

MEET THE PRESS

Transcript for June 11

Barry McCaffrey, Markos Moulitsas, Jonathan Alter, Amy Walter, Byron York

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MR. TIM RUSSERT: Our issues this Sunday: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is dead. What does this mean for Iraq, especially the 135,000 American troops still on the ground? We'll ask NBC News analyst and retired General Barry McCaffrey.

Then, 1,000 political activists and readers of the liberal blogs hold a convention in Las Vegas, strategizing and listening to Democratic luminaries. What role will the blogosphere and the Internet play in the 2006 midterm elections and the 2008 race for the White House? With us, the founder of the Daily Kos and host of the YearlyKos Convention, Markos Moulitsas; and from National Review Online, Byron York.

And which issues will frame this year's congressional election? With us, Jonathan Alter, senior editor and columnist for Newsweek magazine; and Amy Walter, senior editor of The Cook Political Report.

Then in our MEET THE PRESS MINUTE, Senator Robert Byrd makes history tomorrow in the U.S. Senate. We'll look back at his first MEET THE PRESS appearance.

MR. RUSSERT: But first, General George Casey, commander of American forces in Iraq, was our announced guest this morning, but his appearance was canceled by the Pentagon for what they say was a scheduling problem. But with us to discuss the war in Iraq and the death of Zarqawi is NBC military analyst, retired General Barry McCaffrey.

Welcome.

GEN. BARRY McCAFFREY: Good to be here, Tim.

MR. RUSSERT: Before I get to Iraq, let me just talk about the three suicides in Guantanamo prison, alleged terrorists. What do you make of that, and how will that play around the world?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, Tim, I, I've looked at our detention facilities in both Afghanistan and Iraq. I think the problems of the first year—we had some real serious difficulties complying with, I think, our own national and international law—are gone. Firm, humane, professional way of handling it.

Guantanamo's a special case. It's become a huge political problem for us, in the Gulf region in particular. I don't know how we get out of this. Some of these people are extremely dangerous. This was an act of political warfare by the three people that committed suicide, the same as a suicide bomber in downtown Baghdad. But we got a challenge trying to think our way through how to close down Guantanamo in the next two or three years and get these people into some other judicial system.

MR. RUSSERT: You think it will be closed eventually.

GEN. McCAFFREY: Oh, yeah. I think right now the payoff in propaganda for the international jihadists is, is enormous. But the question is how do we back our way out of it?

MR. RUSSERT: The death of Zarqawi. Is that a turning point in the war in Iraq or an interesting but not very significant event long-term?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, we can't ever ignore good news. This fellow was ferociously dangerous. He raised a lot of money for them. He was very good at information operations. It's a great blessing to the Iraqi people. He was slaughtering Shiite civilians by the thousands, literally.

Having said that, look, al-Qaeda in Iraq has turned mostly Iraqi Sunni Muslim. Lieutenant General Stan McChrystal and these special operations air-land-sea forces have decimated their ranks, not just in Iraq, but in Afghanistan. So I think the foreign jihadists were a terrible factor for the Iraqi people to deal with, but not the problem we're working, which is how do you tamp down an incipient civil war and get Mr. Maliki and his Cabinet to create some governing mechanism?

MR. RUSSERT: You said this to Time magazine: "We are in trouble in Iraq. Our forces can't sustain this pace, and I'm afraid the American people are walking away from this war." Explain.

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, if we had 10 years to work the issue, there's a 99 percent probability we'll achieve our objective. But I don't think we've got that much time. So it seems to me, in the next couple years prior to Mr. Bush leaving office, it has to appear to the American people this thing is working. And therein lies the risk. Because—so we've got to hurriedly transfer security arrangements to a force that's ill-equipped, the Iraqi security forces, and is yet probably inadequate to stand on their own.

Plus, I think the United States Army and Marine Corps, and elements of the Air Force—C-17 lift, special operations command—cannot maintain this pace of deployment. But we've got to draw down, and pretty soon, maybe 50 to 100,000 troops by next summer. But otherwise, we risk breaking the force.

MR. RUSSERT: Who has the strongest force right now, the more capable military force, the Sunni and Shiite militias, or the national Iraqi Army?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Oh, I think the national Iraqi Army, as badly equipped as they are. And I, you know, I made the argument on the Hill in the last week, we've got to do better. But they'll be 300,000 by the end of the summer. The Mahdi and Badr militias, probably 100,000 people, the Sunni insurgents, who knows the number? I carry around in my head 15,000 or so. So the Iraqi security forces, to include the police, are a real factor. This guy, Lieutenant General Marty Dempsey's done a superb job equipping and training them. But the problem is, you know, we've got to defend the electrical system, the oil industry, you got to protect the people. So the other side has—clearly has the initiative, and factional fighting is now the biggest problem an Iraqi mother has to deal with.

MR. RUSSERT: You made an observation about some of our allies who are beginning to leave, and this is what the Dallas Morning News reported: "It's a civil war. The allies are going to leave. By next Christmas, we're there alone. It's over. We're coming out. The American people are willing to sustain combat operations in the face of death. They are not willing to take the steady drain of casualties without a chance of achieving victory."

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, it's, you know, that's a classic problem. Our—we require a long-term strategy to deal with the so-called long war with foreign jihadists. In the case of Iraq, though, we're losing basically a battalion a month killed and wounded. It's probably \$10 billion dollars a month to prosecute this conflict. Many of us think it's worth it, and we hope to achieve a satisfactory outcome. But I think we're time-constrained. We ought to understand this. Our allies think Afghanistan is a good war to be engaged in. They think Iraq's a problem. So I think we're going to see most of them leave in the coming 12 months.

MR. RUSSERT: The New York Times reported this in terms of troop withdrawals. "Senior administration and military officials now acknowledge that there is little chance the United States can reach the milestone of reducing American troop levels in Iraq to 100,000 by December, a goal that earlier in the year had seemed within reach. ...

"Military planners in Iraq and at the Pentagon have been refining troop-rotation proposals that, in the best case, would reduce levels to 110,000 to 120,000 troops by the end of December from current levels of 130,000." You think trying to maintain 110,000, 120,000 by the end of this year is not doable.

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, I think it's going to start having a huge impact on our ability to recruit and retrain—retain people. Look, General George Casey—the commander on the ground, is a very sensible, capable, experienced guy, he's an operational commander—General John Abizaid, our brilliant CENTCOM commander, are operational people. The challenge is in the Pentagon, the civilian leadership. Do we have an adequate military to sustain this operational pace? And the answer is no. I've been saying the Army is 80,000 soldiers short, the Marines are 25,000 people short. SOCOM is under huge stress, and we aren't resourced to continue this effort. We've got to make up our mind. Are we going to pay for the kind of strategy we're prosecuting or not?

MR. RUSSERT: The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Khalilzad, had this to say to Der Spiegel magazine in Germany. "The next six months will be critical in terms of reining in the danger of civil war. If the government fails to achieve this, it will have lost its opportunity."

GEN. McCAFFREY: Yeah, well, thank God we've got that ambassador on the ground. He's going to be a huge part of our ability to coach this new emerging legitimate Iraqi government to achieve some...

MR. RUSSERT: But General, he seems to be saying that by the end of this year...

GEN. McCAFFREY: Yeah. I think so.

MR. RUSSERT: ...if we have not gotten control of this civil war, the Iraqi government will have lost its opportunity.

GEN. McCAFFREY: Yeah. I think between now and Christmas is the crucial time.

And look, by the way, there may be some good news here. That bombing of the Samarra mosque brought Iraq to the edge of civil war. Some of us—I'm one of them—think it may well have also inoculated the population. They saw the outcome. They've slaughtered thousands of both Shia and Sunni in the space of a few weeks, and they drew back from it. So Sistani urged moderation, the Iraqi Army didn't crack, and we got through it. Now, having said that, again, I think the ambassador's right on target. This window's closing rapidly.

MR. RUSSERT: We will know by the end of this year whether we have won or lost the war?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, if Mr. Maliki can't build some operative mechanism of government to which the Iraqi security forces can provide a legitimate support if we can't disarm the militias, if we can't go into Ramadi and Sadr City and Baghdad and, and confront open rebellions, then we're in trouble and the outcome would be unknown. My guess is, though, Tim, these guys are actually going to pull their act together. It may be a weak government, it may be ineffective, but the prospect of turning Iraq into Lebanon is a frightening one to the Iraqis as well as their allies like us.

MR. RUSSERT: But your sense is within the next six to 12 months, we're going to be pretty much out of Iraq.

GEN. McCAFFREY: Oh no, I don't think so. I think we'll start coming out. If Maliki can get this government to operate, if security forces can be better equipped, we'll see a substantial drawdown, let's say a third of our combat brigades—we've got 17 brigades there now—in the coming 12 months, six to 12 months. And I think we've got to do that. So the question is political primarily. Look, unemployment is a bigger problem than the AIF, the Iraqi insurgent force. I think that's the other challenge. We spent 18 billion on economic reconstruction. There's only 1.6 billion left in the pipeline. Tim, when that money runs out, in my judgment, we just lost the war. We've got to sustain the economic reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, for that matter.

MR. RUSSERT: Even with significant withdrawals, you believe that in 2008 you say that both presidential candidates, nominees of each party, will be debating a better plan to withdraw completely from Iraq?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Yeah. I think that's it. Again, I think we're in a race against time. We've got a couple of years here to make it look like it's going to work. If it isn't, both the Republican and Democratic candidates are going to run for office saying, "I'll get us out of there."

MR. RUSSERT: What do we leave behind if it's not a strong government?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, if it's a government that works, we can probably sustain the U.S. troops, 50,000, 60,000, 70,000 troops there for 10 years and hope that Iraq turns into a responsible governmental entity that doesn't attack its neighbors, doesn't build WMD. I still think that's a likely outcome if the political system can come together on the ground.

MR. RUSSERT: Afghanistan reports now that the Taliban, who had harbored Osama bin Laden, are now back to their strongest position since September 11, 2001, when we went into—after that period—into Afghanistan. Did we take our eye off Afghanistan in order to fight the Iraq war?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, I think initially we did. Certainly, we took these high-value special operations troops and jerked them out of Afghanistan to posture for the intervention in Iraq.

But, look, you know, I just got back from Afghanistan also—by the way, I posted both my reports as a West Point professor on mccaffreyassociates.com, if it interests people to read them—but Afghanistan's in a strange situation now. Huge economic reconstruction, road network appearing, 50,000 Afghan national army battalions, 44 battalions out in the field. Lots of things going right. The Taliban two years ago were in 10-man units. A year ago in 100-man units. This year they're in battalion-size units, 300, 400 people. There's a huge offensive going on.

The last of November—I think we're going to slaughter them in open warfare, but there's a challenge. Mr. Karzai, a giant of a person now, there's a parliament there. Things are starting to work in Afghanistan. We've got to push back. NATO's coming in. We got to keep our fingers crossed. They got a brilliant commander: Lieutenant General Richards, NATO commander, taking charge of the—in the south. Canadians are down there in their first big fight since World War II, doing very well. But this is going to be a tough year in Afghanistan, also. Got a smart guy out there, Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry. He knows what he's doing. He's been in Afghanistan the better part of three years.

MR. RUSSERT: After your trip to Iraq and Afghanistan, you were brought into the White House with a small group to talk to the president. Do you believe the president of the United States is getting an honest, unvarnished view of Iraq from his advisers?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, I certainly think there's a new effort. Steve Hadley, this brilliant national security adviser and Josh Bolten, I think, is going to be a very positive force. This is a smart, open-minded man.

The president knows we've got a challenge. Twenty thousand dead and wounded in the U.S. armed forces, \$300 billion dollars spent and the situation's in a perilous state. So I think he's listening and I think his team now is looking for—very open-minded, looking for new answers. They're in a race against time, too.

MR. RUSSERT: Has the Iraq war limited our options, vis a vis Iran?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Yeah, I think so, but I also think, you know, Secretary Rice probably got the right approach. You got to build some kind of a coalition. You got to build a coalition in the Gulf. You cannot threaten the Iranians with air attack or conventional ground attack. We're more vulnerable than they are and they know it, so the threat is incredible. Our allies are scared. We got to build a new alliance with the Saudis, with the Kuwaitis, Bahrain, Iraq, and try and hedge these people in. They're going nuclear, Tim. They're going to have 20, 30 nuclear weapons five years from now.

MR. RUSSERT: We can't stop them.

GEN. McCAFFREY: I don't think so, no. Because our allies won't stand with us. The Russians, the Chinese, the Indians are not going to respond to serious constraints on Iranian behavior because of energy access. So we got to take a different approach as we did with the Soviets.

MR. RUSSERT: But the president has drawn the line. He says Iraq will not be allowed to build a nuclear bomb.

GEN. McCAFFREY: Yeah.

MR. RUSSERT: Iran will not be allowed to build a nuclear bomb. How does he back down off that?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, I don't think it's a time for muscular rhetoric. I think you got to get international organizations and allies to try and hedge in Iranian options. That's what Secretary Rice is, practically speaking, trying to do. But, you know, threatening an air attack doesn't make any sense. The Shia population in southern Iraq sits on our 400-mile logistic supply route from Kuwait up to our military forces. All of our Gulf allies, their oil production facilities, are vulnerable to air and sea attack. They don't have any coordinated integrated air and sea defenses. We don't want to see the Iranians cut off—try and cut off the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf. So this is not a time for military threats. This is the time to build new alliances.

MR. RUSSERT: So it's inevitable they get the nuclear bomb, in your opinion?

GEN. McCAFFREY: I think so. I think they're going nuclear five, 10 years from now. We'll be confronted. And that's not a good outcome. That argues that perhaps Saudi money and Egyptian technology gets a Arab Sunni bomb to confront the Persian Shia bomb. None of us want to see proliferation in the Gulf. This is a time for serious diplomatic interventions.

MR. RUSSERT: General Barry McCaffrey, we thank you for your views, and your reports on Iraq and Afghanistan are also linked to our MEET THE PRESS Web site.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13189411/>