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FACE THE NATION

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GUESTS: Senator JOHN McCAIN (R-AZ)
Member, Armed Forces Committee

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BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, Senator John McCain on torture. And a new report that intelligence agencies have now concluded the war in Iraq has hurt rather than helped the effort to win the war on terrorism.

This week, the White House and the renegade Republican senators led by McCain struck a deal on the interrogation of terror suspects. But is it a done deal? Will Congress go along? And the even larger question: Has the Iraq war caused a setback in the war on terror? That's what US intelligence agencies have concluded, according to The Washington Post and The New York Times. Those are the questions for Senator McCain. John Harris of The Washington Post will join in the questioning, and I'll have a final word on when blowhards blow, how do we respond?

But first, Senator McCain 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. With us in the studio this morning, Senator John McCain.

Welcome, Senator McCain.

Senator JOHN McCAIN (Republican, Arizona; Member, Armed Services Committee): Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: Joining in the questioning, John Harris, who is the national political editor of The Washington Post, and the co-author of a new book called "The Way To Win: Taking the White House in 2008." And it's a very good book, I recommend it.

Well, let me start here with Senator McCain...

Sen. McCAIN: I'll have to read it.

SCHIEFFER: Yes, it might be of interest to you, Senator McCain. The New York--we got to get serious here. The New York Times and The Washington Post report on their front pages--and I know you've seen these reports, Senator McCain--that US intelligence agencies concluded back in April that the war in Iraq had hurt rather than helped the war on terror. It says that Iraq has become the primary recruiting vehicle for violent Islamic extremists. Now, this is what both newspapers report, that the government behind the scenes in this secret report has concluded. Number one, what do you know about this, and number two, do you agree with that?

Sen. McCAIN: I know nothing about it, I'm not on the intelligence committee, so I'm not--that kind of information isn't shared with me. I think that it's obvious that the difficulties we've experienced in Iraq have certainly emboldened. Lack of success always does that. But I would also argue that

these people didn't need any motivation to attack us on September 11th. According to their history--and there's some validity to it--this begins with bombing of the--and killing the Marines in Beirut, and then Somalia, and now other, quote, "successes" of theirs. But I would--I think it would argue that we need to prevail in Iraq, and that if we fail, then our problems would be much more complicated. But if it wasn't Iraq, it'd be Afghanistan; if it wasn't Afghanistan, it would be others that they would use as a method of continuing their recruitment.

And finally, we all know that this is an ideological war, too. This is what I know as evil and a perversion of an honorable religion against everything we stand for and believe in. That's why I think it's still important we prevail in Iraq.

SCHIEFFER: Well, there's another part to this of course, and that is that the president has been saying, and other members of this administration have been saying that Iraq has made us safer, not weaker, and this is the central point in the war on terror. What do you make of that, that the president seems to be saying exactly the opposite of what his own intelligence agencies have concluded?

Sen. McCAIN: I can't speak for the president, but I haven't seen him say that it's--that it's safer. I think he has laid out recently a pretty cogent argument why we must, quote--I hate to use the phrase--"stay the course," but I would rather use "prevail" in Iraq, bring about a democ--a democracy, and a free society. The best way to combat terrorism, and the recruitment of these young people who are willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to take others, is an opportunity, is a free and open society. And the longer that there are these conditions that prevail, the more likely they are to have more recruits.

SCHIEFFER: Let me just, for the record, put in that the White House responded this morning, that they said quote, "We do not comment on classified documents," and says "The New York Times characterization of the intelligence report is not representative of the complete document." But it seems to me they didn't deny it. And it seems to me that somebody in the intelligence community must have felt that the right story wasn't getting out, else why would they have leaked it?

Sen. McCAIN: This town, as we all know, there's nothing secret in our nation's capital. All I can do is say I think the president recently has laid out our challenges very well in Iraq. We all know that things are not going as well as we want it to. The Marine intelligence report that was leaked about Anbar Province, and the difficulty--this is long and hard and tough. But the benefits of success are enormous, and the consequences of failure are enormous. So frankly it doesn't astound me that we would get an intelligence report that if we're not succeeding as well as we had hoped, that that would encourage the enemy.

Mr. JOHN HARRIS (National Political Editor, The Washington Post): But if you look at this news, and you look at the news out of Iraq today--another

explosion, several dozen killed--are you any closer to concluding that the strategy is just not working? Yes, the goal is important, but are we getting closer to the goal?

Sen. McCain: I think the tactics have been flawed, and that's been well documented and chronicled. We didn't have enough troops over there, the looting shouldn't have taken place, the difficulties in not anticipating the enormous challenges of bringing democracy and stability to a place that has been ruled by an absolute, terrible, repressive dictator for many years. That doesn't mean to me that, therefore, we should then plan on leaving. It means that we should fix the mistakes, it means that we have to make progress.

Mr. Harris: What's your level of confidence that the administration is doing that, is fixing those mistakes?

Sen. McCain: I think we are getting better. I still think we need more troops over there. I notice that, quote, "maintaining troop levels" is basically a troop increase. I worry about neglecting Anbar Province, the real hotbed and base of a lot of this terrorist activity.

But I also believe we are making progress in certain areas. There's parts of Iraq that are very stable, there's significant progress being made in training of the Iraqi army. I guess, John, my answer is two steps forward, one step back, and we should not raise expectations of the American people as to the difficulties of this challenge.

Schieffer: Well, how many more troops, senator?

Sen. McCain: I would--I would say 20 or 30,000, but they have to be the right kind of troops. But having said that, the fundamental problem, Bob, we've got to expand, and should have five years ago, six years ago, expand the Army and the Marine Corps. All these reports about the strain on the Guard are very valid, those are valid reports. We're asking our men and women in the Guard to do things we've never asked them to do before, and it's marvelous the way they've responded, it's incredible, but it's very, very difficult. And it all goes back to a lack of sufficient number of troops to handle the job.

Schieffer: Well, we are now hearing that they may have to call on the Guard more rather than less. Can the Guard sustain this?

Sen. McCain: What...

Schieffer: I mean, can you keep the National Guard if you have to increase the burden on those people?

Sen. McCain: From an objective point of view, you might say no. But I'll tell you, these people, these young men and women who are serving in the Guard, are marvelous. And they're just as capable as the--as the regular forces are, and they've responded in incredible fashion. But we still need to expand the Army and the Marine Corps. I say that as an old Navy man.

SCHIEFFER: And you--in other words, you say we just need a larger Army and Marine Corps, that we have--we're asking the military to do a job that they're really not large enough to do.

Sen. McCAIN: Exactly. And we need--Afghanistan is proving very troublesome now, we know about our pending difficulties with Iran, North Korea. We live in a very dangerous world, and we not only need to have the equipment--which by the way, the Guard is having a problem with getting their equipment replaced--but we also need the personnel as well. And it doesn't mean we go back to a draft.

Mr. HARRIS: Senator, can we go to your agreement with the administration this week...

Sen. McCAIN: Sure. Sure.

Mr. HARRIS: ...on the law regarding torture?

Sen. McCAIN: Sure. Sure.

Mr. HARRIS: This whole debate turned on things that I think most citizens couldn't understand. You said you--severe punishment, pain should not be inflicted, but serious pain can--what can that possibly mean in concrete terms?

Sen. McCAIN: In concrete terms, it could mean that waterboarding and other extreme measures such as extreme deprivation--sleep deprivation, hypothermia and others would be not allowed.

Mr. HARRIS: That's what you say. What if the administration interprets it differently, as it is allowed to do under the provisions of this law? What if you disagree with the interpretation?

Sen. McCAIN: If we disagree with the interpretation, the fact is that those interpretations have to be published in the Federal Register. That's a document that's available to all Americans, including the press. And we in Congress, and the judiciary, if challenged, have the ability then to examine that interpretation and act legislatively. These are regulations the president would issue, we would be passing laws which trump regulations.

Mr. HARRIS: If you have confidence that those were--tactics were disallowed, why didn't you get it in the--in the actual law?

Sen. McCAIN: What we did, John, was we called--outlawed certain procedures, including some of those that you might think would be natural--murder, rape, etc.--but also cruel and inhuman--we included cruel and inhuman treatments, not as severe as torture but could still be considered a crime.

SCHIEFFER: Well, we look at...

Sen. McCAIN: I'm confident that some of the abuses that were reportedly committed in the past will be prohibited in the future.

SCHIEFFER: Well, for example, will this prohibit making people stand up for long periods of time? Because I know in your captivity--what?--you were once made to stand up for two days, or something?

Sen. McCAIN: Yeah. It's hard for me to get into these techniques. First of all, I'm not privy to them, but I only know what I've seen in public reporting. But some of these, such as an extreme stress position and extreme application of that I think would be--would be certainly important. But we also put in that if they're employed to the extent they cause serious physical or mental pain and suffering, but even if that is not prolonged. In other words you could do something almost instantaneously and that would still be prohibited under the, quote...

SCHIEFFER: What does prolonged mean?

Sen. McCAIN: Well, like the sleep thing you just mentioned, like standing, like--exposed to cold temperature to the danger that serious injury could, mental or serious--or physical injury could result.

Look, we couldn't outline everything that should be done. We tried to outline what couldn't be done under the War Crimes Act, leaving the Geneva Conventions alone, which was our first and utmost priority. Look, ACLU and the New York Times don't like the agreement, but we think this will recognize, people will recognize that it defends both our values and our security. Some want the CIA not to be able to carry out this program. That was never our intent. And--but it was--it's very important that we have this tool to collect intelligence.

Mr. HARRIS: What gives you the confidence? The last time you reached an agreement, it was in law, the administration signed it, and then put out a signing statement saying it was going to interpret it its own way. Did you have confidence as you were negotiating with the administration, and are you also confident that this outlaws torture?

Sen. McCAIN: That Detainee Treatment Act, they did have--put that signing statement in, but it's--they have never violated it to my knowledge, and we would challenge it if they did. And second of all, part of this agreement is adherence to the act that we passed, the Detainee Treatment Act. So, look, I believe the administration acted in good faith. We all understand the need to collect intelligence and we know how important it is. But we also ought to recognize that...

Mr. HARRIS: Do the tactics work?

Sen. McCAIN: Well, that's--I was just going to say. Thanks, John.

Mr. HARRIS: Because the administration said these tactics work. Do they?

Sen. McCAIN: I think that they work to an extent, but I also think that we have to be very careful, because we already have numerous examples where, if you torture somebody, they'll tell you anything that you want to know. Ask the British in Northern Ireland. Ask the French in Algeria. Ask the Israelis. So you've got to be very careful about the--about these abuses.

Mr. HARRIS: Well, you have access to more information about this than any of us because you've been in the negotiations.

Sen. McCAIN: No, actually I...

Mr. HARRIS: What works?

Sen. McCAIN: No. What do you mean? They're going to...

Mr. HARRIS: You know of specific instances where these tactics have produced valuable information. And...

Sen. McCAIN: Only what the president talked about in his speech, and there has been, everyone agrees, there has been some valuable information gained. Exactly what techniques were used in obtaining that, I certainly don't know.

SCHIEFFER: Senator McCain...

Sen. McCAIN: But it's clear we have to have the moral high ground and we cannot violate the Geneva Conventions, which we've adhered to for 57 years. And we will not.

SCHIEFFER: Well, that just leads to my question. Should the administration and the CIA close these secret prisons?

Sen. McCAIN: I--that's not for me to say. But I--but I do believe that we have to be careful about our image in the world. But we also have to balance that with the ability to win this war on terror. And gathering of intelligence is a very important tool. The administration makes a very strong case, and I don't question it, that the interrogation of a couple of these high-value--and remember, these are the worst people in the world and we all know that--that has--gave them valuable information in thwarting attacks on the United States of America. I take them at their word.

But we also have to remember that if we have our men, young people, captured, say a CIA agent in Iran, and we--if the Iranians decide to interpret the Geneva Conventions, then obviously that would put our young peoples' lives in danger. That's why we didn't touch the Geneva Conventions.

SCHIEFFER: OK. Well, let's take a break here. We'll come back and talk a little politics in a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Back again with Senator McCain.

Well, Senator McCain, the UN General Assembly met this week and there were some fairly tough things issued from the--from the podium up there. What's your overall reaction? How about this guy Chavez from Venezuela?

Sen. McCain: Despicious--despicable. In his case, he aspires to be this generation's Castro. I think the people of Venezuela ought to look at the standard of living in Cuba before they would embrace such a thing. We were just talking off camera, Senator Wences, I guess it was, the sock puppet. Look, it's despicable and the United Nations should not be used as that kind of forum. But it goes back to Khrushchev in '56 banging his shoe on the table. But I would--I would say that this is an argument to get John Bolton confirmed as our UN ambassador. He's smart, he's tough, he would respond to these guys. And he could talk back to these two-bit dictators who have the air fare to New York. And I hope my Democrat friends will stop holding up the nomination of John Bolton.

Mr. HARRIS: Chavez called Bush Satan. And there's Jerry Falwell in the news just today, said Hillary Clinton will do as much as Satan to energize the conservative base. You were just down there at his university. What did you make of Falwell's comment?

Sen. McCain: I think he was joking. I'm--from what I was told, he was laughing. And for the record, even though Mrs. Clinton and I may have some disagreements, I don't think she's Lucifer.

Mr. HARRIS: You once said you'd think she'd be a good president. Do you still think that's true?

Sen. McCain: I am sure that she would do a job that is in keeping with her philosophy and her beliefs. I happen to disagree with those, but when I say, quote, "good" president, I think we have very different views on the conduct of the presidency, but that's--she works hard as a senator, and I think that she knows her issues.

SCHIEFFER: Senator, when will you make it official that you're going to seek the Democratic--I mean, the Republican nomination? Some people wonder if you might seek the Democratic nomination. I didn't mean it that way.

Sen. McCain: Early next--early next year we'll make a decision on that. Right now we're focusing on the 2006 election. We all know that a lot is up for grabs here. I think it's very important that the Republicans keep both houses of Congress, so I'm traveling all around the country campaigning for our Republican candidates. That's very appropriately my focus.

Mr. HARRIS: Right. And when you do that...

Sen. McCain: Mm-hmm.

Mr. HARRIS: ...issues that are important to you--immigration reform, Congress did nothing; lobby reform in the wake of Abramoff; token measures;

pork barrel spending, high as ever. What is the case that you make to those Republican audiences that the record of the Congress deserves re-election?

Sen. McCain: Well, the war on terror, obviously, and the war in Iraq, are the number one issues. Lower taxes is obviously a part of it. A good economy. We do have a good economy, a good strong healthy economy, which is important to the American people. I believe that the administration and Congress should get credit for that. Of course I wish we would move forward with an agreement on immigration. We can. We can decide that we will do everything necessary to fix our border and provide border security and at the meantime, move forward while we've made that commitment to addressing the other aspects of the issue.

Schieffer: Do you think Republicans will keep both houses at this point, Senator?

Sen. McCain: Yes.

Schieffer: You do?

Sen. McCain: Yes, I do. But I think it's going to be very, very tough. Off-year elections, as you well know, given your advanced age, is a very--the off-year of the second term of any president is always a tough election. And, of course, Iraq is a very controversial issue with Americans, and there's uncertainty of our future because of globalization. We understand all that, but we also think we have a record we can stand on.

Schieffer: What is wrong with the Congress? It can't seem to get anything done, Senator McCain.

Sen. McCain: I think we need to have a little less partisanship and join together on issues that are of importance. I remember when the president, State of the Union message said, 'I regret we're unable to reform Social Security.' the Democrats cheered. In 1984 when I first came, Ronald Reagan, Tip O'Neill stood together and said, 'We're going to fix Social Security.' We better, I think, lower the rhetoric a little bit and work together a little more maintaining our philosophical differences.

Mr. Harris: About 2008. Your friend John Kerry's said if he runs for president again, he's learned a lot about how to push back against attack politics.

Sen. McCain: Mm-hmm.

Mr. Harris: Those--that same brand of attack politics hit you pretty hard in 2000, some of the same interest groups and people. What have you learned about how to push back against that if you do run for president in 2008?

Sen. McCain: I lost the nomination in 2000 because President Bush had a better organization, better support and was a better candidate. I will not run a campaign or be involved in a campaign that engages in that. I'd rather

lose than be involved in it, and I just won't...

Mr. HARRIS: Will you be the target of that once again?

Sen. McCain: Oh, I would imagine. But I have a long record, and a lot of the American people know me very well.

SCHIEFFER: Senator...

Sen. McCain: Unfortunately, in some cases.

SCHIEFFER: ...are you going to--if you do become a candidate, will you enter all the primaries? Will you enter all the early contests? I know the last time out you skipped a couple.

Sen. McCain: Yeah, I would--that would be a decision to be made after we decide whether to run or not. I did attend the Iowa state fair recently, where I met Waldo, a 1190-pound pig. A remarkable experience.

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

Sen. McCain: Thanks for having me.

SCHIEFFER: ...for joining us this morning. I'm sure...

Sen. McCain: Thanks, John.

SCHIEFFER: ...we'll be talking again.

Sen. McCain: Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: Back in a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally today, Senator McCain just mentioned it, but I think it irritated all of us last week when two of the world's leading blowhards--the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the leader of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez--insulted America and its leaders. But you know what? It was probably a good thing for us, because the more the world sees and hears these two, the quicker they will understand just how awful they and what they represent are.

With every appearance, the Iranian president reminds us that in a movie about Hitler, he would be the perfect Mini Me for the Nazi dictator, and I doubt there is much of a market these days for Nazism, no matter how much some people resent the United States. And speaking of the movies, the more you hear Chavez, the more you realize this guy wouldn't be a credible villain in a Batman flick. Sure, we have to keep an eye on them, but the way to hurt their cause is to keep encouraging them to show the world how they do things, and let the world compare it to our way.

That's why it was so important that while they were blowing off, Senator McCain and the White House came together on a plan that ensures America will abide by the Geneva Conventions in dealing with enemy prisoners. It is not a perfect plan, to be sure, but it shows how we do things in a democracy--out in the open, and in accordance with the law, even when dealing with the worst of the worst.

We'll never win a battle for hearts and minds by preaching. We do it by showing who we are, and inviting the other side to do the same.

That's it for us. We'll see you next week right here on FACE THE NATION.