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



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TRANSCRIPT

HARRY SMITH: Today on FACE THE NATION, White House senior advisor David Axelrod on President Obama's trip and the economy.

Plus, a debate on guns. The United States and Latin America in the dance of international diplomacy. Where is President Obama leading?

Although White House says the economy is showing signs of improvement but many Americans are wondering when they'll see the same thing.

April Violence: Has President Obama given up on banning assault weapons?

All those questions and more for White House senior advisor David Axelrod.

Then we'll have a debate on the assault weapons ban between Ed Rendell, governor of Pennsylvania, and Wayne LaPierre of the National Rifle Association.

But first, David Axelrod on FACE THE NATION.

ANNOUNCER: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from Washington, substituting for Bob Schieffer, anchor of THE EARLY SHOW, Harry Smith.

HARRY SMITH: Welcome again to the broadcast. Bob Schieffer is off today.

Joining us now White House senior advisor David Axelrod. Good morning.

DAVID AXELROD (White House Advisor): Good morning, Harry.

HARRY SMITH: Let's first talk about the trip. I want to talk about Venezuela and Hugo Chavez.

DAVID AXELROD: Mm-Hm.

HARRY SMITH: A picture is worth a thousand year-- words and to see this smiling picture with President Obama and Hugo Chavez in-- in this handshake in both with these big, broad smiles. What message do you think that sends?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I don't-- I'm not concerned about the message that it sends. I'm concerned about what flows from it. Words and handshakes are nice, but they're not enough.

Now, also coming out of this meeting was an overture from President Chavez to restore our ambassadors, our respective ambassadors. Something we want to--

HARRY SMITH: (Overlapping) And what threshold does Venezuela have to achieve in order to-- to get that?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, for one thing, to stop this sort of rampant and tasteless anti-Americanism that we've seen over the last eight years, and try and work cooperatively with us. And the hope is, is that that's what will come from this.

But understand what's happening, Harry, and not just with Venezuela but with countries around the world. I think this President has engaged the people of the world, the constituencies of these leaders, and the leaders are now responding. Easy anti-Americanism is no longer a great political tactic in their countries. And I think that's one of the early accomplishments of this presidency.

HARRY SMITH: The President eased travel restrictions with Cuba earlier this week. Raul Castro came back and said we want to talk. The same question again applies to Cuba. What does Cuba have to put on the table to say we actually are interested in having in-- more normal relations or something close to normal relations?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, as you know, Mister Castro made an interesting speech in which he said everything was on the table--human rights, political prisoners, democracy. He also said something interesting. He said we may not have been right about some of our assumptions, which is the first time we've heard that from the Cubans.

So if all of that pans out, it's-- it's an encouraging development. And certainly we're going to pursue that.

But there are certain things that they should do right away. One is we've now eased remittances from families here back to Cuba. The Cuban government should stop taking thirty percent off the top of that money when it arrives.

We've suggested that our cable-- our cellular companies can begin to negotiate contracts there. The Cuban government should receive that and act on that, because it would be positive for both-- both Cuba and the world for there to be free flow of communications.

HARRY SMITH: Although there are-- there are European companies that have cable and cellular contracts there. I mean, it's not like this is--

DAVID AXELROD: (Overlapping) No, but it would make an enormous difference if this was done.

And thirdly, they ought to begin to move on the issue of political prisoners. That would be a very positive sign.

But look, there's no doubt that the fifty years of policy we've had has not been very successful in changing the realities on the island of Cuba. And this is an encouraging week.

HARRY SMITH: Any thought in the White House now to lifting the embargo?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, we're a long way from that. As I said, there are-- there are many steps that need to be taken. But we-- these are encouraging signs. And we intend to pursue them.

HARRY SMITH: Let's talk about Mexico, where the trip started. The drug war is raging there. Thousands of people have died. Many of the guns that are being used there are being illegally smuggled into Mexico. One of the things that Mister Obama had talked about on the campaign was reinstating the assault weapons ban. Everything seems to indicate that that's dead, that that's not going to happen. Does the President have any intention of reinstating that?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I don't know about dead, Harry. The question is, is there the consensus and the ability, given the rules of the Congress and the realities of the Congress, to move that in the midst of everything else that we have to do. Is that something that you want to embark on now?

But there are many things we can do apart from that that can make a difference. Secretary Napolitano has taken a series of steps to stop the smuggling of weapons South, including sending 450 more people, along with the ATF, down to the border, including inspecting trains, which hadn't been done before, that goes South. There are a wide range of things that we're embarking on that the two presidents discussed.

HARRY SMITH: (Overlapping) Because almost none-- because almost none of the cars that go South from the United States are even looked at.

DAVID AXELROD: We need to be much more assiduous. And-- and that was part of the discussion between them. We don't want drugs or-- or immigrants being smuggled North. We don't want guns being smuggled South.

HARRY SMITH: Right. Sixty Blue Dog Democrats, as soon as this whole notion of the assault weapons ban being reinstated, immediately signed on and said we want no part of that.

Is the White House afraid of the National Rifle Association?

DAVID AXELROD: Not-- not at all. The White House is interested in pursuing policies that we can enact quickly to deal with the issue of violence in this country, to deal with the issue of violence on the border. That means tightening enforcement and doing the things that I just mentioned on the border.

This isn't about that. This is about being effective in dealing with a problem that's in front of us.

HARRY SMITH: Is there a timetable to go after assault weapons? Not this year, next year?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, you know, we'll monitor that-- we'll monitor the issue. And if there's a consensus, we'll move on it.

But, Harry, as you know, we're faced with an enormous array of challenges. And we need to make some choices as to which to pursue first.

HARRY SMITH: I have another foreign policy question. And that is, President Zardari in Pakistan signed an agreement this week that basically ceded an entire territory of the country of Pakistan to the Taliban. Here the United States is in the middle of trying to fight a war in Afghanistan and ramping up troops to help fight that fight and its next door neighbor and our theoretical ally is harboring the Taliban. How do we wage that fight?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, as you know, Harry, the President embarked on a very intensive review of the problems in the entire region as soon as he became President. And he's embarking on a new strategy that includes the whole region, not just Afghanistan but Pakistan.

He's rallied the world behind it. And it includes significant assistance for the Pakistanis. But they have to meet us along the way and intensify their efforts in terms of teaming with the threat, which is as threatening to them as it is to us.

HARRY SMITH: Has the White House communicated with Zardari their -- its displeasure with what happened this week?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, we're in-- we're in close communication. As you know, Ambassador Holbrooke is a special envoy there. The government there knows what our feeling is. And they need to really focus in on what is a threat to their own stability and what is a threat to the security of the world. And that is this growing hegemony of the Taliban and allies of al Qaida.

HARRY SMITH: I want to talk about the CIA memos that were released this week. Immediately, when it happened, former CIA director and the former attorney general said this was a huge mistake for reasons not the least of which were--now you've told al Qaida, any al Qaida operative who ends up being captured by the United States exactly what's going to happen to them.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, first of all, it's not going to happen because the President, in one of his first acts, banned these enhanced interrogation techniques. That's point number one.

Point number two, virtually everything that was in those memos has been publicly reported. The New York Review of Books had a full catalogue of these techniques, you know, that were given to the International Red Cross through testimonies.

So, and you may know, the CIA may believe that al Qaida doesn't read the New York Review of Books, but I suspect they know what's going on.

The truth is that, because these were in the public domain, because even the last administration has revealed the most serious aspects of this, and because the President has banned these techniques, there was no legal rationale for keeping them classified. And so the President acted.

HARRY SMITH: On the other hand, groups like the ACLU and others have said this proves there are prosecutable-- prosecutable crimes that need to be acted on. What's your response to that?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, the President has said, if there were agents of the United States government acting on legal advice that what they were doing was legal and appropriate, that they should not be prosecuted. If people acted outside the law, that's a different issue.

But the main point is the President has banned these enhanced interrogation techniques. We have turned the page on this episode in our history. We have so many challenges in front of us, in terms of our national security, our relations in the world.

And remember, these techniques, far from enhancing our safety, really became a recruiting and propaganda tool for al Qaida and the extremists around the world. We're moving past all of that. And to-- to revisit it again and again and again isn't, in the President's view, in the country's interest.

HARRY SMITH: But the people who advocated these acts still say and are absolutely adamant that they were worthwhile and turned over information that was helpful to the United States.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, that's-- that's a heated debate. But the reality is that it also became, as I said, a rallying point for extremists around the country.

HARRY SMITH: (Overlapping) What if-- but what if that, in fact, is true?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, Harry, we are absolutely confident that we have the tools necessary to get the information we need to keep this country safe. And we don't believe and the President of the United States does not believe that this is a contest between our values and our security. He thinks we can honor both and execute both. And that's what he's going to do.

HARRY SMITH: Let's talk about stress test results that are supposed to come out this week. Is all of the information going to be made public or a certain amount of the information made public, and there's this fear that some banks will look so bad there might be a run on some of them?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I think that we'll have-- I don't believe that. I believe that-- that the American people and the markets can handle the truth—

HARRY SMITH: (Overlapping) Okay.

DAVID AXELROD: --to quote an old movie. And the guidelines will be released shortly.

There will be disclosure. It's important that there is a disclosure. And I think the banks are going to want that, because they're going to want the markets and the country and the world to know exactly what their condition is. And we're confident that, yes, some are going to have very serious problems, but we feel that the tools are available to address these problems.

HARRY SMITH: Work on the budget is going to ramp up this week. Do you feel in the White House that there really is any Republican support whatsoever for the budget?

DAVID AXELROD: You know, that remains to be seen. There seem-- there seems to be a political decision that has been made that it is better for the Republican Party to say no than to say yes or to make constructive contributions to the process.

We hope that changes. I don't think it's a good political strategy. It's certainly not a good governing strategy. No one expects the Republican Party to fully embrace what we're doing, and, you know, what they would like is for us to ratify the policies that we've had for the last eight years that have gotten us into the mess we're in. We have two parties for a reason, but there are areas of common interest, and we ought to pursue them.

HARRY SMITH: What do you make of this spreading and very public disaffection with not only the government, but especially the Obama administration, the Tea parties this week? You even have the governor of Texas even using the word secession? Should Texas be allowed to secede?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I don't think that really warrants a serious response. I don't think most Texans were all that enthused by the governor's suggestion.

HARRY SMITH: But what about the first part of the question--this growing disaffection?

(Overlapping)

DAVID AXELROD: I think any time that you have severe economic conditions, there is always an element of disaffection that can mutate into something that's unhealthy.

HARRY SMITH: Is this unhealthy?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, we're-- this is a country where we value our liberty-- our liberties and our ability to express ourselves. And so far these are expressions.

Now, one thing I would say is-- the thing that bewilders me is this President just cut taxes for ninety five percent of the American people. So I think the tea bags should be directed elsewhere, because he certainly understands the burden that people face.

HARRY SMITH: Last question very quickly. This Iranian-American reporter that has now been convicted of spying in Iran is going to be sentenced to eight years. Is the White House ready to intervene on her behalf?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, look, we're very concerned about it. We think the charges were totally unwarranted and inappropriate. And we will be communicating through the appropriate channels to do whatever we can to help secure her release.

HARRY SMITH: Mister Axelrod, we sure appreciate your time this morning.

DAVID AXELROD: Great to be here, Harry.

HARRY SMITH: Thank you very, very much.

We're going to be back with the debate over the assault weapons ban in just one minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

HARRY SMITH: With us now from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Governor Ed Rendell; and here in our studio, Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the National Rifle Association. Good morning, gentlemen.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL (D-Pennsylvania): Good morning.

WAYNE LAPIERRE (Executive VP, National Rifle Association): Good morning.

HARRY SMITH: Governor, let me start with you. You have this situation outside of Pittsburgh, where a man is holed up in his house. Police come to respond to a domestic disturbance call, and three police officers end up-- end up dead.

The man in question was using an assault weapon, which he-- which he attained by using legal means and went through a check. Do you believe that crime would not have happened had he not had that weapon?

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: No, I think the crime itself would have happened, Harry. But I think one officer at least would still be alive. And remember, the AK-47 jammed. When he was putting out an incredible amount of fire power against police arriving on the scene, it jammed. Had it not jammed, we could have lost a whole lot more than three police officers on that day.

There's absolutely no reason under the sun, no rational reason that we should allow people to legally possess these type of semi-automatic assault weapons. They're made for one purpose. They're not used in a duck blind for hunting. They're not used in the Olympics for target shooting. They're used to kill and maim people, and most often it's police officers.

HARRY SMITH: Do you believe the assault weapons ban should be reinstated?

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: Absolutely.

HARRY SMITH: Do you think there's political will in this country? You just heard David Axelrod. You heard Dianne Feinstein say last week on 60 MINUTES, it's not going to happen.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: Well, I think first of all, I agree with the President's decision, right now with the economy being as challenged as it is, with healthcare on the table, this is not the time to bring this issue up. But I think it has to be brought up in the near future, because every police organization in this country supports-- virtually every one supports banning assault weapons.

You know, we all pay homage to police. We have these days in Washington, May 15th is the day to remember the policemen who have died in the line of duty. We all give homage to the police, and yet we don't listen to them on this basic issue. Since the assault ban has been lifted, Harry, forty American police officers have either been killed or seriously wounded with assault weapons.

HARRY SMITH: All right. Wayne LaPierre, are the cops wrong?

WAYNE LAPIERRE: The rank-and-file cops know this is a totally phony issue. And that's why Congress doesn't want to deal with it again.

You know, the governor sits up there in Philadelphia. Let me tell you the reality of the crime problem in this country. The former U.S. attorney said there's simply no risk of a felon in Philadelphia putting a gun in his pocket and walking out in the street. The former-- the head of the FOP up there said the problem in Philadelphia is the revolving door criminal justice system. It lets the most prolific and violent criminals back on the street again and again. The chief of detectives of the Philadelphia Police Department has recently said there's no reason to talk about gun control; they don't enforce any of the gun laws they already have. He talks about no consequences.

HARRY SMITH: So you think-- you think that the assault weapons ban is just a bogeyman?

WAYNE LAPIERRE: I think it is a totally phony issue. It was enacted, and the governor is doing it again today, on the basis of saying these were machine guns. That's a lie. They were rapid fire. That's a lie. They made bigger holes. That's a lie. They were more powerful. That's a lie. It was lie after lie after lie.

Congress found it out. That's why they let it expire, and lies that are found out don't get reenacted.

HARRY SMITH: Here's-- the majority of Americans support the assault weapons ban. And here's what a lot of people think, and one of the members of your own board has said, well, this whole thing about going to assault-- after assault weapons is just a way for them to take away our rights to carry shotguns. That's what people--is that what people in the NRA really believe?

WAYNE LAPIERRE: Harry, let me tell you, there is no functional difference at all between any of these so-called assault weapons the media talks about. Assault weapons are machine guns. They're fully automatic. They spray fire. They're rapid fire. That's what our soldiers use. These guns we're talking about, that the governor wants to ban, are functionally no different than any other gun. The performance characteristics are exactly the same. There's no difference.

HARRY SMITH: Okay. Governor.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: That's just unbelievably untrue. That's unbelievably untrue. The assault weapons that are used that are sold in sporting goods stores now because the ban has been lifted, they put out a tremendously high amount of fire. And remember, the ban not only banned these assault weapons. It banned large capacity ammunition clips.

Now, I'd like Wayne to explain to the American people why anybody should have the right to have an ammunition clip that has more than ten bullets in it at one time.

HARRY SMITH: Go Ahead.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: What use is that made for, Wayne? Who uses that?

WAYNE LAPIERRE: Governor, you know there is absolutely no difference between two ten-round magazines and three of another. I mean, and you just said something--

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL (Overlapping): It's a big difference -- it's a big difference because someone--

WAYNE LAPIERRE: --you just said something plainly untrue.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: It's a big difference because someone has to change within a ten--

(Overlapping)

WAYNE LAPIERRE: I want you to go to the range with me, and let's get ballistics experts. And CNN has footage on this, where they went to the range with police officers and they showed there's not a dime's worth of difference between the guns you want to ban and you don't want to ban. You're going to ban these semi-autos, and then it's going to be handguns, and then it's going to be pump shotguns--

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL (Overlapping): See, and that's the excuse all the time.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: And that's the truth, and you know it.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: Harry, they use that excuse all the time, and everybody knows, everybody knows that every one of our amendments have limitations to it.

WAYNE LAPIERRE (Overlapping): That--

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: You can't-- you can't cry "fire" in a crowded movie theater and say free speech.

(Overlapping)

HARRY SMITH: Governor, hang on-- hang on one second. Mister LaPierre, let me ask you this. Do the people in the NRA-- do the rank-and-file really believe the President of the United States is interested in basically overturning the Second Amendment?

WAYNE LAPIERRE: You know what they're trying to do right now? They're trying to piggyback this whole phony issue of-- on the back of the tragedy in Mexico. I challenge the President of the United States and the media to prove that ninety percent of the guns used by the drug cartels are being smuggled.

HARRY SMITH: It may not be ninety percent. That certainly has been put in question. But there's certainly plenty of these guns that are coming across the border.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: You know, the only people that have ever put up their hand in the air and testified under oath on this is BATF, two weeks ago in Congress.

And let me tell you what they said. "I'm not sure where those institutes get these numbers. The investigations that we have--

HARRY SMITH (Overlapping): The ninety percent number?

WAYNE LAPIERRE: Exactly. And the two thousand a day.

HARRY SMITH: Nobody's claiming the 90 percent number.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: "And we see, for firearms seizures flowing across the border, don't show us showing individuals taking thousands of guns a day flowing into Mexico."

But the other thing, if there's one gun, it's already illegal. ICE, the customs people, enforcement people are asking Congress, do you need more laws? They said, no, we just need to enforce what we have.

HARRY SMITH: Let me go back to the governor. Because the thing that the NRA has said repeatedly, and was just said again this morning, is, why aren't the laws that are on books enforced already, and that would alleviate most of the problem?

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: Well, first of all, number one, I agree with Wayne that we need to enforce existing laws better. But in Pennsylvania, we've gone-- in over a decade, we've increased our prison population in our state prisons by over fifteen thousand people.

We are enforcing the laws. We're putting bad and difficult and dangerous people who use firearms to commit crimes in jail. When I was district attorney, we enacted the first mandatory minimum sentence for people who use guns to commit crimes. We just enacted, in Pennsylvania, a twenty-year mandatory minimum sentence for anybody who fires a gun at a police officer.

But that is-- and I agree, we should enforce our existing laws better. And in fact, as Wayne will admit, he and I and Charlton Heston-- we combined on a tougher procedure in Philadelphia.

But, having said that-- having said that--

HARRY SMITH (Overlapping): Quickly?

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: --let's go back to the original point. What blessed use is there for one of these assault weapons?

What American needs an assault weapon to protect themselves, to hunt, or to shoot targets?

HARRY SMITH: Go ahead Mister.

(Overlapping)

HARRY SMITH: Go ahead.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: It's not an assault weapon. It's no different than any other gun.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: It's an assault weapon.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: But you know what happened in Philadelphia, Governor? When the cameras went away, you went away. But I'll tell you what we ought to do this morning. Let's agree on this. Every American city-- let's put Project Exile. Every time a violent felon, drug dealer, gang member touches a gun, let's prosecute.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: I agree with that.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: And let's go to President Obama and say, look, you've got hundred U.S. attorneys. Let's have them do ten additional prosecutions a month, each one of them. No, better than that let's do twenty.

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: Harry, let's make a deal right here. I agree with Wayne. I agree with Wayne. We'll do that. And Philadelphia has used it and used it very successfully.

But, also, Wayne, let's you and I agree that the Congress can pass a law saying that individuals can only purchase one handgun a month. That's twelve a year. Who in their god's name needs more than twelve handguns a year?

WAYNE LAPIERRE: You know, there you go again. Like criminals are standing around going, only one; only one. Don't you get it? They're criminals. They violate all your gun laws. That's why we have to take them off the street.

(Overlapping)

GOVERNOR ED RENDELL: But criminals get their guns from people who buy guns legally. Straw purchasing is the number one problem for crime guns in this country.

(Overlapping)

WAYNE LAPIERRE: And it's illegal and let's enforce the law.

HARRY SMITH: All right. Gentlemen, thank you so much.

Governor Ed Rendell, thank you for your time this morning.

Mister LaPierre, do appreciate it, sir.

We'll be back in a moment.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

HARRY SMITH: That's our broadcast. Bob Schieffer will be back next Sunday. I'll see you tomorrow morning on THE EARLY SHOW. Thanks for watching FACE THE NATION.