

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Interview With ITAR-TASS/Rossiya TV

July 2, 2009

Q. Mr. President, thank you very much for having us today.

The President. Thanks.

Q. It's your first interview for the Russian media.

The President. Yes.

Q. And it will be on air in TV Channel Russia on the Fourth of July. Congratulations, sir.

The President. Thank you so much. Thank you very much, and I'm very much looking forward to visiting Russia on Monday.

President's Visit to Russia

Q. You're leaving for Russia, and it will be your second time there. What's your personal sense of Russia?

The President. Well, I had a wonderful time when we visited both Moscow and Perm; this was several years ago. I was traveling as a Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, interested in issues of nuclear proliferation. The people were very warm; we had a wonderful reception. I had a wonderful time visiting Red Square and the Kremlin.

I think that traveling there as President, obviously, is very different, and now those issues that I was interested in as a Senator, of nuclear proliferation, how we can reduce tensions and conflicts between our countries, I'm in a position, hopefully, to get more accomplished than my first visit.

Russia/Russia-U.S. Relations

Q. And what we in Russia can expect from the new American leader? How you see the role of the Russia in the world?

The President. Well, look, Russia is a great country with an extraordinary culture and extraordinary traditions. It remains one of the most powerful countries in the world and has, I think, enormous potential for being a force for stability and prosperity in the international community.

I think that there has been a time over the last several years where Russian-U.S. relations were not as strong as they should be. What I said coming in is that I wanted to press the reset button on relations between the United States and Russia. And I think the possibilities for our cooperation on economic issues, on defense issues, dealing with the threat of terrorism in both our countries, our ability to deal constructively with issues like Iran, increasing trade and commercial relations, those are all issues that are important.

And the main thing that I want to communicate to Russian leadership and the Russian people is America's respect for Russia, that we want to deal as equals. We are both nuclear superpowers; with that comes special responsibilities that are very different from the positions of many other countries around the world, and we have to handle those responsibilities in a way that encourages peace.

Russia's Leadership

Q. You will spend a couple hours with Dmitry Medvedev; you will meet with Vladimir Putin. What your opinion, how important the personal chemistry between leaders?

The President. I think it's very important. Ultimately, it's hard to do business with somebody unless there's some sense of trust and understanding of what the other person is thinking, what is important to the other person. And so I always like to spend time one on one, not just with a big delegation and everybody taking notes, but just having a conversation.

I've found President Medvedev to be a very thoughtful, forward-looking individual. I think that he is doing a fine job in leading Russia into the 21st century.

I have not had a chance to meet Prime Minister Putin before, but obviously, he's been a very strong leader for the Russian people. And my hope is, is that I will come away from this meeting with a better sense of their concerns, their policies, and hopefully, they will get a sense that I'm somebody that they can do business with in an effective way.

Nuclear Arms Reduction

Q. START Treaty, we all hope that you will find a decision through the end of this year, but what steps after that?

The President. Well, I think our first step is to provide a framework for the post-START treaty. And my goal is that both countries reduce their nuclear stockpiles in a way that doesn't leave either country with an advantage, but reduces tensions and the expense of maintaining such high nuclear stockpiles when they're not necessary for our defense and our deterrence.

And if we can get the framework during this summit, then we will be able to advance a treaty by the end of December. There are other issues that I want to make sure that we discuss that have to do with our mutual security. As I said before, I think the issue of nuclear proliferation remains very important, and we need to create a strong nonproliferation framework in the international community. Having Russia as a leader on that is going to be critical. I think counterterrorism activities, ways we can cooperate together, that will be very important.

But given the unique position the United States and Russia has when it comes to nuclear power, for us to send a strong signal that we want to reduce our stockpiles, I think, would help us internationally, to give people a sense that we're moving into a new era and we want to get beyond the cold war.

America's Role in World Affairs

Q. For the new President, your plate is awfully full. Too many challenges: economic crisis, Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea—too many challenges. What's happened with lady luck? [Laughter] And what you think the role of America in the world? Share with us, please, the Obama doctrine.

The President. Well, first of all, it's true that we are coming in with unprecedented challenges, at least in the modern era. Probably the last time we saw so many difficult challenges facing America was during the 1930s and the Great Depression. And the way that we're trying to handle it is to send a clear message to the American people that it took us a while to get into some of these problems; they're not going to be solved overnight, but we can make steady progress and continually improve and move towards the future.

In terms of, I think, the U.S.'s role in the world, obviously, we remain a military superpower. We still have the largest economy in the world, but the world is becoming more integrated. You've got countries like China and India and Brazil that are much more developed and growing much more quickly than in the past. And so I think the United States has to recognize that our role is not to dictate policy around the world, but to be a partner with other countries around the world and find those areas of mutual concern and agreement that are so important.

And a great example of this is the issue of climate change. This is an issue that could have profound impacts on both the United States and on Russia. If the permafrost in Russia completely melts, it could completely transform the weather patterns on the planet, in some cases in very dangerous ways.

And the problem is, no one country can solve this country. The United States has to take steps; China has to take steps; Russia has to take steps; India has to take steps. And so I hope that the United States role will be to help convene and moderate negotiations that lead the international community to move in a direction that's good for all people and not just for a few.

The Presidency

Q. Yesterday one of the most popular Russian radio channel, Echo of Moscow, asked its audience, what you want to ask President Obama? There was more than 10,000 questions during only yesterday. The most popular was—and it was—first was sent by one engineer from Perm, city where you visited before, and I will read this question: What Mr. Obama feel when he realized that the whole world may depend sometime of choosing his decision to press or not to press a button?

The President. Well, I think that——

Q. It's not my question.

The President. No, I understand.

Q. It's a question of audience.

The President. It's an excellent question. I think that when you are elected as the President of the United States—and I'm sure this is true if you are elected as President of Russia or other powerful countries around the world—you realize what an extraordinary responsibility it is. And I think that you have to have confidence in your ability to make good decisions, but you also have to have humility and to understand that you are just one man and that nobody is perfect.

And so I spend a lot of time making sure that I have good advisers, that I'm getting information from a lot of different sources, so that any decisions I make I've thought through all the opinions, including those of my critics, so that I can feel confident that I'm making the best decision possible.

But I always feel very humbled by the position that I'm in, and I'm grateful for the American people giving me this extraordinary opportunity.

The President's Success

Q. When you decided to run for President, it looked like that you had no chance, but you win.

The President. Yes.

Q. I have a Russian edition of your book "Audacity of Hope." This is for you, Mr. President.

The President. Oh, thank you so much.

Q. And tell me, what gave you the audacity of hope?

The President. You know, when I think back, I think my mother was such an important figure in my life. I grew up without a father in the household, but my mother gave me love and support and confidence that I could do anything that I put my mind to doing. And I think that if there's one person who is responsible for my success, it would have to be her.

The President's Heroes

Q. During the campaign, you were compared with many leaders—with Abraham Lincoln, with Jack Kennedy, with Mr. Roosevelt. I don't like comparisons. Obama is Obama. But who are your heroes?

The President. Well, you just named some of them. Abraham Lincoln is probably the President who I find most compelling, because not only did he deal with probably the biggest crisis in American history, the Civil War, but he also did so in a way that was full of understanding of humanity. And his willingness to, I think, understand other people, from slaves to slave owners, and try to hold people together even when we were in the midst of war, I think, is extraordinary.

Internationally, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi. I always am interested in leaders who are able to bring about transformative change without resort to violence, but rather changing people's minds and people's hearts.

The President's Golf Game

Q. I can honestly—you are very, very famous as a very cool man. But what don't you like about yourself?

The President. Oh, you know, I have been playing golf lately, and I don't like my golf swing. [*Laughter*] I don't—if they—I don't how much—you probably don't have that much golf weather in Russia, but it's a game that I keep on thinking I should be good at, and somehow the ball goes this way and that way and never goes straight. [*Laughter*]

Life in the White House

Q. You know, for the whole world, White House symbol of power: White House announce, White House declare, White House decided. But for you, White House is a home.

The President. Yes.

Q. How comfortable your family—your wife, your daughters, first of all, your mother-in-law—[*laughter*—feel here in White House as a new home?

The President. Well, you know, we've gotten used to it. When we first got here, obviously, it's much bigger and fancier than anything that we had lived in in the past. And what we've discovered is, is that—the second and the third floor is where we live, and it is actually a very comfortable space. And the people, the staffs are just wonderful and very supportive.

What I haven't gotten used to is still the difference of being President, where you can't just go down to the street and go to the local restaurant or go to the——

Q. But you visited a restaurant 2 weeks ago.

The President. Yes, we did, but these days now I have 15 Secret Service cars—*[laughter]*—and helicopters, and so I miss, sometimes, being able to just walk around like an ordinary person. But it's a small sacrifice to make for the privilege.

The First Lady

Q. Well, I tell you a secret, Mr. President. Maybe you don't know, but your wife, Michelle, may be more popular in Russia than you. You know why?

The President. Why?

Q. Because of the garden kitchen.

The President. Oh.

Q. Because kitchen gardens very popular in Russia, and when she started to make a kitchen garden around the White House, she became very popular.

But historically, role of the First Lady very important in the United States. What do you think about her role in your Presidency?

The President. Well, she's done just an extraordinary job. Her first role is to make sure that our children are doing well. And our two girls, Malia and Sasha, are just special young ladies, and they have made the adjustment very well, and that's because Michelle is such a good mother.

Her second job is to make sure that I don't get too cocky. *[Laughter]* She keeps—she always makes sure that—she reminds me of all the things that I can improve on.

And then she's also, I think, been an inspiration to a lot of women here in the United States who combine careers with parenting. I think she is somebody who they can identify with because she's had to balance a lot of different issues. So she's doing a marvelous job. I'm very, very proud of her.

The President's Tastes

Q. Very briefly, you are well known not like a great writer, but also like a great reader. What's your favorite literature, maybe in Russia, your favorite music, your favorite song, your favorite movie?

The President. Well, you know, I think Russia has so many great writers; poets like Pushkin I love; "War and Peace" is still one of the greatest novels of all time; Dostoevsky. So I'm a big fan of Russian literature.

In terms of music, I have a very wide mix. I like classical like Bach, but I also like hip-hop and some modern music.

And favorite movies? I'm biased towards old American movies: "The Godfather," "Casablanca," the classics.

The President's Message to the Russian People

Q. Mr. President, thank you very, very much for this talk. We all wish you and Mr. Medvedev great success to reset Russian-American relationship. And maybe you'll use this opportunity to say a few words to millions of Russian audience in Russia and all over the world.

The President. Well, I think the most important thing is to thank the Russian people for their warmth and hospitality. They are an extraordinary people and an extraordinary culture, and I am very much looking forward to my visit to Moscow in the next few days.

Q. Thank you very much, Mr. President. And before we leave, I want to present you this traditional Russian doll.

The President. Thank you.

Q. It's most popular toy—

The President. Look at this. [*Laughter*]

Q. —in Moscow streets now.

The President. Yes. I like this. [*Laughter*]

Q. You'll get many more there, but this will be the first.

The President. Absolutely. Look at this.

Q. All Democrats inside.

The President. You've got only Democrats. [*Laughter*]

Q. Only Democrats inside. No Republicans. [*Laughter*]

The President. Excellent. Thank you so much.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

NOTE: The interview began at 12:25 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to former President Nelson R. Mandela of South Africa. A reporter referred to the President's mother-in-law Marian Robinson. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on July 5. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

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