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FACE THE NATION

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FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
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BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, a late development from Iraq, an al-Qaeda terrorist group claims it is holding three missing American soldiers. The missing soldiers were part of a unit on patrol that was ambushed yesterday during an assault that left five dead. We'll go to Baghdad and our correspondent Mark Strassmann for the latest details.

Then we'll turn to the story of the week back home. Will the Republican Party continue to support the president on the war? In a remarkable meeting last week, a group of House moderates bluntly told the president the war is damaging the Republican Party. We'll talk about that with Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel, one of the first Republicans to break with the president on Iraq.

We'll talk about where all this stands in Congress and the other news with veteran political reporters Jeanne Cummings of Politico.com and Michel McQueen Martin of National Public Radio.

Then I'll have a final word on the Iraqi parliament's vacation plan.

But first, Senator Chuck Hagel 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.

SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. There is a massive manhunt under way in Iraq today, more than 4,000 American soldiers participating. They're looking for three American soldiers who went missing yesterday after their patrol was attacked in Iraq. The late news this morning is that al-Qaeda, the terrorist group, says that it is holding these three American soldiers. We're going to go to Baghdad, Mark Strassmann is there.

Mark, nothing confirmed on this as yet, but what can you tell us about it?

MARK STRASSMANN reporting:

Well, potentially, Bob, it's a very ominous turn in this story, three American soldiers missing. This al-Qaeda led group, the Islamic State of Iraq is a very bad actor in this part of the world, responsible for some terrible atrocities, a market bombing across the river behind me that killed 127 people just last month. And this group has now claimed on its Web site that they are holding an undetermined number of missing American soldiers, possibly all three. They have yet to offer any proof that they have those soldiers in custody, but they say that more details are coming. But this, for a US military that now has a massive search—4,000 soldiers—US soldiers alone, plus Iraqi forces, looking for these missing Americans about 20 miles south of Baghdad, this is a very potentially devastating turn and the worst possible news at this point in the search.

SCHIEFFER: What—how is the military taking this news? They haven't confirmed as yet that they believe this group is holding these soldiers, but what can they tell you about it?

STRASSMANN: Well, they're certainly looking for proof. They need some proof that the group actually does have the soldiers. The US military knew all along, they were telling me, that the more time went on, of course, the more ominous it was going to look if these soldiers had been hiding, for instance, and not been captured. With so many other people looking for them now, that is US forces looking for them, presumably at some point they would have stood up and said that they're over here, for instance. But that didn't happen. And

so the question was were they captured all along, and were they--are they wounded. And now, if, a part of their being held by this group, this group does not have a history of negotiating. This is a hard-line Sunni insurgent group, and the US military is now really up against it if, in fact, this group really does have these missing soldiers, Bob.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, thank you very much, Mark.

And joining us now to talk about that and the rest of the news about Iraq, and the rest of the news, Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska. He, of course, was among the very first Republicans to break with the president on this war.

It's not very good news to start the day, Senator Hagel.

Senator CHUCK HAGEL (Republican, Nebraska; Member, Foreign Relations Committee): Bob, no, it is not good news. But it is predictable, as we have now seen these kind of events become more and more frequent, as we are now in our fifth year. And I think we've got to understand that, as General Petraeus and Secretary Gates have said, there will be no outside military solution to Iraq. The solution to Iraq is a political accommodation, a political resolution, reconciliation. That must occur.

Now, we'll continue to help and support. But, as Secretary Gates said in Iraq two weeks ago, he was there right after I was there, this is not open-ended. And so every day that goes by, more attacks in the green zone, more deaths, more problems for all of us. It's going to intensify. We've got to find some new way to approach this. And I think one of the things that the administration's going to have to do is look at the possibilities of, for example, bringing in some kind of a UN mediator like the former Algerian Foreign Minister Brahimi, who was special adviser to the UN secretary general, to take us out of the center of this in some way, to help mediate this.

SCHIEFFER: To try to negotiate the Sunnis.

Sen. HAGEL: Yes.

SCHIEFFER: Get the Sunnis and the Shias to negotiate.

Sen. HAGEL: That's right, this is a--this is a civil, sectarian war. Yes, al-Qaeda's there. Yes, terrorists are there. But they are not the predominant aspect of this. And I'm really sorry to see some of the administration continue to say that this is the front on terrorism, this war. It's not. This is a sectarian, civil war.

SCHIEFFER: But, obviously, this is an al-Qaeda group. What do you do with al-Qaeda, where you're trying to get the Sunnis to...

Sen. HAGEL: Well, one of the things...

SCHIEFFER: ...come to some settlement?

Sen. HAGEL: One of the things that we can be doing is redeploying our forces and focus American forces on counterinsurgency measures against terrorists there. That's something that Baker-Hamilton has talked about in their 79 recommendations. I've talked about it. Others have. But we've got to do something different. Obviously, we have interests in Iraq; we have interests in the Middle East. I was heartened to see the United States and Iran are finally, evidently, going to sit down and talk. I've been calling for an engagement with Iran for four years.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Sen. HAGEL: There'll be no peace in Iraq or anywhere else until the regional dynamic of this is framed up in a regional understanding, and Iran has to be part of that. Iran's not going to do us any favors, but it's in their interest to find some common denominators here. So we've got to start thinking differently. That's why, if you want to get into this, the president had the meeting with some of these Republicans on Tuesday.

SCHIEFFER: Yeah. Well, talk about that a little bit. I mean, you said a long time ago, kind of talk to the president with the bark off. This is really the first time a group this large has gone to the White House and, from what we hear, really just laid it out to the president and said basically that the administration's credibility on the war is gone and that, in a sense, unless something turns around there, they could take down the--all the Republicans that're up for re-election next year.

Sen. HAGEL: Well, Bob, there's no question there is a very clear political dynamic here. And the president may find himself standing alone sometime this fall where Republicans will start to move away, and you're starting to see trapdoors and exit signs already with a number of Republicans. The 11 House Republicans that went to see him speak for more than just 11 House Republicans. That's just the tip of the iceberg. The uneasiness that's in the Republican Party today is there.

But here's what I go back to, and I've always said this, and I've been beat up pretty good by my own party on this. War should never be framed up as a partisan issue. It should be never, ever held captive to a political wedge issue. If Bill Clinton was president, if Bill Clinton got us into Iraq like George Bush did, would that mean all the Democrats would be for the war and all the Republicans against it? We must evaluate our involvement anywhere in the world, foreign policy wars, based on what's right for the country, not on what's right for a particular president or a party.

We're in serious trouble in the world today. We're destroying our military, our Marines and our Army. We've got all these other areas--the real front against terrorism is Afghanistan, and we're not doing very well there. But Darfur, Kosovo is still a problem. We've got Chavez in Venezuela. At the time we should be expanding our relationships and understanding that this is the future for the 21st century. We're bogged down in an area where we cannot influence the outcome. And we've got to change policy there.

SCHIEFFER: Let me--let me just ask you about some of those things. You know, everybody talks about 'If the surge fails, what's plan B?'

Sen. HAGEL: Mm-hmm.

SCHIEFFER: Some people will say, 'Well, those of you who want a withdrawal, what is your plan B?' You say negotiations. But isn't it--isn't it more complicated than that, senator?'

Sen. HAGEL: Well, I've said more than that. Negotiations--just like the Baker-Hamilton report said, if the administration would've used those 79 recommendations as a new foundation for a bipartisan consensus on Iraq, we could've moved forward in a realistic way. What did the Baker-Hamilton report say, in answer to your question? It said use all the instruments of power--negotiation, diplomacy, a strong military, absolutely, economic issues, relationships, a regional context of a regional security plan here. The Israeli/Palestinian issue is thread into this same fabric. All of it is in the Middle East.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Sen. HAGEL: And we've not been wise and smart how we've utilized our power. That's what Baker-Hamilton report was all about. Yes, it's negotiations, but it's the hard fact here, Bob, we're not going to just pull out. We can't pull out. I've never maintained that, and most of my colleagues have never said that.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Sen. HAGEL: Redeploy our forces, get our young men out of the middle of a civil war. Put them on the borders. Put them in the training areas, what we're doing now. Get them into the counterinsurgency against al-Qaeda. Show where we've got a broader reach of using our military. At the same time, the diplomatic effort with Syria and Iran, building a consensus. Saudi Arabia. We've got trouble with our ally Saudi Arabia on this issue.

SCHIEFFER: Let me switch to politics. You have said that you were thinking about running for president yourself. You said you'd probably decide sometime this fall, but I want to ask you, number one, are you moving more toward doing that, and, if you do, will you run as a Republican or will you run as an Independent?

Sen. HAGEL: Well I've been a Republican all my life. I voted for the Republican ticket in 1968 when I was in Vietnam. I'm not happy with the Republican Party today. It has drifted from the party of Eisenhower, of Goldwater, of Reagan. The party that I joined, it isn't the same party. It's not. It's been hijacked by a group of single-minded almost isolationists, insulationists, power-projectors. That's not what Eisenhower talked about in 1961 when he probably gave one of the best speeches ever given by a president about how we will use our foreign policy and our engagement and reaching out to the world. The world will always respond to leadership that they have confidence in and they trust.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Sen. HAGEL: That's essentially been the reason we've been able to lead the world. But as far as my position, I'll make some evaluation and if I think there might be an opportunity for me to play a role somehow, some way...

SCHIEFFER: When will you make that decision, this fall?

Sen. HAGEL: Oh, by certainly late summer I've got...

SCHIEFFER: Are you more interested or less interested in running this morning?

Sen. HAGEL: Well, you get into this business, Bob, because you want to influence the outcome of the world. You want to make a better world. You try to use whatever capabilities, experiences you have to shape policy, to move a country in a certain direction. I feel very strongly about that. I feel as strongly about that today, Bob, as I did when I entered the Senate 11 years ago. Where I can best play that role, I don't know yet. We'll see.

SCHIEFFER: Well, let's talk about this whole idea of an Independent Party, or an Independent candidate. Can an Independent candidate be successful? Do you think that's good for the system?

Sen. HAGEL: I think it is good for the system, especially today. I think we are living today at the most unpredictable political time in modern history. I think the elections next year for president and other offices will be settled on the basis of what America will be looking at and wanting and demanding is honest, competent, accountable leadership. I don't think ideology's going to play a big role in that. I think a credible third ticket, third party, would be good for the system. It would force both parties that have been hijacked by the extremes of their two parties, and I think we would want something like that. I would hope this country has

some options like that. I think it shakes the system up. The system needs to be shaken up. This country's in trouble, Bob. The world's in trouble. The world's always in trouble when America's in trouble. And we need some new fresh independent ideas to lead this country forward.

SCHIEFFER: You had dinner, I know, the other night with Mayor Bloomberg of New York. Some say he's thinking of a run, perhaps, as an Independent. What did you come away from that meeting feeling?

Sen. HAGEL: Well, we didn't make any deals, but I think Mayor Bloomberg is the kind of individual who should seriously think about this. I think he is. I can't speak for him. Obviously, the conversation we had was confidential, but it's that kind of independent thinking. He's been—here's a man who's been successful in every walk of life. He's thoughtful. He's got a range about the world. He's not tied down and captive to political ideology. He wants to make things work. He is the mayor of one of the greatest cities on earth. He makes that city work. That's what America wants.

SCHIEFFER: Well, let me just ask you this. Could you see a ticket that had Mayor Bloomberg and Chuck Hagel, in no particular order there, but those two names on the same ticket? Would that be—can you see something like that?

Sen. HAGEL: It's a great country to think about a New York boy and a Nebraska boy to be teamed up leading this nation.

SCHIEFFER: All right, well, we'll certainly leave it there, senator. Thank you very much. And I hope we'll be hearing more from you.

Sen. HAGEL: Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: Back in a minute with our roundtable.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: We're back now with our political discussion. It is Mother's Day, and I'm happy to say we have two moms with us to kick it around a little bit here. My old friend Jeanne Cummings, formerly of The Wall Street Journal, The Atlanta Constitution, now with Politico.com. And Michel McQueen Martin, late of The Wall Street Journal and ABC, and now at NPR.

Happy Mother's Day to both of you.

Ms. MICHEL McQUEEN MARTIN (National Public Radio): Thank you.

Ms. JEANNE CUMMINGS (Politico.com): Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: Well, I must say that Chuck Hagel kind of threw a tantalizing little tidbit out there for us this morning. He said it would be a great thing if a—if an old boy from Nebraska and a guy from—a kid from New York could wind up on the same ticket to lead this country. Now, he did not say he's going to run as an Independent, but clearly he is thinking about it, clearly, and we know for a fact he had dinner the other night with Mayor Bloomberg of New York.

Michel, do you think anything's possible on that front that we might see a third party candidate this time?

Ms. MARTIN: I think that it's the kind of thing that it's so tantalizing. I think it meets a need not just with the political system, but with the public. I mean, you see a yearning within the public for another option. Although,

I will say that third party candidates tend to advantage one of the established political parties. I mean, you've seen that sort of over and over again, whether it's Ross Perot or sort of John Anderson. Third party candidates tend not to win. What they do tend to do is change the dynamic of a race to favor somebody who's already in the race.

The only other point I'd make on this is that Democrats like their candidates. The Republicans are the ones who don't like their candidates. So I think that's why you see the energy coming from the Republican side for a third party option.

SCHIEFFER: What do you think about that, Jeanne? Have we seen all the Republican candidates yet that are going to be in this race? A lot of talk about Fred Thompson. Hagel says he may or may not.

Ms. CUMMINGS: I think we'll probably see some latecomers to the race. I think that Fred Thompson is serious. From what I understand in talking with people who are close to him, he is interviewing people. He's looking to create a staff. He's trying to think through how he would run a campaign. I do think we might want to keep our eye on Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker. He has talked about September as a time when he would make a decision about whether he would get in. If he sees weakness or flabbiness in the field, Newt Gingrich is just the sort of guy to step into that sort of breach. I think his thinking is he could run a more Internet, a more viral, a more grassroots kind of campaign, not necessarily need the machinery. Would either of those candidates do well? I don't know. But I think that you probably will see somebody step in.

SCHIEFFER: Well, on the--what about the Democratic side? Do you think Al Gore might get in?

Ms. MARTIN: I really don't. I think that, you know--I hope he doesn't take this the wrong way, but after that appearance on "Saturday Night Live" a couple of years ago where he's sort of in a hot tub sipping champagne, I think that was his swan song to politics. I think he's...

SCHIEFFER: It really is--well, he's done a lot since then. He's really brought a lot of attention to global warming and things of that nature.

Ms. MARTIN: Sure, but I think that what he's done is found his voice in the issues he cares about, as opposed to having to--I mean, I think that the biography of Al Gore is a guy who did what he thought he was supposed to do for most of his life. I think now he's doing what he wants to do, and I think what he wants to do is raise attention to the issues that he cares about. And as I said before, the Democrats like their field. They're very excited. You've got, you know, the opportunity to possibly have the first African-American president, first woman president, first Latino president. All those people are highly qualified. People can debate whether their qualifications match the job, but there's a lot of excitement about the existing Democratic field. I don't see the need for it in the same way that you see a hunger on the part of the Republican grassroots for some other choice.

SCHIEFFER: Well, let's talk about the issue that apparently is going to be the issue--it certainly is right now--and that is Iraq. What do you make of--what significance do you put, Jeanne, into the visit that these 10 Republicans made to the White House last week to sort of tell it to the president to his face, `If you--things don't turn around in Iraq, you're not going to be able to hold Republican support on the Hill'?

Ms. CUMMINGS: Well, there is a lot of fear in the Republican conference, and the senator spoke about it earlier today, that those 11 moderates don't speak just for themselves, they speak for many. I think what we will see is a real desire by the Republicans on the Hill to try to get--to move Iraq off of the agenda before next year because they are completely against public opinion. And for the senators, it's particularly important, because they have to rely upon independent voters. And independent voters in New Hampshire and in Minnesota and some of these places where there're going to be very tough races, they have shifted. They're

anti-war. And they will--and the Republicans now have got to try to find a way to peel some of them off in order to win. In addition, you have the liberal anti-war groups conducting a very well-coordinated, very aggressive campaign against them already in their home states, including telephone banks and television advertisements. Millions of dollars that's already digging the ground underneath of them two years before their own re-elections. They are very afraid.

SCHIEFFER: Who is doing this? Where is--where's this coming from?

Ms. CUMMINGS: The major--there are five or six big organizations inside of the anti-war coalition. They include big labor unions. They include moveon.org, the online organization with three and almost a half million members. All told, together they represent more than eight million people. They have \$7 million in their budget. It is a very big organization.

SCHIEFFER: What's going to happen? Do you think that the Democrats will be able to get some conditions put on this next funding bill, Michel?

Ms. MARTIN: What I--what I think is interesting about what Jeanne and what you've been talking about is the way the moderates have reasserted themselves, really, in both parties. I mean, the Democrats understand that the moderates are the reason that they have the hold on the Congress now. What's happening now on the Republican side is that the moderates are reasserting themselves. They've been substantially disempowered over the last six years, and now they're trying to find their voice. I mean, you have the president say that he would consider benchmarks, I think that that's an indication--somebody who's not been willing to consider any curtailment of executive power in any area, for him to say he's willing to consider this proposal, which is coming really from the activism of the grass roots, then I think that there's been a change.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, I want to thank both of you very much, and have a happy Mother's Day.

Ms. MARTIN: Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: We'll be back with a final word in just a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally today, I was in my office reading the newspaper one day last week when I heard someone on one of the cables say Vice President Cheney urged the Iraqi parliament to abandon plans for a two-month summer vacation. I guess I should've heard about this before, but somehow I hadn't, and it hit me with a jolt. I mean, who could be serious about taking two months off while people--Americans and Iraqis--were dying just beyond the parliament door?

But then I heard the television reporter say the vice president had told the Iraqis that, with so much at stake, quote, "any undue delay would be hard to explain," end quote. Now, I've got a couple of issues with the vice president, but I am with him on that one big time. We have a sharp debate going on in our Congress about whether to bring our troops home from Iraq. I buy some of the arguments; some I don't. But I have not heard a better argument for withdrawal than the Iraqi parliament's decision to take a vacation in the coming weeks. That makes the case far better than our poor power to add or detract, to quote another American wartime president.

The idea that the vice president of the United States would have to go to Baghdad to urge the Iraqis not to take a vacation is ludicrous in itself. If the Iraqis think the American people will put up with that, I am sorry, they had better think again. I'm not sure even the president's strongest supporters would put up with that.

That's it for us. We'll see you next week, and have a happy Mother's Day. We'll be back on FACE THE NATION.