BLITZER: Welcome back to "LATE EDITION."

Joining us are two guests who know firsthand about the challenges and difficulties of diplomacy. In Connecticut, Henry Kissinger: He served as the U.S. secretary of state under former presidents Nixon and Ford. And in New York, Richard Holbrooke: He was the United States ambassador to the United Nations under former president Bill Clinton.

Gentlemen, welcome back to "LATE EDITION."

And Dr. Kissinger, I'll begin with you. Do you believe Syria will withdraw all of its military and intelligence forces from Lebanon by the time of the scheduled Lebanese elections in May?

HENRY KISSINGER, FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE: It will be very reluctant to do it, and it will look for ways to avoid it and to delay as long as possible.

But the pressures that are now being used against it, I think will in the end make it withdraw.

BLITZER: So it will withdraw.

What about you, Ambassador Holbrooke?

RICHARD HOLBROOKE, FORMER AMBASSADOR TO UNITED NATIONS: I agree with Henry on this. I think the real issue here is that Syria has been a tremendous obstacle to peace in the Middle East ever since the 1960s. And Lebanon has been a tortured country forever. In 1958 President Eisenhower sent troops in, and we had the tragic bombing of the barracks in 1983.

And if Syria will behave itself and stop being such an obstructionist, supporting terror throughout the region, it will make a huge difference. And Lebanon, as you said in your previous interview, desperately deserves some peace and quiet.

BLITZER: What's the best strategy, Dr. Kissinger, to get the Syrians to cooperate with the U.S., the Europeans, not only when it comes to Lebanon but other issues; for example, insurgents coming into Iraq from Syria and the whole issue of Syrian support for international terrorism?

KISSINGER: I think Syria has to understand, and I believe it is beginning to have it brought home to it, that interference in Iraq is going to run enormous risks of American retaliation, if necessary.

And with respect to Lebanon, it seems now that the world community is united on this issue. So I think we will be able to achieve the withdrawal of Syria. And if Syria wants to play any role in the region, it will have to stop interfering in surrounding countries...
BLITZER: In that part of the world...

KISSINGER: We will have...

BLITZER: ... Yes, I was going to say to Ambassador Holbrooke, in that part of the world, Ambassador Holbrooke, is it better to deal with a country-like regime, a country like Syria with the regime that it has in Damascus? Is it better work with carrots or sticks?

HOLBROOKE: With terrorists or what?

BLITZER: Is it get bettor work with a government -- as is the case in Damascus -- is it better for the U.S. to throw out carrots or throw out sticks?

HOLBROOKE: Proper diplomacy requires a combination of the two, and I think that the current pressure on Syria is very productive.

And I would note that it is built around the United Nations' Security Council Resolution for those people who keep maligning the U.N. I noticed that Steve Hadley in his interviews this morning referred to how important the U.N. process is. So what's going on now is very important.

I would also comment that Bashar al-Assad, the son of the legendary strong man who ran the place and who died, is clearly not up to filling his father's shoes. Joe Klein had an extraordinarily interesting article and interview with him in Time magazine this week which showed how weak he is.

So something big is happening in Syria, and I hope it will result in a seat change in that country's behavior because they have been an obstacle to peace in the region ever since I can remember.

And Henry Kissinger, who spent much more time there than I have, can give you chapter and verse on that.

BLITZER: Well, you spent a lot of time, Dr. Kissinger, with the father, Hafez al-Assad, negotiating disengagement agreements between Syria and Israel.

Is the son, Bashar al-Assad, is the son really in charge based on what you know right now?

KISSINGER: He is not in charge to the degree that the father was and isn't made of the steel that the father was.

And based on the interview that Dick Holbrooke mentioned, he seems to be somewhat uncertain about his own prospects. So we may see not only a change in Lebanon, we also may see a change in the Syrian political system.

BLITZER: Ambassador Holbrooke, one of the big wild cards, and you talked about the tortured history of Lebanon, a big wild card is Hezbollah right now, an organization the U.S. government, the Clinton administration, the Bush administration, has long considered to be a terrorist organization responsible for the murder of Americans in that part of the world as well.

But it does have a political party now, and it does clearly have influence in Lebanon.

How should the U.S. government be dealing with this Hezbollah element of the Lebanese equation?

HOLBROOKE: Hezbollah is a terrorist organization that's sponsoring terrorism. It also has a political wing and a
political base. This is not unprecedented.

There have been many organizations with similar histories that have emerged out of the shadows of terrorism and into participation in Democratic institutions over generations.

One can talk about Jerry Adams and his wing of the IRA. But behind him were rejectionists who continued violence.

Right now the pressure should be on Hezbollah to behave itself, to show that it is not a terrorist organization. And anyone who accepts them as a political party simply because of that extraordinary rally in Beirut this week, is deluding themselves. Their track record is unambiguous and very dangerous, and they have killed far more people, I’m sure, than we know about.

BLITZER: Dr. Kissinger, there are some who believe that if Hezbollah plays its cards right there could be a split over the whole issue of Hezbollah between the U.S. and Israel, the Israelis being much more forceful in rejecting any kind of deal with Hezbollah, if you will. Is that an analysis that you accept?

KISSINGER: There could be a disagreement. But I’d like make an (UNINTELLIGIBLE) point. The United States has had spectacular success in recent months in the first stage of the democratic process, that is to say with respect to elections.

But the next stage of the democratic process involves: Who gets into power by the democratic process and what means will they employ? If Hezbollah gets elected and if Hezbollah does not give up its military organization or its terrorist aims, then we will have a big problem even if it got elected because we want two things.

We want a political process that is not based on terrorism. And we want, of course, people to be able to express their choice. And this is something that the U.S. government will have to study, not only in Lebanon, but has to look at with respect to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries where we have been urging the institution of a democratic process, which I support.

BLITZER: All right. We’re going to take a quick break. But we have a lot more to talk about with our guests. We’ll continue our conversation with Henry Kissinger and Richard Holbrooke right after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BEGIN VIDEO CLIP

BUSH: I look forward to working with our European friends to make it abundantly clear to the Iranian regime that the free world will not tolerate them having a nuclear weapon.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: President Bush, speaking on Friday about a new U.S. strategy in dealing with Iran and its nuclear ambitions.

Welcome back to "LATE EDITION." We’re continuing our conversation with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Richard Holbrooke.

What do you make of this apparent shift, Ambassador Holbrooke, in the U.S. strategy toward Iran now going along with the European effort to offer incentives to the Iranians to walk away from their nuclear program?
HOLBROOKE: I'm very pleased by it, Wolf. I think the administration has belatedly, but finally, made a major change in its policy. And what they did was the essence of good diplomacy.

And I say this as someone who criticized them on your program and elsewhere last year. They have cut a deal with the Europeans which makes perfect sense. There was no chance for European/British/French/German initiative to work with the absence of U.S. participation. And it also wasn't going to work if the Europeans did not say that they were willing to put the issue into the Security Council if necessary.

So the deal that the Americans struck with the Europeans was smart. We join the initiative and the Europeans agree that if it doesn't work it goes to the U.N. for additional pressure. It was a very good deal. And I congratulate Secretary Rice and Deputy Secretary Zoellick for the hard-headed way they went at it after a long period in which we were getting nowhere.

BLITZER: Dr. Kissinger, there are some critics, though, who say the United States is blinking, the United States has blinked, that the Iranians should get no rewards for doing what they're committed to doing as part of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, which is not building a bomb. What do you say?

KISSINGER: Well, we are talking with the North Koreans in the six-party talks in Beijing. And the North Korean regime is just about the most brutal that exists in the world.

The critics have this point: One should not believe that one can create enough incentives to do away with the Iranian nuclear program without creating an incentive for other countries to create nuclear weapons in order to share in those benefits.

But as long as it is measured, as it has been in the recent announcement and as long as we and the Europeans have agreed that if this does not work we will go to the Security Council and presumably then think of pressures that can be used, I believe it is the right diplomacy and probably the only diplomacy to proceed.

BLITZER: All right. Let me get your thoughts, Ambassador Holbrooke, on John Bolton, the man nominated by President Bush to be the next U.N. ambassador to the United Nations. Eleven years ago he said this -- it's causing quite a stir, as you know, right now -- he said, "There is no such thing as the United Nations. There is an international community that occasionally can be led by the only real power left in the world, and that is the United States, when it suits our interest and when we can get others to go along."

Is this man suited to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, a position you held during the Clinton administration?

HOLBROOKE: Wolf, that's a decision for the United States Senate to make. And I think, based on that very powerful interview you just had with Senators Dodd and Senator Lott, we can anticipate a tough confirmation battle.

I've never met John Bolton. I never talked to him until one hour after the announcement, when he called me and asked to meet with me. I'll meet with him this week in Washington. And until I meet him I want to give him the benefit of the doubt.

The quote you've just shown on the screen and many other quotes and comments he's made raise a fundamental question. Of course, John Bolton's going to say he's for reform in the U.N. So am I, so is Kofi Annan, so is Jesse Helms, so is Henry Kissinger. We all want reform. The U.N. is a bureaucratic mess and Kofi Annan is making a major effort to do it.
But the question arises as to whether John Bolton believes that a stronger U.N., a more effective U.N. is in the American national interests or whether he shares the view of some people that a strong U.N. hampstrings the U.S.'s freedom of maneuver.

I don’t share that latter view. We have the veto in the Security Council. We’re the host nation, the founding nation, the largest contributor. We can direct the U.N. and protect our interests.

But I look forward to seeing Secretary Bolton answer those questions. And I’m willing to overlook the quote you’ve just shown on the screen if he will pledge himself that a stronger U.N. and a reformed U.N. is in the American national interest, which is certainly my view.

BLITZER: We don’t have a lot of time left, Dr. Kissinger. But I’m anxious to get your thoughts on the controversial policy of what’s called rendition: in effect the U.S. government taking suspected terrorists apprehended on U.S. soil, and sending them to third countries, whether Syria or Egypt or Jordan or Morocco or other countries around the world for interrogation, where techniques might be supposedly more effective. What do you make of this?

KISSINGER: It’s something that one usually would not welcome. On the other hand, we have to consider that these are issues that may involve thousands of American lives. And we’re dealing with people who have been trained to avoid interrogation. It’s something that I’m not happy with.

On the other hand, it’s something that I can understand. And it is inherent in the nature of the struggle in which we are engaged. But it’s not something that is a general policy I’m at ease with.

BLITZER: We only have a few seconds left, Ambassador Holbrooke. Are there occasions when the U.S. should be doing this, knowing that those suspected terrorists might be tortured in third countries?

HOLBROOKE: I have no evidence as to whether it does in fact increase the protection to American lives or not. There’s no more controversial issue. It goes back deep into history. And I feel very uncomfortable with it. I understand Henry Kissinger’s answer.

But the evidence is out and the United States has to be extremely careful because our own image, our own values in the world, are also at stake. So the balance here is probably the most excruciatingly difficult than any chief executive can face. And I think the best thing to do is just to leave it at that.

BLITZER: Richard Holbrooke and Henry Kissinger, thanks to both of you very much for joining us here on "LATE EDITION."