

Press Releases: Interview With Wolf Blitzer of CNN

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Buenos Aires, Argentina
December 1, 2018

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thanks so much for joining us.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Wolf, it's great to be with you.

QUESTION: Let's talk about the late President George H.W. Bush. How do you see his legacy?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's a remarkable American legacy, and they don't make them like that very often. I had the chance to get to know him when I was a member of Congress first and then I held a job that he held at one point, and I remember talking to him just after I was nominated to be the CIA director. He said you'll be great, you'll be awesome. In fact, it was the second-best job I ever had, and he loved that group of people, that talented espionage agency so much. America is worse off today. I want to extend my and Susan's heartfelt sympathy to the entire Bush family.

QUESTION: What lessons can politicians today learn from the life he led?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It was a true life of service. He was also committed to his faith and he was (inaudible) work really hard. Maybe those would be the three things – if you work at it, if you keep your faith, and you have this commitment to serve, good things can happen. Not only to him – he had a remarkable life – but you'll do good work for your fellow man as well. President Bush certainly did that.

QUESTION: He was an amazing man and I was blessed myself to have interviewed him on several occasions. I know if he were here, he'd want us to get to substantive issues, so in his memory, let's talk about some of the major national security issues facing the U.S. right now.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Saudi Arabia. Do you believe the Saudi explanation that the crown

prince, Mohammed bin Salman, did not know about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Wolf, I've spoken about this a lot. I continue to work on this issue. President Trump and this administration sanctioned 17 people that we came to learn were connected to the murder – heinous murder – of Jamal Khashoggi. All across the United States government we continue to investigate, to try and learn, to make determinations about what happened, and we'll continue to hold those responsible accountable. We've been very clear, very clear about that since literally the very beginning.

We also, Wolf – and this is important – are doing everything we can to make sure that we get it right for America, that we keep the strategic relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and protect the American people. Those two things can both be done and we've done it very effectively.

QUESTION: Because you have said that – and you're a former CIA director, so you understand how U.S. intelligence analysis works – you said there's no direct reporting connecting the crown prince to order the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Can you confidently tell his four children that he was not involved in that order?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, obviously, sitting in an unclassified setting, here's what I can say: I have read every piece of intelligence that is in the possession of the United States government, and when it is done, when you complete that analysis, there's no direct evidence linking him to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. That is an accurate statement, it is an important statement, and it is the statement that we are making publicly today.

QUESTION: Did the CIA conclude with high confidence that he was involved?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I can't comment on intelligence matters or CIA conclusions. I didn't do it when I was director; I'm not going to do it now.

QUESTION: Because you've seen all the reports in the media about it.

SECRETARY POMPEO: I've seen lots of reports in the media, Wolf. They often are untrue.

QUESTION: So the bottom line is that the U.S. is going to continue to maintain the same relationship, strategic or operation, with Saudi Arabia right now, irrespective of what may have happened?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Today we're working with the Saudis in Afghanistan, we're working with the Saudis to push back against Ayatollah Khamenei, who killed hundreds of Americans, Wolf, and they are an enormous support to us. They are a relationship that has mattered for 70 years across Republican and Democrat administrations alike. It remains an important relationship and we're aiming to keep that relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

QUESTION: Because you're losing support in Congress, even – including among Republicans right now for – to continue U.S. support for the Saudi operation in Yemen. Even Lindsey Graham voted against your position. There were 14

Republican senators who voted against you the other day in the Senate.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Secretary Mattis and I and the President have made very clear we're working to end the hostilities in Yemen. The humanitarian crisis there is of epic proportions, millions of people at or near starvation. This administration has put almost a billion dollars into stopping that humanitarian crisis. The Saudis have put even more money in of theirs. The Iranians, Wolf, have put zero dollars in to stopping that humanitarian crisis, and we are determined to fix the problem of the humanitarian crisis while ensuring that we don't end up with a Hizballah organization on the southern edge of Saudi Arabia.

QUESTION: So U.S. military support for the Saudis in Yemen will continue?

SECRETARY POMPEO: The program that we're involved in today we intend to continue.

QUESTION: Let's talk about Russia, another critical issue. Why did the President decide to cancel what was supposed to be a two-hour face-to-face meeting with the Russian leader?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I can actually answer that. I was there. He canceled it because the Russians behaved in a way that is deeply inconsistent with international law and is outrageous. To have held the Ukrainians that they took in the strait needs to be changed. The President wanted to send a clear, unambiguous message that we find that type of behavior unacceptable, and so he canceled the meeting.

QUESTION: But the Russians – well, the Russians – the Russians have done other awful things and the President went ahead in Helsinki and met –

SECRETARY POMPEO: This happened hours, days before – the series of events unfolded days –

QUESTION: But wouldn't it be a good time for him to have a face-to-face –

SECRETARY POMPEO: (Inaudible) hours and days, Wolf, hours and days before, and the President made the decision that the right thing to do was tell the Russians return the sailors, return the Ukrainian equipment, it's theirs. The people need to be returned to their families, and he wanted to send an unambiguous message that the Russians needed to change that act.

QUESTION: It had nothing to do with the announcement that came just an hour earlier before he boarded Air Force One to fly here to Argentina that Michael Cohen was cooperating with Mueller and all these new information – details about a supposed Trump Tower project in Moscow?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Ludicrous. Washington parlor game.

QUESTION: Well, explain, because it –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I was involved in the decision, Wolf. I can explain (inaudible).

QUESTION: You were aboard Air Force One.

SECRETARY POMPEO: I was aboard Air Force One.

QUESTION: And nobody discussed Michael Cohen?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Wolf, this is the thing that the American people need to understand about Washington, D.C.: It makes stuff up that is wholly unfounded. I was involved in the decision-making process. We evaluated it – we considered the opportunity to speak with him, we considered the message we would send. President Trump made the decision this was the right approach based on the activity that had taken place in the lead-up to the G20 summit.

QUESTION: So is there going to be an opportunity down the road for the President to meet with Putin?

SECRETARY POMPEO: President's made clear the conditions for that meeting.

QUESTION: What are the conditions?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We want the sailors returned, we want the ships returned.

QUESTION: And once the Russians do that, there will be a summit?

SECRETARY POMPEO: President has said he wants to meet. He wants to have a conversation with President Putin. There are lots of things that we need to find paths forward on together, lots of places Americans are at risk. He's trying to find a way to move forward with Russia, and now this jumped in the middle of a time when they could have begun to have a discussion where we might have made some progress. We regret that, but the Russians caused this meeting to be canceled by their behavior in the Kerch Strait.

QUESTION: When is the President going to meet again with the North Korean leader?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I don't know. I hope it'll happen pretty soon. We're working hard at it. I think it'll happen shortly after the first of the year but I don't have any additional information to share with you this morning, Wolf.

QUESTION: What's the problem right now with the North Koreans?

SECRETARY POMPEO: The progress – yes. Well, the progress we've made has been good.

QUESTION: No, what's the problem?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, the progress we've made has been good. We're not having missiles launched, there haven't been any nuclear tests. We continue to have conversations about the right next step – that is the right substantive next step, not the process next step of meetings. We're working with partners all across the world – South Koreans, the Japanese. Remember, Wolf, these are global sanctions put in place by the United Nations Security

Council which deny North Korea the capacity to improve their economy. That's not going to change, unlike previous administrations that when they got to a point that became difficult wrote checks for tens and hundreds of millions of dollars and let the North Koreans off the hook in that sense. We're determined to fulfill the commitments that were made by Chairman Kim in Singapore and we're working hard at it.

QUESTION: A final question on Mexico. It looks like U.S.-Mexican relations are improving, right? You're off to Mexico for the inauguration of the new president, and the President – President Trump signed together with the leaders of Mexico and Canada the U.S.-Mexico-Canada new trade agreement. But there's still a lot of tension along the border and there's a lot of uproar about whether or not the U.S. should go ahead and build a new wall, spend all that money. What ever happened to the President's commitment for so long during the campaign that Mexico would pay for the wall?

SECRETARY POMPEO: That wall's going to get built. I have already developed a good relationship with my counterpart, Marcelo Ebrard, the incoming foreign secretary of Mexico. We've met a number of times already. I'm unfortunately not going to make the inauguration, as it's taking place today in Mexico, but he'll travel to Washington on what I guess would be his second day in office and we're going to continue to develop this relationship.

It's not just focused on the migration issues that draw all the headlines. There are many economic issues between our two countries and other commercial – we have transnational criminal organizations that we work on together. It's a broad set of relationships. We're going to work to help build the Mexican economy in the southern part of their nation, work with the Northern Triangle countries too. Those are important elements of what we're trying to accomplish, and soon-to-be Foreign Secretary – I guess within hours – Ebrard and I are working hard at it.

QUESTION: And Mexico paying for the wall?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're going to get the wall built, Wolf.

QUESTION: But will Mexico pay for it?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Wolf, we're going to get the wall built.

QUESTION: I'll leave it on that.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, sir.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you've got a busy schedule ahead of you. Thanks so much time for spending some time with us.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, Wolf. Have a great day.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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