

Gravel: Representative Government Is Broken

Sen. Mike Gravel answers questions in our presidential mashup.

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The following is an unedited transcript and may contain typos or omissions.

Rose: Sen. Gravel, the president has said that he's going to listen carefully to what Gen. Petraeus says and reports to him about the surge and what might be America's commitment in the future. What do you make of what Gen. Petraeus has said?

Gravel: I think it's a tragic charade where obviously one could predict what Petraeus was going to say three years ago on this particular subject. And then you get the president, who is the commander in chief, saying he's going to follow what the dictates or recommendations of Gen. Petraeus, who is making recommendations that the White House wanted. This is a very tragic charade. While human lives are lost because of the inability of this government to have any sense of moral commitment.

Rose: Speaking of that, Moveon.org had an advertisement in the paper about Gen. Petraeus, which I know you're familiar with. Do you think that was appropriate, a positive contribution in the political dialogue?

Gravel: Well, Charlie, I didn't see it, but I'll tell you what. I don't think Petraeus is an appropriate general, and I say that with all due respect to his service. Here's a guy that made a speech just before the—and he was a three-star general at the time—made a speech that literally endorsed George Bush's position in Iraq, and now he's got four stars and he's telling us let's wait a little longer and be more patient. This is the party line that he's articulated. And when you get military leaders, and that's the tragedy of what's happened under this president, is they've been promoting people to general-rank officers and flag officers who are yes men. We need members in the military that are not afraid to tell the truth to the president and to the American people, and that is not what's happening, and as a result of that, we continue this debacle. The people in Iraq want us out. Who are we to say, oh, we're there to protect you? Are they stupid or something? They don't want our protection. Why? Because they're not getting the protection. They want to take back their own country, and they should.

Rose: So, you're suggesting that Gen. Petraeus is lying?

Gravel: Well, what does a very sophisticated, intelligent person do? He knows what to say. We see this in American media all the time. He knows what to say. He doesn't have to lie. But he's not telling us, the American people, what's going on. Every independent study and analysis of Iraq demonstrates that his statements are inaccurate. You want to characterize it as a lie? I think so. It's a fair characterization. But in polite society, we just say he's just following the orders that he's received from the White House. Is that too tough, Charlie? But those are the facts. People are dying under his command and don't need to die right now. And what we ought to do is have the guts and the leadership to get out. But unfortunately, the leadership in the Congress is too timid, and they play into this charade, as is mainline media, playing into this charade back and forth. The media's gone crazy over his presence. Did not anybody reason out that you could predict what he was going to say two years ago?

Rose: Is anything—

Gravel: I could, and I don't consider myself a genius.

Rose: But you enjoy running for president?

Gravel: Well, I don't enjoy running for president. I'm running for president because I don't know of anybody around that's prepared to end this war. And it should be ended. And the sooner we can pull American troops out, as soon as possible. And it can be done in 120 days, Charlie. And what we can then do is begin an aggressive diplomacy. And that would mean to go to Iran, go to Saudi Arabia, go to Syria. And tell these people, help us restabilize the region that we destabilized, and tell them we made a mistake in doing this. A tragic mistake, and it puts the whole world at risk of a possible nuclear confrontation.

Rose: Do you think anything is likely to change between now and the election in November 2008?

Gravel: No, because there's no leadership in this country, and that's the tragedy of it. There's no leadership in Congress, and there's no leadership in the House to speak of. And so we're stuck playing out. And I just—I feel terrible over the young men and women and the Iraqis that will die and get their bodies blown up because of this nation's mistake. This is all foretold the day we invaded Iraq without reason, without reason. It's criminal!

Rose: Let me turn to health care. Do you favor universal coverage without exception, and how would you pay for it?

Gravel: I'd pay for it with a retail sales tax. I favor universal coverage of quality medical care. I favor it through a device of using vouchers where everybody would be able to get a voucher. They'd sign up for it every year. It would guarantee them equal health care. All citizens would get the same health care. They would be able choose from insurance plans or a government plan like Medicare. That's how we would have health care, and the

only way you're going to pay for it is not by saddling business. All you do by forcing business to pay for health care or passing a law telling people they have to go buy insurance, which is a subsidy for the insurance companies, all these plans are going backwards.

Rose: All right, let me give you a viewer question now, a user question. This is Matthew Keeling, who says, "The number uninsured people in America is troubling, but for the well-insured majority, the actual quality of health care they receive and the speed with which they receive it is arguably the best in the world. How do you cover everyone without sacrificing quality or creating scarcity in the health-care system?"

Gravel: By one, making the whole process competitive. Two, by changing the control that's held by the pharmaceutical companies, by the insurance companies and the health-care industry over the Congress so that they cannot properly design a health-care system that meets everything that you defined. Stop and think what failure we have in this country. Bismarck put this in place in 1888. Truman advocated this in 1946. And we still can't get it right. Maybe there's something failing in our society. And there is. It's called representative government. And what we need to do is to equip the American people to then step in and be able to make laws in partnership with their elected officials.

Rose: Senator, I'm going to take one break here. They've got to change the feed, so I'll come up on my next question in just a second while they make sure that we have the right feed.

Rose: I've asked this of many people. Health care on every poll I have seen is the most pressing and significant issue for the American people other than the question of Iraq. Do we need not only to consider how we fund it and who has access to it, but the definition of what we mean by health care in America and how we go about rethinking it?

Gravel: It's not so difficult, and it doesn't take a lot of rethinking. There's nothing wrong with a wealthy—supposedly wealthy—country like ours to define that everybody should have the same health care. And that's what I've done with my program. Which isn't my program, it's Dr. Victor Fugue's. It's Dr. Israel Emmanuelle. It's doctors in Boston. These are people that have really fought, they've spent their lives at this. It's not that difficult if you have a commitment. But when the industry that profits from health care calls the shots on the way health care is going to be delivered, then you are going to see the anomalous situation that you have in this country where they can't even deliver it to everybody fairly.

Rose: So, how would you prohibit that kind of influence?

Gravel: Well, you can't. This is representative government. They put up all the money. When you're looking at all the people who come up with their health-care plans, look at where their money comes from, and you'll see the health-care plan you're going to get. You're not going to get much of a health-care plan after this election for the very simple reason that the nation is broke. We have a \$50 trillion to \$70 trillion fiscal gap. All these

people who are making promises cannot deliver. The only way you're going to have a health-care system is if you have a retail sales tax that the people will pay for if they want it. If they don't want it, they don't have to pay for it.

Rose: I want to turn to education now. Tell me what you think the debate ought to be about education in America and how we are failing our children?

Gravel: Well, we're failing our children, and let me give the figure, how bad it is. Thirty percent, one-third of our children, do not graduate from high school, and that's a good number. I've been in parts of the country where it's 50 percent, it's 40 percent. We're failing? Of course, we're failing. How can we not fail when we make the No. 1 priority in this country the military-industrial complex? We're spending more money on our defense than all of the rest of the world put together. There's no money left to make what should be the No. 1 priority, and that's education. In Japan, children go to school at 7 in the morning and end at 5. In the United States, they get off at 3. In the United States, we have all summer off. That's no way to compete and succeed. We need to get off of this agricultural-educational-designed system we have. Teachers want to get paid? Well, let them work year-round like the rest of the people. We need to have super teachers, and we need competition in education. We're not getting that, and we're going to continue to see the failure. It's not just throwing money at it, because we see what happens in Washington, D.C. They throw all the money at needs, and the money goes primarily to the administration and not to the education of children. We need to rethink the way we finance education, and that is by a property tax that pays for it. Now, wealthy communities can have great education. Poor communities have terrible education. That's because they don't have a property tax, and so what we're fed is, oh, this is a state matter. The federal government has to weigh in not only with money but with some discipline to make our educational system work, and first, they have to make this the top priority. Isn't it embarrassing, Charlie, that Sweden, Spain—and I could name several other countries—they educate their children at no cost to the children from childhood to PhD? And this supposedly great country of ours can't even match that? Shame on us.

Rose: This question comes from a user, Elyse Moretti, from Hawaii. She says, "I'm a new special-education teacher and already observing how students with special needs are not getting the services they are legally entitled to. How do you make sure these children, and all the other children in America, are not being left behind?"

Gravel: Well, you do that with leadership. Presidential leadership, one. Not just presidential leadership, but empowering the American people so they can make laws. Clearly, the Congress and the president in the last 50 years haven't been able to do it, because education is not the top priority in this country, and it needs to be. It is in other countries, and it shows. We are going downhill as a nation. We refuse to accept this. We're stuck in triumphalism, thinking we're the greatest in the world. Well, boy, start looking at educational statistics around the world and you'll see we're far from the greatest in the world, and we're going downhill. When a third of your children do not graduate from high school, it means that these people are destined to suffer subeconomic existence. The unemployment rate for people who have not finished high school in this

country is 8 percent. It comes down to—and it just comes down from there. No, we are failing, and it's our leadership that's failing, and the American people, if they had the power to make laws in partnership with representative government, they could correct this. But you can't, since the country is run by corporate America, particularly the military-industrial complex, the medical-industrial complex, and we do nothing about it, because you're—look at this election and it's all money. Follow the money, and you'll find out what you're going to get in the way of leadership.

Rose: All right, here is our last question. It comes on video from Los Angeles, Calif. Here is Bill Maher with a question for you. "Sen. Gravel, since 1980, the percentage of Americans who are obese has risen steadily to an all-time high, and a recent report by Trust for America's Health said things were getting worse. In addition, SAT scores have declined and 38 percent of fourth-graders aren't able to read at a basic level. If the definition of a friend is someone who tells you the truth, would you be willing to tell Americans that they're getting fatter and dumber, and if not, why aren't you my friend?"

Gravel: Well, first off, I am prepared to tell you that Americans are getting fatter and dumber. I have no problem saying that. I've said that essentially on your program, and I've also said that the Americans are going to get the government they deserve. And so, if things are going bad, just remember who put these people in power. What I'm trying to say to you Americans, and that is you have to become empowered. You're too busy trusting your leaders, thinking they're going to do the job for you. They've proven they cannot do the job, whether it's war, whether it's education, whether it's health care. Please go to nationalinitiative.us and vote to empower yourself. Because that is the only answer. Representative government and our government is broken. It's in pieces, and the people are the only ones that can do something about it. There's only two venues for change. One is the government, where the problem lies, and the other is with the American people. And that's the message of my campaign, is the American people have to step forward and solve the problem. Don't wait on your leaders, because they'll never get the job done.

Rose: What recommends you to them, in terms of experience, change, leadership?

Gravel: What recommends them to me, to the people, let me tell you. Let me tell you.

I'm the fellow that ended the draft. I'm the one that stopped the nuclear testing in the north Pacific. I'm the one that brought about the Alaska pipeline. I'm the one that released the Pentagon Papers and had to go to the Supreme Court because Richard Nixon was trying to throw me in jail. That's what I did 28, 29, 30 years ago. That was leadership then. And I was excoriated by the media at that point. I was a loose cannon. Well, right today, I've had the good fortune to live this long, and people look back and say, "My God, were you a courageous leader." Well, that's the leadership you'll get when I become president of the United States. Now, can the American people stand that kind of leadership? That remains to be seen.

Rose: Sen. Gravel, thank you for joining us.

Gravel: Thank you for having me, Charlie.