

"Q&A with Richard Holbrooke"

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"What is your view on, for instance, the influence that the looming election is having on foreign policy in the US and maybe, putting it very bluntly, who do you think will win that election?"

Well, first of all, a declaration of interest: you have all figured out already that I am a Democrat. While I am advocating a peaceful regime change in Washington next year [laughter], I very much respect the tradition that when an American, particularly a former member of the US Cabinet, goes overseas one has to talk within that framework. But let me address your question directly. Nobody knows who is going to win the election next year. President Bush became president with 600,000 less votes than Al Gore. Had it not been for the events of 9/11 the mandate of this Administration would have been under constant challenge. Actually, if you go back to the first week of September 2001 -- which seems like a century ago -- this Administration was having a rocky start. Everything changed on September 11th. Americans of all political persuasions felt that George W Bush conducted himself with great skill in the immediate period of 9/11, starting with his trip to ground zero in lower Manhattan, and going through the invasion of Afghanistan which had a complete international and U.N. mandate, and whose initial phase was very successful. However, right now, the Administration has pinned its political future on two issues: the economy and Iraq. As I said earlier, the economy is improving but jobs are not coming back. So my assumption is that the country will split within the margin of error on the economy 40/42 or 42/39, something relatively close. The undecided vote will be decided by Baghdad. So my own view, which I again stress is not necessarily what the professional politicians will tell you, is that the election will be decided by what happens in Baghdad. If the optimistic scenario is correct, the one Washington keeps putting forward, -- that things are going great, we are building all these schools, the water is coming back, etc -- and the level of American deaths goes down, then Bush will be elected quite easily because he will have proved that he toughed it out and succeeded. On the other hand, if the situation in Iraq on Election Day looks like it looks today, then the election will be very much up for grabs. It will be a 50/50 election.

Now that brings me to the second variable, which is who will be the Democratic nominee. There are 9 people contesting the nomination. A great deal depends on who the nominee is; some of these candidates are not serious candidates. The nominee will

either be Dean, Kerry, Gephardt or Clark in my estimation but you can't completely rule out Edwards or Joe Lieberman, an outstanding senator from Connecticut who was vice president Gore's running mate three years ago and is a wonderful man but for various reasons he just does not seem to take off in the polls. I am not quite sure why because he is an exceptionally gifted person. Now a great deal depends on who the nominee is. There is no clear-cut answer to that right now. Yet we are going to know in 20 to 22 weeks because the schedule is front-loaded this year. Howard Dean, who is the clear front runner, has no national security experience and this will work against Governor Dean. Bush would run against Dean by saying that he is completely unqualified in this area.

General Clark has no domestic experience but his credentials in the national security field are unassailable. He was wounded twice in Vietnam; he has won a lot of medals. He was NATO commander in the one and only war in NATO history, which was a complete success and had no casualties and achieved all our objectives. He helped me negotiate the Dayton Agreement, the military annexes, and is a skilled military soldier. Senator Kerry is a Vietnam veteran, much decorated, and from the liberal side of the party. Each one presents a very different profile so that is a very long way of saying I don't know what is going to happen.

Events will determine this election. Let me tell you that the Bush Administration is going to run very aggressively. The predominant political event in George W. Bush's life is his father's defeat in 1992. That was simply stunning to him. The Bush family never saw it coming, they couldn't believe that this Governor for Arkansas could overthrow them. Yet Clinton, who is a political genius, just connected with the electorate. From that day on, they were determined never to let that happen again. So they are going to run very, very aggressively in 2004.

Shawgi Mushtag General Manager of Skysales at Saudi Arabian Airlines asks, "Given the recent commentary from Washington that would leave one to believe that there are imminent targets for further US attacks, do you believe we will continue to see the US invade countries that it perceives to be a threat and if so, how can international commerce be expected to continue to develop?"

This is a question I encounter everywhere. It is a result of the Administration's unnecessary decision to assert the right to wage pre-emptive war. In point of fact, every President always had that position but no one ever asserted it the way Bush did. There is no question that an American President would strike first if that President believed the US was about to be attacked. If you knew, for example, that Pearl Harbour was going to happen, you would attack Japan before it attacked you. If the European powers had attacked Hitler in 1936 or '38, the history of the world would have been different. So the concept of attacking first against an evil person was always an option. But the assertion of it, in the way it was done, muddied the case against Saddam and

raised the question that Mr. Mushtag has asked Linda to ask. Now, it is certainly true that there are people in Washington who would like to carry on some kind of great military crusade and move onto Syria and North Korea or elsewhere, but I can tell you categorically, it won't happen, it can't happen and I'll tell you why. The Pentagon is not going to agree to go to war again. They are stretched to the breaking point in Iraq. They have got National Guard and reserve units that have been extended years beyond their tour. There is real anger in the local military communities all over the country. Be sure to understand, those of you who are not Americans, many of the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are not regular military. They are people who signed up for reserve duty, weekend duty, once a month on the agreement that in an emergency they will be called up for temporary duty. They were called up in massive numbers and then they have been extended on their tours. The troops, even the United States, the world's only superpower, have a limit to what it can do militarily. To be sure, the American military can project its power under any square metre of ground on the face of the earth but they can't keep going on this way. So even if certain people in Washington proclaim that we should go on to Syria, we have to take on North Korea, it is not going to happen. The military is fundamentally a conservative institution and they are stretched to the breaking point. That question is a good one, as it does address the fact that style is as important as substance in foreign policy and the fact that it is asked here today, that everywhere I go suggests the Administration has left an impression of an aggressiveness which is a warlike aggressiveness which is not in keeping with American national character.