

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Interview With Master Sergeant Rusty Barfield of the Pentagon Channel

February 27, 2009

President's Decisionmaking/Iraq/Afghanistan

M. Sgt. Barfield. Mr. President, thanks for joining us on the Pentagon Channel.

The President. Thank you so much for having me.

M. Sgt. Barfield. Thank you. You face many tough issues as Commander in Chief, for instance, drawing down forces in Iraq and ramping up in Afghanistan. What goes through your mind when you are in front of these marines here at Camp Lejeune and you have to tell them that they're going into harm's way?

The President. Well, look, this is the most important, most sobering decision that you make as the President in your role as Commander in Chief. And my main goal is to make sure that any time we are deploying our men and women in uniform, that the civilian leadership has done everything that it needs to do to make the best decision possible.

And that means consulting with our commanders on the ground; it means talking to every level of Pentagon leadership, from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to my Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates; it means also consulting with a wide range of people outside, so that you're not just listening to one voice, you're listening to a whole bunch of them and then arriving at some sort of consensus.

And I'm confident that with respect to our drawdown in Iraq, it's done in a way that General Odierno is comfortable with, General Petraeus is comfortable with, that our diplomatic efforts can be ramped up to accompany that drawdown.

With respect to Afghanistan, I think that all of us believe that the situation has deteriorated somewhat there, and that's why I immediately made a decision for us to send additional troops, including marines from Camp Lejeune. But I also think that we've got to refine our goals and our strategy more effectively. I think in Afghanistan we've seen that strategy drift a little bit.

And, you know, my most important job as Commander in Chief is to make sure that if we're sending folks there, we have a well-thought-out strategy, clear goals, and that they're achievable and that I can marshal and maintain the strongest support possible from folks back home.

Afghanistan

M. Sgt. Barfield. And to sort of continue with that topic, you said that the U.S. will forge a new and comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan to defeat Al Qaida and to combat extremism in the region. What will this mean for our men and women in Afghanistan now and in the future, sir?

The President. Well, first of all, by sending an additional 17,000 troops, we are obviously going to be bolstering our forces in Afghanistan, and that will obviously be important to the folks that are already there. If you talk to General McKiernan, our commander in Afghanistan, he will tell you that especially in the southern regions of the country you've seen brazen attacks

from Taliban forces, extremist forces, and we want to make sure that we have the force necessary to meet that.

I also think that because you're going to see that additional engagement, there is the risk of greater additional casualties, at least in the short term, just as there was in Iraq. And, you know, that's something that, you know, we'll have to monitor very carefully.

The key, though, is to understand that we are not going to win in Afghanistan or get an acceptable outcome in Afghanistan if we're only dependent on our military. Our military does everything that's asked of them, but anybody who knows the region knows that if we don't have a Afghan Government that can deliver for its people, if we don't have an economic development strategy where farmers don't have to grow heroin poppy but instead can grow other crops so that they're not feeding narcoterrorism, if we don't have Pakistan providing us support on the other side of the border that cleans out some of these areas where Al Qaida and the Taliban are using as safe havens, then this isn't going to work.

And my goal is to have a comprehensive strategy of not just force, but also diplomacy and development that is all moving in concert to get the kind of outcome we want.

Iraq

M. Sgt. Barfield. Yes, sir. You just talked about your plan for drawing down combatant forces in Iraq by the end of August 2010. Why is this timeline so important to you, sir?

The President. Well, because I think it's important, first of all, to send a very strong, clear signal to the Iraqis that they are going to need to be taking these responsibilities, that we mean it when we say that we're not going to be a permanent occupying force in Iraq. And we already have an agreement, a security agreement that was signed by the previous administration and by the Maliki Government that says we've got to be out of there by the end of 2011. We don't want to have 140,000 troops there the day before we have to be out of there; we've got to have a glide path that is responsible in pulling our troops out.

And so what we've done is we've set a point of August 31, 2010, as a transition point, after the Iraqi elections have taken place, where there's, obviously, potential vulnerability. After that point, you're looking at maybe six brigades, 35,000 to 50,000 troops overall, who are providing logistical support, training, are providing protection for U.S. civilian as well as military personnel, and some counterterrorist—counterterrorism striking capability.

That then gets phased down over the next year and a half or so, until finally at the end of 2011, we should have no troops there. I think it's a responsible plan that meets our objectives, and it's one that was created in close consultation with our military commanders on the ground.

U.S. Troop Levels in Iraq

M. Sgt. Barfield. Yes, sir. And in continuing on with that topic, what will be the major measuring stick, if you will, when we talk about the 35,000 to 50,000 troops? What is it that's going to really sway you in terms of, is it 35,000, is it 40,000, or is it 50,000?

The President. Well, you know, I think that all these decisions have to be made based on what the situation is at the time, and it's very hard to anticipate exactly what things are going to be like in 18 months. If we continue to make strong progress in training the Iraqi security forces, if the elections are peaceful, if we've seen resolution of some of the issues that are creating sectarian tension in Iraq, like the oil laws and how much power the national Government has versus the Provincial governments, if those issues are getting resolved

peacefully through a regular political process, then that probably means that we're going to be able to have less troops—support there, as of August 31st of next year. If some of those things haven't happened, then that will put more of a burden on us, as well as the Iraqis.

So our hope is, is that we're doing everything right leading up to that point so that by the time we get to that transition period, we are well prepared to start phasing our entire operation out of Iraq.

Military Families/Benefits for Military Personnel

M. Sgt. Barfield. Mr. President, how does your plan for Iraq and Afghanistan deal with the issue of relieving the pressure on the fighting force and their families?

The President. Well, this is one of the most important issues that we face. I don't need to tell you the enormous burden that our men and women in uniform have been under: so many people I meet on repeated tours—three, four tours of duty; the stop-loss policy that's hit a number of our fighting men and women; the burden on military families, something that my wife, the First Lady, Michelle, has taken very seriously and talked to a lot of families about.

So first of all, obviously, as we start drawing down, that puts less pressure on military families. That means that we can start ending—we can end stop-loss policy. We can start getting back to the kinds of rotations where, you know, after a year of service, then people have a lot more time back home than they have had over the last several years, which is good for everybody.

In addition, my budget has also called for an increase in the force structure, the size of the Marines and of the Army. So that will also relieve some of the pressure, and it will allow us to meet some of the strategic needs not just in Afghanistan and Iraq, but around the world. I mean, there's a big world out there, and right now we don't have the kind of strategic capability that we should to meet other emergency situations that might arise.

Along those same lines, one big piece of relief, I think you heard during the speech today, is that we're going to have a pay increase for our troops. That, obviously, is important. But beyond that, in the recovery plan that I got passed through Congress we have a whole slew of steps that we're taking that are going to provide some immediate help to the military families. There's a lot of money in there for construction of wounded warrior treatment centers, construction of additional housing and facilities for military families.

In my budget, we've got additional money for daycare, additional money for training, making sure that the GI bill that was signed last year by Congress, that that is adequately funded and implemented.

So one of the things that's very important to me is improved quality of life, making sure that our troops and their families are supported, honored, and that our veterans, when they come home, are treated with the respect and the care that they need.

Military Personnel/Military Families

M. Sgt. Barfield. Yes, sir. I have a final question for you, sir; I know you have a full plate today. If you could sit down and speak to each military member and their family, as Commander in Chief, what would you tell them, and how would you convey your commitment to them, sir?

The President. Well, first of all, what I'd tell them is thank you. And you know, just yesterday, I had the mother and father of a fallen marine, who actually was stationed here at

Camp Lejeune—I had written them a letter of gratitude and condolence. Their son had just been killed relatively recently. They actually got a ride on Air Force One down here because their grandchildren, their son's children, are still down here.

And what I told them was, first of all, thank you; that all of America is grateful. We enjoy the freedoms we do because of what young men and women like that are willing to do on our behalf. And I wanted to tell them also that I carry them in my mind every single day when I'm making decisions; that when I am thinking about troop deployments, when I'm thinking about budgets, when I'm thinking about what our foreign policy is going to be, uppermost in my mind is understanding that young men and women are willing to offer up their last full measure of devotion to this country. The least they can expect is, is that their President is going to get it right and to keep them in mind when he is making the decision.

M. Sgt. Barfield. Yes, sir. I really appreciate you joining us on the Pentagon Channel, sir.

The President. I enjoyed it very much. Thank you so much.

M. Sgt. Barfield. Thank you, sir.

The President. You bet.

NOTE: The interview began taping at 2:15 p.m. at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to David H. Petraeus, USA, commander, U.S. Central Command; Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Forces—Iraq; Gen. David D. McKiernan, USA, commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan; and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Interviews :: Pentagon Channel.

Locations: Camp Lejeune, NC.

Names: Barfield, Rusty; Gates, Robert M.; Maliki, Nuri al-; McKiernan, David D.; Obama, Michelle; Odierno, Raymond T.; Petraeus, David H.

Subjects: Afghanistan : Counternarcotics programs; Afghanistan : Democracy efforts; Afghanistan : Terrorist attacks; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Afghanistan : U.S. policy review; Armed Forces, U.S. : Expansion; Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Pay increase; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication; Budget, Federal : Fiscal year 2010 budget; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense, Department of : Pentagon Channel; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Economy, national : American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009; Iraq : Democracy efforts; Iraq : Elections; Iraq : Government :: Federalism; Iraq : Iraqi military and security forces; Iraq : Status of Forces Agreement with U.S.; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Pakistan : Federally Administered Tribal Areas, suspected terrorist safe havens; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900113.