

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH SENATOR RUSSELL FEINGOLD (D-WI)

SUBJECT: REDEPLOYING FROM IRAQ AND REFOCUSING ON TERRORISTS

MODERATOR: JONATHAN SALANT, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MR. SALANT: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. I'm Jonathan Salant, a reporter for Bloomberg News and president of the Press Club.

I'd like to welcome club members and their guests in the audience today, as well as those of you watching on C-SPAN. Please hold your applause during the speech so we have time for as many questions as possible. For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it is from the guests and the members of the general public who attend our luncheons, not from the working press. (Laughter.)

The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by ConnectLive and is available to members only through the Press Club's website at www.press.org. Press Club members may get free transcripts of our luncheons at our website. Nonmembers may buy transcripts, audio tapes and video tapes by calling 1-888-343-1940. For more information about joining the Press Club, please call us at area code 202-662-7511.

Before introducing our head table, I would like to remind you of future speakers. On May 9th, Dr. I. King Jordan, the president of Gallaudet University. On May 12th, Senator Mel Martinez, a Florida Republican, will discuss immigration. And on May 19th, Mayor Beverly O'Neill of Long Beach, California and president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

If you have any questions for our speaker, please write them on the cards provided at your table and pass them up to me. I will ask as many as time permits.

I would like now to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. Please hold your applause until all the head table guests are introduced.

From your right, David Lightman, Washington Bureau chief of the Harvard Courant; Jeff Zeleny, the national political correspondent for The Chicago Tribune; Skip Kaltenheuser, a business and travel editor for Nine Magazine (ph); Craig Gilbert, the Washington Bureau chief for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. This speaker needs no introduction, but I'll do it anyway -- Helen Thomas, a columnist for Hearst Newspapers. (Applause.)

Mary Irvine, the chief of staff to Senator Feingold. (Scattered applause.)

Angela Greiling Keane, the associate editor of Traffic World magazine and the vice chair of the club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for a moment, Katherine Skiba, the Washington correspondent for The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and the member of the club Speakers Committee who organized today's luncheon. And Katherine, thank you very much for your work.

Sumner Slichter, policy director for Senator Feingold. (Solitary applause.) (Laughter.)

Roger Simon, chief political correspondent for Bloomberg News and a new member of the Press Club; Diedra Henderson, staff writer in the Washington bureau of The Boston Globe and also a new member of the Press Club; and Keith Hill, Bureau of National Affairs, and a member of the Press Club's board of governors. (Applause.)

You may be surprised to learn that Senator Feingold's first name is actually not McCain. (Laughter.) It's Russell. Senators John McCain and Russ Feingold teamed up in 2002 to enact the McCain- Feingold campaign finance law, a piece of legislation that many Americans know only by the name of its sponsors. The law bans corporate, union and unlimited individual donations to the political parties. It hasn't hindered their ability to take in money, with both the Democrats and Republicans setting fundraising records, but it has stopped six-figure donations from flowing to the parties.

On other issues as well, Senator Feingold, a Wisconsin Democrat, goes his own way. In 2001 he was the only senator to vote against the Patriot Act, which expanded the government's powers, to try to prevent another terrorist attack. Senator Feingold was concerned the act curbed Americans' civil liberties. In 2002 Senator Feingold voted against authorizing force in Iraq and three years

later called for a flexible timetable for the withdrawal of American troops. This year he called for the censure of President Bush for approving the warrantless wiretapping of Americans.

Senator Feingold has supported a balanced budget, objecting to Republican efforts to cut taxes but increase spending. He regularly tries to curb congressional pay hikes.

His positions on issues like the Patriot Act and wiretapping have drawn the ire of his Republican colleagues. Even many Democrats haven't rushed to his side.

Like his late father, Senator Feingold's an avid golfer. On the last day before a county board election -- a county board election, Senator Feingold's father went golfing. He lost the election by one vote. (Laughter.) When Senator Feingold ran for the state senate in 1982, he didn't go golfing the day before -- and won by 31 votes. (Laughter.)

A decade later, in 1992, he set his sights on the U.S. Senate. In one campaign ad, he opened up a closet door and said, "Look! No skeletons." (Laughter.)

Senator Feingold defeated two primary opponents and Republican incumbent Bob Kasten to win the seat. Six years later, facing a tough race from Republican Representative Mark Neumann, he asked the Democratic Party not to run independent ads. He narrowly won reelection. He easily won a third term in 2004, after considering and rejecting a presidential campaign.

Now with 2008 approaching, Senator Feingold is once again pondering a run for the White House. He is being urged to run by progressives in the party. He says he won't make a decision until after the midterm elections. Meanwhile, he has traveled to 10 states to help elect Democrats, including Iowa and New Hampshire. (Laughter.)

Senator Feingold, we're glad to welcome you to the National Press Club. (Applause.)

SEN. FEINGOLD: Thank you very much. Thank you, Jonathan, and thank you, Katherine, for our work together and for the honor of being asked to speak here at this great club.

I especially want to mention the presence of Ellen Proxmire. I know she's here somewhere. Where is Ellen? (Applause.) You know, this idea of being a senator from Wisconsin was not a hard thing to want to do when you grew up having the two greatest senators in the country being your senators, both of whom we lost in the past year, Gaylord Nelson and Bill Proxmire. So as a Wisconsinite -- and there are many Badgers here who agree -- we are grateful for the service of your husband. (Applause.)

Now, I'm sure you've heard this, but I'll tell you, there's one thing that I have heard in virtually identical language everywhere across this country for months and even for years, and it goes like this: "Why do don't you Democrats stand up? Why don't you Democrats stand up for what you believe, and state it boldly?" I go to every one of Wisconsin's 72 counties every year and hold a town meeting. Pretty soon I'll be holding my 1,000th listening session. In every one of those counties, somebody says something like that. I've heard it in Austin, Texas; I've heard it in Santa Monica; I've heard it in Montgomery, Alabama; I've heard it in Philadelphia. And the other day

my car accidentally swerved over the Wisconsin border into Iowa -- (laughter) -- and I heard the same thing, in Cedar Rapids, in Des Moines, in Osceola -- not Osceola -- (different pronunciation) -- that's Wisconsin -- Osceola, Johnston and Fort Dodge. I really have never seen anything like this consistency, after 24 years as a legislator, of that kind of a concern about the Democrats and the Democratic Party.

Of course, they are asking us to stand up on domestic issues, especially guaranteed health care for all Americans, a real commitment to alternative energy and energy independence, a desire that we reject these unfair trade agreements that have hurt so many jobs, especially in our part of the country, and a desire that we return to the fiscal responsibility of the Clinton years. All of these issues, and many more, are ones that people want us to stand up on.

Having said that, though, the greatest passion is for us to stand up on the critical post-9/11 issues -- from Iraq to the USA Patriot Act to the president violating the law by authorizing illegal domestic wiretapping. The president likes to say, in response to this sort of concern, that some of us have a pre-9/11 perspective. Many Democrats, and others around this country, want us to point out that the White House actually has a pre-1776 perspective -- (laughter) -- and that we ought to have the guts to point that out. (Applause.)

Now, you don't hear this stand-up language here in this town. The consultants and the pundits and others will tell you that those positions are, quote, "losers." I've heard that literal language for this. And that it is dangerous to let there be any real light between our position and the White House's position or else you'll get called soft on terrorism. You already hear people saying that this Michael Hayden nomination will be a great opportunity for the White House to show that Democrats are soft on terrorism. You bet, the pundits in this town will somehow suggest that this, too, just like my censure resolution, will cause the president's numbers to shoot up. You remember that happening, right? It didn't happen at all. But that's what they're going to say, and it's not right.

I take a different view with a major qualification. My view is that we should appeal to basic American values in the post-9/11 era by saying that we will stand up to this administration's mistakes in strategy in the fight against terrorism, and that we will stand up to this administration's unnecessary assault on the rule of law in the guise of the fight against terrorism. But it is what I just called a qualification that is key, and what I want to talk about today, and that is that we must show the American people that we care deeply about the most important issue, and that is that Democrats -- if we are able to take over this year -- will work with Republicans and do a better job of winning the battle against al Qaeda and the associated networks. Period. We have to be able to not only say that, but say it in a way that is persuasive and valuable to the American people. That is our priority will be to literally protect the American people and to make decisions based on our actual national security interests, not some notion of this is the opportunity to finally expand executive power; not some exotic theory of how to suddenly change the whole world; and certainly not some isolationist or cut-and-run approach that pretends that the 9/11 attackers didn't mean business and that they don't want to kill every one of us, if they could.

We must also show knowledge, understanding, and dedication, and focus in the fight against terrorism so that we can convince the American people that we are up to the job and we have the strength for the job. As we do it, we have to show passion and make it very clear to the American people that we care every bit as much about the disaster that occurred on 9/11, that we understand the pain of it, and that we are resolved to make sure it never happens again.

Now, I believe, as good as Democrats may be on domestic issues and as bad as the Bush administration has been on domestic issues, and as often dishonest and sometimes even incompetent as they've been on foreign policy, if we do not show both a practical and emotional readiness to lead in the fight against terrorism, we will lose in '06 and we will lose in '08, just like we did in '02 and '04.

So what do we do? Well, the first thing we do is, we must get out of political foxholes and be willing to clearly and specifically point out what a strategic error the Iraq invasion has been in light of our top goal of fighting al Qaeda and the connected terrorist organizations.

Now, some people say -- even those who are Democrats say, "Well, you know, we're in Iraq. We're there. Now, what do we do?" Well, that's not an adequate way to discuss the issue. It shouldn't be discussed in isolation. It should be put every time in the context of 9/11, of what we had to do in Afghanistan and the problems that have occurred because of the excessive focus on Iraq itself.

We should, without overly focusing on issues of manipulation of intelligence or theories of why we went into Iraq, tell the American people just how odd and bizarre it is that we went in there when we did, and how we did it.

I'd like to point out that two months after 9/11, the State Department, with George Bush's name on it, had a list of the 45 countries where it said al Qaeda was operating: Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Spain, Ireland, United States. Guess what country wasn't even on their list. Iraq! Wasn't even on their list.

Now we are told there are some 60 to 80 countries where al Qaeda is already operating, perhaps some 20 more countries where there is the potential for Islamic populations to be radicalized. And yet we are so focused on Iraq.

Porter Goss, who now is leaving the CIA, said as early as February 2005 that the number-one national security problem we had in America was the fact that Iraq had become a training ground for terrorists, who would be exported to other places.

And just recently in the State Department release of their human rights report, they said the same sort of thing, that it had become a safe haven. Think about how bizarre that is.

Remember the president saying after -- right after 9/11 that we will confront the terrorists at a time and place of our choosing? Remember what he said recently? Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden have chosen Iraq, so we must fight them there, so they will not fight us in Boston and

New York. Now, how do you square those two statements? The fact is, you bet they chose it, and we have played into their hands by handling this situation in an unwise way.

This is what I like to call the roach motel theory -- (soft laughter) -- which is that somehow all the terrorists are going to come from all over the world into Iraq, and we'll get them all. (Laughter.) That's the theory.

But you know what? It's not true.

In fact -- in fact -- Iraq has become a crucible for the recruitment and development of more and more terrorists who are sworn to harm us.

Now, what I like to call this whole policy is "our Iraq-centric policy." It's like there are 64 pieces on a chessboard and all the focus is on that one piece. We've got to change this.

It is not only obviously a problem with the opportunity costs of not being able to deal with terrorist problems in other places, but the literal costs. I don't need to tell you about all the deaths of American soldiers, 17,800 wounded. The thing was going to cost -- when we feared it would cost as much as \$100 billion. Now it's \$320 billion that the Iraq war has cost. The military recruitment problems, including the recruitment of people who want to be officers, is growing. It is well-known and well-documented that a number of the things that we are doing in Afghanistan were weakened and hurt militarily and otherwise by the diversion of resources into Iraq.

And just to mention the non-military costs, you know, the reconstruction budget for Iraq, roughly \$20 billion, much of that is going to security. Just for Iraq, just for reconstruction, more than all the foreign aid budget for all the other countries of the world combined, just for the reconstruction budget. So this is a very odd and dangerous choice to make at a time when we must deal with the terrorist problem.

What I believe is most important now is to redeploy from Iraq. I have specifically proposed that we have a timetable by the end of this year, which I know from various sources through the military and otherwise is a practical goal. To redeploy our military forces there with some exceptions in order to make sure our troops are protected, to help with the training, and to deal with specific special operations that may have to occur. But I believe that is the thing that can and should be done, and I have offered amendments to do so.

The problem, though, is that as Democrats have stood up on this issue last fall -- we had a good amendment, where we had 40 senators basically vote for some kind of a timetable -- again, there is a tendency to go back in the foxhole, and that's what's happened. We had a chance last week on the supplemental to do a timetable for withdrawal amendment or redeployment, but instead a number of my Democratic colleagues introduced amendments that were well thought out -- they had to do with interesting policy issues.

For example, one had to do with should we leave if there's a civil war there? Well, you know, how do you define a civil war? And is that really the question? The question should be, what is most important for the safety of America? Another idea by my colleague, Joe Biden -- actually,

it's been unfairly characterized as trying to split up the country into three parts -- but you know, the problem is when you start making proposals like this and people start seeing visions of colonial powers -- of League of Nations and, frankly, I think at best we kind of look like political scientists trying out theories on interesting specimens in the Middle East; or at worst, we look like we're just meddling in the affairs of a fragile but sovereign nation.

And again, these are not bad policy ideas, but what do they have to do with the core issue of how do we protect Americans from terrorist attacks around the world?

So I propose that we move in this direction, and I have long believed that our presence there -- the way we are present there actually encourages these terrorist takes, encourages the growth of the anti-American movement around the world, and I am very concerned that if we don't move in that direction, we are never going to get on track in the broader fight against terrorism.

But what about the broader challenge of the fight against al Qaeda and terrorism? At the risk of this speech becoming Iraq- centric, let me turn to just a few quick observations.

It's been almost five years since we experienced this 9/11 attack, but there are a number of lessons that we have not learned about the nature of the threat. It's been clearly laid out in the 9/11 report, where they talked about -- in fact, they had two elements: the al Qaeda network and the possibility of an ideology around the world that would become radicalized, that would feed that network. That's the challenge.

And so the question isn't: What do we do in Iraq or what shouldn't we do in Iraq? The first question is: Are we focusing on the right places and challenges? Well, obviously, I don't think we are.

Let me give you one example. Indonesia. I had a chance to go to Indonesia in February. You know, here is the fourth largest country in the world, the largest Islamic nation in the world, and I found out from our ambassador I was the only second -- only the second United States senator to even visit there in the last two years. Some of the Marines say that when all of us go to Iraq to visit, which we need to do, that they call that military tourism. Just about everybody goes over there to see what's going on, but what about this nation? What about our reaching out to this situation there? And some people have said to me, "Wow, you're going to Jakarta. That sounds really dangerous." No, it's not. Compared to Baghdad or Kabul, it's not anything like that.

But the fact is, that one of the major affiliates of al Qaeda, JI, Jemaah Islamiyah, is based in Indonesia, and they do want to radicalize that country. They do want to turn the Islamic people in that country against us, and they have not only done explosions in Bali, but also in Jakarta itself. We have got to understand that a country like that is on the border in terms of whether they're going to come with us or against us, and if we do not engage in a very serious way with the fact that there are terrorist elements there and put our resources there in a place called the Sulawesi Sea, where there are -- in between the Philippines and Indonesia and Malaysia -- it's a safe haven of terrorist activity that we are not putting our resources into.

I hope Americans can learn just a fraction about Iraq -- about Indonesia that they know about Iraq because it is one of the most important places in the world, and we give very little attention to it.

Are we thinking broadly enough about what the terrorist tactics really are? I mean, sometimes I think that people think it's just a military operation. In fact, according to "The Next Attack" -- the book written about this issue -- it said, quote, "For the president, the fight against terrorism is a manhunt" -- that that's all it is. Well, it's really much more complicated than that.

Remember the bombings in Kenya against the Israelis in Thanksgiving of a couple of years ago? Well, it turns out that that occurred because a lobster boat fisherman actually was fishing with other lobster boat fisherman in Mombasa harbor for six weeks. He got comfortable with them, they got comfortable with him. And when the moment was right, the mortars and the other things that were used for the attack were floated in and sent over to those who committed the terrorist attack.

Now, what are we going to do, blow up every lobster fisherman in Mombasa harbor? No. We have to somehow get the confidence and have a feeling of the people in that area having a stake in their own stability and having a positive relationship with us.

And what have we learned about the lessons of failed states? You remember Somalia? That was sort of the first place that President Clinton had to take action, even the first President Bush. Oh, we had a very bad situation there militarily; we had to get out. But you know what happened? We just got out of there hook, line and sinker. We had nothing there -- virtually no intelligence, no presence in terms of NGOs or any of the other things we want to do to stay engaged in a place that we know is both in fact a place where terrorism has come from, and where certainly it can be bred again. On this point, think about it -- \$1.6 billion a week for Iraq, \$2 million a year for Somalia. This is -- these are among the worst foreign policy choices I think we have ever seen in this country. This is a place where Osama bin Laden has contacts, where there is piracy, and it's almost -- and the pirating and transfer of military and other equipment goes through these borders, and yet we don't really have a strategy at all for Somalia. Why is this, five years after 9/11?

And finally, do we really understand and work to connect the issue of human rights and this issue with our bilateral relations with other countries? Two quick examples. One is back to Indonesia. The region of Aceh was a major separatist Islamic area in Indonesia for many years, and there was a great risk there of that population becoming radicalized because they were treated brutally by the Indonesian government, in particular by the Indonesian military. The only thing that stopped it was a tsunami. This is Banda Ache. And because the tsunami was so devastating for Indonesia and for the rebels, they did come together and they do have a peace agreement, and things may get better and that area may not become radicalized. But surely we are not going to have a foreign policy based on tsunami. (Laughter.) We have to get ahead of these situations.

Finally, the same thing goes for Thailand, a country that is largely Buddhist, a great ally of ours, but they have four or five Islamic provinces in the South.

And again, here you have a democratically elected government which has shown little concern for human rights in its tactics toward the people that live in that area. It's not a big separatist movement. In fact, we couldn't find any evidence of a connection at this point between JI or al Qaeda in that area. But it is a very real possibility if we do not indicate to the prime minister and to the leaders in Thailand, "If you do not stop this kind of tactic, you're going to be growing homegrown terrorists," and obviously those very individuals may well end up harming Americans as well.

So I say all of this in the belief that somehow we all have to be talking about not this country or that, but how we can best protect American lives at home and abroad. This is our most solemn responsibility, and Democrats should be especially clear that we understand the post-9/11 world. And to return to the outset, I think we should show we mean it. I think we should show that this is just as important and personal for us as it is for those who sometimes try to use this issue to intimidate us.

For me, obviously as for many people, it's about my own kids, my own daughter. You know, she was just starting college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison the week of 9/11. And she called me when they could finally track me down that day, and she sounded terrible. She wanted to know if I was all right. I thought her voice had changed. I thought she sounded like somebody whose world had just shrunk. But you know what? She went back to work, and her mother and I said that, you know, she could go junior year abroad to either Ireland or Scotland at that point because obviously it was a scary time.

Well, she went to the University of Wisconsin and she did well. And she went back and she had an internship in London last summer. Well, I heard that voice again on July 7th last year. She had been in the subway about 45 minutes before -- not the same line -- she was fine. But she said to me, "Dad, should I come home? You know, should I stay here?" And I said, "No, you stay there. There's no way I want these terrorists to be able to take away this experience from you." This is what she agreed to do.

And she had a wonderful time.

And she is reaching out now to the rest of the world, as we all must do, because it is in fact about our kids and our grandchildren that we must defeat al Qaeda and the terrorist networks, so they can feel safe in our own country and in the rest of the world as they seek to connect with other peoples.

To do so, we must not just bluster and threaten; we must be smart and effective and thoughtful so that we can make the right call for ourselves and, hopefully, for all people in the world who not only reject terrorism, but who really would benefit from a good relationship with America and the American people.

Thanks for having me here today. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: To begin with names in the news, what do you think about the nomination of General Michael Hayden to run the CIA?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, let me first say that I respect General Hayden. Being a member of both the Judiciary, Foreign Relations and Intelligence Committee, I've had a lot of exposure to the general in recent months, and he's an impressive guy with a great record. But I do have some serious concerns.

As you know, I believe that this warrantless wiretapping program that the president authorized was the bailiwick of Mr. Hayden. And I know that he wasn't the top man, but the fact is he has stood with the president and others in claiming that somehow the president has inherent authority to do this. I didn't vote for Attorney General Gonzalez when he couldn't tell me that the president wasn't above the law, and it would be very difficult for me if Mr. Hayden does not in some way indicate that he does not feel this way.

The other problem, of course, to me, apart from the issues that are being raised about having a man in the defense area, the military area, coming over -- that's an interesting debate that I'll be thinking about. What concerns me even more is, what do we need in this country right now? We need a situation where everything isn't politicized. We need somebody who's not going to raise all these concerns, because the intelligence community is becoming too political for the good of America. I'm not saying that's General Hayden's fault, but really a choice that would have been more acceptable instead of a confrontation would seem to have been the right thing at this point.

But I'm going to be fair about this. Those are two of my concerns. I will be on the Intelligence Committee for the hearings, but I do have a couple of major concerns.

MR. SALANT: Please comment upon the failure of your initiative to censor President Bush as a result of -- (due to ?) lack of courage of the Democrats who should have supported you. Are they all short-sighted? (Laughter.)

SEN. FEINGOLD: Not only was Rome not built in a day, but the only bill that I saw pass this fast was once in the Wisconsin Legislature when we had a resolution commending the Girl Scouts for the cookies! (Laughter.) I mean, this is four weeks. This notion -- you know, I introduced the thing on a Monday -- and I've been a legislator for 24 years.

When you introduce a bill, you don't have to pass it in 10 minutes. You know, you go around and get support. And Washington pundits and Republicans and Democrats all said, "He doesn't have any support." Well, you know, give me a little time.

Since then, a courageous senator from Iowa, Tom Harkin, has cosponsored. Barbara Boxer has cosponsored. Pat Leahy said at Judiciary Committee that he would be inclined to support it. Former senator John Edwards endorsed it. Our candidate from the last time, John Kerry, supports it. But even more exciting, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, he says it's a bad idea, but the other day I heard him say -- I heard Arlen Specter say over and over again, the White House is just running roughshod over us in the Congress; what are we going to do about it?

How can something that simply says, "Mr. President, you did something wrong here and we wish you'd stop," be such a big deal? My favorite thing is being lectured by members of the Judiciary Committee, who are friends of mine, who literally came into the well of the Senate

when I was a senator in 1999 and asked that President Clinton be removed from office. They call this an extreme step.

All I want to happen is for the president to acknowledge, after we pass the censure resolution, which we might do this year or next year, to say, "You know, I was trying to protect the American people. I got carried away. I'm sorry. Let's get back to work." He should be able to say that. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: A lot of Iraq questions. This questioner writes: Why are we still in Iraq? (Laughter.)

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, you know, I think historians will debate this for, you know, a thousand years -- why we went in, why we're still there. What I see it is this problem of this administration thinking it's just a terrible thing to admit that maybe you did something wrong. There's really three distinct failures, and each one should be sufficient to say that this has been a disaster.

The first was the false basis to get in. The second was not planning for various contingencies. I can show you the hearings we had where every one of these possibilities was laid out before we went in. And the third was, once you realize something is a mess or isn't going well, you have to adjust course.

Well, they've been willing to do none of that. And I guess it has to do with some kind of a playbook in the White House that, if you ever admit you might have made a little mistake, the whole thing's going to fall apart. What I find is if you admit you did something wrong and you're trying to fix it, people trust you more. They will believe you more. Because the White House has, obviously, a very severe problem in this regard.

So I see it as -- you know, they've won two major elections using this approach, so maybe they figure it's worked in the past; let's keep doing it. But let's face it, it is hurting America, it is hurting our military. It is weakening our country in the fight against al Qaeda, and that is dead wrong. They should acknowledge some of their mistakes and fix them.

MR. SALANT: How do you respond to critics who argue that the withdrawal of U.S. troops will plunge Iraq further into chaos?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, that's a very difficult question. I've been there twice, both with Senator McCain a year ago and just this year, and I'll tell you, the situation I see there, both times, was increasingly chaotic. The number of attacks have increased with our presence there. In Al Anbar province, which is, you know, people say, "Well, this civil war, it's a sectarian war." No, that's all Sunni. Fallujah, Ramadi -- that isn't a civil war situation. It is just a situation where our presence -- even our generals have suggested this -- is a stimulate to terrorist activity. Now that doesn't mean our people aren't doing the best job they can, but they're being put in a situation that is reminiscent of the French in Algeria and the Soviets in Afghanistan, where our very presence causes more problems than it actually helps.

And that is what we have to recognize in terms of Iraq, and that is why we -- I believe the situation would probably get better. The lesson of insurgency is, when the occupying power leaves, it tends to lessen rather than increase the level of violence. It'll still be a problem. I believe it would help diffuse the situation.

MR. SALANT: Do you think oil was a factor in the decision for war?

SEN. FEINGOLD: You know, people ask me this at the town meetings all the time, and you know, I don't know. We've heard the oil theory; we've heard the theory about the president's father being a subject to a potential assassination attempt; we've heard geopolitical theories; we've heard theories of the neoconservative notion, that Iraq should be used as a way to start a whole worldwide change. I honestly don't know. It's almost as if somebody got into this mindset, and they all started talking to each other into this idea when it made so very little sense. But I don't know, and I don't want to claim without proof that oil was the main factor. I think it's a very complicated thing that happened up at the White House, and I really am still astonished that it happened.

MR. SALANT: How do you compare today's U.S. involvement in Iraq to Vietnam?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, I think it's a mistake to make comparisons because it's such a different time, and it's such a different threat. You know, we remember feeling misled by the Johnson administration and Kennedy administration at times and Nixon with regard to that war, but I would say, one thing that is different is that the level of defensiveness and the level of sort of unity on the Republican side on not admitting that this was a bad idea is actually different. I remember courageous Republicans coming forth and talking about the problem in Vietnam in a way -- Pete McCloskey and others -- that helped get a national policy to cause us to stop making the mistakes we were making in Vietnam.

It seems to me here that the one-party rule that we have in this country is causing us not to take a realistic view, and we need bipartisanship in trying to solve this problem. So I think the comparisons are very difficult and not particularly helpful in terms of what's happening on the ground.

MR. SALANT: This questioner wants to know: Where were all the Democrats before the Iraq war? Why didn't they more aggressively challenge the administration's case for Iraq, that it posed an imminent threat, and why did most Democrats support the October 2002 authorization for the use of force?

SEN. FEINGOLD: We should have done that. One of my colleagues said to me the other day the only thing that matters is that we win in 2006, get the House and the Senate back, and that's how we change America. And I -- and of course I'm for that, and I'm campaigning for it.

But I had to remind this colleague that we were in the majority in the United States Senate when we voted for the Iraq war, and we were in the majority in the United States Senate when the USA Patriot Act went through. So don't tell me about how being in the majority is a be-all and end-all. You got to do the right thing. And when you're in the majority, you shouldn't say, "Well, you

know, now we're in the majority. We don't want to lose the majority, so we're not going stand up on that either." That's where we're heading if we don't stand on principle.

And I am sad to say that after this country did a wonderful job and the president did a wonderful job after 9/11 and him going into the Afghanistan invasion and doing it the right way, lining up support from Islamic countries and others, this Iraq situation was an effort at political intimidation, which succeeded.

I heard my colleagues say in private conversation, over and over again, they didn't think this was a good idea. But in the end, unfortunately, the intimidation worked. And I believe many Democrat senators voted for this war who didn't really think it was the best idea, but they were so concerned about the atmosphere and the obvious political fears of what could happen if you're accused of being soft on terrorism that we allowed too many of our colleagues to be led into one of the worst votes they could have possibly ever taken.

We were -- those folks who did that were wrong. We as Democrats were wrong to vote for this war. It was a chance to stand up and show that we had a different view and a better view in the fight against terrorism, and we missed that opportunity.

But we're missing the opportunity now, too, by not saying what I've tried to say throughout this speech and answering questions. It is okay to say that we should try to redeploy from Iraq. It is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of trying to actually deal with the threats around the world that are the most important.

MR. SALANT: Switching gears, why has Congress tolerated the sending of prisoners to secret prisons in countries known to torture?

SEN. FEINGOLD: You know, I'm going to be limited in what I can say about this, but obviously I don't believe that Congress has tolerated that.

I believe there is tremendous concern and in part an effort to find out exactly what has happened. So I would not put that in the category where Congress is being -- or certainly Democratic members of Congress are being placid. It's just very, very difficult to get at it. I intend to, but some of the material that I already know about this is obviously within the Intelligence Committee, but it is something we cannot let sit.

It's another example of where, in addition to all the other issues -- I mentioned the fight against terrorism -- if we lose the confidence of our friends and allies because we're doing something like this, it hurts us, just as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. And violation of human rights hurts our credibility in the world. So it is an important issue, but it is not certainly over at this point, either.

MR. SALANT: According to this questioner, Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte said today in a press briefing that to his knowledge, there is no warrantless wiretapping of purely domestic calls going on. Does this allay your concerns?

SEN. FEINGOLD: No. (Laughter.) Both in the public hearings in the Judiciary Committee and in the Intelligence Committee opportunities, we repeatedly tried to get the administration to tell us what this program really is. I think it's safe for me to tell you we weren't told. You know it's public that only a subcommittee of the Intelligence Committee is even being allowed to get occasional briefings from the White House. It's not really an investigation.

So essentially, even though the 1947 National Security Act requires -- requires -- that all members of the Intelligence Committee be briefed on these matters, the White House refuses to do so. And it just leaves us in a position that's very, very difficult.

MR. SALANT: On another front, you voted against the Senate version of the lobbying bill. The House has now passed its own version. Do you expect the negotiators to produce a stronger or weaker bill, or at least a bill you can support? Why or why not?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Oh, I would guess -- it was already a bad bill in the Senate, and the idea that the contributions of the House will make it a strong bill are -- (interrupted by laughter) -- zero.

It really is sad. We had a wonderful group of people working on this thing, a bipartisan group. Of course, whenever I work with John McCain, I feel like it's an exciting opportunity to cut through all the partisan nonsense. And we were trying to have a strong bill on issues like the revolving door and issues like the use of corporate jets by politicians, free meals and gifts and the like, and it really was a missed opportunity. It really is not nearly strong enough. You know, when people say to me, "Well, how do you do this, Russ? I mean, how am I going to have lunch with my friend the banker?" And I say, "Well, in Wisconsin, we've had a rule for 30 years that if a politician goes out to lunch, they have to just do this -- you just take out the credit card."

And if the person waiting on you is nice, they'll split the bill. It's not that hard. And yet we still -- we still have somewhat of an idea in Washington if somebody else isn't paying for it, you can't do it. That just isn't right.

So I regret this. I'm almost sure the bill will be weak. We will have missed an historic opportunity to get rid of some of the worst abuses that occur in this town.

MR. SALANT: It took you seven years to pass the first McCain- Feingold bill. Will it take seven years to pass a strong lobbying bill?

SEN. FEINGOLD: That should have been my answer to the censure question. (Scattered laughter.)

I'm afraid that as John McCain always says, is that these things usually happen when there's a scandal. And of course John always says, "There's more and more scandals coming, don't worry." And of course that had a lot to do with McCain-Feingold passing, the various problems that occurred in campaign finance.

But this Abramoff scandal was so significant, that I would have thought it would have worked. Maybe further revelations in this regard will help. But if we just sort of go two years from now

and there isn't a another scandal, it will just grow up again and it will get worse. The ability of people to try to figure out ways to manipulate this stuff is endless.

You know about the whole Redskins thing where we -- under the rules that McCain and I passed years ago, you can take stuff under \$50. Well, apparently the skybox there, amazing coincidence that the skybox, the football game, the drinks, you know, and the private bathroom, all that good -- amazingly enough, \$49.50. (Laughter.) You know, what a fluke!

This is the kind of stuff that you have to stay on all the time. And we got to take this opportunity to do it now.

MR. SALANT: Are there specific parts of the Patriot Act that concern you the most, and have there been specific parts that you know have caused abuses of the rights of U.S. citizens?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, let me -- I don't want to get into all the details of it. Let me give two quick examples that have been, you know, a major part of my opposition and what was for a while there the Democratic opposition, until they decided that it was okay, even though it wasn't changed, and that is the fact that your library, business and medical records can be obtained in a secret court on the mere say so of the FBI, and the judge in that FISA Court has no discretion to say no. They just have to say, look, we want this. There has to be no proof that you've done anything wrong. This is unacceptable.

Same thing goes with the so-called "sneak and peek" searches. We all know that the Fourth Amendment basically requires that there should be a search warrant, but there are exceptions in extreme cases. That means the government comes into your house, you're not there, and they don't tell you you (sic\they) you were there. The general understanding is that should be seven days, only seven days, unless a judge renews it. The Patriot Act gives them 30 days. What justification is there for the government to have a 30-day period where somebody's been in your house, you don't know it, and they don't tell you about it?

These things can be changed. They were reasonable. And just to show you how reasonable they are, the minute that they broke down my filibuster on this, Arlen Specter introduced a bill with exactly the four provisions that I think ought to be changed. So again, it's intimidation. It's not that people on the other side don't believe that we should do this. It is intimidation.

MR. SALANT: Many Americans believe this country is headed in the wrong direction. What's your vision for America?

SEN. FEINGOLD: I think we're on the verge of a fabulous period in this country. As I go around this country and I see young people's activism that I haven't seen for a long time, as I see new communities -- in my state of Wisconsin, the Latino community. When I first became a senator, you would rarely see a Latino in the northern and western part of the state. Now they're key parts of so many of those communities. We have Hmong people in our state, tens of thousands of them, who were so new to this country that it must have seemed like a terrible mystery to them, and they are becoming valuable and important members of the community.

In other words, this nation is becoming so excitingly diverse, that I believe what will come out of that is the kind of every and creativity and understanding of the rest of the world in a way that we had perhaps a hundred years ago when so many of our families first came to this country. And you look at the great things that came out of that.

So despite all the problems, and with a little help with changes in some elections, I do believe this will be a great new era in this country, and I am excited that I will have a chance to participate in some of it.

MR. SALANT: Senator Martinez, your colleague from Florida, will be here on Friday to talk about immigration. What should be done?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, I think Senator Kennedy and Senator McCain were on the right track. This is a terribly difficult issue, extremely divisive. But those who are saying "enforcement first," let's just do enforcement first, are not looking at the whole picture. We cannot have a society where the idea is, "If you can get in here illegally, that's great; then you'll be treated fine." We can't have a system like that. It's a violation of the rule of law and it also could be very dangerous for the country's future.

But we do have 11 (million) or 12 million people in this country, many of whom are not only working hard, but absolutely vital to our state and to our country. I heard one southern Republican governor say to me -- and he wasn't from the Southwest -- he said, "You know, if you send these folks back, you might as well just shut my state down."

So it's crucial to the economy. It's crucial in terms of fairness to those individuals to do the sort of thing that the McCain- Kennedy bill does. It doesn't provide amnesty, in my view. A person has to pay a thousand-dollar fine and gets a temporary permit. When that expires they have to go to back of the line, get a green card, and go through what apparently -- and pay another thousand-dollar fine, and apparently go through an 11-year process to become a citizen.

That, to me, isn't just being irresponsible. It's a practical solution.

I'll tell you this -- what I have witnessed on this issue in April is this issue is starting to really divide America in a way that is scary and dangerous. We need to pass legislation as soon as possible, even if it isn't perfect, to try to deal with both enforcement and helping those who are in the shadows to have an opportunity to get a permanent status in this country.

MR. SALANT: President Bush and congressional Republicans are now calling for an increase fuel economy standards for cars and trucks with gasoline at \$3.00 a gallon. Do you believe them?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, it should be increased. I may not support the highest level of increase because I want to be absolutely certain it isn't unfair to American autoworkers. I will be very candid with you. I am from a place called Janesville, Wisconsin. My grandfather bought the first Chevy truck ever made in Janesville, Wisconsin, and I believe very firmly in the need to do what we can to protect the environment, but if at all possible, protect those jobs. Of course, a lot of it has to do with the companies themselves using every opportunity to achieve fuel-economic cars.

I don't want to pass a fuel economy standard that is a gift to our competitors in a way that doesn't require them to be responsible as well.

But yes, it does have to come up, and we cannot leave it at the current level.

MR. SALANT: Another foreign policy question. What approach do U.S. take in dealing with Iranian nuclear policy?

SEN. FEINGOLD: This is one that is so loaded with how people take words that I want to be very careful. I know that the president has said that he does want to take any option off the table, and I agree with that statement. I believe that the American people have a right -- inherent right to defend ourselves if there is a risk of us being attacked. So I agree, but you don't literally take any option off the table.

But there's a question of what you talk about, about what you emphasize, about how you come off, and that's where I'm concerned -- that the president seems too quick to raise the specter of either a conventional, either a nuclear option. And I think that weakens the willingness of some of our other countries in the world who are very concerned about this to do everything we can to pass the sanctions and the other steps that may be necessary in order to have a peaceful solution to this problem. We cannot tolerate an Iran that is a nuclear power from the point of view military or weapons, I believe.

But you know, this is, again, a case where we can handle this in a more intelligent way. When I was in Indonesia, I met with the president there, President Yudhoyono, and I had a few minutes with him. And I actually am impressed with him, and I think he's going to do the right things. But I got to say to him, you know, "Why were you one of the five countries that didn't refer Iran to the Security Council?" And he said to me, "Well, it was a question of timing."

But you know, he heard from one of the two United States senators who had even been in Indonesia in those two years, that that is a concern in terms of our relationship with Indonesia. In other words, cashing in our chips and making sure that we know that all of our allies know, that they are clear that we consider this to be one of the most important priorities in the world. I think that's the only way this will be resolved in a proper manner.

MR. SALANT: Could you please list your top five countries of concern?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, obviously, Indonesia because I've mentioned it 43 times today. I'm very concerned about what is happening with Iran. Obviously, China is an enormous potential and concern. I am concerned about Russia and which direction Russia is heading at this point in terms of human rights and freedom of the press. And one of the problems is we have new challenges and new events occur, and those of us from the Cold War era realize that that is a place that we cannot just assume is not going to be a major issue for us in the future.

Finally -- and I probably have missed some terribly important country -- I would mention Colombia and the whole situation in Latin America, because if that situation does not get

resolved in a way that sends the right message to the rest of Latin America, I think it could connect with many other difficult situations that are developing in Latin America.

So those are some of them, and yes, I did omit Iraq on purpose because Iraq is important, but I don't think it raises some of the challenges and threats that some of these other situations do.

MR. SALANT: Can you outline the principles upon which foreign policy and national security should be based?

SEN. FEINGOLD: The first and foremost thing is the safety and national security of the American people. The number one responsibility is to protect Americans.

Now, the question of how you do that is what I discussed in my speech and the notion that somehow that is just done militarily. I think back in the '60s people thought when you said "national security" that -- you know, how many nukes were you for, and what are we going to be about Russia. That's not what it is. It's being smart; it's understanding this connection between the violation of human rights and a country's -- the people of the country feeling that somehow the United States helped repress them. All I have to do is mention the shah of Iran and the whirlwind that we reaped because of our inappropriate support for the shah.

So I think that is the foundation. It is protecting the American people.

But remember -- and I like to say this because I think of Americans traveling around the world, and they should do it more and more; it would help us -- it's not just being secure here in our country. It's that Americans should be able to feel safe around the world. I think that should be the foundation of our goals in terms of our foreign policy.

MR. SALANT: Should the U.S. get involved in Sudan? If so, how?

SEN. FEINGOLD: We should be much more involved in Sudan. The greatest amount of work that I've done on the Foreign Relations Committee has been with regard to Africa. For years, along with former Senator Corzine and others, I have tried to get the policy to be more serious. You know, we had an excellent special envoy to help negotiate the 20-year war between the north and the south, Ambassador Danforth, and he did a fine job. And they were able to at least move that in the right direction to have a peace agreement.

I have not been able to understand, when this administration came out pretty strong and said that this was genocide in the western part of the country, why they would not take the step of appointing somebody of great stature to work on this issue every day. We have far too little attention being paid to it -- even less attention by our European friends, by the way. Sometimes in a situation like this, we're lagging behind. They're even lagging behind more than we are.

We need to take the lead in demanding -- and it's going to take probably some kind of a military force to supplement the AU, either from the U.N. or NATO. And without it, you're going to have the kind of incidents that are occurring today.

You know, I visited a refugee camp just over -- in the Chad border two years ago, of these refugees, and I felt completely safe. Apparently today people were attacked who were visiting in a refugee camp.

This is dissembling, and we have got to work with the other countries in the world to be very aggressive about it.

MR. SALANT: This questioner wants to know why there is no concern about voting machines, no paper trails, inadequate numbers of machines at Democratic areas, problems in vote counting, no public outrage.

SEN. FEINGOLD: Oh, there is! It's just not in this town. (Chuckles.) If you go to any meeting of Democrats or progressives anywhere in America, you will not get through that meeting without somebody saying they're worried sick about the voting machines and Diebold and all of that.

And in fact, they're very concerned that we pass legislation such as Representative Rush Holt has proposed with regard to paper trails. We have the paper trail requirement in Wisconsin. But in order to have that requirement, in order to have this work, I think it needs to be a national requirement.

Now, of course, the party in power doesn't want to have that bill go through. So the tragedy is that we may have to go through another election without that reform being passed. But it should be one of the top priorities after the Democrats take over the Congress.

MR. SALANT: What criteria are you weighing as you decide, after the midterm elections, whether you're going to run for president?

SEN. FEINGOLD: Well, I am going to look at this in November and December, after I see, first of all, what happens with these elections. That's going to have an impact on what role I think I ought to play, whether I should be a candidate or whether I should continue to do what I'm doing in the Senate.

For me, I would think anybody would look at these things. The first question I would ask myself is, am I up to the job? Am I able to run this country in a responsible way? And I don't consider it to be an adequate answer to that to say, "Look who we got there now!" (Laughter.) You know, this is what people who want me to run say. (Laughter.) I think that's an insufficient answer to that question. (Laughter continues.)

The second is, if I somehow got the nomination, could I win? Could I be elected? I happen to feel pretty good about that one. But if I don't really believe that, I'll be darned if I want to be the guy that wins the Democratic nomination and the Democrats don't get the presidency again.

Finally, obviously, the question is whether this is the right thing for me as an individual and my family. And people say, "Aw, politicians always say that." Believe me, when you're -- even anybody is crazy enough to mention that you ought to do this, you think about that. You think about that long and hard.

So those are the things I'm going to think about. And I'm obviously pleased that anyone would ever mention it. But my greatest thrill was to be a senator from Wisconsin and to succeed people like Bill Proxmire and Gaylord Nelson. I'm very, very happy doing that.

MR. SALANT: Before our last question, I want to give you the official National Press Club coffee mug -- (soft laughter) -- suitable for sipping coffee while you ponder whether you want to run or not -- (laughter) --

SEN. FEINGOLD: Thank you. Very thoughtful.

MR. SALANT: -- and a certificate of appreciation for appearing before the club.

SEN. FEINGOLD: Thanks so much.

MR. SALANT: Thank you very much. (Applause.)

Final question: Have you and Senator McCain discussed the presidential campaign? And what advice has he given you? And what advice are you giving him? (Laughter.)

SEN. FEINGOLD: One time in the eight-year process of passing McCain-Feingold, we were out on the floor of the Senate, and Mary Irvine, my chief of staff, was sitting next to us, and I said to McCain, "Nobody's talking to us, John." I said, "I know how this is going to work.

You're going to get elected president, and you're going to go over there and nobody's ever going to talk to me over here."

He said, "No, no. You'll be in the Cabinet." And he said, "But not secretary of Defense. Not secretary of Defense."

It was a joke, the conversation. (Laughter.) But we kid around about this. Obviously I have great regard for John McCain. And I like to say -- people say to me, "What happens if ran against you? Do you think you could beat him?" I say, "I think he'd beat me in Wisconsin." (Laughs.)

So we're close. The odds of all this happening, obviously, are thin, so I'm not going to worry about it. But I do think that it would be wonderful if we could elect either a Democrat or Republican president that the American people would feel good about and could trust. And those are some of the qualities I see in Senator McCain. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: I'd like to thank everyone for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze, and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. And thanks to the Eric Friedheim Library at the National Press Club for its research.

We're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.) (Applause.)

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