the president had to have the ability to deal with this threat through available means. I mean, people have known about this for a long time. It's been debated in Congress before, and overwhelmingly the U.S. Congress supported regime change as a policy.

Now, if you fast forward to four years later, it's hard to believe that this situation has gotten better than it was in '98.

So, yes, we are more than prepared to talk about the case, prepared to talk about what has happened since 1998. But already in 1998, the collective wisdom of the Congress and the then-Clinton administration was that this was a regime that was a threat to its neighbors, a threat to its people, a threat to American interests, that its weapons of mass destruction were best going to be dealt with when the regime was gone. That collective wisdom was right in 1998. It is more right in 2002.

BLITZER: The president was on the phone Friday speaking to world leaders, including the leaders of Russia, France, China. He met with Tony Blair, as you know of course, over the weekend at Camp David.

But with the exception of Tony Blair and maybe one or two others, he still doesn't have that kind of endorsement that he would love to have from the rest of the allies and close friends and permanent members of the U.N. Security Council.

RICE: What we're hearing from everyone is that they understand that Saddam Hussein is a threat. They understand that he's been a threat for a long time. After all, France and China and Russia are members of the permanent five of the Security Council that voted the 16 U.N. resolutions that he has repeatedly violated. So there is no confusion about the threat.

Of course there are those who want to discuss and talk about how we address that threat, and the president has promised those consultations.

This is not an easy issue. No one goes to the use of military force lightly, and most especially this president who is deliberative, who, even when we were brutally attacked on September 11, took his time in assembling a coalition for Afghanistan, took his time in making sure that we had a good military plan, took his time in making certain that we got word to the Afghan people that this was not a war against them, this was a war of liberation.

So this is a president who is deliberative. And he will be deliberative here. He has not determined that the use of force is the best option.

We are talking to our friends and allies. And I think you will see that, as we make the case, as we do the consultations, as we decide on a course of action, that there will be plenty of support for this president, as there has been in the past.

BLITZER: Dr. Rice, is there any hard evidence directly linking the Iraqi government to al Qaeda and the 9/11 terror attacks against the United States?

RICE: There is certainly evidence that al Qaeda people have been in Iraq. There is certainly evidence that Saddam Hussein cavorts with terrorists.

I think that if you asked, do we know that he had a role in 9/11, no, we do not know that he had a role in 9/11. But I think that this is the test that sets a bar that is far too high.

We know a great deal about his terrorist activity. We know that he, as I said before, tried to assassinate President George H. W. Bush. We know that he pays Hamas terrorists \$25,000 for suicide bombings that led to suicide bombings against American citizens with five American deaths at Hebrew University. We know that he is acquiring weapons of mass destruction, that he has extreme animosity against the United States.

And what we will not wait for is that particular nexus of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, that is extremism and the technology to come together in a way that is harmful to the United States.

Again, the burden of proof is not on us. The burden of proof is on him. We will make a case. There is plenty of evidence and plenty of experience with who this man is and with what he is doing. But in the final analysis, you have to ask yourself if you want the 100 percent certainty of what he is doing to be an attack on the United States or an attack on our allies. We don't want that to be the moment at which we think, oh yes, we should have connected the dots differently. There was plenty of evidence of what he was trying to do, and we didn't act.

BLITZER: What is the significance, if any, of the meeting that occurred between Mohammed Atta, the ringleader of the al Qaeda terror operation, the 9/11 terror operation, and a senior Iraqi intelligence operative in Prague, in the Czech Republic before 9/11? And did that meeting -- can you confirm absolutely that that meeting took place?

RICE: We continue to look at evidence of that meeting. And it's just more of a picture that is emerging that there may well have been contacts between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime. There are others. And we will be laying out the case. But I don't think that we want to try and make the case that he directed somehow the 9/11 events. That's not the issue here. The issue is, what kind of threat does he pose to America and to its interests? And he poses a clear threat to the United States. He poses a threat because he is trying to acquire the most terrible weapons, because he is not a status-quo actor.

Those who say, "Well, if we just leave him alone, he'll leave us alone," really do have a burden of proof, because he has never left anyone alone. He's attacked his neighbors. He is involved in assassination attempts. He is paying suicide bombers.

Eventually, sooner rather than later, our interests and his are going to clash again. And what he wants to do is to have the United States at bay because he can threaten us with weapons of mass destruction. And this president is simply not willing to wait until he either actually attacks or blackmails us and keeps us from acting in our own interests.

BLITZER: Dr. Rice, we are winding up our time, but let me ask you about the assassination attempt against the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai. Was al Qaeda behind that assassination attempt?

RICE: Certainly the assessment of the Afghan authorities is that this was probably Taliban or al Qaeda remnants. I don't think that we know fully, and obviously we'll help in any investigation of that.

There's no doubt that it's still a dangerous place, Afghanistan. The fortunate thing is that the United States was helping to provide security for Chairman Karzai. And it shows that the United States is committed to that regime.

Afghanistan has a long way to go. There are pockets of insecurity in the country, particularly in southeastern Afghanistan, where we're really still at war and where American forces are still very active along the Pakistani border. There are clearly remnants of Taliban and al Qaeda still in the country.

But we have to step back and look at where Afghanistan is now as opposed to a year ago. A year ago, the Taliban were still in power. They were still able to harbor al Qaeda. al Qaeda was able to train openly there, to carry out its financing of its terrible schemes. It had its communications network there.

Now, al Qaeda's on the run. Afghanistan is no longer a base of operations. The Afghan government is a friendly government that is trying to bring democracy to its people. And the Afghan people are free of the kind of horrible, oppressive regime that made it impossible for women to even walk in the streets without fear of police, of religious police beating them up.

I mean, this is a place that has come a long way. We still have a lot to do. The U.S. government is committed to Afghanistan's reconstruction and security, but we've come an awfully long way in less than a year.

BLITZER: I believe a year ago, almost a year ago, you were the person who first informed President Bush that the United States was under attack at the World Trade Center in New York.

What is the single most important lesson that you, as the president's national security adviser, the single most important lesson you've learned over this past year?

RICE: The single most important lesson that I've learned is that, unfortunately, you will always be surprised about the magnitude of events; that you will be surprised, particularly in this world, with terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, at how much damage can be done by a few people; and that you should not wait to be surprised by evil people who may wish you real harm with weapons of mass destruction that would make September 11 look small in comparison.

History shows us that inaction is the problem, and the vulnerability of the United States is really what came home very, very clearly on 9/11. We've been a country that's been fortunate to be protected by two oceans, to not have serious attacks on our territory for most of our history. And we were unfortunately reminded in a very devastating way of our vulnerability.

We're in a new world. We're in a world in which the possibility of terrorism, married up with technology, could make us very, very sorry that we didn't act.

So I think, if September 11 taught us anything, it taught us that we're vulnerable, and vulnerable in ways that we didn't fully understand.

We've been working hard to minimize those vulnerabilities. That's why there's a new Department of Homeland Security being created. We've been working hard at hardening the country. Tom Ridge and his colleagues work at this every day, as do we all.

But the truth of the matter is, we're an open society, we want to remain an open society, and there will continue to be vulnerability. That's why we have to meet the threats when they are not yet taking place on our territory and on our soil.

It makes ever more urgent the continued war against al Qaeda, the continued support for our allies, who are helping us to fight that war. And it makes more urgent looking at other threats, like those who are building weapons of mass destruction and mean us ill.

BLITZER: Dr. Rice, thanks for taking some time out from your meetings at Camp David, joining us on this Sunday. Appreciate it very much.