

May 16, 2004

Guests: Secretary Colin Powell, Department of State; Senator Joseph Biden, D-DE, Ranking Member, Foreign Relations Committee; Senator John McCain, R-AZ, Armed Services Committee

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Guests: Secretary Colin Powell, Department of State; Senator Joseph Biden, D-DE, Ranking Member, Foreign Relations Committee; Senator John McCain, R-AZ, Armed Services Committee

Moderator/Panelist: Tim Russert - NBC News

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Meet the Press (NBC News) - Sunday, May 16, 2004

Tim Russert: Our issues this Sunday: Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld talks to the troops in Iraq about prison abuse.

(Videotape):

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: In recent months, we've seen abuses here under our responsibility and it's been a body blow for all of us, but it doesn't represent America.

(End videotape)

Russert: An American civilian is beheaded.

(Videotape):

President George W. Bush: There is no justification for the brutal execution of Nicholas Berg--no justification whatsoever.

(End videotape)

Russert: And the president asked Congress for more money for Iraq. What now?

With us: the Secretary of State, Colin Powell.

Will Iraq be the most important issue in the Bush-Kerry race? With us: former POW, now Republican senator from Arizona, John McCain, and the ranking Democrat of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joe Biden of Delaware.

Powell, McCain, Biden, only on Meet the Press.

And in our Meet the Press Minute, a wartime secretary of Defense admits mistakes and miscalculations.

(Videotape):

Secretary Robert McNamara: I don't think any of us predicted seven years ago or 15 years ago the climate of 500,000 men in Vietnam. I know I didn't.

(End videotape)

Russert: But first: Earlier this morning, I spoke to Secretary of State Colin Powell, who is in Jordan.

Secretary Powell, good morning.

Let me show you the headline that greeted Americans and people around the world yesterday. "Powell Says Troops Would Leave Iraq if New Leaders Asked." What happened to staying the course?

Secretary of State Colin Powell: We are planning to stay the course and we expect that the Iraqi interim government that will come into place on the 1st of July, would certainly ask us to remain and help them stay the course. Excuse me, Tim. But, basically, what we are anxious to do is return sovereignty, but it's a long way between that initial return of sovereignty and national elections. And we're confident that we will stay the course. This was in response to a specific question as to what sovereignty meant.

Russert: But, Mr. Secretary, if you look at a poll taken by our own government, the Coalition Provisional Authority, it says, "Four out of five Iraqis report holding a negative view of the U.S. occupation authority and of coalition forces, according to a new poll conducted for the occupation authority. In the poll ... 82 percent said they disapprove of the U.S. and allied militaries in Iraq."

This was before the allegations of prison abuse. If a government is in power in Iraq, is responsive to its people, why wouldn't they say to the U.S, "Get out"?

Powell: Because there's still a need for the U.S. to remain. They need our financial support. They need the reconstruction effort that is under way. And, frankly, they need the U.S. armed forces and the other coalition forces that are present to help create an environment of security and stability so they can get on with the process of rebuilding their country and preparing themselves for national elections. We don't want to stay one day longer than we have to, but we know they want us to remain long enough so that they have their own security forces built up and in place and that'll take some time.

Russert: John McCain said this the other day, Mr. Secretary: "If we fail in Iraq, we will have taught our enemies the lesson of Mogadishu, only one hundredfold: If you inflict enough pain, America will leave. Iraq will then descend into chaos and civil war. Warlords will reign. There will be bloodletting. We will have energized the extremists and created a breeding ground for terrorists, dooming the Arab world."

Do you agree?

Powell: We certainly are not going to cut and run. The president's made that clear. And quite the contrary, as you see from what Secretary Rumsfeld and General John Abizaid have done, we are stabilizing our force at a higher level than we thought we would at this point? Why? Because there is still danger there. Why? Because the work is not finished. Why? Because we need to help the Iraqi interim government as it is established create an environment of security.

So we're not going to walk away. We're not going to cut and run. We're going to stay and help the Iraqis do what we know the Iraqi people want and that is to have a democracy based on free elections. It takes time to get there and we are on our way with the creation of an Iraqi interim government.

Over the past several weeks, we've set up 11 Iraqi ministries that are now free-standing, not connected to the Coalition Provisional Authority. Of course, the Iraqis want the occupation to end. They want the Coalition Provisional Authority to cease its work and that's going to happen when this Iraqi interim government is established, but they need our troops there for some considerable period of time in the future to provide the security environment needed so that they can have free, open and fair election and have the time to build up their own security forces.

Russert: In those free, open and fair elections, if the Iraqi people choose an Islamic theocracy similar to what we have in Iran, we would accept that?

Powell: We will have to accept what the Iraqi people decide upon. But right now, I think most Iraqis understand that in order to live together in peace as a single nation, they have to have a nation which understands the role of

the majority but respects the role of minorities within a country. And they know they have to have, for international acceptability, a country that preserves human rights, that is founded on democracy, that respects the rights of all individuals and respects the rights of women, that respects basic tenets with respect to open speech and meeting fundamental needs of the people and the fundamental standards of human rights that all of us believe in.

Russert: But, Mr. Secretary, if the Iraqis opt for an Islamic theocracy, which could easily become a haven for terrorists, how then do we explain to the 782 who died or the nearly over 4,000 who were wounded or injured that this was worth the fight?

Powell: I don't think that's going to be the case. I think that those who have given their lives in the cause of freedom for the Iraqi people will see that the Iraqi people are interested in creating a democracy. If you look at the same kind of polling that you mentioned earlier, that's what they are interested in, that's what they're looking for.

If you talk to some of the Shia leaders, such as Mr. Sistani and others, Ayatollah Sistani, they are talking about openness and freedom. Surely everybody understands it is a nation that rests on the faith of Islam, but they also know that in order to be successful as a 21st-century country, they have to respect the rights of all individuals and not allow a purely fundamentalist regime to arise in the country. And my sensing of what the Iraqi people want is a democracy with a majority, but with respect for all the minorities, all working together to create the kind of country they'll be proud of.

Russert: Bob Woodruff reports that on August 5, 2002, you met with the president and warned him about Iraq; that, in your words, "You break it, you bought it." In light of the fact that we have miscalculated being greeted as liberators, miscalculated the number of troops needed, miscalculated the extent of weapons of mass destruction, do you wish the president had followed your advice?

Powell: My advice to the president was that we had to be sure that we understood the difficulties of managing this country once we took it over, if that's what it came to. The advice I gave to the president was that we should take it to the international community, to the United Nations, to see if there was a diplomatic solution before we resorted to the use of force. And if we had to resort to the use of force, we had made the efforts with the United Nations so that we could get coalition partners to join us. And the president followed that advice.

My advice to the president was to make sure that we understood all the consequences of the actions that we're about to take. And he took that advice, and he responded to that advice by going to the United Nations. And we went to the United Nations. We knew that it would either be solved diplomatically or through of use of force. And we knew that if it was the use of force, we would be in for a challenging time. We would be responsible for the fate of 25 million Iraqis. The president understood that. And we are acting on that responsibility.

We have 138,000 troops there providing security. We have provided \$18 billion for reconstruction and we're helping now the Iraqi people develop a democratic system. We are putting in place ministries that are functioning and we're going to be moving forward to elections. And so, yes, the place was broken after the war. And we're well on our way to fixing it.

Russert: Let me show you the video of Nicholas Berg, with the terrorists behind him who are about to behead him. When you see that picture and then what happened to Mr. Berg, are you satisfied with the level of outrage that exists in the Arab world, the level of outrage that has been formally announced by Arab leaders?

Powell: I think that should be a higher level of outrage. Notwithstanding what people think, what we did at the prison, there can be no comparison to the actions of a few who are going to be punished and brought to justice as a result of what happened at Abu Ghraib. But what we saw with this horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible murder of Mr. Berg should be deplored throughout the world. It is an outrage and the terrible thing about it is these individuals are yet to be brought to justice. They have no concept of justice. They have no concept of right. What a horrible thing for them to have done. But as the president said, we will do everything we can to bring all of these people to justice so they can pay for this horrendous crime.

Russert: Why the silence from the Arab world about Mr. Berg?

Powell: Well, I don't know, Tim. I wish I could explain that. There ought to be outrage. There is anger in the Arab world about some of our actions, but that is no excuse for any silence on the part of any Arab leader for this kind of murder. This kind of murder is unacceptable in anyone's religion, in anybody's political system, that is a political system based on any kind of understanding and respect for human rights. And so I would like to have seen a much higher level of outrage throughout the world, and especially the Arab world, for this kind of action.

Russert: Let me show you a picture of a United States soldier holding an Iraqi prisoner by a dog leash. That, too, is seen around the world. This morning, Seymour Hersh reports, "The roots of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists but in a decision, approved last year by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to expand a highly secret operation, which had been focussed on the hunt for Al Qaeda, to the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq. ... According to interviews with several past and present American intelligence officials, the Pentagon's operations, known inside the intelligence community by several code words, including Copper Green, encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq."

Your reaction.

Powell: I haven't read the article and I don't know anything about the substance of the article. I've just seen a quick summary of it, so I will have to yield to the Defense Department to respond. And I think the initial response from the Defense Department is that there is no substance to the article, but I will have to yield to the Defense Department to handle any further comment, Tim.

Russert: But, Mr. Secretary, Newsweek reports that on January 25, 2002, the White House counsel, Alberto Gonzales, wrote a memo to your department which said, "In my judgment, this new paradigm of terrorism renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitation on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions, the Geneva Accords." And it is reported that you hit the roof when you saw that memo to scale back, in effect, on the rules governing the treatment of prisoners. Is that accurate?

Powell: I don't recall the specific memo and I wouldn't comment on the specific memo without rereading it again. But I think I have always said that the Geneva Accord is an important standard in international law, and we have to comply with it, either by the letter, if it's appropriate to those individuals in our custody that they are really directly under the Geneva Convention, or if they're illegal non-combatants and not directly under the convention, we should treat them nevertheless in a humane manner in accordance with what is expected of us by international law and the Geneva Convention.

Russert: Mr. Secretary, you met with the International Red Cross on January 15. In February, they released their report which said that, amongst the other allegations, male prisoners were forced to wear women's underwear; prisoners were beaten by coalition forces, in one case leading to death; coalition forces firing on unarmed prisoners. And then in May, you and others in the administration said you were "shocked" by the allegations about U.S. forces' treatment of Iraqi prisoners. Didn't you have a heads-up on this whole problem?

Powell: In January, when I met with the head of the International Committee for the Red Cross, Mr. Kellenberger, he said to me that a report would be coming and it would outline some serious problems with respect to the treatment of prisoners in Iraq. We were aware of that within the administration. He also met with Dr. Rice and with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz.

And then in early February, the actual report was presented to our authorities out in Baghdad, both to Ambassador Bremer's office and to General Sanchez's office. By then, of course, an investigation was already under way as a result of a soldier coming forward in the middle of January and outlining specific cases of abuse, and so an investigation was well under way by time the report was made available in February to the command. I first saw the report in March when it was made available eventually to us in Washington.

Russert: But you're a military man. Do you believe that national reservists would go to Baghdad with hoods or dog leashes and actually undertake that kind of activity without it being devised by someone higher up?

Powell: I wouldn't have believed that any American soldiers would have done any such thing, either on their own volition or even if someone higher up had told them. I'm not aware of anybody higher up telling them. But that's why Secretary Rumsfeld has commissioned all of these inquiries to get to the bottom of it.

What these individuals did was wrong, was against rules and regulations. It was against anything they should have learned in their home, in their community, in their upbringing. So we have a terrible collapse of order that took place in that prison cell block. Let's not use this to contaminate the wonderful work being done by tens of thousands of other young American soldiers in Iraq. We'll get to the bottom of this. Justice will be served.

The command responded promptly. Court-martials are already scheduled. And I know that the president wants to make sure that we follow the chain of accountability up to see if there was anybody above these soldiers who knew what was going on, or in any way created a command climate in which such activities might in some bizarre way be found acceptable. They were not acceptable in any way. And one soldier stood up and said, "I know this

is wrong," reported it to his chain of command, and the chain of command responded the very next day with the launching of an investigation that became the General Taguba investigation.

Russert: Finally, Mr. Secretary, in February of 2003, you placed your enormous personal credibility before the United Nations and laid out a case against Saddam Hussein citing...

Powell: Not off.

Emily: No. They can't use it. They're editing it. They (unintelligible).

Powell: He's still asking me questions. Tim.

Emily: He was not...

Powell: Tim, I'm sorry, I lost you.

Russert: I'm right here, Mr. Secretary. I would hope they would put you back on camera. I don't know who did that.

Powell: We really...

Russert: I think that was one of your staff, Mr. Secretary. I don't think that's appropriate.

Powell: Emily, get out of the way.

Emily: OK.

Powell: Bring the camera back, please. I think we're back on, Tim. Go ahead with your last question.

Russert: Thank you very much, sir. In February of 2003, you put your enormous personal reputation on the line before the United Nations and said that you had solid sources for the case against Saddam Hussein. It now appears that an agent called Curveball had misled the CIA by suggesting that Saddam had trucks and trains that were delivering biological and chemical weapons. How concerned are you that some of the information you shared with the world is now inaccurate and discredited?

Powell: I'm very concerned. When I made that presentation in February 2003, it was based on the best information that the Central Intelligence Agency made available to me. We studied it carefully; we looked at the sourcing in the case of the mobile trucks and trains. There was multiple sourcing for that. Unfortunately, that multiple sourcing over time has turned out to be not accurate. And so I'm deeply disappointed. But I'm also comfortable that at the time that I made the presentation, it reflected the collective judgment, the sound judgment of the intelligence community. But it turned out that the sourcing was inaccurate and wrong and in some cases, deliberately misleading. And for that, I am disappointed and I regret it.

Russert: Mr. Secretary, we thank you very much for joining us again and sharing your views with us today.

Powell: Thanks, Tim.

Russert: And that was an unedited interview with the secretary of state taped earlier this morning from Jordan. We appreciate Secretary Powell's willingness to overrule his press aide's attempt to abruptly cut off our discussion as I began to ask my final question.

Coming next, the view from the Senate with Republican John McCain and Democrat Joe Biden. Then, our Meet the Press Minute, with wartime Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara from 36 years ago. All coming up right here on Meet the Press.

Russert: Senator John McCain, Senator Joe Biden, what should we do in Iraq? After this station break.

Russert: And we are back.

Senators McCain and Biden, welcome.

Senator McCain, let me ask you about a speech you gave in April of this year. "...as we continue to see large numbers of American casualties a year after Americans were told major combat was over, I fear U.S. public support is eroding. So I think we need to admit that serious errors have been made, increase our troop strength in Iraq and do what's necessary to turn this thing around."

What serious errors were made?

Sen. John McCain, R-AZ: I think several. One was the lack of sufficient troops there which allowed the looting to take place, which established kind of a lawless environment. I think any law enforcement person would tell you that the environment is a very important aspect of it. The fact that we island-hopped and left certain areas of towns and cities around Baghdad as well as in the Sunni Triangle alone. I think it's because we probably didn't make sufficient plans to turn over the government as quickly as possible and a level of expectation that probably was unrealistic, which led to a certain amount of disappointment, but a lot of it had to do with lack of sufficient troop strength at the time that "combat phase" was over.

Russert: Senator Biden, what serious errors were made?

Sen. Joseph Biden, D-DE: First of all, there was no imminent threat. By making it an imminent threat, we squandered the opportunity to get international support. We could have easily done this instead of in the fall, in the spring--isolated the French and Germans, gotten more support, number one.

Number two, too little power. John's right. Imagine if we had not treated the French--excuse me, the Turks with such disdain, that 4th ID would have come down from the north through the Sunni Triangle, there may not be a Sunni Triangle. As John pointed out, too few troops, looting, 850,000 tons of weapons left open, not able to guard them and then we went with too little legitimacy. Remember the notion. There was going to be a guy named Garner and a guy named Chalabi. Before they even flew in troops, they flew in Chalabi who was going to come from the south as a Shia and, you know, be the liberator from outside.

I think they just miscalculated from the very beginning which is--that doesn't bother me as much as the failure to acknowledge how badly they miscalculated, and as John suggested and others of us have, do something about it. A year ago, I called for more force. John visited after that, as well, argued we need more force. I don't know what it is. They seem to be unwilling to acknowledge the mistakes made and trying to correct them.

Russert: You mentioned Mr. Ahmad Chalabi. He was the person responsible for the agent Curveball, that I talked about with Secretary Powell, who gave discredited information. Mr. Chalabi is still on the payroll of the United States government for three...

Biden: Almost 400 a month.

Russert: Four hundred thousand dollars...

Biden: A month.

Russert: ...per month.

Biden: Yeah.

Russert: Should he be taken off?

Biden: He should have been taken off to begin with. Look, I was on your show after Chuck Hagel and I came back from--after we sort of got smuggled into northern Iraq before the war. The reason we went to see the Talibani and Barzani clans of the north and I said to them--I said, "By the way," I said, "Tell me about Chalabi. Are you guys with Chalabi?" They said, "Chalabi's his own man. We're not part of him," even though they formed the INC with him.

I think he seems to be the darling of the vice president and of some of the civilians in the Defense Department. I think he's a problem, he's not part of the solution. But yet there seems to be an unwillingness to break from him.

Russert: Senator McCain, in that speech I read to you a few minutes ago, you said "to do what's necessary to turn this thing around." I'm going to ask both you and Senator Biden to try to be very constructive here. What specifically must President Bush do "to turn this thing around"?

McCain: I believe that we have to make sure that we stick to the June 30 date. I believe we should accelerate the date of the elections. I think that many parts of the country, including in Baghdad, that we could have these elections. They may be flawed but the quicker we turn the government of the Iraqi people over to the Iraqi people, the more it will be then the insurgents verses the Iraqi government rather than the insurgents against us. And I would accelerate the timetable for the elections and I would certainly enter into the status of forces agreement so that we would know exactly the relationship between the U.S. military and new Iraqi government.

Russert: Senator Biden?

Biden: About the same as John. I would make this about the Iraqi people, not about us. Look, it's real simple. Why are we there? We're there now to make sure the Iraqis end up with a government. What kind of government? One that's secure, its own borders, is representative, is not a threat to its neighbors and does not have weapons of mass destruction. How do you get there? You get there by an election.

An election is going to take place, hopefully in November or December of 2005. What do you need to do that? You need more security and more legitimacy. Right now, 82 percent of the people don't want us there. This new government we're going to get, they're not going to be happy if they wake up on July the 1st and there are still 138,000 Americans and no one else. We need a contact group. We need to get to the major powers and, say, "Look, here's the deal, guys. Sign on to Brahimi's plan. Help us pass a resolution that is a NATO-led multilateral force to be in place for Iraq," giving an excuse to the Iraqi government to be able to cooperate.

And those who say NATO will not cooperate, I met with five four-stars for a two-hour conversation yesterday, with Jim Jones. If the president will lead, if the president gets on a plane and/or summons or asks the major European leaders to come here, NATO will authorize the use of NATO forces.

Russert: Do you believe President Bush should reach out to Russian President Putin, French President Chirac, German Chancellor Schroeder, and meet with them?

Biden: Absolutely. Positively. This is about presidential leadership. That's what it takes. It needs a president. I don't believe this is lost. I believe it will be lost if the president does not lead.

Russert: Senator McCain, should the president embark on such a mission, meeting with Putin, Chirac and Schroeder?

Biden: As well as Blair.

McCain: I think he should. I think he should at every opportunity and I think that we should encourage more U.S. participation, but at this point I disagree with my friend Joe. I think the likelihood of that happening is not good. We have to increase U.S. troop strength to do the jobs that's necessary.

Biden: I agree.

McCain: But let me just say that the Iraqi people don't want Americans there as occupiers. But if the Iraqi people saw us there as a way to provide security and to bolster the government and help them make this transition, I think these numbers would be very different. I just don't see our friends in Paris now agreeing to significant NATO involvement. I'm sorry to tell you, because of many of the errors in the past, the bulk of the responsibility is going to lie with America. But should President Bush seek help wherever he can? Absolutely. But it's still going to be America's mission.

Biden: Tim, it is America's mission. Ninety percent of the troops will remain American. We've got to change the face of it, though. No German troops, no French troops, the no German or French veto for NATO-led force. I want a NATO commander, I want--which is an American. I want a NATO label on it. That, in turn, will get additional likelihood of Muslim countries being willing to participate. But the additional U.S. forces must be U.S. forces. But you need legitimacy along with it, Tim. And the legitimacy requires to give the new Iraqi government excuse to say, "It's not the same old deal."

Russert: Senator McCain, you know politics is politics. If 82 percent of the Iraqi people don't want U.S. troops there, if there are, in fact, free elections in Iraq, when someone runs for office, they probably in all likelihood will have to run against America or not be perceived as an American puppet. And what happens in those elected Iraqis say, "We don't want you here?"

McCain: Well, again, I just have to repeat what I said before. I believe that the religious leaders, the Shiites who have now turned on al-Sadr, and others understand that they cannot let an insurgency take over their country in ensuing chaos and return to some kind of authoritarian government. I believe that if there's a relationship where the United States of America and our allies--and I'm not that much in disagreement with Joe--do provide the security to make that government function well, then I think the Iraqi people would appreciate it. Eighty-two percent of them want us out because they don't want us governing their country, and I understand that.

Russert: Senator Biden, we have a situation where Mr. Brahimi, the U.N. representative in Iraq, has called Israel's policies poison and said the United States is supporting poison. We have a situation where Saddam's

military is in charge of Fallujah. When you look at the situation in Iraq now, are you optimistic that it can get to a democracy anytime soon?

Biden: I've never been of the view, never once said that I thought there could be a democracy in the terms of a liberal Western democracy. My greatest hope would be that there'd be a representative government, secure within its own borders, where the bulk of the Iraqi people thought they had a stake in the outcome of that government. I still think that's possible, but, Tim, I'm not playing a game here. It requires presidential leadership. I met with the president on Wednesday and he asked me the same question. I said, "Mr. President, you sit in a chair that commands worldwide respect and you have a reputation for moral clarity. It's time for you to lead, Mr. President." We keep talking about not cutting and running. I want this administration to stop walking and reacting. They walk and they react. There's no sense of urgency here.

Russert: Senator McCain, do you think the Bush administration understands the sense of urgency necessary to deal with Iraq at this moment?

McCain: I think they're beginning to. I think the increase in troops, which actually has taken place and more may be needed, is an indication of that. I believe this commitment to hold firm to the June 30 date. As was mentioned earlier, mistakes happen in war. That's why we try to avoid them. Mistakes have been made. I think we all acknowledge that. The important thing is, we are in a crucial time. This is the point where we can still achieve success in Iraq if we get a legitimate election and a legitimate government in power. And now's the time that, yes, we need presidential leadership and we need congressional leadership, and we have to understand that if we lose this conflict, the consequences are enormous. And the benefits of success are also enormous.

Russert: Let me turn to the whole issue of the alleged torture of Iraqi prisoners. Senator Ted Kennedy on Monday took to the floor of the Senate and made this observation:

(Videotape, Monday):

Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-MA: On March 19, 2004, President Bush asked: Who would prefer Saddam's torture chambers still be open? Shamefully, we now learn that Saddam's torture chambers reopened under new management, U.S. management.

(End videotape)

Russert: Is that appropriate, Senator Biden?

Biden: I think it's a little harsh. Look, I don't think they're nearly equivalent, but I do think that the damage done by the treatment of Iraqi prisoners, and we saw the pictures and John--look, I yield to John totally on this. I think John has been absolutely eloquent about the lack of facility, the lack of success that comes with this kind of treatment. And it just undermines us. Big nations can't act small. Noble nations can't act meanly. It is not comparable to say that, "Well, they do it; therefore, we can do it similarly." It does us incredible damage, but I don't think it's comparable to Saddam's torture chambers by any stretch of the imagination. But it is as damaging to us as Saddam's actions were to his reputation.

Russert: Senator McCain, there is a debate within your Republican Party as to how to deal with this particular issue. Senator Inhofe of Oklahoma on Tuesday offered this:

(Videotape, Tuesday):

Sen. James Inhofe, R-OK: ...this outrage everyone seems to have about the treatment of these prisoners. I have to say--and I'm probably not the only one up at this table that is more outraged by the outrage than we are by the treatment.

(End videotape)

Russert: You were someone who was tortured in a North Vietnamese prison cell. Can you talk about torture of a soldier and how you see it as relates to this particular allegation against U.S. soldiers?

McCain: Tim, I believe my view is shaped more by my view of the role of America and the world than whether I was in a prison camp more than 30 years ago. I'm an idealist. I adhere to Wilsonian principles. I believe we are the noblest experiment in the history of the world, and now we are the world's superpower and we have the opportunity to bring democracy and freedom to every part of the world, not through bullets and Humvees but through our example. With all our problems and flaws that we have, which I point out almost every day, we are an incredible example to the world. We are a shining city on a hill. And what this does is that it diminishes our

reputation so dramatically.

You're going to see pictures of that guard with a leash on an Iraqi in Burma and in Belarus. And that's a huge penalty that we'll be paying for the sins of a few or some. We still don't know how systemic this was and all the ramifications of it. We've got to get to the bottom of it. We've got to prove that we as a nation punish those-- another difference between us and Saddam Hussein...

Biden: That's true.

McCain: ...and other countries criticizing us, we will punish those responsible. In many countries that are criticizing us today, it is common practice. But that doesn't matter. We distinguish ourselves by our treatment of our enemies. And there are conventions for the treatment of prisoners of war. And my view in Iraq, they were violated and we cannot let this happen again. And you got to get everything out as quickly as possible. Take remedial action and move forward and take the measures that we were talking about earlier in the program.

Russert: So you are not outraged by the outrage?

McCain: No. I'm saddened. I'm saddened by what it hurts the reputation of our brave young men and women who are serving with such honor and sacrifice. But I'm also saddened by the image of America in the world. There are prisons all over the world that are looking for our adherence to human rights, the people are, and that we will bring about their freedom. This diminishes our ability to achieve that goal.

Russert: Senator Biden, as I mentioned to Secretary Powell, New Yorker magazine has an article today talking about Operation Copper Green, which suggests that this coercion was instructed by the highest levels of the Pentagon. The Pentagon is denying that. Newsweek reports, White House counsel Alberto Gonzales wrote a memo back in 2002 suggesting that the Geneva Accords' strict limitations had become somewhat obsolete and rendered quaint. How high up do you believe this scandal may go?

Biden: I don't know. It's much higher than these young guards. Look, there's obviously, at a minimum, a policy of a studied ambiguity here, Tim. There is plausible deniability built in everywhere here. There's sort of the morphing of the rules of treatment. We can treat al-Qaeda this way and we can't treat prisoners captured this way, but where do insurgents fit, etc.? This is a dangerous slope.

And, look, we're talking about democracy in the Middle East. The single most essential element of democracy is accountability. There is no accountability so far. It cannot be just those people in that prison. It doesn't seem rational, based on my experience. And another piece of this is, where is this notion of the for the good of the country? Where's the nobility of this administration, somebody, coming forward and saying more than, "I take responsibility but I have--but there are no consequences here"?

I mean, look, it's not merely whether or not they were involved, it's whether or not they should have known and didn't do anything. But, again, accountability. The rest of the world, as John is saying, is looking for who is responsible. Are we different than other nations?

Russert: Senator McCain, you're a military man, highly decorated. Do you think it's plausible that National Guardsmen and Reservists would undertake this kind of activity without being instructed?

McCain: I don't think so. I think that there's real questions about this "shift in responsibility" where military intelligence people were given authority over the Guards. There are so many questions that need to be answered. And I agree with Joe in this respect. We need to take this as far up as it goes and we need to do it quickly and I am convinced that the sooner we do that, the sooner the United States of America can begin to reassert its rightful place in the world as a leading advocate for democracy and human rights. And we are signatories to certain protocols as well as adherence to the Geneva Convention which should apply in Iraq.

Russert: This is a presidential election year. I don't have to tell either of you gentlemen. Newsweek, this is the latest poll. President Bush's job approval? Approve, 42 percent; disapprove, 52 percent. President Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq? Approve, 35 percent; disapprove, 57 percent. Senator McCain, what do those numbers tell you for Republican President George Bush?

McCain: It means that we've got to get this issue--bring closure to this issue as quickly as possible, assign whatever responsibility there is and move on, because the thing that bothers me more than the presidential implications is that Americans, when they saw these pictures, turned away from him, as I turned away when I saw them, and we cannot lose this and we cannot lose the American support, public support for this conflict. And that's, I think, the more serious consequences than even to the fortunes of President Bush.

Russert: Senator McCain, do you believe that President Bush has bet his presidency on the outcome of the war in Iraq?

McCain: No, I think he's bet it on the economy, which is becoming very strong and going to be very helpful to him. But, clearly, what happens in Iraq will have significant impact. And I think one of the aspects of that will be the level of casualties and how Americans believe that we have done our stated goal of bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq.

Russert: Senator Biden, even though President Bush has a 42-percent job approval and 57 percent disapprove of his handling of the war in Iraq, in the head-to-head race with Senator Kerry, it's John Kerry, 43 percent, George Bush 42 percent, Ralph Nader, 5 percent. Practically a dead heat. What's the problem with Senator John Kerry, the Democratic candidate?

Biden: I don't think there's any problem. I think they just don't know John Kerry. You know, everybody thinks because when you go through and win a primary everybody knows you. The vast majority of the people don't have a firm opinion to John yet and they're not likely to. And I think the poll reflects a view of mismanagement.

Look, the Democrats cannot count on the failure of Bush for the success of the Democratic Party and because-- and the American people, including this senator, want Bush to succeed because Bush's success is America's success. Bush's failure is America's failure. I think these poll numbers reflect the notion this has been mismanaged badly, and the war in particular. I think it is about the war, even more than the economy right now. And I think that the president is going to have to start to level with the American people beginning with the cost of the war, beginning with what we have to do from this point on. There has been no leveling with the American people. Foreign policy can't be sustained without the informed consent of the American people. And there has not been informed consent and the president, as I said, his--this has been badly mismanaged. Redeemable, but up to now, badly mismanaged.

Russert: Do you believe that George W. Bush has bet his presidency on the outcome of the war in Iraq?

Biden: He may not have intended to but I think that's what it is.

Russert: Senator McCain, it's the elephant in the room, the story that will not die. This is the front page of The New York Times yesterday. Headline: "Undeterred by McCain Denials, Some See Him as Kerry's No. 2. Despite weeks of steadfast rejections from Senator John McCain, some prominent Democrats are angling for him to run for vice president alongside Senator John Kerry, creating a bipartisan ticket that they say would instantly transform the presidential race. "Senator McCain would not have to leave his party," [former Democratic Senator Bob] Kerrey said. "He could remain a Republican, would be given some authority for selection of Cabinet people. The only thing he would have to do is say, 'I'm not going to appoint any judges who would overturn Roe v. Wade,'" the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, while "Mr. McCain has said he opposes." What do you think of Senator Kerrey's recommendation?

McCain: I'd like to have the camera move over to a palm tree to start with.

Russert: Yeah.

McCain: With friends like Bob, who needs...

Biden: I'm about to jump in, John, so hang on.

McCain: I've said categorically--categorically, I will not be vice president of the United States. I will not be a candidate. And I mean that. I'm happy in the Senate. I'd like to maintain my role. I am a loyal Republican. I am supporting President Bush's re-election. I am campaigning for it. And I'd like to mention one other thing. The bullet played in all these stories is John McCain is angry at President Bush about 2000. Look, that was four years ago. My constituents don't want me to look back in anger. They want me to represent them. I work with President Bush on a lot of issues and I want him re-elected and I'm not looking back in anger at anything. That's not what my constituents deserve. So I'm afraid this will not be the last conversation you and I have on this issue and I categorically say no, but I can only hope.

Russert: Senator Biden, what do you think of John McCain as a Democratic candidate for vice president?

Biden: I think John McCain would be a great candidate for vice president. I mean it. I know John doesn't like me saying it, but the truth of the matter is, it is. We need to heal the red and the blue here, man, the red states and the blue states. And John McCain is a loyal Republican. God, he drives me crazy how loyal he is as a Republican

as much of a friend as he is. We disagree on a lot of things, but I'll tell you, the fact of the matter is that we've got to bring together the red and the blue here. This is a divided nation. And I think that--I would still urge John Kerry to pick up the phone and call John McCain. He'll say no probably. But I think John Kerry has an obligation to do that for the way he wants to heal. And I know John will listen. He'll say no, but I'm going to tell you, I'm counting on him being a more loyal American than he is a loyal Republican.

And, John, I'm not so sure you're so happy about the Senate. I'd like to see you president instead of the guy we have now. So--but you're a great senator. But I think you'd also be doing a great service. Do I think it's going to happen? No. But I think it is a reflection of the desire of this country, and the desire of people in both parties, to want to see this God-awful, vicious rift that exists in the nation healed, and John and John could go a long way to healing that rift.

Russert: Senator McCain, as an American, you can stay a Republican. You can be a loyal Republican. It would be a fusion or a unity ticket. Would you contemplate it in any way, shape, or form? Would you take Senator Kerry's phone call if you knew he was calling about it?

McCain: I will always take anyone's phone calls but I will not--I categorically will not do it. But I would like to add one additional quick comment. Joe's right, there's too much partisanship in America and there's too much partisanship in the Senate and there's too much partisanship. We've got to have people sit down and start working on issues that are not partisan in nature and start working on them so we can do our job as legislating and working for America. And I'm very disturbed about the level of partisanship which has led to gridlock. And we're not doing our job as our constituents expect us to do.

Russert: All right, Biden. McCain is out. Who is in?

Biden: I'm sticking with McCain. It's safer right now. Look, there's a lot of qualified people. I don't know how John's going to go about the--John Kerry is going to go about the choice. I think the single most important thing that John Kerry has to do is, the day he announces that person for the Tim Russerts of the world--there are not many of you, but for the big feet, as they say, in the press--to say that makes sense, that guy could be president, or that woman could be president. I think that's the single most important thing for people, when he or she is announced, say that person could be president.

Russert: What if John Kerry picked his vice president and also said, "I want Joe Biden for secretary of state and John McCain for secretary of defense?"

Biden: Well, if John will do it, I'll do it.

Russert: Senator McCain, do we have a deal?

McCain: No, no. No, no, we don't have a deal. But I certainly look forward to following Secretary of State Biden on your show.

Russert: We have to leave it there. We'll be back with our Meet the Press minute. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, February 4, 1968.

Russert: And we are back.

Forecasts of victory in Vietnam are shaken when the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong mount a massive and deadly offensive in South Vietnam on January 30, 1968. It becomes clear that the North Vietnamese forces were growing, not diminishing. The secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, makes a rare television appearance right here on the Meet the Press in the midst of the Tet offensive and admits the war has not gone as planned.

(Videotape, Meet the Press, February 4, 1968):

Mr. Max Frankel (New York Times): 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 to this?

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara: Oh, this is not an appropriate time for me to be talking changes. 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. As a matter of fact, my wife pointed out to me the other day four lines from T.S. Eliot that 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.

Frankel: Are you suggesting...

McNamara: 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.

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

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)

Russert: The next week marked the deadliest for U.S. troops in Vietnam with 543 killed in action. U.S. involvement in the war continued for another five years. All told, the U.S. lost over 58,000 men and women in the Vietnam War.

And we'll be right back.

Russert: That's all for today. We'll be back next week. If it's Sunday, it's Meet the Press.

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