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FACE THE NATION

Sunday, December 4, 2005

GUEST: Senator JOHN KERRY, (D-MA)
Foreign Relations Committee

MODERATOR: BOB SCHIEFFER - CBS News

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**FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
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BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, Senator John Kerry in his first Sunday interview since January. A shift of fewer than 100,000 votes in Ohio and John Kerry would have become president. So how would he handle Iraq today and will he run again? We'll put those questions and more to the senator from Massachusetts. Then I'll have a final word on paying for good news. But first, Senator Kerry, Iraq and politics 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: Good morning again.

With us in the studio, Senator Kerry, and welcome back to the...

Senator JOHN KERRY (Democrat, Massachusetts): Good morning.

SCHIEFFER: ...Sunday talk show circuit. This is your first Sunday appearance...

Sen. KERRY: Glad to be here.

SCHIEFFER: ...I believe, since January, our first face-to-face interview since...

Sen. KERRY: Happy to be with you.

SCHIEFFER: ...the presidential debate before...

Sen. KERRY: Wow.

SCHIEFFER: ...the election. Senator, I want to go directly to what I think is the core question here. When the secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was here three weeks ago, I asked him would the security of the American people, not the Iraqi people, but would the security of the American people be endangered if we brought home our American troops over the next six months? His answer was, 'Absolutely,' and one of the things he said was, 'Turning Iraq over to the terrorists who behead people would make for a more dangerous world.'

How do you answer the question?

Sen. KERRY: Well, to begin with, I'm amazed Secretary Rumsfeld is still there. I believe Secretary Rumsfeld has misconduted this war in the most extraordinary way from the first decisions about when and how to go in through the last two-and-a-half years. And if there was ever a lack of accountability, it is the lack of accountability on the secretary. In fact, just this last week, General Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had to publicly correct the secretary of Defense about torture. The secretary of Defense said, 'You don't report--our troops have no obligation to do anything except report torture.' And General Pace publicly countermanded him and said, 'No, Mr. Secretary, they have an obligation to stop it.' I think we need a secretary of Defense who thinks like John McCain, not like Dick Cheney...

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well...

Sen. KERRY: ...and that's the starting point.

SCHIEFFER: And I want to get back to the torture question in a minute, but I'd like to go back to the original question.

Sen. KERRY: All right.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think the American people's security would be endangered if we withdrew our forces over the next six months?

Sen. KERRY: I believe that you have to begin with the fundamental truth of the ground in Iraq. That fundamental truth has been set forth by none other than General Casey, the commander of our forces. He has said that the large presence of American forces in Iraq feeds the notion of occupation and it delays--this is critical--delays the willingness and ability of the Iraqis to stand up for themselves. Now that truth from our commanding general, you take it on its face. Then you have to operate on that which means you begin to reduce the number of troops.

No one that I know of even on a six-month basis believes that that's going to leave us in a more exposed basis. Why? Let me tell you. We're not fighting World War II, Bob. The dangers in Iraq on a day-to-day basis to our troops are what basically, fundamentally, IEDs, improvised explosive devices, and suicide bombers. You don't need troops trained on the level of World War II or NATO troops and others in order to be able to do what we need to do, provide security in Iraq. And our troops could redeploy, pull back into a more garrisoned rear position. They don't need to leave totally so that you have no ability to intervene in the event that Iran played their games or Syria or others. We can provide for the security of our country but it begins with the understanding that success in Iraq is predicated on an exit strategy.

SCHIEFFER: So what you're saying here is it is more dangerous to the American people to leave the troops there than to begin drawing them down? Is that what I take from your answer?

Sen. KERRY: It is more dangerous to the mission to leave them in the large numbers they're in today in the status quo. The president keeps saying we're going to stay the course. Staying the course leaves the Iraqis the option of making the decision of when they stand up. If you say to the Iraqis--here's what I believe the president should do. I--these elections are incredibly important. I believe they're going to be successful. We want them to be successful. The day after the election, the president of the United States should announce to the Iraqis and the world, 'Because they were successful, because the referendum was successful, I am withdrawing the 20,000 additional troops we put in to do them.'

SCHIEFFER: All right. All right.

Sen. KERRY: And I am calling for a summit in the region immediately so that we have the political reconciliation necessary to resolve the political differences that feed the insurgency.

SCHIEFFER: Well, let me just ask you this, because that is the basis of your plan, and the headline of your plan was draw down 20,000 troops over the holidays.

Sen. KERRY: Well, I also want to draw down more...

SCHIEFFER: But let me just show you what the secretary of Defense said...

Sen. KERRY: Sure.

SCHIEFFER: ...when he was here three weeks ago.

Sen. KERRY: Absolutely.

(Excerpt from November 20, 2005)

Secretary DONALD RUMSFELD (Department of Defense): We're now at 159,000. We're going to stay that size roughly through the December 15th election. We're clearly going to go back down to 138,000 after the election. And, as the president has said, as the Iraq--as we keep passing off responsibility to the Iraqi security forces, we have the prospect of bringing down the numbers of coalition forces.

SCHIEFFER: So you are...

(End of excerpt)

SCHIEFFER: So there you have it. He's saying exactly what--you're criticizing the president and saying...

Sen. KERRY: That was indirectly--that was...

SCHIEFFER: ... `Here's what he ought to do'; well, they're saying they're going to do that.

Sen. KERRY: That had never been said until it was said that Sunday, which followed almost directly on the speech I gave at Georgetown University, where I called on the drawdown and told them precisely why they could do that.

SCHIEFFER: So...

Sen. KERRY: That was the first time publicly they acknowledged what I had said. Now I believe the president needs to reiterate it, but it's not all he needs to say. He needs to make clear what this administration has never made clear: We will have no permanent basing and no permanent interest in Iraq. And part of the problem that feeds the insurgency today is that we are, like it or not, the inheritors of the legacy of both the British and the French. It is not a pretty legacy in that part of the world. And so the president needs to make it clear: 20,000 troops are coming out. We intend to shift additional responsibilities with a series of benchmarks--political, economic benchmarks, military benchmarks. And as those benchmarks are met, then we withdraw. And that negates what the secretary and the president have said. It does not make Americans more threatened. It, in fact, improves the situation for Americans, because it will empower us to do more with respect to Syria, Iran, the region, the peace process, as well as free us up to do what we always should have been doing, which is getting Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Let me shift to another point of view, and it comes from another Democrat, Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut. He takes a very different view. He says basically we should stay the course because, he says, real progress is being made. He said this is a war between 27 million Iraqis who want freedom and 10,000 terrorists. He says we're in a watershed transformation. What about that?

Sen. KERRY: Let me--I--first of all, there is so much more that unites Democrats than divides us. And Democrats have much more in common with each other than they do with George Bush's policy right now. Now Joe Lieberman, I believe, also voted for the resolution which said the president needs to make more clear what he's doing and set out benchmarks, and that the policy hasn't been working. We all believe him when you say, `Stay the course.' That's the president's policy, which hasn't been changing, which is a policy of failure. I don't agree with that. But I think what we need to do is recognize what we all agree on, which is you've got to begin to set benchmarks for accomplishment. You've got to begin to transfer authority to the Iraqis. And there is no reason, Bob, that young American soldiers need to be going into the homes of Iraqis in the dead of night,

terrorizing kids and children, you know, women, breaking sort of the customs of the--of--the historical customs, religious customs. Whether you like it or not...

SCHIEFFER: Yeah.

Sen. KERRY: ...Iraqis should be doing that. And after all of these two and a half years, with all of the talk of 210,000 people trained, there just is no excuse for not transferring more of that authority.

SCHIEFFER: Well, you're not saying we should stop fighting these insurgents?

Sen. KERRY: Absolutely not. In fact, in my plan, I have said very specifically that we need to keep Special Forces capacity. We need to have the ability to go after hard intelligence. We need to chase down Zarqawi. But we do not need 160,000 troops running around the country as a whole, exposing themselves as they are, feeding the notion of occupation. Let me just emphasize this.

SCHIEFFER: Let me just--before you go further...

Sen. KERRY: OK.

SCHIEFFER: ...let me just ask you one more question about Joe Lieberman...

Sen. KERRY: Sure.

SCHIEFFER: ...because there's a lot of talk. Last night--over this weekend, I had four different people tell me that the White House is thinking if the secretary of Defense goes over the next year--and a lot of people think that he will, that the president is thinking of nominating Joe Lieberman to be secretary of Defense. If he did that, would you support Lieberman?

Sen. KERRY: Of course, I'd support Joe Lieberman. He's a friend and he's a very capable guy. But that's all inside Washington stuff, Bob. You know, what people really care about is how we're going to protect our country and get your troops home in a way that is successful. Now...

SCHIEFFER: Do you think Lieberman would do a better job than Rumsfeld?

Sen. KERRY: Well, right--I think a lot of people would do a better job than Secretary Rumsfeld. But let me come to the more important issue...

SCHIEFFER: Go back.

Sen. KERRY: ...80 percent of the Iraqi people have said they want us to leave. They want us out. The Iraqi leaders met in Cairo a week or so ago and asked to have us set a timetable for withdrawal. Forty-five percent of the people in Iraq believe that it's OK to kill Americans. Secretary Melvin Laird, the secretary of Defense under Richard Nixon, broke his silence of 30 years and said in an important article in Foreign Affairs that it is the large American presence of troops that feeds the insurgency. And he said you have to have a slow draw-down to establish confidence in the Iraqis themselves.

SCHIEFFER: Let's take...

Sen. KERRY: What I'm proposing is a strategy for success, and I think it begins with withdrawal. The president will not accept that reality.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Let's take a break here. We'll come back and talk some more about this in a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And we're back again with Senator John Kerry.

Senator, we were talking about Iraq. You keep talking about how—the reality on the ground. Are you suggesting here that the president is not being straight with the American people about what's going on in Iraq?

Sen. KERRY: Yes.

SCHIEFFER: You are? In what way?

Sen. KERRY: In so many ways, but beginning with the nature of the insurgency itself. I mean, for the first time at Annapolis, the president broke down several categories of insurgents. You will notice that the smallest category, though he called them the most lethal, but the smallest category are the jihadists, the suicide bombers. The truth is that he has kept telling America this is the central focus of the war on terror when, in fact, it is our presence that has acted as a magnet that's brought many of those people to Iraq and diverted us from the real central focus of the war on terror, which is al-Qaida's diaspora around the world and principally Osama bin Laden in northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Now with respect to the insurgency, if you can get the Sunnis to stop being rejectionists, which ambassador Khalilzad, who incidentally I praise; he's been doing a good job since he's been on the ground, and he needs more diplomatic leverage. If you can bring Sunnis and Shia and Kurds together in the next days, this is the greatest imperative of the post-election period which is why the president should announce a summit. It's why he should bring the leadership of the region and Russia and Turkey and others together and leverage this political agreement. Because if you do that, then you take the guts away if the insurgency and you isolate the jihadists.

Believe me, the Shia, the Kurds and even the Sunni, if they begin to participate, do not want Zarqawi and company in their country. And they will kick them out. So the notion that if you begin to empower the Iraqis and reduce somehow gives greater ability to the terrorists is exactly the opposite of the truth on the ground. It will isolate Zarqawi. It's what he dreads the most. He needs us there, and it empowers them and al-Qaida to be able to recruit people across the globe.

SCHIEFFER: The secretary of Defense, when he was here—administration figures today say that all of this must be based on progress, and they say when it becomes time to draw down people after they draw down the 20,000 after the election, they'll go on the advice of the generals. Do you believe that they are getting the advice of the generals or are the generals being muzzled? What's the situation between the civilian and the uniformed military right now.

Sen. KERRY: Bob, I can't tell you what advice they're getting from the generals because I'm not in the room. But I can tell you what I'm told by people on the outside they have asked for or tried to get, or I can tell you what the attitude is. I was with a retired general of some distinction out in San Diego yesterday who informs me, as have other generals with whom I speak, that as they talk to their friends who are still in the Pentagon and still in the uniformed services, there is a chill that has been sent throughout the uniformed branch where, because of what happened to General Shinseki and...

SCHIEFFER: Who suggested it would take several 400,000...

Sen. KERRY: Who suggested it would take some several hundred thousand troops, and he was immediately cold shouldered, sent off and basically retired. That has sent a chill down through the ranks. And I've also heard through other sources that there's a sort of first inquiry. They say, 'How will it be received if we ask for more troops?' and when they find that it will not be received well, then they don't do it. So I suspect from what I'm gleaning from those who've served and made it their life's mission to serve our country well, they are deeply disturbed about what had happened to the morale and to the ability of our uniformed services to speak frankly and candidly as they ought to.

SCHIEFFER: At one point you did vote for the resolution authorizing the president to take military action. If you knew then what you know today, would you have cast that vote?

Sen. KERRY: No.

SCHIEFFER: And what changed your mind?

Sen. KERRY: Assuredly not.

SCHIEFFER: Why did you do that and what has changed since you did that?

Sen. KERRY: Well, so much has changed since I did it, but I did it--you know, I did it for the simplest of reasons. I believed the evidence that we were given, number one. I believed the word of the president of the United States when he said he would do what he promised us with respect to how he'd take us to war if he did: the exhaustion of the remedies of the United Nations, the inspections, the planning, the caution, all of those things. He did none of them.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm. Well...

Sen. KERRY: And finally, conversations with Colin Powell, whom I trusted enormously. Now all of those things said to me we have to protect our country.

SCHIEFFER: Do you...

Sen. KERRY: But I'll tell you, everything since then, Bob, screams mistake, mistake.

SCHIEFFER: Well, let me ask you this: Do you give them the benefit of the doubt that they were just wrong or do you think you were deliberately misled?

Sen. KERRY: No, I don't give them the benefit of the doubt because I've seen too much evidence of the way in which they ignored evidence and, in fact, kept it from us. I mean, the examples, or the reasons why I say so calmly that it was a mistake and there was no way I'd have voted that way--let me give you an example. Vice President Cheney said there was a meeting with Iraqis and al-Qaida. That meeting never took place. We weren't told that. We were told that there was a less than one hour ability to be able to send weapons, biological and chemical. That was disagreed by the Air Force intelligence. We weren't told that. They told us that they had unmanned aerial capacity to deliver weapons.

SCHIEFFER: But then let me...

Sen. KERRY: We weren't told they couldn't do that.

SCHIEFFER: Your point is that you say today you were deliberately misled by this administration?

Sen. KERRY: What I'm saying today is that this administration hyped the evidence, exaggerated, took every opportunity to go down a course that they wanted to go down, and that they did not judiciously parse or share with the Congress doubts that their own intelligence agencies had which they saw and we did not, and that means they misled us and misled the nation.

SCHIEFFER: Are you going to run for president next time?

Sen. KERRY: I honestly don't know yet. I'm looking at it and I'll wait and see.

SCHIEFFER: Leaning one way or the other?

Sen. KERRY: It's too early to—right now we need to focus on 2006. I believe we can win the House. I believe we're gonna win a number of Senate seats. What's important is to change what's happening. Washington is broken, really broken. You and I were chatting earlier. I've never seen it the way it is today. More partisan, less collegiate, more arrogant, less willing to reach across the aisle. The American people deserve more, they deserve better, they want better, and we can do a better job, and that's exactly what we're gonna provide.

SCHIEFFER: Let me show you something you said the other day. You were over at the White House for the Rosa Parks dedication.

Sen. KERRY: Yes, sir.

SCHIEFFER: And as you came out of the White House, a reporter ask you this question. Just listen.

(Excerpt from December 1, 2005)

Unidentified Man: Do you ever find yourself saying, 'How did I lose to this guy?'

Sen. KERRY: No. I know how I lost.

(End of excerpt)

SCHIEFFER: Well, I must say, Senator, if there was ever a question that begged a follow-up. So why do you think you lost?

Sen. KERRY: It's not getting a follow-up. I'm not going backwards, Bob. I'm going forwards. I'm going to take the lessons I learned, take the mistakes I made. I certainly made some, but I'm proud of the campaign. I'm proud of what we achieved. We tried to run a very positive offering of a vision for the nation. America is a great country and I love being out there. And I think we can do a lot better than we're doing today and a lot of Americans think that. So I'm just going to keep working.

SCHIEFFER: If you were at a graduate seminar on politics and they said, 'Well, Senator, what did you learn?'

Sen. KERRY: I've avoided those. I've avoided those on purpose so that I don't have to do that.

SCHIEFFER: Well, what do you think was the great lesson of that campaign?

Sen. KERRY: Well, there were a lot of great lessons, Bob, but as I said, if I decide to run again, I'll show them to you rather than talk about them.

SCHIEFFER: What's going on in the Senate right now? Is Alito going to be confirmed to the Supreme Court?

Sen. KERRY: I think it's too early to tell. I think very, very serious questions have risen in the last days. I have serious questions as do others about a whole host of issues—one man, one vote; some of his views with respect to the civil rights applications; some of his views about the commerce laws, things that are arcane to a lot of people. But the bottom line is it is too early to know yet and we need those hearings. They're going to be very important hearings and I look forward to listening to the questions that my colleagues ask.

SCHIEFFER: Senator, it's very nice to see you again.

Sen. KERRY: Great to be with you. Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: Welcome back to Sundays.

Sen. KERRY: Happy holidays to you.

SCHIEFFER: Hope we'll see you soon. Same to you...

Sen. KERRY: I'll be here.

SCHIEFFER: ...and we'll see you down the trail.

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

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally today, when I read those stories about the military secretly paying Iraqi journalists and their newspapers to print pro-American stories, it made me think of a man named Garrett Morris. Garrett is well into his 80s now and his name won't mean anything to you unless you're from Ft. Worth, but he is one of the wisest men I've ever known.

Thirty-three years ago, my younger brother, all of 24 years old at the time and still in graduate school, had decided to run for a seat in the Texas state Legislature. He was an underdog, of course, and a friend suggested a real dirty trick to use on his opponent. He went to Garrett for advice, and I'll never forget Garrett's answer: 'Never do something in a campaign that you'll be ashamed of if you're found out and, besides, that would not be effective.'

So why in the world, when we are trying to convince the Iraqis of the strength and efficacy of democratic institutions, would we try to do that by corrupting their press, one of the cornerstones of democracy? The government writes the stories for a totalitarian press, not a democracy's press. This administration has never had much use for reporters, and that is their privilege. But speeches about democratic values ring hollow when the speechmaker gets caught trying to undermine democratic institutions. We can do better than that.

This is a war over values. We can best demonstrate the strength of our values by practicing them. To do otherwise, after all, is just not effective.

My brother, by the way, took Garrett's advice. He was elected that year and two times after that.

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