



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Tibet 2020 continues with Clinton, Bush administration officials

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As part of its Tibet 2020 campaign, the International Campaign for Tibet recently hosted two episodes of its Tibet Talks conversation series with Greg Craig, the first US special coordinator for Tibetan issues, and Ambassador Paula Dobriansky, who was special coordinator from 2001-09.

Their discussions touched on powerful moments in presidential history, the future of Tibet and the deep bond between Tibetans and Americans. In addition to serving as the special coordinator, Craig went on to serve as White House Counsel to President Obama, while Dobriansky was the under secretary of state for global affairs.

During Dobriansky's tenure, a very powerful moment occurred in 2007 when the Dalai Lama received the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award in the US. By presenting the Dalai Lama with the medal in the Capitol Rotunda, President George W. Bush became the first sitting president to meet with him in a public setting outside the White House.

Bush and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., "came together, and they recognized him," Dobriansky said. "And that was very significant in terms of demonstrating the importance that we attach to religious freedom and the importance of everything His Holiness is very much about."

Craig recalls being the first US official to invite a Tibetan official for a meeting inside the State Department when he began meeting with Lodi Gyari, the special envoy of the Dalai Lama. "Having that meeting opened a door that had not been open prior to that," Craig said.

Such breakthrough moments in Washington, DC helped show the impact of advocacy for Tibet, which has transformed the Tibetan issue into a passionate cause for many lawmakers in the United States. As Craig noted, the special coordinator position only came into being because of strong, bipartisan support from members of Congress.

The exchange also demonstrated the importance of ICT's Tibet 2020 campaign, which seeks to mobilize ICT members to tell the candidates for president why Tibet matters this election year.

Historic support

During their talks, Dobriansky and Craig recounted major examples of support for Tibet from US presidents.

- Dobriansky said the greatest achievements of her tenure included giving the Dalai Lama the Gold Medal and building support for Tibet in Europe.

The United States is "an idea that's galvanized around basic and fundamental freedoms," Dobriansky said. "Not one single individual on this Earth should be deprived of those freedoms. In that sense, it is very much connected to Tibet."

- Craig spoke about another remarkable moment when President Clinton challenged President Jiang Zemin over Tibet and the Dalai Lama during a news conference in Beijing in 1998 that aired on live television in China. After Jiang recited Communist Party talking points about Tibet,

Clinton responded that China should engage the Dalai Lama in dialogue, saying, “I believe him to be an honest man.”

“It was quite clear that Jiang Zemin was prepared for the subject of Tibet and the Dalai Lama to come up at some point and somehow in his meetings with President Clinton,” Craig said. “The way in which it came up at the public press conference, as opposed to in a private meeting ... was extraordinary.”

- The Dalai Lama also impacted Clinton and his family on a more personal level, Craig said. Around the time of Clinton’s impeachment and the revelations of his affair with Monica Lewinsky, the Dalai Lama met with Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton, as well as Craig, Gyari and another US official.

“The Dalai Lama said, ‘Do you mind if we have this conversation alone?’” Craig recalled. “So the three of us got up, and he stayed on and talked to Mr. and Mrs. Clinton for another 25, 30 minutes. So not only was he a great leader of a great religion and venerated around the world, but he became a very special marriage counselor, I think, at that particular moment.”

- For her part, Dobriensky also talked about the personal connection between the Dalai Lama and President Bush. The two share a birthday on July 6 (the Dalai Lama was born in 1935 and Bush in 1946), and when the Tibetan spiritual leader turned 85 this year, Bush sent him a video message saying, “I admire you, I care for you, and I love you.”

“The two of them are very compassionate about the importance of democracy, of freedom and just universal freedoms that all should have,” Dobriensky said. “I think in that sense, I saw and I witnessed a relationship not only come together firmly but truly grow.”

The future

Looking ahead, both Dobriensky and Craig said presidential support for Tibet should continue over the next four years no matter who wins the election.

Dobriensky said the special coordinator position should remain at the level of the under secretary of state to which it rose during the Bush administration.

“Staying the course definitely means keeping the position at that high level,” she said, “also continuing to build upon all of the kind of progress that has been achieved.”

Appointing a special coordinator for Tibetan issues is one of the three main requests for the Republican and Democratic parties in the Tibet 2020 campaign.

The other two requests are to include Tibet in their platforms and to support a nonviolent end to decades of oppression in Tibet through negotiations between the Chinese government and the representatives of the Dalai Lama.

Craig said his experience shows the Chinese government will respond to US pressure—as long as the American people pressure their leaders to take action.

“The Chinese do listen. They end up having to listen,” he said. “It’s absolutely vital that they not only listen, but that they hear, over and over again, our concerns.”

“That won’t happen unless from the outside we continue to make our points to the political leadership of this country.”



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