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'The Rachel Maddow Show' for Friday, March 25th, 2011

Read the transcript to the Friday show

updated 3/28/2011 12:39:54 PM ET

Guests: Richard Engel, Eugene Robinson, Frank Von Hippel

RACHEL MADDOW, HOST: Thanks to you at home for staying with us for the next hour as well.

The U.S. handed over military operations in Libya to NATO today, sort of.

The president of Yemen offered to step down today, sort of.

The government of Canada was toppled today, sort of.

And Japan started evacuating a much larger area around the busted nuclear reactors today, sort of.

It was a day of huge headlines, with equally huge devils in the details of all of these big stories. But we're going to start with U.S. politics, where we don't really do details, where we tend to like things blunt and simple.

Case in point: there is a magic word in Washington politics. The well-earned common wisdom about this word is that if you attach this special magic word to a proposal, to something the government could spend money on, it doesn't really matter how bad an

idea it is, how many smart people think it's a stupid thing, if it has this magic word attached to it, it becomes politically invincible, indestructible, it can't be killed.

The magic word is "defense." And it is well-earned common wisdom in Washington that any spending that is labeled "defense" is pretty much untouchable spending. It can't be killed. Dollars spent by the military or on things that seem military-esque just don't compete with other kinds of spending in the United States.

And there's a million reasons why. Defense contractors figured out that spreading to lots of different congressional districts the jobs associated with a particular airplane or vehicle or weapon system earns you a champion in Congress for keeping those jobs from every

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district you have larded yourself into.

Defense spending is untouchable because calling a politician weak on defense in the 2000s is the equivalent of calling them soft on communism in the 1950s. Defense spending is untouchable because civilian lawmakers defer so deeply to the military, and to the former military officers laced through the contractor world, that if you squint, you would swear that Congress is some lackey puppet parliament in a country where the government has taken over by a junta.

Defense spending, since the mammoth defense-funded, spend thrifty arms race build up of the Reagan years has been unquestionable in America.

But not it runs in the case of war in Libya. Republican House Speaker Boehner's letter to President Obama about Libya this week said this. Quote, "Has the Department of Defense estimated the total cost, direct and indirect, associated with this mission?"

Did you say cost? Cost for something the military is doing in America? All of a sudden, we are worrying out loud about that?

Hallelujah, yes, we are.

Now, liberal Democrats have been raising cost questions about the cost of military intervention for a long time.

Democrats who raised cost questions about previous wars are doing that about Libya now,

too. For example, Democratic Senator Al Franken of Minnesota released a statement saying the president needs to clarify how much this operation is going to cost American taxpayers and how it's going to be paid for. Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich of Ohio announced plans this week to try to defund the U.S. military intervention in Libya. He raised separate issue of cost beyond his concerns about the president not seeking authorization for the war from Congress.

But what does that it mean that you can put alongside Dennis Kucinich now Republican Congressman Roscoe Bartlett of Maryland, saying this about Libya. Quote, "This could cost us a billion dollars, which means another billion-dollar debt that our kids, our grand kids and our great grandkids are going to have to payback."

And then there's Republican Senator Richard Lugar, who has been talking about the

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potential cost of intervening in Libya since before the airstrikes began. Senator Lugar said about Libya this week, “The facts are that our budget is stretched too far and our troops are stretched too far.”

This new way of thinking and talking about waging war, which is frankly an old liberal way of thinking and talking about waging war, is even seeping into the mainstream, Beltway media coverage of the U.S. operation in Libya. You’re starting to see headlines like this from the beltway press. This is from “The Hill” newspaper this week: “Cost of military campaign in Libya could wipe out GOP’s spending cuts.”

“The Associated Press” also reporting on the cost of the U.S. role in Libya so far this week. In its reporting, “A.P.” brings us this detail. “In a classified briefing for congressional staff Tuesday, officials from the State Department, Pentagon and Treasury were pressed on the cost.” Congressional staffers and presumably their bosses in Congress are demanding details on how much this thing in Libya is costing us already.

Suddenly, for the first time, in all the wars I can remember, the question of the cost of waging war isn’t just being raised by commie, pinko, liberals on the margins, it’s being front-paged. It’s being mainstreamed. It’s being discussed and worried over and debated by an ideological rainbow of lawmakers, both Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, day after day, again and again, even on your TV machine.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIPS)

SEN. RICHARD LUGAR ®, INDIANA: Almost all of our congressional days are spent talking about budget, deficits, outrageous problems. And yet, at the same time, all of this passes, which is a very expensive operation, even in a limited way, always is.

REP. BARBARA LEE (D), CALIFORNIA: We’re talking about hundreds of millions of dollars.

JOE SCARBOROUGH, MSNBC HOST: At what point do Wyoming residents get fed up with all this money overseas?

SEN. JOHN BARRASSO ®, WYOMING: Wyoming people, we balance our budget every year. They are concerned that the president isn’t leading in other areas such as balancing the budget.

REP. ADAM SMITH (D), WASHINGTON: We need

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to know where we're going and what the long term cost is to the American people and to our military.

ANDREA MITCHELL, NBC NEWS: In terms of risks to Americans and also the expenditures to taxpayers, you don't have to have ground forces for it to be a high risk, prolonged mission.

REP. CHRIS VAN HOLLEN (D), MARYLAND: Well, that's very true. It gets expensive very quickly.

REP. RON PAUL ®, TEXAS: We're in this crisis. And they are deciding to spend all this money again. I mean, it makes no sense at all. And I think the American people are going to wake up a little sooner this time. I think they finally woke up, said we ought to get out of Afghanistan. But here we can't get them out of Afghanistan, now they are getting ready to put us in Libya.

(END VIDEO CLIPS)

MADDOW: The magic of the magic word "defense" is apparently starting to go wear off in terms of its ability to make spending politically unquestionable. Suddenly, there is a mainstream discussion in Washington about money that recognizes a dollar spent on a bullet is the same kind of dollar that could also be spent on something other than a bullet.

There's something I remember seeing when I was growing up. And in certain liberal parts of the country, you will still see this. It is an iconic liberal bumper sticker. The car you will

see it on will either be either a Subaru or a pre-1990 era Volkswagen.

It says this: "It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber."

This has been a liberal fantasy forever about how defense policy gets treated in fights about all other kinds of spending. This has been a liberal bumper sticker fantasy for years. And maybe it took the election of a president who Republicans want to beat so badly, they will back flip over their own principles and ideology to do it. But maybe this will be the war where we started actually counting the cost while we waged it, and we started weighing those costs against other things we could spend that money on instead.

There is word tonight that President Obama will be addressing the nation on the issue of

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Libya from the National Defense University in Washington on Monday. The choice of venue? Namely anywhere that's not the Oval Office suggests that the president is still taking pains to demonstrate in word and in deed that Libya is not a new Iraq war or new Afghanistan war. It's not even a new Bosnia war.

The administration has been insistent that the U.S. will handoff what has been a lead American role in the international war in Libya. The headlines about the war today reflecting that handoff is imminent, that NATO will be taking over as "The New York Times" says in this headline, taking over full command of the Libya campaign.

With NATO in full command or not, however, the Pentagon today was not able to give a clear statement about just how much U.S. responsibilities will be scaled back in Libya. Really, what the scale of the Libya war comes down to for now, for all its implications, including cost, what the scale of the war and commitment come down now to is the rebels versus Gadhafi. Whether the two sides on the ground are heading towards an end to the conflict or whether this is a stalemate now, an internationally overseen military stalemate.

NBC's Richard Engel is on the ground in Libya. He is in rebel-held territory. Unhappily for us who know and love Richard, he has filed tonight more uncomfortable dramatic footage showing him way too close for comfort, to the actual live fire, live ammunition fighting that is going there on the ground. That footage and Richard live, next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

RICHARD ENGEL, NBC NEWS CHIEF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over):

Ajdabiya is mostly deserted, an urban war zone. Shops are closed or destroyed. There is no power or running water.

"Just fighting between the revolutionaries and Gadhafi's men," says this man. Through a broken gate, we enter his home. It was badly damaged by Gadhafi's troops.

And the fighting isn't over. Outside, we hear gunfire. Gadhafi's troops are just a few blocks away. We see rebels running, advancing, firing behind a wall.

(AUDIO BREAK)

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ENGEL: The rebels reload—

(END VIDEOTAPE)

MADDOW: We lost some of the audio there from Richard's report there from Ajdabiya.

Do we have the second part available to us at all? No, we don't have it available. We will try to reestablish the audio on that and get it posted online, if not on the air, so you can hear what Richard is saying as well as seeing where he is.

Richard does join us now live from the rebel stronghold of Benghazi.

He, of course, is NBC's chief foreign correspondent.

Richard, thanks very much for staying up to join us again. I really appreciate it.

ENGEL: No problem at all. Do you want me to do this in mime as well?

MADDOW: Yes, exactly right. If you can just act it out with guttural gestures, we probably get the idea.

Let me—what we had you doing there was talking to rebel fighters—

(CROSSTALK)

MADDOW: Yes, very good. We had you talking about weapons and the rebels' ability to fight. And they are sort of expressing some optimism that they are getting better in terms

of their military capacity, their training, their discipline. Do you share that optimism?

ENGEL: I was fairly encouraged by what I saw today. I'll just set up that clip that you just played.

We are here in Benghazi. And for the last several days, we've been going down to the frontlines, which is about 100 miles south of here. Instead today, we went down to the front line, and then went into the desert, so, we were able to go around the front line and enter the city of Ajdabiya itself.

And in Ajdabiya, that's there where we saw this street to street fighting. There was some sniper fire. Gadhafi forces hold part of the town. They don't hold part—other parts of the town.

And the rebels inside the city where they have something of—they are on par, more or less,

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with Gadhafi's forces, because Gadhafi's troops have the advantage in the open where they can fire tanks, they can shoot at great distances. But in urban warfare, if you're untrained rebel, and you're a fairly unskilled Libyan soldier, the sides are much more even.

And we were somewhat encouraged. We saw them moving better. They seemed to be communicating among themselves with greater degree of sophistication. They were camouflaging some of their vehicles, and reinforcements were actually coming in, and they were in the town. That's perhaps the most encouraging thing.

So—but it is still going to take a long time. I was looking at a map just while I was waiting for this segment, and even if they take Ajdabiya, there are still 500 miles of little towns that they need to cover before they reach Tripoli. So, get to go Ajdabiya is great, getting better is even better from the rebels' perspective, but this is going to take a long time if they have to go town to town to town for 500 miles.

MADDOW: Richard, is there any reason to understand the effect of the international force there as having essentially an augmenting affect on what the rebels are capable of? Are the international forces making the rebels more capable of defeating Gadhafi's troops when they do get into fights with them? Or are the international forces operating at such a distance that it is not making a difference in those skirmishes that you saw?

ENGEL: No, it's making a huge difference. One, this rebel movement would have been extinguished had there not been an international intervention. Benghazi would have been overrun. They were losing this war and were about to lose it.

How close they were to losing it is amazing to think about. The tanks

I'm in Benghazi, were down the street from here. And they were heading in this direction with heavy armor and the tanks.

Most people were leaving in this hotel where we're staying, it was just the manager and a few other people left on the roof. Everyone else was gone. And they really thought this was over. The few rebels in this city managed to hold back those tanks for a few hours until the airstrikes came.

If those airstrikes had waited even 12 more

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hours, Benghazi would have been taken back by Gadhafi, and who knows what would have happened in here. But most people think really terrible atrocities would have happened.

So, it has helped tremendously. It gives the rebels confidence. They are going out and fighting. When Gadhafi's forces were advancing, rebels did nothing but retreat. They didn't want to be in the open because of airplanes.

Now, they are willing to go into the city and fight. There's also a tactical advantage. They don't have—Gadhafi's army doesn't have the heavy weapons they did before. So, yes, of course, that helps.

MADDOW: In terms of the weapons the rebels have access to—I know that one of the things you were able to hear today from talking to rebel fighters is that they say that they are getting more weapons in Libya. Do you know anything: (a), do you believe that's true, and do you know anything about what the source of the new weapons is?

ENGEL: Well, there are only two sources for the weapons to come in. That would be either from Egypt or from the Mediterranean Sea. Egypt would be the most likely place. We've heard reports and reported several times that the Saudis have been supplying weapons here through Egypt. We haven't seen any brand new weapons, but we are seeing more weapons.

For the first time today, I saw on the outskirts of Ajdabiya, multiple rocket launchers, a

sophisticated weapon. We are also seeing defected army units, you remember the guys who are staying home, taking vacations—they are starting to creep back to the front. Maybe they realize if the rebels might, in fact, win, it would behoove them to be part of this movement that they were joining.

So, with every day, they seem to be gaining some momentum. But, still, look at the map, 500 miles. Things could change. There could be a tipping point here, and Gadhafi's regime could collapse quickly from within.

But if they're going to do this, this long march to Tripoli, I'm truly, as you say, never getting back to New York.

MADDOW: NBC chief foreign correspondent, Richard Engel, live in Benghazi, in Libya for us tonight—and, Richard, I know you're not going to have a permanent address for a long time so that we can send you care packages, but we

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are sending you them at least in theory and you should let us know if we can do it in reality.

ENGEL: All right. Thank you very much.

MADDOW: Absolutely.

All right. Remember on yesterday's show, we reported on those workers at the nuclear plant in Japan having to be hospitalized because they stepped in some water that had higher than normal levels of radiation? It turns out that water was 10,000 times more radioactive than normal, which is obviously bad, but which also probably means one very, very, very specific thing about Japan. Stay tuned.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: They measure exposure to radiation in REMs. A REM is the unit. REM is actually an acronym, REM, like the band. But it for something else unpronounceable that essentially means a standardized unit of radiation that is defined in terms of exposure for humans.

If you as a human are exposed to 200 REMs, you are likely to get serious radiation illness. If you as a humanitarian are exposed to between 500 to 1,000 REMs, you're dead.

In Japan, they say the workers at Daiichi plant are being exposed to 40 REMs per hour.

The dangerousness of exposure to radiation is

cumulative. It adds up over time. These guys in Japan at the Daiichi plant, are being exposed to 40 REMs an hour. At that does rate, a cumulative total of five hours working at that plant is enough to give you radiation sickness. A total 12 ½ hours working there could be enough to kill you.

We reported yesterday that workers at Daiichi had stepped into water that was contaminated with radioactivity. We learned today that the water they stepped in was not just more radioactive than normal water, it was 10,000 times more radioactive than normal. That highlights not only how dangerous it is to be working there, but it also raises the question of how that water there got that radioactive.

The water accident that hospitalized those workers—we said on yesterday's show it was two workers. It turns out it was three. That accident happened in reactor number three.

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“The New York Times” today attributed a long and frankly upsetting description of the status of reactor three to an anonymous senior nuclear executive that the paper described as having broad contacts in Japan. The executive says, “There is a long vertical crack running down the side of the reactor vessel itself. The severity of the radiation burns to the injured workers are consistent with contamination by water that had been in contact with damaged fuel rods.”

Quoting the executive directly, quote, “There is a definite, definite crack in the vessel. It’s up and down and it’s large. The problem with cracks is that they do not get smaller.”

How important is that if it’s true? And do the injuries to those heroic workers at Daiichi imply that it is true? And does the fact that this is one reactor that includes plutonium in its fuel mix make this a worse situation than would be true if it happened at any of the other reactors?

Today, Japanese authorities tried to tamp down worries by saying that pressure readings for that reactor were stable. The government also expanded its evacuation advice. Previously, everyone within 20 kilometers was told to leave. Now, people up to 30 kilometers are not being told to leave, but are being advised to.

This stuff is worth understanding. I desperately want to understand its importance. And I am very, very grateful to have here to help us understand it, nuclear

physicist Frank Von Hippel. He is the cofounder of the program on science and global security at Princeton University. He’s also co-chair of the International Panel on Fissile Materials. Professor Von Hippel wrote an op-ed in “The New York Times” yesterday about Fukushima and the future of nuclear power here in the States. It was titled “It Can Happen Here.”

Professor Von Hippel, thanks very much for being with us again.

PROF. FRANK VON HIPPEL, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY: My pleasure.

MADDOW: Let me start, as is my custom, to ask you if I got anything wrong there so far in that—in that introduction.

VON HIPPEL: You know, no, that was good. That’s the first I heard about the crack. That could explain a lot.

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You know, I was looking at the reports from the Nuclear Industrial Safety Agency in Japan, and they've been putting quite a bit of water into those pressure vessels, but they haven't been able to cover the fuel. This could—this could explain where it's going.

I thought it might also possibly be there was a valve open someplace that they hadn't been able to close because of the salt accumulation from saltwater.

MADDOW: Is there anything else about the conditions at the plant, whether it is releases of radioactivity or any other kinds of signs—is there any other way to know about seeing it directly, if there is a rupture in the reactor, a crack like the one described by that anonymous source in "The Times" today—is there a way to know?

VON HIPPEL: You know, people could speculate about it, but it sounded like he really—that there was visual evidence. I don't know. You could certainly, you know, put a camera in there. I don't know how they've been trying to do that. I think that would be a very good idea.

You really—it is amazing how little they know about what's going on in those reactors. Most of the sensors are still dead, and the few that do report—you know, reports are worrisome, when they indicate that the water is still not covering the fuel.

MADDOW: We know that there has been damage to some fuel rods. We can see the

damage to the external containment vessels. We know that some radiation has been released.

Given—we are now two weeks into this. Given all we already know about what is bad, how significant, would it be to find out that an internal reactor vessel had cracked this way? How much worse would that be than the situation we already—than what we know about the situation already is?

VON HIPPEL: It depends on where the crack is, how high it is. And if the bottom of the vessel is still intact, then it still can serve as a pot and prevent the melt through the bottom. Hold enough water to keep that debris at the bottom of the pressure vessel—you know, much of the fuel is probably debris at this point—keep it from continually heating up to the point it starts to heat up to the pressure vessel.

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But we don't—you know, it sounds like from the description, that is on the side of the pressure vessel. There's hope the pressure vessel can hold some water.

And even, you know, depending, of course, on the rate which they pump the water in, you know, it would—and the rate at which it goes out, you could even, with a crack maintain, you know, some water level, you know, with it leaking out.

MADDOW: Do you believe that something happening at reactor three is significantly more dangerous than the other reactors because of that mixed oxide fuel that they've got there, the different type of fuel at that reactor?

VON HIPPEL: I don't, frankly. It's only about 6 percent or 7 percent of fuel. The other fuel, the remainder of the fuel is about 1 percent plutonium. So, in fact, it doesn't increase the total amount of plutonium in the core that much.

MADDOW: What do you understand so far about how much radioactivity has been released? How much human danger it poses?

VON HIPPEL: Well, there's a—in terms of total release, there's a very interesting report from an institute in Vienna where they looked at the measurements that were made at the radiation measuring stations at the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization has around the world. They estimated that perhaps 20 percent as much radioactivity as was released from

Chernobyl has been released. Fortunately, most of it has blown to sea.

The radiation doses inland, we know something about that as well, thanks to—I think it's a UAV that the U.S. has been flying back and forth, taking radiation measurements. Those rates there are not scary on the week-to-week basis. There is an area, sort of a streak on the ground, you know, which you wouldn't want to live there for too long, but it's not life-threatening at all. And it just results in a slight increase in the risk of cancer, maybe a tenth of a percent a week of exposure to the population who may be there.

MADDOW: The map you describe is one I have seen today describing that sort of streak that you're describing sort of moving on land northwest from the plant. We're going to post that online at our Web site today so people can see exactly what you mean there.

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Princeton professor, nuclear physicist, Frank Von Hippel—I know you have been besieged for comment on this and I'm really grateful that you're willing to talk to us about it. Thank you very much.

VON HIPPEL: My pleasure.

MADDOW: It has already been quite the year for toppling governments, right? Latest to fall? Canada, did not see that coming. Details, plus the hidden message inside that story for American elected officials trying to get away with really stupid arithmetic. That's coming up.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: Hey, watch this clip. This is not from American C-SPAN, it's from Canada. It's from their parliament, happened earlier today.

(VIDEO CLIP PLAYS)

MADDOW: What's with the cheering and the paper throwing amid the wigs and the French? It's because they just toppled their government. This being Canada, still was pretty civilized. Spelling with an S, not a Z.

But, yes, the government was toppled with a T. The prime minister in Canada was from the conservative party. This vote in parliament today does not necessarily mean he's out of a job, it means there's going to be an election. It will be Canada's fourth election in seven years.

What all the cheering was about, what they nailed him for, what they got this no-

confidence vote for was a lack of transparency on budget issues.

Now, to be fair, there are a number of things they could have gone after this guy for. There was, for a example, a scandal involving a man who used to work for the prime minister, allegedly arranging for an ex-hooker 22-year-old fiance of his to make money off a company the guy was lobbying Harper's government for. Wow!

There were a lot of things that could have led to this today. But what ultimately led to the cheering and paper-throwing in the parliament was transparency about the budget. Even though the global financial crash was kinder to Canada than it was the most countries, Canada is still not in great shape for them. Their deficit hit a record last year. They are still trying to climb out of that.

Despite that, the conservatives and their prime

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minister have pursued a whole bunch of new military spending and a whole bunch of other spending, particularly on crime issues, which they like for political reasons, and they are trying to slash one of the sources of the government's income, the government's revenue. They are proposing a cut in corporate taxes that could cost the Canadian more than \$6 billion.

The vote that toppled the Canadian government was about conservatives not coming clean about the financial impact of that spending and those corporate tax cuts. Imagine if you could topple a government for that here?

We actually have the technology to do the wobbly screen thing and then show you what that would be like. But then we would have to act it out. And, frankly, there's a war on and we are busy losing Richard Engel's tape instead of acting things out in the newsroom.

But think about it. Just do the acting out part in your head. Imagine what it would be like if we could topple governments for not coming clean about the budget impact of what they're doing here—saying, for example, that you're going to cut corporate taxes—always sounds great, sounds conservative, and it is about something fiscal. So, it therefore sounds sort of fiscally conservative.

But if you're dealing with a budget deficit, cutting revenue is bad for the deficit. It's not good for the deficit. It is bad for the deficit. It is not addition, it is subtraction.

If we had full transparency about this, full understanding of all this, what's being done by this Republican governors and Republican legislatures in the States right now would not be described in Beltway media as fiscal conservatism. It would be described as profligacy. As fiscal madness, as something stupid enough that could even get Canadians excited enough to stand up and shout and throw paper about it.

This is what I mean—in Michigan, faced at the start of this year with a \$2 billion budget deficit, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder proposed spending \$1.8 billion to give tax breaks to corporations.

In New Jersey, faced at the start of the year with a \$10.7 billion budget deficit, Republican Governor Chris Christie proposed spending \$200 million on corporate tax breaks.

In Florida, faced at the start of this year with

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\$4.7 billion deficit, Republican Governor Rick Scott proposed sending \$1.5 billion over two years on corporate income tax cuts.

In Ohio, facing the year with \$463 million worth of a budget deficit, the Republican-controlled House proposed spending up to \$10 million on tax breaks specifically for the petroleum industry, because they need it.

In Arizona, faced at the start of the year with \$3.1 billion deficit, Republican Governor Jan Brewer decided to spend over a half billion over the next six years on tax cuts, about half of it on corporate tax cuts.

In Wisconsin, faced at the start of the year with \$3.4 billion budget deficit, Republican Governor Scott Walker proceeded to spend \$140 million Wisconsin dollars on business tax giveaways.

This is sort of what toppled the Canadian government today. Conservatives up there trying to do the same—telling everybody they cared about the deficit. They wanted to be fiscally conservative, while doing exactly the opposite, instituting huge revenue giveaways that would absolutely decimate the budget.

The opposition cited their lack of transparency about the fiscal impact of what they were doing in voting them out today.

We do not have a parliamentary system here, but we do have recalls here. And according to Wisconsin state Democrats, their effort to recall a handful of Republican state senators in

Wisconsin is moving right along—thank you very much.

Democrats in Wisconsin telling “The Washington Post” today that statewide, they already have over half the petitions they need to recall the Republican senators they are targeting. They’ve got a 60-day window to collect signatures. And once they have been collected and validated, a special recall election would be held within six weeks. This doesn’t wait until November.

The Republican majority in Wisconsin is not a large one to begin with. If and when these recall elections happen, Democrats only need to flip back three of the Republican-held seats they are targeting. It is worth noting one of those seats belongs to a Republican who is representing a district that voted for President Obama in 2008 by 61 percent. And one of them belongs to the guy whose wife says he is no longer living in his district because he now

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lives in Madison with his alleged 20-something girlfriend.

So, there might be vulnerability among these Wisconsin Republicans.

There might even be a Canadian-like government toppling in the making.

Joining us now is Eugene Robinson, MSNBC political analyst and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for “The Washington Post.”

Gene, thank you for being with us on a Friday night.

EUGENE ROBINSON, MSNBC POLITICAL ANALYST: It is great, Rachel. You know, I come here for the special effects. I can’t stay away.

MADDOW: Imagine going back in time. I can’t even bother to do it on camera. I know.

Fiscal conservatism is something that sounds so good nobody ever bothers to define it anymore. Do the Republican governors, though, with these big tax giveaways, are they going to run themselves into a real fiscal conservatism problem when people do the math about what they’ve done?

ROBINSON: Yes, I think there is a problem, because after all, you know, you say we are going to give corporate tax breaks—well, that’s fine, but that costs money. That’s money you’re not going to get, and therefore, you’re going to have a bigger deficit. And I think where the rubber hits the road is when people

see that the deficit has actually grown, rather than shrunk.

MADDOW: I think that’s right.

Poll after poll shows the public on the sides of unions. There was a new poll from CNN that said 49 percent of people sympathize with unions, and 41 percent tend to sympathize with companies when it comes to labor disputes over the last two or three years.

Republicans I think have calculated picking these fights because they thought they would have public opinion with them against unions. I think they’ve sort of been believing their own press about this too much.

But can Democrats take advantage of polling numbers like that? Can they get that lightning into a bottle and build some electoral momentum around these issues?

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ROBINSON: I think the momentum, if it is indeed real momentum that you see in Wisconsin, illustrates that Democrats can do that. I mean, there's been more excitement about organized labor and the labor movement since Governor Walker decided to take away collective bargaining rights than there had been in many years and in my memory, really.

Now, does that translate into votes and does it translate into recalls? You know, we're going to have to see how real it is. But I think they got the start of something at least.

MADDOW: In terms of who benefits from the strategy that these governors and legislatures have taken, there is this sort of elephant in the room in terms of lowering corporate tax rates.

I mean, front page of "The New York Times" is about the largest corporation in the country, the General Electric Corporation, which, by the way, is part of owner of this network, they avoided paying taxes all together with some very clever accounting. They even got a few billion dollars back from treasury despite all their profits. Bank of America not paying any taxes. Citigroup not paying any taxes. ExxonMobil Corporation not paying taxes.

Why lower tax rates when companies like this are already paying nothing?

ROBINSON: See, this is really a philosophical argument, Rachel, because as we see, there are enough loopholes in the corporate tax code that, you know, clever and big corporations

can avoid paying taxes at all. So, I don't see why they should object to the corporate tax rate up to 90 percent. You know, who cares? We don't have to pay it.

MADDOW: Eugene Robinson, MSNBC political analyst, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for "The Washington Post"—Gene, thank you. Much appreciated.

ROBINSON: Great to be here, Rachel.

MADDOW: So, follow up on our report last night that no matter what the federal government says, there is still not a backup plan for deepwater oil rigs. It turns out, we are having a big fight with the government now. More on that in a moment.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: The energy of the revolution that started in Tunisia and then Egypt is still

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ricocheting around the Arab world today. In towns across Syria, tens of thousands rallied for what the opposition called a Friday of dignity, protesting the Assad government in Syria.

The government responded by sending in troops who used live ammunition to put down the protests. They troops reportedly shot protesters in a town south of Sanamin, which is just of Damascus. "The Associated Press" quoted residents saying that as many as 20 people were killed in Sanamin, but there is no independent verification of those numbers.

Forty miles further south in the town of Daraa, where dozens of protesters were shot and killed earlier this week—there are also reports of at least 20 demonstrators killed today. But again no independent confirmation. That's what happened in Syria today.

In the nation of Yemen, tens of thousands of people also rallied there today for what the opposition called a "day of departure." They're calling on the president of Yemen to step down. The president's promise that he would step down, he keeps saying that he will do that eventually but he said specifically today, he will only step down when he could hand over power to what he called safe hands.

Protesters in Jordan today as well. One person killed there today and more than a hundred injured after pro-government supporters started throwing stones at them. The police stepped in with batons and water cannons.

We'll stay on all of these stories, of course. Please stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BRIAN WILLIAMS, NBC NEWS ANCHOR: Coast Guard rescuers spent the day looking for as many as 11 missing oil workers after a huge explosion rocked a drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico about 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana. It came out of nowhere and left several workers critically injured and the visual is on again tonight for people working in a dangerous job.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: On the evening of April 20th to last year, 2010, 11 men working onboard the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico were killed. They died suddenly and violently

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when that rig burst into flames after a malfunction occurred 5,000 feet below them on the sea floor. Those 11 men should not have lost their lives that night. The malfunction that occurred below them was supposed to be preventable.

The rig was equipped with something called a blowout preventer that was supposed to keep those men safe. It failed. And now, 11 months later, we are learning the painful truth of why.

This week, a government commission report on the BP disaster produced some alarming news. According to investigators the blowout preventer failed not because it was broken but because of a fundamental design flaw. It turns out the surge of pressure that causes a well blowout in the first place can also render the blowout preventer itself inoperable.

The thing that's supposed to be the last line of defense, the thing that's supposed to prevent massive loss of life as well as massive damage to the environment, it does not work.

As Steve LeVine put it at "Foreign Policy" magazine last night, "In a new report prepared for the U.S. Interior Department—we get good news and bad news. The good news is that the blowout preventer does what is suggested in the oil industry's photos and accompanying charts. The bad news is that it only does so in the photographs and charts, not in the real life crisis such as the BP disaster."

From "The Financial Times," quote, "The bottom line is that if the

blowout preventer can be compromised during an accident, then it cannot be

guaranteed to serve its purpose of the preventing a blowout of the kind

that spilled oil into the Gulf of Mexico for three months last year. The

Interior Department had been moving toward letting the industry back in the

Gulf. It is likely this latest report is going to slow—if not reverse -

that effort."

Here's the thing though. It hasn't slowed or reversed that effort. Last night on this show, we highlighted this new report and raised questions about the federal government's decision to resume granting new permits to drill in the deep water in recent weeks. Five

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new permits have been granted in the last 26 days.

The fact that the government is now stepping up this country's return to deep water drilling would seem to suggest that drilling is safer now. But is it?

The agency within the Interior Department that hands out these permits has gone to great lengths to assure the country that it is—promoting the, quote, “rigorous new safety standards implemented in the wake the Deepwater Horizon explosion.”

But as we reported last night, these assurances at least appear to be unwarranted. For one thing, our investigation reveals that the oil spill response plan for the first new permit handed out last month was written the year before the BP oil disaster. It's dated September, 2009. It therefore cannot include any lessons learned from the BP oil disaster.

So, for the record, oil companies are not being required to update their oil spill response plans ahead of receiving new permits to drill.

After our report aired last night, the Interior Department contacted us to complain about our coverage, bitterly. They provided a list of what they said were new safety measures that have been implemented in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. You can see those right now on our blog, Maddowblog. MSNBC.com.

These measures include things like stepped up

verifications of inspections and measurements, workplace safety rules for people who work on the rigs, a requirement to have remotely-operated vehicles on hand at drill sites.

But the fundamental question about these blowout preventers remains. You remember the blowout preventer that failed on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, killing 11 oil workers.

Listen to what Bob Cavnar, former oil industry executive, told us on this show about that last night.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BOB CAVNAR, FORMER OIL INDUSTRY EXECUTIVE: There's no fundamental change to the way we drill the deep water, Rachel. We're doing it with the same equipment, the same blowout preventers on all the deep water rigs

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in the Gulf that failed on the Macondo well.

MADDOW: You're saying that oil rigs operating in the Gulf right now and anybody getting new permits to operate in the Gulf right now, they're using that same piece of equipment?

CAVNAR: They're using that exact same piece of equipment.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: The same exact piece of equipment.

As we reported with Mr. Cavnar last night, these new regulations of blowout preventers that the Interior Department is bragging on right now—they are just regulating a piece of equipment that is fundamentally flawed by design.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

CAVNAR: The issue here is that these new regulations regulate an unreliable piece of equipment. And regulating something that's unreliable doesn't make it more reliable. It just makes it more regulated.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: Regulating something that is unreliable does not make it more reliable. It just makes it more regulated.

The Interior Department is not happy with our coverage of this issue.

And you know what? I'm glad. They shouldn't be.

This reporting does not paint them in what they are doing in a very good light. I'm sure the people who work for the Interior Department are good people. This is not personal. I don't mean for you to take it personally.

But despite your complaints, we stand by our reporting. We do not believe we got anything wrong here. This is an issue of national significance.

Americans—particularly Americans who work on oil rigs or who have a family member who works on an oil rig—Americans deserve legitimate assurances from our government that this work is safe, especially at a time when our government is green-lighting that work at a rapid rate. It is not just an implication from these new permits that this work is safer than it used to be. There are direct assurances from

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the Department of the Interior that these permits mean things are more safe.

Then important questions need to be answered here. These are important questions that need to be asked. We will not back down from asking them.

We are going to stay on this story. We will let you know what we find out. Grrr!

That does it for us tonight. We will see you again Monday night.

Meanwhile, there's lots to add to what you see on our show. We are very proud of our excellent blog Maddowblog.MSNBC.com. Have a good night and a good weekend.

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