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Highlighted Excerpts

On his legislation

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On conferring with Democratic leaders

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On civil war

KENNEDY: Look, clearly we have interests in that region, but we don't have interests in fighting a civil war...How many Americans do you think, members of the United States Senate, would vote for a resolution to put American servicemen in harms way, between the Shia and the Sunnis? It doesn't exist. That's what's happening today.

BLITZER: Is this Vietnam?

KENNEDY: Well, it is, in the concept that the administration has looked for a military solution for the outcome -- that was true in Vietnam, that is true in Iraq today. It is -- everyone understands you need a political resolution. American servicemen have been there for four years...they deserve a policy that is as good as their courage.

Full Transcript

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BLITZER: And joining us now, the senior senator from Massachusetts, Senator Ted Kennedy.

Senator, thanks very much --

KENNEDY: Thank you very much.

BLITZER: -- for joining us.

You realize, of course -- at least, all the experts say -- you don't have the votes, necessarily, to get this passed.

KENNEDY: Well, first of all, the war in Iraq is the over-arching issue of our time. It was the over-arching issue in the November -- on the elections. The American people are way ahead of the House of Representatives and the Senate of the United States. It's only a question of time before the Congress and the Senate catches up with the people; what they want to do is bring an end to this war. The last thing that the American people want is to insert tens of thousands of new American troops into a civil war in Iraq.

And they want the Congress to do something. I've outlined a pathway where that can be done, so we'll get real accountability and we'll find out who is standing up for the American people and who is going to be continuing to support this administration's failed and flawed policy.

BLITZER: Have you checked with the leadership -- Harry Reid, the new Senate Majority leader? His spokesman, Jim Manly (ph), put out a statement today saying, "Senator Kennedy's resolution underscores the significant opposition on the Hill, and with the American people, to the president's plan. This is only one of several ideas about how to respond to the president's proposal on Iraq."

KENNEDY: That's so. I've talked, for example, to both Harry Reid -- I've talked to Carl Levin, who's developing a proposal -- Joe Biden is developing a proposal. I've talked to Congressman Murtha, who's got a very interesting idea, in terms of phasing in the accountability in the House of Representatives. So all of this is taking place at this time.

But the encouraging aspect, from the American people's point of view, is that we're no longer just going to be a blank check for this administration. We had a Republican administration -- controlled the House, Republicans controlled the Senate and they were just a rubber stamp for the president, and we have seen this enormous continuation and the escalation of the war.

Time is for a political solution in Iraq, not adding more American lives to a civil war.

BLITZER: Because you might -- even if you got the votes in the Senate and the House, the president could then veto that legislation. You'd need veto-proof kind of roll calls.

KENNEDY: Well, the fact has a way -- if you have the will of the American people being so overwhelming, at that time where you get that kind of support, where I believe we'll have Republican support in both the House and the Senate, the president is going to have to make adjustments. Just look at the fact, the Democrats just won the Senate of the United States by one vote -- small majority in the House, then he fired Don Rumsfeld the next day. And he's gone into a period of time to look for a changed policy.

That's just as a result of the election. People have the power. The real question is, whether Congress and the Senate are going to do something, rather than just talk, whether it's going to be something beyond rhetoric. Will we really take a stand and do what we have done in the past, in Lebanon and also in Vietnam, where we said, Dear Mr. President, you have to get positive authorization, new authorization, if you're going to surge, you're going to commit more American soldiers into this civil war.

BLITZER: How worried are you that if the U.S. decided to pull out all of its forces, rather quickly, from Iraq, there would be a bloodbath -- the Iranians would align themselves with the Shiites, the Sunnis would align with al Qaeda, and all hell would break out in Iraq?

KENNEDY: Well, I think, first of all, all hell is breaking out at the present time. I think what you have over there is, you have most of the forces in there don't want the United States to succeed, but most of the forces in there don't want the United States to lose.

And the real kind of question is, can we be clever enough, smart enough, to be able to get both the Iraqis to make the kind of judgments and decisions, and be able to be wise enough and smart enough to be able to rotate American troops home?

BLITZER: So what should -- if you had your way, what would you do in Iraq, given the hand you're dealt right now? What should the U.S. do?

KENNEDY: The first thing is, I believe what General Abizaid has said before the Armed Services Committee, of which I'm a member, what General Casey has said before the Armed Services Committee, and they believe that they, at the present time, the enhancement of American forces in that will be a crutch for the Iraqis not to take judgments and decisions. The Iraqis have to be convinced, and they will never be convinced until you begin to rotate American troops out of the combat arms in that part.

BLITZER: Will they step up to the plate?

KENNEDY: Well, then, that's going to be -- but they're not going to be convinced until that point. Look, clearly we have interests in that region, but we don't have interests in fighting a civil war. And for this administration to continue Americans to be involved in a civil war between Sunni and Shiite, on that part, no! How many Americans do you think, members of the United States Senate, would vote for a resolution to put American servicemen in harms way, between the Shia and the Sunnis? It doesn't exist. That's what's happening today.

BLITZER: Is this Vietnam?

KENNEDY: Well, it is, in the concept that the administration has looked for a military solution for the outcome -- that was true in Vietnam, that is true in Iraq today. It is -- everyone understands you need a political resolution. American servicemen have been there for four years, longer than World War II, they've done everything that they've been asked to do. They were underarmed, undermanned, and without a strategy to win, and they've served valiantly and courageously, and they deserve a policy that is as good as their courage.

BLITZER: You voted against that original resolution, way back, and you say that was the best vote in your 42 years in the United States Senate. Saddam Hussein was executed, as you know, in the last few weeks. Was the country better off -- was the U.S. interest in that part of the world better off under Saddam Hussein?

KENNEDY: Well, the fact is, he was a brutal dictator. I mean, there's no question about that. But the question is, are we -- did we really fight against those who attacked the United States, which was the al Qaeda? The answer to that is clearly no.

This administration, rather than pursuing Osama bin Laden and pursuing the al Qaeda -- and when you had the al Qaeda just virtually in a small group -- what we have seen is that, has metastasized all over the world. And we have less respect, less ability to deal with that particular challenge in the world today than we did previously. And that is the accumulation of mistakes.

BLITZER: Well, unfortunately, we're out of time, but thanks very much, Senator.

KENNEDY: Thank you very much.

BLITZER: Appreciate it.

KENNEDY: Nice to see you, Wolf, as always. Good to see you.

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