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Sent: Saturday, February 12, 2011 1:55 PM
To: H
Cc: Mills, Cheryl D; Sullivan, Jacob J; Abedin, Huma
Subject: NYT

In U.S. Signals to Egypt, Obama Straddled a Rift By HELENE COOPER, MARK LANDLER and DAVID E. SANGER Sat, Feb 12, 2011

WASHINGTON — Last Saturday afternoon, President Obama got a jarring update from his national security team: With restive crowds of young Egyptians demanding President Hosni Mubarak's immediate resignation, Frank G. Wisner, the envoy who Mr. Obama had sent to Cairo only days before, had just told a Munich conference that Mr. Mubarak was indispensable to Egypt's democratic transition.

Mr. Obama was furious, and it did not help that his secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Mr. Wisner's key backer, was publicly warning that any credible transition would take time — even as Mr. Obama was demanding that change in Egypt begin right away.

Seething about coverage that made it look as if the administration were protecting a dictator and ignoring the pleas of the youths of Cairo, the president "made it clear that this was not the message we should be delivering," said one official who was present. He told Vice President

Joseph R. Biden Jr. to take a hard line with his Egyptian counterpart, and he pushed Senator John Kerry to counter the message from Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Wisner when he appeared on a Sunday talk show the next day.

The trouble in sending a clear message was another example of how divided Mr. Obama's foreign policy team remains. A president who himself is often torn between idealism and pragmatism was navigating the counsel of a traditional foreign policy establishment led by Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Biden and Defense Secretary

Robert M. Gates, with that of a younger White House staff who worried that the American preoccupation with stability could put a historic president on the wrong side of history.

In fact, Mr. Obama never did take the extraordinary step of publicly calling on Mr. Mubarak to resign.

In interviews over the past week, participants and the people they consulted described the tension inside the administration, tension that fed the perception that there was confusion on the Potomac. Time and again, the administration appeared to tack back and forth, alternately describing Mr. Mubarak as a stalwart ally and then a foe of meaningful political change. Twelve days ago, Mr. Obama was announcing that Mr. Mubarak had to begin the transition "now"; last weekend his chief diplomat was telling reporters that removing Mr. Mubarak too hastily could undermine Egypt's transition to democracy.

Inside the White House, the same youthful aides who during his campaign pushed Mr. Obama to challenge the assumptions of the foreign policy establishment were now arguing that his failure to side with the protesters could be remembered with bitterness by a rising generation.

Those onetime campaign aides included Denis McDonough, the sharp-tongued deputy national security adviser; Benjamin J. Rhodes, who wrote the president's seminal address to the Islamic world in Cairo in June 2009; and Samantha Power, the outspoken Pulitzer Prize winner and human rights advocate who was once drummed out of the campaign for describing Mrs. Clinton as a monster.

All agreed that Egypt, facing a historic popular revolt, needed to begin a genuine transition to democracy. The debate was how to deploy American influence on a volatile and fast-changing situation — to at least temporarily shore up a faltering ally proposing a gradual transition in the interests of stability, or to signal more support for a new generation of Egyptians demanding faster and more decisive change.

Despite the fervor on the streets of Cairo, and Mr. Obama's occasional tough language, the president always took a pragmatic view of how to use America's limited influence over change in Egypt. He was not in disagreement with the positions of Mr. Wisner and Mrs. Clinton about how long transition would take. But he apparently feared that saying so openly would reveal that the United States was not in total sync with the protesters, and was indeed putting its strategic interests first. Making that too clear would not only anger the crowds, it could give Mr. Mubarak a reason to cling to power and a pretext to crush the revolution.

It was not only Mr. Wisner's and Mrs. Clinton's comments that threw the administration off message. Mr. Biden told an interviewer that he did not believe Mr. Mubarak was a dictator — words he quickly regretted, officials say.

As the administration struggled to craft a message, it was playing to multiple audiences — the crowds in Tahrir Square who wanted Mr. Obama to be their champion; neighboring allies who feared instability and that revolutionary fervor would spill across their borders; and home audiences on the left and the right who saw this as a test of whether he would restore democracy promotion to the top of the foreign policy agenda.

Mrs. Clinton and some of her State Department subordinates wanted to move cautiously, and reassure allies they were not being abandoned, in part influenced by daily calls from Israel, Saudi Arabia and others who feared an Egypt without Mr. Mubarak would destabilize the entire region. Some of these allies were nervous in part because they believed that the United States had cheerleaded the protesters in Tunisia.

In fact, some of the differences in approach stemmed from the institutional biases of the State Department versus those of the White House. The diplomats at the State Department view the Egyptian crisis through the lens of American strategic interests in the region, its threat to the 1979 peace accord between Egypt and Israel and its effects on the Middle East peace process.

The White House shared those concerns, officials said, but workers in the West Wing also worried that if Mr. Obama did not encourage the young people in the streets with forceful, even inspiring language, he would be accused of abandoning the ideals he expressed in his 2009 speech in Cairo.

For her part, Mrs. Clinton, too, has called for radical change in the Arab world. In January, on a trip to Qatar, she issued a scathing critique of Arab leaders, saying their countries risked "sinking into the sand" if they did not undertake swift political reforms. She said that stagnant economies and the bulge in the youth population was a recipe for the kind of unrest that later convulsed Tunisia and Egypt. And during a meeting at the White House on Jan. 29, officials said, Mrs. Clinton pushed for the administration to adopt language that would clearly lay the groundwork for Mr. Mubarak's departure.

But she also expressed concern later that a hasty exit of Mr. Mubarak could complicate Egypt's transition to democracy given the lack of a political culture there. Added to that, many foreign policy experts worried — and still worry — that Egyptians are even now faced with a choice between the military on one side and the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group, on the other.

For Mr. Obama, the turning point came on Feb. 1, when he watched Mr. Mubarak give a defiant speech on television and then called him to make the point that if the Egyptian leader thought he could avoid reform, he was mistaken. He stopped short of calling for Mr. Mubarak to resign, but the next morning, he instructed his press secretary,

Robert Gibbs, to not to shy away from his demand that day that meaningful reform must begin "now." "I want you to be clear that I meant what I said when I said 'now,'" Mr. Obama told his aides, according to a senior administration

official. The result was Mr. Gibbs' line that "now started yesterday," which appeared to harden the administration's position even more.

But it also angered the administration's allies, who made their displeasure clear in a flood of calls. It was in that tense atmosphere that Mrs. Clinton left on Feb. 4 for a security conference in Munich without Thomas E. Donilon, the national security adviser, who was initially supposed to attend, too.

The surprise speaker was Mr. Wisner, who addressed the group by video link just days after returning from Cairo, where he went to deliver Mr. Obama's message in person to Mr. Mubarak, whom he had known well when he was the American ambassador to Egypt.

Mr. Wisner comes from the old school of nurturing American relationships around the world. And he warned the audience in Munich that "you need to get a national consensus around the preconditions of the next step forward," and that, in the remarks that so angered Mr. Obama, Mr. Mubarak "must stay in office in order to steer those changes through."

In Munich, Mrs. Clinton and other Western officials put their emphasis on the "orderly" part of an "orderly transition" in Egypt. Mrs. Clinton ticked off the list of hurdles that had to be surmounted: Political parties had to be created, leaders had to emerge from an opposition that had been suppressed for 30 years, the Constitution needed to be amended and voter rolls assembled.

She said the process should move "as expeditiously as possible under the circumstances," but added, "That takes time."

Mrs. Clinton's message, officials said, was conflated later with Mr. Wisner's. Administration officials insist that Mr. Obama was angered by Mr. Wisner's remarks, not by Mrs. Clinton's. But speaking to reporters on the flight home from Munich, Mrs. Clinton echoed at least part of Mr. Wisner's argument, warning that Mr. Mubarak's abrupt resignation could prompt a chain of events, stipulated by the Egyptian Constitution, which would lead to elections in two months — far too short a time.

A spokesman for Mrs. Clinton, Philippe Reines, said, "The secretary sees the need for profound transformation in the Middle East — and sees it as consistent with both our values and long-term interests." But he added, "She is also very mindful of the challenges and seeks to insure it proceeds in a way where people's aspirations are realized and not thwarted; where lives are valued and not lost."

Back in Washington, though, Mr. Obama was moving quickly to counteract the rhetoric coming from Munich. The White House recruited Senator Kerry, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, who appeared on the NBC News program "Meet the Press" and declared that Mr. Wisner's comments "just don't reflect where the administration has been from day one."

In an interview on Friday, Mr. Kerry played down the administration's mixed messages. "A little confusion came out of Munich," he said. "Apart from that, they calibrated it appropriately, to try to give the process room without making it an American process."