

**Question and Answer Session  
with  
Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel  
At the  
2013 Washington Institute Soref Symposium  
May 9, 2013**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ROBERT SATLOFF: Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for that deep and comprehensive assessment, evaluation from your trip, and your observations about Middle East security today. I have the privilege of being able to ask you just a couple of questions before, I know, you have to depart. And I know there's at least three hundred people who wish that they shared my responsibility.

SECRETARY CHUCK HAGEL: As long as I don't get one from [Marvin] Kalb, that's alright. [laughter]

SATLOFF: Mr. Secretary, I first want to ask you a question about Syria. There's at least one phrase that didn't appear in your text, and perhaps appropriately so, and that's the phrase "redline." So I would be grateful if you could give us your sense of where we are on assessing the violation of the president's redline—but, more generally, on the idea of redlines themselves and the appropriateness of using them to define bounds beyond which people should not go and behaviors that we're trying to prevent.

HAGEL: Is that all?

SATLOFF: That's all, sir. [laughter]

HAGEL: Well first, Rob, as you know, I'm no longer a United States senator, so I can say anything as irresponsibly as I would like. But, that's—I'll pay a price for that. Well, let me see if I can make my way through that. You surely don't expect me to publicly question anybody's use of redlines. But, in a very serious response—because it's a serious question: the president has been rather clear on this point that we take all this—and I noted it in my comments—very seriously, use of chemical weapons. He has said, I have said, Secretary [of State John] Kerry has said that we continue to assess and collaborate with our intelligence agencies, and other intelligence agencies, on the question [of] whether, when, who, and all the other relevant questions that have to be satisfied before any options are exercised that the president has. And I think it's fair to say that we're all probably a little wiser today than maybe before, and when we take action, there's always the reality, and you accept that there may be consequences—and unintended consequences may come from that. There are also consequences and unintended consequences that come from *inaction*.

So, we continue to dwell very seriously on what happened, and when, and all the other questions that must be asked by responsible leaders. And I think the president is always seeing—whether it's Syria or any other international matter, or any matter a president has responsibility for . . . And certainly I have some responsibility for the options that I give him through the Defense Department and whatever advice he asks for from me. And I take that seriously: that we know what we're talking about and that we're dealing with the facts. And that may not be a good enough answer, or a good answer, but right now that's the most honest answer I can give you.

SATLOFF: Thank you. I can't ask for anything more than the most honest answer. Thank you. Mr. Secretary, I just want to ask one question about Iran. I think everyone was quite pleased to hear you restate America's policy on Iran that you and the president have stated on many occasions about the need to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And we have been working in many different realms—diplomatic, economic sanctions, and making sure that there's a credible threat of alternatives that the Iranians know about. And I want to match, connect, that third point with your comment toward the end of your remarks about sequestration and limitations. We've had to withdraw our second carrier from the Gulf . . . And I want to ask you to discuss with us, sort of, the difficulties and the balancing of trying to deal with the limitations and the sequestration and the cuts at the same time as we need to project credible threats, project our power and our commitment to an adversary like Iran.

HAGEL: Let me answer it this way—and it's an important question, and it's one that the president deals with, I deal with, Secretary Kerry deals with every day—because in life, in this job, when you are the most powerful country in the world, there are many audiences out there. There are friendly audiences, and then there are not-so-friendly audiences. And those who don't wish us well pay attention just like the people who support us. So what you say and how you say it, and recognition of the transparency of our system, which I don't think anybody would trade, about budget limitations are all out there for people to see.

Now, that said, I'm going to go back a little bit to your first question on Syria, as I answer your question on Iran and capabilities and how do we deal with this and so on. I mentioned in my speech that Secretary Kerry was in Russia, and he and [Foreign] Minister [Sergei] Lavrov have announced an agreement to go forward on the basis of our common interests on dealing with Syria, the region, use of chemical weapons. Now, I bring that up as an example of—and I also mentioned this in a broader way—Great Powers use all of their tools; it isn't just eleven carriers and carrier battle groups and all the air wings and all the missiles . . . Those are important, but those are elements, important elements, of protecting one's interests and working with one's allies. I also talked about building up regional common interests in our allies to protect their interests as we help them protect their own interests. No nation, I don't think, in the world that we're in—and where we're going—is going to be powerful enough to fix every problem themselves. It's too big—the problems, the challenges—they are too complicated. And even if we had

twice the budget we have now, you couldn't fix all the problems. So that leads, I think, most of us to believe that these alliances are absolutely critical. You multiply your force ability with alliances—everyone knows that. The capability of those alliances is critical to that.

The Syrian example of what we're doing, and what Secretary Kerry is doing and the president is doing, and others, on trying to build those coalitions to deal, as I noted, with Iran—Syria is now; the humanitarian devastation that's occurring has to be factored in to this. Jordan, in particular, is vulnerable here, on this, and we're working with Jordan, as I said. But these all are working toward the common interests of our common goals and, as I said, in a regional way, and I also noted that each is specific.

Now, specifically to your question about budget limitations to protect our security interests and be able to fulfill our commitments to help protect our allies: I noted in an inventory of what our priorities were in the Middle East—I started with the security of Israel, the second point I made was our allies, counterterrorism, so on. We have the capabilities required, bottom line. As secretary of defense, I can tell you that, I will tell you that; it's an honest response. If I didn't think we had those capabilities, or we weren't going to have them because of the budget adjustments we're making, I would have no choice but to go to the Congress and president and say . . . Now, does that mean we are having to adjust? Absolutely, it does. It does mean that we have to adjust. And we are adjusting. And we're having to make some tough choices. And those tough choices are based on the prioritization, first, of our national security interests. There're a lot of things we can do without. No one likes to have a budget cut. But our security interests are paramount. Our budget this year, our baseline budget that I presented to the Congress, the president's budget, was \$527 billion, baseline, for the Defense Department. On top of that is another account called the Overseas Contingency Operations, which we haven't yet come in with that—and my comptroller would be very unhappy if I announced that tonight—because we're still working with OMB [Office of Management and Budget] on this, and the president. But it's a significant amount of money, on top of the baseline budget. We can protect the interests of this country with that budget, and still make the adjustments that we have to make and do the things that the American people expect us to do, our allies expect us to do, we're committed to do.

SATLOFF: Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

HAGEL: Thank you. [applause]