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Interview of the Vice President by Bob Schieffer, CBS News Face the Nation

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Q Good morning, again. And the Vice President is in the studio with us this morning for this live interview.

Mr. Vice President, thank you very much for coming.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Good morning, Bob.

Q Let's start right in about Iraq because that's right at the top of the list this morning. The conservative columnist George Will in this morning's paper, reflecting what I think is a growing unease among some Republicans now, says that conditions in Iraq today are worse than they were after the elections in December. And today, Ayad Allawi, the former interim Prime Minister, the most pro-American of the Iraqi leaders, I think, says that we can no longer mince words, Iraq is in the midst of a civil war. Do you agree with that?



THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't, Bob. I think the assessment that we get from General George Casey, who is our man commanding in Iraq, from Zal Khalilzad, the ambassador, from John Abizaid, who is the general in charge of Central Command, doesn't square with that.

Clearly, there is an attempt underway by the terrorists, by Zarqawi and others to foment civil war. That's been their strategy all along. But my view would be they've reached a stage of desperation from their standpoint. For example, the bombing of the mosque in Samarra here a couple of weeks ago that is a reflection of the fact that they are doing everything they can to stop the formation of a democratically elected government.

Zarqawi himself was quoted two years ago saying that if the Iraqis ever achieve that objective, put together a democratic government, that he'd have to pack up his bags and go elsewhere. And I think that's absolutely the case.

So what we've seen is a serious effort by them to foment civil war, but I don't think they've been successful.

Q You don't think they're there yet?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't.

Q Mr. Vice President, all along the government has been very optimistic. You remain optimistic. But I remember when you were saying we'd be greeted as liberators. You played down the insurgency. Ten months ago, you said it was in its last throes. Do you believe that these optimistic statements may be one of the reasons that people seem to be more skeptical in this country about whether we ought to be in Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I think it has less to do with statements we've made, which I think were basically accurate, and reflect reality, than it does the fact that there is a constant sort of perception, if you will, that's created because what's newsworthy is the car bomb in Baghdad. It's not all the work that went on that day in 15 other provinces in terms of making progress towards rebuilding Iraq.

The facts are pretty straightforward. The Iraqis have met every single political deadline that's been set for them. They haven't missed a single one. They took over, in terms of sovereignty, 21 months ago. They held national elections the following January. They wrote a constitution -- one of the best constitutions in that part of the world. They held a referendum on it last October, and last December, had turnout of about 78 percent in terms of the election, and now are putting together a government which they'll form up here shortly.

On the security front, we've seen major progress in terms of training and equipping Iraqi forces. Today, roughly half of all of the missions that are being conducted over there are with Iraqis in the lead. They've been very successful now in terms of training and equipping over a hundred battalions of Iraqi troops. And it continues to improve day-by-day. Those are the facts on the ground. That's the reality.

Q But may I just interrupt?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Sure.

Q Isn't it also a reality that the violence continues? They keep finding these people that have been executed? And isn't it also reality that they can't seem to put a government together? They can't seem to find a way, a compromise to get this government together.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Bob, it took us a lot longer to put an effective government together when we tried to do it 200 years ago than it has taken the Iraqis. It's remarkable when you think about a group of people who have been under the heavy hand of oppression for 35 years, with Saddam Hussein, one of the bloodiest dictators in modern times, slaughtered hundreds of thousands of his own people, started two wars, used weapons of mass destruction against his own folks, to emerge from that as effectively as they have in as short a period of time as they have.

Yes, there's continuing violence. Why? There's continuing violence because our adversaries understand what's at stake here, because they know that if we're successful in establishing a democratic government in Iraq, that that's going to put enormous pressure in that part of the world on all of those other regimes and governments. It offers a counter to the bloody ideology that Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda organizations have tried to perpetrate throughout that part of the world.

There's a lot at stake here. It's not just about Iraq. It's not about just today's situation in Iraq. It's about where we're going to be 10 years from now, in the Middle East, and whether or not there's going to be hope and the development of governments that are responsive to the will of the people, that are not a threat to anyone, that are not safe havens for terror, or manufacturers of weapons of mass destruction -- that's our vision and our view -- or whether or not the terrorists succeed.

And if they succeed, then the danger is that Iraq will become a failed state as Afghanistan was a few years ago when it was governed by the Taliban, a safe haven for Osama bin Laden, and the base from which they launched attacks against the United States and our friends around the world.

Q Let me read to you what Senator Kennedy, liberal Democrat from Massachusetts, and a long-time opponent of the war said on the third anniversary. Here's part of his statement. He said:

"It is clearer than ever that Iraq was a war we never should have fought. The administration has been dangerously incompetent. And its Iraq policy is not worthy of the sacrifice of our men and women in uniform. Yet President Bush continues to see the war through the same rose-colored glasses he has always used. He assures the American people we are winning, while Iraq's future and the lives of our troops hangs so perilously on the precipice of a new disaster."

Dangerously incompetent is what he is saying. I want to give you a chance to respond.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I would not look to Ted Kennedy for guidance and leadership on how we ought to manage national security, Bob. I think what Senator Kennedy reflects is sort of the pre-9/11 mentality about how we ought to deal with the world and that part of the world.

We used to operate on the assumption before 9/11 that a criminal attack -- a terrorist attack was a criminal act, a law enforcement problem. We were hit repeatedly in the '90s and never responded effectively, and the terrorists came to believe not only could they strike us with impunity, but if they hit us hard enough, they could change our policy, because they did in Beirut in 1983, or Mogadishu in 1993.

We changed all that on 9/11. After they hit us and killed 3,000 of our people here at home, we said, enough is enough. We're going to aggressively go after them. We'll go after the terrorists wherever we find them. We'll go after those states that sponsor terror. We'll go after people that can provide them with weapons of mass destruction. We'll use our intelligence and our military services very aggressively. And we have.

We did in Afghanistan. We've done it in Pakistan. We're working with the Paks. We captured or killed

hundreds of al Qaeda. We've done it in Saudi Arabia. And obviously, we're doing it now in Iraq. That kind of aggressive forward-leaning strategy is one of the main reasons we haven't been struck again since 9/11 because we've taken the fight to them.

Senator Kennedy's approach would be pack your bags and go home; retreat behind your oceans and assume you can be safe. But we learned on 9/11 that, in fact, what's going on 10,000 miles away in a place like Afghanistan, or Iraq can have a direct impact here in the United States when we lost 3,000 people that morning. And we know now that the biggest threat that we face of all isn't just another 9/11, it's a 9/11 where the terrorists have something like nuclear weapons, or a deadly biological agent to use against us.

The Iraq situation has to be viewed within the broader context of the global war on terror. It is a global conflict. You can't look just at Iraq and make decisions there with respect to how that's going to come out without having major consequences for everything that's going on. And I think we are going to succeed in Iraq. I think the evidence is overwhelming. I think Ted Kennedy has been wrong from the very beginning. He's the last man I'd go to for guidance in terms of how we should conduct U.S. national security policy.

Q Well, let me ask you about this charge of incompetence because we hear that not just about Iraq, but we hear it more and being raised sometimes by members of your own party on a variety of issues -- the stumbling after Katrina, the Harriet Miers nomination, the failure to see the political implications of the Dubai ports deal. Some people are even saying you need a staff shake-up over at the White House, Mr. Vice President.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Bob, you know what this reminds me of? It reminds me of 30 years ago when I was Jerry Ford's chief of staff and you were the CBS correspondent covering the White House.

Q That's right.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We had the same kind of stories then, the same kinds of controversy. Administrations go through peaks and valleys. It's a tough business that we're involved in. And when you're down in the polls, you're going to take shots that you don't deserve. And when you're up in the polls, you're probably going to get praise you don't deserve. So I don't think we can pay any attention to that kind of thing.

The President has got a job to do. I've worked very closely now with this man for over five years. He's a superb leader. He's tough. He's decisive. He's willing to take tough decisions. He ignores the background noise that's out there in the polls that are taken on a daily basis. He's doing a superb job. He's got great people around him. And I simply don't give credence to those kind of comments.

Q But many people say that they're just worn out. And we all know whether you like him or don't like him, respect him or don't respect him, people who work at the White House work very long hours. They work very, very hard. Is it possible that maybe they're just suffering a little fatigue here, and it would be good to bring some people?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we're always -- there actually -- there has been a fair amount of change and movement if you look at -- been a lot of changes in the Cabinet in the second term. But we got some very good talented people there. But the President will make decisions when he wants to move people around and make those kinds of choices, that's really up to him. But I think the notion that somehow the staff is exhausted, yes, these are tough jobs. No question about it. But we've got some very good, very able, very talented folks who are devoted to the President, devoted to trying to do what's right for the country, and I think that -- I think the country has been well served by this President and by the --

Q You don't see any shake-up coming?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not in the business of making predictions. The President hasn't indicated he plans to make any changes. If he does and when he does, I'm sure he'll announce it.

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Q And we're back now with the Vice President. Mr. Vice President, I must say candidly you have become a lightning rod in this administration -- whether it's defending the administration when John McCain says he wants to eliminate torture, on this whole eavesdropping thing. Some Republican pundits suggest that you may have become a liability. I know Secretary Rumsfeld once offered to resign. Have you ever thought of that? Or would you think that would be something that would be helpful to the President?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I made sure both in 2000 and 2004 that the President had other options. I didn't ask for this job. I didn't campaign for it. I got drafted, and -- delighted to serve, and it's been the highlight of my career to be part of this administration. I've now been elected to a second term; I'll serve out my term.

Q The fact that you have become some people say a hate magnet in some ways because you have spoken out on some of these issues, is this some version of a "good cop, bad cop" kind of routine where you take the heat the keep the President from taking it?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It may look that way. It's not conscious. I think -- what I would say about it, Bob, is that this has been a different kind of arrangement than most administration's have between the President and the Vice President, primarily because I'm here to serve him, I'm not here to run for higher office. Most of my predecessors spent a good part of their time as Vice President getting ready to run for President, and thinking about their own campaigns for President. I've made it clear from the outset that I'm not a candidate for President. I won't run for President. I've taken the Sherman statement, if nominated, I will not run; if elected, I won't serve. I've been very, very firm on that.

So my job is to do what I can to support him and to support the administration. My advice to him is untainted by any concern I might have about how the folks in Iowa look at me with connection with the 2008 Iowa caucuses. And when I speak out on an issue, it's because somebody needs to speak out on the issue. And I can do it without fear in a sense that I'm not here trying to burnish my image, or improve my standing in the polls. I'm here to do a job that needs to be done for the President of the

United States. And I'm perfectly willing to go out and speak out on those issues such as the NSA terrorist surveillance program because I believe very deeply in what we're doing. It's the right thing to do, and, frankly, I don't spend a lot of time worrying about the polls.

Q Well, let me -- since you just brought that up, will you support the move now underway in the Congress to give them more congressional oversight on the eavesdropping program?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I've been directly involved on behalf of the President negotiating with members of both the House and the Senate in the intelligence committees in setting up the new arrangements. We negotiated an arrangement whereby there'll be subcommittees in both the House and the Senate of the intelligence committees that a larger number of members -- for example, seven members now in the Senate instead of just the two that have been briefed previously off the committee -- will be fully briefed into the program. And we've already had that briefing. Shortly, we'll have a similar briefing for the House.

We are working with them to give them broad oversight with respect to this program. But it's a very important program. It is totally in compliance with the laws and constitution of the United States. It has been a major success in preventing attacks against the United States, and it needs to be preserved and protected.

Now, the intelligence area is one of the areas the President asked me to work on when I first came onboard, and I've had an interest in this subject going back 30 years to my days in the Ford administration. So it's an appropriate one for me to work on. But it also means going out publicly and defending it. A lot of people would perhaps run for the hills or avoid controversy. And obviously, I don't feel that way.

Q Let me go back to one thing you said about serving out your term because you hear some of these Republican pundits and strategist that say, well, since the Vice President does not have any aspirations to be President, maybe a year or so before his term is up, he might step aside for one reason or another so you could put somebody else into the job, and then that person would then have a head's up on getting the nomination. Would anything like that ever make sense to you?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, nobody has suggested it to me.

Q All right, that's a good answer, a direct answer.

We have, I must say, Mr. Vice President, known each other as you mentioned back to -- since back to the days when President Ford was President. You were very open. You were -- you dealt with reporters a lot. But Brent Scowcroft, who has known you longer than I have, said the other day, I don't know Dick Cheney any more. I want to ask you, do you think you have changed since those days?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm a lot older. I've got less hair.

Q So am I.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: And what I've got left is gray. Circumstances have changed, I think, Bob. The job I have now as Vice President is to be an advisor to the President primarily. I don't run anything. I'm not in charge of the White House. I'm not in charge of the Defense Department as I once was, or a congressman from Wyoming. And the most valuable service I render to him is to give him advice, and that advice is most valuable when it's totally private -- when he knows what I've recommended, and I don't talk about it. I don't talk about the conversations I have with him.

I think Presidents need to have somebody around them that is totally reliable and trustworthy and is going to protect those communications they have with the President. They need to be able to have somebody they can level with. And I sort of see that as my role in this administration. It means I don't give very many interviews. It means I am cautious about what I say and what I'm willing to talk about, and that preserves my value to him. Some people look at that and say, well, Cheney has changed, or Cheney has shifted. Or another tendency, I think, is to always assume that the President -- any President is a black box and it's the advisors around him that run things, or this faction is up, and therefore that's why this happened. They fail to give adequate credit to the man himself.

This President has very firm ideas. He makes decisions very decisively. When you see policy announced out there, for example, the belief in spreading freedom and democracy is the key to our national security strategy. That's pure George Bush. That's not just because I believe it, or others in the administration believe it. That doesn't mean one faction is up, or one faction is down in the great game of advice as it's commented on by the talking heads. That's what George Bush believes.

And I think a lot of my friends out there look and see some of the policies, we've pursued and disagree. But to suggest somehow I've changed, or my fundamental views of the world have evolved over time, basically, I don't think that's valid.

Q I must ask you about what you have called the worst day of your life -- the day that you accidentally shot your friend Harry Whittington down in Texas on that hunting expedition. You didn't make it public for almost a day. Now, you told Brit Hume the other day that you still thought that was the right way to go about it. But I just want to ask you, now that you've had some time to reflect on it, could that have been better handled?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think it's one of those situations or circumstances that is obviously difficult, and generates controversy. It's probably the first time the Secret Service have had to worry about a protectee shooting somebody else, instead of being shot at. (Laughter.) As the President said the other night, he's at 38 percent in the polls, and as a result of this incident, I shot the only trial lawyer in Texas who supported him. (Laughter.) So people can laugh about it now, but at the time, it was deadly serious.

Q Oh, I can imagine.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: And I must admit, the first thing I thought when I saw what had happened and rushed over to help Harry, I did not think, gee, I better call the press corps and tell them what's going on here.

Q Sure. But later on, shouldn't you have --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: This is about 6:00 at night. By the time we got him to the hospital, and we did not know until the next morning exactly the status of his medical condition. And that's when we began to notify the press. And there's been controversy over whether we should have called the White House press corps -- I didn't have any press people with me; this was a private trip -- or do it the way we did it. And the way we did it, I thought was appropriate, which was to have Katherine Armstrong, who was a witness to all of these events call the local newspaper. They immediately got it, immediately put it on the wire and everybody had it. So it struck me as a bit of a tempest in a teapot over the question of how it was announced.

It was announced by us, I believe in a timely fashion as soon as we knew what Harry's status was.

Q Well, you do believe that elected officials owe the public an explanation for their actions?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Sure. This was not part of my public duty and responsibility, or my official duties at all, but there's bound to be interest in it when something like that happens because I am the Vice President. And we treated it that way.

Q All right, Mr. Vice President, thank you so much for coming.

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