

Oct. 11: Levin, Graham, McCaffrey, Myers, roundtable

Carl Levin, Lindsey Graham, Barry McCaffrey, Richard Myers, Ron Brownstein, Paul Gigot, Katty Kay, Bob Woodward

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MR. DAVID GREGORY: This Sunday, war and peace.

(Videotape)

PRES. BARACK OBAMA: To be honest, I do not feel that I deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who've been honored by this prize.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: President Obama unexpectedly wins the Nobel Peace Prize even as he tries to craft a new strategy to win the war in Afghanistan, now entering its ninth year. Is the centerpiece of Obama's foreign policy mission impossible? This morning, an exclusive debate on the way forward and whether the Taliban and al-Qaeda can ever truly be defeated. Two key voices on the Hill and two experienced military leaders weigh in: chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan; a GOP member of that same committee, Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina; former commander in chief of U.S. Southern Command, retired General Barry McCaffrey; and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, retired General Richard Myers.

Then the political debate. Will the president be able to get his own party's support when he finally presents his plan for Afghanistan? When will we see some agreement on health care, and what more should the White House do to create jobs? Insights and analysis from our political roundtable: the National Journal's Ron Brownstein, The Wall Street Journal's Paul Gigot, "BBC World News America"'s Katty Kay and The Washington Post's Bob Woodward.

Finally, our MEET THE PRESS Minute from February 4th, 1968; some very important lessons from another war that didn't go as planned.

But first, the debate about the way forward in Afghanistan. Joining me now: the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Carl Levin; and the Republican from South Carolina, Senator Lindsey Graham; as well as retired Generals Richard Myers and Barry McCaffrey.

Great to have all of you here for such an important discussion. So here's where we are. On the president's desk, a request for more troops, up to 40,000 troops, from his general on the ground, General McChrystal. The president has said in Afghanistan it is a war of necessity. In March he said there was a massive

counterinsurgency strategy, that was the strategy. So, Senator Levin, if his commander comes to him and says, "I need more forces," why isn't the answer yes?

SEN. CARL LEVIN (D-MI): The answer is that the president of the United States has got to look at all aspects of this. Obviously a commander's recommendation is important, it'll be given great weight, I have no doubt about that, and it should be given great weight. But so also should the recommendation of a secretary of Defense who is the choice of the president to be in that position. And the president has to look at a much broader perspective than the commander's request, as important as that is.

GREGORY: But doesn't it flow--war of necessity, massive counterinsurgency strategy announced in March, handpicked guy goes in there, an expert on counterinsurgency, says, "I need at least 40,000 more troops," doesn't it flow that the answer would be yes?

SEN. LEVIN: The flow is that you want to succeed, and what--how do you maximize the chances of success? That is the question, and that's what the president is struggling with. We don't know what all those recommendations are, by the way, of General McChrystal. But General McChrystal said a number of things, not that he just needs more resources, whatever that number is. He also says we need a new strategy and that that is even more important than the resources. Those are McChrystal's own words. He also says deliberate, take the right amount of time to think this thing through. And he also says that what is even more important than numbers is the resolve. And I had a personal conversation with McChrystal, and what he says is that you want to find ways of showing resolve to the people of Afghanistan. There are many ways to show resolve in addition to more and more combat forces, including many more trainers to get the Afghan forces to be a lot larger and a lot stronger.

GREGORY: Right. You say no, don't send more troops?

SEN. LEVIN: I'm saying at this time don't send more combat troops, but I say focus on the Afghan forces, the army; faster, larger, better equipped. Why are we shipping--why don't we have a great plan to ship equipment from Iraq to Afghanistan? We ought to do that to strengthen the Afghan army. So there's a lot of ways to show resolve other than more and more combat forces.

GREGORY: Senator Graham, where are you?

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM (R-SC): I think I'm with General McChrystal. He says that the force structure we have today--68,000 American troops plus our NATO partners plus the Afghan army--are not sufficient to turn around the momentum that the Taliban have gained. I am all for more trainers. The president says we're not going to withdraw. He's rejected the counterterrorism strategy. The only difference this morning is whether or not you put combat troops in to enable the trainers. The Afghan national police are getting slaughtered. It's hard to train people, send them off to fight when they get killed at their first duty station. So without better security, the training element will fail. That's exactly what happened in Afghanistan. So we need more combat power. General McChrystal says 40,000, in that neighborhood; I would go with the general.

GREGORY: There, there's a larger question of what the nature of the fight is right now, and I'll turn to the two generals here. This is how The New York Times reported it on Thursday in terms of the debate that's taking shape within the White House: "President Obama's national security team is moving to reframe its war strategy by emphasizing the campaign against al-Qaeda in Pakistan while arguing that the Taliban in Afghanistan do not pose a direct threat to the United States." In fact, General Myers, the current national security adviser, General Jones, says there's fewer than 100 al-Qaeda fighters actually currently operating in Afghanistan. What is the central front here in this war?

GEN. RICHARD MYERS (Ret.): I think the central front is against violent extremism, which plays out in both Afghanistan and, as we saw just recently in the last several months, in Pakistan as well. So I don't know how you differentiate between violent extremists that have an extreme view of their religion and are willing to take--go to any means to achieve their political goals. And, and we--we're seeing it play out in Afghanistan, we're seeing the Taliban in Pakistan. So it's, it's more than Afghanistan, it's Pakistan as well, it's the region. Uzbekistan has terrorists that have found safe haven in Afghanistan before. And then it's--I think that, that's spills over into the, the rest of the world, matter of fact.

GREGORY: But where should the fight be, General McCaffrey? I mean, in--within the White House there seems to be a very strong view that the focus on Afghanistan and counterinsurgency against the Taliban might be misguided. We went to war after 9/11 to take out al-Qaeda, and they don't appear to be there in big numbers in Afghanistan.

GEN. BARRY McCAFFREY (Ret.): Well, you know, I actually think Senator Levin set the argument up correctly. The last thing we ought to debate is whether the answer is 40,000 or 10,000 troops. The real question is you've got this giant nation, 32 million people, it's 500 miles from the sea, which complicates matters. Our logistics lines go through Pakistan. The question is do we have resolve to build a viable state in Afghanistan? And that's a function not just of troop strength. Now, having said all that, there's 25,000 Taliban on the ground now is the unclassified number we're talking about. The country's then quadrupled in terms of direct enemy threat, we're about on the verge of losing small U.S. combat forces. I don't see how the president can't back up his ground commander in the short run.

GREGORY: So you got to escalate?

GEN. McCAFFREY: I think in the short run you got no option.

GREGORY: General, do you have to escalate?

GEN. MYERS: I think you probably do, but I would, I would caution--I don't--it's not about 40,000 or whatever the number is--and by the way, that doesn't all have to be U.S., in my view. I think one of the things the president and his team has to do is convince our friends and allies who committed at the Bonn conference back in 2001 to help support development of Afghanistan, that they have to pony up as well. And they have to do so--when they do so, they have to do it with the right rules of engagement.

GREGORY: Senator Levin, some of your colleagues, Senator Graham included, Senator McCain, say, "Hey, remember the surge in Iraq? That was--that's a model here. And that--things got better in Iraq." We don't know the outcome in Iraq yet. But you traveled to Iraq in 2007 and you said there were tangible, positive results from surging U.S. forces. Why not apply those lessons to Afghanistan and send more combat troops if your general says we need them?

SEN. LEVIN: The surge that really worked--that will work in Afghanistan will be a surge of Afghan troops. And that's not me speaking, that's a captain, Marine captain down in Helmand province who says the Achilles' heel in Afghanistan is the shortage of Afghan troops. Our own commandant of the Marines, General Conway, says if he could change one thing in southern Afghanistan it would be to have more Afghan troops. As far as the Iraqi surge is concerned, it took place after the strategy was changed to try and, successfully, to get to get 100,000 Iraqis who were attacking us to switch sides. That was called the--an Iraqi surge, Sons of Iraq. And we need to do the same thing in Afghanistan. It takes a plan. We don't have a plan yet to get those, those lower level, those local Taliban fighters who are on a payroll not because they're, they're wildly fanatic religious people but because they're being paid.

GREGORY: But, Senator Graham, doesn't it also take a government in Afghanistan that's a legitimate ally, that isn't corrupt, that isn't failing in the fundamental job of governance?

SEN. GRAHAM: Absolutely. You could send a million troops into Afghanistan and it would not legitimize their government. So I...

GREGORY: But then why are you pushing for more troops when we don't have an ally there?

SEN. GRAHAM: Well, because I do believe, like Iraq, where you had a dysfunctional government, the security environment was impossible for Iraq to move forward. And once the security got better due to the surge, the Iraqis stepped up. So what I am suggesting is that training the Afghan army and police only is a failed strategy. We had 200,000 people trained in Iraq; they folded like a cheap suit when they went in combat. Only when we embedded with the Iraqi army and police and provided better security did the training get better and governance get better.

You have to do two things here. You have to bring about security, because if the Taliban keep re-emerging it's a mortal threat to Pakistan, according to the foreign minister of Pakistan. Any area lost to the Taliban means soccer stadiums are reopened. It would be the defeat of NATO. So you've got to secure the country against a re-emergent Taliban and have benchmarks and measurements on the Afghan government to get them to perform better for their people. You have to do two things at once. It's exactly what we did in Iraq. But without better security, more combat power, we're going to lose in Afghanistan.

GREGORY: Senator, you and your colleagues, like Senator McCain and others, have been suggesting that the president is taking too long in making this decision. Do you think he's showing weakness in this very important national security problem?

SEN. GRAHAM: Not at this point. At the end of the day, he'll be judged by the decision he makes. If he does a half measure, putting just a few troops in that won't turn around the momentum of the battle, that will be weakness. If he used the counterterrorism strategy, that will lead to failure. If he will plus up American combat power and get more NATO troops involved and go at the Taliban and push the Karzai government, that will be strength. And the Iranians will notice what we do in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government feels threatened by a re-emerged Taliban.

GREGORY: All right....

SEN. GRAHAM: They say, "Why are we sticking our necks out?" So I think what he does will determine if he's weak or strong.

GREGORY: But right now you think he's being appropriately deliberative?

SEN. GRAHAM: I cannot--yes. I think if he'll continue to talk with his foreign policy team and the generals and come out with a military/civilian strategy that is robust and gets to the heart of the problem, he will be just fine.

GREGORY: All right.

SEN. GRAHAM: And earn the award he was given.

GREGORY: Let, let me take a step back here. We'll get to the Nobel Peace Prize in a, in a few minutes. I want to talk about the current situation in Afghanistan by going back to the beginning. This was President Bush in October of 2001 announcing the invasion of Afghanistan.

(Videotape, October 7, 2001)

FMR. PRES. GEORGE W. BUSH: Given the nature and reach of our enemies, we will win this conflict by the patient accumulation of successes.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Well, you'd have to be very patient if you'd look at the timeline of this war compared to other wars. The United States was in Vietnam for 102 months, the American Revolution 100 months, the Afghanistan war 96 months and counting. And where we are we currently? General McChrystal, the, the commander on the ground said this in his assessment this summer: "The situation in Afghanistan is serious. ... Many indicators suggest the overall situation is deteriorating." General Myers, you were chairman of the Joint Chiefs starting in October of 2001. What assumption about Afghanistan was fundamentally wrong?

GEN. MYERS: I think that the--I think it played out in execution. My view, and it's been talked around the four of us here, if you're going to be successful in, in these endeavors, Iraq or Afghanistan, it takes all

instruments from national power. We've been focusing on troop strength. That's an important part of the equation. The other parts, though--economic development, political, diplomatic development--have been lagging. They lagged in Iraq and now they're lagging in Afghanistan. We have a central government...

GREGORY: But, but the question I'm asking you is you were the military leader....

GEN. MYERS: Right.

GREGORY: ...at the time, with Senator Rumsfeld, and you were advising the president. Did the Bush administration fail because it didn't commit enough resources to this war?

GEN. MYERS: Well, the--you know, by the time I left office Afghanistan had a constitution, they had a central government and they were, they were progressing fairly well. The Taliban had retreated. The Taliban has come back. And you can argue that we should've had more forces in there, I suppose, at the time. But...

GREGORY: What do you think?

GEN. MYERS: No.

GREGORY: That is the argument.

GEN. MYERS: Well, I think--my view is that we had it about right. We were--the central government was relatively cohesive, relatively strong.

GREGORY: Then why aren't things going better eight years later?

GEN. MYERS: The Taliban re-emerged and the central government has gotten weaker. We've taken our eye off, I think, off the other elements of power that it needs to--not just the military part--but it needs to be successful.

GREGORY: All right. But wasn't the issue you took your eye off of Afghanistan because you wanted to put forces into Iraq?

GEN. MYERS: Well, that--no, that was never, that was never explicit in anything that we ever did. No, no commander--all the commanders that we had, General Abizaid and so forth, our Central Command commander, the fellow that General Petraeus replaced, never thought that was the case. We thought, we thought we were making progress.

GEN. McCAFFREY: I must admit, I have a different view. From the start I thought that war was underresourced. And to get back to the notion of should the President Obama rush his decision, one of the things we saw when we went into Iraq was that, you know, we had the unbelievable statement from the Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld that he was not asked his viewpoint on the war, nor had he offered it. So I

think bringing along Secretary Clinton and, and Gates and the CIA and others, they're going to own this war when they're done with the, the debate. At the end of the day, what they're--what they shouldn't do is overintellectualize this thing, talking about the sweet point on the spot, on the curve on troop deployments. They've got to decide are we in, are we going to stay for 10 years and build a viable state? Or do we try and downsize, watch our allies disappear, watch the Pakistanis go unstable? My guess is they've got a political decision that's unbelievably difficult. The country isn't with him, his party isn't with him. How's he going to reach a conclusion to support Petraeus and McChrystal in the short run?

GREGORY: Senator Levin, I want to ask this same question to you because I think it's important, which is what assumption about the war in Afghanistan has proven to be wrong?

SEN. LEVIN: I think that perhaps the key assumption so far is that there was a government which would be viable and it is not. The key assumption is that this is a matter for American combat forces rather than to be focusing on the Afghan army, which is a highly respected institution inside of Afghanistan. Clearly we should keep the number of forces that we have. No one's talking about removing forces. The question is whether we focus on more and more American forces or do what we should've done here all along, build up that Afghan army and the--build up the police much more quickly and do what we can to, to put in place, to the extent we can, a government which has the confidence of the Afghan people and also focus, as Barry McCaffrey said, on the economy as well. You've got to have commitment of the Afghan people to a government.

GREGORY: Mm-hmm.

SEN. LEVIN: And that means they've got to see some things positive that are happening in their towns and villages.

GREGORY: What about the question of when this war ends? British forces are committed in Afghanistan, but back in August the head of the British army was asked about timeline, he said this: British mission-- "Britain's mission in Afghanistan could last for up to 40 years, the now current head of the Army warns in an interview with The Times. General Sir David Richards ... said: "I believe that the UK will be committed to Afghanistan in some manner--development, governance, security sector reform--for the next 30 to 40 years." Senator Graham, what kind of timeline should Americans expect about U.S. forces in Afghanistan? Will it be that long? Are we there forever?

SEN. GRAHAM: Well, I think the issue is how long will we be there sustaining casualties like we are today? We've been in Germany and Japan since World War II and most Americans don't care because it's made the world a more stable place--place and we're not suffering casualties. The question is a good one. What happened in Afghanistan? I think Iraq did affect Afghanistan. Iraq, whether it should've happened or not, became the central battle. We needed to surge there to prevent a loss. And as the Karzai government failed, President Bush, in my view, did not push him enough. You had ambassadors on the ground and military commanders going to Karzai, pushing him very hard on governance, and President Bush would talk to Karzai and, quite frankly, undercut the effort. President Obama is smart to push Karzai. But I think it's

going to be required of him in this nation to understand this is a generational struggle. You're never going to make progress until you provide better security. You can have 10,000 American civilians over there helping the Afghans. They can't get off the base because they'll get killed.

GREGORY: But, Senator, you're still talking...

SEN. GRAHAM: The Afghan army and police...

GREGORY: You're still talking about goals, and my question is about timeline. We have been there for more than eight years, and the situation is deteriorating.

SEN. GRAHAM: Yes.

GREGORY: Senator Levin, why isn't it appropriate, as Democrats did with Iraq, to say here and now that there should be a timeline for how long we're there?

SEN. LEVIN: There should be milestone for success, obviously.

GREGORY: A deadline?

SEN. LEVIN: No.

GREGORY: For withdrawal?

SEN. LEVIN: No. I don't think we can put a deadline. I don't think we know enough about how these events are going to unfold for there to be a deadline. But the mistake, going back to that last question, I believe that was made in Afghanistan was taking our eye off that ball, not going after bin Laden when we had him where we wanted him and instead putting--shifting our major focus to Iraq. I think that was the major mistake that was made. But now I think it would be a mistake for us to do anything other than to look for ways to succeed in Afghanistan. And there's a legitimate debate going on as to how do we succeed in Afghanistan, and that's what we ought to focus on. Setting a timeline I don't think would be the right thing.

SEN. GRAHAM: David...

GREGORY: Senator?

SEN. GRAHAM: David, could I add something? I don't mean to interrupt.

GREGORY: Yeah, go ahead.

SEN. GRAHAM: Can I add something?

GREGORY: Yes, sir.

SEN. GRAHAM: I think in the next 24 months, if we'll follow McChrystal plan to reinforce the 68,000, bring about better security, come up with a game plan of--plan of better governance, in 24 months from now we'll change the security environment, we'll build up the Afghan army and police and we can begin--begin to do in Afghanistan what we're doing in Iraq in 24 months. That's what I think.

GREGORY: Realistically, from both of you generals, what is victory in Afghanistan?

GEN. MYERS: Some sort--in my view, it's some sort of stable government. And back to Senator Levin's point...

GREGORY: So we can't leave. We can't pull troops out of Afghanistan until there's a stable government?

GEN. MYERS: I think it has to be a viable, stable government that the people believe in. And if you're going to have Afghan security forces that are effective, they have to be connected to the central government and feel that there's some connection and some direction coming from their central government. Otherwise it doesn't work; they're just in the field doing what they do but there's no connection to the overall mission of that country. So I think clearly that's, that's part of it. And I think there has to be some economic development to give people there hope that there's something beyond...

GREGORY: Yeah.

GEN. MYERS: ...what they're doing today.

GREGORY: Can we beat the Taliban?

GEN. McCAFFREY: Well, I, I think in 10 years of \$5 billion a month and with a significant front-end security component, we can leave a Afghan national army and police force and a viable government and roads and universities. But it's a time constraint that we can't change things in 18 to 24 months. So I think we got to lower expectations. Senator Levin talked about our political resolve; is it there or not? You know, sort of a simplistic lesson I learned as an infantry company commander in combat, you only got three choices. When you're under fire you can hunker down and take casualties--it's bad--you can break contact and withdraw or you can reinforce and attack. That's really the, the challenge facing the Obama administration right now. And the, the politics of it are really tough. The American people do not appear to support large-scale continued intervention in this conflict.

GREGORY: Just with, with very little time left, I want to get to two other issues. The president spoke last night at the Human Rights Campaign dinner and spoke about "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

(Videotape)

PRES. OBAMA: I'm working with the Pentagon, its leadership and the members of the House and Senate on ending this policy. Legislation has been introduced in the House to make this happen. I will end "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." That's my commitment to you.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: That, of course, the position of the military to expel gays and lesbians from service.

Senator Levin, will the president live up to this pledge? Can he?

SEN. LEVIN: I think he, he will and he can. I think it has to be done in the, in the right way, which is to get a buy-in from the military, which I think is now possible. Other militaries in the West, the British and other Western armies, have ended this discriminatory policy. We can do it successfully. But it ought to be done with thoughtfulness and with care, and with a buy-in from the military.

GREGORY: General Myers, is it time?

GEN. MYERS: I can't talk about whether it's time or not. I think the process that Senator Levin outlined is exactly right, that the senior military leadership needs to be part of this.

GREGORY: Mm-hmm.

GEN. MYERS: The Pentagon needs to be part of it.

GREGORY: Do you have an opinion about whether it's time?

GEN. MYERS: Well, I, I take some exception to what Senator Levin said, because gays can serve in the military, just can't serve openly. And they, they do and there's lot of them. And we are, and we are, and we're the beneficiary of all that.

GREGORY: OK.

GEN. MYERS: So I'll leave it to the current folks to, to decide whether it's time or not.

GEN. McCaffrey: Well, there's no question it's time to change the policy. The key to it isn't buy-in from the military, it's for Congress to change the law. They ought to do so. And we would--I'm confident the military will move ahead on it.

SEN. LEVIN: And we, I think, will do that, but we'll need the support at least of some of the military to do it.

GEN. MYERS: I think that's right. You can't...

GREGORY: Does the, does the president have the political resolve to make good on his promise?

SEN. LEVIN: Oh, he does, and I think many of us do.

GREGORY: Yeah.

SEN. LEVIN: I thought it was a mistake to begin with.

GREGORY: Right. Congress has the resolve as well to change it?

SEN. LEVIN: I think we will gain that resolve. The way we've made other changes in this country, the military are the ones that ended a discriminatory policy against African-Americans. They can end it here and it will be great progress.

GREGORY: And finally, Senator Graham, on that question, do you think the military should end the policy?

SEN. GRAHAM: Well, it's my belief that if the policy--you don't have buy-in by the military, that's a disservice to the people in the military. They should be included in this. I'm open-minded to what the military may suggest. But I can tell you, I'm not going to make policy based on a campaign rally.

And when it comes to time, the one thing I would say again about Afghanistan, history will judge not when we left but by what we left behind. And our national security interests will be determined by what we left behind and not when we left. And if this policy about "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" changes, it should be done based not on politics, but on reason.

GREGORY: And, and, finally, Senator Graham, do you think the president deserved the Nobel Peace Prize?

SEN. GRAHAM: If he can successfully turn around Afghanistan, deter Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, I will build a bookcase for him to put it in. It depends on what he does.

GREGORY: Senator Levin?

SEN. LEVIN: I think it was a, a positive statement about hope for America, as well as a recognition of the new direction that he's setting for us.

GREGORY: All right, we are going to leave it there. This debate will continue. Thanks to all of you.

And coming next, Afghanistan, health care and jobs; the politics behind it all. Insights and analysis from our roundtable. Plus, our MEET THE PRESS Minute highlighting some eerie similarities between Afghanistan and Vietnam, only on MEET THE PRESS.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Our roundtable weighs in--Afghanistan, health care and the economy--after this brief commercial break.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: We are back and joined now by BBC America's Katty Kay, The Washington Post's Bob Woodward, National Journal's Ron Brownstein and Paul Gigot of The Wall Street Journal.

Welcome to all of you. So much to get to this week; war and peace, as I said at the outset. But let's talk about the politics of war, and I think it's striking. Here we are in October of 2009, and it was October of 2001 when President Bush made the decision to go to war. In October of 2009, another president has to make another big decision about troops in Afghanistan, and look how the politics have changed. This was a USA Today/Gallup poll about views of sending more troops, and what you see here is a huge political divide: Democrats, 36 percent for it; Republicans, 73 percent for it. Opponents on the Democratic side, 59 percent to 23 percent.

Bob Woodward, what's different? What are the politics here for this president?

MR. BOB WOODWARD: Well, I, I think what's interesting, instead of trying to figure out the future, what's going on in the White House now? It's extraordinary series of very long meetings. One of the big criticisms of Lyndon Johnson during Vietnam was he wouldn't listen, and Obama is listening. He's on a listening tour, and everyone is getting their say. And he's got to, he's got to make a giant decision not about troop numbers, but what's the strategy? And I think, you know, this is, this is the test for him. Can he come up with some consensus so the military doesn't feel wounded, so his own party doesn't feel wounded? And if he does that, you know, a lot of people, even if they don't agree with the final decision, will say he did something--again, George W. Bush, in deciding to go into Iraq, the model there was he decided...

GREGORY: Right.

MR. WOODWARD: ..."We're going to do it." All the meetings were about how to do it, never considering other options.

GREGORY: But, but there, there is a real debate about this policy that has broken into the public, and you broke this story with McChrystal's assessment. The vice president is on the cover of Newsweek magazine with his perspective as a, as a counselor to the president on important matters, including this question of Afghanistan. This is played out--we spent a lot of time talking about this in the Bush administration over Iraq. This has really played out publicly.

MR. WOODWARD: But, but--and I think to everyone's benefit, including the president's, including the military and certainly the, the public. Look, if we had had the secret report on WMD in Iraq before the war and published that, history might have been different. It's very important to know, if you can, what these classified memos say. And in the, in this case we have it, and people are talking about something very concrete.

GREGORY: Paul Gigot, the, the question is the president had a strategy. He announced it in March.

MR. PAUL GIGOT: I thought--yeah.

GREGORY: It was clear. This is what Charles Krauthammer wrote on Friday in his column: "So what does [the] commander-in-chief do now with the war he once declared had to be won but had been almost criminally underresourced by Bush? Perhaps provide the resources to win it? You would think so. ... Obama agonizes publicly and the world watches. Why?"

MR. GIGOT: I think the implication is it's because of domestic politics, particularly because of opposition within his own party. The poll that you cited showed that Republican voters and Republican legislators are still basically in charge--in favor of this strategy. The problem is he's getting enormous pressure from Capitol Hill, people saying, "The left on our party don't support it. We're going to have a hard time appropriating enough money for this." So they're putting great pressure. And you see inside the White House, the debate you're talking about, the political side is against this. A lot of the strategists in the State Department, some of the people like Richard Holbrooke and others are saying, "Look, we've been making a commitment here to Afghanistan and Pakistan. If we're going to unwind that, it could be very dangerous."

MR. RON BROWNSTEIN: Well, you know, in the speech in March, in the original speech from the president, he said we have a clear and focused goal, which was focus to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda. I think a central part of the discussion in the White House is, "Well, what does that--how do you operationalize that goal at this point?" And I think there is beginning to be--when you talk to people in the administration, there is beginning to be consensus around the idea that the core goal here is to prevent a Taliban victory that would give them control of the mechanism of the state in Afghanistan that would allow them to reconstitute bases for al-Qaeda. So the question becomes what do you do, then, if that is your goal? If the goal is not necessarily to build a democratic, pluralistic, functioning Afghan state, but to avoid this--to get to this irreducible national interest of preventing the Taliban from taking over, what does that mean in terms of troops, what does that mean in terms of training, what does that mean in terms of encouraging political reconciliation within Afghanistan itself? And my guess is that that is the track that they are heading down. That does not imply the 40,000 troops that the general wants, but it, it does not also imply simply leaving the status quo as it is. But that seems to be the core principal they are, they are organizing around.

GREGORY: But, Katty, I, I go back to this question about assumptions. You know, during Vietnam, did they fundamentally question the assumptions of the war? They didn't do that. And in this case we went to war to beat al-Qaeda. We're now in a struggle with insurgents, the Taliban, which doesn't really have designs on the United States, it wants to take over Afghanistan. And you can sort of play that out.

MS. KATTY KAY: Right. And I think...

GREGORY: And ultimately, have the assumptions of the war been challenged?

MS. KAY: I think that's exactly what is happening in the White House at the moment. In a sense, it's a false choice to say we're looking at the McChrystal plan or looking at a Biden plan. It's not necessarily just about these 40,000 troops or not 40,000 more troops, the discussions are much broader than that. And at base,

they are questioning whether, if the Taliban did take over some of these rural areas--and no one's talking about the Taliban being allowed into Kabul or even being allowed into Kandahar. Say the Taliban took over some of the rural areas of Afghanistan and the Americans pulled back some of their outposts from there, would that necessarily even mean that they allowed al-Qaeda leadership? Would the al-Qaeda leadership, which is currently in Pakistan and seems to have a reasonably solid base there, move into some of those areas of Afghanistan? So we're talking about really fundamental stuff now...

GREGORY: Right.

MS. KAY: ...about the mission itself and what would happen if the Taliban were allowed some encroachment in the country.

GREGORY: Bob, but isn't it striking that you have the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs who says we got to make Afghanistan stable, because you got to have a functioning government to protect the population. Where were the Republicans who want all these troops now and want McChrystal to be listened to eight-- during these eight years when this appears to be an underresourced war?

MR. WOODWARD: Well, as we know, we were fighting and resourcing the war in Iraq, and, and that was the focus. But I mean, how--you know, who knows what the outcome is going to be. But it is good that they are questioning these assumptions. Paul suggests that politics is driving this. I think that obviously politics is there, as it always is. I don't think it's driving it. And I think, from the reporting I've done, Obama is forcing them to dig into this. And the people who are on one side or the other are kind of--it's, it's having a calming effect on them, because they realize this is a really hard course...

MR. GIGOT: Bob, what was the, what was the debate that happened...

MS. KAY: One of the...

MR. WOODWARD: ...hard choice.

MR. GIGOT: What was the debate in March about? What was the strategic review in March about?

MS. KAY: But that was, that was a debate, that was a debate, a short-term debate to get us through the Afghan elections, to try and get us through the fighting period of the summer. And I don't think that anyone thought that the result of that debate was going to pre-empt what happened now.

MR. GIGOT: I can tell you, the Pakistanis...

MS. KAY: Now what's...

MR. GIGOT: ...the Pakistanis don't think it was a short-term result. The president, when he announced his policy, didn't make it sound like this was a short-term policy.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: But, Paul, Paul--well, that's...

MR. GIGOT: This was a strategic amendment.

MS. KAY: But, but...

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Paul, it's not--but it's not clear, first of all, that he would be renouncing what he, what he, what he affirmed in, in March. And can I just make a broader point? The politics--I want to make a counterintuitive point. The politics are not as dire, I think, as has been suggested. I mean, the, the history is that the president has enormous leeway in these kind of arguments. And the first time a majority of Americans said the Vietnam War, it was a mistake to have sent troops, was August of 1968; we stayed there another seven years. And for all of the weariness and frustration with Afghanistan, the fact is that Americans, I think, do see more of a genuine national interest there than they did in Iraq. We still have 61 percent of Americans saying it was not a mistake to send troops, and we have 80 percent of Americans in Gallup polling saying that denying terrorists the opportunity to re-establish bases in Afghanistan is in our core national interests. So I actually think he has more leeway here to drive the debate than, than, than is sometimes suggested. That doesn't mean he's going to end up where Lindsey Graham or Paul wants him to go.

GREGORY: Right.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: But he does have more freedom to set his course than, than many people argue.

GREGORY: Let, let me just shift gears a little bit. When my children wake me up in the morning, they say that they want a whipped cream waffle; when the president's children wake him up, well, they say that he's won the Nobel Peace Prize. So it's a little bit of a difference. And the reaction to him winning the Nobel Peace Prize, this war president that we're talking about, has been diverse. And here's Ruth Marcus in The Washington Post, says she voted for the president. She writes this: "This is ridiculous--embarrassing, even. I admire President Obama. I like President Obama. I voted for President Obama. But the peace prize? This is supposed to be for doing, not being." Did he deserve this?

MR. GIGOT: Did he deserve it? Well, of course he didn't deserve it. He said himself he really didn't deserve it. His own advisers say he didn't deserve it. Most of his own supporters say he didn't deserve it. And I think that you get a sense that the White House is a little embarrassed by it, because it's going to put enormous pressure on him to deliver. And they said, look, Norwegian committee gave him credit for his support for banning nuclear weapons. We're going to get rid of nuclear weapons. You're going to take U.S. values and you're going to make them--subjugate them, I think was their message, to global values, to the majority of global voters. Well, what does that mean? There are a lot of dictators out there, some of whom are in China, we have to deal with. But nonetheless, subjugating American values is, is, I think, something that's not going to really play in the American electorate.

MR. WOODWARD: Hm. Hm. But he's changed the nature of the debate in the world, and that's what he said he was going to do, and the debate is out there now. I, I think it's absolutely true, let's look at results. Clearly the committee that awards these prizes wanted to stick it to George W. Bush...

MR. BROWNSTEIN: You think?

MR. WOODWARD: ...and--yeah, I know. And it's evident. And actually, next year they're going to have another opportunity to do that, because then they can give it to Bush's dad for ending the Cold War.

MS. KAY: Some of the irony of this, of course, is that then the president is criticized for once again being the darling of European capitals, and the Nobel Prize was just another...

MR. GIGOT: Correct.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

MR. GIGOT: Correct.

MS. KAY: ...recognition of that. But actually, on the day that it was announced, I read some of the left-of-center press in Europe, and they were just as surprised as the American press here.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

GREGORY: Right.

MS. KAY: There was just as much questioning of whether this was deserving. But I, I think Bob's point is, is true to some extent, that changing the tone of the debate and shifting from a policy of strong-arming allies to engaging allies has the potential--and this is what the White House says...

GREGORY: But that, but that gets to an important point.

MS. KAY: ...that this is an aspirational prize...

GREGORY: All right.

MS. KAY: ...rather than a prize based on results, which of course it can't be.

GREGORY: What is the role of America today in the world? I mean, that's something that this sort of speaks to, because I think that's what the Europeans are responding to. Like, here is the American ideal. This is the America that we dream about. And the president said this on Friday, reflecting something he'd said recently at the United Nations as well. Listen.

(Videotape, Friday)

PRES. OBAMA: I know these challenges can be met, so long as it's recognized that they will not be met by one person or one nation alone. This award is not simply about the efforts of my administration, it's about the courageous efforts of people around the world.

(End videotape)

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

GREGORY: The question: When he receives the award in December, does he give a speech, as Peggy Noonan suggested on the pages of The Wall Street Journal editorial page, that he should talk about America's role in the world?

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. Well, look, I mean, first of all, I think the award is probably more of a problem for the Nobel committee than it is for the president. I mean, it's--it does seem premature here in the U.S. But the problem, I think it's going to change the way the prize itself is viewed in America. It will be seen as more overtly political. They've been kind of nibbling around the edge of that with these last few awards, this more so. But look, the fundamental divide in our debate out foreign policy, in the U.S. politically, is whether you believe that the, that the core way to protect and advance American interests in the world is through unilateral American action or primarily through diplomacy and alliance. The president's coalition, by and large, the, the new Democratic coalition, very heavily dependent on upper-middle class college educated voters, tend to see diplomacy and alliance as the core way of advancing American issues. In fact, as we've talked about, when you went around the country in 2008 you talked--saw--talked to people supporting President Obama, one of the principle reasons they often said was they thought he would change America's image in the world. This is a tangible reflection of that fact that you talked about. This is kind of what you see in the polling around the world. But he also has to be clear that while he does embrace this idea of America being part of a global community, he is going to defend our interests if it requires us to collide with that global community.

MS. KAY: And the, the...

GREGORY: Yeah.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Paul's, Paul's point was one made very explicitly by Republicans in 2004 when Dick Cheney and Rudy Giuliani, at the Republican convention, argued that the fact that George Bush was unpopular in Europe was proof that he was standing up for American interests. That counterargument has already been made, and I think the president does have to be sensitive to it. And he was in his statement on Friday.

MS. KAY: But the question...

MR. GIGOT: This is--go ahead, Katty.

MS. KAY: The question is going to be, in the end, whether he gets results on things like Afghanistan and Iran, even on global economic stimulus. And so far, perhaps on Iran, perhaps the Russians are making the right sorts of noises that they will cooperate with more sanctions on Iran because there has been the decision not to have the defense shield in Eastern Europe. That might be an indication of a place where you could say President Obama's new approach has produced tangible results. I'm not sure that you can say that about Afghanistan yet. The Germans have not shifted their troops from spraying poppy fields into Helmand province.

MR. WOODWARD: No. But look, what--where...

MS. KAY: And you can't say it on the Middle East peace policy yet.

MR. WOODWARD: Where's the first test of this going to be? In this Afghan strategy review now going on. General McChrystal is not just the U.S. commander, he's the NATO commander. There are 41 other nations who have troops in Afghanistan. So what McChrystal and President Obama and the others are going to do, and this is kind of a pre-Nobel test, go around the world, do the briefings, get those people involved. They have 30,000 troops in Afghanistan.

MS. KAY: And there, and there is, there is no appetite...

MR. GIGOT: You're making, you're making my point. You're making my point.

MS. KAY: Right.

MR. GIGOT: Because if you're relying on the allies in, in Afghanistan, it is a fool's mission. They will not help us. They have not helped us. The Germans won't even fight.

MS. KAY: Well, no...

MR. WOODWARD: You know, I mean...

MS. KAY: On Wednesday...

MR. WOODWARD: ...that's insulting to the 30,000 troops...

MS. KAY: Right.

MR. WOODWARD: ...who are there.

MS. KAY: On Wednesday, actually, the British will announce...

MR. WOODWARD: I mean, you're saying that they...

MR. GIGOT: No, and you're, and you're right about this, the Canadians and others are fighting and dying. But ultimately, if you think that they are--the, the Canadians have already set a date explicitly to exit in 2011.

MR. WOODWARD: 2011.

MS. KAY: I think it's actually--I mean...

MR. WOODWARD: Yes, sure.

MR. GIGOT: That's right. And, and if we're going to finish this job the Americans will have to lead, and that is why Madeleine Albite--Albright called America a dispensable nation.

MR. WOODWARD: Wait...(unintelligible).

MR. BROWNSTEIN: And that's a, and that is a test, and, and that will be one of the tests for the president. I mean, one of the questions asked in 2008, legitimately, was will a greater popularity for the U.S. around the world translate into tangible results?

MS. KAY: Yes, absolutely. Because that's the whole thing.

GREGORY: Right.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: And right now, in polling around the world, often you see publics in other countries saying they--more people trust him than their own national leaders to make the right decisions in international affairs.

MS. KAY: But interestingly...

GREGORY: I, I want to spend...

MR. BROWNSTEIN: That is not translating to anything on the ground.

GREGORY: We've just got a few more minutes. I want to bring it back to domestic policy, the economy and health care. Look at this poll numbers from the Quinnipiac University poll out this week in terms of the most important problem today: the economy, 42 percent; health care, 18 percent; war, 7 percent. We spend a lot of time about war, it's usually important. But, Ron, the economy right now is huge, whether it's approaching double-digit unemployment. This is still the, the biggest challenge for this president. And then the question, is there more that the president should be doing to create jobs?

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. Well, and clearly I think unemployment is shaping the national mood. We do a quarterly poll, AllState/National Journal Heartland Monitor poll, and in the survey that we just put out this week it is a very toxic mix of attitudes, and, and, and, and kind of a combustible mix of attitudes out there

right now. You see the public at once apprehensive about the future, with large majorities saying they're concerned there's going to be more boom and bust in the years to come. You see declining trust in every major institution--government, the private sector, the financial sector. And at the same time you see intense polarization along partisan lines, racial lines, to some extent age and income lines about what we do next. As long as you have this overhanging fear of unemployment out there, I think it is very difficult to build consensus for any direction.

GREGORY: Hm.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: So yes, I think the White House is going to be forced to look at other means of dealing with this. There is discussion about a job creating--a, a tax credit for people who create jobs. The problem is it's expensive to do that in a meaningful way. And the next area of the debate will be if we go down the road of trying to create a jobs incentive tax credit, do you take the money away from already allocated dollars for the stimulus or do you simply make the deficit larger?

GREGORY: Hm.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: But I'm--they're beginning to discuss this, I don't think there's any decision imminent. But clearly, clearly this unemployment is, is hanging over, I think, and shaping this national mood, and there's a great deal of anxiety out there about where we're going as a country.

MR. WOODWARD: But, but, but every, every president learns they're not commander-in-chief of the economy, and Obama is learning that too. And he is commander-in-chief of the military, and the confidence factor is so important here. If he does this in a way that the military is satisfied; if his own party, if the Republicans are satisfied, then people will say, "OK, we're confident in him." If he fails, if the--if there is a breach between the White House and the military, which would be the nightmare for Obama and the people who run the military, then we're really in trouble.

GREGORY: Paul Gigot, if you think about the economy and the prospect of a--some kind of second stimulus to create jobs, and health care, which gained some momentum this week, you've got some prominent Republicans signing on as the bill makes it way through the Senate, what happens?

MR. GIGOT: Well, I think health care is going to pass in, in some form. And frankly, the fact that it hasn't moved through yet is creating enormous uncertainty. People would--in the--who are job creators, small business, big business, they want to know what costs is it going to take to hire these employees? And there's so much uncertainty now about public policy in Washington. How much are--is there going to be a big energy tax? How big is a healthcare tax going to be? What about antitrust policy? What about contracts? How secure are they? That is weighing heavily on job creation.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: Hm.

MR. GIGOT: Even as we get what otherwise is a, is a, is a recovery. We're going to have 3 percent growth, I think, in the latter half of this year. But unfortunately, it's probably not going to have any jobs until this Washington uncertainty settles down.

GREGORY: Whether it's war or health care, or still on the economy, Katty Kay, I spoke to a business leader last week who said, "You know, the problem is there's just no impetus for robust job creation and economic growth." Double-digit inflation, if that's coming, hanging over the midterm race, what impact does it have?

MS. KAY: Well, most economists that I've spoken to have said they don't see jobs turning around until next summer. So actually, in some senses we are on track. It's not surprising that jobs are still being lost at the moment. Try telling that, though, to people who are losing their jobs. It's not a very reassuring prospect to say, "Well, actually, this is what economists were expecting." If they do start turning around, if the numbers start turning around next summer, then that, of course, is heading into the midterms and then that starts to look better for the president. But it's going to be all about jobs next summer.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: The...

GREGORY: I've got to--go ahead, real quick.

MR. BROWNSTEIN: The--I say, the picture to me, even more complicated. You may have positive job growth early next year, but not enough to prevent unemployment from continuing to rise. How the public reacts to that will be a big impact on 2010.

GREGORY: We're going to leave it there. Thank you all very much.

Coming next, our MEET THE PRESS Minute from 1968, at the height of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara appears here and has some surprising things to say about how the war had been conducted after this brief station break.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: We're back with our MEET THE PRESS Minute. In the early hours of January 31st, 1968, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched the Tet Offensive, a massive and deadly attack against more than a hundred cities and towns throughout South Vietnam, catching U.S. forces off guard. U.S. troops recovered quickly, though, and managed to deliver a military defeat to the Viet Cong. Still, the incident became a public relations and political defeat for the Johnson administration, fueling the anti-war movement back home. It also marked the height of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The man who would become known as the key architect of that war, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, had already announced his impending resignation months earlier. In a rare interview, he appeared here on MEET THE PRESS just four days after the Tet Offensive and made the stark admission that the war had not gone as planned.

(Videotape, February 4, 1968)

MR. MAX FRANKEL: Looking back over this long conflict, and especially in this rather agonized week in Vietnam, if we had to do it all over again, would you make any major changes in our approach?

SEC'Y ROBERT McNAMARA: Oh, I, I--this is not an appropriate time for me to be talking of changes in--with hindsight. There's no question but what five or 10 or 20 years from now the historians will find actions that might have been done differently. I'm sure they will. I--as a matter of fact, my wife pointed out to me the other day four lines from T.S. Eliot, to answer your question. Eliot said, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Now, that applies to Vietnam. I'm learning more and more about Vietnam every day. There's no question I see better today than I did three years ago or five years ago what might have been done there.

MR. FRANKEL: Are you suggesting...

SEC'Y McNAMARA: On balance, on balance, I feel much the way the Asian leaders do. I think the action that this government has followed, the policies it's followed, the objectives it's had in Vietnam are wise. I don't, by any means, suggest that we haven't made mistakes over the many, many years that we've been pursuing those objectives.

MR. FRANKEL: You seem to suggest that we really didn't--that none of us appreciated what we were really getting into.

SEC'Y McNAMARA: I don't think any of us predicted seven years ago or 15 years ago the deployment of 500,000 men to Vietnam. I know I didn't.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: One month later the U.S. commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, requested an additional 206,000 troops from President Johnson. That request was denied as the administration began a reassessment of the policy and ultimately an effort to de-escalate the war. Still, the last U.S. military unit would not leave Vietnam until March of 1973. All told, the U.S. lost more than 58,000 troops during the war.

We'll talk more about the parallels between Vietnam and Afghanistan and hear from Bob Woodward about his 2007 interview with Robert McNamara, his last interview on record before his death, where McNamara goes further than ever before about the mismanagement of the Vietnam War. We'll post that conversation later today in our MEET THE PRESS Take Two Web Extra on our Web site. Plus, look for updates from me throughout the week. It's all at mtp.msnbc.com. And we'll be right back.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Before we go today, a couple of programming notes. Tonight, tune in to the premiere of our chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel's "Tip of the Spear," a one-hour special documentary on the lives of soldiers on the front lines of the war in Afghanistan. That's tonight at MSNBC at 8 PM Eastern. And next

Sunday, right here on MEET THE PRESS, we kick off NBC's special weeklong series A Woman's Nation, and we'll feature a special conversation with the first lady of California and the project's guest editor, Maria Shriver. You'll also want to watch the surging Los Angeles Dodgers in the National League Championship Series.

That's all for today. We'll be back next week. If it's Sunday, it's MEET THE PRESS.

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