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Interview of the Vice President by Tim Russert, NBC News, Meet the Press

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Q Good morning. This is a special edition of Meet the Press, marking the fifth anniversary of September 11th. And joining us for the first time in three years is the Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney. Welcome back.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Morning, Tim.

Q Mr. Vice President, tomorrow marks the fifth anniversary of September 11th, and in many way marks the beginning of the war on terrorism. Three years ago, the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wondered out loud, are we creating or recruiting more terrorists than we are killing? What do you think? Five years later, are there more terrorists now than there were five years ago?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's hard to say, Tim, and hard to put a precise number on it. It's changing and evolving to some extent. We've done enormous damage to al Qaeda, to the leadership of al Qaeda. We've captured and killed hundreds of their senior people. By the same token, you've got wannabe organizations, Al Qaeda organizations out there now that have only a remote connection to the center. The groups, for example that the Brits have uncovered recently. These are second-generation immigrants to the U.K. These are not people living in the Middle East, or who have grown up terror training camps in Afghanistan the way the original group did. So it is changing and evolving. On the other hand, I think we've also made -- just say, I think we've made significant progress.



Q It's interesting. Here's what the American people said in a recent poll: Is the U.S. involvement in Iraq

or Afghanistan creating more terrorists or eliminating terrorists. And look at that, overwhelmingly, 54 percent, a clear majority, believe we are creating more terrorists.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I can't buy that. I think you've got to look at what's happening in Afghanistan and Iraq in terms of where we were five years ago and where we are today. Take Afghanistan: Afghanistan was governed by the Taliban, one of the worst regimes in modern times, terribly dictatorial, terribly discriminatory towards women. There were training camps in Afghanistan training thousands of Al Qaeda terrorists; all of those camps today are shut down. The Taliban are no longer in power. There is a democratically elected President, a democratically elected parliament, a new constitution, and American-trained Afghan security forces -- and NATO now -- actively in the fight against the remnants of the Taliban. We are much better off today because Afghanistan is not the safe haven for terror that it was on 9/11.

Q But in Afghanistan, one of the British commanders there, Richards, said that 70 percent of the Afghan people are undecided; that we only have until the end of the year to secure that country; that the Taliban is back; that the opium crop has increased 60 percent. We have not secured Afghanistan.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We're still in the fight, and we're likely to be for some considerable period of time. But come back to basic proposition with respect to the struggle that's under way there in terms of the Taliban. We have had significant activity this summer in southern Afghanistan as NATO moved in and replaced U.S. forces. The Taliban wanted to challenge those. There was the belief that in fact the NATO wouldn't fight as aggressively as U.S. forces would, and so they've made a major effort in that regard, but just in the last 48 hours, we've killed 130-some Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

In terms of the question of people being on the fence, that in part is a reflection of the reality of life in that part of the world and the uncertainty in the minds of a lot of people about whether or not the United States will, in fact, stay the fight. And it's one of the major battles that we are going to have here at home, as well, this year.

The basic proposition for our adversaries -- and we ought to take a minute and focus on it -- they want to re-create the old caliphate that stretched from Spain all the way around to Southeast Asia. They want to topple the regimes that are there today. They want to kick the U.S. out of that part of the world, destroy Israel, equip themselves with weapons of mass destruction, et cetera. In the course of doing that, their strategy for doing that is to break our will. They can't beat us in a stand-up fight -- they never have -- but they are absolutely convinced they can break our will: the American people don't have the stomach for the fight. So you look at the situation in today in Afghanistan or even in Iraq and you've got people who have doubts. They want to know whether or not if they stick their heads up the United States, in fact, is going to be there to complete the mission.

And those doubts are encouraged, obviously, when they see the kind of debate that we've had in the United States. Suggestions, for example, that we should withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq simply feed into that whole notion, validates the strategy of the terrorists.

Q Let me stay on Afghanistan because the front page of The Washington Post today, "Bin Laden, the trail is stone cold according to intelligence officials." Do you agree with that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't. I haven't read the article. I saw the headline. There's the on-again, off-again approach, "is the U.S. really serious about bin Laden?" We are serious. We've stayed actively and aggressively involved in the hunt for bin Laden from the very beginning.

Q Well, just stop there because it's real important. This article says that in 2002 the U.S. pulled its Special Operation Forces out of Afghanistan and really did lower down the volume in going after Osama, which is at the exact time that President Bush said, "I don't spend much time on him," talking about bin Laden.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: He's not the only source of the problem, obviously, Tim. If you killed him tomorrow, you'd still have a problem with al Qaeda, with Zawahiri and the others. But bin Laden has been a top priority for us from the very beginning. He continues to be a top priority today. That hasn't changed. The President and I get periodic reports on our efforts in that regard. There has been no lessening of our interest or of our activity --

Q Pakistan has now a peace pact with the terrorists in the area where we think bin Laden is, creating what Richard Clarke, the former White House advisor on terrorism called a sanctuary; and reports from the Rand Corporation, that the Pakistan CAI, the ISI --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: ISID --

Q -- are in cahoots with the Taliban. So if the Pakistanis aren't willing to seek bin Laden and have a peace pact with the terrorists, where are we?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't buy the premise of your question, Tim. I think it's wrong, and I think the sources you've quoted are wrong. The fact is we've captured and killed more al Qaeda in Pakistan than anywhere else in the world in the last five years. President Musharraf has been a great ally. There was, prior to 9/11, a close relationship between the Pakistan intelligence services and the Taliban. Pakistan was one of only three nations that recognized -- diplomatically recognized the government of Afghanistan at that time. But the fact is Musharraf has put his neck on the line in order to be effective in going after the extremist elements, including al Qaeda -- and including the Taliban in Pakistan. And there have been three attempts on his life, two of those by al Qaeda, over the course of the last three years. This is a man who has demonstrated great courage under very difficult political circumstances and been a great ally for the United States.

So there is no question that area along the Afghan-Pakistan border is something of no man's land. It has been for centuries. It's extraordinarily rough territory. And people there that move back and forth across the border, they were smuggling goods before there was concern about terrorism. But we need to continue to work the problem. Musharraf just visited Karzai in Kabul this past week. They're both going to be here during the course of the U.N. General Assembly meetings over the course of the next few weeks. We work that area very hard and the Paks have been great allies in that effort.

Q Many people look at Afghanistan and say, however, if we had not been distracted by Iraq, we could have secured Afghanistan. It would not be a narco-state, which it's on the verge of becoming, with a 60

percent in opium. And we took our eye off the ball.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I disagree. There were narcotics being produced, heroin being grown in Afghanistan for centuries. It has been the major source of supply because of the nature of the area for heroin going to Europe long before the United States got involved in Afghanistan, or long before we got involved in Iraq. That's not a new development. The fact is that we have made major progress in Afghanistan. We've still got a lot to do.

You start with a country that is one of the poorest in the world, that's been wracked by decades of civil war and conflict. It was occupied by the Soviets and then fought over by the Soviets and the mujahideen for years; that badly needed what we have, in fact, provided. We took down the Taliban regime, liberated 25 million people, created a democratic government with a President and new constitution and a parliament. I was there for the swearing in of the Karzai administration, as well as, for the new parliament. It is major progress. Is it over? No, it's not over. Is it easy? Of course it's not easy. It's always going to be difficult in that part of the world

But the key here -- and this is the key in a lot of what we do in that part of the world -- is to get the locals into the fight. And we've done that I think very effectively in Afghanistan. The U.S. will continue to be involved there. But we've also got great support from our allies. NATO is very heavily engaged now in Afghanistan, in the fight against the Taliban to secure that nation for its people.

Q It is Iraq, however, that the President has said is the central front on the war on terror. This is what he said --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It is now.

Q This is what he said on August 31, 2006. Let's watch it for the record.

(Video clip is played.)

Q And yet if you ask the American people, is the war in Iraq a part of the war on terror, this is what they now say: 46 percent, yes; 53 percent, a majority, say it is not part of the war on terror.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I beg to differ. Let's walk through it. Look at where we are in Iraq today. I do think we've made major progress. Five years ago, Saddam Hussein was in power in Iraq. Iraq was a major state sponsor of terror. Saddam Hussein was providing payments, bonuses to the families of suicide bombers. He had a history of starting two wars. He had produced and used weapons of mass destruction. It was one of the worst regimes of modern times. We moved aggressively against Saddam Hussein. Today you've got Saddam in jail where he's being prosecuted for having butchered thousands of people. You've a democratically elected government. There have been three nationwide elections, there has been a new constitution written. We've got almost 300,000 Iraqis now trained and equipped in the security forces. And we are -- that's significant progress by anybody's standards. It's still difficult. It's still obviously major, major work to do ahead of us. But the fact is, the world is much better off today with Saddam Hussein out of power.

Think where we would be if he was still there. He would be sitting on top of a big pile of cash because he would have \$65 and \$70 oil. He would by now have taken down the sanctions because he had already with the corrupted Oil for Food Program, nearly destroyed them when he was still in power. He would be a major state sponsor of terror.

We also would have a situation where he would resumed his WMD programs. That was one of the conclusions of the Duelfer Report, so to suggest somehow that the world is not better off by having Saddam in jail I think is just dead wrong.

Q But, Mr. Vice President, the primary rationale given for the war in Iraq was Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. In August of 2002, this is what you told the VFW. Let's just watch it.

(Video clip is played.)

Q In fact, there is grave doubt because they did not exist along the lines that you described, the President described and others described. Based on what you know now, that Saddam did not have the weapons of mass destruction described, would you still have gone into Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, Tim, because what the reports also showed -- while he did not have stock piles, and clearly the intelligence that said he did was wrong. That was the intelligence all of us saw. That was the intelligence all of us believed. It was when George Tenet sat in the Oval Office and the President of the United States asked him directly, he said, George, how good is the case against Saddam and weapons of mass destruction, the Director of the CIA said, it's a slam dunk, Mr. President. It's a slam dunk.

That was the intelligence that was provided to us at the time, and based upon which we made --

Q So if the CIA said to you at that time, Saddam does not have weapons of mass destruction, his chemical and biological have been degraded, he has no nuclear program under way, you'd still invade Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Because, again look at the Duelfer Report and what it said: No stock piles, but they also said he has the capability. He'd done it before. He had produced chemical weapons before and used them. He had produced biological weapons. He had a robust nuclear program in '91. All of this true, said by Duelfer, facts, also said that as soon as the sanctions are lifted they expect Saddam to be back in business.

Q But the rationale was he had it, a growing threat; all the while, North Korea, which had one or two potential bombs in 2000 when you came into office, now has double or triple that amount. So again you took your eye off of North Korea to focus on Iraq.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: But let's go back to the beginning here. Five years ago, Tim, you and I did this show, the Sunday after 9/11. And we learned a lot from 9/11. We saw in spite of the hundreds of billions of dollars we'd spent on national security in the years up until 9/11, on that morning, 19 men

with box cutters and airline tickets came in the country and killed 3,000 people. We had to take that and also the fact of their interest in weapons of mass destruction and recognize at that time -- it was the threat then and it's the threat today that drives much of our thinking -- that the real threat is the possibility of a cell of al Qaeda in the midst of one of our cities with a nuclear weapons, or a biological agent. In that case, you'd be dealing -- for example, if on 9/11 they had a nuke instead of airplanes, you'd have been looking at a casualty toll that would rival all the deaths in all the wars fought by America in 230 years. That's the threat we have to deal with, and that drove our thinking in the aftermath of 9/11, and does today.

Now, what Saddam represented was somebody who had for 12 years defied the International Community, violated 16 U.N. Security Council resolutions, started two wars, produced and used weapons of mass destruction, and was deemed by the intelligence community to have resumed his WMD programs when he kicked out the inspectors. Everybody believed it. Bill Clinton believed it. The CIA clearly believed it. And without question that was a major proposition.

But I also emphasize while they found no stock piles, there was no question in the minds of Mr. Duelfer and other in that survey group that Saddam did, in fact, have the capability, and that as soon as the sanctions were ended -- and they were badly eroded, he'd be back in business again.

Q But let's look at what you told me on that morning of September 16, 2001, when I asked you about Saddam Hussein. Let's watch.

(Video clip is played.)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: At this stage, the focus is over here on al Qaeda and the most recent events in New York. Saddam Hussein's bottled up at this point.

(Video clip concludes.)

Q Do we have any evidence linking Saddam Hussein or Iraqis to this operation?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No.

Q You said Saddam Hussein was bottled up, and he was not linked in any way to September 11th.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: To 9/11.

Q And now we have the select committee on intelligence coming out with a report on Friday that says here:

"A declassified report released Friday by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence revealed that U. S. intelligence analysts were strongly disputing the alleged links between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, while senior Bush administration officials were publicly asserting those links to justify invading Iraq."

You said here it was pretty well confirmed that Atta may have had a meeting in Prague -- that, that was credible. All the while, according to the Senate intelligence committee, in January and in June and in September, the CIA was saying that wasn't the case. And then the President --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Let me on that. Well, go ahead.

Q Go ahead.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I want a chance to jump on that.

Q Okay, but you said it was pretty well confirmed that it was credible. And now the Senate intelligence committee says, not true. The CIA was waving you off --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No.

Q -- any suggestion there was a meeting with Mohamed Atta, one of the hijackers with officials Iraqi officials.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, the sequence, Tim, was when you and I talked that morning we had not received any reporting with respect for Mohamed Atta going to Prague. Just a few days after you and I did that show, the CIA -- the CIA -- produced an intelligence report from the Czech intelligence service that said Mohamed Atta, leader of the hijackers, had been in Prague in April of '01 and had met with a senior Iraqi intelligence official in Prague. That was the first report we had that he'd been to Prague and met with Iraqis.

Later on, some period of time after that, the CIA produced another report based on a photograph that was taken in Prague of a man they claimed 70 percent probability was Mohamed Atta on another occasion. This was the reporting we received from the CIA. When I responded to your question and said it had been pretty well confirmed he had been in Prague. Later on, they were unable to confirm it. Later on they backed off of it. But what I told you was exactly what we were seeing at the time -- it never said -- and I don't believe I ever said specifically that it linked the Iraqis to 9/11. It specifically said he had been in Prague, Mohamed Atta had been in Prague. We didn't know --

Q Well, I asked you. I said, is there a connection between Saddam and 9/11 on September '03, and you said, we don't know.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's right.

Q So you raised that possibility.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It was raised by the CIA who passed on from the report from the Czech intelligence service.

Q All right, now the President was asked what did Iraq have to do with the attack on the World Trade Center. And he said nothing. Do you agree with that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I do.

Q So it's case closed?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We've never been able to confirm any connection between Iraq and 9/11.

Q And the meeting with Atta did not occur?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We don't know. We've never been able to link it. And the FBI and CIA have worked it aggressively. I would say at this point nobody has been able to confirm --

Q Then why in the lead-up to the war was there the constant linkage between Iraq and al Qaeda?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's a different issue. Now, there's a question of whether or not al Qaeda -- whether or not Iraq was involved in 9/11; separate and apart from that is the issue of whether or not there was a historic relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda. The basis for that is probably best captured in George Tenet's testimony before the Senate intel committee in open session, where he said specifically that there was a pattern, a relationship that went back at least a decade between Iraq and al Qaeda.

Q But the President said they were working in concert, giving the strong suggestion to the American people that they were involved in September 11th.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, they are -- there are two totally different propositions here. And people have consistently tried to confuse them. And it's important, I think -- there's a third proposition, as well, too, and that is Iraq's traditional position as a strong sponsor of terror.

So you've got Iraq and 9/11: no evidence that there's a connection. You've got Iraq and al Qaeda: testimony from the Director of CIA that there was, indeed, a relationship; Zarqawi in Baghdad, et cetera. Then the --

Q The committee said that there was no relationship. In fact, Saddam --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I haven't seen the report. I haven't had a chance to read it yet --

Q But, Mr. Vice President, the bottom line is --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: -- but the fact is, we know that Zarqawi, running a terrorist camp in Afghanistan prior to 9/11, after we went into 9/11 -- then fled and went to Baghdad and set up operations in Baghdad in the spring of '02, and was there from then basically until the time we launched into Iraq.

Q The bottom line is the rationale given to the American people was that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, and he could give those weapons of mass destruction to al Qaeda, and we could have another September 11th. And now we read that there is no evidence according to Senate intelligence committee of that relationship. You said there's no involvement. The President says there's no involvement --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim, no involvement in what respect?

Q In September 11th, okay? And the CIA said leading up to the war that the possibility of Saddam using weapons of mass destruction was "low." It appears that there was a deliberate attempt made by the administration to link al Qaeda in Iraq in the minds of the American people and use it as a rationale to go into Iraq.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim, I guess -- I'm not sure what part you don't understand here. In 1990, the State Department designated Iraq as a state sponsor of terror. Abu Nidal, famous terrorist, had sanctuary in Baghdad for years. Zarqawi was in Baghdad after we took Afghanistan and before we went into Iraq. You had the facility up at Kermal, a poisons facility run by an Ansar al-Islam, an affiliate of al Qaeda. You had the fact that Saddam Hussein, for example, provided payments to the families of suicide bombers of \$25,000 on a regular basis. This was a state sponsor of terror. He had a relationship with terror groups. No question about it. Nobody denies that.

The evidence we also had at the time was that he had a relationship with al Qaeda. And that was George Tenet's testimony, the Director of CIA, in front of the Senate intelligence committee. We also had knowledge of the fact that he had produced and used weapons of mass destruction. And we know, as well, that while he did not have any production under way at the time, that he clearly retained the capability. And the expectation from the experts was as soon as the sanctions were lifted, he'd be back in business again. Now, this was the place where probably there was a greater prospect of a connection between terrorists on the one hand and a terror-sponsoring state and weapons of mass destruction than anyplace else.

You talk about Iran, North Korea, they are problems, too. But they hadn't been through 12 years of sanctions and resolutions by the U.N. Security Council and ignored them with impunity.

Q The American people have now pretty much made their views of the war known. We asked them: The Iraq War is it worth it? And look at this -- 39 percent say worth it; 59 percent, nearly six in 10, say not worth it.

The President has said we will stay the course, complete the mission. Finish the job. How do you define victory? And why have the American people turned against the war?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, Tim, I think the people obviously are frustrated because of the difficulty, because of the cost and the casualties. But you cannot look at Iraq in isolation. You have to look at it within the context of the broader global war on terror.

Remember what we've been involved in here. We've been involved in Afghanistan, take down the Taliban, stand up a new regime, et cetera. Pakistan -- we've gone in and worked closely with Musharraf to take down al Qaeda. Saudi Arabia, same thing. In all of those cases, it has been a matter of getting the locals into the fight to prevail over al Qaeda and al Qaeda-related types.

Now comes Iraq. Now we've got people saying, gee, get out of Iraq. You ought to pack it in and go home. It's unrelated. You've got hundreds of thousands, millions of people out there who have staked their fate, to some extent, on the United States. Think of all those people who turned out in the face of assassins and car bombers to vote. Think of the hundreds of thousands of folks who've signed on for the security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Think of Musharraf, who puts his neck on the line every day he goes to work, where there have been attempts on his life because of his support for our position.

Now, they look over here and they see the United States that's made a commitment to the Iraqis, that's gone in and taken down the old regime, worked to set up a democracy, worked to set up security forces. And all of a sudden, we say it's too tough, we're going home. What's Karzai going to think of Kabul? Is he going to have any confidence at all that he can trust the United States, that, in face, we're there to get the job done? What about Musharraf? Or is Musharraf and those people you're talking about who are on the fence in Afghanistan and elsewhere going to say, "My gosh, the United States hasn't got the stomach for the fight? Bin Laden is right. Al Qaeda is right. The United States has lost its will and will not complete the mission." And it will damage our capabilities in all of those other war fronts, if you will, in the global war on terror.

Q The alternative view is that this has been a fundamental set of misjudgment. There were no weapons of mass destruction. There was no linkage of Iraq to September 11th and that there is a disconnect between rhetoric and reality. I want to go back to May 30th, 2005 when you said to the American people and to the world, "I think the level of activity in Iraq that we see today from military standpoint, I think, will clearly decline. I think they are in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency."

Since that time, Mr. Vice President, look at this, between the beginning of the war and May 30th when you made that statement we had 1,656 deaths in Iraq. There are now a thousand more American servicemen. There are 7,500 more wounded and injured. There are 20,000 more dead Iraqis. Wasn't it a flat-out mistake to say we are in the last throes of the insurgency?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think there's no question, Tim, that the insurgency has gone on longer and been more difficult than I had anticipated. I'll be the first to admit that. But I also think when we look back on this period of time 10 years from now, and this is the context in which I made that statement last year, that 2005 will have been the turning point, because that's the point at which the Iraqis stepped up, and established their own political process, wrote a constitution, held three national elections and basically took on the responsibility for their own fate and their future.

And as I mentioned before, in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, in Saudi Arabia and in Iraq, the key to victory is for us to be able to get the locals into the fight. The United States can't do it all by itself. It can't be only U.S. security forces fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan. They've got to be willing to step up and take on the responsibility for their own fate. But they are doing it. And it's absolutely essential that we complete

that mission.

Now, is it tough and difficult? Absolutely. No doubt about it. You regret every single casualty. I visit with the families. We spend time with the wounded when they come back. I visit with the troops every chance I get. It's the toughest thing the President has to do. But it is absolutely the right thing to do, Tim, because if we weren't there, if Saddam Hussein were still in power, the situation would be far worse than it is today.

You'd have a man who had a demonstrated capacity for violence, who'd started two wars, who had, in fact, been involved with weapons of mass destruction, who had every intention of going back to it when the sanctions were lifted. And by this point, especially with Ahmadinejad, living next door in Iran, pursuing nuclear weapons, there is no doubt in my mind that if Saddam Hussein was still in power, he would have a very robust program underway to try to do exactly the same thing. The world is better off because Saddam Hussein is in jail instead of in power in Baghdad. It was the right thing to do, and if we had to do it over again we would do exactly the same thing.

Q Exactly the same thing?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, sir.

Q But leading up to the war, three days before the war you were on this program and I asked you a question, and I asked you about an analysis of what could occur. Let's just watch and we'll talk about it.

(Video clip plays.)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think things have gotten so bad inside of Iraq, from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.

Q If your analysis is not correct, and we are not treated as liberators but conquerors, and the Iraqis begin to resist, particularly in Baghdad, do you think the American people are prepared for a long, costly, and bloody battle with a significant American casualties?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't think it's likely to unfold that way, Tim, because I really do believe we will be greeted as liberators."

(Video clip concludes.)

Q It, in fact, did unfolded that way. It has been a long and costly and bloody war.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It has. Well, the first part, getting rid of Saddam was not, but clearly the insurgency and the aftermath has been.

Q But again, wasn't your judgment overly rosy -- greeted as liberators --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, you gave me a choice, Tim -- "will you be greeted as occupiers or liberators;" and I said, "We'll be greeted as liberators."

Q But I said, "What about a long, costly, bloody battle," and you said, "It's unlikely to unfold that way."

THE VICE PRESIDENT: And that's true within the context of the battle against the Saddam Hussein regime and his forces. That went very quickly. It was over in a relatively short period of time. What obviously has developed after that, the insurgency has been long and costly and bloody. No --

Q Mr. Vice President, Tommy Franks, when he landed in Iraq, had a meeting and said, "All right, start making plans we're going down to 30,000 troops at the end of this year, 2003."

There was a view of the administration that you were going to walk in, topple the government and that was it. And now three-and-a-half years later, we are in Iraq for a long, long time with 2,500 deaths; 20,000 wounded and injured. There were some fundamental misjudgments made.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think there's no question but what we did not anticipate an insurgency that would last this long.

Q Three hundred billion dollars spent so far. The Congressional Budget Office says if we stay in Iraq through the end of 2009, it will be a half trillion dollars. In all candor, could that \$300 billion we've spent so far in Iraq not have been better spent securing Afghanistan, improving airline security, having technology for gels and liquids so people can get on without being nervous, our cargo in our ports, could that \$300 billion have not been better spent securing our nation against terrorists rather than in Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim, I think we've done a pretty good job of securing the nation against terrorists. We are here on the fifth anniversary and there has not been another attack on the United States. And that's not an accident because we've done a hell of a job here at home in terms homeland security, in terms of the terrorist surveillance program we've put in place, in terms of the financial tracking program we've put in place, and because of our detainee policy, where we, in fact, were able to interrogate captured terrorists to get the kind of intelligence that has allowed us to --

Q But could it have been better spent?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not sure that it could have been. I don't know how much better you can do than no attacks for the last five years.

Q But the Commission on 9/11 says we that get D's and F's. People with radios in police departments can't -- in D.C. cannot talk to Alexandria. Four-fifths of the mayors say they can't communicate with their localities. People can't carry tooth paste and shampoo on planes. The administration cut \$6 million -- or tried to out of funding to screen those kinds of things --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim --

Q -- rather than spending the money in Iraq.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We have spent billions on homeland security. You can always find more you can spend funds on. But the fact of the matter is, I think we've done a pretty good job. I don't know how you can explain five years of no attacks, five years of successful disruption of attacks, five years of defeating the efforts of al Qaeda to come back and kill more Americans. You have got to give some credence to the notion that maybe somebody did something right. I think we did. I think we did a lot right.

And I think part of what we did right was to take the fight to the enemy, to treat this as a war, not a law enforcement problem, which is the way these things have been treated before we arrived; to actively and aggressively go after the state sponsors of terror, as we did, for example, in Afghanistan and Iraq; aggressively go after those places where the terrorists might be able to lay their hands on that deadly technology they'd like to use in that next attack. So I think we got it right.

Now, I can't say it's perfect. Obviously, you can always look back and find things you'd like to do differently or do better. But on the broad, overall strategic sweep of what we did, what we set out as our objectives, the strategy we've pursued to get there, I think we've done a pretty good job.

Q But the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq said it's not foreign terrorists that are the biggest threat in Iraq, it is a sectarian war, Sunnis killing Shiites; Shiites killing Sunnis.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Remember how we got there, though. Now, the way we got to the sectarian strife in Iraq was because of Zarqawi, who was the head of al Qaeda in Iraq -- went and pursued a deliberate policy of attacking the Shia in order to try to foment strife between Shia and Sunni. And I must say he had some success, obviously, with the bombing of the mosque at Samarra earlier this year. Now, we got Zarqawi, he's dead. But we are still having to deal with the legacy of the al Qaeda strategy that they've put in place inside Iraq to, in fact, go after the Shia and the Sunni.

Q Mr. Vice President, the President of the United States said Hezbollah has killed more Americans than any other terrorist organization than al Qaeda. The largest demonstration in favor of Hezbollah was in Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis on the street supporting Hezbollah. I asked the Foreign Minister of Iraq, is Hezbollah a terrorist organization? He said I can't make that judgment. The parliament, the Speaker of the Parliament, "Dennis Hastert of Iraq, Tip O'Neill of Iraq," said it was, the Jews that were causing the violence. What are we creating in Iraq? I ask you again, what is victory? What is staying the course? What is winning?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim, victory in Iraq will be a situation in which there is a viable government, representative of the people of Iraq elected under their constitution. We are part way there. It will be an Iraq that is not a threat to the United States in terms of being a safe haven for terrorists. It will be an Iraq where al Qaeda has been pretty well eliminated, where, in fact, the Iraqis are able to govern and deal with the difficult political situations obviously that exist inside Iraq given their history. Those are all things that need to happen.

But I think we are well under way to do it. And we are better off there because of what we've done to date. We are less likely to have a threat emerge against the United States from that corner of the world than would have been the case if Saddam were still there.

Q Have we created a fundamentalist Islamic regime in Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No.

Q The Prime Minister of Iraq is going where tomorrow? Iran.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: He is a neighbor.

Q If you go to southern Iran, Richard Engel, our correspondent, has been there for three years. They answer the phones in hotels in Persian. Iran has built an airport in Najaf. They've built an airport in Najaf, in Iraq. Who has more influence with Iraq, Iran or the U.S.?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Oh, I think the U.S. does today. But there's no question but what the new government of Iraq has to get along with its neighbors. He also visits the Saudis. He also has had sessions with other governments in the region. Their people need to work with the Turks, with the Syrians, with the Jordanians and with others. We have encouraged the states in the region to come together to help the new government in Iraq. It is a Shia government. No question about it. They've got close ties. Iran was the place where most of the leadership took refuge during the period of time when Saddam Hussein was in power because it was the only place they could go. But the fact of the matter is, you are better off. You don't have a government in Baghdad that is pursuing weapons of mass destruction. You don't have a government in Baghdad that is a state sponsor of terror. You don't have a government in Baghdad that is doing all those things that Saddam Hussein did for so long.

Q But you have also lost a buffer to Iran, and that's what I'm going to come back and talk about if I could.

(Interruption to proceedings.)

Q And we're back with the Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney. Let me show you what Mr. Khatami from Iran visiting the United States had to say and read it for you and our viewers.

"Former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami warned that the U.S. military action in the Middle East has backfired, producing greater terrorism, imperiling the future of Iraq, and damaging America's long-term interest. But the danger of even great instability in the region will ultimately prevent the U.S. from launching military strikes against Iran over disputes about its nuclear intentions. He predicted: 'America will not make the same mistake of attacking Iran; Iran is not Iraq.'"

Is he right?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we certainly understand Iran is not Iraq. I'm not sure I would agree with

much what else he said. Obviously, we are concerned about what Iran is up to. We think their pursuit of enrichment capability that would allow them ultimately to produce nuclear weapons is fundamentally a problem for that part of the world. That's a view shared by most of our friends in the international community.

Q How do you stop them?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we've started through the process of working with the other nations involved -- the EU3, the Russians and the Chinese; we got a resolution through the U.N. Security Council -- a tough resolution in July -- that basically called on them to give up their nuclear aspirations. And since they have not responded affirmatively to that, we are now in the process of negotiating with the U.N. Security Council members and the part of that P5 process on a set of sanctions that could be approved by the United Nations and imposed on Iran.

Q Will we do anything to stop the Iranians from having a nuclear bomb?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We have said repeatedly that we think they should not have a nuclear bomb. And we also made it abundantly clear we want to solve the problem diplomatically. But the President has always emphasized no options have been taken off the table.

Q Is there a problem with our country and the world if the President came forward and said, I have intelligence which says Iran is this far advanced, and people in the world and the people in the country say, is that the same intelligence you had on Iraq, Mr. President?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, of course, much of the information that's been available on what Iran is doing is the result of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Inspectors had been kicked out of Iraq. Obviously, here you've got more access from an international body that I think most people wouldn't question.

Q But we rejected their intelligence leading up to Iraq. I asked you on this very program --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Right, that's correct.

Q -- about ElBaradei, and you said, "He's wrong."

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It wasn't consistent with our report --

Q But he was right about Iraq.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I haven't looked at it; I would have to go back and look at it again. But your point, Tim, in terms of the credibility of the reporting, there's not much dispute within the international community, and that includes the Russians, it includes the Europeans, that, in fact, the Iranians are pursuing capabilities that would allow them to produce nuclear weapons.

Q Do we have the military wherewithal to take out the Iranian program?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't want to speculate on military options. That's not wise, and Rumsfeld would probably object.

Q What about North Korea -- do we have the military --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim, I'm not going to speculate on military capabilities. I think it's not helpful to do that.

Q But their potential has increased three- and four-fold. Our estimates are they can build 12 nuclear bombs.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to speculate, Tim.

Q Let me turn back home, domestic politics, and talk about the whole situation involving Scooter Libby, your former chief of staff, who was indicted by Patrick Fitzgerald. This was a document that was released in the investigation. It's a New York Times op-ed piece with your handwriting on it, and that handwriting says, "Or did his wife send him on a junket," referring to Ambassador Joe Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, who was a CIA agent. Did you, in any way, authorize Scooter Libby to release her name or her occupation to the press?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim, Scooter Libby is a good man. He's a friend of mine. He's somebody -- one of the most competent and capable people I've ever known. He's entitled to the presumption of innocence. But there is a legal matter pending; there is going to be a trial next year. I could well be a witness in the trial. And much as I would like to talk about it, and I certainly have strong opinions about the case, I think it would be totally inappropriate for me to do so.

Q There was a story in the National Journal that Cheney authorized Libby to leak confidential information. Can you confirm or deny that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I have the authority as Vice President under an executive issued by the President to classify and declassify information. And everything I've done is consistent with those authorities.

Q Could you declassify Valerie Plame's status as an operative?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I've said all I'm going to say on the subject, Tim.

Q Do you think the President should pardon Scooter Libby?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I've said all I'm going to say on the subject, Tim.

Q You wouldn't support a pardon?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I've said all I'm going to say on the subject.

Q How about Richard Armitage who has come forward and said that he was the original source for Robert Novak some years ago?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Does he need a pardon?

Q Are you upset or concerned?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Tim, I'm not going to discuss the subject. I understand why you want to ask about it, but the fact of the matter is, it's a matter pending before the courts and since I could be a witness, I think it's inappropriate for me to say anything more.

Q The New York Times today, "Cheney's power no longer goes unquestioned," suggesting that your support of issues regarding the treatment and prosecution of terror suspects, of the national NSA surveillance eavesdropping policy has weakened your influence within the White House.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Is that a question? (Laughter.)

Q Yes, sir. Has it?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I haven't read the story in any great detail. It looks like one of those thumb-suckers that's done periodically, and is probably as valid as the ones that were done saying that I was in charge of everything. Obviously --

Q Were you?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I give my advice, the President makes his decisions. Sometimes he agrees, sometimes he doesn't.

Q When you were on this program, you did talk about being on the dark side, that we're going to have to get involved in intelligence and do some things with shady characters and so forth. Is that what we've done in the last five years?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We have done everything we could think of to make the nation safe. That's our number one obligation. The oath that the President and I take when we are sworn in up there on Capitol Hill is always to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. And we have done everything within our power and within the Constitution to, in fact, pursue that objective.

And that's meant that we have gone after -- for example, we set up the terrorist surveillance program which has been instrumental in identifying key communications involving our adversaries, just as the financial tracking program has been vital in terms of tracking the money, and the detainee program, which has allowed us to collect some extraordinarily valuable intelligence from the terrorists we

capture. It's all been done in a manner that's consistent with the President's authorities, with the Constitution, with our treaty obligations, and with the blessing of the lawyers. So any suggestion we've gone beyond where we should have, I would take issue with. The fact of the matter is I see part of my job to think about the unthinkable, to focus upon what, in fact, the terrorists have in store for us.

Q But the Supreme Court did tell you, you needed congressional authority.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, I happen to disagree with the Supreme Court. I think they made -- I think the Thomas, Scalia, Alito minority views were the correct ones. The fact of the matter is the Court said for example the Geneva Convention applies to terrorists, that Common Article 3 applies to an international conflict. We've never before believed it did --

Q But no regret over the treatment of the suspects, water-boarding, loud music, some of the other techniques used?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I won't discuss techniques. It's important we preserve certain classified elements of the program. But I will say to you, Tim, that the information we've collected from the detainees and people like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11, has probably been some of the most valuable intelligence we've had in the last five years. And has helped us prevent attacks against the United States.

Q Did it help in any way with the London terror plot?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: The detainee program? I can't say that.

Q There is a report in the papers today that the Republican Campaign Committee of the house is going to spend \$50 million between now and the mid-term elections, and 90 percent of the money is on negative advertising against their Democratic opponents. Is that appropriate?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, Tim, -- (laughter) -- I haven't seen the ads. I hope our guys have good, hard-hitting advertisements. Certainly the opposition does. And I don't see anything inappropriate about a tough, hard-charging campaign. This is an important campaign.

Just think about what's at stake in this election in terms of national security and the global war on terror, and where we go on these issues you and I have been talking about this morning.

Q What happens if the Democrats win the House of Representatives? What do you expect?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't think it will happen. I don't expect that Nancy Pelosi will be Speaker. I think we are doing very well out there. I feel better about the election now than I did three months ago.

Q But do you fear serious oversight of the Bush administration?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We've had oversight all along, Tim.

Q With robust congressional hearings?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We have oversight all along.

Q With robust congressional hearings?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: With robust congressional hearings.

Q Like the Democrats would have?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: On what?

Q On the war on Iraq, on weapons of mass destruction --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We have those all the time now anyway.

Q No fears?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No.

Q No concerns?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, not on that part.

Q And you're full confident you'll maintain control of both Houses?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think we will. I really do. I've spent a lot of time on it. I've done 91 campaigns myself this cycle, since last fall. I'm on the road a lot. I've seen our candidates. I've seen how they're handling the issues. We've generated the resources we need to be able to have a good, hard fought competition. If I had to bet today -- well, I can I bet you a dinner that we hold both Houses.

Q I don't bet.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: You don't bet, all right.

Q Have you be hunting since February 11, 2006?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, sir, that was the end of the season.

Q No more hunting?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I didn't say that at all, but I have not hunted since then, but I ordinarily wouldn't anyway.

Q Will you go out and hunt again?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I do, I will.

Q Have you gotten over that incident?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know that you ever get over it. Fortunately, Harry is doing very well. Harry Whittington.

Q You've talked to him?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, I have. And he's a good man. And he could not have been more gracious or more generous. But it's not the kind of thing I don't think anybody could ever forget.

Q Should I be relieved you didn't bring your shotgun in today? (Laughter.)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I wouldn't worry about it. You're not in season. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. Vice President, I hope I never am. Thank you for sharing your views.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Tim.

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