

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT BY MICHAEL SMERCONISH

Oval Office

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Q Mr. President, thank you for this privilege. This is our seventh conversation, and I appreciate the honor of coming into the Oval Office. Thank you for that.

THE PRESIDENT: Michael, it's great to be with you again.

Q Let's talk polarization. It's a subject of concern for both my listeners and me. Putting aside the blame, the fact is you've been unsuccessful in getting Republicans to work with you. Today I noted that The Washington Post endorsed you, embraced your candidacy, but said that you've been isolated in the White House. What can, what will you do in a second term to win cooperation from Republicans?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think the most important thing is, after the election -- and I believe I'm going to win -- to once again bring the Republicans together with my administration and Democrats and say to them, the election is over; we still have some big problems to solve, and the goal of making me a one-term President is behind us, and the question now is how do we move forward in a way that strengthens middle-class families, make sure that job

growth is strong, that wages are going up.

Probably the first piece of business is going to be to go ahead and fix our deficit and debt issues, and make a decision about how big our government is and how we're going to pay for it. And I put forward a \$4 trillion deficit reduction plan -- we've already cut a trillion dollars' worth of government spending. We can do the rest by a sensible combination of spending cuts and some revenue.

And if we can spend the first four, five, six months getting that done so that the American people feel like the parties came together and put us on a more solid fiscal footing, where we don't have to worry about taxes going up sky high for everybody, we don't have to worry about massive cuts that would hurt our economy and our growth, then I think that that will break the fever here in Washington.

Q Will you make the first move? Will you go to Capitol Hill?

THE PRESIDENT: Listen, I've said to folks, I'll go to Capitol Hill, I'll wash John Boehner's car, I'll walk Mitch McConnell's dog -- I'll do whatever is required to get this done. And I think the key that the American people want right now is for us to tackle some big challenges that we face in a common-sense, balanced, sensible way.

Q Will you resurrect and fight for Simpson-Bowles by way of example?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Simpson-Bowles is a great example -- for your listeners who aren't completely familiar with it, this was a commission I put together, bipartisan, to find a way to reduce our deficit and stabilize our government finances in a balanced, sensible way.

And we didn't accept every one of the recommendations, because they, for example, wanted defense cuts that were steeper than I felt comfortable with as Commander-in-Chief. They wanted revenues that would have required us eliminating home mortgage deductions for middle-class families, and charitable deductions for middle-class families, which I thought went too far.

But what we did was take the basic principles that they put forward, which is you've got to have spending cuts, you've got to get control of our health care programs -- Medicare and Medicaid -- and you've got to make sure that you raise some revenue. And we put together a package that allows us to meet the same targets that they've been talking about.

Q Do you regret not having fought harder for Simpson-Bowles?

THE PRESIDENT: As I said, what we did, we took the basic framework, the basic principles, and we tweaked it. I don't regret declining to make the steep defense cuts that they were talking about.

Q Mr. President, I watched your interview with Brian Williams and I know that you've already been questioned on this 62 percent who want a major change in a second term. Can you give my listeners an example of a major change that they can get from President Obama in a second term?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I just gave you an example, which is we can get our deficit and debt under control in a sensible, balanced way. That's number one. Number two, we can build on the success we've had with the auto industry by encouraging manufacturing to come back to our shores.

This is a huge issue, because even if you're not in manufacturing, you understand -- I think most workers understand that having a strong manufacturing base makes our economy stronger as a whole. And so for us to change our tax code to lower corporate tax rates for manufacturers who are making stuff here, closing loopholes for companies that are shipping jobs overseas so that they're not getting tax breaks for setting up shop in China -- that's a big piece of business.

On energy, we can cut our oil imports in half by 2020. We have done more on energy to reduce our dependence on foreign oil over the last four years than we've done in the previous 20. But we've got an opportunity now to really free ourselves from dependence on Middle East oil, for example, and Venezuelan oil and some of these other turbulent places in the world. That

would make a huge difference not only in terms of gas prices, but it would also make a difference in terms of our national security.

Q Allow me to shift to foreign policy. You and I spoke several times before you got bin Laden, and each time you said that you would act on intelligence even if it might be to Pakistan. You were roundly criticized. I went back and looked at some notes: President Bush said that your comments were unsavory. Senator McCain, that you were naïve. Senator Clinton, that this was a mistake. Even Senator Biden, that you undermined your ability to be tough. And Governor Romney at the time said that these were ill-timed and ill-considered remarks.

What, sir, do you say to those who now wish to look back and say that was a no-brainer?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, look, their own words, Michael, I think indicate that this was a tough decision, but it was the right decision. The fact of the matter is I said very clearly at the start that those who attacked us on 9/11 have to be our national security priority. And we ended the war in Iraq; we refocused on al Qaeda. Not only did we get bin Laden, but we also have decimated the core leadership of al Qaeda in Pakistan-Afghanistan region. That has made America safer.

And the reason I was able to make these tough calls was, number one, unbelievable intelligence work. Once we brought our intelligence teams into the White House -- and

Leon Panetta at the time was the head of CIA -- and said, I want us to double down -- it was almost like a cold case -- and just drill down and focus on this. And these guys had been working on it, but it had been sort of on a slow burner -- I said let's ratchet up the heat. And for us then to have extraordinary confidence in our Navy SEALs once we were able to identify the guy -- that gave me a lot of confidence.

But what I will also say is this: It's not just bin Laden. We have been able to take out 20 out of the 23 top al Qaeda leadership. The folks in the FATA are on their heels. There are groups throughout the Middle East and North Africa that aspire to jihad and terrorist acts, but what we've done is really crippled their capacity to carry out homeland attacks here in the United States. That's made America safe.

We're still going to have to deal with groups and watch them, and that's why we've set up the kind of counterterrorism cooperation we have throughout the region. But we've got an infrastructure now where we can keep putting pressure on them, and that is an achievement I'm very proud of. But, again, I couldn't have done it without the incredible intelligence work, but also the incredible work of our military and our special forces.

Q Do you think that the unwillingness of some to give you your deserved credit for ordering the killing of bin Laden is because it contradicts a narrative that they fostered of you as being sympathetic, apologetic -- fill in the blank?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think that some of our opponents on the Republican side have had difficulty with the fact that we have been successful, tough, and effective when it comes to going after terrorism, but we've also been able to do it in a way that's consistent with our values, consistent with rule of law, and that is credible around the world.

I mean, one of the interesting things that I think we've been able to achieve on foreign policy is that we have taken the fight to the terrorists, but you notice that you have not seen the kind of international objections and outcry that you saw in the previous administration. And that's -- the reason is, is that we don't go around thumping our chest about it; we seek cooperation with other countries wherever we can; we do it in a careful, methodical, systematic way. But what this shows I think is a smart, strong, steady foreign policy is different than a lot of saber-rattling and chest-pumping.

Q But you follow my question, Mr. President, that they've tried to foster this narrative of you being -- for lack of a better word -- an "other"? The guy who sat at that desk and gave the order to take out bin Laden is no "other."

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, well, the good thing is the American people don't buy that. I mean, the one thing that I think is clear in this campaign is that -- obviously people are concerned about the economy and want to see faster job growth, all the things that I care about and that my five-point plan addresses. But when it comes to foreign policy,

I think they know that I'm looking after the American people's safety every single day; that not only is this notion of me apologizing for America the most debunked lie of the campaign season, because I go around and lift up America as the indispensable nation around the world, and everybody -- I think the American people know that. But what they also know is that I don't hesitate to act decisively when it comes to looking after the safety of the American people.

And by the way, the military, who I work with, they understand that as well.

Q If you figure out who killed Ambassador Stevens, will you take that person out without regard for the election timetable?

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely. But I think our goal would be to bring them to justice. My efforts will be to see if we can roll up these networks that do harm to Americans anywhere in the world.

This is a top priority. What happened in Benghazi was a tragedy. We're investigating exactly what happened. I take full responsibility for the fact -- I send these folks into harm's way; I want to make sure that they are always safe, and when that doesn't happen, that we figure out what happened and make sure it doesn't happen again.

But my biggest priority right now is bringing those folks to justice. And I think the American people have seen

that's a commitment I always keep.

Q Before the attack which killed Ambassador Stevens, were you personally aware of any request to increase security?

THE PRESIDENT: I was not personally aware of any request. Obviously we have an infrastructure that's set up to manage requests like that. But we're going to find out exactly what happened. Ultimately, though, any time there is a death of an American overseas, I want to find out what happened, because my most important job as President is keeping the American people safe. And we will get to the bottom of what happened, and we're going to make sure, most importantly, that those who carried it out, that they are captured.

Q There have been charges made about the shifting narrative relative to Benghazi. I noted that on Monday, the Wall Street Journal reported that your daily briefings between September 13 and 21 said that the attack had arisen from a spontaneous protest. Is it true that your statements and those of Ambassador Rice were simply repeating what the PDBs were telling you?

THE PRESIDENT: What's true is that the intelligence was coming in and evolving as more information came on. And what is true -- and this is something that the American people can take to the bank -- is that my administration plays this stuff straight. We don't play politics when it comes to American national security. So

what we consistently have done throughout my presidency, and what we did in this circumstance is, as information came in we gave it to the American people. And as we got new information, we gave that to the American people.

And that includes, by the way, members of Congress. So one of the things that always frustrates me about this town is when people go out there and try to politicize issues, despite knowing that we have given them all this information --

Q Well, is Governor Romney one of those who does know? Because the public record suggests that since September 17, he has been receiving intelligence briefings, and presumably, Mr. President, they would contain some level of the same information provided to you. So is it, therefore, disingenuous, in your opinion, when he was making political hay of the shifting narrative?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, here's what I can say, is he certainly understood that when our diplomats are still under fire -- not just in Benghazi, but around the world -- in Cairo, in Pakistan, et cetera -- that if you aspire to be commander-in-chief, you don't release a political press release. You don't have a political press conference that tries to take advantage of that opportunity that is so reckless that even members of your own party criticize you for it.

And I think that what's fair to say when people look at how I've dealt with national security issues is we've made tough decisions even when it wasn't politically

convenient. And I've always been straight with the American people about decisions we've made. Anybody who's worked with this White House, from the Pentagon to the State Department to the CIA, will tell you that our number-one priority consistently is what are we doing to keep the American people safe; what are we doing to advance America's national security interest; and, by the way, what are we doing to make sure that the American people are informed of what we're doing -- within the constraints of classified information that would endanger folks in the field -- so that people can have confidence that their President and everybody involved in national security is working for them.

That's what we've done. That's not how we've seen Governor Romney operate during the course of this campaign. But that's his choice to make. What I know is, is that my team is under a clear directive in terms of how we operate.

Q Did it occur to you in the third debate, which covered foreign policy, that perhaps the reason he took a pass on the first question, which pertained to Libya and Benghazi, is because at that time he knew his own briefings, like yours, had reflected that the belief initially was that the protests spawned the attack?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not sure that Governor Romney was necessarily constrained by facts that he had received. The truth is that during the course of this campaign he hasn't been restrained by facts that much,

period.

I do think that they probably got a sense that the American people understand how I've operated over the last four years. The American people trust that I make decisions in a straightforward, steady way, not in a reckless way, and not in a political way. And I just don't think that that was getting a lot of political traction for them.

Q Finally, sir, Governor Sununu insinuated that Secretary Powell endorsed you due to race. Does that offend you?

THE PRESIDENT: I'll let General Powell's statements stand for themselves. He spoke about the fact that my foreign policy during a very difficult time had been steady and strong. He talked about, with respect to our economy, that we had helped to rescue America from a potential Great Depression and that we were moving in the right direction.

I don't think that there are many people in America who would question General Powell's credibility, his patriotism, his willingness to tell it straight. And so any suggestion that General Powell would make such a profound statement in such a important election based on anything than what he thought was what's going to be best for America I think doesn't make much sense.

Q I don't want to overstay my welcome. Did you know you were on a split screen in that first debate? Did

you know that in American living rooms they were looking at both of you at the same time?

THE PRESIDENT: There's no doubt that the way they cover debates have changed over the last four years. We knew that there would be some split screens. I don't think we anticipated that it was the entire time. But, look, the fact is that first debate was clearly a sign I was out of practice, I had a bad night. But the underlying statements that I made, the underlying truth of the choice in this election didn't change, which is why, in the second debate and the third debate, once I was making the presentation more effectively, I think it became very clear to the American people which direction we need to move in.

The fact of the matter is that Governor Romney's economic policies are reverting back to the same policies that I inherited that led us to the slowest job growth in 50 years, record deficits, and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The economic policies that I'm talking about -- making sure we've got the best education system in the world; making sure that we're cutting our oil imports in half by 2020 and developing all sources of energy; bringing manufacturing back to our shores and making sure that we're providing tax breaks to companies that are investing here in the United States, not overseas; reducing our deficit in a balanced way by making cuts to make, but also making sure that we're asking the wealthy to pay a little bit more so that we can invest in things like research and technology that keep our

technological edge; that we're not voucherizing Medicare but we're maintaining the integrity of that system; and then, as we end these wars, using some of the money that we're saving to put Americans back to work rebuilding our infrastructure -- our roads, our bridges, our schools -- and focusing on our veterans so that when they come home and they take off that uniform, that they're getting the skills they need and the jobs that they need to help grow a strong middle class and make sure that we're serving them as well as they've served us -- that's an agenda that we know works.

And it's based on the idea that when everybody gets a fair shot, when we're growing from the middle class out and not from the top down, that if you work hard in this country, you can count on some basic security -- that idea I think is what America is all about. I believe that's the reason I'm going to win this election -- because that is the right direction. That's how I've governed. And what Governor Romney is offering is a return to policies that have failed us in the past. He's now talking about them as big changes. They're not big changes; they're a repeat, a relapse of things that haven't worked for American families for over a decade now.

Q Mr. President, thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Michael, it's great to talk to you.

Q Thank you, sir.

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12:33 P.M.