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



April 24, 2011 Transcript

GUESTS: SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
D-Conn.; Armed Services Committee

SENATOR CHRIS COONS
D-Delaware; Budget Committee

SENATOR MARK KIRK
R-Illinois; Appropriations Committee

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN
R-Arkansas

REPRESENTATIVE JOE WALSH
R-Illinois

MODERATOR/

PANELIST: Bob Schieffer, CBS News Political Analyst

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FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
(202) 457-4481

TRANSCRIPT

BOB SCHIEFFER: Today on FACE THE NATION, Syria is worse than ever. We'll have the latest.

And from Washington, where the new CBS News poll says people dislike Congress more than ever. We'll ask some of the newest members what they think about the legislative branch. They've just joined. We'll talk to Republican Senator Mark Kirk who took Barack Obama's old seat in Illinois; Chris Coons, who took Joe Biden's seat in Delaware; Richard Blumenthal, the new senator from Connecticut; and two Tea Party favorites--Arkansas Congressman Tim Griffin and Illinois Congressman Joe Walsh.

It's all ahead 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. I hope your day is as beautiful as it is on this Easter Sunday in Washington. We begin with Senator Coons and Senator Blumenthal in the studio. Senator Kirk is in Chicago. Welcome. Well, gentlemen, the news from Syria overnight is not good. Government troops open fire on tens of thousands of protestors. The estimates now are at around a hundred and twenty people were killed over the last three days. That brings it to about three hundred people who have been killed since the protest began five weeks ago. Three members of Bashar Assad's government have resigned to protest the killings. Assad has promised more reforms but the protestors say they will not be satisfied until he leaves. And, so far it looks like he's not. President Obama issued another statement condemning the violence. He called on the government to change course now. Senator Kirk, you were one of those who advised Barack Obama to be aggressive about getting involved in Libya. What do you think needs to be done about Syria here?

SENATOR MARK KIRK (R-Illinois/Appropriations Committee): We should use the diplomatic weight and press authority of the United States to undermine the Sy-- Syrian dictatorship. Remember, the Assad dictatorship was responsible for the murder of the Lebanese prime minister, supports the Hezbollah and Hamas terrorist organization and even tried to build a North Korean reactor in its northwest province. I think we're witnessing the slow end of the Assad dictatorship. And we should stand with the people of Syria.

BOB SCHIEFFER: But, you know, we sent American warplanes into Libya. Should we be doing that in Syria?

SENATOR MARK KIRK: No. I think the U.S. military is now overstressed with four major missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Japan. But the U.S. weight and diplomatic authority can be a-- a great source of strength and-- and political support for the Syrian opposition, which has now apparently got its voice and I think we are seeing the final stages of the Assad dictatorship--first his father and now him.

BOB SCHIEFFER: The two Democratic senators here in the studio, Senator Blumenthal, where-- where do you see this thing going on? Something about-- we've talked about that Libya imploded but Syria could explode. And-- and could have an effect far greater than-- than what's

happening in Libya, because after all, this is the main enemy of Israel amongst other things. What do we need to be doing there?

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL (D-Connecticut/Armed Services Committee): And a far greater threat to Israel and to the Middle East generally and Syria. And we should encourage the democratic movement in Syria, but at the same time avoid anything like an open-ended commitment certainly no troops on the ground and no military involvement without the same kind of international consortium that we managed to do in Libya. But generally encourage the forces of democracy just as we did in Egypt, a much better model than-- than Libya for the United States.

BOB SCHIEFFER: What about you, Senator Coons?

SENATOR CHRIS COONS (D-Delaware/Budget Committee): Bob, America is safest and America is strongest when we lead with our values. And the values we have that are really compelling to folks around the world are when we stand up and support democracy and people who are seeking a greater role in their own countries. We've done that in a way that I think is moving the Middle East not towards the 7th Century Caliphate view of al Qaeda but instead towards a view of wanting to participate in the 21st Century. I agree with Senator Blumenthal. We need to form an international coalition. We need to be limited in our goals and aims in Syria, but we need to be engaged.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Senator McCain just came out of Libya and he said we need to take Qaddafi out. Do you agree with that, senator?

SENATOR CHRIS COONS: Well, I agree that we need to support the multi-national coalition that the Arab League and the African Union and the UN put in place. And we need to give it a little bit of time. I think the squeeze play that we are applying more and more pressure to Qaddafi with military action with an embargo will eventually succeed.

BOB SCHIEFFER: What do you think we should recognize the rebel government in Libya, Senator Blumenthal? Senator McCain seems to think that would be a wise thing to do.

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL: We need to be very cautious about who exactly the rebels are. And I think one of the contributions of Senator McCain's trip is that we know more about them. And he certainly has given his personal view that they are legitimate, that they are not al Qaeda and that would certainly lend support for the view that we should recognize them, but at the same time the people of Libya should decide who their government is.

BOB SCHIEFFER: What about you, Senator Kirk? Do you think we ought to recognize that rebel government?

SENATOR MARK KIRK: I think we should follow the direction of our European allies that have already recognized the rebel government. White House staffers have called up for a responsibility to protect which was the justification of that mission. But now that the U.S. military and our NATO allies are involved, we have a responsibility to win. And remember, Qaddafi is responsible for the murder of over a hundred and eighty Americans aboard the Pan Am 103, killing American servicemen in Germany. I think we should wrap this up. It would also help us stabilize the Middle East and the international economy--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): All right.

SENATOR MARK KIRK: --if we make sure that we bring more U.S. AC-130 and A-10 combat power back online to quickly end this conflict.

BOB SCHIEFFER: I want to shift to things closer to home here. CBS News put out a poll last week, it was an absolute stunner. It said that seventy-five percent of the American people now disapprove of this institution that you all are a member of--the Congress. They just don't seem to like anything about it. And furthermore, they said that seventy percent-- seventy percent of the people we questioned believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. Senator Blumenthal, does that say to you that maybe somebody is doing something wrong here? Maybe it's time to start listening, to think about finding ways to compromise?

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL: You know, Bob, if you're out in America the way I am and my colleagues are. And I spend a lot of time back in Connecticut, every weekend, every opportunity, you really hear how people are still hurting, struggling to stay in their homes, to find jobs, to make ends meet. And they have a right to be angry at Washington because Washington hasn't been listening, on gasoline prices for example. The price of gasoline in the state of Connecticut has risen from two dollars and ninety-nine cents last year to four dollars and fourteen cents right now.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Well, let me just say-- tell you that President Obama's appointed some kind of an investigatory group to look into that. Is-- is that enough? Do we need to do more?

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL: Bob, the problem is it is not investigatory, it is more to monitor and follow the developments and I commend and applaud the President for focusing on this issue. But I think there really needs to be an investigation involving, for example, subpoenas and compulsory process, which I used as attorney general in similar investigations. There needs to be very possibly a grand jury to uncover the potential wrongdoing there.

BOB SCHIEFFER: So-- so you want the Justice Department? Is that what you're saying?

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL (overlapping): The Justice Department should take the lead, seize this moment and send a message, a very strong deterrent message that this country will not tolerate the kind of illegal speculation and trading and hedge fund activity that may be driving prices up. Just to give you one fact, the amount of trading and hedge fund activity, the energy positions are at an all-time high in this country's history up sixty-four percent from just a few years ago. And, the indicia of potential illegal activity, whether civil or criminal, I think certainly justify the Department of Justice investigation immediately and comprehensively right now.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you something, Senator Kirk, because I'm going to shift a little bit the-- the conversation here. People continue to say that Congress doesn't hear what they're saying out there and I wonder, can you really blame them when something like happened-- last week happened? While the Congress is on vacation, here are ten senators of both parties led by the Senate leader, Harry Reid showed up in Macau of all places, which is the gambling capital of Asia and they say they're-- they're to visit constituent interests there. Of course, win interests out in Nevada are a big deal for Nevada. But should taxpayers be paying for a trip like that? I know they're going on to China. But should taxpayers be paying for a trip like that when we're in the mess we're in financially?

SENATOR MARK KIRK: Ideally, the Senate would have not taken a two-week break and it would be debating right now the bipartisan commission on deficit reduction, especially following Standard & Poor's saying that we are headed towards losing our AAA credit rating. I'm particularly worried about the Senate. While the House of Representatives has cast over two hundred votes and sent major legislation directly on point to expand the gasoline supply of United States lowering prices and cut government spending, the Senate is largely moribund. It's not voting very much. In fact, we've been on a-- a very small, small business bill for weeks rather than dealing with the business of the country.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, let me just ask you that, Senator Coons. Why is the Senate on vacation? You know, most of us, if you're Jewish, you get Passover off. And, if-- if you're Christian, you get Good Friday off. But the Congress is taking two weeks off. President's Day you took a week off. If I'm not mistaken, this is now five vacations since January that-- that the Senate and the Congress have taken, why?

SENATOR CHRIS COONS: Well, to be clear about, I don't think the Senate is making as much progress as it needs to as someone who worked in the private sector for a longtime and then ran a local government before coming here. At times, I'm so frustrated, I-- I feel like I'm banging my head against the wall trying to encourage forward movement. And I agree. I'm very hopeful that the Gang of Six, Republicans and Democrats, senators who have been working in private very hard to try and come up with a responsible budget compromise will have something to put on the table. But to be clear, when we're on recess as my daughter Maggie says, my recess is quite different from her recess. I'm busy going up and down the state of Delaware, visiting manufacturers, visiting schools--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Well, I--

SENATOR CHRIS COONS: --visiting the seniors--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): --okay, I'll take your point.

SENATOR CHRIS COONS: We don't just take vacation.

BOB SCHIEFFER: But Macau.

SENATOR CHRIS COONS: I can't-- I can't explain or defend why folks take some of the trips they do. The only trip I've taken as senator is to visit our troops in Afghanistan. And I do think that senators and the Senate as a body need to focus on our spending every bit as much as every working family in America is focusing on their spending.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, the next big question is going to be, do we or do we not raise the debt ceiling, which if we don't do it I think its general agreement the government will have to start defaulting on its debts, which could set off worldwide recession in the minds of some people. Are you going to find a way to raise the debt limit, Senator Blumenthal?

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL: The answer is, unequivocally yes. We will raise the debt ceiling because the alternative, as every expert economist agrees, would be catastrophic for our economy, for our credibility around the world, for the bond markets and for the world economy. So I think the only question is really whether raising that ceiling will be tied to spending reductions. And I personally believe that we need to rein in government spending, cut debt and the deficit but at the same time make our priority--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Okay.

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL: --jobs and economic growth.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let's see what Senator Kirk says about that. Are you going to raise it?

SENATOR MARK KIRK: Maybe or maybe not. I will vote no on raising the debt ceiling unless we have comprehensive, dramatic, effective and broad-based cuts to federal spending, including the reform of entitlement spending. I think the-- that the best play here is to have the bipartisan deficit commission report of the Gang of Six attached to the debt limit extension. That would be huge cuts in the future spending of the United States that may be a good deal. Without that, we should not send the blank check to the administration. We would risk repeating the mistakes of the governments of Greece, Portugal and Ireland, all who said yes to everyone and no to their economic future.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, gentlemen, I want to thank all three of you, a very interesting discussion this morning.

We'll be back in a minute to get some feedback and see how they're thinking about it over on the House side, especially among the Tea Party folk in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Now some of the perspective from the House side of the Capitol, Tim Griffin of Arkansas and Joe Walsh of Illinois, two recently-elected Congressmen. Both I think it's fair to say are favorites of the Tea Party. Congressman Griffin, you just heard the discussion here. You both-- both of you voted for the Ryan plan, which is the Republican plan now to try to bring the deficit under control. And as both of you are well aware and I think most people know it calls for turning Medicare into a private insurance program. Is that going to happen?

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN (R-Arkansas): Well, I certainly hope that what we've passed in the Ryan or the House budget, I hope that that becomes law at some point. I'd like to just clarify a little bit. What the-- what the plan does with regard to Medicare, is if you're fifty-five and over, there are no changes. If you're under fifty-five, yes, there will be changes. But the fact is that Medicare as we know it is on a path to bankruptcy--

BOB SCHIEFFER: Mm-Hm.

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN: --in nine years. And if we do not privatize it, and there is not a voucher system, I hear that a lot and it's not true.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well at that's what I-- let me just ask you about that because, you know, in our CBS poll it says sixty-three percent of people don't want to change Medicare. I know you've been having a lot of town hall meetings out there.

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN: Yes.

BOB SCHIEFFER: What have people been saying to you about this proposal?

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN: Well, what I usually do is I couple my discussion of Medicare and the House budget with a discussion of the debt problem. And once we-- I run through all of the numbers with regard to the debt and the deficits that we're running on a yearly basis and what that impact will have on our economy, then folks understand that we have to do something. I would love to come on this show look in the camera and say, you can have anything, any time, no matter what the cost. But that would be a lie. And unfortunately, people, politicians for the last ten, twenty years have been saying exactly that.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, let me-- let me go to Congressman Walsh here. I know you've been having town halls out there too. The next big thing coming up here is this business about the debt ceiling. We keep hearing Republican say that they want to attach something to the legislation to raise the debt ceiling, some kind of cut. You just heard Senator Kirk say that he'd like to attach the, whatever the Gang-- so-called Gang of Six comes up with. Just attach that to it. What do you think ought to be attached to that in order to make it palatable for you to vote for it Congressman?

REPRESENTATIVE JOE WALSH (R-Illinois): Hi, Bob. Look, we're-- we're borrowing-- our federal government is borrowing a hundred and eighty-eight million dollars every single hour of every single day. I wish that the administration, I wish that Secretary Geithner would get as excited and passionate and concerned about the debt we're placing on the backs of our kids and our grand kids as they seem to get upset-- as they seem to get so wound up about this raising the debt ceiling. There is no way we should raise the debt ceiling unless this city is really serious about cutting up the credit cards.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, what do you want--

REPRESENTATIVE JOE WALSH (overlapping): We--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): --what do you want attached to that a vote to raise the debt ceiling?

REPRESENTATIVE JOE WALSH (overlapping): It would--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): What would it take to get you--

REPRESENTATIVE JOE WALSH (overlapping): Bob, it would--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): --to vote for it?

REPRESENTATIVE JOE WALSH: It would have to be something that fundamentally changes the way we do business here in Washington when it comes to spending. I'm sponsoring a balanced budget amendment in the House that all forty-seven Republican senators have signed on to. It's got to be something structural that says we are going to cut up this credit card and we're going to quit spending money we don't have and placing all of this debt on the backs of our kids and our grandkids. And respectfully, the President just doesn't acknowledge that problem. And he continues to play politics with this and with Medicare and with entitlement reform.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, let-- let me ask you this, Congressman. I mean, what do you think would happen if in fact, Congress voted not to raise the debt ceiling? What do you think the impact would be not just in this country but around the world? Is that being overstated?

REPUBLICAN JOE WALSH: It-- it-- it is being overstated. It's being overstated. The administration's playing politics with this issue just like they're playing politics with entitlement reform. What's going to happen? All we've got to do is look in the last twenty years. Three or four times over the course of the last twenty years Congress has voted not to raise the debt ceiling and it's taken a few months and then they've come together and they've raised it. But over the course of those few months when the debt ceiling wasn't raised, Armageddon didn't hit, the government paid its bills. We've got enough government revenues to certainly pay to service all of our debt. And the administration knows that. And so, we've got time here to deal with this program, this problem, and the administration's got to get serious and recognize that. We're not just going to just give them a vote to raise the debt ceiling unless they fundamentally change the way this city works.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me ask both you, you heard Senator Blumenthal just say that he thinks it might take the Justice Department and-- and-- and getting a grand jury to figure out what's causing these gas prices to go up. Congressman Griffin, what-- what do you think about that? I-- I know you'll agree that people are pretty upset about these gas prices but how do you see bringing them down?

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN: Well, they're really upset and certainly if there's something illegal going on, we need to look into that and deal with it. But I don't need a grand jury to tell you why this country has continuing problem with energy. And that's because we've been talking about energy independence for decades. The problem is a lot of the people who talk about energy independence then pursue policies that are counter to that. We can't talk about energy independence and then say, but you can't drill here and you can't drill there and we shouldn't do this. You start excluding all of the different options. That's like me telling you to go fix my car but leave your tool box behind. I mean it just-- that's the problem. Natural gas is clean burning. We have a lot of it here in Arkansas and we ought to be pursuing natural gas options as well. There are a lot of things that we should have been doing over the years and there are different obstacles whether it's drilling in the-- in the Gulf or whether it's drilling in--

BOB SCHIEFFER: Mm-Hm.

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN: --in ANWR, we have a lot of reserves.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): All right. Let me--

REPRESENTATIVE TIM GRIFFIN (overlapping): --but ultimately we need to be energy independent.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me-- let me just interrupt quickly because we're out of time. I want-- Congressman Walsh, I want to ask you, you know, you're a big fav of the Tea Party. How are the Republicans treating you? What kind of reception have you been getting? Do you think they're-- they're treating you right or what-- what needs to be done here from your point of view?

REPUBLICAN JOE WALSH: You-- you know, they're-- they-- they're-- they're treating me and a number of my fellow freshmen like they're-- like they're treating the American people because we represent the American people. This thing, Bob, that we call the Tea Party Movement, it's bigger than either political party. It's-- it's, you know, add up every American that's concerned, frustrated, or scared about the financial burden that we're placing on the backs of our kids and

our grandkids about the fact that we're spending more money than we take in, people who are concerned about that represent the Tea Party. And the Republican Party recognizes that--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): All right.

REPUBLICAN JOE WALSH: --which is why they've-- we've played such a great influence moving this debate along.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. I'm very sorry I have to stop you there. The clock just ran out. We'll be back with some final thoughts in just a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Finally today, here comes the bride. Another royal wedding is upon us. I can't decide who's more excited about this, the royal couple, little girls everywhere, or television executives who are already counting the real dollars the big ratings promise. I'm not talking about any of my bosses, of course, but a lot of TV executives. Even I, one who shares Thomas Jefferson's view of kings and queens, even I will probably watch some of it. Put aside that I believe the whole idea of citizens paying royalty for the privilege of bowing to them is about as silly as people paying money to hear a lecture by Charlie Sheen. But people do. Even so, I still enjoy a good wedding. I've actually paid for a couple myself, nothing like what we'll see in London but fairly major productions. We actually had a director of transportation at one of ours. But it was money happily well spent. So, yes, I'll be watching. I'm convinced every wedding brings out the best and worst in all involved. And I like to keep score on whether best or worst is winning. And besides they are always a learning experience. For example, The Washington Post passed on a report from Splash News that candid photos of bride-to-be Kate Middleton are bringing a higher price than photos of Lady Gaga. Now who would have thought it? But never mind. I'm a softy for weddings. And I usually shed a tear, but probably not this time. This time I'll just be smiling because as it unfolds in all its glory, I will be reminded this is not our prince and princess. It's theirs, the Brits. And they are paying for the whole thing. Thank you, Thomas Jefferson. I'm really fine with that.

Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: That's it for us today. We'll see you next week on FACE THE NATION.

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