

Will Bush Revisit Immigration Reform?; Imus Tries to Make Amends for Racially Charged Remarks

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Highlight: Will President Bush gain any ground with Congress by revisiting immigration reform? Then, radio host Don Imus tries to make amends for racially charged remarks.

Body

WOLF BLITZER, CNN ANCHOR: Happening now, President Bush on the border straddling a political fence. Will he gain any ground with Congress by revisiting immigration reform?

Iraq war anger four years after the fall of Baghdad, this hour a new defense from Senator John McCain of his mission and of himself. Is his presidential bid in free fall?

Plus, radio host Don Imus tries to make amends for racially charged remarks. I'll ask the Reverend Al Sharpton if he's accepting Imus' apology after their face-off on the airwaves today. I'm Wolf Blitzer, you're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

President Bush went to Arizona's border with Mexico today, low on political capital and without much goodwill from the Democratic controlled Congress. He's trying to jump-start the push for immigration reform, despite his own baggage and the very complicated and emotional politics of the border wars.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BUSH: This is a matter of national interest and it's a matter of deep conviction for me. I've been working to bring Republicans and Democrats together to resolve outstanding issues so that Congress can pass a comprehensive bill and I can sign it into law this year.

(END OF VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Our White House correspondent Ed Henry traveled with the president to Yuma, Arizona. Ed?

ED HENRY, CNN WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Wolf, 11 months after touring the U.S./Mexico border here in Yuma, Arizona, the president found himself in the same spot, literally and figuratively. Since last May, the president has gained little, if any ground, in pushing what he calls comprehensive immigration reform. Improving border security plus providing some sort of a temporary guest worker program to deal with the nearly 12 million illegal immigrants already here. When it comes to putting those illegals on a path to U.S. citizenship, conservative outrage is still smoldering.

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That's why the president took a lot of time on the tour here to show off some of the high-tech tools that border officials here are using to try and catch illegal immigrants. The president clearly trying to show conservatives he's serious about getting tough. Ironically, in fact, the president's plan has a better chance of passage in a Democratic Congress. But CNN has obtained a copy of a PowerPoint presentation the Bush administration is using to try to sell this plan privately on Capitol Hill.

It includes some provisions that are nonstarters with Democrats on the Hill like the provision hitting illegal immigrants with a \$2,000 fine and a \$1,500 processing fee to get visas to stay in the country. Democrats say that's too expensive. The White House says they need to show that they're not granting amnesty and that divide right there shows why it will be extremely difficult to get reform signed into law. Wolf?

BLITZER: Ed Henry traveling with the president in Yuma. Thank you for that.

Immigration is a red-hot issue in the 2008 presidential race, particularly for some members of the president's own party. That's not making the White House push for reform a lot easier. Let's go to our senior political analyst Bill Schneider. What kind of challenge does this immigration reform pose for the president this year, Bill?

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER, CNN SR. POLITICAL ANALYST: Well, Wolf, the challenge is, can President Bush triangulate?

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

SCHNEIDER (voice-over): Everybody favors better border security. The issue is what to do about the millions of illegal immigrants already in the United States. President Bush favors a path to citizenship.

BUSH: People who meet a reasonable number of conditions and pay a penalty of time and money should be able to apply for citizenship.

SCHNEIDER: The Democrats running for president tend to agree with Mr. Bush.

SEN. BARACK OBAMA (D), ILLINOIS: Everybody who lives within those borders has the right to a life that is full of opportunity.

SCHNEIDER: Republican candidates are split down the middle. Five oppose a path to citizenship --

REP. TOM **TANCRED**O, (R) PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: And we're going to make them explain why they have decided that maybe amnesty is a good idea.

SCHNEIDER: Five favor a path to citizenship for at least some illegal immigrants.

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN, (R) PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: I know of no one who believes you can just round up 12 million people.

SCHNEIDER: The president's party is split, while the opposition party, which tends to agree with the president on this issue, controls Congress. We've seen this situation before. President Bill Clinton regarded welfare reform as a key part of his legacy. Clinton triangulated by reaching out to Republicans who gained control of Congress in 1994. The result? When welfare reform came up for a vote in 1996, Democrats split down the middle. They voted 23-23 in the Senate and 98 to 98 in the House. But Republicans solidly supported President Clinton on the issue. Could President Bush triangulate on immigration?

TANCREDO: I guess -- I guess he could be congratulated for that, for **helping** change the Congress of the United States from Republican to Democrat so now that he can get his immigration bill through.

SCHNEIDER: There's one big difference. In 1996, President Clinton was on his way to re-election with a job approval rating of 58 percent. President Bush's latest job rating, 38 percent. It's hard to triangulate when you haven't got much clout.

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(END VIDEOTAPE)

SCHNEIDER: President Bush may not want to triangulate. In 1996, President Clinton co-opted the Republicans' position on welfare reform. But President Bush is moving away from the Democratic position on immigration by endorsing more stringent requirements for citizenship. So it's hard to see Democrats supporting Bush on this issue, the way Republicans supported Clinton on welfare reform.

BLITZER: Well what are they saying in general though, congressional Democrats?

SCHNEIDER: Well the top Congressional Democrats are saying they are not going to deliver votes for President Bush unless he comes up with Republican votes. Nancy Pelosi has told the president he has to come up with at least 70 Republican votes for his immigration reform package if he expects the Democrats to deliver at least that many votes to support his position.

BLITZER: Seventy votes in the House of Representatives?

SCHNEIDER: In the House of Representatives.

BLITZER: All right, Bill, thank you for that. Bill Schneider and Ed Henry are part of the best political team on television. And remember for the latest political news at any time, check out our political ticker at cnn.com/ticker.

Radio host Don Imus is apologizing over and over again today for making offensive comments about the Rutgers women's basketball team. But the Reverend Al Sharpton and others are still calling for Imus to be fired. Sharpton told Imus to his face that what he said in Sharpton's words were abominable and racist. Listen to this exchange when Imus appeared on Sharpton's radio program just a short time ago.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REV. AL SHARPTON: You call these people nappy-headed hoes, but you wasn't talking racial when you said nappy. Jigaboos and wannabes, but you didn't understand what you were saying, you just -- what are you saying, you blanked out?

DON IMUS, RADIO TALK SHOW HOST: Oh, no. Don't tell me I -- I didn't say I didn't understand what we were saying. I said I wasn't thinking that.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Earlier on his own program, Imus said he was trying to be funny, not mean, but he knows his remarks were repulsive.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

IMUS: I'm not a bad person. I'm a good person. But I said a bad thing. But these young women deserve to know that it was not said with malice.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: And coming up, I'll speak with the Reverend Al Sharpton about his face-off with Don Imus earlier today and where the controversy may be going from here. It's not dying down, at least not yet.

Let's check in with Jack Cafferty he's in New York. Hi Jack.

JACK CAFFERTY, CNN ANCHOR: Hi Wolf. The war in Iraq may be what all the 2008 presidential candidates are talking about but it turns out that very few of them actually have any military experience. In fact, of the top contenders, only Republican Senator John McCain has worn the uniform and served in the military and gone to war. So how much does that really matter to voters? Well, recent history suggests maybe not that much.

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Consider that former President Clinton, who never served, beat two World War II veterans, the first President Bush and Senator Bob Dole, and the current President Bush, whose National Guard service kept him out of Vietnam, defeated three Vietnam veterans, McCain and Democrats Al Gore and John Kerry. Recent polls suggest having a military background can be helpful, but most adults don't think it's essential. Some think that's because of fatigue from the war in Iraq. One expert said we're sick and tired of war, and I think that feeling is going to last for about a decade unquote. Others say, though, that if a candidate has a war record, he has less to prove when it comes to character. And presidents who have military experience might better understand what soldiers and their families are going through.

So here's the question. How much does it matter to you if a presidential candidate has military experience? E-mail caffertyfile@cnn.com or go to cnn.com/caffertyfile. Wolf?

BLITZER: Jack, thank you for that.

Coming up, a powerful demonstration of anti-American anger in Iraq four years after the Saddam Hussein statue came down. Our Michael Ware joining us from Baghdad. That's coming up next. Plus, John McCain gets ready to go on the offensive over the war in Iraq. We're going to tell you what he's saying and if it will help his campaign for president.

And later, should the presidential hopefuls avoid appearing on Don Imus' radio program? I'll ask James Carville and Terry Jeffrey, that's coming up in today's strategy session. Stay with us, you're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

BLITZER: A powerful picture today of anti-American anger in Iraq. Thousands of Shiite protesters marched in the holy city of Najaf marking four years since the Iraqi capital fell to U.S. forces. The demonstration was called by the radical anti-American Shiite cleric Muqtada al Sadr. He appears to be taking some dramatic new steps to try to stir up more Iraqi hatred of the United States.

And joining us now, our correspondent in Baghdad, Michael Ware. Michael Ware, the comments coming from Muqtada al Sadr, these purported statements coming from him urging his followers and we know there are plenty of Shiite followers of this radical Shiite cleric to not fight Iraqis but to fight, to resist the occupiers. That's a clear reference to the United States. What's going on?

MICHAEL WARE, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Well, this is Muqtada politically rejockeying and militarily preparing the ground for what may come, whatever contingencies lie ahead. He was very careful with these words. He didn't actually exhort his followers to launch attacks. He's just said to his militia and to the brothers in the police force and the Iraqi army, to stop fighting each other because this is what the enemy, the occupier, America, wants. Let's focus on the true enemy, which is America.

Now, this comes as over the weekend one of the strongholds of his militia has been attacked by Iraqi and American forces and there's been intense fighting. He calls for this rally to mark the fourth anniversary of the war. Instead of celebrating liberation, it's an anti-American demonstration where the military says only up to 7,000 took the streets. But you can see the pictures of the holy city of Najaf. Iraqi officials say it was tens of thousands. Now American generals are trying to put a good spin on this. They say this is a mark of democracy. This is what we came here to let them do to have freedom of speech. But this is freedom of speech, a gathering by thousands of supporters of an armed anti-American militia backed by Iran. Wolf?

BLITZER: And those pictures very dramatic. We see American flags being burned. We see these followers being told by Muqtada al Sadr in effect, don't fight Iraqis. Don't cooperate with the occupiers, the United States. But he's also suggesting one step further to the Iraqis, his followers, don't work with America. Don't cooperate. Don't walk with them in any way. What's the message to those Iraqi military and police forces who do cooperate with the U.S.?

WARE: Well, obviously, they have to be very cautious individuals. Now, it's been well established that no one from Muqtada's military forces, no one from his parliamentary faction and none of his officials in the government. Remember, Muqtada al Sadr, the anti-American cleric, owns several ministries in this government, including health. He runs the hospitals in this country. None of those officials will talk to Americans. Now what we saw after the start

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of the surge or the Baghdad security plan on February 14th is Muqtada leave the scene. American intelligence says he went to Iran. Well this demonstration is him putting himself back on the scene. He's saying, no matter where I am, look at what I can still do.

BLITZER: Michael Ware in Baghdad for us, thanks Michael.

WARE: Thank you, Wolf.

BLITZER: Top Republicans in Congress fired a new shot today in the battle over Iraq war funding. They're urging the speaker Nancy Pelosi to call the House back into session immediately to try to resolve House and Senate spending bills that include troop withdrawal deadlines. Right now the House is scheduled to reconvene one week from today. The Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and the House Minority Leader John Boehner, they're both warning Pelosi that a delay in war funding will put troops at risk. A Pelosi spokesman dismisses that as a cheap political stunt. That's a direct quote. Democrats accuse Republicans of overstating the risk of a funding delay and they say any risk to troops would be the president's fault since he's vowed to veto any bill that includes a pullout timetable.

Coming up, Barack Obama invades Hillary Clinton country. We're going to tell you why the senator from Illinois is in his rival's adopted hometown.

But up next, what goes up doesn't necessarily go down. We're going to take a look at the latest jump in gas prices and what that means for you. Stick around, you're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

BLITZER: Let's check in with Carol Costello, she's monitoring the wires, she's keeping an eye on the video feeds. What's making news Carol?

CAROL COSTELLO, CNN ANCHOR: Got it right here Wolf. Humpty- Dumpty likely would have been mortified. It wasn't all the kings' horses or all the kings' men pushing these eggs, but thousands of children at this year's White House Easter egg roll, children of all different ages but with similar enthusiasm raced eggs across the White House lawn using these giant spoons. You see them there. They also hunted eggs, read and they painted faces. First Lady Laura Bush hosted the event first started by President Rutherford B. Hayes way back in 1878.

How much are you paying for a gallon of gas? It's likely wherever you are it's higher than just two weeks ago. Gas prices have gone up more than 18 cents in that time. The national average now \$2.79 for regular. That's up 60 cents since late January. Back to Iraq, four National Guard units will return to the war for a second time, the Pentagon announcing which units today. One is based in Little Rock, Arkansas, another in Oklahoma City, a third in Indianapolis and the fourth is based in Columbus, Ohio. The 12,000 troops in the four brigades will return to Iraq later this year or early next year, they'll replace troops leaving Iraq.

And Iran is celebrating what the U.S. government scorns. Iran says it's reached industrial level nuclear production. Iran's president announcing that in a speech today at a uranium enrichment facility. He likened it to a proud moment and vowed his country's nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. Children around the country chanted slogans of support. The U.S. State Department says it's just another example of Iran's defiance. The administration insists Iran's true pursuit is building nuclear weapons. That's a look at the headlines right now. Wolf?

BLITZER: All right, we're going to have a lot more on this story coming up in the next hour, too, Carol. Thanks very much.

The British defense ministry is coming under fire after several of those British sailors held in Iran were allowed to sell, yes sell their stories to the press. Now the British military is banning enlisted men and women from being paid for news media interviews. Let's turn to Abbi Tatton. The impact on this could be significant on those hostages.

ABBI TATTON, CNN INTERNET REPORTER: Yes, but the hostages Wolf, those 15 sailors and marines are going to be able to go ahead. Some of them are speaking out today in prearranged deals. Faye Turney, she's the only woman in the group, sold her story to the "Sun" tabloid. She also gave an interview to television news in the UK that has just aired. The fact that she was allowed to speak out for profit and others has been criticized by some military

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families, some politicians. The ministry of defense has defended this citing exceptional media interest in this story. But now we're hearing there is going to be a review of those procedures. Wolf?

BLITZER: How much money are they getting?

TATTON: We don't know exactly. We do know from Turney that she described what she was offered as a hell of a lot. She has said that some of this is going to be going to navy personnel and their families. Wolf?

BLITZER: We had heard earlier it's up to six figures that would be British pounds, which is a lot more than dollars. All right thanks very much for that.

Up next, John McCain gets ready to go on the offensive over the war in Iraq and over his campaign for president. But can he get rid of perceptions that his campaign has stalled? I'll ask our own John King.

Plus, New York is moving up and the presidential contest calendar is getting even more crowded. Will the empire state's new date help any of the White House hopefuls? Stick around, you're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

BLITZER: Happening now -- for good or for ill. That's what many are asking about Iran's nuclear program. Today Tehran claimed its reached industrial level nuclear production. But might they be trying to build nuclear weapons as the U.S. suspects.

A critical look at the Iraq war from an ultimate Iraqi insider. Ali Allawi a former minister, the cousin of the former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi is out with a powerful new book. He's blasting the U.S. as having, quote, a monumental ignorance of Iraq before the war. And what he's calling, and I'm quoting once again, a U.S. swaggering arrogance just after it started.

And Senator Barack Obama's Broadway act. The democratic presidential candidate will be appearing on a major show tonight. So what's he trying to accomplish on Senator Hillary Clinton's turf? I'm Wolf Blitzer, you're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

This hour, Republican presidential candidate John McCain is engaged in more damage control over a suggestion that people could walk freely around a neighborhood in the Iraqi capital. Senator McCain is facing reporters in his home state of Arizona. In a "60 Minutes" interview that aired last night, McCain acknowledged he overstated security improvements in a Baghdad market he recently visited. McCain was accompanied by armed troops on the ground and helicopter gun ships that hovered overhead. McCain was asked about this controversy moments ago.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN, (R) PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: In my discussion with General Petraeus and the men and women who are serving there, some of them on their second, third and even fourth tours. It convinces me that we are making some progress but that it will be long and difficult. Unfortunately, the American people are not being told of the progress that's being made. They should be.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Senator McCain also concedes that the top commander in Iraq doesn't go out in an unarmed humvee, despite what the senator told me in an interview exchange just a couple of weeks ago.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MCCAIN: You know, that's where you ought to catch up on things, Wolf. General Petraeus goes out there almost every day in an unarmed humvee. I think you ought to catch up. You see, you are giving the old line of three months ago. I understand it. You certainly don't get it through the filter of some of the media.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

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BLITZER: On "60 Minutes" last night he acknowledged he misspoke when he made that statement here in THE SITUATION ROOM. Our chief national correspondent John King is joining us here. How is he trying to fix this problem that he has and is he succeeding?

JOHN KING, CNN CHIEF NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT: Well, Wolf, he's hoping through that "60 Minutes" interview last night, through the news conference you just alluded to today and to a big speech later this week at the Virginia Military Institute. Hit the reset button if you will, both politically and strategically when it comes to Iraq. He's not going to retreat completely, but he acknowledges in that interview with you he did overstep. He was wildly overoptimistic. So what he will say in this speech is this is not the Iraq war President Bush sold us at the beginning. He will be much more detailed in his criticism of administration mistakes but he also will say there are some signs of progress. Some sheikhs are cooperating, the Iraqi government is beginning to take some good concrete security steps and in Senator McCain's view, he will not back away from his threshold, which is, we must finish the job there in his view because leaving he says will just incite chaos across the Muslim world. So he will hold firm on the policy, try to recalibrate politically.

BLITZER: You speak -- you are speaking all the time to insiders among his rival campaigns. What do they say?

KING: Very interesting conversations today with rival campaigns.

They think the senator is back on his heels because of Iraq. But what they see as fundamentally more troubling to the McCain campaign is, they say that not only did he not raise enough money, very disappointing fund-raising moneys, but they say they are looking at the numbers, and that he is spending too much money.

So, they do see him -- if you talk to the Giuliani people, the Romney campaign, others in Republican politics, some in the presidential campaign, some just watching from the sidelines, they say McCain, as the presumed front-runner, is a little vulnerable right now, especially, they say, finger-pointing and fighting within the organization. And they say they are spending way too much money.

BLITZER: And a lot of people are using the phrase, he's doubling down on the surge on the war in Iraq right now, the increase in U.S. troops. That's a risky gamble. But how risky is it?

KING: It's incredibly risky. In some ways, the conversations now, politically, about John McCain are the same conversations we had last year, in 2006, about President Bush.

This -- Senator McCain, even though Governor Romney, Mayor Giuliani have essentially the same policy -- support the surge, support more troops, give the president's policy, especially now under General Petraeus, more time -- they all have the same policy, the three leading Republicans, but it is Senator McCain who is so closely identified with this one. He has the most risks.

And he's going to stick it out. But it's a tough one. When was the last time you remember any candidate winning an election by looking at the voters and saying, vote for me because we disagree? That's essentially Senator McCain's message on Iraq, although his rivals would say, if anyone can pull it off, he can, because of his history of being a maverick and being contrarian. But he's in a very deep ditch, very similar to the political ditch the president finds himself in.

BLITZER: He had some tough talk last night on "60 Minutes," very straight-talking. And, as you say, he basically said: I know the American people don't like this, but I'm willing to take my chances...

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: ... because I believe in it.

KING: But no one votes in April. So, John McCain is in trouble right now, but he has time. Just like the president, for his standing to improve, Iraq needs to improve.

BLITZER: John King, thanks very much.

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And John, as every one of our viewers knows, is part of the best political team on television.

New York tops our "Political Radar" today. The Empire State governor, Eliot Spitzer, today signed into law a bill that moves the state's presidential primary up to February 5. New York now joins California and nine other states for a coast-to-coast super-duper Tuesday primary.

If you add up all the states with contests that day, you have got nearly 27 percent of the country's population. And that's not all. Get this. Fifteen other states are thinking about moving their primaries or caucuses up to February 5.

One other note about New York -- right now, adopted New Yorker Hillary Clinton is the front-runner in the polls in the Democratic race for the White House. And native New Yorker Rudy Giuliani is on top in the polls on the Republican side. We're watching New York, all the other states as well.

Barack Obama, by the way, is in enemy territory today. He's in New York City, **fund-raising** in Hillary Clinton's backyard. The senator from Illinois is attending four -- yes, four -- **fund-raising** events in the Big Apple, as well as making an appearance on "The David Letterman Show" tonight.

When it comes to campaign cash, Obama and Clinton are neck and neck. Clinton brought in some \$26 million in the first quarter of this year. Obama was just \$1 million behind -- a lot more on this story coming up in our next hour.

And, remember, for all the latest political news at any time, check out our Political Ticker at CNN.com/ticker.

Up next in our "Strategy Session": Four years after Saddam Hussein's statue fell in the center of Baghdad, will the city ever be safe? (BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM CALDWELL, U.S. ARMY SPOKESMAN, COALITION FORCES IN IRAQ: I mean, we still have challenges. I don't want to minimize that at all, and there's still a long ways to go and there are still the threats out there. But the people are moving on with their lives, and they're seeing hope for the first time. And so our job is we have to secure this progress that we're starting to see take place and maintain that hope and give that back to the people here.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: And we are going to have more on the Don Imus flap. Should the 2008 presidential field boycott the controversial shock jock's radio show? That's coming up in our "Strategy Session."

James Carville and Terry Jeffrey, they are standing by live.

Stick around. You're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

BLITZER: In today's "Strategy Session": two subjects. We're going to talk about the fourth anniversary of the fall of the Iraqi capital to U.S. forces, also more on the Don Imus controversy.

Joining us, our CNN political analyst and Democratic strategist James Carville, and Terry Jeffrey. He's the editor at large of "Human Events."

Only moments ago, John McCain was asked whether he, being a regular on the Don Imus show, would agree to go back on, despite this controversy. Listen to what he said.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN (R), ARIZONA: He has apologized. He said that he's deeply sorry. I'm a great believer in redemption, whether...

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: All right, so, the answer is, yes, he would go back on the show.

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If you were advising any of the candidates right now -- and I know you aren't involved in any of the campaigns, even though you support Hillary Clinton's campaign.

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: What would -- what advice would you give a candidate about going back on his radio show?

JAMES CARVILLE, CNN POLITICAL ANALYST: Well, first of all, I was, am, and will continue to be a friend of Don Imus. I have known him since 1992. And he has profusely apologized. I watched him this morning. As just somebody -- as a friend of his, he knows that he's made a terrible error. It was almost -- he was anguished this morning. He's going to do a lot of apologizing. And it's very encouraging that he wants to apologize to these young women on that basketball team, who had a magnificent achievement.

But I would say, if we can't -- in a way, we have got to reconcile this and move on. And, remember, he said a really bad thing. He didn't do a really bad thing. And life is redemptive, as Senator McCain said. And I think, looking at -- knowing him like I do, I think he is really, truly sorry for this.

BLITZER: So, the answer is you think that candidates should -- I know you...

(CROSSTALK)

CARVILLE: Yes. Yes. I would.

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: You are willing to go back on his show?

CARVILLE: Well, I would go back on his show. But I forgive people.

I'm a believer that friendship -- when a friend is in trouble, that's when you run to their aid. Anybody -- I can be -- anybody can be Don Imus' friend when they all want to get a book promoted. What's that? Just like when President Clinton got into trouble. That's when the demand of friendship is. If someone asks for forgiveness, you don't give a friend that forgiveness, you don't give a person that forgiveness -- and I think that Don is going out of his way.

He's going on "The Al Sharpton Show," is -- is trying to get to these young women. That's the big issue for me, is that he apologized to these young women. And he wants to do that.

BLITZER: And, Terry, I think James was right in describing how Don Imus approached this today. He clearly seemed anguished over what he had said.

TERRY JEFFREY, EDITOR, "HUMAN EVENTS": Well, I think his apology is sincere. I don't think he's a racist person. I think the remark he made is racist on its face.

But I do believe that Don Imus represents a general decline in standards in American broadcasting. I think his program is designed to try and attract audiences through saying crude and outrageous things, that the basic irony of his show, the reason people are supposed to be attracted to it, is, they go, hey, I didn't know someone was actually going to say that on the radio or TV.

I wish we had a higher standard in general. But I wish Don Imus had a higher standard. And I do think that politicians who go on that show are taking a risk, because then they are going to have to take a stand about these various outrageous things that he says.

BLITZER: So, should they continue to go on that show?

JEFFREY: I think they're taking a risk.

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And I think, if you're a cultural conservative, you ought to object to the general standards of a show, Wolf. For example, I didn't hear or see his show on Friday, but I read in "The New York Times" that there was a song on his show on Friday that made a very crude reference to the Christian doctrine of resurrection as we were heading into Easter.

You know, it didn't cause a huge uproar, but this is the regular sort of thing that appears on this guy's program.

CARVILLE: Well, I'll tell you what. I'm a friend of his. And I will take all the blame for the kind of crude things they do.

But give Don Imus half the credit for the literally tens of hundreds of millions of dollars he's raised. And he's a man that sometimes has a foul mouth. But he has a good heart. And I hope that people understand that about Don.

JEFFREY: I'm not at all, by the way, contesting that this is a good person or that his apology is sincere.

CARVILLE: Right. No, I know.

JEFFREY: But the level of his broadcast is low. And I think there's a general trend in our culture, especially in electronic media, for the standards to go down and down and down and down. At some time, we have to start bringing them back up.

I think, especially when you look at the fact that cable news stations have a limited audience -- not all the 300 million people in this country are watching the cable news channels -- they are, in fact, appealing to, theoretically, people that are seriously interested in the news.

I think this type of program underestimates the intelligence of the potential audience it has.

BLITZER: All right, let's move on and talk about four years to the day. The statue of Saddam Hussein goes down in Baghdad on this day four years ago.

As you look at the political fallout right now of Iraq, it's fair to say, this issue is clearly the dominant issue hovering over this campaign.

CARVILLE: It's -- it is the biggest issue in American politics today. We're into the fifth year of this war.

And I will tell you, I get a sense that a lot of people on the Hill are moving it. They want this Iraqi parliament that -- we see demonstrations and people saying they want us out of there, and attack American troops, and everything.

And I think this parliament is going to have to pass an overwhelming resolution asking the United States, in the interest of their country, to please stay there, because I -- this thing has gone on and on. And then we were told there was going to be all this progress.

And then we pick up the paper this morning and the last few days, and find out that's overblown. We have had one, you know, kind of report of good news after another that turns out bad.

And to tell you, the patience of the American people is about done with this thing. The patience of the Congress is about done with this. And I have got to tell you, these Republicans' patience is getting rather frayed here now.

BLITZER: How worried are Republicans, especially those who are up for reelection, all the members of the House of Representatives? More than 20 Republican senator incumbents, they are up for reelection. How worried are they...

JEFFREY: Well...

BLITZER: ... that this issue of Iraq and the president's stance is going to undermine their reelection capability?

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JEFFREY: Well, extremely, because the reason the Republicans lost their majority is because of the Iraq war, primarily.

And, unless things change significantly in a positive direction in Iraq between here -- here and November 2008, it's quite likely the Democrats are not only going to maintain their majority in Congress; they will elect a president over this.

But I will says, Wolf, if people look carefully at what the Democrats are actually proposing, including this new legislation with Russ Feingold that Harry Reid is going to co-sponsor, none of these proposals actually call for fully removing U.S. troops from Iraq.

Even Feingold's proposal says, we're going to keep troops in there to fight al Qaeda and other international terrorists; we're going to keep troops in to protect our personnel; and we're going to keep troops in there to train Iraqi army. Neither Republicans and Democrats in Washington today are actually proposing pulling all our troops out of Iraq at any time.

CARVILLE: You know what? The Democrats says we're pulling -- but -- want to pull, on a timetable, a majority of the troops out.

This is a Republican war. This war was President Bush's idea. He's the one that implemented it. It's his strategy. And he's going to have to deal with this. And the Democrats are saying, you know what? They are going to want this Iraqi parliament to step up. They are going to want the president to do some things to report to the American people, and keep -- quit giving us this Pollyannish news that we keep getting. (CROSSTALK)

JEFFREY: At some point, when the rubber meets the road, the Democrats' actual policy is going to have to meet their rhetoric. And it better be a responsible policy, because, at some point, they may actually be...

(CROSSTALK)

CARVILLE: You know what? There's nothing more irresponsible than starting a war without a plan. There's nothing more irresponsible than taking...

BLITZER: All right.

CARVILLE: ... an army to war without the American people.

JEFFREY: And Hillary Clinton voted to authorize it.

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: We have got to leave it there, guys.

James Carville, Terry Jeffrey, thanks for coming in.

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: Some viewers of THE SITUATION ROOM got a payoff this weekend. If you happened to be doing "The New York Times" crossword puzzle on Saturday, you saw this.

The clue was 21 across. And here was the clue: "SITUATION ROOM ailer" -- A-I-R-E-R. Of course, if you're watching us now, you probably can guess the answer. It's three letters. What are those three letters? CNN.

As for the rest of the puzzle, you are on your own.

THE SITUATION ROOM, not only in "The New York Times" crossword puzzle, but on "Saturday Night Live" as well.

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Still to come: a question of service. Does it matter to voters if presidential candidates have been members of the military? Jack will be back with "The Cafferty File."

Also: Barack Obama on Hillary Clinton's home turf, competing for presidential primary votes and cash, and laughs as well.

Stay with us. You're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

BLITZER: Saying sorry is apparently hard to do, especially when you are being grilled for racially insensitive comments.

That's what Don Imus faced today over comments he made about a woman's basketball team. The person he faced, the Reverend Al Sharpton.

Reverend Sharpton is joining us now from New York.

Reverend Sharpton, thanks for coming in.

AL SHARPTON, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST: Thank you.

BLITZER: All right, so, did he reassure you, or you still want him fired?

SHARPTON: Oh, no, we want him fired.

I think that it is clear that we're not just talking, Wolf, about his personal beliefs or feelings, or even his being contrite. What we're talking about is public policy.

There's no way the airwaves should be used to allow people to call people nappy-headed hos. That's what he called these people. And, for him to say that, and just to walk away like, "I'm just sorry; I made a mistake," would then mean that the FCC, who regulates everything on the airways, and who sanctioned people, as far as Janet Jackson, with a wardrobe malfunction, has no purpose at all.

BLITZER: Everybody seems to think, though -- at least a lot of people are suggesting, including John McCain, who just spoke out on this matter, maybe he deserves a chance, a second chance, given the anguish.

You saw him eyeball to eyeball. Did you sense how sorry he is?

SHARPTON: The question becomes whether or not we are going to have a regulatory policy that goes based on how contrite someone behaves, or whether or not they step over the line.

Again, Janet Jackson was contrite. The TV station was fined. She was fined. Everybody involved was fine. Are we going to have policy? Are we going to say, if you say you are sorry, or even convince us you are sorry, policy is out the window?

And, then, the next guy can do the same thing, and use the precedent of Don Imus to say, I can't be punished.

Those of us that believe women ought not to be called hos and that blacks ought not be called nappy cannot have that precedent live beyond this particular situation.

BLITZER: Well, did you get the impression he was sincere in his -- in his anguish? You sat just across the table from him during your radio program.

SHARPTON: I got the impression he was sincere. Whether he was sincere about keeping his job or sincere about what he did, I don't know him well enough to make that determination.

The real question is whether the stations he worked for are sincere about upholding a standard. The real question is whether the FCC is sincere about having regulations that operate the same for everyone. And, when you see some

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hardworking young ladies who excelled academically to go to Rutgers University, and fight their way to the championship, being reduced to being called nappy-headed hos, the humiliation they feel and a lot of young women -- I had my daughter in the studio today.

How do they feel? And, if nothing is done about this, if there's no punishment, what message are we sending to this country?

BLITZER: That -- that exchange you had with him, with your daughter there, I want to play -- I was listening to your radio program today. I want to play that little exchange, Reverend Sharpton.

Stand by for a moment.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP, "THE AL SHARPTON SHOW")

SHARPTON: You see this young lady here? Where is she at? You see this young lady?

IMUS: Yes, sir.

SHARPTON: This young lady just graduated and went to Temple. She is not a nappy-headed ho. She's my daughter.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: And what -- what was his response to you?

SHARPTON: I think he was a little taken back. And I think he understood why the impact of this is a lot more than just something that should be argued in the boardrooms of some radio station.

He hit a lot of us where we live. And a lot of us that have condemned a lot of the language in gangster rap and a lot of language on radio, and said to kids, you have got to quit using negative words, how do we go back to tell our kids to clean up their words, when you can call some exemplary young women this, and we say nothing and extract no punishment to protect their integrity and their self-esteem?

BLITZER: John McCain just said, only a few moments ago, that everyone deserves a chance at redemption. He's willing to give Imus another chance. James Carville, here in THE SITUATION ROOM, said he's been on his program for many years. He's been a friend of his. He's going to give him another chance, will continue to go on his program.

Do you think big-name celebrities, whether politicians or media stars or others, should continue to be guests on Imus' radio program?

SHARPTON: I think that, if there is no punishment, if there is no policy enforced, to continue to go there is to endorse the policy that it doesn't matter how vile you get and who is violated, that an apology will do. It's strange to me that none of them have stopped to talk about the offended. It is easy for people that have not been offended to forgive people that didn't offend them. I think that is arrogant and insensitive.

I would think that everyone, especially those running for president, would first say, wait a minute, has there been some punishment and acknowledgment by those who were offended here? How can I forgive somebody for something they didn't do to me?

BLITZER: What about all the good work he's done over the years? He's got a program at his ranch, as you know, out West. He brings sick children there, including a lot of minority kids. He gives them a chance to be out West.

What about all the good work, the millions he's raised for these young kids?

SHARPTON: I don't -- I don't think anyone discounts that. I think that that is good. And he ought to be applauded for that.

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But I don't think that answers the point that he himself said, that he did a repugnant, racist act. And I think that, if someone is accused of something, sure, you weigh their background. But you still do not say that that totally means that you have immunity from behaving in a great way -- in a way that is a great insult and a great offense to people.

I mean, if you go to all of those disc jockeys that have been fired for saying offensive things -- look at Al Campanis. He did things in his community. He was fired -- Jimmy "The Greek," fired.

Are we now going to get to the 21st century, and you have somebody say something more repugnant than Campanis, more repugnant than Jimmy "The Greek," and say, all you have got to do is say I'm sorry and have a few of your big-shot friends come out and say they forgive you, when you didn't do anything to them in the first place?

BLITZER: The Reverend Al Sharpton, thanks very much for coming in.

SHARPTON: Thank you.

BLITZER: Appreciate it.

We are going to have more on this story coming up.

Also coming up: "The Cafferty File." How much does it matter to you if a presidential candidate has military experience? Jack Cafferty with your e-mail, that's coming up next.

And the Pentagon is weighing new marching orders in Iraq. We will have a report on a plan that could affect thousands of American forces.

Stick around. We will be right back.

BLITZER: Let's check in with Jack Cafferty in New York -- Jack.

JACK CAFFERTY, CNN ANCHOR: The question is, how much does it matter to you whether or not a presidential candidate has military experience?

Bill writes from Florida: "It would be helpful, but not necessary, provided he would have someone in his Cabinet who does have this knowledge, and it's someone he would listen to. It's like talking to a priest about marital problems. They read the book, but they lack the understanding of all the problems that marriage actually contains."

Kathy in Austin, Texas: "It's a vital component for an '08 candidate. The American military is often caught in a tug of war between ideologues on both sides. These are serious times for our civil liberties and the Constitution. Who better to lead the way back to sanity than someone who has sworn an oath to protect and defend that Constitution?"

Soni in Salem, Oregon: "I would prefer a president who has experience with peace."

John in New Jersey writes: "No. A president is the sum total of the people he surrounds himself with. If the president surrounds himself with experienced and wise people who are not afraid to disagree with him, he is much more apt to make wise decisions based on their advice."

John in Colorado: "I believe it does not matter if the president has military experience. History proves some of our greatest presidents had no military experience and some of our worst presidents came right out of the military."

Hutch in Rhode Island writes: "If you believe, as I do, the first tenet of leadership is never asking or ordering anyone to do something that you haven't done yourself, then the answer to your question regarding military service is -- as a prerequisite for the commander in chief is a resounding yes."

And D. writes: "A president with no military experience is like playing poker without having to pay for the chips."

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I -- we're going to get somebody to translate for me, because I have no idea what that means -- Wolf.

BLITZER: All right, Jack, thanks.

And, to our viewers, you're in THE SITUATION ROOM.

Happening now: Is it a big step toward producing nuclear power or a nuclear weapon? As Iran celebrates, America may have cause to worry. Four years after Saddam Hussein was toppled, we have learned that thousands of U.S. troops could be in Iraq a lot longer than they had planned. And you will learn why an Iraqi insider is now accusing the Bush administration -- and I'm quoting now -- "of monumental ignorance."

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