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## **December 6, 2009 Transcript**

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ROBERT GATES  
Secretary of Defense

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## TRANSCRIPT

SCHIEFFER: And joining us now in the studio Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. I believe this is the first time we've ever had two cabinet officers in the studio at the same time. So thank you both for coming. But let's get right to it. Tuesday night the president made it pretty clear he is dispatching another 30,000 troops to Afghanistan but for a limited time. Here is the way he put it.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: These additional American and international troops will allow us to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces and allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July 2011.

SCHIEFFER: But since he has said that, Mr. Secretary, you have said what the president has announced is the beginning of a process, not the end of a process. You have said this will be a gradual process and based on conditions on the ground, so there is no deadline for the withdrawal of American forces in Afghanistan. So what's going on?

GATES: Well I think what the president has done here is balanced and signaling our commitment and, now thanks to Secretary Clinton's and others' good work, NATO's commitment to reenergize our efforts and reverse the momentum.

SCHIEFFER: But Mr. Secretary, is there a deadline or is there not?

GATES: There isn't a deadline. What we have is a specific date on which we will begin transferring responsibility for security district by district, province by province in Afghanistan to the Afghans. The process of that and the subsequent thinning of our forces will take place over a period of time and will happen and will be done based on conditions on the ground. And the decision on that will be made by our commanders in the field.

SCHIEFFER: But does that mean, Madame Secretary, that American forces will still be there as we start... That they're not going to start bringing the troops home? That we'll just begin handing over responsibility?

CLINTON: No, it means that as we assess the conditions on the ground we will be transferring responsibility to the Afghans. And depending on the assessment at the time, that means some of our troops can begin coming home. I think that...

[crosstalk]

SCHIEFFER: Can begin coming home?

CLINTON: Absolutely, can begin coming home.

SCHIEFFER: But not will begin coming home?

CLINTON: Well, you know Bob, I really believe that the president was very clear in his speech. He said that we want to evidence both resolve and urgency at the same time. You know, this is a very big commitment. The president engaged in a deliberative process that led to this decision. And he is resolved to what he can with these new troops to break the momentum of Taliban, to begin taking back territory, to stand up the Afghan security forces in an effective way

on a faster timetable. And that we believe, based on everything that is going on, that marines that are in southern Helmand province got there in July of this year, they will have been there for two years, as Secretary Gates can tell you they're making progress. So it's not an arbitrary time. It is an assessment based on what we see happening that yes, we will be able to transfer responsibility and that will very likely mean some troops can come home.

SCHIEFFER: But in other words, there's not a deadline. Is that what you're saying? That we'll look at what's going on on the ground and then we'll decide where to go from there?

GATES: Let's be clear that the date in, of July 2011 to begin transferring security responsibility and thinning our troops and bringing them home is firm. What is conditions based is the pacing at which our troops will come home and the pace at which we will turn over responsibility to the Afghans. And that will be based on conditions on the ground.

SCHIEFFER: So we get to the month, the magic month and he might decide to bring six troops home or something like that and that would mean... that's what he's talking about.

[crosstalk]

GATES: Or 6,000.

SCHIEFFER: But it might be six.

[crosstalk]

CLINTON: Well you know Bob, I think it's very hard for us to be armchair generals.

SCHIEFFER: Well, precisely.

CLINTON: What we've done and what the president's direction to the commanders on the ground is very clearly: we want this to move. We want it to move quickly. We want to show urgency about our aims here. And we do expect to start this transition in July 2011. And I think everybody is very clear about that. All of the generals are. We certainly are. But it's hard to sit here today in Washington and predict exactly what that pace will be.

SCHIEFFER: Well that's why I wondered why he put out this deadline because...

[crosstalk]

GATES: I'll tell you why because...

[crosstalk]

SCHIEFFER: If there's one thing we know it's that you can't predict what's going to happen in a war.

GATES: The reason that we did, and I started to make this point earlier, is he was balancing a demonstration of resolve with also communicating a sense of urgency to the Afghan government that they must step up to plate in terms of recruiting their soldiers, training their soldiers and getting their soldiers into the field, first to partner with us and our ISAF partners and then on their own. So it's an effort to try and let the Afghans know that while we intend to have

a relationship and support them for a long time, the nature of that relationship is going to begin to change in July of 2011. And as the security component comes down, the economic, development and the political relationship will become a bigger part of the relationship. We are not going to abandon Afghanistan like we did in 1989. But the nature of the relationship will change.

CLINTON: And that also, Bob, is in keeping with what President Karzai said at his inauguration. Because he said that he wanted to see Afghan troops taking responsibility for important parts of the country within three years and to have the total responsibility within five.

SCHIEFFER: Well let me just ask you this. What if there's total chaos in 18 months? What if the government has fallen in? Does that mean that we'll still begin this process? I mean what would we turn it over to?

GATES: I think the key here is, first of all, it's a clearly a hypothetical. If we thought that was going to be the case I think we would've perhaps come to a different set of conclusions and the president would've made different decisions. Our military commanders are confident that they will have clear understanding by that time of whether the strategy is working or not. And if it's not, then we obviously will have to reconsider the whole approach. But our commanders have the confidence and bought into this date as a realistic date in terms of when they will be able to make a judgment and begin this process of handing over security responsibility.

SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you this. Former Vice President Cheney says anytime you start talking about leaving, that just emboldens the enemy. It causes the Afghans to begin accommodate the enemy because they get the idea that the bad guys are still going to be there, but we're going to leave.

GATES: The reality is the Taliban read the newspapers. Okay. They know what popular opinion is in Europe. They know what popular opinion is in the United States. Whether you announce a date or not, they can tell as easily from reading the news media about political support for these kinds of undertakings themselves and they always believe that they can outlast us. The reality is tough, what are they going to do? Are they going to get more aggressive than they already are? We don't think they can. If they lie low, that great news for us because it gives us some huge opportunities in Afghanistan. We think that we have the opportunity to engage these guys with the additional force we're sending in, make a significant difference in 18 months, get enough additional Afghan troops and police trained that we can begin this gradual process of transitioning security.

SCHIEFFER: Madame Secretary, let me ask you about one thing the president said. In this entire speech he talked about handing over authority to the Afghans. But he never included the words 'win' or 'victory' as far as I know it in that speech. He just talked about avoiding an open ended commitment. Have we given up trying to win? Do we think that's no longer possible? Is victory no longer possible?

CLINTON: Well Bob, I think he talked about success and that's what we're looking toward.

We do believe we can be successful.

[crosstalk]

SCHIEFFER: Well what is success?

CLINTON: Well success is doing what we have set forth as our primary goal, which is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda. It is also being able to stand up an Afghan security force so that they can defend themselves and partnering with the Afghan government and people so that they will not once again become a safe haven for terrorists. And I think part of our very careful deliberation over the last months was to ask ourselves really hard questions. Like okay, who is the enemy? Is it every young boy who is coerced into joining the Taliban or who decides he can make more money being a fighting member of the Taliban than he can being a member of the Afghan security army? You know we thought hard about that. And no, we don't think so. We think those are people that actually if we reverse and break the momentum of the Taliban, which we think can very well happen with the strategy that we're pursuing, that a lot of these people are going to come back over. They don't want to see the return of the Taliban. There's absolutely no evidence that Afghans are in any way supportive of that.

SCHIEFFER: Will there be a civilian surge as well as a military surge?

CLINTON: Yes, there will be. In fact there has been. We've tripled the number of civilians in Afghanistan. When this administration came into office there were about 320 civilians. They were on, most of them, on six month rotations. There was in my view not the kind of serious effort that needs to be demonstrated to the civilian aspect of our strategy and we've changed that. And we're going to keep building it.

SCHIEFFER: The president made it clear that we expect the Karzai government to improve its performance and clean up corruption. How will we know and what will we do if he doesn't.

GATES: Well, Secretary Clinton made this point pretty clearly in our hearings this week. The reality is the Karzai government has been painted with too broad a brush. The reality is we have several ministries – Interior, Defense, Agriculture, Education and some others – where we have very competent honest ministers that are doing a darn good job. We also have governors in important provinces that are making a big difference, that are honest and competent.

[crosstalk]

SCHIEFFER: But what if he appoints a crook to one of those province governors' jobs? Do we then cut off the aid to that province? What do we do?

[crosstalk]

CLINTON: Well you know Bob, we've said very clearly that our aid is going to be based on a certification of accountability and transparency. So there are certain ministries we will not, American money will not be going to. We've looked at every civilian assistance program and contract and we've said, 'look, we're not going to just aid and abet bad behavior.' So we will be putting the money where, as Bob said, we think we've got people who are doing a good job. And they are. And so part of the challenge here is to begin to make the more difficult, complicated assessments that were not made before.

GATES: I'd just like to add one other point. And that is we, one of the refinements in this strategy is that we are not doing full scale nation building. What we are going to do is focus on the ministries that matter to our success and that contribute to the success of our strategy both with respect to Al Qaeda and stabilizing the security situation.

SCHIEFFER: Let's just take a break right here and we'll come back and continue this. We want to talk about NATO because you're just back from NATO. Back in a minute.

[COMMERCIAL]

SCHIEFFER: And we're back now with Secretary Clinton and Secretary Gates. You're just back from Europe. NATO has pledged 7,000 troops. Let me ask you Madame Secretary, what will these troops be able to do? Are these going to be fighting troops or are they trainers? What are they?

CLINTON: Well they're everything we need. They are combat troops. They're trainers. They're support and logistical troops. I think what we saw at NATO...

[crosstalk]

SCHIEFFER: How many are combat troops?

CLINTON: You know what, it's a little hard to give you that number because combat troops are also training troops. I mean that's one of the distinctions we want...

[crosstalk]

SCHIEFFER: Well I mean, how many are combat and trainers then?

CLINTON: The majority of them are.

SCHIEFFER: A lot of troops that have gone to Afghanistan have been basically there to hold our hats while we do the hard work.

CLINTON: Well, but you know, a lot of them have really fought and they sacrificed and they lost people too. We've had some extraordinary partnerships with a number of our allies. And what was significant about these new contributions is the vote of confidence that it displayed in this strategy. We know that this is not politically popular in our country or any country. But for the leaders of our NATO allies and our other partners in the international security force ISAF to say 'we really believe this is the right thing to do. We do see it as affecting our national security. And we want to be in. You know, we started this fight together. We want to continue it and finish it together,' was a reflection of the work that we've done all year to rebuild these relationships. You know the president has made that a clear priority.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think there are more coming?

CLINTON: I do. I do think there will be more coming.

GATES: And the fact is that with this pledge of 7,000 that will be 50,000 non-U.S. troops in Afghanistan. That is not a trivial matter.

SCHIEFFER: Let me just ask you this. I want to go on and talk about Pakistan, but it's my understanding now that we have a ratio of one combat troop in Afghanistan to one civilian contractor. Is that ratio going to continue?

GATES: That's, that's not quite right, but there are a lot of contractors.

SCHIEFFER: But it's pretty close to that.

GATE: But most of the contractors are in fact Afghans.

CLINTON: Yeah, that's a very important point.

GATES: And so these are people that we're paying who have a real job that frankly become our allies rather than potential recruit for the bad guys.

SCHIEFFER: So let's talk about Pakistan. There are repeated assertions by U.S. officials that senior leaders of the Afghan Taliban including Mullah Omar, generally thought to be the main leader, have taken up residence in Pakistan near the town of Quetta. They're even calling them the Quetta Shura. Have you raised this with the Pakistani government? What are they going to do about these people?

CLINTON: Well, we have raised it with the Pakistani government. And, you know, I said when I was there that despite the fact that the top leaders of the Pakistani government, you know, say they don't really know that because a lot of these areas, including the one you just referring to, are in parts of country that are largely ungoverned by the Pakistani government. That's one of the problems they have, which is why they're going after the Pakistan Taliban because they ceded territory that they're now trying to get back. But I think this will be a continuing issue in our ongoing discussions. You know if you had told us a year ago that the Pakistani army would be going after Pakistani Taliban, I think a lot of people would've said no, that couldn't ever happen that's not the way it works. But they saw the threat to their sovereignty. And look at what they did. They just blew up a mosque in Rawalpindi, which is frequented by members of the military. They're going right at the real core institutions of their state. So you know, we've seen a lot of change in the last year.

SCHIEFFER: So what about that? Would we ever go after those people?

GATES: The Pakistani government is, Pakistan is a sovereign government. We are in a partnership with them. I think at this point it's up to the Pakistani military to deal with this problem.

SCHIEFFER: But as long Mr. Secretary, as long as they have a safe haven there it doesn't make much difference what we do in Afghanistan.

GATES: But if there is pressure being brought to bear on the Pakistani side of the government against the Taliban, then that is helpful to us.

SCHIEFFER: How safe are the nuclear weapons that Pakistan has?

GATES: We are, we are comfortable with the security of their weapons.

CLINTON: Yes.

SCHIEFFER: I've asked this question before to other officials including you I think, how do you know that?

GATES: Well, we have a good relationship with them. We've actually given them assistance in improving some of their security arrangements over the past number of years. This is not a new relationship. And I think just based on the information available to us that gives us the comfort.

SCHIEFFER: But I'm told that we don't know where all the weapons are. So how can we be comfortable in saying we think they're safe?

GATES: Well I think I'll just leave it that based on information available to us we're comfortable.

SCHIEFFER: Talk about the relationship, there's been this historic relationship between the Taliban and the Pakistani intelligence services. It's well documented. Do you believe that relationship still exists?

CLINTON: I think there's been a sea change in the attitude of the Pakistani government, both civilian leadership as well as the military and the intelligence service as they have seen the growing threat to their sovereignty from these groups. Because now, Bob, it's not discrete groups operating for a specific missions that might or might not be ones we would approve of. It is now a syndicate of terrorism with Al Qaeda at the head. I think that that's a change. There has been such a, as Bob has said, symbiotic relationship group up between Al Qaeda and all these various terrorist groups within Pakistan. So our argument has been consistently that as the Pakistanis go after those who are directly assaulting them, they have to keep in mind that they are part of a larger threat that exists.

SCHIEFFER: Mr. Secretary, are you optimistic that this will work? And we have about 30 seconds.

GATES: I think that based on my conversation with our military leaders and the team that we have in Kabul – Ambassador Eikenberry and General McChrystal – I am, I am optimistic.

SCHIEFFER: And you?

CLINTON: Absolutely, yes.

SCHIEFFER: Thanks to both of you.

[COMMERCIAL]

SCHIEFFER: And finally today, I was at a lunch in Houston this week where I met one of my longtime heroes, the great home run hitter Hank Aaron. After watching him shake hands and chat with the hordes of people who came up to meet him, I told him it was a pleasure to meet a famous person who was just the way I thought he would be.

Arnold Palmer, the great golfer, was the same way. If Palmer ever ate in a restaurant without being interrupted by a dozen people who wanted to meet him, it went unrecorded. But he always got up, shook hands, and wished them well.

Which is why I loved the story John Feinstein told in the Washington Post about the lunch Palmer had with a 21-year-old Tiger Woods, the year Woods won his first Masters.



Tiger opened up to Palmer. He said he couldn't be a normal 21-year-old because he had to sign autographs, talk to the media, do photo shoots for sponsors. "It just never ends," he said.

"You're right," Palmer replied. "Normal 21-year-olds don't have \$50 million in the bank. If you want to be normal, give the money back."

Tiger Woods is 34 and close to a billion dollars now in worth, but as his life came apart last week, he was still complaining about being put upon, about being unable to lead a normal life.

Sorry Tiger, we all make mistakes but if you wanted to be normal you should have taken Arnie's advice, just played golf with your friends on Saturdays like the rest of us and I promise you no one would have cared what you did -- except maybe your wife.