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Interview of the Vice President by Bret Baier, FOX News

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QUESTION: Mr. Vice President, thanks for being with me.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's good to have you on the trip.

QUESTION: Thanks. This has been interesting, two days in Iraq. You just spent complete days filled with meetings with both commanders and Iraqi leaders. After that, can you point to evidence that the U. S. is making decisive progress there?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, the thing - one item that stood out that everybody mentioned to me is the changes they see in Anbar province, where apparently the locals, the tribal sheikhs, the Sunni population, appears to be turning against al Qaeda. Al Qaeda has been a dominant force in that part of Iraq. It's been heavily engaged out there for several years. But apparently, it's reached the point where their conduct in the local community has been such that the Sunni leaders in the region have, in effect, turned against them.

So there are stories, for example, of extensive number of volunteers to serve in the police forces now. It used to be very hard to get anybody out there to volunteer to serve in the police force, be part of the security force sponsored by the government. Now that's going very smoothly. It's those kinds of things that I think were important in terms of looking forward to changes on the ground in this situation. I think if you look in Baghdad, the number of sectarian killings, of Sunni-on-Shia and Shia-on-Sunni killings, has gone down. The number of car bombs has gone up. But so I think there are areas where there are beginning to be signs of progress, but it would be a huge mistake to overestimate, or another way to put it, to underestimate how much is yet to be done. There's still a long way to go.

QUESTION: On the rest of this trip, we're told by your aides that you're going to be asking the Saudis and other Arab nations to increase their contacts and influence with Sunnis in Iraq, and yet you mentioned the Sunnis standing up against al Qaeda there. At the same time, the U.S. is pointing to Iran influencing its support and influence with Shiite militias. How do you avoid setting up a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran inside Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't think it's a proxy war at this stage. That's not the way I perceive it. There are a number of issues to be talked about when you travel in this part of the world these days.

Obviously, Iraq is an important part of it. It's been the dominant theme for the last two days because I've been in Iraq. It will be important in terms of my conversations with other governments in the UAE, in Saudi, in Jordan, Egypt. They all have been involved one way or another in U.S. activities and operations in this region over the years. Most of them participated in the conference at Sharm el Sheikh that Condi Rice attended last week aimed at garnering support, both financial and political, for the Maliki government in Iraq.

Separate and apart from that are issues like the Iranians and what the Iranians are up to in the region. And they are obviously a major source of concern not only for the United States but also for most of our friends in the area, who are worried when they see an Iranian government that appears to be operating in a threatening manner given the kinds of statements that are made by Ahmadi-Nejad and while they aggressively pursue the development of enrichment capability that would allow them to enrich uranium to build nuclear weapons and so far have refused to respond to the sanctions package and the resolutions adopted by the United Nations unanimously. So Iran is a big area of concern.

So, you know, it's the Middle East. It's always complicated. There are always complex relationships between the nations involved, between the people involved, between the leaders, sometimes complex relationships inside the countries themselves. It's useful for me to come out periodically, as the President asked me to do this time, and especially talk with our friends about how they see those developments, to seek advice and counsel, but also to express our wishes and reaffirm our commitment to our friends in the region that we're here to stay and that we look forward to working with them to deal with mutual threats.

QUESTION: But you don't feel that it's increasing somehow the sectarian tension by the Saudis and the Arabs funneling help to the Sunnis and Iran funneling help to the Shiites?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, it's - you know, it's a very complicated situation inside Iraq and one of the things you learn as you go through some of the sessions I went through today, for example, with our military commanders, it really depends on what part of Iraq you're looking at in terms of what kind of conflict or controversy we have. If you go to Baghdad, obviously, the problem has been Sunni-Shia conflict in the past. You've got al Qaeda woven in various places through the area, which is primarily a Sunni organization, and they have been responsible for a lot of the more dramatic bombings and so forth. If you go to Basra in southern Iraq, the conflict that exists there and crops up from time to time is really Shia versus Shia. In the north, you get into conflicts between the Kurds and others in Tikrit.

So Iraq is a very complicated situation, obviously, and it would be, I think, simplistic to say that somehow the Sunnis are backing one group, the Iranians are backing another and there's a proxy war underway in Iraq. I don't think that's the case yet.

QUESTION: You are portrayed by your opponents and some in the media as this sinister figure, as this cold-blooded warmonger who doesn't care about the number of body bags going back. I know you read the casualty reports every day. I know you and Mrs. Cheney visit wounded troops privately. And I saw you in Iraq with troops in Iraq. But how do you feel about the cost of this war in blood and treasure four years later? And I guess the question most Americans have is how much is enough.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, obviously, any casualty is to be regretted. Nobody likes to be in the position where they have to make those kinds of decisions. Obviously, the President bears the major part of the burden. He's the man with the authority to commit the force.

This is not a new problem for me. I served as Secretary of Defense during the Gulf war. I went to the services at Arlington after it was over with for the 148 killed in action that we couldn't bring home again. We got everybody else home, but we couldn't get them home. And when you see the wounded and the price they paid for their service to the nation and talk with the families of those who have been killed or wounded in action, it's a very emotional experience, and it ought to be. Nobody should ever be in a position of authority to take that for granted.

But I also have strong feelings about the cost if we don't act, about the cost if we allow the United States to be run out of town, so to speak, by al Qaeda. We saw what happened on 9/11. 9/11 had a lasting significance in my mind because it was a watershed event where what was going on in a country thousands of miles away in Afghanistan, where training camps had been established in the late '90s, where al Qaeda had been trained, put together the attack that came to New York and Washington on 9/11 and killed 3,000 of our fellow citizens armed with airline tickets and box cutters.

The real threat we face today is the possibility of an al Qaeda cell in the midst of one of our cities armed with a nuclear weapon, and if they ever were to achieve that, and we know they're trying, but if they were ever to pull that off and detonate a nuclear weapon in one of our major cities, it would rival all the casualties we've suffered in all the wars in over 200 years of American history. So this question of saying, you know, we're suffering casualties, isn't the cost too high, I don't think it is when you lay it over against what it is we need to prevent.

And one of the lessons we learned on 9/11 was that we can't hide behind our oceans and ignore what's going on in the Middle East and be safe and secure; we have to be actively and aggressively involved there. We've got to go after the terrorists. We've got to go after states that sponsor terror. We've got to go after people that can provide them with that kind of deadly capability.

Right now, Iraq is the centerpiece in that global war on terror. Al Qaeda has made it that way. Osama bin Laden has said that. That's where, in fact, we're operating now against al Qaeda on a consistent basis. It's not the only issue that's involved in Iraq by any means, but we need to get it right in Iraq. We need not to fold our tent and go home. If we do that, all we do is validate the al Qaeda strategy.

QUESTION: There's a cost politically, obviously, as -

THE VICE PRESIDENT: There certainly is.

QUESTION: Six in ten Americans say they feel it was a mistake to go to war. About as many say they think it's hopeless on the ground. And then you had a group of moderate Republicans at the White House who said they delivered a frank message that they are really worried about the future of the Republican Party after this - how the war is going. What do you say to those people?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, what I say and I know what the President says is that we were elected

to do a job and to do what we think is right for the country. When we ran, nobody had any idea that 9/11 was going to happen just a few months later or that we would be faced with the kinds of problems that we're faced with now, in effect a worldwide conflict that has seen attacks not only in New York and Washington, but in London, in Madrid, in Istanbul and all the way around the world; an al Qaeda organization that's still very active today trying to marshal the resources and acquire the weapons to launch further attacks against the United States. We've been enormously successful at defending the country for the last five and a half years against another one of those attacks. It doesn't mean there won't be more attacks. There may well be.

But the things we've done, sometimes unpopular such as aggressively get involved in the Middle East with military force or set up a terrorist surveillance program at home that allows us to monitor communications between Americans and people overseas at suspect phone numbers or the controversy over the detainee program and how we interrogate prisoners. So I got labeled under that, obviously, because I stood up and defended the importance of that program. It's been absolutely vital.

We didn't get elected to be popular. We didn't get elected to worry just about the fate of the Republican Party. Our mission is to do everything we can to prevail on what is now, we believe, a global conflict, a fundamental test of the character of the American people, whether or not we're going to be able to prevail against one of the most evil opponents we've ever faced. And on our watch, we're going to do absolutely everything we can to see to it that we do succeed and that we do prevail in that conflict, and sometimes that means that we don't do well in the polls or people want to be critical. That's their prerogative. But we sit there every morning and read the intelligence reports in the Oval Office and we know what's happening out there. We know how committed our adversaries are to try to get at us. And we've done what we thought was right for the country.

QUESTION: Speaking of intelligence, former CIA Director George Tenet in his new book charges that there was never a serious discussion in this administration about the imminence of the Iraqi threat or about the implications of this war. How do you respond to that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's just not true. I haven't read George's book, but to state that somehow the President didn't spend a lot of time thinking about this or talking about it - we had extensive conversations. Maybe George wasn't included in those, but the fact of the matter is this decision was weighed as heavily and given as careful consideration as any I've ever been involved in, and I've worked for four presidents.

QUESTION: In his book, I mean, he takes particular aim at you. I know you haven't read it, but I'm sure you've heard some of the things he's talked about in those interviews. And he said it was particular difficult for him to listen to you on Meet the Press last fall and you said this: "George Tenet said in the Oval Office and the President asked him directly. He said, 'George, how good is the case against Saddam on weapons of mass destruction?' And the Director of the CIA said, 'It's a slam dunk, Mr. President. It's a slam dunk.'"

Why did you point to that one comment? It seemed to suggest that it was a tipping point in the decision to go to war?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't know what the question is that Tim asked, but that's an accurate reflection of what I said then. It's an accurate reflection of what happened. Now, it's not saying that George walked in and said that and everybody decided to run off and go to war. Not by any means. We had been receiving evidence for months. I think this conversation that occurred sometime in late '02, as I recall. We had been in office for almost two years and were receiving a steady flow of reports from the agency on what was going on in Iraq. We by then had received the National Intelligence Estimates signed up to by George. He supervised putting that together. The President asked him that question specifically, "How good is the evidence, George?" And George says, "It's a slam dunk." It's an honest, accurate statement of what transpired.

QUESTION: But not the tipping point -

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I never said it was a tipping point.

QUESTION: He suggests that it was somehow preordained that this administration was going to war with Iraq.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, that's not true.

QUESTION: Do you have any ill feelings towards George Tenet?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No. Listen, if I had ill feelings towards everybody who has written books, it'd be a pretty long list. I got to know George while he was CIA Director. I thought we had a good relationship and I think we did a lot of good work together. I haven't read the book so I don't think it's fair for me to judge the book.

QUESTION: About victory in Iraq, today speaking to troops you said, "We look with confidence to the day the mission is completed with honor and in victory." How do you describe victory in Iraq for the American people? We know there's not going to be a signing ceremony on some ship.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Right.

QUESTION: We know that you want an Iraqi government that can sustain, govern and defend itself. But what does victory look like for Americans?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think victory in Iraq looks, as you've just touched on it, it's an Iraq that's self-governing, that is basically democratic, reflects the will of the Iraqi people and is capable of providing for its own security, at which point we'll be able to significantly reduce our activities in the region. We don't want to stay a day longer than we have to, but we've got to get Iraq to the point where they can take care of their own affairs and protect themselves against the conflict that they've been subjected to.

So it's a fairly straightforward proposition. It's not likely ever to be a violence-free society. America is not a violence-free society. But I think we can get it to the point where they can, in fact, defend their

homes, defend their sovereign territory, make sure it doesn't become a safe haven for terrorists, and govern themselves as a democracy. That is going to be a fundamentally better proposition for the neighbors and for the world than it was when Saddam Hussein was in charge.

QUESTION: Democrats and some Republicans say if you don't have benchmarks with specific timelines for the Iraqis to meet with consequences if they don't meet them, then this is simply an open-ended war.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we're interested in having benchmarks that we want to see the Iraqis meet. The President has talked about this previously. That's not a new concept or anything that one of the Democrats came up with. It's also not - I'm always a little puzzled when we talk about consequences. I mean, these people, you've got to remember the consequences that the Iraqis have been faced with. I mean, in terms of casualties, they've suffered far more than we have. We've seen days where suicide car bombers show up at the local market and kill 40 or 50 people with a car bomb.

These people have put up with a lot. They still risk everything to go participate in three elections. The volunteers - they've got an all volunteer military force. There isn't a draftee in the bunch. Every single one of them volunteered to sign up to get into the fight, to prevail hopefully in this conflict.

So when we talk to them about consequences in some kind of bureaucratic sense or threatening them with a cutoff of funds, for example, if they don't do A, B and C, it strikes me as, you know, that's Washington talk but it may not have all that relevance on the ground out there. They've got a job to do. They've got to meet those requirements in terms of being able to govern themselves, deal with the tough issues they've got before them in terms of reconciliation and an oil law and so forth. I pushed very hard to make certain they understand that and --

QUESTION: Do you think they get it?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think so, but we'll see. Time will tell. I came away from my two days in Iraq feeling pretty good about things, but they've got a lot to do and we've got a lot to do. In the meantime, we're doing the best we can to buy them the time they need in order to deal with the political issues that are before their congress, their government, their parliament. And hopefully, they'll get it right.

QUESTION: Last thing. When President Ford died, a lot of political pundits started talking about the Ford administration -- of course, you were part of it - in a bright light. They looked back favorably to an administration that perhaps was not thought of that way at the time. It wasn't. How do you want history to remember this administration?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, hopefully with a bright light. (Laughter.) No, I was struck by the Ford experience. I was there with the President, went to work for him about a month after he took over and went through all of those challenging times, if I can put it in those terms. And I was very pleased - I think all of us who were associated with him - that at the end of his days, 30 years after he'd served, that he was as well regarded by the nation and by historians as he now is. I think a lot of what he did was very good. It was very tough at the time. It was unpopular politically. He dropped 30 points in the polls the day he pardoned Richard Nixon. But it was, in fact, I think, a remarkable man who did

remarkable things for the country under extraordinary circumstances.

And I think the situation we're faced with today, when viewed from the perspective of history, and wait 10 or 15 down the road, hopefully will show that what we did was the right thing to do, that it was very important that we take 9/11 as the watershed event that it is and that we embark upon an aggressive course of action to defend the nation and to defeat our enemies, and that that'll become clear over time.

QUESTION: Thank you.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Okay, Bret.

QUESTION: How are you feeling?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Good.

QUESTION: Yeah? The doctors okay with a long trip?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: They signed up to it and I've got my daughter along to watch carefully to make sure I do everything they tell me to.

QUESTION: I saw the meals. They were pretty healthy on the flights.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Right. Well, what I get especially is healthy. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Thanks for your time.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: All right. Good to have you on, Bret.

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