

Press Releases: Conversation With Rich Lowry at the National Review Institute's 2019 Ideas Summit

Remarks

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Secretary of State

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MR LOWRY: Mike Pompeo, ladies and gentlemen. So we are thrilled, Mr. Secretary, to have you here. Thanks so much for making the time. So it's kind of amazing when you think about it; less than three years ago you were the congressman from the 4th District of Kansas. Now you are the 70th Secretary of State of the most powerful nation ever in world history. How did it happen? (Laughter.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's a very fair question. I'm reminded when you say that I'm the 70th Secretary of State that Trump is President 45, so turnover in my

gig is – historically been almost double.

Good fortune and we work hard, and here I am. Yeah.

MR LOWRY: So what has surprised you most about the job?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Goodness. So you know I came out of a previous job where I got a chance to see both this team, the National Security Council apparatus, a very different job, as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. You know the enormous scope of the State Department, right? 90,000 people across 190 facilities across the world. So the leadership management job, wholly apart from the job that you see climbing in and out of airplanes, the leadership management job occupies an awful lot of my time. Making sure we keep our officers safe and that every one of them is delivering against President Trump's agenda is something I love. I've led organizations for two, three decades now, and I love it. I've never run anything nearly this big, and it is a wonderful leadership challenge every day.

MR LOWRY: So we don't have to spend a lot of time with this because it was complete nonsense, obviously, but for two years the President has been accused of being part of a treacherous plot with the Russian Government. And this must have been exceedingly frustrating to you on the front lines of policy that was much tougher than the previous administration with regard to Russia in several really important respects, whether it was providing lethal arms finally to the Ukrainian Government or pulling out of the INF Treaty. What did you – what were you thinking during those two years and what do you think of this outcome?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So you don't have to speculate on what I thought about this. I've testified in front of the United States Senate a handful of times where the allegations were somehow that we didn't understand the threat that Russia posed to the United States. As someone who was a soldier in the Cold War, who served along the East German border in an M1 tank, I mean, the accusations were silly on their face, and I watched President Trump take this threat very seriously as well. And then if you looked at any of our actions, right, the – look, the fact that we're exporting energy is not something Vladimir Putin's excited about. The fact that we now have a budget of over \$700 billion a year for the Department of Defense cannot possibly be in Russia's best interest. I think the policies that we've delivered, while there's still work to do to deter Vladimir Putin, I think are some of the toughest since President Reagan.

MR LOWRY: So is there a working definition of the Trump doctrine, and what is it?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, I like to think about it this way: It's about making sure that every place we go, we're honest and candid, and we're prepared to reevaluate positions that have been taken before, positions taken by previous administration or administrations before that as well. And you can see it in our actions. It's principled; it's realistic. We don't guild the lily. I was in Beirut this past week and sat – stayed next to the foreign minister of Lebanon and called out Hizballah, an organization that now has infiltrated

Lebanon in a way that is horrible for the Lebanese people. You've got to go back decades when the last secretary of state was prepared to do that. It wasn't popular. We – big security team around me, so I was very confident. (Laughter.) But it's those kind of things, the willing to reevaluate core institutions.

Next week – I know we'll talk about this – next week we'll have all my foreign minister counterparts from NATO in town for the 70th anniversary of NATO. It is worthy to go reevaluate whether the first principles of NATO, right, the founding doctrine, if that charter is being adhered to, if the roles are right, if we've got it structured for 2019 and beyond. And we've done that, whether it was the UN Human Rights Council or the International Criminal Court. These are institutions that we need to stare at – we've been accused of not liking multilateral organizations. That's just not true; it's just fundamentally not true. We don't like multilateral institutions that are failing, that are taking American dollars and not delivering against the stated objectives. And so where they're working, we're happy to reinforce and be a big participant, and where they're not, we're happy to dig in and try and make them better.

MR LOWRY: So you mentioned Lebanon. In the Middle East, the big news this week is the administration has recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. (Applause.) And of course the critics are –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I got that about three quarters, one quarter. (Laughter.)

MR LOWRY: Yeah. The critics are freaking out, something you're probably used to, and one thing – one line they have is that this will somehow empower authoritarian regimes to go grab foreign territory and annex and hold it forever.

SECRETARY POMPEO: This is a long-time shibboleth, and we've now busted down a handful of those things where people thought an American action would lead to a particular reaction. You need only look on the ground at what happened here. Many countries have said they're not going to join us, but almost no one said that what we did wasn't right, didn't recognize a set of facts on the ground that were important. This was land taken in a defensive engagement where Israel itself – I spoke the other night about the Valley of Tears, the battle of the Valley of Tears, where Israel saved its own nation, and it needed this high ground to do it. This is a unique situation; it is – it in no way blesses any act of aggression by any country. I mean, people – the one people use most often is Crimea. Even the United Nations acknowledged that was an act of aggression. We did – what was there was right, was justified, and I'm glad we did it.

I – the other thing I'll add is I remember reading – I was traveling. I was actually in Israel when the announcement was presented, and then I traveled to Lebanon the very next morning. I remember reading that said, oh, this looked like a snap decision, like it was random and not well thought through. We've been working on this for an awfully long time all across the United States Government, trying to make the analysis that you just described. Is this the right thing? How do we do it? What's the – what are the

underpinnings of this? What will be the reactions? How do we ensure that we get what it is we're trying to do by making that decision? And so it's the case that at the moment the tweet came out, I suppose it was spontaneous, but the work – the groundwork that had been done to lay the foundation for this decision was – was interagency, was appropriate, and long in the making.

MR LOWRY: So on North Korea, there's been some confusing reporting in the press over the last four or five days about whether there's actually going to be a new round of sanctions. So can you address that? And then also, the criticism you'll hear, both from the left and the right, that President had these two high-profile meetings with Kim, nothing came of them, and the only effect is giving this horrific dictator a higher level of prestige than he had before.

SECRETARY POMPEO: I've never heard that, Rich. (Laughter.) So with respect to sanctions, we will continue to enforce the UN Security Council resolutions. It's often – people think about these as being American sanctions. They are not. These are UN Security Council resolutions passed unanimously by the Security Council, put in place – the significant economic sanctions put in place during our administration before my time as Secretary of State that are having a real impact and are what ultimately, I think, has led Chairman Kim to contemplate what I believe he continues to contemplate.

And as for the meetings, look, there's obviously a long ways to go. There's more work to do. Chairman Kim hasn't yet demonstrated that he is prepared to fulfill the commitment that he made. But I continue to believe that hard work and diplomatic effort may well get us there. We've made a counter-proposal too. We've said that we will be there to ensure that there's a brighter future for the North Korean people, and I've been part of those discussions. I've – literally, I've spent more time with Chairman Kim than any American, including now Dennis Rodman – (laughter) – and – I passed him in our next – in my next to last meeting. It's –

MR LOWRY: So that's a segue to my –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Let me just – one last thought. And so yes, this is going to take some time and yes, this will be filled with uncertainty and there'll be bumps in the road. But we have the toughest sanctions in the history – on North Korea – and I think the most promising diplomatic engagement, and we're doing those both at the same time.

MR LOWRY: So the Dennis Rodman part was a segue to my completely superficial question. So what is Kim like? Do you have a sense of what he's like as a person?

SECRETARY POMPEO: You know, Rich, I remember when I committed to doing this, I said there were questions I would not answer. (Laughter.) I'll give you just three thoughts, though. From the first time I met him, he was in complete command of the file. He knows exactly the risks, the opportunities, he knows his system. He knows the history of these negotiations. I remember having – I was a CIA director when I met him the first time. I remember having spent, my goodness, hours and hours making sure that I understood the

history. I knew the data set, I knew the national security situation on the ground, but I wanted to make sure I understood the diplomatic history of what had taken place and why we had failed before, why, collectively, we had failed to get where we wanted to be. He knew it as well as I did when I showed up.

He also knows that he's young and wants to make sure that North Korea has a future, and so when he engages with you, he does so in a way that reflects the nature of a long trajectory for North Korea, and that as he knows in his early thirties that he's got to run this country for some time, and he is – he's thoughtful about how he's approaching this. Whether that gets us there the next time our two leaders meet, I hope there will be a next time before too long, Chairman Kim has made these promises. He's made this – these set of promises to me personally, he's made them to the President on a number of occasions. Ultimately the proof will be whether we can convince him that it's the right strategic direction for him and for his country.

MR LOWRY: So on Venezuela, the administration's obviously been very forward-leaning against this sick and despotic and kleptocratic regime that's, by force, stopping food aid from reaching its people. So what do we do? What options do we have if Maduro just doesn't go and just sits there for the duration?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, so I'm not sure what you mean by duration. He's there until he's not. We will continue to do all the things that we have the capacity to do. That includes, importantly, building out a big coalition. I do laugh. One of the core critiques is that America has withdrawn from the international stage. We built out an 80-plus country coalition to defeat the caliphate ISIS. We got everyone to vote for UN Security Council resolutions. We've got 50-plus countries that have recognized Juan Guaido, in the Lima Group, in the OAS, all on board. Never possible in the previous administration.

We've got the Gulf states and Israel sharing our view of the threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is a bit of a segue, but it is important because it is absolutely powerful where American's values are at stake, and we are working on an American project to make sure that we have partners around the world to work on them alongside us. That's certainly the case in Venezuela, and so we're working closely with our partners.

I will say one of the things that we will continue to do is press the Cubans. The Cubans provide an enormous amount of the security apparatus inside of Venezuela. Indeed, having been an Army officer, if a third country had come to make sure and protect my president, I would have been embarrassed that they have to turn to the Cubans to provide security for their own leadership. I think some of them see that, and I am very hopeful that a large number of them will conclude it's not in their best interest to be protected by a bunch of thugs from Cuba.

MR LOWRY: So – and how portentous is it that they're now – that Russia is lending its hand to the regime?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I think the President said it yesterday well. I won't repeat his words. It was deeply unconstructive. See, I'm a diplomat. (Laughter.) If I was a congressman, I'd do what Senator Rubio probably did and just let it rip. But I'm going to go with deeply unconstructive, yes.

MR LOWRY: So you have a meeting coming up here in Washington to mark the 70th anniversary of NATO, and when you're talking about the Trump doctrine you're talking about sort of re-examining old ways of thinking and old institutions. And you have a number of people now on the right, populist right, who really question the utility of this alliance and whether we are getting anything out of it anymore that makes the cost to us worthwhile.

How in your view should – in the administration's view, should people think about NATO?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, I served in a NATO country. I served in Germany for my first three years. I think there's real value in the partnership with Western countries that share our democratic values. There is also real value in a country that is wealthy spending more than 1.25 percent of its GDP on defense. That's what the Germans committed to – I think it was last week now. I mean, that doesn't remotely reflect what they tell us they believe about their security interests, and so there's this disconnect.

And so, I mean, this issue comes up all the time. When I talk to my counterparts, they will begin by saying, "America needs to do X and Y because Russia poses a threat." And then you ask them, "Well, that's awesome. Tell me what you're prepared to do." And they say, "It's tough. Our voters just really don't like to spend money on defense." (Laughter.) I mean, yeah, folks in America are crazy about it. (Laughter.)

They have to do the right thing for themselves – in the case of NATO, honor a commitment that they made to spending at least 2 percent. We certainly think they ought to do more, and to convince them to do that, you have to go back to first principles about why it is we have this group joined together. And I'll talk about – the secretary general will talk about that too. He's going to address a joint session of Congress next week. I haven't seen his remarks, but I've talked to him about things I think he ought to say, and I am confident he will make that point as well.

MR LOWRY: So sticking with Europe, does the administration have any view – we think our politics can be crazy. At least we're not grappling with Brexit the way parliament is. Does the administration have any considered view on whether Britain should be in and out – in or out of the EU? Or it's just whatever the sovereign authority in Britain decides?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, we are hoping they sort it out there in Britain.

MR LOWRY: Okay. (Laughter.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. We're watching closely and providing moral support for their vigorous democratic debate, yes. (Laughter.)

MR LOWRY: So the kind of conventional view of American administrations has

been that the EU is a good thing and we should be supportive of the EU. What is this administration's view?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, questions like that I think miss the point. The EU intrinsically, right, the United Nations intrinsically, doesn't have a moral dimension to the entity. It's when the entity has power and does the right thing and is prepared to engage in important ways. Yes, the structure matters. Those institutions are important. But when they lose their way, when they have moved from their charter, when they begin to act in ways that are deeply at odds with what they tell you or if they are deeply at odds with America's interest, this administration's going to make sure that we do our best to fix that.

And so it's the same you say as – is Country X a good or bad country. It's about the people and it's about the people's expectations for their own nation and what they direct their own sovereign to do and how that impacts us here in the United States. That's the focus I've tried to have my team on. When we engage, we have big teams that engage with multilateral institutions all around the – we have an ambassador to the EU – the mission set is to make sure that they – the European Union understands the things that matter to us, and then we work alongside them to make sure that we come to understandings that benefit each of our two populations.

MR LOWRY: So back to Middle East. The caliphate has now been eliminated, a tremendous accomplishment. (Applause.) So what is kind of the – now the – sort of the steady state administration's strategy in Syria and our troop presence there?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. So it's difficult to talk about Syria in isolation. If you'll recall, the caliphate owned most of Iraq at one point as well and was on the verge of moving on Erbil and Baghdad too. And what's – it seems like a long time ago we were watching people in cages and heads being cut off on beaches. That threat remains. The threat from radical Islamic terrorism is not only in the Middle East; it's in other – it's in East Asia. I was with the prime minister of Mali yesterday. It's in Africa. ISIS reigns on some territory in Afghanistan yet today as well, so this threat is still there.

And our mission set in the Middle East is really threefold: First, it's to drive stability broadly. Second, it's to counter terrorism in whatever form, so inside of Syria itself you still have remnants of ISIS, you've got al-Nusra, al-Qaida, lots of different Sunni terror groups there too. So the mission set remains and our troop levels – everybody is inordinately focused on the number of soldiers on the ground. What – we should really be focused on the strategy and what it is we need to implement and execute that strategy. So whether the right number's 200, 2,000, or 20,000, President Trump's committed to making sure that we execute that counterterrorism mission.

And then finally, today – I'll miss one and I'll overstate this, but you don't have to go very far in the Middle East or talk to very many countries before the Islamic Republic of Iran rises to the top of the pile in terms of the threat to stability there. And so we have a massive diplomatic campaign

and a significant financial campaign with the Department of Treasury, and we're using our Title 10, our Department of Defense forces as well, to reduce the capacity of Iran to cause trouble in the Middle East and, frankly, in South America too. You see the Iranians leaning in with Venezuela. I saw an article about this the other day and I was reminded the Venezuelans were asking the Iranians for money like two drunks drowning. (Laughter.)

This is a serious challenge. They are underwriting Hizballah in Lebanon and Syria. They're underwriting the Houthis in Yemen. They're underwriting Shia militias in Iraq. They're underwriting lots of malfeasance inside of Syria. We have a campaign to change the nature of what Iran is doing.

MR LOWRY: So speaking of Yemen, had some disgruntlement in the United States Senate, as I'm sure you're aware, over the war in Yemen. You have the critics making the case that the Saudis are prosecuting this in an immoral or even barbarous way and we should completely wash our hands of it. Why are they wrong?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. Well, factually, they're wrong. Factually, frankly, the American role there has reduced civilian casualties there inordinately. I can – I think it's declassified. I can show you the statistics. Since America's begun to assist the Saudis in their campaign, the ratio of civilian casualties to effectiveness has decreased dramatically, and that's important. And so it's been a good thing that we've helped them.

Second, the humanitarian crisis is often raised. It's real, the risk of cholera and starvation in Yemen – USAID's done a great deal of work there. The United States has now contributed – I think it's just short of a billion dollars in humanitarian assistance. The Saudis have contributed more, the Emiratis have contributed more, and the Iranians have contributed zero dollars to humanitarian assistance. That often goes unnoticed by folks on Capitol Hill. I'm happy to remind any of them if you hear them get that fact wrong.

Second, Martin Griffiths, who's working on behalf of the UN to reduce risk, take down violence so that a political resolution can be made, is at wit's end. The Emiratis have helped. The Saudis have helped. I've spoken to the crown prince a number of times. He has leaned in to try and make sure that we get to a political resolution. And the Iranians want nothing to do with it because the chaos there – the arming of the Houthis, the flying of missiles – some of you will travel to Riyadh within the next two months. There are missiles, Iranian missiles, landing at the King Khalid Airport. That's not good, and that has nothing to do with Saudi malfeasance, but rather the Saudis' right to defend their own nation. And I'm hopeful that the Iranians will lose heart and that the Houthis will see that they can have a political role there, and that they will permit humanitarian assistance to move through route eight to the east of Hodeidah and we can save an awful lot of lives.

MR LOWRY: So, have some questions from the audience.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Other than that, those senators have it exactly right. (Laughter.)

MR LOWRY: We've had –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Having served in Congress, I was wrong once too.
(Laughter.)

MR LOWRY: So as we were discussing earlier, we've had this inordinate focus on Russia, whereas this new strategic challenge that has arisen over the last several decades and presumably persists for decades to come is China. So how do you think about the strategic challenge from China? And the question specifically from our audience is: Is there anything we can do to counter or check the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, of course there is. So the first step was to acknowledge that there is an important relationship between the United States and China. We have huge economic interests there. They buy our products; we buy theirs. Both countries are better as a result of that. However, that trade's not been remotely reciprocal. I ran a small business. I bought some things in China; I sold a few things in China. Had I wanted a Chinese company to be my partner for my U.S.-based company in Kansas, they could have. Had I wanted to be a partner in a business there, it would have been impossible, and if they would have permitted it, they would have demanded to steal the intellectual property that my company had invested heavily in to do that. That's just wrong; we've got to fix it. President Trump has leaned on that, and Secretary Mnuchin is in China today, along with Ambassador Lighthizer, working on that dimension.

But the threats that – the security threats – and I don't want to separate the two. There's a security component to that as well. But the security threats more narrowly defined are very real. They're moving into the South China Sea is not because they want freedom of navigation. Their efforts to build ports around the world aren't because they want to be good shipbuilders and stewards of waterways, but rather they have a state national security element to each and every one of them.

The Belt and Road Initiative is no different. We've said this every place we've gone, every – if you talk to any of our ambassadors or our charges, they will tell you we are happy to compete on a fair, transparent basis under rule of law with the Chinese anywhere in the world. We'll win more than our fair share, but we'll lose some to them too. But when you're showing up with a non-economic offer, whether that's through state-facilitated, below-market pricing or handing someone something knowing that you can foreclose on their nation shortly, so predatory lending practices, that's not straight and we are working diligently to make sure everyone in the world understands that threat. And I think the world is waking up. I think Asia and Southeast Asia in particular are waking up to this risk, and I hope the State Department can continue to be a part of making sure that they see that, identify it, and that it becomes more difficult for the Chinese to engage in these practices.

We have a handful of other tools too, but I'll stop there.

MR LOWRY: So on Israel, another question from the audience. In this country for decades you've had a bipartisan – a strong bipartisan consensus in favor

of Israel and our relationship with it that now really seems to be fraying on the left. What do you make of the increasing anti-Israel sentiment on the left and is there any way to counter it?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's a little out of my lane, other than to say it is unfortunate. You're right about the history. The history is important, and I hope that the leaders on the left will rein this in, and I hope the world, frankly, will rein in anti-Semitism more broadly. It – it ought not be partisan. I said this the other night, and there have been those take a shot or two at me, but the Labour Party in Britain is lost to anti-Semitism. That's unfortunate. Anti-Semitism is rising in France. This is not good news. It – anti-Semitism can come from either direction, from either pole, either political place, or it can be agnostic with respect to where it comes from politically. Anti-Semitism is itself wrong, and I hope all of us will call it out every place we see it and push back against this. (Applause.)

MR LOWRY: So we have just a couple minutes left, so let's go sort of broad gauge, because you're at the pointy end of the spear of American power – at least part of it.

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm at the soft end of the spear there. (Laughter.)

MR LOWRY: Well, it's still pretty – I think it's still pretty pointy. I watch how you work.

So what do you make of – there's this pervasive sense – again, you can get it on both the right and the left – that this country is in decline, it's not as powerful as it's been before, it's not as influential in global affairs as it has been before. What do you make of that declinist sentiment, being someone who – whether you're pointy or soft – who's out there on the front lines every single day?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, it's – it is evil to talk about America in decline. And what do I mean by that? It's fundamentally false, so that's different from being evil. But when it's said most often, when I hear – I saw something, and I shouldn't repeat it because I haven't verified it.

MR LOWRY: Oh, come on, please repeat it. Repeat it.

SECRETARY POMPEO: But a former senior official – a former senior official saying America was never great. It so fundamentally underlines the nature of the greatest nation in the history of civilization.

And so when people talk about that, I always think there's intent behind it, that there's – that it's not about – because you simply stare at the good which America has done around the world, and I say this when I travel to the Middle East: We've been a force for good. I know it's true in Europe; it's undeniable. If you go to Asia, we are there trying to make the lives of the people of Asia better. And so when I see someone who can't observe that, when I see that you can't see that in way that you would say, "No, America is in decline, we've lost influence, we've lost power, America is not a force for good," I always think there's intent behind it, and –

MR LOWRY: Intent in what sense? Wishfulness?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Intent in the sense of – either wishfulness or an agenda that’s trying to change the shape, the fundamental principles that our founders laid out. And that’s really bad, and it has the capacity – if it becomes the narrative, which I think some of them intend – has the capacity to actually be self-fulfilling. And that’s – that can’t be the case. The world can’t survive an America that’s not great and successful and on the world stage.

MR LOWRY: So a related question: What do you say to – and this comes from the left mostly – that America as a beacon of ideals or of idealism has somehow been dimmed in the last several years and we’re less influential because of that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I just don’t see it. Every place I go – I’m the Secretary of State of the United States of America – people want to see me.

MR LOWRY: Dammit. (Laughter.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: I actually meant it just – I actually meant it –

MR LOWRY: I could hear it. Applause. You couldn’t say it because you’re a diplomat. (Laughter.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: I meant it just the – I meant it just the opposite of that, actually. It’s not Mike Pompeo, it’s the American Secretary of State who’s traveling there, and they want our ear, they want our mindshare, they want our capacity to deliver outcomes. And it’s not just that we’ve got a big military, it’s that we have an enormously big heart and a fundamental set of principles in our nation that keep us straight through administrations that have views as widely different as this one from the predecessor administration.

America has always remained a beacon who is out on the stage, and we should never – no administration should ever walk away from that, and no senior leader should ever talk about anything other than the fact that, while we are imperfect, this is an amazing country. (Applause.)

MR LOWRY: I don’t think we can leave it on a better note than that. Let’s just say we are so glad that you are there doing what you’re doing.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you.

MR LOWRY: Mr. Secretary, and again, we really appreciate you being with us today.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, sir. (Applause.)

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