

President Obama on Iran, the Economy, and the 2012 Campaign

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In a wide-ranging interview at the White House, President Barack Obama talks about Iran's nuclear ambitions, the economy and the 2012 presidential race.

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Transcript

President Obama on Iran, the Economy, and the 2012 Campaign

MATT LAUER, co-host:

Now our exclusive interview with President Obama. Before watching the Super Bowl, he sat down with us for a wide-ranging interview at the White House. I started by asking the president if he's satisfied with the intelligence we have on Iran and their nuclear ambitions.

President BARACK OBAMA: I think we have a very good estimate of when they could potentially achieve breakout capacity, what stage they're at in terms of processing uranium. But do we know all the dynamics inside of Iran? Absolutely not. And I think one of the difficulties is that Iran itself is a lot more divided now than it was. Knowing who is making decisions at any given time inside of Iran is tough, but we do have a pretty good bead on what's happening with their nuclear program.

LAUER: One of the things we do know, I would imagine, is that they are conducting a lot of this research and development far underground. And I understand the United States is in the process of developing the next generation of bunker-busting bombs that can go far beneath the surface and take a site like that out. Will those bombs be ready in time? Would you use them unilaterally against those sites?

Pres. OBAMA: Matt, I'm not going to discuss specific military programs or go into details in terms of what our planning is. I will say this, that we have done extensive planning over the last several years about all our various options in the gulf and, you know, we are prepared to exercise these options should they--should the need arise. But my goal is to try to resolve this diplomatically, mainly because the only way over the long term we can assure Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon is by getting them to understand it's not in their interest.

LAUER: Let's talk about domestic politics. Mitt Romney is a guy who's running for your job. He may eventually become the nominee. He's a guy who's been incredibly successful in his life and career. He's made a lot of money. It's not a crime. It's part of the American dream.

Pres. OBAMA: Absolutely.

LAUER: Do you think, though, that Mitt Romney can identify with the middle class and the underclass in this country?

Pres. OBAMA: You know, I'm not going to comment on any particular candidate until they decide who it is--the Republicans decide who their nominee is going to be. I think most people think of the election's nine months away, the last thing we need is to start it right now when the other side hasn't determined its nominee. But I do think the vast majority of American people understand, A, we want everybody to be successful and nobody begrudges people who've been successful because they're making things, creating new products, new services. That's the American way. But what people also want to see is that everybody is doing their fair share, that we're all pulling together, that we're creating ladders of opportunity for all Americans. Whoever the Republican nominee is, I fundamentally disagree with a formula that would go back to the same policies that got us into this mess in the first place.

LAUER: This idea being able to reach out and connect to the middle class and having the middle class reach out to a political candidate.

Pres. OBAMA: Right.

LAUER: On Friday you held a fundraiser.

Pres. OBAMA: Right.

LAUER: You raised \$900,000 in a couple of hours. I think 25 wealthy individuals paid \$36,000 apiece to spend a couple of hours with you.

Pres. OBAMA: Yeah.

LAUER: How do you think the guy sitting, drinking a beer and eating chips watching the game today can identify with something like that?

Pres. OBAMA: Right. Well, I think, Matt, if you--if you noticed about a month and a half ago, I also had lunch with five folks who had given 25 bucks each who were part of this huge base of supporters that we have all across the country. And it's precisely because we've been able to create a grassroots movement that I was successful in 2008 and I think will be successful this time. Now if you ask me would I love to take some of the big money out of politics? I would. Unfortunately, right now, partly because of Supreme Court rulings and a bunch of decisions out there...

LAUER: Right.

Pres. OBAMA: ...it is very hard to be able to get your message out without having some resources.

LAUER: Maybe the better question is how will you spend the money? By all accounts you can raise a lot of money for this campaign. Some people say up to a billion dollars. We've just seen in Florida on the Republican side a lot of money spent, about 100% of it spent on extremely negative personal ads. If you raise a billion dollars to keep this job, can we expect the same kind of negativity coming from that money?

Pres. OBAMA: What I can tell you is in 2008, part of the reason that we were successful is we ran an affirmative campaign about my vision for where the United States should go. And I think what Americans want to hear more than anything else is how are you going to help me right now? If they're hearing a persuasive argument about how we are going to recreate a solid path for middle class success in this

country, then I think I'll win regardless of the negative ads coming in.

LAUER: Then to that end, and this may sound like a bit Pollyanna, Mr. President.

Pres. OBAMA: Right.

LAUER: But when a Republican nominee is chosen...

Pres. OBAMA: Hm.

LAUER: ...would you agree to meeting with that person, whether it's Governor Romney or Speaker Gingrich or whoever, and getting together with that person and talking about how the two of you plan to conduct yourselves over the course of this campaign? I think the American people would like that. Would you agree to that?

Pres. OBAMA: You know, I think that you'll be able to see how we conduct ourselves in the campaign. I think it'll be consistent with how I conducted myself in 2008 and hopefully how I've conducted myself as President of the United States. One of the worries we have, obviously, in the next campaign, is that there are so many of these so-called super PACs, these independent expenditures that are going to be out there, there's going to be just a lot of money floating around. And I guarantee you a bunch of that's going to be negative. But it's not going to be enough just to say, 'The other guy's a bum,' you've got to explain to the American people what your plan is to make sure that there are good jobs at good wages and that this economy is growing over the long term. And whoever wins that argument I think is going to be the next president.

LAUER: Which leads me well into this next question because I have talked to so many people over the last couple of years, President Obama, who were huge supporters of yours back in 2008.

Pres. OBAMA: Right.

LAUER: And today they're not sure. I hear more and more that they're disappointed in you, that you aren't the transformational political figure they hoped you would be. How does that make you feel when you hear that?

Pres. OBAMA: Oh, I--you know, I think this is the nature of being president. What's frustrated people is that I have not been able force Congress to implement every aspect of what I said in 2008. Well, you know, it turns out that our founders designed a system that makes it more difficult to bring about change than I would like sometimes. But what we have been able to do is move in the right direction. And what I'm just going to keep on doing is plodding away, very persistent. And you know what? One of the things about being president is you get better as time goes on.

LAUER: Why, though, should a voter look and say, 'Look, you know, he wasn't able to fix Washington,' which is a big job for any one man. Perhaps there's more gridlock and more divisiveness in Washington now than there ever has been in the past. Why will he be able to do it in the next four years and if he can't do it, isn't nothing going to get done?

Pres. OBAMA: Even with a bunch of obstruction over on Capitol Hill, we've been able to save an auto industry, we've been able to take 750,000 jobs being lost a month and move it so that it's 250,000 jobs being created this month. We've been able to make sure that we ended the war in Iraq on schedule. We've been able to make sure that we ended policies like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." So we've been able to get a lot done. Not as fast as we want, sometimes it's messy, the process is frustrating. I do think that this is going

to be a critical election because having yanked ourselves out of the risk of a great depression, having stabilized the economy, we now have a broader question which is how do we take it to the next level. And I think whoever comes in, both in Congress and in this White House, is going to have to take a strong message from the American people about which direction to go. And I think that will allow us to make more progress over the next couple of years.