

**Interview of Mr. Mike McConnell
Director of National Intelligence**

With Mr. Tim Russert – NBC's 'Meet the Press'

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MR. RUSSERT: Our issues this Sunday -- what is the real terrorist threat to the United States homeland? How good is our intelligence gathering, and nearly six years after September 11th, why is Osama bin Laden still at large? With us -- the director of National Intelligence, Admiral Mike McConnell, in his first television interview.

Then -- briefings, debates, and votes -- the Iraq war front and center. With us, Democratic senator from Wisconsin, Russ Feingold. And in our roundtable, insight and analysis from New York Times Columnist, David Brooks; The Washington Post, Bob Woodward; and The Weekly Standard, Stephen Hayes, author of "Change, The Untold Story of America's Most Powerful and Controversial Vice President." But, first, this week, this document, the National Intelligence Estimate entitled "The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland," was released. How serious is this threat and what can we do about it? Joining us for an exclusive interview is the director of National Intelligence, Admiral Mike McConnell -- welcome.

MR. McCONNELL: Thank you.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you a key judgment from this report, "We judge the U.S. homeland will face a persistent and evolving terrorist threat over the next three years."

In laymen's language, for the American viewers watching today, what is the most serious threat facing our country?

MR. McCONNELL: Tim, the most serious threat is that the plotters that are being observed will be successful in penetrating our defenses and conducting an attack that would result in mass casualties. Their intent is to effect and attack with mass casualties. A secondary attempt would be a political or infrastructure targets to even include economic targets that would have long-lasting impact.

MR. RUSSERT: Is it biological and chemical, or did they achieve nuclear?

MR. McCONNELL: They have not achieved nuclear based on our current understanding. The intent is either chemical, biological, nuclear radiological, or even nuclear to include a nuclear yield. I would add what we see currently is primarily a focus on explosives -- explosives that can generate a large explosion, but they're put together with commercially available material.

MR. RUSSERT: Why aren't we seeing more suicide bombers the way we see in the Middle East?

MR. McCONNELL: In the United States, you mean? The efforts that the United States and our allies have gone through over the past five years have been significant in establishing barriers. So the terrorists perceive us as a much more difficult target, very different from what it was at 9/11.

So barriers have been established, databases have been established, the National Counterterrorism Center, which conducts three times a day a teleconference with all the players -- federal level, state level, international -- to try to coordinate these things, and if someone can be identified, they'll be taken out of the pipeline in their process to come into the United States.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me read another key judgment, "Although we have discovered only a handful of individuals in the United States with ties to al Qaeda's senior leadership since September 11th, we judge that al Qaeda will intensify its efforts to put operatives here." But there are people in the United States, you are saying, who have direct ties to al Qaeda senior leadership?

MR. McCONNELL: The way we describe it is we have strategic warning, we know what al Qaeda and their safe haven in Pakistan intends to do. We're watching them train and recruit, and their effort is to put someone inside the United States.

There have been some clues in some cases where there would be attack, but we do not have tactical warning currently that there are sleeper cells tied directly to al Qaeda inside the United States. So we have the strategic warning not the specific tactical warning, but we know their intent.

MR. RUSSERT: But you say there are handfuls of individuals in the United States with ties to al Qaeda senior leadership.

MR. McCONNELL: That's correct, and that's in the form of raising money or being sympathetic to. But we haven't identified individuals who are actively plotting or planning. But there have been some that have been sympathetic to al Qaeda's cause.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you believe there are sleeper cells in the U.S.?

MR. McCONNELL: I worry that there are sleeper cells in the U.S. I do not know. There is no specific on a sleeper cell. There are some elements under surveillance because we're not sure, so it's warranted -- court-approved, warranted surveillance. We have some ties. This is what I meant when I said we've raised the barriers and made it more difficult.

MR. RUSSERT: This intelligence report that came out this month raised a lot of concern and alarm in the U.S., and it seems to be in stark contrast to the National Intelligence Estimate from last April -- this one. Let me read that key judgment to you, "United States- led counterterrorism efforts have seriously damaged leadership of al Qaeda and disrupted its operations. We assess the global jihadist movement is decentralized; lacks a coherent global strategy; is becoming more diffuse.

That seems so different than your assessment in July of '07. What a difference a year makes. What changed? We were told that the al Qaeda had been, in many ways, close to being destroyed or dismantled.

MR. McCONNELL: Following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, about two-thirds of al Qaeda's not only leadership but their soldiers, the foot soldiers, had been eliminated. And at that point in time, that was an accurate assessment of where we were.

Now, what happened? What's different? What changed? In Pakistan, where they're enjoying a safe haven -- the government of Pakistan chose to try a political solution. A political solution meant a peace treaty with the region that's never been governed -- not governed from the outside, not governed by Pakistan. The opposite occurred. Instead of pushing al Qaeda out, the people who live in these federally administered travel areas, rather than pushing al Qaeda out, they made a safe haven for training and recruiting.

And so in that period of time, al Qaeda has been able to regain some of its momentum. The leadership is intact, they have operational planners, and they have safe haven. The thing they're missing are operatives inside the United States. So that's the difference between last year and this year in our assessment.

MR. RUSSERT: Why haven't we captured Osama bin Laden?

MR. McCONNELL: Think about attempting to capture a single human being whose primary purpose and emphasis is to remain unobserved or hidden. It's a very difficult challenge. From having been in intelligence for most of my professional life, it's not difficult to find something large -- an armored division, ships that are being built or airplanes or whatever, but a single human being that wants to be unobserved, who is being assisted in that process, it just makes it very, very difficult.

MR. RUSSERT: If we captured Osama bin Laden, we might lose General Musharraf and Pakistan because of unrest such apprehension might create in his country. Would it be worth losing Musharraf but apprehending Osama bin Laden?

MR. McCONNELL: Well, first, I wouldn't agree that if we capture or kill Osama bin Laden it would be a particularly increased or direct threat to President Musharraf. President Musharraf is one of our strongest allies. He agrees with capturing or killing Osama bin Laden, and while he tried the political arrangement, the peace agreement, last fall, he has made decisions over the last few weeks -- you are aware of the Red Mosque and cleaning that out -- and he's gone on the offensive to go back into this federally administered travel area, FATA, is the shorthand we use to refer to it.

Now, in doing that, there's been a price. He has lost already, I would say, 100 troops. Broadly, across Pakistan, the number is probably approaching 300 from suicide bombs and roadside attacks. So there is a price to pay, but President Musharraf is a moderate, he has a moderate view, and he is attempting to cause the nation of Pakistan to rally around a moderate's view to eliminate the extremists.

MR. RUSSERT: If his government fell, how detrimental would it be to the U.S.?

MR. McCONNELL: It would have severe impact. It would depend -- if it fell, it depends on who would replace him. It's a democratic nation, if

they continue down this current path, so if the process of turnover happens in a democratic way, it may not have severe impact.

One of the things that I would like to highlight, however, is President Musharraf is one of our most valued allies, and let me just highlight this -- Probably, the majority of the senior leadership have been captured or killed or is the direct result of assistance and cooperation and participation by the Pakistanis.

MR. RUSSERT: Are you convinced Osama bin Laden is alive?

MR. McCONNELL: We have not heard from Osama bin Laden for over a year. There's a recent video where he appeared. Many people thought that was current. That was actually old videotape. So it's been a year. There are rumors about his illness. My personal view is that he's alive, but we don't know because we can't confirm it for over a year.

MR. RUSSERT: And living in Pakistan?

MR. McCONNELL: I believe he is in the tribal region of Pakistan, and how he conducts his affairs, only speaking to a courier, staying complete removed from anything we could exploit to find him, I think he's in that region.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me ask you about the executive order the president issued about enhanced interrogation measures. What does that allow a CIA-held target? What kind of measures can you use to get information from them?

MR. McCONNELL: Well, Tim, as you know, I can't discuss specific measures. There's a variety of reasons for that. One, if I announce what the specific measures are, it would aid those who want to resist those measures to train, to understand it, and so on, so I won't be too specific.

Let me go back to a higher calling in this context. The United States does not engage in torture. The president has been very clear about that. The executive order spells it out. There are means and methods to conduct interrogation that will result in information that we need, and what I would highlight -- I was concerned and worried and, quite frankly, appalled by Abu Ghraib. My view is America risked losing the moral high ground, and so I focused on this when I came back.

What I can report to you is that was an aberration. The people who were responsible for the atrocities at Abu Ghraib have been held accountable, and they're serving a sentence for that. That is not the program the CIA was administering. It is not the program that the president approved in the recent executive order.

MR. RUSSERT: But by use of the term "enhanced interrogation measures," there clearly are things that are used to elicit information. Have we eliminated water-boarding? Can you confirm that?

MR. McCONNELL: I would rather not be specific on eliminating exactly what the techniques are with regard to any specific. When I was in a situation where I had to sign off, as a member of the process, my name to this executive order, I sat down with those who have been trained to do it, doctors who monitor it, understanding that no one is subjected to torture. They are treated in a way that they have adequate diet and not exposed to

heat or cold, they are not abused in any way, but I did understand when exposed to the techniques how they work and why they work -- all under medical supervision, and one of the things that's very important, I think, for the American public to know -- in the history of this program it's been fewer than 100 people.

And so this is a program where we capture someone known to be a terrorist, we need information that they possess, and it has saved countless lives because they believe these techniques might involve torture, and they don't understand them, they tend to speak to us, talk to us in a very candid way.

MR. RUSSERT: Does this new executive order allow measures that if were used against a U.S. citizen who was apprehended by the enemy would be troubling to the American people?

MR. McCONNELL: I can report to you that it's not torture.

MR. RUSSERT: How do you define torture?

MR. McCONNELL: Well, torture is -- an attempt to define torture in the executive order gives examples of mutilation or murder or rape or physical pain, those kinds of things.

Let me just leave it by saying the techniques work. It's not torture, you're not subjected to heat or cold, but it is effective, and it's a psychological approach to causing someone to have uncertainty and, in a situation where they will feel compelled to talk to you about what you're asking on that.

MR. RUSSERT: Then you would find it acceptable if a U.S. citizen experienced the same kind of enhanced interrogation measures?

MR. McCONNELL: Tim, it's not torture. I would not want a U.S. citizen to go through the process, but it is not torture, and there would be no permanent damage to that citizen.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me turn to Iraq, another key judgment from the National Intelligence Estimate, "We assess that its association with AQI, al Qaeda in Iraq, helps al Qaeda to energize the broader Sunni extremist community, raise resources and recruit and indoctrinate operatives including for homeland attacks."

That seems to suggest that the Iraq War has been a very effective recruiting tool for al Qaeda.

MR. McCONNELL: It has served as a recruiting tool to draw additional terrorists into Iraq, but it's a mutually beneficial situation for both organizations. Now, the debate often is -- was al Qaeda in Iraq prior to the U.S.-led coalition invasion? Some members of those who associate with al Qaeda were there -- Zargawi, who had served in Pakistan with Osama bin Laden, was the principal lead. In 2004 he swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden. As you know, he was subsequently killed about a year ago -- June 2006. The person that replaced him as sworn allegiance to Osama bin Laden.

So al Qaeda finds it beneficial in that it's in the press. It draws in recruits, and al Qaeda in Iraq found it beneficial because it unites in a broader context.

There's one thing I think is very important is in the NIE that's often overlooked -- there is an element of extremism in the Middle East that runs from North Africa down into South Africa into the Levant, Syria, into Iraq and over to Afghanistan, even Pakistan. What al Qaeda has done is find a method for uniting those extremist views, and so what we see now is groups who are predisposed to extremism and terrorism are uniting under the al Qaeda banner.

MR. RUSSERT: But al Qaeda is a much more robust and larger presence in Iraq now than it was before the war?

MR. McCONNELL: That's fair to say, that's fair to say. Now, but, let me just highlight one thing that's also important -- At one point in the war, al Qaeda controlled the huge expanse to the west, it's called Anbar Province. What's happened is because of the atrocities in their approach that leadership, tribal sheikhs in that region, collaborated with the coalition and turned on al Qaeda.

So has al Qaeda defeated in Iraq -- no. But in some areas, they're back on their heels for two reasons. The local citizens have turned against -- Iraqi citizens have turned against al Qaeda, and the coalition has been much more effective. As you know, the troops in this surge arrived in about the middle of June, and so the effort has been to take the fight to al Qaeda, and they have a very high level of success in doing that.

MR. RUSSERT: In terms of the balance in Iraq, which creates more of the violence? Which is the greater cause for violence? The sectarian conflict or al Qaeda?

MR. McCONNELL: I think it is both. In some cases, we even have Shi'a on Shi'a sectarian violence. But, for the most part, it is Sunni versus Shi'a, and al Qaeda is the one that takes -- is the organization that attempts purposefully to serve as an accelerant attacking things like the mosque, the Grand Mosque that was destroyed over a year ago, and then revisiting with attacking the two minarets that were still up.

The whole purpose is something massive against the Shi'a or against something Shi'a holds sacred to act as an accelerant to stimulate the violence.

MR. RUSSERT: But there seems to be, Admiral, a coordinated campaign by the administration to elevate al Qaeda is the threat in Iraq, and yet the Pentagon quarterly report, which came out in March, said this, "The conflict in Iraq has changed from a predominantly Sunni-led insurgency against foreign occupation to a struggle for the division of political and economic influence among sectarian groups and organized criminal activity," the Pentagon quarterly report on Iraq to Congress.

The Pentagon report also said sectarian violence has become "the greatest impediment to the establishment of security and effective governance in Iraq." Do you agree with that?

MR. McCONNELL: I agree with that, it's true. But what I would highlight is al Qaeda is part of that sectarian violence, al Qaeda is part of that crime. In some neighborhoods, it would be a classic shakedown -- "We will provide security if you give us money and resources." So al Qaeda is a major portion -- not the only. It's had significant impact, but there are other sectarian disagreements and criminal activity going on, as I mentioned, even Shi'a on Shi'a in some cases.

MR. RUSSERT: Stephen Hayes has written his book on Vice President Cheney, and as I was reading it, I found an interview with you about your views of the administration and some of their methods of gathering intelligence, and I want to share that with you and have a chance to talk about it.

It says here, "In November of 2006, Michael McConnell, who had been working on intelligence issues in the private sector since resigning from the NSA in '96 was asked to consider joining the Bush administration as the nation's top intelligence official. McConnell was honored to be asked but had serious reservations. He had been unimpressed with many aspects of the Bush administration and its conduct of the war on terror, particularly what he felt was a politicized use of intelligence and lead-up to the war.

All of these current players, Secretary Rumsfeld, Vice President Cheney, and the president,' McConnell said in an interview in late November '06, 'must come through from me as a citizen. I am no longer on active duty, so I can say these things. They had, first and foremost, very strong political convictions. My sense of it is their political faith and convictions influence how they took information and interpreted it, how they picked up and interpreted outside events. As a former intel pro, when you don't like the answer, and you set up your own thing, you tend to get the answer you want. You hire people that think like you do or want to satisfy the boss. I've read much more about the current set of players, and they did set up a whole new interpretation because they didn't like the answers. They got results that, in my view, now have been disastrous.'"

That's pretty harsh.

MR. McCONNELL: We're all influenced by what we see and hear and read. I am a concerned citizen. I read those things and read those accounts. What I was taking greatest exception to was to have a secondary unit established in the Pentagon to reinterpret information.

The problem I have with that is the way you do intelligence is all sources considered. You have to factor one issue against another and balance it. If you start an independent effort with a point of view, it's not infrequent that you would take a single piece of data to make a point as opposed to consider everything.

So what I was referring to and talking about at that time is I was worried that in the Pentagon there had been established this separate unit, and I thought it would have been too influential. Now, you can imagine, I consider myself an intelligence professional, I've been doing this either on active duty or serving this community for 40 years. The first responsibility of an intelligence professional is ground truth, and the second responsibility is to speak truth to power.

So when I was asked to consider this nomination, that was the condition under which I would consider it, and I focused on it very intently once I came back. What I found, or what I discovered, was quite refreshing. As you know, I meet with the president and vice president six days and, on occasion, seven days a week. That dialog is open and frank and direct, and the thing that the president and the vice president frequently will do, whether they're talking to me or one of the analysts that go in with me, is that we're not telling you what to think or how to think or what your conclusion should be. We need your information. We can challenge your assumptions or your assessment, but we want to know what your opinion is.

MR. RUSSERT: But leading up to the war in Iraq, you strongly suggest that many Americans believe that we went to war on Iraq on faulty intelligence, skewed intelligence, or cherry-picked intelligence.

MR. McCONNELL: I would just report what came out of the WMD commission and even the 9/11 commission, to some extent, the assessment that was concluded, I think it was October 2002, determined or made an assessment that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. I believed it at the time, and I mostly believed it because of my experience as intelligence officer for General Powell in the first Gulf War. I knew they had them, I knew Saddam had killed 300,000 of his own countrymen. He had engaged in two wars. He had those weapons, so I believed it.

What I believe happened is that the community allowed itself to be lulled into making the call on information, in some cases, from people who thought they had them -- even Saddam's generals thought they had weapons of mass destruction. So those threads took us to a place that turned out to be not valid.

MR. RUSSERT: But did the policymakers hype the intelligence?

MR. McCONNELL: That's a judgment that I think the American people will have to make. I have paid very close attention to hyping of intelligence, and what I can tell you from personal experience is the decision-makers are making every attempt to call it straightforward based on the information that we provide to them, and we are not being asked to cherry-pick or to go down one path or another path but to give them complete information or the best assessments we can.

MR. RUSSERT: Admiral Mike McConnell, we thank you very much for coming here and sharing your views this morning.

MR. McCONNELL: Thank you so much.

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