



TV News

MEET THE PRESS

'Meet the Press' transcript

Sunday, August 1

GUESTS:

Former Senator BILL BRADLEY
Democratic Presidential Contender

Senator JOHN CHAFEE, (R-R.I.)

Senator ERNEST HOLLINGS, (D-S.C.)

Senator MITCH McCONNELL, (R-Ky.)

Senator DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN, (D-N.Y.)

GENE SPERLING
Chairman, National Economic Council

MODERATOR/PANELIST: Tim Russert - NBC News

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MR. RUSSERT: Our issues this Sunday: Vice President Al Gore
says he's going to be the Democratic nominee next year. But the former
United States senator from New Jersey and New York Knicks Hall of
Famer Bill Bradley has another idea. With us, as part of our Meet the
Contenders 2000 series, in his first Sunday morning interview as a
presidential candidate, Bill Bradley.

Then: The debate over tax cuts rages:

(Videotape):

SEN. McCONNELL: I say, "Tax cuts, if not now, when?"

Unidentified Congressman: This Republican initiative will explode the debt, it is fiscally irresponsible.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: How much should we cut taxes? What will it mean to the deficit and long-term debt, to education, defense and Medicare? We'll ask Democrats Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Fritz Hollings, Republicans Mitch McConnell and John Chafee, and White House economic adviser Gene Sperling.

But first, the man who is going one-on-one with Al Gore to be the Democratic nominee for president next year, former Senator Bill Bradley. Welcome.

MR. BRADLEY: Thanks, Tim. Good to be with you.

MR. RUSSERT: Who is Bill Bradley, and why should he be president?

MR. BRADLEY: Well, I think there's only one reason that you should want to be president, and that's because you think that your leadership can improve the quality of life for millions of Americans. I think that my ability matches the moment.

Who am I? I'm Bill Bradley. I grew up in a small town on the banks of the Mississippi River in Missouri, about 3,492 people, 96 in my high school graduating class and one stoplight. I had wonderful parents. That town shaped me in many ways. I went on—lucky to have a good education at Princeton and Oxford. For 10 years I had a chance to play basketball in the NBA, traveled the country with an extraordinary group of human beings and began to see the country through their eyes as well as through my own, saw the country whole. The people of New Jersey gave me the honor of representing them for 18 years in the United States Senate. It was a tremendous experience. The Senate probably the best elective job in the world.

And then after I left, I taught at Stanford and Notre Dame, worked in the private sector, wrote a book called "Values of the Game," spoke around the country, and also led an effort to get campaign finance reform and something called Project Independence. And at the end of 1998, I decided that this was the moment, that I should run for president of the United States, and the last eight months I've been doing that and, quite frankly, I've been having the time of my life.

MR. RUSSERT: President Bradley, sitting in the Oval Office, and what lands on it is a tax cut sent by a Republican Congress for \$792 billion. Would President Bradley sign that tax cut or veto it?

MR. BRADLEY: No, I'd veto it.

MR. RUSSERT: Why?

MR. BRADLEY: I think that there are more important things that we need in the country now than this size of tax cut. I think, for example, that there are still 44 million people in the country who don't have any health insurance, there are still 15 million children in America who are below the poverty line. I think that also it's not fiscally responsible, I think. It also, depending on whether the House or Senate win, could have the perverse effect of preventing reducing taxes if we got into a recession, and I think that you need a tax cut available for countercyclical reasons.

MR. RUSSERT: Some have proposed a \$500 billion tax cut. The administration is suggesting a \$300 billion tax cut. Where does Bill Bradley come down?

MR. BRADLEY: Well, I don't have a number today, Tim, but I'd probably be more in line with a smaller, rather than a larger, because I think that, you know, one of the important things we can do now is pay down a little bit of the debt. That's reducing interest rates in the long run. Another thing we could do, as I said, is deal with those problems in the country that you can only deal with in good economic times. This should be the time when the economy is so good that we get more people on the prosperity train in this country. And I think you have to give those things consideration, as well as returning money in the form of tax cuts. Everybody's for some form of tax cut.

MR. RUSSERT: One of the people who've given a lot of credit for the economic growth and expansion is Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve. When he was first appointed, you voted against his confirmation. Would you urge President Clinton to reappoint Alan Greenspan?

MR. BRADLEY: Well, I voted against him the first time. I thought he didn't have enough international experience, and I voted for him the second time when I was proven wrong. I think that the most important thing that you can have with a Federal Reserve chairman is somebody who has the confidence of the financial markets. Alan Greenspan has that. There are probably other people who do have it as well.

MR. RUSSERT: But would you urge the president to reappoint him next year to another four-year term.

MR. BRADLEY: I'd have no problem with that at all.

MR. RUSSERT: Medicare: Right now, a little more than a third of our budget goes to Medicare/Social Security. In 10 years, two-thirds of all federal expenditures are going to go to those two programs. In April,

you suggested that we take a hard look at Medicare, structurally and even propose looking at the idea of means testing. Should affluent Americans pay a little higher premiums because they can afford to? Would you do that as president?

MR. BRADLEY: Well, Tim, I think that the answer to Medicare you have to see in a context of the whole health-care program. In the fall, I'll be laying out a very specific program on terms of—how to approach national health coverage. And in that context I'll also be dealing with Medicare. I don't think anything should be off the table.

MR. RUSSERT: But you're not afraid to look at means testing? MR. BRADLEY: No, I'm not afraid to look at it. I'm certainly not advocating it today, but I'm not afraid to look at it.

MR. RUSSERT: Are you concerned that a liberal Democratic constituency in primary politics would say, "Bradley, don't fool around with Medicare?"

MR. BRADLEY: Well, I think the important thing is to make sure that seniors have adequate health care and that Medicare is fully funded. There are a variety of ways that you can do that. That's only one of them. What I'd do is I'd make a call based upon what I thought was the best thing at the time.

MR. RUSSERT: But Medicare needs structural reform?

MR. BRADLEY: Well, if you don't have structural reform, you simply take money out of the surplus and use it to back up Medicare. I mean, that's another alternative. Again, I'll be laying that out in the fall.

MR. RUSSERT: Welfare reform: One of the areas that there's a very clear distinction between you and Al Gore is on welfare reform. The president signed a welfare reform bill. You voted against it. Now, the Republican Party has been doing some polling. And let me show you the question they asked and get your reaction. And put it on the screen for our viewers.

"If you learned that Bill Bradley voted against welfare reform that included time limits and work requirements because he thought it was too harsh on the poor, would you be: More likely to vote for him, 24 percent; less likely to vote for him, 60 percent."

MR. BRADLEY: Well, yeah, I voted against welfare reform.

MR. RUSSERT: Why?

MR. BRADLEY: I voted against it because I don't think that the answer to the problems of children who are poor in America is to take a pot of money from the federal level and send it to a bunch of politicians

at the state level and say, "Spend 80 percent of this on poor people as you define poverty." I don't think that that's the answer.

I also think that it's not wise, after everything we've known about the importance of the bond between the mother and the child in the first three years of life, to have a program that severs that bond. I think that the full measure of whether this program has succeeded or not will, of course, be at the end of five years when people will be cut off unceremoniously. And that means that—for example, I had a mayor of a major city call me after the welfare reform bill passed and he said to me, "You gotta do something." I said, "Why is that?" And he said, "Because in five years I'm going to have 200,000 people on my streets with no cash."

So I think the jury is still out here. Now, welfare needed to be reformed, but I thought the best way to do it was to build on the act that we passed in 1988, which Senator Moynihan was a strong author of. And that was to still have federal commitment, but state experimentation in how to deal with the root problem, which is too many children being born in families with a single parent.

MR. RUSSERT: Gun control: You have said that all handguns should be registered. All handgun owners should be licensed. Many people are deeply concerned that is a huge intrusion by Big Brother into the lives of God-fearing, law-abiding American citizens.

MR. BRADLEY: Well, Tim, I think that we're at the time in our country where commonsense gun control can be widely accepted. It can be accepted by gun owners, by sportsmen, by hunters. I think it'll be accepted by parents who are certainly worried about children getting access to guns. And I think that this is common sense. I would ban Saturday Night Specials. I mean, ever since I saw Robert Kennedy on the floor of the Ambassador Hotel in 1968, I always thought that somebody who was president of the United States ought to ban Saturday Night Specials. So I'd do that. I would also do registration and licensing.

MR. RUSSERT: Why would you force someone to register a gun? What do you gain by that?

MR. BRADLEY: Well, what you are able to do is track where the gun goes. For example, if you have a fly-by-night dealer, and the fly-by-night dealer sells it to someone else, it's like a car, you've got to register that or you're in violation of the law. Another thing that I have discovered recently that I think you should also do is that when you're a gun dealer and you sell a gun to a strawman, in other words, not a person who's going to purchase it, but somebody who's going to pass it on to somebody else, that's only a misdemeanor. I think it should be a felony, because that's the way guns get in the hands of children.

MR. RUSSERT: Campaign finance, another issue you have spoken

out on. What would you do to take money out of politics?

MR. BRADLEY: I think we need a comprehensive approach. I think money distorts the democratic process in a fundamental way. I think most of the American people realize that the big money is heard and that they're not heard. In many ways, I think our democracy's like a broken thermostat, that people turn the dial and nothing happens, and I think money's partly to explain why it doesn't happen. So what I would do is I would ban all soft money, which are the \$500,000, \$1 million contributions or up, that are given to parties by individuals who are wealthy, and by corporations. I would go to public financing for general elections. We spend \$900 million a year promoting democracy abroad. I think we ought to be able to spend about the same amount of money ensuring that the special interests don't have a grip on the legislative jugular in this country. I would provide free TV so that candidates could make their case without having to purchase television time. And then, in addition—I think it's Democratic reformists, not just campaign finance reform.

In addition, what I would do is to open up the process in America to encourage more people to participate. And that means same-day registration, such as they have in Minnesota. One in six people in Minnesota vote on the same day that they register. Voting by mail—they have that in Oregon. And I would also have a Voter Leave Act, where it would allow people to take an hour or two off in the course of the day in order to vote. I think those are important initiatives, and they are joined with campaign finance reform in a kind of comprehensive democratic reform that I think the country so desperately yearns for these days, and which, I think if it passed, when people turn that dial on the thermostat of democracy, things would change.

MR. RUSSERT: When your opponent heard your proposals, it struck a nerve. People cried claims of, "Oh, he's born again." Let me put on the board what the chairman of the Gore campaign had to say about Bill Bradley. This is Tony Coelho. Excuse me. "Senator Bradley's actions have not yet matched his words on campaign finance reform. Al Gore long ago issued the call to end soft money and kept working for real reform long after Bill Bradley abandoned the Senate for private life and \$2 million in special interest speaking and consulting fees."

MR. BRADLEY: Tim, I was actually shocked that the Gore campaign attacked me so strongly on this issue. I issued a challenge. The challenge was to Democratic and to Republican candidates that it takes two farsighted leaders to change this system, and that I would hope that they would accept the challenge not to accept soft money.

MR. RUSSERT: No soft money in the general election.

MR. BRADLEY: No soft money in the general election. And instead, I was attacked by the Gore campaign, and ironically, the next