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CBS News

FACE THE NATION

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GUESTS: Major General JOHN BATISTE,
retired, U.S. Army; Former
Commander, First Infantry

PATRICK BUCHANAN
Former Reagan White House
Communications Director

JOHN PODESTA
Former Clinton White House
Chief of Staff

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, retired General John Batiste on Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, plus Pat Buchanan and John Podesta on the White House shake-up. When General Batiste and five other retired generals said Rumsfeld should be fired, it sent off a debate that is still raging in public and behind the scenes. How will Congress react when it returns from Easter vacation? Do the generals reflect the view of the rank and file in the military? We will ask General Batiste. And what should we make of the changes at the White House? Republican Pat Buchanan and Democrat John Podesta have a lot to say about that. We'll give them a chance to say it. Then I'll have a final word on secrets. We'll declassify that at the end of the broadcast. But first, General Batiste on FACE THE NATION.

Announcer: FACE THE NATION with CBC News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from CBS News in Washington, Bob Schieffer.

SCHIEFFER: And General Batiste is with us here in the studio this morning. He is, of course, just retired as commander of the 1st Infantry Division which was in Iraq. One of our most historic Army units, the Big Red One, they call it.

General, you were one of--what?--six generals who said, the time has come to speak out that we need new leadership at the Pentagon. This was a major event in any way you look at it when a group of generals such as yourself decide to say something like that in public. Did--was there any kind of coordination between you when you decided to do this?

Major General JOHN BATISTE, (Retired, United States Army): Bob, no, there wasn't. This was all spontaneous.

SCHIEFFER: And how did you finally make the decision to do this? What was the one thing that caused you to issue this criticism?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Bob, let me say that I'm a combat veteran of Iraq not once, but twice. My father was a career infantry officer, fought in World War II in both Europe and in the East. He fought in Korea and he fought in Vietnam. I understand sacrifice in service. This was a gut-wrenching decision for me and I didn't take it lightly. I did it for basically one reason: It's important to do the harder right than the easier wrong. My decision was grounded fundamentally in what I learned at the United States Military Academy in terms of duty, honor and country. I feel like I have a duty to continue speaking out. Our people, the great people of the United States of America, deserve it. I'm honor-bound to continue speaking out.

SCHIEFFER: What did Secretary Rumsfeld do wrong in your view that causes you to say he--he must be replaced?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Bob, I think it--it's all a matter of treating the military with contemptuous attitudes, dismissive behavior and arrogance. We made a series of strategic decisions that were flawed with respect to the size

of the force that we took into Iraq, the war plan that we executed, setting the conditions for Abu Ghraib. That should've been no surprise to any of us, and we stood down the military at a point in time when that was the last thing that we wanted--or should have done. You need...

SCHIEFFER: The Iraqi military.

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: The Iraqi military. You need the institutions within a country like Iraq to help build the peace. And quite frankly, we have never recovered from that decision. So this series of flawed strategic decisions--I believe our servicemen and women and their families deserve competent civilian leadership at the top of the Department of Defense whose instincts, judgment and motivation that we trust.

SCHIEFFER: Well, General, were the generals telling the secretary of defense these things that you're saying that he did wrong? Were they telling him at the time that this was the wrong way to go?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Bob, within the military, we speak out, sometimes violently, heated debate. At a point in time, the commander, the boss makes a decision, and you then at that point have two options, you either execute the best idea you've just ever heard, or you get out. In my case, I chose to stay with my soldiers in combat. At a point in time when I could retire, I did, and I did that on principle, in large part so that you and I could be having this discussion today.

SCHIEFFER: Well, but what I'm saying to you, were the generals telling Secretary Rumsfeld at the time, 'Wait a minute, boss, this is not the way to go. We need more people in here'? Was he hearing those things? Or, as you say, they found him so intimidating that they were afraid to speak out?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: He certainly heard it from General Shinseki, and we all know what happened to him. We need senior military leadership that are grounded in the principles of war and are not afraid to call it like it is.

SCHIEFFER: Well, what's the main problem? I have heard some say that the problem is we frankly just don't have a military large enough to carry out the missions that's been assigned. Is that the root problem here?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: That's probably part of the problem. I firmly believe that we are fighting a 12- to 14-division, Army division, national strategy with something far less than that. By the way, I'm joined in this with some very distinguished Marines. This is not about Army dissatisfaction, this is not about an officer who does not like what's happening with transformation. Quite the contrary. I've been an agent of change my entire career, and transformation is terribly important.

SCHIEFFER: Well, that's one of the things that Secretary Rumsfeld has said, obviously, as you well know, in reaction to your criticism and the criticism of others. He says that the reason the military got mad at him is because he was for change and they were against change.

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: That's nonsense. Transformation in the Army started well before this administration came into office. We now have an Army that's overcommitted and under-resourced. Something needs to give.

SCHIEFFER: Why did you say in 2004 that Secretary Rumsfeld was a man of courage and conviction, who was determined to win the war against terrorism? Were you as disillusioned then as you are now? Do you regret saying that?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Bob, I was a loyal subordinate introducing the secretary of defense to my soldiers. I said what I had to say. Was I disillusioned at that point? You bet. Because for months I had been dealing with the effects of the decisions to go to war with the wrong plan, to set the conditions for Abu Ghraib, and to stand down the Iraqi military when I needed them desperately, to set the conditions for Iraqi self-reliance, to build the peace in Iraq.

SCHIEFFER: Did you tell him at the time when you had introduced him, that, 'I've given you a good intro here, Mr. Secretary, but I've got a few things that I need to talk to you about'? What do generals say to secretaries of defense when they come to visit at a time like that?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: The secretaries of defense who have a track record of contemptuous behavior, dismissiveness and arrogance on decisions made a couple of years prior, it's too late.

SCHIEFFER: And you are saying directly that that's the man that is the secretary of defense now, someone who is what? What did you just say?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Contemptuous, dismissive and arrogant.

SCHIEFFER: Well, let's talk about some of those things. When you say he discounted professional military advice, tell me something that he discounted, that should have been done that he didn't do.

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Bob, I would be the last one to say that we should have gone to war in Iraq with the same plan that we used in the Gulf War in 1991. But the truth is, the planning that had gone on since then, the lessons learned that we had learned, the deliberate process, very analytical, came up with some wonderful conclusions. One of those conclusions happened to be that if you go to war in Iraq, you are going to fight an insurgency, you have an incredible amount of work to do to build the peace, and you need the forestructure, the boots on the ground, simultaneously with the war fighters. You're taking down a regime. But then, as General Powell has said, 'When you break it, you own it.' There was no surprise with that insurgency; anyone who has read a little bit of history of Iraq would have anticipated that.

SCHIEFFER: You said there were ambiguous rules. You talk, and you brought up, I think, a couple of times this morning what happened at Abu Ghraib. What--what was the lesson there?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: One of the rules in the military is that you keep it very simple. We had ambiguous rules, changes to the Geneva Conventions, to the rules that soldiers apply to treat prisoners and interrogate them. On top of that, you had commanders who were burdened with insufficient troops on the ground so they were therefore managing shortages as opposed to commanding, planning and anticipating opportunity in an incredibly complex operation. We set the conditions for Abu Ghraib.

SCHIEFFER: Should--should some of the generals who were there at the time, at the beginning, should they have resigned rather than sign off on a war plan that you say many of them knew was not a good plan?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: I can't speak for them, Bob. I really can't.

SCHIEFFER: But you're saying that the original plan just simply was not a good plan.

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: That's exactly what I'm saying, and I'm saying that we need senior generals who are absolutely grounded in the principles of war and take the appropriate stand when it's necessary.

SCHIEFFER: What kind of response have you gotten to this decision to speak out?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Incredibly favorable. Letters, phone calls, e-mails. I can count on six fingers the numbers of negative responses I've received.

SCHIEFFER: And is that from people on--still on active duty, as well as those like yourself who are retired?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: This is from the American people. Those on active duty can't speak out. To do so would violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

What perhaps makes me different from others is that I am not associated at all with the Department of Defense. I am not a defense contractor, I'm not a defense consultant. I am not reticent to speak out.

SCHIEFFER: General, let me ask you about what may be ahead here. Number one, what has to be done now in Iraq? Because some people say, you know, 'We--we simply can't turn around and leave. That would be a sign of weakness, that would open us up to attack elsewhere.' But then they also say, 'But what good is it doing for us to stay there?' What do you think needs to be done right now?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: Bob, there's no question in my mind that we will win the war on terrorism. Assuming we have the political will, we'll finish what we started in Iraq as well. I am not going to prejudge that. I have not been on the ground in awhile, and I'm certainly not privy to the intelligence. The recent development with the prime minister is encouraging, but beware. This is an incredibly combat--complex society with tribal, ethnic and religious complexities that have defined that country forever.

SCHIEFFER: We're told that the Iranians are developing a nuclear weapon. Let's suppose they--they do that. Can the United States tolerate that, and can we take military action against Iran if we're still involved in Iraq?

Maj. Gen. BATISTE: This is exactly my point, Bob. We need to hold the current secretary of defense accountable for some very bad strategic decisions. Just around the corner there are some huge decisions that this country will have to make. And we need senior leadership at the Department of Defense whose instinct and judgment we trust.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, General, thank you very much for coming and being with us this morning. I found your--I found your presentation fascinating. Thank you so much, and good luck down the road.

We'll be back in just a minute to talk about last week's White House shake-up.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And joining us now from New York John Podesta, who was the White House chief of staff during the Clinton administration. Here in the studio: Pat Buchanan, former White House communications director for President Ronald Reagan, and of course he was on the staff of President Nixon way back when.

Mr. PATRICK BUCHANAN (Former Reagan White House Communications Director): Way back when.

SCHIEFFER: I think you and I are probably the only people still alive that remember those days. I want to ask both of you--Pat, let me just start with you. You heard the general here. I found him very impressive. What--what--what did you think about what he said?

Mr. BUCHANAN: Well, the general's very compelling. He's a combat veteran. He commanded the Big Red One, the legendary division in Iraq. He is speaking from the heart. I think a lot of his criticisms are agreed to by most Americans now, three years after we went in. The one question and the problem that the generals have speaking out, the six of them, is that it appears to be a generals coup demanding that the president fire his minister of war in the middle of a war, and that's where I think President Bush was right, and he had to stand up and say, 'Wait a minute, I'm the one that decides who the minister of war's going to be and I'm keeping Mr. Rumsfeld.' But I respect the general and these other folks for speaking out.

SCHIEFFER: Let's just hear that...

Mr. BUCHANAN: Sure.

SCHIEFFER: ...because it was the quote of the week when the president said it. Let's listen to just how he said it.

Mr. BUCHANAN: Right. Mm-hmm.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: I hear the voices and I read the front page and I know the speculation, but I'm the decider and I decide what is best. And what's best is for Don Rumsfeld to remain as the secretary of defense.

SCHIEFFER: So the president says he is the decider, John Podesta. Do you think--do you agree with Pat Buchanan that he had no choice but to give an endorsement to Secretary Rumsfeld?

Mr. JOHN PODESTA (Former Clinton White House Chief of Staff): No, I don't agree, Bob. You know, he is the decider, but I think he's made a bad call on this one. I think that Donald Rumsfeld's continuation at the--at the Defense Department just looks like an administration that is tone deaf, that--that does not believe in accountability, that will keep down the same path that they're going down. And I think, you know, we talk a lot about polls, but maybe the most important poll is the one of the young officers who are now leaving in record numbers, the people who've graduated from West Point in the--in the class of 2000. They've lost faith in the leadership at the Pentagon, and I think it's time for a change.

Mr. BUCHANAN: I think that would have been a real mistake on the president's part to fire Rumsfeld after six generals demanded his resignation. The perception would have gone overseas and to the American people that George W. Bush, president of the United States, had been rolled by military officers who demanded the resignation of his minister of war, minister of defense. So I think the president--the presidency was at stake here. The issue was civilian control of the military, not simply the criticisms with which I disagree. And that's why I think any president I had served--and I served three of them--I would have told him, 'Mr. President, we got no choice. I don't care whether you're dissatisfied with Mr. Rumsfeld or not right now, you've got to stand behind him right now. It is imperative that we do so simply to maintain the authority of the president of the United States.'

SCHIEFFER: Well, let me ask you this, Pat Buchanan. I mean, you were not--you did not favor this invasion in the beginning, although you are a conservative Republican...

Mr. BUCHANAN: Right. Right.

SCHIEFFER: ...and part of what they call the conservative base. Do you think that Secretary Rumsfeld has done a good job?

Mr. BUCHANAN: I think the--I agree with the general's criticism to a T. I think they went in with too few troops, I think the--they should not have stood down the Iraqi Army. Bob, I don't think we should have gone in. I never believed Saddam Hussein--thug, criminal though he was--was a threat to the greatest power on earth. I mean, none of his neighbors were apparently frightened to death of him. And then we invaded, I think--I think we launched a war to--basically an unnecessary war to deprive that regime of weapons we now know it did not have.

SCHIEFFER: Where do we go from here in Iraq, Mr. Podesta?

Mr. PODESTA: Well, I--you know, I think that, listening to Pat, one rule that I learned at the White House is that you--when you dig it--when you're in a hole you don't just keep digging, and--and it seems to me that's the advice he's given the president.

Look, I think we got to try to push forward on this political process, which is showing some signs of--of life. We've got to complete the training mission, but we've got to get on track to get out of there. You know, in my organization we've--we've suggested that that could happen over the course of 2006 and 2007. But I think that at this point we're--we're just as much of an--of an irritant to the--to the civil strife there if we--if we project that we're going to stay there for the long term.

SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you, John, as we shift a little bit here and--and talk some about the shake-up, staff changes at the White House. You've been in White Houses where they changed the staff. Is this going to make a difference in policy in your view, or is it cosmetic? Just what--how--how significant do you think these changes are?

Mr. PODESTA: It's a bit--it's a bit unclear I think at this stage. You know, I have admiration for Josh Bolten. He's making some quick moves to get rid of Scott McClellan, to demote Karl Rove, but so far we haven't seen really a change of direction on policy, and I think that's what the American people are asking for. They--they don't disapprove of the White House staff, they disapprove of the direction the president's going. So, until we see more signals that the presidents' going to come back to the center, I don't think that changing--you know, mixing up the White House staff is going to matter.

SCHIEFFER: Pat:

Mr. BUCHANAN: I think Mr. Podesta's stumbled into a couple of truths here. Look, I think the--clearly the president's rearranging the batting order. Mr. Bolten's a very powerful figure. Moving Portman to budget tells me that they are downgrading the Doha trade negotiations, where they put in a deputy, which is surprising over there.

But fundamentally the president's coalition and the country are profoundly divided over a variety of issues. One of them--let's take one: immigration. The president has basically a Teddy Kennedy position on immigration. He's for amnesty and bringing in hundreds of thousands of guest workers into the country; whereas his base, and frankly the base of the country, is demanding that the borders be secured, the borders be protected, the invasion of the United States be halted. On that issue, on trade, on Iraq, on a variety of other issues, the president is out of touch with his base and I think the country. And if the policies don't change, I don't think changing personnel means much.

SCHIEFFER: Well, does that mean that the Republicans might lose the House in the fall elections?

Mr. BUCHANAN: If the election were held--if the election were held today the Republicans, I think, would be defeated and have--be in real danger of losing both houses. I think what Rove will do and the president will do is instead of turning this into a referendum on Bush turn it into an "us or them," meaning, 'You disagree with us, we made mistakes, but look at what the Democrats offer. It is amnesty for illegals, it is censure the president, etc.'

SCHIEFFER: Well, that must be music to your ears, John Podesta.

Mr. PODESTA: Well, you know, I think that--that Karl Rove has a real dilemma. You know, he's run--tried to run the last two elections by appealing to the base. But right now, if you look outside the Republican base, the president's job approval rating is at 17 percent. And so I think they have a dilemma. If they try to do what they did in 2002 and 2004, he deepens his problem with the center of this country. On the other hand if he--if he moves sensibly toward the center, tries to create a policy on immigration, for example, that's--that's tough but fair, then I think he--he further depresses his base. So, they have a very big dilemma. But I think that, no question that I think the Democrats are likely to make some serious gains in congressional elections this fall.

Mr. BUCHANAN: John, I would--I would remind you that in 2002 and 2004 the president of the United States won. An astonishing victory in 2002. Three million vote in 2003. This is my point: If you make this a conservative vs. liberal election rather than 'Do you like the way Dick Cheney's doing his job?' you have a far better chance of moving toward a 50/50 situation. And if they are smart--and they are smart in there--I think that's just what they're going to do.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, thanks to both of you.

Mr. BUCHANAN: All right.

SCHIEFFER: We could go on, or at least I could, for another hour. But we'll be back with more in just a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally, at my age nothing much surprises me, but my jaw did drop when I read the FBI has been trying to go through the files of dead columnist Jack Anderson to see if he had any classified documents. Now mind you, Anderson was 83 when he died, and did virtually no work for 15 years because of Parkinsons. But the FBI has been pressing his family to get at those files. The family has said no. Dare I state the obvious here? That with Osama bin Laden still on the loose, maybe there are more important things for the FBI to do than that? And it happened the same week that the CIA fired an agent for hanging out with Washington Post reporter Dana Priest, who just won a Pulitzer Prize for revealing the CIA is operating a secret prison system. The Justice Department will decide whether to bring charges.

Almost every day now brings news of yet another leak investigation. But it's not the leakers, it's what they're leaking that is scaring me. After all, why should a democracy be operating secret prisons? If the government isn't telling us about the prisons, can we ever be sure who might wind up inside them? Isn't finding out stuff like that what reporters are supposed to do?

As for rifling through Jack Anderson's files, surely that will founder in its own silliness now that it's been exposed. But you do have to wonder what some government zealot will try next. Maybe re-opening the hunt for the killer rabbit that once attacked Jimmy Carter's canoe? No one has seen the beast since Mr. Carter fought it off with an oar. Might still be out there, dangerous if it still has teeth.

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