

© 2007 CBS Broadcasting Inc.
All Rights Reserved

***PLEASE CREDIT ANY QUOTES OR EXCERPTS FROM THIS CBS
TELEVISION PROGRAM TO "CBS NEWS' FACE THE NATION. "***

CBS News

FACE THE NATION

Sunday, June 17, 2007

**GUESTS: Senator MITCH McCONNELL (R-KY)
Minority Leader**

**Senator CARL LEVIN (D-MI)
Chairman, Armed Services Committee**

**LEE HAMILTON
Co-Chairman, Iraq Study Group**

MODERATOR: BOB SCHIEFFER - CBS News

*This is a rush transcript provided
for the information and convenience of
the press. Accuracy is not guaranteed.
In case of doubt, please check with*

***FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
202-457-4481***

BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, is Iraq as bad as it looks? The civil war grows wider, as American casualties continue to grow. US commanders in Iraq this weekend are announcing a new offensive against al-Qaeda forces, saying they're taking the fight to insurgent hideouts. But will that make a difference?

We're going to get three perspectives this morning, from Mitch McConnell, who leads the Republicans in the Senate; Senator Carl Levin, Democrat of Michigan, head of the Armed Services Committee; and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, co-author of the Baker-Hamilton Report on Iraq. Then I'll have a final word on third parties.

But first, trouble in Iraq and what to do about it 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. We're starting this morning with the Republican leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell. He joins us from Oregon this morning.

Senator, the American ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, said this morning that the situation in Iraq is a mixed picture, but not a hopeless one. I guess I would ask you this: Will that be enough for the president to hold the support for the war that he now has among Republicans in the Senate?

Senator MITCH McCONNELL (Republican, Kentucky; Minority Leader): Well, I think most members of my conference in the Senate, Bob, believe the critical point to evaluate where we are is in September. That's when the big Petraeus-Crocker report is supposed to be presented. That's--you know, we've all been to one degree or another disappointed in the Iraqi government. They've not been able to do on the political side what they told us they would try to achieve. But I think the proper time to really make a serious evaluation of the direction we ought to head is in September.

SCHIEFFER: Well, you said the other day, and I'm going to use your words here, "the handwriting is on the wall, that we are going in a different direction in the fall, and I expect the president to lead it." What did you mean by that, Senator?

Sen. McCONNELL: Well, by that I mean the surge is going to come to an end, obviously. It's now--the buildup in troops is now complete. It will obviously go on over the summer. I think everybody anticipates that there's going to be a new strategy in the fall. I don't think we'll have the same level of troops, in all likelihood, that we have now. The Iraqis will have to step up, not only on the political side, but on the military side, to a greater extent. We're not there forever. I think they understand that, and the time to properly evaluate that, it strikes me, is in September.

SCHIEFFER: Well, what--there are some suggestions that General Petraeus may ask for more troops. Do you think that's even possible, that the Senate would

go along with that?

Sen. McCONNELL: I don't know, we'd have to wait and see what the conditions were at the time. But I find growing support in the Senate among Republicans--and, for that matter, some Democrats as well--for the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. There's a proposal by Senator Alexander and Senator Pryor, basically advocating going in that direction. The president himself has spoken favorably of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which if you recall, basically involves still having troops forward deployed, but getting them off the point which would obviously reduce our casualties, and possibly reducing our numbers, as well.

SCHIEFFER: But it also called for some draw down. In addition to pulling them back from the day-to-day fighting there, they would beef up the borders, be prepared to strike at al-Qaeda. Would you see some sort of draw down of US troops, perhaps, beginning this fall?

Sen. McCONNELL: Well, that is what the Iraqi Study Group recommended, and we'll have to see what happens in the fall. But that is the--that is the direction in which they thought we ought to go: lower overall troop levels, not out on the point in these dangerous missions that we're in during the surge, forward deployed so we can still go after al-Qaeda, which is all over Iraq, and still a serious threat to us here at home. By being forward deployed, of course, we have a better chance to protect us here at home, which is the whole point of being on offense since 9/11.

SCHIEFFER: At this point, it appears that the Iraqis--and I think you sort of alluded to that--have really made no progress in any of the benchmark areas that the Senate wrote into the previous appropriations bill. They just don't seem to be getting it done. What happens if we get General Petraeus and General--and Ambassador Crocker this summer, and they give their report and there's no more progress has been made on those things that the Senate obviously considers very important? Could the president still count on the support of people in your party?

Sen. McCONNELL: Well, I hate to respond to a hypothetical like that, but let me just put it this way, Bob: The Iraqi government, so far, has been a big disappointment. They've not done the things that they know they need to do to hold their country together, things like the new oil law, things like local elections, things like finishing the de-Baathification process. The Iraqi government's been a pretty big disappointment. We've given them an enormous opportunity here over the last four years to have a normal country, and so far they haven't been able to take advantage of this opportunity, and our commitment will not be there forever.

SCHIEFFER: Well, but what happens? I mean, does that mean this summer you tell them, 'Sorry. Sorry, fellas, you had your chance, we just can't continue this way'? I mean, what--how do you respond to that?

Sen. McCONNELL: Well, I'm not going to answer that hypothetical, but I think the Iraqi--the Iraq Study Group proposal gives you an outline of a possible

direction the president could take this fall. He has spoken favorably about it himself. But I think predicting what's going to happen in the fall is something I'm not prepared to do here in June.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, let's switch to immigration. The immigration bill pronounced dead just a matter of days ago, has suddenly risen from the grave and is coming back to the Senate. You're going to take it up. Do you have any idea that you can pass the kind of bill that the president wants, Senator McConnell?

Sen. McCONNELL: Well, it's a mixed picture. There are good things to the bill and not so good things in the bill. For example, the most controversial part is the so-called Z visa, which the critics of the bill believe amounts to amnesty. I'm among those who voted to get rid of that portion, but that amendment failed. So that's a disappointment to many in my party. There are other provisions, I think, that're quite good, like getting rid of the lottery. You know, right now, with 50,000 people can come into the United States and get a green card simply by having their name pulled out of a hat. We also get rid of what's called chain migration, which gives somebody's second cousin, some American citizen's second cousin somewhere in the world just as much access to the United States as the next Albert Einstein. That's ridiculous. That's gotten rid of. We also have a funding source in there for border security, which everybody feels very strongly about. So it is a mixed picture. And when we get to final passage, Bob, it's hard to know whether the votes will be there to pass it or not.

SCHIEFFER: All right. And you hope to do that by the Fourth of July?

Sen. McCONNELL: Yeah. I think we'll finish Senate consideration of the immigration bill one way or the other before the Fourth of July.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, we'll leave it there, Senator. Thank you very much for joining us.

Sen. McCONNELL: Thank you, Bob.

SCHIEFFER: We'll be back with the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Senator Carl Levin, in just one minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: The subject is still Iraq and joining us from Detroit, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Senator Carl Levin.

Well, you heard Senator McConnell, Senator Levin. He didn't seem all that enthusiastic about what's happening in Iraq these days.

Senator CARL LEVIN (Democrat, Michigan; Chairman, Armed Services Committee): Well, with good reason. There's no progress on the political side and that's the key. There's still the deadlock there. There's still political paralysis in that government, and unless there's a political solution, unless these

factions come together in Iraq, there's not going to be any hope of a successful outcome here. So everything depends upon that government and that they're a failure, as far as I'm concerned, in terms of achieving those compromises. And it really is--what's required here is for the president of the United States to tell the Iraqi leaders that we're going to begin to reduce our troops as the message to them that the responsibility for their own country is in their hands, not ours.

Three messengers delivered a message of disappointment to the Iraqi leaders from the American government this week, most recently Gates, saying he's disappointed. We just heard from the Republican leader, he's disappointed. That's got to be translated into ongoing pressure on the Iraqi leaders to reach a political settlement on those benchmarks you mentioned, which they themselves adopted about 10 months ago.

SCHIEFFER: Well, Senator, do you see anything here that leads you to believe that they will sort of take the point and do something about it, or is that impossible at this point?

Sen. LEVIN: The only hope is if they understand that we're going to begin to leave and that's why the Democratic Congress, by a majority vote, passed language saying that we're going to begin to reduce our forces in 120 days. That went to the president, he vetoed it. But the pressure, I think, is beginning to have an effect anyway. Even though we can't override a veto, we don't have the vote to do that, our pressure's beginning to work. When you have these three messengers: you had the head of the Central Command, Admiral Fallon, you had our ambassador to the UN, Ambassador Khalilzad, and then just in the last couple of days, you had Secretary of Defense Gates going to Baghdad specifically to deliver a message of disappointment. Now, those words have got to come out of the president's mouth before they have any real bite. There's got to be consequences. As the Iraq Study Group pointed out very explicitly, there's got to be consequences to the failure of the Iraqis to reach a political settlement. So far there have not been consequences and that's what the president needs to tell them.

But the only way we believe--all Democrats but two--we believe that unless we set a timetable to begin the reduction of American forces and a transition to a more limited mission, including a counterterrorism mission, that the Iraqi leadership is going to continue to do nothing. They're going to dawdle while their country is going up in flames.

SCHIEFFER: Are you going to take additional steps, Senator Levin, and by that I mean the Democrats, to put some new pressure on them in the legislation that is coming before you now?

Sen. LEVIN: We are. We're going to be offering an amendment which will in one form or another set a timetable for the reduction of American troops starting at about 120 days. We got 51 votes for that before. That's what was vetoed. We would include, as we did before, a transition to a more limited mission which will be a counterterrorism mission and a continuing to support the Iraqi army with logistics and training. But we will try again because--we

must try again. We've got to change this course. We've got to change the Iraqi mentality to thinking that they've got some kind of an open-ended commitment, which is what the president promised them a few months ago. We've got to end that open-ended commitment, not just rhetorically, the president has ended it rhetorically, but in fact. They've got to see that the security blanket that we've provided to them in that green zone is going to begin to disappear in about four months. They better get their political act together.

SCHIEFFER: Do you have any indication, Senator, that you'll get more Republican votes on that this time around than you did the last time?

Sen. LEVIN: A number of Republicans tell us that they are very dissatisfied with the lack of political progress in Iraq. And when the Republican leader says, as he did a few months ago--a few weeks ago, when you quoted him, when you talked to him--that the handwriting is on the wall, that there's going to be a change in course in the fall, that's not something which he says it might happen. He says the handwriting's on the wall. Now, he ducked the question as to what those words read when you asked him about that this morning, but still, it's a very clear statement that there's a lot of unease among my Republican colleagues with just staying the current course and just accepting another vague report which is ambiguous from our military leaders that, well, the surge is working in some places and not working in other places. That kind of a mixed report is likely to be the report in September. If that's what the military leaders say. But what is missing is that the purpose of the surge, as stated by the president, is to give the political leaders space in Iraq to work out a political deal, and that's where we see no progress. As a matter of fact, apparently, they're still considering, believe it or not, a two-month vacation in the Iraqi parliament.

SCHIEFFER: That's still on, that the Iraqi parliament's going to take a two-month vacation?

Sen. LEVIN: It's still unresolved. We have obviously have put pressure on them, for God's sake, you can't do that while our troops are dying and being wounded and your troops are dying and being wounded, and your people are being blown up. But they have not decided whether or not to take July and August off. It is unthinkable to us that they would do that.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, Senator, thank you very much for being with us this morning.

Sen. LEVIN: Bob, good to be here.

SCHIEFFER: We appreciate your perspective.

In a minute, we're going to talk about this with Lee Hamilton, who of course is the co-author of the Iraq Study Group report, along with Jim Baker. We'll talk to him about all of this after these messages.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And here with us now, the former Congressman Lee Hamilton, one of Washington's wise men, as they say. He and Jim Baker authored the report called the Iraq Study Group Report.

That was back in December, and you said at that time, Mr. Hamilton, that the situation in Iraq--you and Jim Baker described it as grave and deteriorating. What is your assessment of the situation today?

Mr. LEE HAMILTON (Co-Chairman, Iraq Study Group): I don't think I'd change it very much. Grave, dire, deteriorating. American casualties up, sectarian violence up. Still a very grim existence there for the Iraqi people. If you look at all of the metrics, you can find some, maybe, that point somewhat positively. But overall, that assessment stands today.

SCHIEFFER: You talked about, in that report, your recommendation was pull the troops back from this civil war that's going on, pull them off the point, beef up the borders, leave them as strike forces in Iraq to strike at al-Qaeda as the situation arose. But also, at the same time, begin to draw down the US forces there. You heard Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate, saying more and more Republicans seem to be coming around to that point of view. Do you think that's what's going to happen this fall?

Mr. HAMILTON: It's very hard to predict, but clearly at this moment, there's a lot more interest in the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group--some of which you've described--than at any time since the report came out. But I want to emphasize that that report put a lot of emphasis, of course, on the primary mission of US forces being to train Iraqi forces. Our primary mission today is the surge. We're not going to get out of Iraq unless we train better than we have the Iraqi forces, and let them take over some of the responsibilities we now have.

But the military part of it is only part of it. You have to also, as Senator Levin was mentioning, put a lot more focus on diplomacy and political reconciliation. There is still no military solution to Iraq. The military plays a hugely important role, but you must have vigorous, robust efforts to get a national reconciliation. And the third part of the report that we recommended, likewise very important, is the diplomatic offensive to get the neighboring states involved in getting stability in Iraq and in reinforcing the national reconciliation. This is not just a military problem.

SCHIEFFER: When you talk about reconciliation, what you're really saying is that the Sunnis and the Shia have got to find some way to share power and run the country.

Mr. HAMILTON: Exactly.

SCHIEFFER: And at this point, they seem back at square one. They seem to have moved nowhere toward getting together and ruling the country.

Mr. HAMILTON: That's right.

SCHIEFFER: Why is that, Congressman? Is it because they have no history of democracy? I mean, it's hard for those of us in the West to understand that, but again, these are people who have never had a democracy.

Mr. HAMILTON: I think what you have is that the various sects still want to hold on or extend or to get power. The Kurds think in terms of Kurd--what--Kurdistan, in effect.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Mr. HAMILTON: The northern part. They don't want to give up anything there. They want autonomy for sure. The Sunnis, who have been in power, want to get back into power. The Shiites, who are now basically running the government, want to keep it and are very fearful of the Sunnis. So you've got all of these groups, and I've generalized quite a bit here...

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Mr. HAMILTON: ...wanting to hold on to power and to lash out against anybody that threatens that power. And they view themselves, most of these Iraqi leaders--we call them Iraqi leaders, I think they're more sectarian leaders than they are Iraqi leaders. And you do not have, in this country, a real sense of what you were suggesting, inclusiveness, of bringing everybody in under the banner of the Iraq national government.

SCHIEFFER: Well, is there any way to do that? Because we've been trying to get them to do that now for a number of years, and it just doesn't seem to take. That's the point I have, is...

Mr. HAMILTON: It's hugely disappointing. Senator McConnell said that. And I think we have been a little too lenient, frankly, with the Iraqi leaders. Now, the last week or two, that's changed. We are beginning to put more pressure on them. I sit there, as I saw the early part of your program, and said to myself, 'Well, why didn't we do those things a year ago, or at least six months ago?' Iraq is this--is a whole history of setting benchmarks and timetables and never meeting any of them. And then when the deadlines come, just passing on to the next phase. I think we have to make very, very clear that if these benchmarks are not achieved that by a date certain, then we will reduce our commitment. Now, that language is written into the supplemental bill, which the Congress has passed, and the president has approved. It's got to be toughened. It's got to be made very firm.

SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you about the rest of the Middle East.

Mr. HAMILTON: Mm-hmm.

SCHIEFFER: We now have this trouble in the Gaza, where the Palestinians are in a war amongst themselves, in the Gaza Strip. Is there any connection between that and what's happening in Iraq, you know, what's happening in the rest of the Middle East?

Mr. HAMILTON: Oh, yes. The Middle East is in flames in many respects today. Everywhere you look, there's deep trouble: Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinians, the peace process, Iran. Nothing seems to be moving in the right direction at this point. Are they linked? Of course they're linked. Every problem in the Middle East is linked to something else. Now, that doesn't mean that you can ignore a specific kind of a solution, but you do have to see the connections. If we're going to get the support, for example, of the moderate Arabs--Egypt, Jordan, the Saudis--then we have to show some interest and effort, a robust effort in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian problem. It's connected in that sense. Everyone has to be approached on its own, but the linkages are clearly present throughout in every single problem in the Middle East.

SCHIEFFER: Mr. Chairman, it's great to always you have and get your perspective. We thank you for coming by this morning.

Mr. HAMILTON: Thank you.

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

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And finally today, I have never been much for third parties and independent candidates. For all of its flaws, the old two-party system has brought us a long way in this country, and I'm slow to change. But as I watch the Senate fumble around with the immigration bill, it made me wonder: Has our two-party system lost the ability to get anything done? We keep hearing that both parties are playing to their base. Republicans don't want to offend conservatives so they block real immigration reform. Democracy--or, Democrats, I should say, fear the liberal left, so they don't want reform. Result: Nothing gets done on that or anything else.

Yet polls show a majority of Americans want reform, want a guest worker program for illegal immigrants in this country, favor a way to make their status legal. Who speaks for that segment of the electorate? Certainly, not Democratic and Republican leaders, who are so busy pacifying those so-called base voters.

You know, I hope we do see a third-party candidate in the presidential race next year, not because I favor anyone who might run as an independent, but because a third choice would force both the Republicans and the Democrats to move more to the center to stop an independent from siphoning off moderate voters. If both parties are forced to shift their hunt for votes to the center rather than the edges of their parties, who knows? They may find some common ground every once in a while and actually get something done.

That's it for us. We hope that you have a happy Father's Day. And remember, dads, pick up the check. That's what we're supposed to do. See you next week right here on FACE THE NATION.