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TRANSCRIPT

BOB SCHIEFFER: Today on FACE THE NATION, President Obama meets with his war council--will he send more Americans to Afghanistan.

As the violence grows in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Barack Obama may be approaching a defining moment in his presidency--should he take General Stanley McChrystal's advice and order more Americans into the war zone or do we change strategy entirely.

We'll ask the minority leader of the Senate Republican Mitch McConnell and Democratic Senator Jack Reed of the Armed Services Committee.

Then we'll get analysis and perspective from Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution and David Ignatius of the Washington Post.

I'll have a final word on the President's October surprise, but first the battle for Afghanistan on FACE THE NATION.

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

BOB SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. Just how dangerous and fragile the situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan is was underscored this weekend when the Taliban forces who had taken over Pakistan's army headquarters were finally ousted by government troops.

Order has now been restored; hostages who were taken have been rescued, but there was a bloody battle. All this as President Obama reconsiders our strategy in this part of the world and whether more troops will have to be sent there.

To discuss it all, we turn to the Republican leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell--he is in Kentucky this morning--and one of the key Democrats on the Armed Services Committee, Jack Reed, who is in Rhode Island.

And we go first to Senator McConnell.

Senator, there are all kinds of leaks coming out of the administration this week about where we go from here, including one that, apparently, one thing being considered is whether we now seek to find some way to find an accommodation with the Taliban in order to focus more attention on al Qaeda and-- and that terrorist organization. In light of this new violence, do you think it is wise for the United States to be looking for some sort of an accommodation with the Taliban?

SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL (R-Kentucky): Yeah, it-- Bob, I would say, to the extent that there is anything to those rumors, it is certainly troubling because, as you just indicated in the opening of this show, the Taliban attack in Pakistan underscores the danger of the Taliban, not only in Afghanistan but in Pakistan as well.

And you do get the impression the administration is-- at least some in the administration are trying to distinguish between al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Well, they are different. But they are interconnected. We know that when the Taliban-- Taliban was in charge in Afghanistan, al Qaeda was allowed to operate freely. We know they launched the 9/11 attack from there, planned it and launched it from there.

I-- I think the-- the smart thing to do here--and I hope this is what the President's going to do, and if he does, I think he'll have broad support--is to listen to General Petraeus and-- and General McChrystal. They were highly successful with the counterinsurgency strategy in-- in Iraq.

Most people think that that's the best chance to succeed in Afghanistan and, of course, in Pakistan. You can't completely separate the two. They're interconnected in terms of the threat the Taliban pro-- poses in both countries.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, as you well know, apparently General McChrystal has come back and said, in order to stave off failure, he may need forty thousand more American troops. Do you think there are the votes in the Senate to approve that, Senator McConnell?

SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL: Well, I would hope so, if-- if that is, in fact, what the general has recommended, and we believe that it is. Because, look, this is not just about nation-building. People use the term nation- building. This is about protecting the United States of America.

We know that we can't have a haven over there for the reconstitution of al Qaeda and attacks against the United States. We also know that Pakistan has nuclear weapons. The Taliban taking over a country like Palis-- Pakistan would be completely and totally unacceptable, destabilizing not only in that area of the world but all around.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Do you actually think that is a possibility? I mean, how much urgency and how dangerous do you think this situation is right now?

SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL: Well, I think it's very dangerous. And our generals have told us the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. We know, over in Pakistan, the Taliban has been a problem there as well, as illustrated by the attack yesterday. And I think we need to take this very, very seriously.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, if, in fact, the President comes to the Congress and says, "I'm going to need 40,000 more American troops," you would support that and you think that the Senate would support that?

SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL: If-- if that is the recommendation of General Petraeus and General McChrystal who got it right in Iraq, I think Republicans almost overwhelmingly will support the President if that is his request.

BOB SCHIEFFER: You have also said that you think General McChrystal ought to come up to the Congress and testify. The administration says he should be advising the President, as other advisers do, in privacy and that the President will make the decision. Why-- why should General McChrystal come to the Congress?

SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL: Well, because we appropriate the funds. And it's not uncommon for generals to come up and speak to us about what they're recommending. And at some point here, certainly, the President will make a decision. And if he chooses to wait until then to have General McChrystal come up, that's his prerogative. But we're going to want to hear from those who are going to implement the strategy.

BOB SCHIEFFER: There are reports again this morning about this increasing evidence of just massive fraud in the recent presidential election in which President Karzai, who the administration has supported, people around him are apparently involved in it. The head of the U.N. mission there is saying and confirming this morning that there was massive fraud and, in fact, called the news conference to deny that he had been part of or one of those who had tried to cover it up. How can we really be partners with that kind of a-- a group, Senator McConnell?

SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL: Well, it's a serious problem. When I was there in April, you could sort of see it coming. The Karzai administration has had a lot of problems. There's no question there was widespread fraud. At some point here, we're going to get a report as to just how pervasive that was and

whether or not it could have changed the outcome of the election which, of course, has not yet actually been announced.

There have been rumors really beyond rumors that the president's brother down in the south of the country has been involved with illegal drugs. There are problems there. There's no question that this is a flawed administration. But remember, this is about protecting the United States of America. We know that this has been a haven for terrorists in the past and we don't want to let it become a haven for terrorists again.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, Senator McConnell, thank you so much for being with us this morning. Let's get a different take on all this now from Democratic Senator Jack Reed.

And I will say this before I ask you a question, Senator Reed. I know that you confer and are really a confidant of this administration on Afghanistan. You've been to Iraq fourteen times. You've been to-- pardon me, I seem to be losing my voice this morning. I'll give it to you. What is your response to what Senator McConnell just said? Do you think it's going to be necessary to send forty thousand troops there and will you, in fact, favor that if the President says that's what he needs to do?

SENATOR JACK REED (Armed Services Committee): Well, right now the President is conducting a serious analysis of the assumptions of going forward. I think this is a critical moment. I-- I don't think we can simply preconceive a notion and then just tailor facts and-- and recommendations to that notion.

So the analysis is critical. And it's not just about troops. The-- the strategy of counterinsurgency is clear. Hold and build. Clearing we can do with American forces. Holding we can do with American forces. Building is almost exclusively the prerogative of the local government together with international advisers and American civilian agencies.

So we have to be very careful that we have the whole package. And this focus on troops is, I think, only one part of the-- of the strategy. And the other point I think, too, is the question not only should be asked will the Senate approve and particularly Republicans additional troops but will they pay for it? They've been notorious over the last eight years of sending troops but putting it on the tab for future generations.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, you bring up an interesting point because apparently it costs about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year to keep one American soldier there. It costs about, what is it, a couple of thousand dollars to keep an Afghan soldier there. Can we actually afford it? Because if you're talking about forty thousand troops, that's-- that's what? Ten billion dollars.

SENATOR JACK REED: Well, that has to be part of the day-- of the debate. So just glib assertions of sending more troops is something that we have to look behind in terms of whole-- many other factors. Do we have the civilian capacity to complement the troops? How much progress and how fast can we bring the Afghani army online? And you're right, Bob, relatively speaking and that's a much less costly option going forward. All of this has to be considered.

And frankly General McChrystal and his colleagues did a very good job analyzing the situation. But their perspective is-- is rather narrow. It's-- it's-- it's military operational aspects. They assume we'll have civilians. They assume that this will be paid for. They assume that this can be sustained over time.

The President doesn't have the luxury of those assumptions. And he has to look across the board. As-- as Senator McConnell indicated and you indicated, the situation in Pakistan is extremely complicated. And-- and, ironically, it's-- it's just the actions in 2003 of taking our eye off the ball in letting al Qaeda continue to reconstitute in Pakistan that is causing us problems today.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Am I right in assuming that you are not yet convinced it's going to take forty thousand American troops there? You-- you think there may be other ways and-- and you're not convinced that is the right way to go at this point?

SENATOR JACK REED: I think that the analysis has to be thorough. I mean, we do not want to repeat mistakes previously of assuming a rather simplistic approach: more troops and more this, et cetera, and just go forward. I think now is the time for a fundamental analysis of all of the components. The President is doing that. It-- it very well may be that additional troops are ordered. Certainly, there's a building consensus about additional trainers for the Afghan security forces. We have to also, I think, build up our counterinsurgency forces and build up the enablers, the intelligence groups.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Do-- do you-- do you believe, Senator, that if, in fact, the Taliban does come back in force that it will follow that al Qaeda will come back with them? Because at one point that was certainly the conventional wisdom, but now I understand that that assumption is being questioned.

SENATOR JACK REED: I think you have to question the assumption. I think al Qaeda looks for ungoverned areas, wherever they may be. The-- again, the irony here is that al Qaeda has significantly reconstituted itself in Pakistan over the last several years. And we didn't, I would argue, pay the kind of attention we should have to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you--

SENATOR JACK REED: I don't think you can dismiss that idea of their coming back for the Taliban, but you have to look closely at it.

BOB SCHIEFFER: The-- the idea that Senator-- I mean that Vice President Biden and that the-- the argument that he is, apparently, making, we should draw down the troops there and use drone aircraft and-- and really focus on just getting al Qaeda, not worry so much about the Taliban, where do you come down on that, Senator?

SENATOR JACK REED: Well, I think, first, we have to take an approach to the Tali-- Taliban which is not identical but similar to what was done in Iraq with the-- the Sunni tribes, which is, try to pull away as many of the Taliban as we can who will swear that the government in Kabul is legitimate and they will support it. That effort has to be go-- going under way.

There are some irreconcilables that will have to be taken out. There also, I think, is the need for-- for not just drone attacks but counter-- at least counterterrorism forces on the ground in Afghanistan. And we also have to begin to work together with the-- the Pakistani forces.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Mm-Hm.

SENATOR JACK REED: And that's a very delicate issue because they're very sensitive of their sovereignty, they're very sensitive of our presence in Pakistan.

But lately, they've shown because they're, I think, generally fearful of their own situation, a willingness to cooperate more, to conduct operations in South Waziristan, to attack or-- or allow drone operations in their airspace.

That has to be continued. And so, when the President is making a judgment on Afghanistan, he literally has to understand its complications and its effects in Pakistan.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, thank you so much, Senator.

SENATOR JACK REED: Thank you, Bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: When we come back in one minute, we'll have our roundtable with David Ignatius of the Washington Post, and Michael O'Hanlon of Brookings.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And we're back now with the Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, who is just back from Afghanistan, by the way; and Michael O'Hanlon the senior fellow at Brookings, an expert on national security and terrorism in general.

Well, gentlemen, we just saw basically a snapshot where this debate is right now. And, obviously, I don't see any consensus at this point on-- on where people think the President ought to go on this.

DAVID IGNATIUS (Washington Post): Certainly, the-- the-- the view of Senator McConnell is you ought to follow military advice; you ought-- you ought to-- if the military wants the troops, you ought to send them.

I thought we heard from Senator Reed a very clear statement of where the President and his inner group are. They want to look at this. They want to think clearly about strategy. They want to match the goals in Afghanistan with the number of troops necessary to achieve those goals.

And I think that's been the tricky thing. It's-- it's not that they want to short-change the troops. They want to make sure that the troops fit the strategic goal. And I think they're still working that through.

My own feeling is that the American people, after Iraq, are going to tolerate that kind of careful review because nobody wants to rush in again to a war without fully understanding the costs and the consequences.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Michael, you have, sort of, been charting this war in both Iraq and Afghanistan for a long, long time. Where is it now?

We hear from one side it's urgent; we have to act now. The other side says maybe we ought to think about this a little bit. Ho-- how would you just assess the situation now?

MICHAEL O'HANLON (Brookings Institution): Well, Bob, it's a good question because I think some of the disagreement now about what to do is people's impressions of how fast we're losing. General McChrystal says pretty fast. He says the Taliban are now at a hundred and forty of Afghanistan's three hundred and sixty-eight districts. And they used to be in just a couple of dozen.

And they've got momentum. People are not necessarily supporting them, liking them, but they are afraid of them. And they appreciate that they have the momentum on the battlefield. So a lot of Afghan tribes are putting some fighters with the Taliban just to hedge their bets.

On the other hand, you have some people in the administration who are implicitly saying, we've got some time; let's let the Afghans do more of the fighting; let's be patient; let's train them up and, you know, wait until they're able to do. They don't put it quite that way, but implicitly, they're saying, we've got a little more time than General McChrystal may be arguing.

And so, frankly, if you look at the evidence, there has been progress in Afghanistan in the last eight years. There are a lot more kids in school. There's better health care. There's a higher GDP. But the battlefield momentum is on the side of the Taliban. There really is no mistaking that. And the simplest way to say it is they are now in control or prevalent in at least a third of the country's districts.

BOB SCHIEFFER: And, David, just as we saw this weekend, when the Taliban can go in and-- and invade the army headquarters in Pakistan, it tells you that they are also a force to be reckoned with there. How-- how serious is that?

DAVID IGNATIUS: Bob, I was just in-- in Pakistan. I wasn't in-- in Afghanistan, but I was there just over a week ago. I was in that same Army compound in Rawalpindi, where these Taliban insurgents managed to sneak in and-- and hold hostages.

What I saw in Pakistan is a country that is trying to get serious about the Taliban insurgency, the threat that Pakistanis at senior levels in the military and the government understand threatens the way they want to live in Pakistan.

I went to Swat Valley, where they've had a big offensive all summer. They're proud of what they did. You know, it's not perfect, but they're proud of it.

I want to Waziristan, which is where al Qaida's safe havens are--

BOB SCHIEFFER: Mm-Hm.

DAVID IGNATIUS --and I saw the troops who were getting ready, I'm told, to-- to start an offensive maybe next week.

So they're getting serious about it. But even as they -- as they mount these offenses, they're getting pounded in their-- in their own capital with these car bombs, with these attacks in-- in Rawalpindi. And it frightens them.

I think one final thing they worry about is, is America really going to stick around? They watch our debate and they-- and they worry the-- the Americans may be gone and we'll be left with this; what are we going to do about it?

I think, if-- if there's one signal the White House would want to send is and I-- President Obama tried to do this last week--"We are not going to bail out. You know, whatever we decide we're not going to walk away."

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, what-- what about this-- this whole thing? And-- and you-- you get these reports - you get them; I get them; we all get them--that they're now talking about, well, maybe we should rethink the Taliban; maybe we should look for some way to seek some sort of an accommodation with them in order to foc-- focus more on al Qaida.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Well, you know, this is where we're hearing this middle option for Afghanistan develop. This is one of the ideas behind the so-called "middle option," we don't have to increase troops. You know, this, however, is inherent to General McChrystal and General Petraeus's concept already. Now, there may be better ways to do it. We may be sloppy in the implementation. The people who are saying, let's try to find Taliban we can negotiate with, this is not new. President Karzai has been trying to do this the whole time he's been in office.

And the essence of the Petraeus strategy in Iraq was trying to do this. McChrystal's trying to do it now, too.

A lot of the question is, do you do that from a position of strength by trying to retake momentum on the battlefield with more troops, if need be, or do you hope that you can find some middle ground with this group that is so adamantly against women's role in modern life, against, you know, technology, against so many of the things we're associated with here in the West.

And I tend to prefer the position from strength approach. I think they are only going to be impressed when we start to get some momentum back.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Do-- do you think, David, that, if the Taliban comes back, that there's a chance that al Qaida may not, that they may go elsewhere? Or are these two linked together?

DAVID IGNATIUS: If the-- if the Taliban is part of a broad coalition government, that it doesn't control, where it understands there are-- there are rules of this game, I think there's a good chance of keeping al Qaeda out. Al Qaeda is really not present in Afghanistan now. At least I haven't seen it, evidence of it on my-- on my trips.

I thought Senator Reed said something really important during our-- our discussion. When he-- when he talked about getting Taliban off the battlefield without having to go out and kill them one by one. He said that's what General Petraeus did in-- did in Iraq. And that basically means, let's be honest, negotiating with mid-level, lower-level commanders village by village to-- to take them out of the battle. I think that-- that is what they're trying to do is, as-- as Mike says, and, you know, that-- that's how many troops does that take? That-- that's what they're discussing in the White House right now.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, is that basically what Vice President Biden, is that the position that he's taking? And he's arguing when he says, you know, we used the drone aircraft to go after al Qaeda. As we-- as we begin to move, as you say, off the battlefield?

MICHAEL O'HANLON: You know I don't totally understand Vice President Biden's position. He hasn't been as public on it lately. And so I don't want to infer too much. But I do have qualms about the so-called counterterrorism option because it presumes that we can somehow keep all these bases and keep our intelligence networks to carry out these strikes as we lose the war on the ground otherwise.

You know, how do you keep human intelligence networks? How do you use air bases to fly drones if you don't have a government you can work with that's in control of its own territory? If the Taliban come back, we're going to lose those air bases and we're going to lose the intelligence networks, I think. And so the counterterrorism option in a minimalist narrow sense doesn't work. It's what we tried under Rumsfeld and it didn't work.

BOB SCHIEFFER: We have about thirty seconds. So, David, do you believe that the nuclear weapons in Pakistan are secure? Is the government there taking care of that?

DAVID IGNATIUS: There's-- there's no way for any outsider to be certain. But what I can say, having met several dozen senior Pakistani officers in-- on this trip ten days ago is that the quality of their officer corps is first rate and they take their responsibilities seriously. You know I think there are a lot of things to worry about in that country. That would be lower on my list than some other things.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right, well thank you all very much for a very enlightening discussion.

Back with a final word in just a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Finally today, I would doubt anyone goes to bed praying they'll be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. The kind of people who win the prize are not usually the kind who do what they do because they want to win a prize. And I would guess no one at the White House was praying for the President to win the Nobel just yet, not because they're selfless humble souls whose only goal is to help humanity but because they are very good professional politicians who would know better than most of us that an undeserved accolade has a high probability of backfire.

For the record, I generally agree with the President's approach on foreign policy, but the Nobel Committee did him no favors by giving him the award before he had anything to show for his efforts. It's like a parent doing a child's homework. Sure, you love the kid, but telling the teacher he needs an "A" before he turns in his work doesn't quite get it.

So instead of cheers, the President gets to take his lumps--reactions of incredulity, laughter, sarcasm, Republicans accusing him of being all talk and no action. Democrats accusing Republicans of siding with the enemy, which is what Republicans used to accuse Democrats of and on and on it goes.

I am not one who believes this will cause the President to rethink any of the difficult decisions he faces on foreign policy. What the Nobel Committee has managed to change--and I am sorry to say it--is the way we look on the prize.

Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And that's our show for this week. We'll be back right here with FACE THE NATION next Sunday. Thanks for watching.

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