

Transcript of June 14 interview of Under Secretary R. Nicholas Burns by Kastljós TV show, Iceland's most popular television show

Q: Mr. Under Secretary, I know you have been meeting with Icelandic authorities, and they have explained their new stance on the war in Iraq. What is your understanding of the new view?

U-S Burns: First of all, I would like to say it is good to be in Iceland because Iceland has been a great friend of the United States. I think our relationship is very good between the two governments. With the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, we focused on Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, United Nations and we agree on nearly every issue. On the issue of Iraq, our hope is that countries will understand that we are beyond the phase of whether we were right to go in or not. We believe we were. That was the argument four years ago. We're now in a very different phase where we hope countries like Iceland will support the proposition that the democracy in Iraq, the democratic government elected by the people, is worth defending; that we should see an end to terrorism and a return to civility and peace. We should try to rebuild the country; help the Iraqis rebuild the country. So, I don't think there are many differences between Iceland and the United States on that issue.

Q: A nation that has been an ally for nearly 60 years, a member of the Coalition of the Willing, says now it regrets the war in Iraq. Do you think Iceland no longer considers itself a member of the infamous coalition of the willing?

U-S Burns: That would have to be a question for the Government of Iceland. I cannot speak for that government.

Q: What's the U.S. position?

U-S Burns: I think that we understand the situation to be that the Icelandic authorities may have disagreed or may now disagree with certain aspects of the decision to go in. But that was four years ago, and historians are going to have to decide that question. The question that's before us right now is we have 170,000 American troops in Iraq. How can they be successful? How can they help to create a more peaceful and stable environment that will allow the Iraqi government to stand up and strengthen itself and to move forward. That's the question. I don't think there are very many countries that disagree with those ambitions. And, in the course of my discussions with the Icelandic government today, I don't think the government disagrees that the United States should be trying to do what it can to help stabilize Iraq. And that countries like Iceland and some of the other countries that don't have forces there, ought to be active in helping themselves strengthen the Iraqi government.

Q: How do you think Iceland could do that?

U-S Burns: There are many ways to do that. One is to show political support for the government of Iraq. Second, is to extend financial and humanitarian assistance to the

civilian population. There are many ways. Third, is to continue to participate in the NATO missions. There's a NATO training mission to train the Iraqi army. And I think all the governments, even those governments who disagreed bitterly with our decision to go in 2003, are now part of that training mission. So, there are many ways that one can have a political view and yet still serve an Alliance objective.

Q: There's another issue that Icelanders and the U.S. Government have not seen eye-to-eye on and that's whaling. This year, Icelandic scientists say it would be okay to hunt up to 200 fin whales. Were Icelandic authorities to issue a quota for 150 to 200 fin whales, what would the U.S. reaction be?

U-S Burns: Well, our reaction is that we just had a meeting of the International Whaling Commission in Anchorage, Alaska and that, there is a possibility, and Iceland and the United States voted together, whereby the International Whaling Commission sanctions for scientific purposes the hunting of whales in limited number. In fact, we were together in voting for the rights of the native populations in Alaska and Russia, the Inuit population, to do that. But when it comes to commercial whaling, we think the International Whaling Commission's standards and framework should be adhered to. And so, I think we don't always see eye-to-eye on this particular issue. But we are members of the same Commission that tries to regulate proper behavior by international standards.

Q: Last year there was talk of sanctions. Do you foresee that could be something that happens?

U-S Burns: I think that we certainly rather prefer to resolve this by more normal means. And I think that further discussion is probably necessary between our two governments and the other members of the IWC so that we can have a better idea of what Iceland intends to do.

Q: Doesn't the U.S. believe that whales should not be hunted for commercial reasons?

U-S Burns: The United States believes the International Whaling Commission's objectives and standards should be adhered to. We're a member of that Commission, and we think that international views are important and should be considered by countries in making their decisions.

Q: A year ago you made a call to then Foreign Minister Geir H. Haarde to announce the drawback of U.S. forces. While the decision per se was not unexpected, many felt it was done in a somewhat almost rude manner. A year later, do you think it should have been handled differently?

U-S Burns: Well, I can assure you that we would always want to show respect for the Icelandic government. Iceland has been a great friend of the United States, since before the Second World War, but certainly since the formation of the NATO Alliance. Iceland has always been considerate of American views, so we would never want to act in a way

that anyone in this country would deem disrespectful. I don't think we conveyed that. But if that's the perception, we obviously would want to correct it. The fact is this was a very difficult issue. We had the security alliance, we had the American base here for many, many decades but the world had changed. The Cold War had ended. The specific reason for that base's existence—the Soviet Union—had disappeared. So, we felt it was time to get on to modernize our relationship and to conserve money, personnel, resources, for urgent needs elsewhere. But that doesn't mean we are not concerned with Iceland's needs. Iceland and the United States have a Defense Agreement, written and agreed to in 1951. We know that's important to the people of Iceland and the Government of Iceland. So, we've tried very hard, and I think we've succeeded, in committing ourselves, each other, to a series of defense initiatives that will help provide for the security of Iceland, and help guarantee the American commitment to the security of Iceland.

Q: Justice Minister Björn Björnsson said in an interview some months ago that the way the issue was handled by U.S. authorities might cause Icelandic politicians to think twice when asked for rights to use the Keflavik base under any circumstances. Do you think this perception—that the U.S. was rude--might affect the relationship?

U-S Burns: First of all, I can tell you we have an excellent relationship with the Government of Iceland. I have the greatest respect for Prime Minister Haarde, and I have gotten to know him very well because of these negotiations. I spent a lot of time with him today, and I don't sense any profound problem between our two governments on this. I don't think there's a problem at all. I think we're working well together. If there's a perception outside the government that the United States could or should have done something differently, we will obviously want to do something to counteract that and to convince people that we acted in good faith. This wasn't easy. We knew there were jobs at stake. There was the symbol that the American base at Keflavik presented to the Icelandic Government and people. We understood all this. And yet at some point, when the world changes completely, as it has changed since 1989, then you have to adjust. And we felt that the base was, in essence, not the most modern and effective way to fulfill our defense obligations to the Government of Iceland. Are there other ways to do it? Now, just today, there is an Aegis class destroyer, the USS Normandy, that came into Reykjavik port, accompanied by ships from Germany and Spain, and so that's an expression of the American defense commitment. In August, American fighter aircraft will come back to Iceland and have exercises with our Canadian, British, Norwegian and Lithuanian allies. We are also close to an agreement, that we have been working on today, that would help to ensure the modernization of Iceland's radar system. We have agreed today that we will give American assistance to Iceland as it seeks to modernize the strategy of its national defense. So, there are many, many ways we can help, and we will be helpful to Iceland because that's our obligation as a friend and an ally.

Q: You mention that the world is changing. Another emerging superpower, China, is showing increased interest in Iceland. Last year, we had between 8000-9000 Chinese tourists. The Chinese just asked for a piece of land to build a considerably larger Chinese Embassy. Is the U.S. following this?

U-S Burns: We're following it, but we're a self-confident country. We have proven, over nearly six decades, our fidelity, loyalty to Iceland. So, if it helps the Icelandic people and government to have a closer relationship with China, that's not against American interests. I think America will always be among the strongest allies to Iceland, given our geographic proximity, given the NATO Alliance, given our defense treaty, given the fact that we have so much in common as to who we are as a people, and what we believe in. So, I don't think we should operate from any degree of insecurity; I think that we should have confidence in this relationship. And we certainly do have that confidence.

Q: You're not suspicious of what the Chinese think?

U-S Burns: Suspicious? Well, no. China is exercising its diplomatic rights as a great power in the world to be represented as best they see fit in a foreign country. So, I wouldn't say that. I don't think we need to obsess about China or any other country. I think we should focus on what's working, which is the U.S./ Icelandic relationship, which is in pretty good shape. I think I had about five hours of discussions with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister today, and I can tell you on nearly every issue, we have a convergence of views. We may have some differences in tone or tactics but I think our strategic aims are quite similar. We talked about the Middle East peace negotiations, Israeli/Arab negotiations, we talked about Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Africa, about the United Nations and the importance of reforming it. So, I think we had a full discussion and I was pleased by it. I think it demonstrates that our two countries are natural partners.

Q: You said there is irrefutable evidence that Iran is supplying weapons to the Taliban in Afghanistan and other countries. What is this evidence?

U-S Burns: What I meant to say was that there is irrefutable, clear evidence that Iranian-origin weapons have found their way into Afghanistan, and they have been intercepted by allied forces, and those weapons, we believe, were destined for the Taliban. Secretary of Defense Gates said yesterday that he finds it very difficult to believe that the Iranian Government is not aware of these or connected to these, so this is a change in Iranian government policy. For a long time, we assumed that the Iranians were the foe of the Taliban and were going to give constructive support to the Afghan government. But now we have a situation where there is this very disturbing evidence that Iranian-origin weapons have been conveyed across the border into Afghanistan for the Taliban. The Taliban is this organization that nearly destroyed Afghanistan when it was the governing authority. And the Taliban is the adversary of NATO. Our forces are there to repel the Taliban and to prevent them from carrying out the kind of terrorist operations that they had specialized in.

Q: Is this an aggressive action by Iran against NATO?

U-S Burns: It's always hard to define the motives of a government like the government of Iran. We would hope that the Iranian government would be able to assure the world that it is not involved. We would hope that the Iranian government would act to support the government of President Karzai and not provide any assistance to the Taliban, which is a terrorist organization.

Q: Some, including John Bolton, say the U.S. should do something about all this, considering what seems to be an escalation in tensions between the U.S. and Iran. Is the U.S. considering action against Iran?

U-S Burns: We are doing something. We have offered negotiations. We have grouped together with China, Britain, Russia, France and Germany to offer a negotiated settlement.

Q: Beyond that?

U-S Burns: Well, that's important. It wouldn't be good just to give up on diplomacy. Diplomacy sometimes takes a while to play itself out. And the Iranians so far have said 'no' to negotiations. If they continue to say 'no', then we'll surely have to go forward with a Security Council resolution, a third resolution, probably to be voted on sometime in July. That resolution would strengthen the existing sanctions, and would be an additional international rebuke to the Iranian government, for the fact that it is operating at variance with the world's wishes. It's trying to seek a nuclear weapons capability, which nobody in the world wants to see; it's the central banker, if you will, funding Middle East terrorist groups, it's funding the great majority of them, and it's a country that's denied the human rights of its own people. So, Iran has a lot to answer for. We would hope that the Iranians would understand that the world is going to judge Iran by its actions.

Q: If Iran threatens an embargo and withholds oil from the world's economy?

U-S Burns: We cannot be intimidated by a government like Iran just because it has oil. Iran also needs the revenues from the sale of oil to foreign countries. Iran is not a wealthy country in this respect. It is a faltering economy, a high inflation rate, a high unemployment rate. Iran's economy is not performing and it needs these oil sales. So, I don't think we should be worrying about Iran cutting off oil sales to Western countries. They're too important to the Iranians. What we have got to do is to try to convince the Iranians that their relationship with us and with Europe is going to be more successful if they would play by the rules and stop destabilizing neighboring countries with the provision of arms like they have done to Iraq, Lebanon, and to not pursue a nuclear weapons capability. I think that's the most important message we could send to the Iranian government.

Q: What can be done to resolve fighting between Fatah and Hamas?

U-S Burns: It's very disturbing to see the reports of violence between the Palestinian groups. We obviously have great support for Abu Mazen and for his leadership of the Palestinian community. We believe that Abu Mazen and Prime Minister Olmert should be meeting. Secretary Rice has been consistently arguing for progress in the Arab/Israeli peace negotiations. (audio unintelligible). ...It's difficult when the Palestinians are fighting each other and when Gaza is being used as a platform to fire rockets into the southern part of Israel and into populated part of the Mediterranean coast of Israel. It's very disturbing to see that. If peace is to be built, then we need to see a full effort and a unified effort by the Palestinians to demonstrate that they can live side-by-side with Israel, that they can live in peace with Israel. That's not what's happening today in Gaza.

Q: Do you think what's happening in Gaza is the Palestinians or do you think other powers are in play?

U-S Burns: I think the major drama is between Hamas and Fatah. And we certainly would like to see an end to the violence as soon as possible because it's destroying lives. It's also very disadvantageous and destabilizing for the Palestinians themselves.

End of interview