

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

**Remarks Following a Meeting With Former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell
and an Exchange With Reporters**

December 1, 2010

The President. I want to thank General Colin Powell for being here with me today. He is not only a great statesman and a great public servant, but also a great friend and a great counselor. And periodically I check in with him, and I know my entire team, including the Vice President, checks in with him, because he continues to have an unparalleled sense of our national security needs, and I think really taps into the best impulses of the American people.

The first thing that I want to do is I want to congratulate him and his wife Alma for the extraordinary work that he's been doing with America's Promise, which focuses on how can we finally get serious about education reform, because he understands, Alma understands, and all of us understand that our kids are going to be competing not just against each other here in this country, but they're now competing worldwide.

And America's Promise has been at the forefront on education reform. They just issued a report, "Building a Grad Nation," that notes that we have made some progress over the last several years in reducing the number of dropout factories that we have around the country, that we are seeing a greater emphasis on kids staying in school, but we've still got a lot more work to do. And it's going to require all of us—parents, teachers, administrators, the public and the private sector—to make sure that we continue on this trend of improvement.

So thank you for the work you're doing there, Colin.

Most of the discussion we had was around national security issues. We talked about some of the challenges across the landscape, from North Korea to Iran to Afghanistan. But we spent, in particular, a lot of time talking about the START Treaty. General Powell has been involved with just about every arms control treaty since there were arms control treaties. I hate to—

Former Secretary of State Powell. Not quite that long.

The President. I hate to date him, but from the Reagan administration on, he has helped to shepherd through a variety of these arms control treaties, and the reason is, is because he understands, as so many others understand, that a world without binding U.S.-Russia arms control treaties is a more dangerous world.

And he and I discussed why START is so important. In the absence of START, without the new START Treaty being ratified by the Senate, we do not have a verification mechanism to ensure that we know what the Russians are doing, and they don't know what we're doing, and when you have uncertainty in the area of nuclear weapons, that's a much more dangerous world to live in.

We also discussed the fact that Russia has cooperated with us on critical issues to our national security like Iran sanctions, transit to supply our troops in Afghanistan, working on securing loose nuclear materials.

And the relationships and trust that are built from the new START Treaty spill over into a whole host of other national security issues that are of vital importance to America.

So Colin is one of a number of former National Security Advisers, Secretaries of Defense, Secretaries of State—from both Democratic and Republican administrations—that have emphasized how important it is to get this done. And we discussed the fact that the Senate appropriately has a role in advice and consent, and it ultimately needs to ratify this treaty. That's why we have made sure that we have had 18 separate hearings. We have answered over a thousand questions. We have offered to brief every single Senator—Republican and Democrat—around these issues. But now it's time to get this done.

I'm gratified by the leadership of the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar, as well as the ranking Democrat, the chairman, John Kerry, for their extraordinary cooperation and work on this issue.

It is important for us to make sure that we complete the evaluation process, we finish the debate, and we go ahead and finish this up before the end of the year.

And so I just want to again thank General Powell for his good counsel, his friendship, most importantly his service to our country. And I very much appreciate the fact that he supports an effort that all of us should support in order to make America more safe.

[At this point, former Secretary of State Powell made brief remarks, concluding as follows.]

Mr. Powell. And so I'm sorry I missed the meeting the President had with the other Secretaries and National Security Advisers the week before last, but I'm glad I had this opportunity to share my thoughts with the President.

So I hope that the Senate will move quickly and give its advice and consent to the ratification of this treaty.

The President. Thank you so much, everybody.

President's Meeting With Republican Leadership/Bipartisanship

Q. —Senate Republicans, what McConnell did today, is that—didn't break the spirit? Didn't break the spirit of yesterday, what Senator McConnell did?

The President. I am absolutely—I am confident that nobody wants to see taxes on middle class families go up starting January 1, and so there's going to be some lingering politics that have to work themselves out in all the caucuses, Democrat and Republican. But at the end of the day, I think that people of good will can come together and recognize that given where the economy is at right now, given the struggles that a lot of families are still going through right now, that we're going to be able to solve this problem. And I think we got off to a good start yesterday. There are going to be ups and downs to this process, but I'm confident that we're going to be able to get it done. All right?

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:34 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Alma J. Powell, chair, America's Promise Alliance. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of former Secretary of State Powell.

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