

“Would You Please Put That Rosary Ring Back On?”

Participant: Mike Mullen

Interviewers: Barbara A. Perry, Michael Greco (A/V), Marc Selverstone, Spencer Bakich

Interview Date: March 13, 2023

Project: Barack Obama Oral History Project

In May 2011, the Obama administration planned a secret raid to find Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader who was responsible for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The raid was dangerous and risky, with many unknowns facing the team. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen describes his interactions with Vice President Joseph Biden, President Barack Obama, and Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta after bin Laden was killed.

Mike Mullen: During the raid, I look over, and I’m standing right above where [Joe] Biden is, who’s right in front of the President. Biden, as you know, is Catholic. I carry a rosary ring with me because I’m Catholic as well. Have I told you this story yet?

Interviewer (Bakich): No.

Mullen: I look down and I see Biden, who I didn’t know carried a rosary ring. Anyway, I see him taking off a rosary ring, getting his wallet out to put the rosary ring back in his wallet. I said, “Mr. Vice President, I’ve got 47 troops illegally in a foreign country. They just killed our number one enemy in the world, and I’ve got a 90-minute transit. They’ve got to refuel. I need to get them back into Afghanistan. I then have to transfer them to an [Bell Boeing V-22] Osprey, fly them through contested Pakistani airspace, get them out to the carrier, and get him buried in accordance with Islamic religious customs. Would you please put that rosary ring back on?” [laughter] Biden looked up and he said, “OK.”

Later, after the POTUS speech, the cameras were shut down. Everybody’s feeling pretty good. Biden walks up to me, pulls out his rosary ring, and shows it to me on his finger. I show him mine. [Barack] Obama sees that. He walks over, and Obama literally reaches in his pocket and he pulls out a crucifix. That story is not known. And then Leon [Panetta], who’s Catholic, he circles in, pulls out his rosary out of his pocket. He’d been moving the rosary beads during the whole thing as well. That was a pretty neat part of all of that.

End of excerpt.

Interview 2 with Mike Mullen, March 13, 2023, Barack Obama Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.
URL: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/mike-mullen-oral->

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