

Press Releases: Interview With Margaret Brennan of CBS 60 Minutes

Interview
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Washington, DC
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MS BRENNAN: Rex Tillerson admits he was an unconventional choice for Secretary of State. He had no prior government experience. But as CEO of ExxonMobil, he had crisscrossed the globe striking deals with foreign leaders. Secretary Tillerson, a man who still considers himself a Boy Scout and follows what he calls the Code of the West, is fiercely private and has shied away from interviews, but he agreed to do a rare, wide-ranging one with us. With the Olympics underway and North Korea very much on his mind, he talked to us about what may be the toughest deal he will ever work on.

QUESTION: In his New Year's Day speech, Kim Jong-un said the "entire area of the U.S. mainland is within our nuclear strike range." That's got to make you nervous.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It does make us nervous. It also – it also stiffens our resolve. That kind of a threat to the American people by a regime like this is not acceptable, and the President's meeting his responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief of asking our military – Secretary Mattis at the Defense Department – to ensure we are prepared for anything.

QUESTION: And those military options are there in case you fail.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: In case I fail. I say to my Chinese counterpart, "You and I fail, these people get to fight. That's not what we want."

QUESTION: But you are willing to work with and potentially negotiate with Kim Jong-un?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, that's who we will have to work with to achieve this diplomatically. What we have to determine now is: Are we even ready to start? Are they ready to start? And if they're not, we'll just keep the pressure campaign underway, and we will increase that pressure. And we are doing that. Every month there are new sanctions rolled out. The world wants North Korea to change.

QUESTION: Well, there are some questions about how badly China wants them to change. You've really needed their help to put economic pressure on Kim Jong-un. What reassurances have you given to China so that they actually follow through?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: What I think we got a common understanding with China is that North Korea represents a serious threat to China as well. And we've been very clear with them that they are going to have an important role to play once we get to the negotiating table.

QUESTION: So I hear you saying there these wouldn't be one-on-one talks. China would be at the table.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Early on they might be one-on-one discussions. For the U.S., first, and North Korea to determine? Is there a reason to begin to put the construct for negotiations in place?

QUESTION: What is the carrot that you're dangling for North Korea to convince them to talk?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We're not using a carrot to convince them to talk. We're using large sticks, and that is what they need to understand. This pressure campaign is putting – is having its bite on North Korea, its revenue streams. It's having a bite on its military programs.

QUESTION: But to say "full denuclearization" – why would they agree to give up something they've already got that they think is an insurance policy?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Because it buys them nothing. It buys them more of being the hermit kingdom, isolated – isolated from the world diplomatically, isolated from the world economically.

QUESTION: Senator Bob Corker, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said, "Every one of us should pray Rex Tillerson and Jim Mattis are successful over the course of the next eight to ten months diplomatically, or our nation is going to be facing one of the greatest military decisions that we face." Eight to ten months. That's how much time you have to get this done?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I'm going to use all the time available to me. Our diplomatic efforts will continue until that first bomb drops. My job is to never have a reason for the first bomb to drop. And we don't know precisely how much time is left on the clock.

QUESTION: You seem to have convinced the President that diplomacy is the way to go on this, but it wasn't always so clear. Back in October, you said you were working to get a dialogue going with the North Koreans, and the President tweeted, "Rex, stop wasting your time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man." Have you asked him not to call him "Little Rocket Man?" Is that a diplomatic term?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: (Laughter.) The President's going to – the President's going to communicate the way he communicates. My job as chief diplomat is to

ensure that the North Koreans know we keep our channels open. I'm listening. I'm not sending a lot of messages back because there's nothing to say to them at this point, so I'm listening for you to tell me you're ready to talk.

QUESTION: How will you know?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: They will tell me. They will tell me.

QUESTION: That explicitly?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We receive messages from them. And I think it will be very explicit as to how we want to have that first conversation.

(A video clip begins playing.) **"SECRETARY TILLERSON:** What's the latest?"

MS BRENNAN: As we saw during this meeting with top aides about the crisis in Yemen, the whole world is now his portfolio.

(The video clip continues.) **"SECRETARY TILLERSON:** I think I saw some reports of further missile attacks out of Yemen..."

MS BRENNAN: But Rex Wayne Tillerson comes from a family of modest means in north Texas. He was named after actors Rex Allen and John Wayne because his parents loved Westerns.

QUESTION: We actually have a photo of you back in your Boy Scout uniform. I understand you rose to Eagle Scout.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Yes.

QUESTION: How old were you here?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think I was 14 when that was taken.

QUESTION: You look very proud.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I am very proud. And was very proud. I still am.

QUESTION: I can tell. I mean, Boy Scouts, you reference it a fair amount. That played a big formative role in your life.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It really shaped who I am.

QUESTION: You still think of yourself as a Boy Scout?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Yes.

QUESTION: Really?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Absolutely.

QUESTION: You don't get to be the CEO of ExxonMobil as a Boy Scout.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I did.

QUESTION: You talked a lot about something that you've called the Code of the West. What does that mean?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, the Code of the West – as the West was unfolding, there wasn't a lot of law enforcement, and people basically relied upon each other's word and "as my word is my bond." And I've used that throughout my life as well, even at ExxonMobil. I would sit down with the head of state for that country or the CEO of that company, and we'd look each other in the eye, and I'd say, "All I need to know is that you're going to live up to your side of this deal, and I give you my word I'll live up to my side of this deal."

And then a lot of the Code of the West was people were very loyal to their organizations. And the phrase "riding for the brand" is a phrase that's always stuck with me that –

QUESTION: Riding for the brand?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Riding for the brand. When a cowboy signed on to a ranch or to that organization, he was committed to that organization.

QUESTION: And what is the brand for you now?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: The State Department, the United States Government, the American people are my brand.

QUESTION: So one leader you hadn't met before December of 2016 was Donald Trump. Tell me what that first encounter was like.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We met in his office in Trump Tower, and he just began by asking me why don't you just kind of talk about how you see the world. So we just – we walked around the world for about an hour. And then after that, then he kind of went into a little bit of a sales pitch with me and said, "I want you to be my Secretary of State." And I was stunned.

QUESTION: You didn't know it was a job interview?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: No, I didn't. I didn't. I thought it was just I was going up just to talk to him and share with him, which I've done with previous presidents. I did with President Obama. I did with President Bush. So I really thought that's all it was. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Did you have any sense of what you were getting yourself into?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: By and large, I did.

QUESTION: You've won some policy arguments: when it came to keeping troops in Afghanistan; you prevented the President in some ways from tearing up the Iran nuclear deal like he said he was going to do. You lost a few arguments too: the Paris climate agreement the President exited; the Trans-Pacific trade partnership, you cautioned against ripping up a deal America had committed to; and you cautioned against moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem on the timeline they laid out. Do you think that's a fair accounting of your record?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think the American people have won with the decisions the President has taken. And it's not about agreeing or disagreeing, because he's the decision maker.

QUESTION: Tell me what it's like to work in an administration where the U.S. has walked away or threatened to walk away from a number of commitments. That has to be hard for someone who believes in the Code of the West.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, some of those I think it's important to keep in mind what the level of commitment was. We have agreements that the Congress never had the opportunity to weigh in on. And so President Trump was elected by the American people, and many of these were issues that he ran on.

(A video clip begins playing.) **QUESTION:** White House officials have said that you're going to be pushed out."

MS BRENNAN: In the past year, Tillerson spent a lot of time denying that he was being outflanked by others in the President's inner circle and that he was either going to resign or be fired.

(The video clip continues.) **SECRETARY TILLERSON:** That's ridiculous."

MS BRENNAN: After reports he called the President a moron:

QUESTION: Why didn't you deny calling the President a moron?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: That's a really old question.

QUESTION: Do you understand that, by not answering the question, some people thought you were confirming the story?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think I've answered the question.

QUESTION: You think you answered the question?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I've answered the question.

QUESTION: Did you call the President a moron?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I'm not going to dignify the question. We've got so many bigger issues that we could be talking about. I'm not from this town. I understand this town likes to talk about a lot of things that are really not important.

QUESTION: Do you think you have enemies in this town?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I don't know.

QUESTION: Where do you think those reports came from that you were resigning or being fired?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I have no idea where they come from. I really don't, and I don't give it much thought.

QUESTION: I mean, you walk into ministry meetings and reporters are shouting, "Sir, when are you resigning?"

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I never hear those questions. The only person that knows whether I'm resigning or not is me.

QUESTION: So one of the other challenges that you have here is sometimes the President's message doesn't jive with your own. I think you'd acknowledge that.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, as I said, the President communicates in his own style, his own way, his own words. And from time to time, I will ask him, "Are you changing the policy?" Because if we are, obviously, I need to know, and everyone needs to know.

QUESTION: Well, you would have thought he'd talk to you about changing the policy before he tweeted.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: And to finish the thought, that has never happened. Every time I've talked to him, he said, "No, the policy hasn't changed." And I say, "Then I'm good." (Laughter.) That's all I need to know.

(A video clip is played.) **"SECRETARY TILLERSON:** I thought today we'd just have a chat..."

MS BRENNAN: Within the ranks of the State Department, there have been complaints Secretary Tillerson is dismantling American diplomacy by embracing major budget cuts and being slow to fill crucial jobs.

QUESTION: There are 41 embassies without confirmed ambassadors, and that's even in places where there are crises. No ambassador in South Korea, Saudi Arabia, in Turkey. How do you explain that?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, there's been no dismantling at all of the State Department. We've got terrific people, both Foreign Service officers, civil servants, that have stepped into those roles around the world, and have stepped in here.

QUESTION: On an interim basis.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It is an interim basis. So clearly, it is not with the same kind of support that I wish everyone had. But our foreign policy objectives continue to be met (inaudible) Senate-confirmed –

QUESTION: But some of these don't even have nominees. I mean, 41 embassies without ambassadors in them.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, some of these are in the process. It's not a question of people being – or neglecting the importance of it. It's just the nature of the process itself.

QUESTION: You've said you have a very close relationship with Vladimir Putin. You've done huge deals with him. Photos of you toasting him with champagne.

And all that closeness raised eyebrows. It even inspired a Saturday Night Live skit. Did you ever see that skit?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I did. My kids pointed me to it. (Laughter.)

(A video clip is played.) "Puty, oh my God." "Rexy, baby..."

QUESTION: Did you laugh?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Absolutely. Absolutely. I laughed out loud.

QUESTION: It made light, though, of this concern that you have a friendship with Vladimir Putin, and that because of that you and the President aren't going to hold him to account.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: The relationship that I had with President Putin spans 18 years now. It was always about what could I do to be successful on behalf of my shareholders, how Russia could succeed.

QUESTION: How different was it walking into the Kremlin as Secretary of State?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It was different because – and I had to think very, very carefully about that. And the only thing I said to him was, "Mr. President, the same man, a different hat."

QUESTION: But the dynamic changed.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: The dynamic changed because the issues were different. What he is representing is different than what I now represent. And I said to him, "I now represent the American people." And I think it was important that that be said right up front, and he clearly got it. I mean, he clearly understood that as well.

QUESTION: But since you're Secretary of State now, you've accused him of violating nuclear arms control agreements, of cheating on North Korea sanctions, letting Assad continue now to use chlorine gas chemical weapons on civilians. He doesn't seem to be particularly concerned about the warnings you're giving him.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I don't know. We'll see if he's concerned or not.

QUESTION: There were six chlorine gas attacks in the past 30 days.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: That's correct. And we have called them out for the fact that Russia has special responsibilities, in our view, because of commitments they made to destroy chemical weapons and ensure they knew that there were none.

QUESTION: That sounds a lot like the last administration. It doesn't sound very different.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, when it comes to killing people with chemical

weapons, it shouldn't look any different. I think the only difference is the consequences for it. And President Trump has already demonstrated there will be consequences.

QUESTION: Does that mean military action is still on the table for chlorine gas attacks?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: As it was – as it was in April last year, we are serious about our demands that chemical weapons not become regularized or normalized as a weapon in any conflict.

QUESTION: Why not implement the sanctions that Congress overwhelmingly says they want to see put on Russia?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We have and we are. We have taken steps that have already prevented a number of Russian military sales as a result of the legislation, and we are evaluating additional individuals for possible sanctioning.

QUESTION: So I know we're under a time constraint.

(A video clip is played.) "...the President."

MS BRENNAN: Near the end of our interview, we were interrupted by a phone call from the President.

(The video clip continues.) "**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Be right back."

MS BRENNAN: Afterward, the Secretary took us out for a brief stroll on his terrace before heading to the White House.

QUESTION: How often do you talk to the President?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We typically will try to talk every day even if it's only for a few minutes. A lot of times, I'll call from the road when I'm on a trip just to let him know how it's going and..."

MS BRENNAN: Rex Tillerson enjoys the view from the top of the State Department. He seems to be one of the few people in Washington not surprised he's still here.

QUESTION: If I believed the press reports that came out about you in the past year, you would not be sitting here talking to me as the Secretary of State. It seems like reports of your political death were premature?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I hope with this little bit of exchange we've had, you understand the man better. That's why I'm still here. Those things don't bother me. I'm here to serve my country. I committed to this President. My word is my bond. I ride for this brand. That's why I'm here, and nothing anybody else says is going to change that.

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