

Interview: Vice President Dick Cheney discusses the war with Iraq, the economy and other topics

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MR. RUSSERT:

Mr. Vice President, welcome back to MEET THE PRESS.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Good morning, Tim. It's good to be back.

MR. RUSSERT: Two years ago, September 11, 2001, you went to New York City, just the other day, attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the crash in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Has this nation recovered from September 11, 2001?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I think in many respects, recovered, yes. On the other hand, there are some things that'll never be the same. I look back on that, and I think about what we've been engaged in since. And in a sense, sort of the theme that comes through repeatedly for me is that 9/11 changed everything. It changed the way we think about threats to the United States. It changed about our recognition of our vulnerabilities. It changed in terms of the kind of national security strategy we need to pursue, in terms of guaranteeing the safety and security of the American people.

And I'm not sure everybody has made that transition yet. I think there are a number of people out there who hope we can go back to pre-9/11 days and that somehow 9/11 was an aberration. It happened one time; it'll never happen again. But the president and I don't have that luxury. You know, we begin every day reading the intelligence reports from the CIA and the FBI on the nature of the threat that's out there, on the plotting by al-Qaeda members and related groups to launch attacks against the United States and contemplating the possibility of an attack against the U.S. with far deadlier weapons than anything we've seen to date. So on the one hand, I'm sure everybody wants to get back to normal, and we have in many respects. But on the other hand, we all have to recognize as a nation that 9/11 changed a great deal in our lives.

MR. RUSSERT: You fully expect that there will be another attack on the United States?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I have to assume that. The president has to assume that. It would be nice to be able to say that that can't happen. But if we've learned anything, if we look back now, it seems to me that we've learned that there was a campaign of terror mounted against us. Before 9/11, we tended to think in terms of a terrorist act as a criminal enterprise, and the appropriate response was a law enforcement response. You go find the bad guy, put him in jail, case closed. What we've learned since is that that's not the case at all; but, in fact, a lot of the terrorist attacks we've suffered in the 1990s were al-Qaeda directed. That's certainly true in the World Trade Center in '93, in the East Africa Embassy bombings in '98, and the USS Cole in 2000 and obviously on 9/11.

It's very important we make that transition in understanding that we're at war, that the war continues, that this is a global enemy that struck in not only New York and Washington but in Bali and in Djakarta, in Mombasa, in Casablanca, in Riyadh since 9/11, that this is an enterprise that is global in scope and one we've had major success against it. And the fact of the matter is there were thousands of people that went through those training camps in Afghanistan. We know they are seeking deadlier weapons--chemical, biological and nuclear weapons if they can get it. And if anything, those basic notions that developed in the early days after 9/11 have been reinforced by what we've learned since.

MR. RUSSERT: There's grave concern about surface-to-air missiles shooting down American commercial aircraft. Should we not outfit all U.S. commercial airliners with equipment to detect and avoid that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, there are technologies available. They are extremely expensive if you're going to put them on every airliner. You've got to make choices here about, you know, when you're dealing with a risk, there may be certain aircraft flying into certain locales that are especially vulnerable that you may want to deal with. But

I wouldn't automatically go to the assumption that we need to put the most sophisticated system on every single airplane.

MR. RUSSERT: The Washington Post asked the American people about Saddam Hussein, and this is what they said: 69 percent said he was involved in the September 11 attacks. Are you surprised by that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No. I think it's not surprising that people make that connection.

MR. RUSSERT: But is there a connection?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We don't know. You and I talked about this two years ago. I can remember you asking me this question just a few days after the original attack. At the time I said no, we didn't have any evidence of that. Subsequent to that, we've learned a couple of things. We learned more and more that there was a **relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda that stretched** back through most of the decade of the '90s, that it involved training, for example, on BW and CW, that al-Qaeda sent personnel to Baghdad to get trained on the systems that are involved. The Iraqis providing bomb-making expertise and advice to the al-Qaeda organization.

We know, for example, in connection with the original World Trade Center bombing in '93 that one of the bombers was Iraqi, returned to Iraq after the attack of '93. And we've learned subsequent to that, since we went into Baghdad and got into the intelligence files, that this individual probably also received financing from the Iraqi government as well as safe haven.

Now, is there a connection between the Iraqi government and the original World Trade Center bombing in '93? We know, as I say, that one of the perpetrators of that act did, in fact, receive support from the Iraqi government after the fact. With respect to 9/11, of course, we've had the story that's been public out there. The Czechs alleged that Mohamed Atta, the lead attacker, met in Prague with a senior Iraqi intelligence official five months before the attack, but we've never been able to develop anymore of that yet either in terms of confirming it or discrediting it. We just don't know.

MR. RUSSERT: But we could establish a direct link between the hijackers of September 11 and Saudi Arabia.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We know that many of the attackers were Saudi. There was also an Egyptian in the bunch. It doesn't mean those governments had anything to do with that attack. That's a different proposition than saying the Iraqi government and the Iraqi intelligence service had a relationship with al-Qaeda that developed throughout the decade of the '90s. That was clearly official policy.

MR. RUSSERT: There are reports that the investigation Congress did does show a link between the Saudi government and the hijackers but that it will not be released to the public.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't know want to speculate on that, Tim, partly because I was involved in reviewing those pages. It was the judgment of our senior intelligence officials, both CIA and FBI that that material needed to remain classified. At some point, we may be able to declassify it, but there are ongoing investigations that might be affected by that release, and for that reason, we kept it classified. The committee knows what's in there. They helped to prepare it. So it hasn't been kept secret from the Congress, but from the standpoint of our ongoing investigations, we needed to do that.

One of the things this points out that's important for us to understand--so there's this great temptation to look at these events as discreet events. We got hit on 9/11. So we can go investigate it. It's over with now. It's done. It's history and put it behind us.

From our perspective, trying to deal with this continuing campaign of terror, if you will, the war on terror that we're engaged in, this is a continuing enterprise. The people that were involved in some of those activities before 9/11 are still out there. We learn more and more as we capture people, detain people, get access to records and so forth that this is a continuing enterprise and, therefore, we do need to be careful when we look at things like 9/11, the commission report from 9/11, not to jeopardize our capacity to deal with this threat going forward in the interest of putting that information that's interesting that relates to the period of time before that. These are continuing requirements on our part, and we have to be sensitive to that.

MR. RUSSERT: Vanity Fair magazine reports that about 140 Saudis were allowed to leave the United States the day after the 11th, allowed to leave our airspace and were never investigated by the FBI and that departure was approved by high-level administration figures. Do you know anything about that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't, but a lot of folks from that part of the world left in the aftermath of 9/11 because they were worried about public reaction here in the United States or that somehow they might be discriminated against. So we have had, especially since the attacks of Riyadh in May of this year from the Saudi government, great support and cooperation in going after terrorists, especially al-Qaeda. I think the Saudis came to realize as a result of the attacks of last May that they were as much of a target as we are, that al-Qaeda did have a foothold inside Saudi Arabia--a number of the members of the organization are from there--that there have been private individuals in Saudi Arabia who provided significant financial support and assistance, that there are facilitators and operators working inside Saudi Arabia to support the al-Qaeda network. And the Saudis have been, as I say in the last several months, very good partners in helping us go after the people in the al-Qaeda organization.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me turn to the situation in Iraq. We all remember this picture from May 1. The president on the USS Lincoln on May 1; mission accomplished. Since that time, these are the rather haunting figures coming out of Iraq. We had lost 138 soldiers before May 1, and 685 wounded, injured. Since that time, since the president came on the carrier and said major combat was over, we've lost 158, and 856 wounded and injured. Those numbers are pretty troubling.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, it's significant, Tim. Any loss of life or injuries suffered by American military personnel is significant. Everyone wishes that that weren't necessary. But from the standpoint of the activity we're engaged in over there and what we've been able to accomplish over the last two years, I think it's important to keep all of this in perspective. I looked at some numbers yesterday. I had them run the numbers, for example, in terms of our casualties since we launched into Afghanistan, beginning of the war on terror a little over two years ago now. And the number killed in combat, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, as of yesterday, was about 213. When you add in those from non-hostile causes--the plane crashes, helicopter goes down without hostile fire--we've got a total of 372 fatalities since we started the war.

Remember, we lost 3,000 people here on 9/11. And what we've been able to accomplish--although I must say we regret any casualties. You'd like to be able to do everything casualty-free. When you think about what we've accomplished in terms of taking Afghanistan--we had a total of 30 killed in action in Afghanistan--taking down the Taliban and destroying the capacity of al-Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base to attack the United States, launching an attack into Iraq, destroying the Iraqi armed forces, taking down the government of Iraq, getting rid of Saddam Hussein, capturing 42 out of the 55 top leaders, and beginning what I think has been fairly significant success in terms of putting Iraq back together again, the price that we've had to pay is not out of line, and certainly wouldn't lead me to suggest or think that the strategy is flawed or needs to be changed.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you believe that Saddam Hussein had a deliberate strategy, a deliberate calculated plan, not to have the big battle of Baghdad but rather to dissolve away into the mainstream population and then mount this guerrilla war?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't. I think that, in effect, he lost control at the outset. If you look at what transpired during the course of the campaign, the campaign that Tommy Franks mounted, the speed with which they moved, the element of surprise that was involved here, the fact that we were basically able to sever communications between the head, Saddam Hussein, and his forces, no, I don't think he had any choice ultimately but to flee Baghdad as he did. The level of resistance continues out there, obviously, but I think we're making major progress against it, and I think it's important not to let anecdotal reporting on individual resistance conflicts somehow color or lead us to make misjudgments about the total scope of the effort.

The fact is that most of Iraq today is relatively stable and quiet. There are still ongoing incidents, attacks on coalition forces or on others, on the Jordanian Embassy, on the U.N. delegation, on the Shia clerics in Najaf, from ones of--two sources, I believe: either from the remnants of the old regime, the Ba'athists, the Fedayeen Saddam, or terrorists, al-Qaeda types, many of whom were in Iraq before the war, some of whom have arrived since the war. Those are the main two sources that we've got to deal with. We are dealing with them. The actual number of incidents, according to General Abizaid, this month is significantly below what it was last month on a daily basis. So we just have to keep working the problem, and we're doing that.

MR. RUSSERT: Joe Lieberman, the Senator from Connecticut, running for president, had this to say: "...what President Bush gave the American people on Sunday night was a price tag"--\$87 billion--"not a plan. And we in Congress must demand a plan."

What is our plan for Iraq? How long will the 140,000 American soldiers be there? How many international troops will join them? And how much is this going to cost?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, some of those questions are unknowable at present, Tim. It'll depend on developments. It'll depend on how fast it takes us to achieve our objectives. Remember that when we went there,

that we went there specifically to take down the Saddam Hussein regime, to wrap up all WMD capability he had possessed or developed, to deal with the threat that his regime represented to the region, and the United States. Very significant challenge. But we have, in fact, I think, been very successful at achieving that.

In terms of where we're going now, we're moving aggressively to deal with the security situation. We're continuing those efforts. We've got some first-rate troops undertaking those efforts, and, needless to say, we've had major success, major progress when you think about the number of Iraqi bad guys that we've eliminated or captured. We've--working very aggressively, Bremer is, to stand up a new government. We've now got a 25-man governing council in place made up of Iraqis, a broad representative group of Iraqi officials. We've got Iraqis now in charge of each ministry in the government. We've got 90 percent--over 90 percent of the cities and towns and villages of Iraq are now governed by democratically elected or appointed local councils. We've got all the schools open; we've got all the hospitals up and functioning. We're making major progress in restoring the electricity to pre-war levels. We're rebuilding the oil system and infrastructure in the country. So all of that's happening. And it's a very important part of our total strategy.

We're also working to stand up an Iraqi security force. And in four months we've put together a force now of some 55,000 Iraqis serving in the police force, serving in the border security force and so forth at the local level. But that will continue to grow. The second largest security contingent in Iraq today behind the U.S. is Iraqi. We've been successful to some extent in getting international support. We've got a Polish division. We stood up a Polish-led division a few weeks ago that has troops in it from 17 countries.

With respect to the financing, the \$87 billion we've asked for is--about 3/4 of that is to support our military and security operations. About 1/4 of it will go specifically to helping make the investments Bremer believes we need to make in order to get the Iraqis back and functioning on their own capability.

So how long will it take? I don't know. I can't say. I don't think anybody can say with absolute certainty at this point. We've achieved already, when you consider that we've only been there about four months, a great deal, and we are well on our way, I think, to achieving our objective. But the key here for us is to stay committed to get the job done, to get the guys on the ground the resources they need, both from a military as well as a civilian standpoint, and that's exactly what the president is doing.

MR. RUSSERT: Let's go through some of those things because there have been suggestions of misjudgments by the administration. When you were on the program in March, I asked you about troop levels. Let's watch:

(Videotape, March 16, 2003):

MR. RUSSERT: The army's top general said that we would have to have several hundred thousand troops there for several years in order to maintain stability.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I disagree.

To suggest that we need several hundred thousand troops there after military operations cease, after the conflict ends, I don't think is accurate. I think that's an overstatement.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: We, in fact, have about 140,000 troops, 20,000 international troops, as well. Did you misjudge the number of troops necessary to secure Iraq after major combat operations?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, you're going to get into a debate here about--talking about several years, several hundred thousand troops for several years. I think that's a non-starter. I don't think we have any plan to do that, Tim. I don't think it's necessary to do that. There's no question but what we've encountered resistance. But I don't think anybody expected the time we were there to be absolutely trouble-free. We knew there were holdover elements from the regime that would fight us and struggle. And we also knew al-Qaeda was there, and Ansar al-Islam, up in northeastern Iraq, which we'll come back to, talk about in a minute.

So I don't think there was a serious misjudgment here. We couldn't know precisely what would happen. There were a lot of contingencies we got ready for that never did happen. You know, for example, one of the things we spent time worried about was that Saddam would destroy his own oil industry, that he'd do in Iraq what he did in Kuwait 12 years ago. The consequence of that, if he'd gone in and blown up those wells, as they contemplated doing, in fact wired some of them for destruction, would have been that the oil industry would have been shut

down to zero production, probably for several years, while we tried to restore it. We were able to defeat that. That didn't occur. We had plans for it that we didn't have to execute or implement.

So it's like any other process. A plan is only as good until you start to execute, then you have got to make adjustments and so forth. But I don't think there has been a major shift in terms of U.S. troop levels. And I still remain convinced that the judgment that we'll need "several hundred thousand for several years" is not valid.

MR. RUSSERT: The Congressional Budget Office said this, that they warned the Army lacks sufficient active-duty forces to maintain its current level of nearly 150,000 troops in Iraq beyond next spring, and that the stress will mean increasing the number of National Guard and reserves.

Can we keep 150,000 troops beyond next spring without, in effect, breaking the Army?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Tim, we can do what we have to do to prevail in this conflict. Failure's not an option. And go back again and think about what's involved here. This is not just about Iraq or just about the difficulties we might encounter in any one part of the country in terms of restoring security and stability. This is about a continuing operation on the war on terror. And it's very, very important we get it right. If we're successful in Iraq, if we can stand up a good representative government in Iraq, that secures the region so that it never again becomes a threat to its neighbors or to the United States, so it's not pursuing weapons of mass destruction, so that it's not a safe haven for terrorists, now we will have struck a major blow right at the heart of the base, if you will, the geographic base of the terrorists who have had us under assault now for many years, but most especially on 9/11. They understand what's at stake here. That's one of the reasons they're putting up as much of a struggle as they have, is because they know if we succeed here, that that's going to strike a major blow at their capabilities.

MR. RUSSERT: So the resistance in Iraq is coming from those who were responsible for 9/11?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I wouldn't, I was careful not to say that. With respect to 9/11, 9/11, as I said at the beginning of the show, changed everything. And one of the things it changed is we recognized that time was not on our side, that in this part of the world, in particular, given the problems we've encountered in Afghanistan, which forced us to go in and take action there, as well as in Iraq, that we, in fact, had to move on it. The relevance for 9/11 is that what 9/11 marked was the beginning of a struggle in which the terrorists come at us and strike us here on our home territory. And it's a global operation. It doesn't know national boundaries or national borders. And the commitment of the United States going into Afghanistan and take down the Taliban and stand up a new government, to go into Iraq and take down the Saddam Hussein regime and stand up a new government is a vital part of our long-term strategy to win the war on terror.

America's going to be safer and more secure in the years ahead when we complete the task in Iraq successfully, and we will complete it successfully. And whatever the cost is, in terms of casualties or financial resources, it's a whale of a lot less than trying to recover from the next attack in the United States. So what we do on the ground in Iraq, our capabilities here are being tested in no small measure, but this is the place where we want to take on the terrorists. This is the place where we want to take on those elements that have come against the United States, and it's far more appropriate for us to do it there and far better for us to do it there than it is here at home.

We talk about \$87 billion. Yeah, that's a significant expense. No question about it. But it's going to be much more expensive down the road if we wait. And it'll be much more expensive--it's less money, frankly, than the events of 9/11 imposed on us here in the United States.

MR. RUSSERT: In terms of costs, Mr. Vice President, there are suggestions again--it was a misjudgment by the administration or even misleading. Lawrence Lindsey, who used to work for the White House, had predicted it would be \$100 billion to \$200 billion for the war. We've already spent \$160 billion after this \$87 billion is spent. The Pentagon had predicted \$50 billion. And Mitch Daniels, who used to be the head of, the top budget official at the White House, said it would cost \$50 billion to \$60 billion, that Lindsey saying \$100-\$200 billion was too high.

And Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of Defense, went before Congress and said this: "We're dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction [and] relatively soon," and that oil revenues would generate between \$50 and \$100 billion over the course of the next two or three years.

It looked like the administration truly misjudged the cost of this operation.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No, I didn't see a one-point estimate there that you could say that this is the administration's estimate. We didn't know. And if you ask Secretary Rumsfeld, for example--I can remember from his briefings, he

said repeatedly he didn't know. And when you and I talked about it, I couldn't put a dollar figure on it.

MR. RUSSERT: But Daniels did say \$50 billion.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, that might have been, but I don't know what is basis was for making that judgment. We do know that we are prepared and need to be prepared to do whatever it takes to make it work. But this is not a situation where, you know, it's only a matter of us writing a check to solve the problem. Iraq sits on top of 10 percent of the world's oil reserves, very significant reserves, second only to Saudi Arabia. The fact is there are significant resources here to work with, and the notion that we're going to bear the burden all by ourselves from a financial standpoint I don't think is valid. We've got a donor's conference scheduled coming up next month, where the international community will come together and pledge funds to cooperate and support with the Iraqi operation. The U.N. resolution now that Colin Powell's been working on this weekend involves, as well, authorization for the international financial institutions to come support that. There's money at the U.N. left over in the oil-for-food program that's going to be available. There are funds frozen, Iraqi assets in various places in...

MR. RUSSERT: How much is all that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't have a final dollar figure. We don't know who will...

MR. RUSSERT: Is the ei...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: ...pony up for that. The \$87 billion, again, remember, about 3/4 of that is to support the U.S. military operations or about 1/4 of it actually goes to Iraq operations, and a portion clearly will be used in Afghanistan and for the war on terror.

MR. RUSSERT: Is the \$87 billion the end of it? Will the American people be asked for any more money?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I can't say that. It's all that we think we'll need for the foreseeable future for this year. It shouldn't be, people shouldn't be surprised that the request is coming now either. What we've done consistently since we started this enterprise, working with the Congress, is we did not want to incorporate the Iraq cost within the baseline DOD budget. So we've always dealt with it on the side as a separate appropriation. That's what we're doing here. The reason we're going now is because we've had the work done in Iraq. Bremer's been there long enough to put together a good budget looking over the next year. He's got a pretty good idea of what it's going to cost him. We've got more information now than we've had before about what our continuing needs and requirements are going to be. So now we're making the request.

We have not tried to hide it under a bush. The president has been very direct. We're working closely with the Congress in putting a request together, but I come back again to the proposition of what's the cost if we don't act, what's the cost if we do nothing, what's the cost if we don't succeed with respect to our current interest operation in Iraq? And I think that's far higher than getting the job done right here.

MR. RUSSERT: Democrats have written you letters and are suggesting profiteering by your former company Halliburton and this is how it was reported: "Halliburton, the company formerly headed by Vice President Cheney, has won contracts worth more than \$1.7 billion under Operation Iraqi Freedom and stands to make hundreds of millions more dollars under a no-bid contract awarded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, according to newly available documents. The size and scope of the government contracts awarded to Halliburton in connection with the war in Iraq are significantly greater than was previously disclosed and demonstrate the U.S. military's increasing reliance on for-profit corporations to run its logistical operations." Were you involved in any way in the awarding of those contracts?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Of course not, Tim. Tim, I had, when I was secretary of defense, I was not involved in awarding contracts. That's done at a far lower level. Secondly, when I ran Halliburton for five years and they were doing work for the Defense Department, which frankly they've been doing for 60 or 70 years, I never went near the Defense Department. I never lobbied the Defense Department on behalf of Halliburton. The only time I went back to the department during those eight years was to have my portrait hung which is a traditional service rendered for former secretaries of defense. And since I left Halliburton to become George Bush's vice president, I've severed all my ties with the company, gotten rid of all my financial interests. I have no financial interest in Halliburton of any kind and haven't had now for over three years. And as vice president, I have absolutely no influence of, involvement of, knowledge of in any way, shape or form of contracts led by the Corps of Engineers or anybody else in the federal government...

MR. RUSSERT: Why is there no bidding?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I have no idea. Go ask the Corps of Engineers. One of the things to keep in mind is that Halliburton is a unique kind of company. There are very few companies out there that have the combination of the very large engineering construction capability and significant oil field services, the first- or second-largest oil field service company in the world, and they've traditionally done a lot of work for the U.S. government and the U.S. military. That expertise has stood the military in good stead over the years, but it's a great company. There are fine people working for it.

I also have a lot of confidence in the people in the Department of Defense. Nobody has produced one single shred of evidence that there's anything wrong or inappropriate here, nothing but innuendo, and--basically political cheap shots is the way I would describe it. I don't know any of the details of the contract because I deliberately stayed away from any information on that, but Halliburton is a fine company. And as I say--and I have no reason to believe that anybody's done anything wrong or inappropriate here.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me turn to one of the most quoted passages from MEET THE PRESS when you were on in March, and that was trying to anticipate the reaction we would receive from the Iraqi people. Let's watch:

(Videotape, March 16, 2003):

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

MR. RUSSERT: If your analysis is not correct and we're not treated as liberators but as 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 significant American casualties?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I don't think it's unlikely to unfold that way, Tim, because I really do believe we will be greeted as liberators. I've talked with a lot of Iraqis in the last several months myself, had them to the White House. The president and I have met with various groups and individuals, people who've devoted their lives from the outside to try and change things inside of Iraq.

The read we get on the people of Iraq is there's no question but what they want to get rid of Saddam Hussein and they will welcome as liberators the United States when we come to do that.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: We have not been greeted as liberators.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I think we have by most Iraqis. I think the majority of Iraqis are thankful for the fact that the United States is there, that we came and we took down the Saddam Hussein government. And I think if you go in vast areas of the country, the Shia in the south, which are about 60 percent of the population, 20-plus percent in the north, in the Kurdish areas, and in some of the Sunni areas, you'll find that, for the most part, a majority of Iraqis support what we did.

MR. RUSSERT: People like Ahmed Chalabi, former Iraqis who came in and briefed--you talked about--did they sell us a bill of goods? Did they tell us this would be easier, that we'd be welcomed with flowers, and not the kind of armed resistance we're being met with?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No. I think they felt--certainly, they were advocates of the U.S. action because they wanted to liberate Iraq from, you know, what has been one of the worst dictatorships of the 20th century, the Saddam Hussein regime. And I see and receive evidence on a fairly regular basis. I mean, if you go out and look at what's happening on the ground, you'll find that there is widespread support.

There was a poll done, just random in the last week, first one I've seen carefully done; admittedly, it's a difficult area to poll in. Zogby International did it with American Enterprise magazine. But that's got very positive news in it in terms of the numbers it shows with respect to the attitudes to what Americans have done. One of the questions it asked is: "If you could have any model for the kind of government you'd like to have"--and they were given five choices--"which would it be?" The U.S. wins hands down. If you want to ask them do they want an Islamic government established, by 2:1 margins they say no, including the Shia population. If you ask how long they want Americans to stay, over 60 percent of the people polled said they want the U.S. to stay for at least another year.

So admittedly there are problems, especially in that area where Saddam Hussein was from, where people have benefited most from his regime and who've got the most to lose if we're successful in our enterprise, and continuing attacks from terror. But to suggest somehow that that's representative of the country at large or the Iraqi people are opposed to what we've done in Iraq or are actively and aggressively trying to undermine it, I just think that's not true.

MR. RUSSERT: You also told me, Mr. Vice President, in March that you thought Saddam would be captured or killed, turned in by his own people. Why hasn't that happened if they view us as liberators?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, we're working on it, and we'll continue to work on it. His sons were turned in by the Iraqi people. A great many of the folks that we've captured of those top 55, the 42 we've got, a great many of them were turned in as a result of tips from the Iraqis. And as we're there longer and get an Iraqi government stood up, get more and more Iraqis involved in the security service and the security force, the intelligence, I think, will improve and people will be willing to come forward and offer even more information than they have in the past that'll help us wrap up these bad guys, and that includes get Saddam Hussein.

MR. RUSSERT: You have no doubt you'll find him?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No doubt.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me turn to weapons of mass destruction. I asked you back in March what you thought was the most important rationale for going to war with Iraq. There's the question, and here is your answer: "...the combination of [Saddam's] development and use of chemical weapons, his development of biological weapons, his pursuit of nuclear weapons."

VICE PRES. CHENEY: And the tie to terror.

MR. RUSSERT: Where are they?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I think that the jury is still out in terms of trying to get everything pulled together with respect to what we know. But we've got a very good man now in charge of the operation, David Kay, who used to run UNSCOM, a highly qualified, technically qualified and able individual. He's in charge of the operation now. And I also think, Tim, that if you go back and look at what we found to date, that we--there's no doubt in my mind but what Saddam Hussein had these capabilities. This wasn't an idea cooked up overnight by a handful of people, either in the administration or out of the CIA. The reporting that led to the National Intelligence Estimate, upon which I based my statements to you, that was produced a year ago now, the essence of which has since been declassified, that was the product of hundreds of people working over probably 20 years, back at least to the Osirak reactor in 1981. The conclusions in that NIE, I think, are very valid. And I think we will find that in fact they are valid.

What we're dealing with here is a regime that had to learn after we hit them in '91 that anything above ground was likely to be destroyed in an air campaign. They'd gone through many years of inspections. They knew they had to hide and bury their capabilities in this region inside their civilian structure. And I think that's what they did. And if you look--we'll talk about the nuclear program. The judgment in the NIE was that if Saddam could acquire fissile material, weapons-grade material, that he would have a nuclear weapon within a few months to a year. That was the judgment of the intelligence community of the United States, and they had a high degree of confidence in it.

What do we know ahead? Well, we know he had worked on the program for 20 years. We know he had technicians who knew how to do this stuff because they had been working on it over that period of time. We believed, the community believed, that he had a workable design for a bomb. And we know he had 500 tons of uranium. It's there today at Tuwaitha, under seal of the International Atomic Energy Agency. All those are facts that are basically not in dispute. And since we got in there, we found--we had a gentleman come forward, for example, with full designs for a process centrifuge system to enrich uranium and the key parts that you'd need to build such a system. And we know Saddam had worked on that kind of system before. That's physical evidence that we've got in hand today.

So to suggest that there is no evidence there that he had aspirations to acquire nuclear weapon, I don't think is valid, and I think David Kay will find more evidence as he goes forward, interviews people, as we get to folks willing to come forward now as they become more and more convinced that it's safe to do so, that, in fact, he had a robust plan, had previously worked on it and would work on it again.

Same on biological weapons--we believe he'd developed the capacity to go mobile with his BW production capability because, again, in reaction to what we had done to him in '91. We had intelligence reporting before the war that there were at least seven of these mobile labs that he had gone out and acquired. We've, since the war, found two of them. They're in our possession today, mobile biological facilities that can be used to produce anthrax or smallpox or whatever else you wanted to use during the course of developing the capacity for an attack.

So on CW and chemical weapons, my guess is it's buried inside his civilian infrastructure. That's not an unusual place to put it. And, again, David Kay's task is to look for the people that were involved in the program, to find documentary evidence to back it up, to find physical evidence when he can find that. It's a hard task, but I've got great confidence that he can do this. And again, the whole notion that somehow there's nothing to the notion that Saddam Hussein had WMD or had developed WMD, it just strikes me as fallacious. It's not valid now. Nobody drove into Baghdad and had somebody say, "Hey, there's the building over there where all of our WMDs stored." But that's not the way the system worked.

MR. RUSSERT: There's real debate about those labs. But I want to talk about something very specific. And that was the president's State of the Union message when he said that the British had learned that Saddam was acquiring uranium from Africa. That was in January. In March the head of the International Energy Atomic Agency, ElBaradei, issued this statement: "A key piece of evidence linking Iraq to a nuclear weapons program appears to have been fabricated," ... "Documents that purportedly showed Iraqi officials shopping for uranium in Africa two years ago were deemed 'not authentic' after carefully scrutiny by U.N." "Also, ElBaradei reported finding no evidence of banned weapons or nuclear material in an extensive sweep of Iraq using advanced radiation detectors. 'There is no indication of resumed nuclear activities,' [ElBaradei said]."

Eight days after that, you were on MEET THE PRESS, and we...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: ...talked about that specifically. Let's watch:

(Videotape, March 16, 2003):

MR. RUSSERT: And even though the International Atomic Energy Agency said he does not have a nuclear program, we disagree.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I disagree, yes. And you'll find the CIA, for example, and other key parts of our intelligence community, disagree.

And we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons. I think Mr. ElBaradei, frankly, is wrong. And I think if you look at the track record of the International Atomic Energy Agency and this kind of issue, especially where Iraq is concerned, they have consistently underestimated or missed what it was Saddam Hussein was doing. I don't have any reason to believe they're any more valid this time than they've been in the past.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Reconstituted nuclear weapons. You misspoke.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yeah. I did misspeak. I said repeatedly during the show weapons capability. We never had any evidence that he had acquired a nuclear weapon.

MR. RUSSERT: Now, Ambassador Joe Wilson, a year before that, was sent over by the CIA because you raised the question about uranium from Africa. He says he came back from Niger and said that, in fact, he could not find any documentation that, in fact, Niger had sent uranium to Iraq or engaged in that activity and reported it back to the proper channels. Were you briefed on his findings in February, March of 2002?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No. I don't know Joe Wilson. I've never met Joe Wilson. A question had arisen. I'd heard a report that the Iraqis had been trying to acquire uranium in Africa, Niger in particular. I get a daily brief on my own each day before I meet with the president to go through the intel. And I ask lots of question. One of the questions I asked at that particular time about this, I said, "What do we know about this?" They take the question. He came back within a day or two and said, "This is all we know. There's a lot we don't know," end of statement. And Joe Wilson--I don't who sent Joe Wilson. He never submitted a report that I ever saw when he came back.

I guess the intriguing thing, Tim, on the whole thing, this question of whether or not the Iraqis were trying to acquire uranium in Africa, in the British report. This week, the Committee of the British Parliament, which just spent 90 days investigating all of this, revalidated the British claim that Saddam was, in fact, trying to acquire uranium in Africa, what was in the State of the Union speech and what was in the original British White papers. So there may be difference of opinion there. I don't know what the truth is on the ground with respect to that, but I guess--like I say, I don't know Mr. Wilson. I probably shouldn't judge him. I have no idea who hired him and it never came...

MR. RUSSERT: The CIA did.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: But who in the CIA, I don't know.

MR. RUSSERT: This is what concerns people, that the administration hyped the intelligence, misled the American people. This article from The Washington Post about pressuring from Cheney visits: "Vice President Cheney and his most senior aide made multiple trips to the CIA over the past year to question analysts studying Iraq's weapons programs and alleged links to al Qaeda, creating an environment in which some analyst felt they were being pressured to make their assessments fit with the Bush administration's policy objectives, according to senior intelligence officials. With Cheney taking the lead in the administration last August in advocating military action against Iraq by claiming it had weapons of mass destruction, the visits by the vice president and his chief of staff 'sent signals, intended or otherwise, that a certain output was desired from here,' one senior agency official said."

VICE PRES. CHENEY: In terms of asking questions, I plead guilty. I ask a hell of a lot of questions. That's my job. I've had an interest in the intelligence area since I worked for Gerry Ford 30 years ago, served on the Intel Committee in the House for years in the '80s, ran a big part of the intelligence community when I was secretary of defense in the early '90s. This is a very important area. It's one the president's asked me to work on, and I ask questions all the time. I think if you're going to provide the intelligence and advice to the president of the United States to make life and death decisions, you need to be able to defend your conclusions, go into an arena where you can make the arguments about why you believe what you do based on the intelligence we've got.

MR. RUSSERT: No pressure?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Shouldn't be any pressure. I can't think of a single instance. Maybe somebody can produce one. I'm unaware of any where the community changed a judgment that they made because I asked questions.

MR. RUSSERT: If they were wrong, Mr. Vice President, shouldn't we have a wholesale investigation into the intelligence failure that they predicted...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: What failure?

MR. RUSSERT: That Saddam had biological, chemical and is developing a nuclear program.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: My guess is in the end, they'll be proven right, Tim. On the intelligence business, first of all, it's intelligence. There are judgments involved in all of this. But we've got, I think, some very able people in the intelligence business that review the material here. This was a crucial subject. It was extensively covered for years. We're very good at it. As I say, the British just revalidated their claim. So I'm not sure what the argument is about here. I think in the final analysis, we will find that the Iraqis did have a robust program.

How do you explain why Saddam Hussein, if he had no program, wouldn't come clean and say, "I haven't got a program. Come look"? Then he would have sanctions lifted. He'd earned \$100 billion more in oil revenue over the last several years. He'd still be in power. The reason he didn't was because obviously he couldn't comply and wouldn't comply with the U.N. resolutions demanding that he give up his WMD. The Security Council by a 15-to-nothing vote a year ago found him still in violation of those U.N. Security Council resolutions. A lot of the reporting isn't U.S. reporting. It's U.N. reporting on the supplies and stocks of VX and nerve agent and anthrax and so forth that he's never accounted for.

So I say I'm not willing at all at this point to buy the proposition that somehow Saddam Hussein was innocent and he had no WMD and some guy out at the CIA, because I called him, cooked up a report saying he did. That's crazy. That makes no sense. It bears no resemblance to reality whatsoever. And in terms of asking questions, you bet I do. I've seen in times past when there's been faulty intelligence, because they don't always get it right; I think, for example, of having missed the downfall of the Soviet Union. And so I ask a lot of questions based on my years of experience in this business, but that's what I get paid to do.

MR. RUSSERT: We have to take a quick break, be right back with more of our conversation with Vice President Dick Cheney and talk about the economy right after this.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: More with the vice president after this quick station break.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: And we are back.

Mr. Vice President, the economy and the Bush-Cheney record. The day you took office, Inauguration Day, as compared to now. Dow Jones is down 11 percent. Unemployment rate is up 49 percent. A \$281 billion surplus is now a \$500 billion plus deficit. Jobs, net loss of 2.6 million. The debt is up 20 percent and still growing. How can you run for re-election on that record?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, Tim, right there we were starting into a recession and we certainly didn't bear responsibility for creating the circumstances that led to the recession. The combination of the recession, the economic slowdown, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the war on terror have obviously created economic problems for the country, but we're making significant progress. The president's policies in terms of--especially the tax cut package that we've passed now three times does offer very bright prospects for the future. The forecast by nearly everybody I've talked with for the last half of this year is we're looking at 4 percent to 5 percent real growth, a significant boost over where we've been. Going into next year, we anticipate most forecasters' growth on the order of 4 percent or better in GDP. So I think we've turned the corner and we're making significant progress. And that's part of the normal business cycle as well as the added unusual factors of a national emergency.

MR. RUSSERT: If you froze the tax cut for the top 1 percent of Americans, it would generate enough money to pay for the \$87 billion for the war, if you did it for just one year. Would you consider that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I think it'd be a mistake, because you can't look at that without considering what its impact would be on the economy. An awful lot of the returns in that top bracket are small businesses, and they provide an awful lot of the job growth in this economy. If you're going to go increase taxes on small businesses, you're going to slow down the extent to which we're able to reduce unemployment. So I think it's a serious mistake; the wrong time to raise taxes.

MR. RUSSERT: The president said in 2002 the tax cut would generate 800,000 jobs; in 2003, he said--be another million jobs. None of that has happened. What has happened is the deficit is skyrocketing, over \$500 billion. You used to be a real deficit hawk. We went back when you were a leader in Congress. This is what you said about Ronald Reagan's deficit. You said that it puts at risk everything Reagan believes in. The deficit's potentially "Mr. Reagan's Vietnam."

And then this: "' Some of us [were] frustrated by the failure of the administration to do anything about deficits.'" "Asked how the president looked after his cancer surgery, Cheney said, ' He looks good; he's just a little soft on deficits.'"

That's when the deficit was below \$200 billion. What happened to Dick Cheney, deficit hawk?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I was just looking at the picture you got there, Tim. I hadn't seen it in a long time. I am a deficit hawk. So is the president. The fact of the matter is, we've always made exceptions for recession, national emergency, time of war. The deficit that we're running today, after we get the approval of the \$87 billion, will still be less as a percentage of our total capacity to pay for it, our total economic activity in this country, than it was back in the '80s or the deficits we ran in the '90s. We're still about 4.7 percent of our total GDP. So the notion that the United States can't afford this or that we shouldn't do it is, I think, seriously flawed. One of the reasons the deficit got as big as it did, frankly, was because of the economic slowdown, the falloff in deficits, the terrorist attacks. A significant chunk was taken out of the economy by what happened after the attacks of 9/11.

MR. RUSSERT: And tax cuts.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Tax cuts accounted for only about 25 percent of the deficit.

MR. RUSSERT: But we see deficits for the next 10 years, big ones. How do you deal with that, when you have

Social Security, Medicare, coming up?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We anticipate even with the added spending that we've asked for now we'll cut the deficit roughly in half from where it'll be next year over the next five years. So we'll be moving in the right direction. We've got to have--without question, we've got to make choices, we've got to have fiscal discipline on the rest of the budget. But the idea that we can't defend America or that we can't go do what needs to be done in the Middle East with respect to Iraq and Afghanistan, support the troops, rebuild those countries so they never again become safe havens for terrorists to threaten our safety and our security, is silly. The cost of one attack on 9/11 was far greater than what we're spending in Iraq.

MR. RUSSERT: What do you think of the Democratic field?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Haven't really, frankly, paid a hell of a lot of attention to it, Tim. I'm awful busy with my normal day job. And I just haven't--really haven't looked at it. I know some of them; Joe Lieberman, Dick Gephardt are people I've known for some time. Others, like Howard Dean, I frankly, I don't have any relationship with. And I'll watch with interest. Whoever they nominate, we're ready to take them on.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you think the president is betting his presidency on the war in Iraq?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: This president is betting his presidency on the importance of fighting the war on terror, of recognizing that 9/11 changed everything, of adopting a strategy that's going to make this nation safer and more secure for our kids and grandkids. And it takes a president willing to take a risk, willing to use the power of the United States, to make that happen. And this president's done it.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Vice President, we thank you for joining us and sharing your views.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Thank you, sir.

MR. RUSSERT: And we'll be right back.

(Announcements)

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