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TELEVISION PROGRAM TO "CBS NEWS' FACE THE NATION."



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TRANSCRIPT

BOB SCHIEFFER: Today on FACE THE NATION, we revive a CBS News tradition, the holiday round table.

ANNOUNCER: The CBS News correspondent Walter Cronkite.

WALTER CRONKITE: Well, this indeed will be a correspondent's report.

BOB SCHIEFFER: When I was coming up my favorite thing in the holiday season was when CBS News would bring together its top correspondents to talk about the news. Trouble was, by the time I became senior enough to participate, the round tables had gone away. Today, we remedy that as we bring together chief White House correspondent chip Reid, our point man on terrorism Bob Orr, congressional correspondent Nancy Cordes, national security correspondent David Martin, and our chief legal correspondent Jan Crawford to talk about the new terrorist threat, President Obama's first year, the future of health care legislation, and the nation's economy.

I'll have some final thoughts as usual.

But first the correspondents' take on FACE THE NATION.

ANNOUNCER: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from Washington, Bob Schieffer.

BOB SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. Old things are as they were then except we no longer allow smoking in the studio. Chip Reid is with the President out in Hawaii. The rest of our correspondents are around the table with us here in the studio. We want to say especially a welcome to Jan Crawford, who you saw a lot of on FACE THE NATION back when she was the legal correspondent for the Chicago Tribune. She's back with us now, back where she belongs. Her blog Crossroads is already up on the CBS website. We expect to see a lot of you, Jan--

JAN CRAWFORD (Chief Legal Correspondent) (overlapping): Thanks, Bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: --right here at this table.

JAN CRAWFORD: Well, it's great to be back.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Thank you. Well, let's get right to the big story. And the news overnight, of course, was that the U.S. embassy and the British embassy in Yemen have been closed because of a security threat. David Martin, what you have been able to find out about this?

DAVID MARTIN (National Security Correspondent): Usually, when you close an embassy it's because there's been chatter on the internet and-- and on cell phones about some sort of vague attack against western interests. That's different from what almost happened on Christmas Day in Yemen. There was a specific a-- plot to attack the American embassy on Christmas Day and the U.S. preempted that attack with an airstrike of its own. It launched jets off a carrier and cruise missiles from ships offshore. And it hit two training camps in Yemen. And General David Petraeus has said that they intercepted four suicide bombers who were on their way to the capital and they also killed some senior al Qaeda in Yemen operators.

So when you look at that and you remember what else happened on Christmas Day, namely the-- the near-miss on the bombing of the airliner inbound to Detroit, Yemen-- al Qaeda in Yemen really was planning a Christmas surprise.

BOB SCHIEFFER: So what you're telling us here that these were U.S. aircraft--

DAVID MARTIN (overlapping): U.S.

BOB SCHIEFFER: --flying off a U.S. carrier that carried out this strike. We heard about that they had-- there had been some strikes but the credit seemed to be going to the Yemenis. This was a U.S. operation.

DAVID MARTIN: It was. The-- the Yemenis gave the green light. It was done with their permission. But this was an American strike, conducted with American intelligence, and designed to preempt an attack against an American target.

BOB SCHIEFFER: But apparently, Bob Orr, they still think the threat is out there because today both the British embassy and the American embassy in Yemen have been closed. What about this guy that was-- was caught on this attempt on the U.S. airliner? He's been talking a lot since they took him into captivity.

BOB ORR (Justice and Homeland Security): After he was arrested, we're talking about Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the man on Northwest Flight 253. After he was arrested, he almost immediately gave up everything to the FBI. In fact, he was so cooperative that one investigator said it was almost like he was bragging and there was some fear that may be he was spreading disinformation.

Turns out so far that the story he has told has checked out every step of the way. He said he went to Yemen, check. He said he got explosives there. He said he trained with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula there. He told us one thing that's very haunting, where he told investigators there, Bob, and that is when he was training in Yemen he trained with a number of other people. He didn't know how many. He called them as brothers. He said that we were segregated and he felt that was because he wasn't supposed to know too much about what other people were up to. If you take that information at face value you have to assume there may be something else out there.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Chip Reid, I take it the President was briefed. We sent-- began every news cycle getting word that the President's been briefed. What else is going on out there?

CHIP REID: (Chief White House correspondent): Well, they're talking a lot about what's going to happen when the President gets back to Washington. And I think what you are going to see, beginning on Tuesday, when the President has this meeting in the Situation Room with the heads of all the various agencies related to homeland security, is kind of another version of the Afghanistan review. It's going to be very methodical. It's going to be very comprehensive, government wide, and the President's going to sit down on that table and go around the room and find out all the things that are wrong with the system now. They're not just going to focus on what happened here. They're going to update the entire system.

It's going to be very Obama-esk, you know, a very cerebral, very intensive. And I'm sure he'll be criticized again for being kind of Spock-like rather than emotional, you know, very logical in his

response to this. But the White House just doesn't seem to care. They believe that the thing to do is to look at the system with very hard eyes and try to fix it. And as far as any kind of head roll afterwards, you know, are-- is there going to be person-- personal accountability here? They say first you fix the system then you focus on who is to blame.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Jan Crawford, some of the people involved in this plot were alumni of Guantanamo and the prison there. There were a-- this particular person released during the Bush administration. Is this going to cause us, the administration, to rethink what we do about Guantanamo?

JAN CRAWFORD (Chief Legal Correspondent): Well, Bob, it certainly is going to complicate whatever happens at Guantanamo. I don't think the administration is-- certainly that we're getting no signals that they're going to rethink the decision to close Guantanamo. Remember that was a major campaign issue that Obama ran. And with great fanfare, after he was sworn in, he declared it would be closed within one year. Now that year is coming up, January 22nd, Guantanamo is not going to be closed within a year of Obama's executive order that that take place.

So that's going to take some time and the question is what's going to happen with these guys down at Guantanamo. There's about a hundred and ninety-eight right now down there. I think ninety or so of them are Yemenis. I think the last train to Yemen has left the station. So where we're going to go? Obviously Obama has identified a prison in Thompson, Illinois, but there's no money for that. Democrats turned down a request for about a hundred and fifty million dollars to get that prison for those Guantanamo detainees. That's going to be a major issue coming in the spring. How they're going to get that prison for those detainees and bring them here. Moderate Democrats are very skeptical.

BOB SCHIEFFER: So you-- you're convinced that they are not going to close this? Have they admitted that to-- to themselves--

JAN CRAWFORD (overlapping): President--

BOB SCHIEFFER: --that they can't close--

JAN CRAWFORD (overlapping): --President Obama--

BOB SCHIEFFER: --it prior to deadline.

JAN CRAWFORD: --has acknowledged that it's very difficult practically speaking. They've had some problems with where they're going to put these people. They have had to do an individual review of all these detainees. You know, they've had some pushback here in Congress. But they are prepared now to say, acknowledge I think what we all are kind of like, you know, yeah there's gambling in Casablanca, this thing's not going to close within that year deadline. They are not going to pushback. They still believe that it must close in the interests of our security. They say that it's been kind of this worldwide symbol of what's gone wrong that's the Obama administration's position.

But Bob, I think, you know, when you think about what we were going to do--where these, you know, hundred and ninety-eight or so people going to go? All-- all accounts now are pointing to Thompson, Illinois. But the Democrats in Congress, you know, they haven't been too keen on giving Obama hundred and fifty million dollars to bring those people here.

BOB SCHIEFFER: It-- it's one of the question that really went unanswered during the presidential campaign because both of the candidates Barack Obama and John McCain said we need to close Guantanamo. Because they both said that we all forgot to ask the next question--how?

JAN CRAWFORD (overlapping): Right, and where?

BOB SCHIEFFER: --and that is what that they're--

DAVID MARTIN (overlapping): But-- but let's--

BOB SCHIEFFER: --dealing with now.

DAVID MARTIN: --let's face it. Closing Guantanamo is going to nothing more than a change of address for the detainees because they still have the procedure of indefinite detention for people you can't take to court because the evidence won't stand up in court for any number of reasons, but you considered too dangerous to release. And that was one of the greatest criticisms of the Bush administration's policy on Guantanamo and that apparently is not going to change. They're just--their location is going to change.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Nancy Cordes, you came back from Europe yesterday, so did you notice any difference in the security--

NANCY CORDES (Congressional Correspondent) (overlapping): Ab--

BOB SCHIEFFER: --any difference in procedures?

NANCY CORDES (Congressional Correspondent): --absolutely. I mean, we were screened again when we got to the gate. We had to go through security and then all of our carry-on luggage had to be screened by hand, by security personnel. And then when we got on to the airplane they took away our blankets at the beginning of the flight. They took away our ba-- blankets at the end of the flight extensively so that we could not hide something on our laps as this would-be bomber try to do. But, you know, all this extra security takes time, you know and takes manpower to do this kind of thing. So our flight took off late and I think you're going to see a lot of half hour delays, hour-long delays as people wait to go through this extra screening.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Where-- where-- where did you go?

NANCY CORDES: I went through Berlin to Copenhagen and it was in Copenhagen on our flight to the U.S. that we saw the extra security. And it was only to the flights going to the U.S. as far I could see that were getting the extra screening.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Chip Reid, Vice President Cheney has been leading the Republican attack. He says that the President simply is pretending that we're not at war with al Qaeda. Isn't-- isn't the President going to really have to step out and take some decisive action here if for no other reason and just to counter this kind of criticism from the other side?

CHIP REID: Well, you talk to them and they believe he already has with the two statements that he gave and then the address that he gave yesterday. But, you know, the-- the criticism, and I think the reason it resonates is because he comes across a-- a bit detached and cerebral when

he makes these statements, he does not sound angry. And when he finally did express frustration or maybe even a little anger it wasn't so much toward the terrorist, it was toward the people who didn't stop them.

So, you know, is there going to be the kind of change in tone that a lot of people really want. I think he is just going to continue to-- to be President Obama. He's not going to get out there with a megaphone and-- and sound more angry than he naturally allows himself to be. So I think you're going to continue to hear that criticism.

But the White House, of course, is fighting back very hard. They said, look he understands the dangers here. He's been talking about it throughout its entire first year, but he doesn't have to beat his chest as one adviser put it to prove it.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Jan, some people, critics of the President are saying that perhaps the response to this was one of the low points of this administration.

JAN CRAWFORD: Well, I mean when you're talking about the Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano coming out and insisting that the system worked and Press Secretary Robert Gibbs saying on this program last week, pretty much the same language that the system has worked. That's a problem. I mean obviously the American people can look out there and go, well, you know, it didn't.

But it's not just those sound bites. I mean those are sound bites. The reason that's an issue for Obama is that it goes to the bigger question of the competency of his government and the trust that people have in that government. You look at polls. Polls show that the trust in government is an all time low. Domestically, obviously, stimulus plan hasn't worked. Unemployment is high.

And so now we have a situation where a terrorist can get on an airplane, seemingly could have been caught if some officials had just done a basic Google search of the database. And the Homeland Security secretary is insisting the system worked.

BOB ORR (overlapping): Bob, can I just--

JAN CRAWFORD: That doesn't you know work. We're in a--what people are going to want to know is, you know does Obama have a plan? What is his plan to fight this long-term war against a determined Jihadist enemy? What's the plan and do Americans have the trust that Obama is confident to fight that long-term war?

BOB ORR: Part of the problem for the White House is their most-effective counterterrorism tool right now is one they can't really talk about and that is this predator drone campaign. That from time to time you hear in the news, there's another strike in Waziristan and Pakistan. They've taken out a Taliban leader, perhaps an al Qaeda leader. I mean, we've killed al Qaeda number three about four times already. The CIA will not admit that they're doing this. They just have a policy of plausible deniability. But the fact is, we've done some checking, under the first eleven months of the Obama administration they've actually launched more drone strikes against terrorists than the last four years of the Bush administration.

So, it's not quite accurate to say that they haven't been aggressive. They have been aggressive at the point of the spear trying to take out these-- these cell leaders. And I think we're going to see more of those things going forward, because right now they have determined that is the best way to go after the core command in control.

DAVID MARTIN: Look at what the Obama administration has done. He approved sending more than fifty thousand more troops to Afghanistan. As Bob just pointed out--he increased the number of drone strikes in Pakistan. And now he's opened up this new front in Yemen, ordering U.S. aircraft and U.S. missiles to strike targets in Yemen. That's hardly pretending like you're not at war. I think what he's trying to do is keep the war against terror for overwhelming his domestic agenda. And so he tries low key this as much as he can plus the-- the normal sort of low-key nature of-- of the way he addresses these things.

BOB SCHIEFFER: I want to get back to that. But let me just ask Nancy. He had some momentum going on-- on his number one domestic priority and that was to get this health care bill passed. The Senate finally passed it. Now they're trying to reconcile it with the House version. Is all of this going slow down the momentum?

NANCY CORDES: Well, the Democrats can't afford to let the momentum slow down. They need to get a win on health care. And they need to get it quickly, because after all now we're in 2010 and it's an election year. And they need to have something to run on. So they're going to keep moving full-steam ahead on health care. And all of these issues on terrorism, on Afghanistan are just going to add to what's already on their plate. You're already seeing the Senate Intelligence Committee saying that they're going to hold hearings on the Yemeni issues, on the terrorism issue, the day after they get back from the recess and the House is going to be doing the same thing.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, the administration plan was to get the health care bill signed before the President makes his State of Union in the--probably the first part of February. Are they going to make the deadline?

NANCY CORDES: That looks very grim. I mean after all the Senate doesn't even get back until January 20th. And so that means that they would have all about two weeks to reconcile all these differences on how you pay for health care and on abortion and on the public option with the House. Work out all those differences and then hold a series of votes before the State of the Union. Congress doesn't work that fast even in the best of times.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): I'm for one is not convinced that it is going to pass. It probably will in the end, but I still think it's not a done deal.

We're going to be back with more of our correspondents' round table in just a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And we're back with our correspondents' round table. Why did this fail, this attack--the attempt on the airliner, Bob?

BOB ORR: Well, first of all the man shouldn't have been on the plane with the bomb in the first place. And that happened because there was a security failure, which has now been widely acknowledged and an intelligence failure of-- again, the government did not connect the dots. But the reason the device failed is, according to people I've talked to, is that it didn't reach a high-enough temperature. He had enough material, enough PETN--it's an element of common plastic explosives, to blow the plane out of the sky. It could have been a very, very bad ending. The chemical that was injected into that did not trigger the right kind of chemical reaction to cause an explosion.

But I think the government has to go back and look at two channels here. How was it that the intelligence was so poor and so badly shared and collated? And then, what about screening? You know there was equipment in the airport in Amsterdam that could have theoretically detected this device but it wasn't used because of privacy concerns. It's just amazing to me that questions about privacy and your rights would trump security. And that's a real debate going forward.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you Jan, one of the things that we're going to be talking a lot this year is this supposed trial that's supposed to take place now that Justice Department says in New York on the-- the 9/11 guy. Is that going to happen?

JAN CRAWFORD: Well, that's going to be playing out really possibly as soon as the end of February and early March. The Obama administration is going to have to notify Congress within forty-five days of when they're going to bring the 9/11 masterminds, self-confessed, Khalid Sheikh Muhammed, to New York City with four other top-ranking al Qaeda terrorists for their-- their trial to stand trial in a regular criminal court.

That is unlikely really to take place the entire thing this year. But, yeah, you're going to start seeing right away--pretrial motions, lawyers arguing that their rights have been violated. Motions for dismiss this indictment for outrageous government conduct. This decision by the Obama administration, his Attorney General Eric Holder, really I think represents the most significant break the Obama administration is making away from Bush administration's policy.

I agree with David. I mean, moving these guys here is really just a change of address on Guantanamo. The Supreme Court has decided they should get some rights. So whether they're in Illinois or Guantanamo, it's not a huge difference. But holding criminal trials for these enemy combatants is something that historically the United States has never done. In World War II, for example, you know we had the German saboteurs coming into this country. FDR ordered them tried by a secret military tribunal. And they were executed month later.

But we've decided, this administration has decided, that we're going to give them a full range of constitutional and procedural protections and allow them to be treated as ordinary criminal defendants. That's going to be a major issue picking up on what Bob said of how we're going to kind of have this tension between the rule of law and rights for these people while we're also waging war. We're going to be holding them, giving them these full range of constitutional rights while we're stepping up drone attacks and trying to basically kill their counterparts.

BOB SCHIEFFER: David Martin, the one thing we haven't gotten to so far is Afghanistan. We're getting ready to send troops over there if the Congress approves the money to ship them over there. What does the Pentagon expect over there this year? Will we see some change in Afghanistan?

DAVID MARTIN: Well, there's no question that thirty thousand more troops are going to make life miserable for the Taliban, but that's only one part of the strategy here. The other parts are that the Afghan government has to get its act together and cut down at least some of the corruption and start delivering services to its people. And the Afghan army and police have to expand and get a whole lot better so that they can take over the fight. And if you believe that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link then those are two very iffy propositions.

So if you look at the thirty thousand troops but everything else that has to be accomplished, you would have to say that the success of this strategy is by no means a sure thing.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Nancy, is Congress going to approve the funds to allow the President to carry out this?

NANCY CORDES: In the end, they probably will. But it won't be the Democrats, a majority of Democrats, who are supporting it. The President will probably get most of his support from Republicans. One of his chief supporters on this issue is Senator John McCain. A lot of Democrats were hoping he'd start ramping down in Afghanistan, not ramping up.

In fact, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was one of them. She has essentially said the President needs to carry his own water on this issue and convince his fellow Democrats if he wants to get the funding for this -- for this troop increase.

BOB SCHIEFFER: I would add that the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, John Kerry, and the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Carl Levin are both fairly lukewarm about this, too. So the President's going to be on his own on this one. I agree with you. I think, in the end, he'll probably get the approval, but--

NANCY CORDES (overlapping): Right, it will be a lot of Republicans and a small number of Democrats, most likely, that give him the majority he needs.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, let's round this out, get the thoughts of all of you on what is going to happen. What is your prediction for this year, Chip Reid?

CHIP REID: Well, Bob, health care reform--I think it probably will be passed and signed into law. And once that happens I think it's going to create a bit of a void in Washington. And the White House has hoped all along that that void would be filled with jobs, jobs, jobs and-- and making progress on the economy.

But I'd tell you, I don't see how you can take all the oxygen out of the room with summits on jobs at the White House and town halls on jobs. I mean, there's only so much the government can do. Something has got to fill that void, and I think it's going to be national security. I think it's going to be Yemen. I think it's going to be progress in Afghanistan. And I think, in 2010, President Obama is going to be defined as a war President much more so than in the previous year.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Nancy?

NANCY CORDES: I think that the Senate Democrats are going to lose their super-majority of 60 Democrats. There are more Democratic incumbents who are in trouble than Republican incumbents in the fall. And that means that the President's agenda--getting it passed is going to be a lot more difficult for him.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Lose their super-majority but probably hold their majority?

NANCY CORDES: That's right, but they won't be able to break a filibuster.

BOB SCHIEFFER: David?

DAVID MARTIN: Thirty thousand troops will reverse the Taliban momentum in Afghanistan. And that will be the beginning of a long, hard slog which will leave tens of thousands of American troops in Afghanistan at the end of President Obama's first term.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Ten seconds.

BOB ORR: We will face more homegrown terror threats from radicals here reaching across to known operatives. And we need to button that down now.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Jan?

JAN CRAWFORD: Justice John Paul Stevens will retire from the Supreme Court at ninety, giving Obama his second nomination. Solicitor General Elena Kagan will be the nominee replace to him.

And I'm not saying in the order of importance, but the University of Alabama will win the national championship on Thursday. Real tight. Because we're not playing the Horned Frogs.

BOB SCHIEFFER: May I just add that I would predict that the Associated Press Coach of the Year Gary Patterson will lead the TCU Horned Frogs to victory tomorrow in the Fiesta Bowl over a very good Boise State team.

Back with some final thoughts in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Finally today, Homeland Security Chief Janet Napolitano is getting hammered because her first response to the undie bomber fiasco was that the system worked.

We shouldn't have been surprised. Sure, she looks a little silly now that the facts are dribbling out. But she was just following the modern bipartisan public relations template in this age of information management.

First, play down the problem. Second, emphasize what did not go wrong. Assure us that those in charge are investigating, and most important, emphasize no one in any position of responsibility is at fault. It's not lying. But it's not exactly the whole truth, certainly not the whole story. All she left out was that part about asking us to respect the privacy of those involved. Oh, I'm sorry. I got the government spin mixed up with the Tiger spin.

Here is the difference. Tiger can hire as many people as he wants to make his excuses. It may do him no good but it's his money to spend as he wishes. When government officials insult us with spin they're doing it on our dime, which is supposed to be used to operate the government, not to hold news conferences to tell us what a fine job people on the public payroll are doing.

As we learned during Katrina, self-serving spin at the first sign of crisis does not help the situation. It makes it worse. Because it makes it harder to believe anything the government says. Real security is built on trust in government. That requires truth, which should be the beginning of government presentations, not the fallback position. Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And that's it for us. We'll see you next week right here on FACE THE NATION.

ANNOUNCER: This broadcast was produced by CBS News, which is solely responsible for the selection of today's guests and topics. It originated in Washington, DC.