

Week Ending Friday, June 13, 2008

**Interview With Gianni Riotta of
Italy's Rai TV**

June 6, 2008

Iraq/Afghanistan/Iran

Mr. Riotta. Mr. President, the world has known tremendous change during your tenure, and three areas of concern remain: Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan. What's your assessment of those three theaters? And looking back in perspective, would you do anything different?

The President. Well, that's an interesting question on doing anything different. Of course, history is going to be the judge of that. But the decision, for example, on Iraq, to remove Saddam Hussein, was the right decision then, and it's the right decision now.

The progress in Iraq has been substantial. For a period of time, it—the democracy was in doubt, primarily because sectarian violence was really unacceptable. I decided to put more troops in, rather than pull back, and now the violence is the lowest it's been since March of 2004. And politics is beginning to happen. So I'm encouraged about Iraq.

Afghanistan is also difficult because of new democracy emerging from the shadows of a brutal regime. Last year, of course, the Taliban announced they were going to go on the offense. In fact, our coalition went on the offense and, from a security perspective, made some progress against the Taliban. The best progress, though, is the advance of better trained police forces—and I thank the Italian Government for helping—as well as a better Afghan Army, which over time needs to provide the security for the country. Iraq will probably—progresses quicker cause it's got wealth. Afghanistan is broke.

Iran—the free world must continue to send a clear message to the Iranians that their ability to enrich, which could be transferred to a program to develop a nuclear weapon, is unacceptable. And so I will continue to work on this trip to talk about the

dangers of a nuclear Iran—not civilian nuclear power, but a program that would be aimed at blackmail or destruction—and that we've got to work to stop them from learning how to enrich. And there's other ways to approach it.

Iran

Mr. Riotta. Should Iran resist the international pressure, military option remains open?

The President. Yes, it does.

Iran/Italy

Mr. Riotta. Italy wants to join the 5-plus-1 group of contacts negotiating with Iran. Germany is skeptical; they don't want us. What do you say?

The President. I say that whatever is effective in terms of sending a clear message to Iran. I will be spending time talking to this with the Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. I've talked to Condi about this issue. I said, look, whatever works. Let's make sure we're effective. Italy can be an effective voice in sending a message to the Iranians. And that you don't have to choose isolation; there's a better way forward. Verifiably suspend your enrichment program, and there's a better way forward for you and your people.

And Italy can be a critical part of that. And so we'll work—I haven't really taken the temperature that much, but my judgment is, Italy can be a very important contributor.

***U.S. Foreign Relations/Energy/Food
Prices***

Mr. Riotta. The relationship between the United States and Europe has been strained sometimes in the recent past. During your trip, what do you suggest we can do together vis-a-vis the oil crisis, the food crisis, and the recession coming?

The President. Yes, you know—first of all, let me talk about strained relations. Look, I've had great relations with many of the leaders. America and Italy remain incredibly

close. Do we agree on every issue? No. But do we agree on common values? Absolutely. We believe in human rights and human dignity and free press and free religion. And so what unites us is a heck of a lot stronger than those moments where we don't necessarily agree on every single issue. And so I will remind people of that. I'll remind people that we've got a lot of work to do.

In terms of the current energy issue, look, we're too dependent on hydrocarbons. World demand is such, relative to supply, that the price of energy is high. And therefore, we need to be spending monies on new technologies to enable us to become less dependent on oil. And I'm a big nuclear power guy. I believe the United States must be much more aggressive expanding nuclear power for two reasons: one, less dependency on hydrocarbons; and two, it will make us better stewards of the environment. I mean, if you're concerned about global warming, one thing you ought to be concerned about then is making sure that we've got power generated from a clean source of energy, a renewable source of energy, which is nuclear power.

The food prices concern me, obviously. But the truth of the matter is, one reason why food prices are so high is because energy prices are high. I mean, when you think about it, farming is a pretty energy-intensive business—fertilizer is an energy; driving a tractor is an energy; crops to markets require energy. And so the crux of a lot of the problem is the energy prices.

Italy-U.S. Relations

Mr. Riotta. Talking to Prime Minister Berlusconi, what areas do you—will you encourage Italy to work with the United States, especially?

The President. Well, Iran, of course, cause I just happen to see it as a major threat. We—look, we got a lot of common areas: Afghanistan—and I will thank the Italian people for their sacrifices to help this young democracy. Silvio Berlusconi and I worked a lot of big issues together in the past. I know him well; I trust him; I like him. I'm—I find him to be one of the really interesting world leaders. And I'm really looking forward to seeing him again in his capacity, once again, as the Prime Minister.

We ought to work on trade matters. We ought to work on diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria on the continent of Africa, for example. I mean, there's a lot we can do together.

Pope Benedict XVI

Mr. Riotta. You met the Pope while in the United States, and how do you see his role in trying to reopen the dialog between different civilizations and religions?

The President. Yes, I think it's—look, the Holy Father is a significant world figure. And we had a fabulous visit here, and it was such an honor to welcome him to the South Lawn of the White House. I wish you could have seen it. But you—maybe you did see it. I wish your viewers could have seen the reception he was given here. I think it was one of the largest crowds ever on the South Lawn, like 13,000 people. And my own personal visit with him was so uplifting.

And we did talk about the interfaith dialog, that I think is really important for people to find common ground through religion to, like, deal with the violence that is used by some in the name of religion, to perpetuate an ideology, and to remind people that peace—religion is peace. And there's no better person to carry that message than His Holy Father.

I talked to the King of Saudi Arabia about his visit with the Holy Father, and those are two very important figures when it comes to, obviously, Christianity and Islam. And I think it's just—I think it's great that he's reaching out.

2008 Presidential Election

Mr. Riotta. I know you don't want to comment on the Presidential elections, but the world is watching and is very excited because—

The President. Yes.

Mr. Riotta. —there is a former war hero, there is an African American candidate, there's been Italian Americans, there's been a lady running for President. How do you see vitality of the American democracy, looking at this?

The President. Well, look, I'm for McCain, and everybody knows that. On the other hand, I thought it was a really good statement, powerful moment when a major political party nominates a African American

man to be their standard bearer. And it's good for our democracy that that happened. And we also had a major contender being a woman. Obviously, Hillary Clinton was a major contender. So I think it's a good sign for American democracy.

Now the debate begins as to who could be the best President. And I'm in an interesting position. I ran hard for Presidency twice; I campaigned hard in the off years, and now I'll be passing the mantle on to Senator McCain, particularly at the convention when he becomes the official nominee of our party. Obviously, he's going to be the nominee, but there's a moment at the convention where it's—"here he is." And I'll do my part to help him win, and—but it's going to be up to him. That's—he'll be the man sitting in the Oval Office making the tough decisions for peace and security.

Iraq

Mr. Riotta. You mentioned history at the beginning of this interview. And you know—you're aware that history will ask you about Iraq. What do you think, now when you look back to Iraq, especially after the report yesterday, are you still happy with all these positions?

The President. Look, I want to remind people, the report yesterday was one of many reports that—everybody thought Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. I will remind people—and one of the things that's important about history is to remember the true history. And so the Security Council resolution was 15 to nothing on Saddam Hussein: disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. European nations—France, Great Britain—supported that—1441, because everybody thought he had weapons of mass destruction, including many of the people who—of the Democratic Party here in the United States. You should listen to their words and listen to their quotes.

And so, absolutely, getting rid of Saddam Hussein was the right thing. And it was—we're all disappointed the intelligence wasn't what it was. But now the challenge is to help this young democracy survive. And a democracy in the heart of the Middle East is going to be, in my judgment, a powerful part of change. And we've got to work to free people

in the Middle East from tyranny, because that is from—the place from which the terrorists have launched their attacks.

President's Future

Mr. Riotta. In the few seconds that are left, what will you do next?

The President. You know, good question. I haven't had much time to think about it, because I've got a lot to do. But I will probably write a book talking about the decisions I had to make, precisely to make sure that history understands the conditions and the environment during which I had to make decisions; start a freedom institute at what's called Southern Methodist University in Dallas to talk about the universal values of freedom abroad and at home. And other than that, I'm open for suggestions.

Mr. Riotta. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Yes, sir. Thanks. Looking forward to going back to Rome. It's a fabulous city, one of the great cities of the world.

Mr. Riotta. Especially after you leave the White House, come and I will take you around. [*Laughter*] Without the constraint of official—

The President. I'd love to.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 10:28 a.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy; Pope Benedict XVI; King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia; Democratic Presidential candidate Barak Obama; former Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton; and Republican Presidential candidate John McCain. The interviewer referred to former Republican Presidential candidate Rudolph W. Giuliani. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on June 7. A portion of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

The President's Radio Address

June 7, 2008

Good morning. Congress will soon vote on legislation to fund our troops serving on the frontlines of the war on terror. This is an opportunity for Congress to give our men and women in uniform the tools they need to protect us, and Congress should approve these vital funds immediately.