

**REPUBLICAN MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES HOLD
A NEWS CONFERENCE ON THEIR RECENT CODEL TO IRAQ,
AFGHANISTAN AND BELGIUM - NEWS CONFERENCE**

3,817 words

10 February 2009

Political Transcripts by CQ Transcriptions

English

(C) 2009 CQ Transcriptions, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

HOUSE REPUBLICANS HOLD A NEWS CONFERENCE ON THEIR RECENT
CODEL TO IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN AND BELGIUM

FEBRUARY 10, 2009

SPEAKERS: REP. JOHN A. BOEHNER, R-OHIO, HOUSE MINORITY LEADER

REP. ERIC CANTOR, R-VA., HOUSE MINORITY WHIP

REP. PETER HOEKSTRA, R-MICH. REP. TOM LATHAM, R-IOWA

REP. JOHN M. MCHUGH, R-N.Y.

REP. JO BONNER, R-ALA.

[*] BOEHNER: Good afternoon, everyone. As you're aware, the six of us spent a long weekend in Iraq and Afghanistan, visiting with our troops. And it was pretty clear that the commitment and the sacrifices shown by our military forces is really nothing short of amazing.

And we saw it throughout our visit.

In Iraq, our troops have made remarkable progress under the leadership of General Petraeus and General Odierno and Ambassador Crocker. The Iraqis, I think, should be congratulated on their successful elections, which were held without any major incidents throughout the country.

And I think it's a -- a further positive sign that Iraqis are taking greater control of their own future.

General Odierno and Ambassador Crocker did remind us, however, that the gains that we have made in the political reconciliation are both in a pretty fragile state.

You know, while there's been an awful lot of success, we've got to be concerned that we can hold those successes and those gains that we've made.

And so I think we should continue to listen to our commanders on the ground, and that any draw-down is done in such a way that it ensures that our troops come home in victory, not in defeat.

In Afghanistan, I think it's a much more complex challenge than what we see in Iraq. The commanders have asked for more troops, and I'm hopeful that the president will -- will send them, to better secure the country.

I think the cost of doing nothing in Afghanistan, or turning our back on the region, is too great, for Afghanistan's security, and frankly, our own.

And with that, I think I'll just turn it over to the rest of the members, for -- let me turn it over to Pete Hoekstra, our (OFF-MIKE)

HOEKSTRA: Thank you, Mr. Leader.

Let me just make a couple of brief points. I think the questions that we are looking at, as we come back from this trip, and as we look forward, we need to make the assessment, is the threat from radical jihadists; does it continue; and is it real?

And I think that this trip, once again, reaffirms that this threat continues and it is real. We've made significant progress in defeating Al Qaida, defeating radical jihadists in Iraq.

They recognize that. They've moved the focal point, now, to Afghanistan. That is one of the reasons why it is important that we have a strong intelligence and a strong military presence in Afghanistan.

We recognize that being successful, not only in Iraq; in Afghanistan, is going to be crucial in defeating -- in containing and defeating radical jihadists.

The other assessment that -- that hits us, when we come back, and as we also met with leaders in Europe, is this is not only important in defeating radical jihadists. It is also -- Iraq and Afghanistan are also important geographically.

You know, you've got five countries that have a tremendous interest in what happens in Iraq and what happens in Afghanistan: Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Iran.

They're all watching. They all have an interest in what goes on there. Four out of these five countries are nuclear powers. The fifth is a wannabe. And so our success is critical into what happens in that region for the long term.

And then the final point is, is that, as we look at these major considerations, we have to recognize that we need to be able to make a compelling case to

the American people as to why being successful in Iraq and Afghanistan is important to our national security.

You put all of those things together, it was a great trip. As the leader, and I'm sure, my colleague, Mr. McHugh, are going to outline, the work not only of the -- the military, the uniform services but of the intelligence community, the people behind the lines, and then working seamlessly has -- have enabled us to make the kind of progress that we've made, to date.

MCHUGH: Thank you, Peter.

(LAUGHTER)

They didn't leave me a lot of room to talk. But, having been a politician for a number of years, I'm going to try.

(LAUGHTER)

First of all, thank you. Thank you to Leader Boehner for allowing me to take this trip. It was an extraordinarily important one. I would say that, having just completed my ninth trip to Iraq, my fourth to Afghanistan, the trends I've seen in those recent visits continue, in some measure, disturbingly so.

The only thing, really, I think these two theaters share is they are places of war. Beyond that, they are places going in pretty dramatically different directions.

In Iraq, obviously, we're withdrawing. Based on what we heard from our military leaders, I would expect more announcements of very justifiable draw-downs of American forces in the very near future.

Of course, in Afghanistan, we all know about the expected buildup. That is appropriate, and indeed it has some urgency.

In Iraq, the confidence in the institutions of government and for government leaders, although far from universal, has taken root.

MCHUGH: It is growing.

Nowhere can you see that more clearly than in the recently concluded provincial elections.

In Afghanistan, I think it's fair to say what we heard, there is an eroding confidence in the government institutions in Kabul. In the countryside, while we see some progress, the fact of the matter is, they feel distance from that -- that government and those government institutions.

The good news, of course, in Iraq is that we are beginning to come home. Conversely, the good news in Afghanistan is that we expect major troop buildups, clearly absolutely necessary.

I don't want to paint the picture that everything in Afghanistan is bleak. It is not. The provincial reconstruction teams are up; they're working. They're becoming more and more effective. They are really one of the keys to the success there.

We had the opportunity to meet with some of the leadership. And, at least from my perspective, they are clearly on the right track.

The poppy cultivation, a source of hundreds of millions of dollars in income to the insurgents, particularly to Al Qaida, this growing season over last is likely to be reduced by some 20 percent to 30 percent.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, we have incredible military leadership.

Obviously, General Petraeus at CENTCOM will bring the same kind of steady perspective in hand that he did to Iraq.

We met with General Nicholson, in charge of RC-South, who is working so hard and who has some exposure through his time in the 10th Mountain Division, Mark (ph), I'll say to you specifically, is doing an incredible job.

And I was totally impressed with our briefing opportunity with General Odierno in talking about the future of this very, very hard fight.

The fight in Iraq is drawing down; in many ways, the fight in Afghanistan is just beginning.

And I want to close, just by saying four lessons -- three or four lessons, something I hope the Obama administration will focus on very clearly, some of which have already been stated by my colleagues.

First of all, the scheduling of troop withdrawals in Iraq has to be done on the conditions on the ground, not on political considerations. We expect there will be recent announcements (inaudible) -- we expect there will be recent announcements -- announcements very soon on withdrawals in Iraq. I think those are totally appropriate.

But in the future, whatever we do cannot be for political considerations.

Second of all, with all due respect, Senator Obama was dramatically wrong on his opinion with respect to the surge. He can't build on that mistake in Afghanistan.

General McKiernan told us Iraq -- or, excuse me, Afghanistan can't stand 150,000 American troops.

MCHUGH: We have to use all of our tools, all of the means we have available to us to secure that nation.

Thirdly, the president should remember, as, to his credit, he said last night, one of the key answers to the country of Afghanistan is not found in Afghanistan, it is in Pakistan.

This administration has been handed a list of tools -- some known, some not; some on the record, some classified -- that will allow him to deal effectively. He has to use every tool available to him.

And I would just say as a word of final caution: Uncertainty does not breed security.

Thank you.

LATHAM: Tom Latham from Iowa. And just a couple brief points.

This was my fourth visit to Iraq, second visit to Afghanistan, and the thing that stands out most to me is the dramatic improvement in Iraq and the success that we've had there. And also the problems and challenges we still have in Afghanistan.

And you cannot begin to talk about this without saying thank you to the men and women in uniform that have sacrificed so much themselves and their families.

They are two starkly different countries, and that's what really stands out. In Iraq you've had a country that has had central governance. In Afghanistan it's basically tribal, regional, and with little influence either from the federal government or the provincial governments.

In the south we have great challenges, and with the troop buildup down there we'll see the results. But the poppy eradication, the funding stream that has given the Taliban is of grave concern, and that has to be addressed immediately.

We have great leadership, I think, in the south. And as an appropriator, all this has to do, number one, with the human toll, with our soldiers, but number two, obviously, the cost to our treasury and what is going to happen in the future with the buildup.

Again, there's two entirely countries, with different problems and really different challenges, and that's going to be what is going to be our challenge going forward.

To rid the world of terrorists and terrorism is a noble cause, but it's not going to come without great cost.

BONNER: Joe Bonner of Alabama. As the most junior member in terms of seniority on the CODEL, I want to publicly thank the leader for allowing me to go.

It was my third trip to Iraq. And to see the measured progress that we've taken since my first trip in December of 2003 is remarkable.

First trip to Afghanistan, and I want to echo what Tom just said: We had an opportunity to see the young men and women who are allowing us to have this conversation today.

Today, the president's down in Florida lobbying on behalf of the stimulus bill. That's an issue that will be front and center before the House and Senate later this week. And it's an important issue. The American people are rightly concerned about our economy.

But, without question, we have the most well-trained, most capable men and women. And we've asked, in many instances, them to do some heroic things. And so, we are very fortunate to have them representing the very best face of America while, at the same time, trying to bring peace and freedom in some parts of the world that have never known what it tasted like.

(UNKNOWN): I'd just like to follow up on a few points.

One, in terms of the prospects for premature decisions or premature withdrawal, you know, there is no question, we need to be focused on mission success in both of these countries.

And a conversation I had with one of our troops, when I asked him about what he would advocate for the policy-makers in Washington, and what we could do to make it so that we could achieve mission success, he said, "Ensure that we do not pull out at a premature time," he said, "Because I don't want to have to come back in" -- and he was in the Air Force -- "I don't want to have to come back in and fly with the folks on the ground shooting at us."

He said, "I've done that before, and I don't want us to have to come back in when they pick their guns back up and aim them at us."

I think that sort of stuck with me as a very real sentiment, that we've achieved a lot of success in Iraq. It is very fragile. And it really is time for us to make sure, not only in the discussion of Iraq and Afghanistan, but certainly in the stimulus and other things, for us to set the campaign rhetoric aside and let's -- let's listen to, as the commanders on the ground, as Mr. McHugh said, and do what's right.

I also would say another takeaway from this trip is the regional -- the regional challenge that we've got. As Pete Hoekstra said, these are some very, very volatile countries that surround both of these countries, both Iraq and Afghanistan.

(UNKNOWN): Iran, in particular, was a focus of a lot of my inquiry. And the continued threat that Iran poses, in its quest for nuclear weapons, and, frankly, regional hegemony, ought to be concerning to all of us.

We do not, I think, at the end of the day, as Americans, want to see either one of those countries become, again, a base for operation of terrorist groups, or accessible by nations who support terrorism, like Iran.

Thank you.

BOEHNER: Questions?

QUESTION: Congressman McHugh, I had a question about -- well, first of all, have you been given any indication by the administration, when you (inaudible) new strategy in Afghanistan?

MCHUGH: It depends how you define the administration. Obviously, we all met with General McKiernan. He has some options and some suggestions that he has put before the administration.

He does not know, nor do I, as to what components of that, if any, the administration may -- may accept. But I think we've got a pretty good idea of what the lay of the land is, there. But it is the president's prerogative, as the commander in chief -- and, obviously, I hope -- I assume, in concert with the secretary of defense -- to make the final determinations.

But most of it sounded pretty good to me.

QUESTION: And then, as far as -- about Iraq and the withdrawal time frame that they're looking at, have you talked with the commanders there about any of the logistics involved with bringing troops home?

There are some semi-permanent structures in Iraq, some large bases, and so forth. Do you have any sense of how long that it would take to bring all those troops home, and those -- your general (ph) impression (ph)?

MCHUGH: Well, it depends what you mean by "come home." Obviously, we're going to be engaged, I would assume, with the government of Iraq, as to what, if any -- if any presence the United States may have. We have a record, and I expect that record will be built upon in this particular redeployment, of turning over certain structures, perhaps most, even all of the structures, to the Iraqi government.

And we're not going to dismantle a lot of these buildings and try to put them on flatbeds and get them back to Kuwait and airlift them out.

The redeployment of the basic vehicle presence in this country is a significant one. That's probably going to go on for some time. And I'm just speaking, now, as someone who's talked to the head of logistics. To do that is going to take, probably, a significant amount of time.

But I have to tell you, it's probably secondary to the major focus, which is getting the ground forces out, where the conflict is -- is met (ph).

So I would think that Senator (sic) Obama's 16-month potential time frame requires about a brigade a month withdrawal, if you take all those forces.

(UNKNOWN): That's a lot of work for the -- for the logistics people.

But having put that aside, whether we can or can't do it physically is not the concern to me. It is whether we should or should not.

And let me just say this. I don't believe I mentioned this during my comments. Virtually every single military leader, including -- or, I should say, in addition to Ambassador Crocker -- warned us against the fragility of this.

We are winning. We have not yet won. Every one of them told us it is a fragile environment that could reverse. And while they're supporting withdrawals, they warned us as well against precipitous withdrawal.

And the only way we know what a precipitous withdrawal is, is to make that judgment at the moment, on the ground, by the military commanders. I think that's where we have to rest our fortunes. That is what has worked to this point.

And that was the only lesson -- or, I should say, word of caution I would have to the new administration, make sure those are your determinations. If we do that, we're with you.

QUESTION: Leader Boehner, if I could ask a stimulus question.

If the House took up the Senate-passed stimulus bill right now, how much Republican support do you think there would be?

And also, are you starting to hear from your constituents any -- any pressure to support a stimulus package?

BOEHNER: Listen, we all know that our economy is facing great difficulty, and American families and small businesses are hurting.

Washington needs to act, and we've made clear to the president we salute him bringing this -- this action early in his administration. We want to continue to work with him.

But the bills that we see moving through the House and Senate continue to produce very few jobs. And I thought the goal, according to the president, was to create and preserve jobs in America.

Our ideas produce twice as many jobs at half the price. So we want to continue to work with the president to get this package enacted, and get it enacted soon. But we have to do this prudently. I mean, we're not spending money that we have. We're spending money that we're going to borrow from our kids and grandkids and their kids. And I'm concerned that the bills that we see thus far are just not going to produce the kind of results that the American people expect.

I don't know whether the House is going to take up the Senate bill. It doesn't appear likely. We've just gone to conference. We've named conferees. And I would expect in the coming days we'll get a better picture of what this final bill's going to look like.

QUESTION: What are you hearing from your constituents, though? Are members coming to you and saying, "Look, I'm getting a lot of pressure from, say, their Michigan constituent or Ohio..."

(CROSSTALK)

BOEHNER: I'm getting a lot of members who are getting a lot of e-mails and phone calls from their constituents saying, "My gosh, what are you doing out there?"

"Where's this money coming from?"

They don't understand why a lot of the spending that's in this bill is in it, because it has nothing to do with creating jobs.

QUESTION: Mr. Leader, also the second TARP, Mr. Geithner's plan, appeared. What do you make of this plan?

And also, just questions about the oversight in the first batch of this...

(CROSSTALK)

BOEHNER: Well, I don't know much more about what Mr. Geithner had to say today than what he had to say, because he didn't say much, other than we need to take some action in three different areas. But he didn't outline, at all, what those actions were.

I remain concerned because we don't know how the first \$350 billion was spent. We don't have the answers as to where it when, who got it, and why.

And now he has the second \$350 billion. What's the plan? What's the need?

And until we have answers to those -- to those questions, I don't know how we can take further steps.

You know, they have made it clear that they want more transparency and accountability. And Secretary Geithner talked about it today, and I applaud him for the transparency and accountability that he did talk about.

But that's going forward. We need to know what happened over the last three or four months.

QUESTION: Regarding your -- your decision to talk publicly about the itinerary of this trip before and during it, including some of your Twitter posts. February 3rd, (inaudible) Iraq and Afghanistan, Wednesday night. February 4th, on the way to Andrews Air Force Base, a 12-hour flight to Mideast. February 6th, moved into green zone, et cetera.

Do you -- everyone I've talked to said standard operating procedure on these trips is not to reveal this sort of thing before and during it. Do you disagree with that premise, or do you think it doesn't apply to you?

HOEKSTRA: Well, I think the same procedures that apply to me apply to -- or the same principles that apply to the speaker apply to me.

We have detailed a -- I think a very factual response to your kind of question. This press conference is about the progress and the challenges that we face in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And as soon as this press conference is done, I will Twitter you.

(LAUGHTER)

And you can find out and go through a detailed response, or as soon as it's done, I will talk to you in person.

QUESTION: So far, your staff has not answered (inaudible) questions.

HOEKSTRA: I look forward to you -- have you signed up for my Twitter?

QUESTION: I see that you're following me and I'm following you.

(LAUGHTER)

HOEKSTRA: You will -- you will get it as soon as the leader says we are done and we can go.

BOEHNER: We're done.

HOEKSTRA: OK, thank you.

BOEHNER: We're done. We're out of here.

END