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TELEVISION PROGRAM TO "CBS NEWS' FACE THE NATION."



## **February 21, 2010 Transcript**

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Former Secretary of State

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## TRANSCRIPT

BOB SCHIEFFER: Today on FACE THE NATION, an exclusive interview with Colin Powell. He holds a unique place in American life: soldier, diplomat, advisor to both Republican and Democratic Presidents. What does he make of the Washington gridlock? Does he think the system is broken? What would he do to fix it? We'll ask him.

Then I'll have a personal thought on why Washington doesn't listen, or does it? It's all next 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. The former secretary of state, the former chairman of the joint chiefs is in the studio with us this morning.

General, you do bring a unique perspective to this. You're a Republican but you have held high-level positions under both Republicans and Democrats. And when you announced that you were voting for Barack Obama in 2008, it really got the nation's attention. Here's part of what you said.

COLIN POWELL (Former Secretary of State) (Meet the Press, October 19, 2008): Because of his ability to inspire, because of the inclusive nature of his campaign, because he is reaching out all across America, he has both style and substance, he has met the standard of being a successful President, being an exceptional President.

BOB SCHIEFFER: That's what you said. Now Barack Obama, who came to Washington, promised to change things, not much has changed. The Congress is in a mess right now and in total gridlock. His critics are having a field day. Any regrets about endorsing Barack Obama?

COLIN POWELL: None whatsoever. I think it was the right choice when the nation voted for him by almost a ten million percent majority. And he has done some things that I think have helped the country a great deal.

Let's remember, at the time of the election the United States was falling into a recession, our financial system was collapsing. We were in deep trouble. And as a result of some actions that President Bush took with the TARP Program before he left and what President Obama has done, our financial situation has stabilized. Our financial institutions are secure now even though I'm not happy with everything they have done. And now, his job has to be to convey to the American people that things are going to get better. And slowly but surely we're starting to see the kind of improvement the American people wanted and voted him in for. Unemployment, I hope, is still on the way to stabilizing and then dropping. We need to see the credit markets opened up. And we need to see our economy start to function again. It's going to take time for all of that to happen.

Now at the same time, there's an old military expression: No great strategist and no great battle plan survives first contact with an enemy. And no great political campaign survives first contact with trying to govern in Washington DC. So he has run into difficulty. But I think he has done quite a few things well to stabilize the situation. But I'm afraid he put too much on the plate for the American people to absorb at this time.

BOB SCHIEFFER: You think he just put too much out there, tried to do too much at one time.

COLIN POWELL: You know, the-- if I could use my military experience again, and then I'll get to my political and diplomatic experience. But we're taught have a main attack. What you're really after. What's most important. Then you could have a secondary attack. And you can have economy of force operations where you keep your eye on it but you don't jump into it. And the main attack the American people wanted to see him lead, and I hear it everywhere I go--fix the economy; fix the mortgage system; fix the credit problem; get us our jobs back; get trade moving.

And while that is happening, it's happening too slowly for the patience of the American people. And as I go around the country and talk to people, they know that health care has to be fixed. They know we need more in education. They know we need to do more with energy. But they don't see that as their main priorities. And as the President went into these areas, all of which were important. It's a disgrace that we have millions of people who are uninsured, but at the same time to-- in the eyes of the American people, in my judgment, it looked as if that somehow become more important than the main attack which was to fix the economy and get the Americans working again.

And he also perhaps u-- underestimated the opposition that would be here in Washington. It's nice to say let's be bipartisan. But we're a partisan nation. We were raised as a partisan nation. The only bipartisanship you ever see is when they finally sign a bill and everybody says, gee, isn't that wonderful? And I don't think he expected such a-- a strong attack and resistance from the Republican Party. But that's what he got. And I don't think that they have yet figured out how to resolve these serious differences that exist between both sides or two sides of the political spectrum.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Do you think this system is broken? I mean we had this extraordinary event last week where you had Evan Bayh, a Democratic Senator, not a member of the minority. But a lot of people in the minority sometimes give up and quit. A member of the majority party in the Senate, he had a big warchest. He was favored to win re-election. Yet, he walked away from the Senate because he said it's become dysfunctional. That you just can't get anything done there anymore. Do you think the system is just broken?

COLIN POWELL: No, I don't think it's broken. I think it's in trouble. I think the American people are watching it and saying, you know, our founding fathers intended for people to argue and have strong views on-- on both sides of an issue. But just as they did in Philadelphia when they were writing the constitution, sooner or later, you've got to compromise. You've got to start making the compromises that arrive at a consensus and move the country forward. We did that with the education funding that's been done. We did that with the funding for our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq since President Obama came the-- in. We did it with the stimulus package.

So, in some ways the government is functioning. It's doing what it's supposed to do, but not well enough. And the American people, I think, see the extreme positions being taken, too left on the Democratic side, too far right on the Republican side, the Tea Party Movement is also now become a force in American politics. And, of course, you got the-- the overhang of cable television, and bloggers and the internet, all of which heightens tension and makes it harder and harder for our political leaders in the Senate or in the Congress to quietly make the compromises that are necessary.

So our system is not broken. It's a great system. But it's in some disarray right now. And the American people are looking for their leaders to fix it. They're looking for the White House to fix it. And they're looking for leaders in both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party in the House and Senate to start finding ways to compromise and get the country moving and not just scream at each other.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, you'll hear some people in the Republican Party say that, look this is not an argument about partisanship, this is an argument over differences. But I noticed the other day that Jon Meacham wrote in Newsweek magazine. He said we're arrogant if we think that the problems that we face today cannot-- that you cannot find a compromise for them. And he went back through history and-- and talked about some of the things that the country has compromised on in the past.

COLIN POWELL: But you have to make it clear what we're trying to achieve and what the main attack is. You talk about our history. In Philadelphia, when they were writing the Constitution, the great problem they had was what to do with slavery. And, they essentially said the main attack has to be creating a country, not solving the problem of slavery, one of the great compromises in our history. And so, sooner or later, no matter how strongly you feel about issues, you've got to find areas of compromise to keep the country moving forward.

Now, one thing we have to understand, Barack Obama is going to be the President of the United States for the next three years. And I don't think the country will be well served if all we see for the next three years are attempts to bring him down and destroy him as a political figure, or on the other side, people trying to shove an agenda, which is increasingly seen by the American people as a little too much government in our lives. But, you know, slogans aren't going to beat this problem either. You can't just say we want lower taxes and less government without saying what less government do you want? What do you want to give up? And, if you want lower taxes, fine, but then you can't complain if the deficit is rising, or if the whole nation is going deeper into debt.

And so, these are the kinds of issues that are out there that we have to compromise on. And frankly, the-- the Senate and the House have not demonstrated the kind of leadership that the American people are looking for on either side of the aisle, and the President has to figure out a way to bring these folks together. We need some of the old cardinals and barons of the old days, Bob, up in the House and the Senate.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, you know, regardless of who is right and who is wrong, the-- the critics, especially Republicans are having a field day with what's going on right now. I am just going to play you a little montage of what people were saying at the CPAC conference. This is this conservative group that met in Washington this week, your fellow Republicans.

SENATOR JIM DEMINT: The hope and change the Democrats had in mind was nothing more than a retread of the failed and discredited socialist policies that have been the enemy of freedom for centuries all over the world. I fear America is teetering towards tyranny.

DICK ARMEY (Former House Leader): The most incompetent President perhaps in our lifetime.

DICK CHENEY: I think Barack Obama is a one-term president.

MAN: Yeah.

(crowd cheering)

BOB SCHIEFFER: That was the applause line at the CPAC conference.

COLIN POWELL: Well, that's-- that's good old American politics.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Your old boss Dick Cheney.

COLIN POWELL: Politics is not bean bags. It's serious, tough stuff. It's rough stuff. Now, we'll see whether Mister Obama is a one-term president or not, but I would caution my Republican friends that he's got three years to go. And in that three years the American people are going to want to see some progress and not just claims that this guy is out of office and we're going to do everything to destroy him, or that somehow he is a socialist taking over the country. Have we so lost our faith in this country that we think one person, one man, can suddenly change our entire system? That's-- that's kind of absurd. And in fact, you're seeing through the Tea Party Movement and through what the Republicans are doing that no one person can-- can change the country that way.

And so, American politics has always been rough and tumble. And you saw it at the CPAC conference. Good. We have had this throughout our history--let's argue. Let's fight. Let's even call each other names from time to time. At the end of the day the American people will watch this. They'll find enjoyment and entertainment in it. But they're going to want to see compromise and progress to solve their problems and not just rallies on either the left or the right where people enjoy themselves screaming.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let's talk a little bit about national security. The vice president, the former vice president, you just saw him there, he has almost on a weekly basis had said something about the-- the President is putting the nation's security at risk. He talked about dithering. He talked about how we should not-- we should still have the option of using waterboarding if necessary when we-- when we catch these terrorists. Are we less safe? Has Barack Obama made this country less safe?

COLIN POWELL: Well, let me lay out a few positions and facts. First of all, the Transportation Security Administration created by George Bush is still in action working in our airports. They take care of me every day that I go to an airport. The director of National Intelligence was created by President Bush and it is still under President Obama working hard. Our counterterrorism authorities and forces are hard at work. Our law enforcement officials are hard at work. We have gone after the enemy in Afghanistan with fifty thousand more troops. More Predators are striking al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in Pakistan. We have continued the policies that President Bush put in place with respect to Iraq.

And so I don't know where the claim comes that we are less safe. The point is made that well, we don't waterboard anymore or use extreme interrogation techniques. Most of those extreme interrogation techniques and waterboarding were done away within the Bush administration. And they've been made officially done away within in this current administration. The issue about sending people to military commissions, we-- we're not using military commissions like we should. Any time you lock somebody up or you catch a terrorist let's give them the military commission. In eight years the military commissions have put three people on trial. Two of them served relatively short sentences and are free. One guy is in jail. Meanwhile, the federal courts, our Article III, regular legal court system, has put dozens of terrorists in jail and they're fully

capable of doing it. So the suggestion that somehow a military commission is the way to go isn't born out by the history of the military commissions.

I think a lot of people think just give them to the military and the military will hammer them. Well, guess what, officers in the military are obliged to follow the constitution. Military lawyers are obliged under their oath to give the best possible defense to the defendant no more whether he's a terrorist or not. And so you didn't get out of the military commissions what a lot of people thought at the beginning you would get and a lot of us did not think it was a good idea in the beginning.

BOB SCHIEFFER: So, your bottom-line answer is no, the country is not less secure?

COLIN POWELL (overlapping): My bottom-line answer is that-- my bottom-line answer is the nation is still at risk. Terrorists are out there. They're trying to get through. But to suggest that somehow we have become much less safer because of the actions of the administration, I don't think are born out by the facts.

BOB SCHIEFFER: I think even the President's strongest supporters would say the handling of the Christmas Day bomber left something to be desired. What--

COLIN POWELL (overlapping): I would say--

BOB SCHIEFFER: Why is the government having so much trouble on-- on things like this?

COLIN POWELL: Well, I was a little surprised at what seemed to be a lack of coordination among the different agencies as to how they handle a guy and should he have been given his Miranda rights either after ninety minutes or fifteen hours. The story kept changing. And so I would have thought after all these years we would have had a process in place either in the previous administration or in this administration that when you get somebody like that we all know how to respond and how to interrogate him or not interrogate him. But he's in jail. He's facing trial. And I don't think it will be a difficult trial to handle. And, also, he's still talking. They found other ways to interrogate him. But even in the military commission, whoever is before that commission has legal rights. They get lawyers.

BOB SCHIEFFER: You were one of those who said early on that we should close Guantanamo.

COLIN POWELL: Yes.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Guantanamo has not been closed. You still stick by that? And what are we going to do with those people who are down there that I think everybody agrees simply cannot be released?

COLIN POWELL: I think there are ways to-- to handle that particular problem. And I don't know the individual cases. But, as does Secretary Gates and General Petraeus and so many others, John McCain and so many others, I think Guantanamo has cost us a lot over the years in terms of our standing in the world and the way in which despots have hidden behind what we have at Guantanamo to justify their own-- their own positions. Let's remember, Guantanamo once had seven hundred people there. It's down to two hundred. Five hundred were released in the previous administration and some in this administration.

So, let's get this population of one hundred ninety-two sorted out. If many of them are of the kind that can be put before trial, either military commission or in our Article III courts, let's do it. I have no problem with them being tried here in the United States. We have two million people in jail. They all have lawyers. They all went before the court of law and they all got hammered. We have got three hundred terrorists who have been put in jail not by a military commission but by a regular court system. And so I think we ought to remove this incentive that exists in the presence of Guantanamo to encourage people and to give radicals an opportunity to say, you see, this is what America is all about. They're all about torture and detention centers.

BOB SCHIEFFER: We're going to take a break here. We're going to come back and talk about the trial in New York--is that going to be held for Sheik Khalid Mohammed, should it be held there or elsewhere?

We'll talk about Afghanistan and Iraq, in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Back now with General Colin Powell.

General, what about it? Should Sheik Khalid Mohammed be tried in New York? The administration has-- wanted to do that. Now they appear to be backing off that. Were you for that or against it?

COLIN POWELL: I-- I have no problem with him being tried in our federal system here in the United States. I would not have picked Downtown New York. I would have picked, I don't know, I don't want to single out anywhere, but I think I could have found a-- a-- military base or some facility far away from New York or a populated area where it would not become a circus.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Iraq. American troops are going to be coming home this summer. As you look back on it now, do you think it was worth the-- the lives and the money that it cost?

COLIN POWELL: We got rid of a terrible dictator. We gave the Iraqi people an opportunity for a new life under a representative form of government. I don't think we handled the aftermath of the fall of Baghdad as well as we might have. But that's now history. And I pay tribute to the young men and women who gave their lives and the Iraqis who lost their lives. But where we are now is the Iraqi government, the Iraqi people, have their own destiny in their own hands and we're pulling out, having given them the opportunity to have a better life and to create a better system that could be an example to the rest of the region. So, history will ultimately make that judgment.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Afghanistan. We have a big operation going on there now. We put more troops in there. The Powell Doctrine was you put an overwhelming number of troops in there whenever you go some place. We didn't do it that way. How do you see this operation Afghanistan right now?

COLIN POWELL: I-- I'm very pleased with what I'm seeing right now because we seem to have a comprehensive strategy. Some people say the President dithered in coming up with it. But he did come up with a strategy that reflects military force, reflects the use of our diplomatic and political forces and economic assistance. And the American army or the American Marine corps, you send a battalion in somewhere, they will clear it out. It isn't a matter of clearing out. It's a

matter of what happens next. The enemy hasn't been defeated, the enemy has been pushed out.

And so the whole success of this operation will hinge on the ability of the Afghan government to come in behind and put in place a functioning government, a non-corrupt police force, and security forces that will keep people from coming back because the American battalions can't stay there forever--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Do you think that they are capable of doing that--the Afghan government?

COLIN POWELL: Right now, I have doubts about their capability. I hope that over time their capability will increase. The Afghan National Army is-- is improved but clearly not up to U.S. standards yet. And the police force, they have a lot to prove. They don't yet have the confidence of the people. But I think it's a good comprehensive plan. I congratulate General McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry. We also recognize that Pakistan is part of that problem, and we're going after folks there with predators and other actions.

BOB SCHIEFFER: General, a new report out on Iran. It looks like they're still proceeding toward trying to develop a-- a nuclear payload for a weapon. If, in fact, they get a nuclear weapon or are close to getting one, there's going to come a point where the Israelis are going to come to the United States government. And this debate is going on right now within the government and I suspect you know that as well as I do, what do you tell the Israelis when they come to our government and say, "We can't live with this. We're going to-- we're going to attack Iran." What should the U.S. position be?

COLIN POWELL: I-- I think the Iranians are clearly determined to have a nuclear program. And we have to assume that with a nuclear program they have the capability and the will to create a nuclear weapon. I think that what you have to do now is to try to stop it at this point with-- with sanctions and with discussions and negotiations with the Iranians. But if they actually cross that line and I still think they're quite a ways away from being able to have a weapon.

BOB SCHIEFFER: But if they do?

COLIN POWELL: But if they ever do cross that line, I don't want to prejudge what the Israeli government might ask for or what an American government might say to an Israeli government in that instance. Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

I also still think that deterrence works. And the Iranians, if they ever get to that point, and I hope we can keep that from happening, it would be suicidal for them to use such a weapon or to think that they could terrorize the whole region with them.

BOB SCHIEFFER: We have about thirty seconds left. Al Haig died yesterday. You worked for him as a young officer, your thoughts.

COLIN POWELL: I didn't work directly for General Haig but he was-- he was an inspiration to so many of us. He was a-- he was a good soldier in combat. He moved rapidly through the general ranks and on-- on the basis of his political work. But I think he did a great service for the nation during the last days of the Nixon administration. We should give him credit for that. And I pay my respects to him and his family.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Thank you so much, General. Always a pleasure to have you. Back with final thoughts in just a second.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Finally when the amateurs ask me--and by amateurs, I mean the good citizens outside the circle of professional politics--when they ask me why Washington doesn't seem to listen when every poll shows that people hate partisanship and want compromise, I tell them the professional politicians always listen--they'd listen to the people who gave them the money to get to Washington.

American politics used to be an amateur sport. But somewhere along the way, we handed over to professionals all the things people used to do for free. So an enormous cottage industry sprang up--consultants, gurus, strategists, pollsters who discovered it was easier to win elections by driving wedges between people than bringing them together. Politics got nastier and worse, it came with a price. Did it ever!

The Center for Responsive Politics says the 2008 campaigns cost 5.3 billion dollars. Good money if you can get it and full disclosure, TV got a lot of it. It cost an average 8.5 million dollars to win a seat in the Senate in Minnesota. Norm Coleman spent twenty million and lost.

On average, a Senate candidate had to raise three thousand eight hundred and eighty-one dollars a day for every day of a six-year term. Only those willing to do that weren't anymore. So to raise that kind of money candidates must promise so much to so many before they get to Washington that once here they can't compromise on anything. Their positions are set in stone. So they're listening all right, but like the loyal country girl they're just listening to them that bring them.

Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And we'll see you next week right here on FACE THE NATION.

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