

Interview: Vice President Dick Cheney discusses the war on terrorism, possible warnings before September 11, and other topics

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MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Vice President, welcome back to MEET THE PRESS. VICE PRES. DICK CHENEY: Good morning, Tim.

MR. RUSSERT: The news of the morning: various reports that the U.S. is intercepting messages hinting at a new attack--that there's a lot of chatter out there that we're finding. What can you tell us?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Basically that. What it is, is a reminder that we're still very heavily engaged in this war on terror, that we're as much involved in conflict today as we were September 12, the day after the attacks of last fall, that, in my opinion, the prospects of a future attack against the United States are almost certain. I'd like to be able to say it's never going to happen again, but I don't think anybody who's really looked at it can say that. We don't know if it's going to be tomorrow or next week or next year, partly because I think we're having some success at disrupting the organization, and making it more difficult for them to carry out their operations. But the prospect of another attack against the United States is very, very real. It's just as real, in my opinion, as it was September 12.

MR. RUSSERT: Not a matter of if, but when.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Not a matter of if, but when. And from our perspective, when you put the thing in the broader context--obviously, you know, one of the things we want to talk about this morning--need to do everything you can to defend against it, and we are. And we're doing more than we've ever done before. But it's almost possible to erect a 100 percent perfect defense. I mean, look at the Israelis. They've got one of the finest intelligence services in the world, they've got a very narrow target to focus on geographically and in terms of who their adversary is, and they still get hit repeatedly by suicide bombings.

MR. RUSSERT: What we're picking up, is it similar to the kind of noise we're hearing the summer of 2001?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Sure, but again, it's non-specific or--but what happens when it comes in, we try to get something that's actionable in it--a name, you know, of somebody we can go after; a location, a mode of attack. And you never get, you know, "Here are the plans." The number of people who actually know the details of an operation, I think, is exceedingly small. I mean, there's some indication, for example, that even some of the hijackers on September 11 did not know until they got on the airplane that it was a suicide mission. And if you have got people even carrying out the assignment who don't know the full scope of the operation, you can imagine how limited is the circle that has accurate knowledge of what, where, when, and how difficult it is to acquire that information in advance of the attack. It's a very hard thing to do, so, you know, you try to read the tea leaves. We look for pieces of information and evidence, but you never get the complete picture. You've got to do the best you can with limited information.

MR. RUSSERT: Warren Buffett, a hard-headed investor who's made billions of dollars, said last week that he believes a major nuclear event is a virtual certainty in the United States.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I can't say that. I would not go that far, because I think we still have the opportunity to prevent the acquisition of a nuclear weapon, for example, by a terrorist organization. But that's one of the reasons--it takes us back into the axis of evil speech the president made at the State of the Union, our concerns about Iraq, our concerns about the possible marriage, if you will, between the terrorist organization on the one hand and a state that has or is developing weapons of mass destruction on the other. And if you ever get them married up--that is if somebody who has nukes decides to share one with a terrorist organization, with the expectation they'll use it against us, obviously we've got another problem. We know with certainty that the al-Qaida organization has been trying to acquire this capability. There's ample evidence in the caves and the training camps in Afghanistan that they were out to get chemical weapons, biological weapons and nuclear weapons. We don't know how far they got. We're aggressively trying to run down all those leads. We spent a lot of time on that

subject, for example, with the detainees and so forth.

But there's no question what the effort is being made. Have they been successful? I don't know. My guess is not--not yet. One theory would be they'd have used it by now if they had it. But there's no question we have to be concerned about a terrorist with a weapon, potentially a nuke, and that is a whole new scale of threat for us to face.

MR. RUSSERT: James Kallstrom, a former FBI man, said that a suicide bomber in the United States is probable.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, we've seen a lot of it now and develop--of course, has been focused in Israel. Certainly, the September 11 attack qualifies as suicide bombers. But if, in fact, the suicide bombers, where they're being used to achieve their desired results--that is, if they're successful, for example, in changing the situation in the Middle East--I think there's a real possibility that we may see that kind of thing here, or in other open societies. I mean, it's--terrorism is an evil, pernicious thing, and it is one of the biggest challenges we've ever faced as a nation--is sort of reorient our whole focus, in terms of national security and defense around that threat, as opposed to what we worried about in the last century.

MR. RUSSERT: Of all the things that were written and said over the last week, for me the most haunting, was when one of the husbands of the victims spoke out. But let me show you and our viewers, and give you a chance to talk about it.

"If a threat is serious enough to brief the president about, it's serious enough to warn the American public," said Stephen Push, whose wife, Lisa J. Raines, died on American Airlines Flight 77, which slammed into the Pentagon. "I am certain that if she knew what the president knew, she would not have been on the plane."

What do you say to him this morning?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I would, first of all, try to explain to him what the PDB really is. There's this notion...

MR. RUSSERT: Presidential Daily Briefing.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Right. There's this notion abroad in the land, partly because of all the controversy the last couple days, that a team went in and briefed the president specifically on this subject. That's not the way it works. The PDB is--it's about the world. It's drawn from sensitive sources all around the globe. It deals a lot with what's going on overseas. Occasionally, it will contain something that relates to a domestic threat here at home. But it's the product of the intelligence community that comes to the president and to me and to his other senior people on a daily basis. I've gone back and looked at that memo of August 6, this was one of several items included that morning, and there's nothing in there that's actionable intelligence.

You know, you could, first time you hear "Somebody might hijack an aircraft"--well, terrorists started hijacking aircraft 30 years ago. Are you going to shut down the nation's aviation system based on that report? You wouldn't. The terrorist succeeds, in a sense, if you shut down the entire country based on a report as nebulous as that was. Plus, it wasn't really current. It dealt with information that had been collected in the late '90s. There wasn't any really new reporting in there so it wasn't as though all of a sudden somebody came in and said, "Hey, they're about to hijack an airplane." It was more a matter al-Qaida has a desire to strike us and one possibility is they might hijack an aircraft. It was more in the nature of that kind of analysis than it was a warning.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you what Richard Shelby said, and he's a Republican, vice chair of the Intelligence Committee. "There was a lot of information...I believe, and others believe, if it had been acted on properly, we may have had a different situation on September 11."

Do you agree with that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I'm not there yet. And there's no question but what there were failures. I mean, we obviously did not know what was about to happen and we were unable to prevent it. Now, there are--we learned bits and pieces various places. The FBI had Moussaoui in custody, but nobody knew that at the White House, for example. It hadn't rolled in. There's this talk about a Phoenix memo. But, again, none of that would ordinarily come to the White House anyway. We cannot have the president of the United States sitting there reading the daily field reports of agents from all over the country.

What's been lacking, I think, was effective coordination between our international intelligence collecting operations

and our domestic law enforcement. I think also in terms of our ability to analyze data and in effect to pull in this intelligence from around the country, collate it, figure out what it means, and then communicate it to policy-makers in a relevant fashion.

We're now building that capability, but it did not exist domestically in an effective fashion prior to September 11. That's one of the things Bob Mueller's spending all of his time on is building that kind of analytical capability so you could pull in the fact of an arrest in Minnesota and a speculative piece from Arizona and then act on it. But I'm not sure even if you'd had that that would have triggered any actionable item from the standpoint of the government being able to take action.

Remember, there was, all through this period of time, even as we received the report on the 6 of August, we had a whole series of threat warnings during the course of the summer. A lot of it dealt with targets overseas--with embassies and bases overseas. There were alerts put out by the FAA to aviation here in this country to warn them that there was a possibility that somebody might try to do something, so it wasn't as though the system didn't respond. But clearly we were not in a position to do as much as one would have liked given what ultimately happened. But I'm not--I can't say at this point that even if we'd had all those pieces together, that it would have led to the conclusion that they were going to hit the Trade Center, the Pentagon, etc.

MR. RUSSERT: Knowing what you do know now, what would you have done differently last July or August?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I think the main problem is an institutional one. I think one of my concerns is that we avoid a search for scapegoats here, and we go try to find some GS-14 someplace who failed to do whatever it was it needed to do. I don't think it's that kind of a problem. I think it's more a matter--take the FBI, for example, a lot of criticism of the FBI at present. The FBI is maybe the finest--one of the finest law enforcement organizations in the world. They've done a superb job over the years, but their orientation has been the traditional law enforcement role; go investigate Oklahoma City after the bombing and find the truck with the serial number on it that lets you prosecute and convict McVeigh.

That's a very different approach than one that says we've got to prevent the next attack and that we're now looking for information out there that may indicate where somebody's planning, getting ready to do something. Now, they haven't committed a crime yet. They're not subject to arrest. It's a whole different way of thinking about the problem on what it is we want the bureau to do. As I say, I think we've got a good start on transforming that organization, so in the future, they'd be better able to deal with this kind of proposition.

But again, I want to come back to the point I made earlier, Tim. The American people must understand the reality of the enemy we're up against; that if you're 99 percent successful, that 1 percent in defense could still kill you. And the ultimate answer here is good offense as well. And not only do we need to deal with the defensive side of things, but we have to go destroy the terrorists, and that offensive piece of the operation also depends upon good intelligence, also depends upon having the assets and the resources to find them and get rid of them before they can launch further attacks against us, and that's a long-term proposition.

MR. RUSSERT: A lot of discussion this week about what the president knew. Let me go back to that August 6 memo we've been talking about and put this on the screen from The Washington Post. "The top-secret briefing memo presented to President Bush on August 6 carried the headline, 'Bin Laden Determined To Strike In U.S.,' and was primarily focused on recounting al-Qaeda's past efforts to attack and infiltrate the United States, senior administration officials said. The document, known as the President's Daily Briefing, underscored that Osama bin Laden and his followers hoped to 'bring the fight to America,' in part as retaliation for U.S. missile strikes on al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in 1998, according to knowledgeable sources. Bush had specifically asked for an intelligence analysis of possible al-Qaeda attacks within the United States."

Why did the president--what prompted him in August of 2001, to ask for a specific briefing on al-Qaeda strikes in the U.S.?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I couldn't be specific, Tim. The way the process works is when we get the morning brief every day, it oftentimes will generate questions. There may be a word or a paragraph or a general conclusion and say, "You know, I want to know more about that. You know, we've got all this reporting"--I'm speculating now, "I've got all this reporting that says they may hit us overseas. Is there any possibility they might hit us here?" Or there may have been information coming out of a trial, the World Trade Center people in New York, for example, that would lead you to ask questions of any possibility of further efforts here against us in the United States. So it's a routine part of the process. It's an integrative process. They bring us information they think we need. We, in turn, ask them to go get more information that we're interested in. But I don't recall any specific thing that would have triggered that kind of request. It was a routine kind of a request.

MR. RUSSERT: When news of the August 6 briefing came out last week, Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary, told this to the Associated Press. "Acting on the information the government did have, the administration notified the appropriate agencies. I think that's one of the reasons we saw the people who committed the 9-11 attacks use box cutters and plastic knives to get around America's system of protecting against hijackers." He's strongly suggesting there was some advance information of some kind and a notification was made to at least the airlines, and that's why the hijackers used box cutters and knives.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I can't come to that conclusion. I don't know what Ari was talking about specifically. My guess would be that they knew what weapons they were going to use very early on in the planning process and that armed security procedures obviously weren't geared to those kinds of weapons, and I would be amazed if that was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I would expect it was something they decided months before that period of time.

In terms of this question of notification to agencies, there is within the NSE a mechanism that's been there through various administrations, the Counterterrorism Group Interagency Task Force. It's headed by--it was at that time by Dick Clark who'd headed it as well back during the Clinton administration, somebody I'd known a long time.

And that's a process. That's where the action takes place when these reports come in and you believe you've got actual intelligence. Out of that group will emerge a directive, for example, encourage the FAA to send out a circular, encourage the Justice Department to undertake certain kinds of warnings. A lot of that now is coordinated with the Office of Homeland Security with Governor Ridge, but there were warnings that went out as part of the regular processes of the government in connection with the possibility of an attack here at home and it went out over a period of months.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me bring you back to July 5, in fact, and this was an article in The Post. July 5 of 2001, "The White House summoned officials of a dozen federal agencies to the Situation Room. 'Something really spectacular is going to happen here, and it's going to happen soon,' the government's top counter-terrorism official, Richard Clarke, told the assembled group according to two of those present. The group included the Federal Aviation Administration, the Coast Guard, FBI, Secret Service and INS. Clark directed every counter-terrorist office to cancel vacations, defer non-vital travel, put off scheduled exercises and place domestic rapid-response teams on much shorter alert. For six weeks last summer, at home and overseas, the U.S. government was at its highest possible state of readiness--and anxiety--again imminent terrorist attacks."

In hindsight, should the American people have been notified in July how serious the threat was perceived inside the White House?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: What would the notification look like? You're going out. You're trying not to panic people. You don't have anything very specific. You've got, you know, increased level of noise in the system that you're picking up on. You're going to go through the relevant agencies, law enforcement when that's appropriate, transportation systems when that's appropriate, try to put those people on alert. You can also only sustain alert for so long. And then it gets to be old hat. People have heard that before and so they begin not to respond. So you're always walking a fine line of trying to figure out, you know, what's the right point at which you want to alert everybody and at what point do you hold off on the grounds that that would be more disruptive or the quality in the intelligence at this point is vague.

You know, I see comments by organizations and individuals, and, well, yeah, they did put us on alert but it was vague. Well, vague is all we've got lots of times. You don't have specifics. If you did, you'd be able to take a more targeted course of action. The nature of the beast we're dealing with here is that it's always going to be very fuzzy.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Dianne Feinstein, who was on the Intelligence Committee, was briefed in July as well. On Friday she put out a statement critical of your office and let me share that with you and give you a chance to respond. "I was so concerned I contacted Vice President Cheney's office that same month of July to urge that he restructure our counter-terrorism and homeland defense programs to ensure better accountability and prevent important intelligence information from slipping through the cracks. Despite repeated efforts by myself and my staff, the White House did not address my request. I followed this up last September of 2001 before the attacks and was told by 'Scooter' Libby, who is the vice president's chief of staff, that it might be another six months before he would be able to review the material. I told him I did not believe we had six months to wait."

VICE PRES. CHENEY: And the question?

MR. RUSSERT: How do you respond to her?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I think I disagree with her interpretation of events. My recollection is that Senator Feinstein was pushing a particular piece of legislation that called for a particular way to address the homeland security issue, and we were in the midst of a study--the president had directed me last May to review all of the recommendations that were out there; had been a number of commissions and so forth that had addressed this issue of what we needed to do to equip ourselves to deal with these kinds of threats. And our position on legislation at that point was we weren't eager to see legislation move because we had not yet made a recommendation to the president, and we wanted the administration to have a chance to take a look at it and decide: Did we want a White House agency? Did we want a Cabinet-level department? What all would be connected with it? And those were the conversations I recall with her office. I don't believe she provided us with any intelligence information, for example, about a threat that we hadn't already seen.

MR. RUSSERT: The first meeting on counterterrorism reform, if you will, was held on September 4. In hindsight, should the administration had been more aggressive in dealing with counterterrorism from day one of the administration?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, we actually were, Tim. There was a lot of work done back at the beginning, as I recall, in May. I had, for example, a couple of meetings with Governor Gilmore and General Clapper, who'd headed up one of the commissions that had reviewed this whole question for the last couple of years. We got a lot of information from a lot of different places. I brought on board my staff Admiral Steve Abbott, who's now the deputy director of the Homeland Security Office, a retired Navy admiral; a number of other people, as we put together a core group, and this was back in, say, May, June time frame, and we worked through the course of the summer on it. The work that had been done there ultimately was reflected in the president's decision on his speech of September 20 when he went before the Congress, announced Governor Ridge was going to head up this new office. There had already been a lot of work done before September 11.

MR. RUSSERT: There's been a lot of discussions last week of things that have been in the public domain for several years. This was from 1995 when Abdul Hakim Murad told investigators he and other Middle Eastern students had taken pilot training in the U.S. in the early '90s, and had proposed flying a suicide mission into a federal building. That information, provided six years before the September 11 attacks on the Trade Center and the Pentagon, was shared with the FBI in Manila. And this from '99, that there was a report put forward by the Library of Congress entitled the Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism, and what that said is that there'd be suicide bombers belonging to al-Qaida's martyrdom battalion would crash land an aircraft packed with high explosives into the Pentagon, the CIA or the White House.

Looking back at that availability of information, was it not imaginable that, in fact, people would use airplanes as flying missiles?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Oh, I think if you pieced all of that together--I was not around in those days. I was in the private sector, so I don't know what kind of attention that had got inside the government. An important part of what we have to do in order to be able to take advantage of that is to be able to assemble data, manage it intelligently, have first-rate people able to analyze it, look at it and try to identify trends in reports.

There's always the problem you're going to have of--we had this in the Gulf War. You may remember the way that got started was with 180,000 Iraqi troops on the border with Kuwait, they invaded Kuwait. Before that, though, everybody, all of our experts, everybody in the region, all the government heads throughout the Mideast said, "He'll never attack," and then he did. And you went back after the fact and looked down through the intelligence community and the Department of Defense, for example, and you were able to find one guy who had warned, "I think he's going to attack."

Now, from the standpoint of trying to manage the government, you know, you can go back afterwards and say, "Hey, somebody got it right, but everybody else got it wrong." And it's always difficult to make that choice of saying, "Well, I know all these people are saying this, all the evidence points this way, but I'm going to look over here and go with this sole individual who stuck his neck out and may be right." So you have to be careful. We have to have a system that will let us overcome that, and that's a very hard thing to create. That's what we're working on.

MR. RUSSERT: There does seem to be a real disparity in judgment. This is what John Gannon, who was the director of the CIA's intelligence branch at the time the document was issued in '99--he said: "Nobody I knew at the time would have ruled this out as an option," Gannon said. "This document very much thought it was as option." And you contrast that to what Condi Rice said on Thursday, and I'll show you: "I don't think anyone would have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center, take another one and slam it into the Pentagon; that they would try to use an airplane as a missile, a hijacked airplane as a missile."

So people in intelligence were saying, "Gee, they've already done that in the past. They've talked about it for seven, eight years. We should have been thinking about that."

VICE PRES. CHENEY: That's right. But when you're in a position Condi's in, or the new administration, when you come on board, you've got to deal with the world as you find it. And you've got certain issues out there you're trying to work at any given time. There's an awful lot of history going back, a lot of reports and analyses buried in the bowels of the government in various places. I used to--when I was at the Defense Department, I was convinced I could find an expert on any single subject I could think of someplace in that building. And I'm sure that's true. I never found one where I couldn't find somebody.

But the information flow is what you've got to deal with, and there's a reason why Condi should, for example, have been reading the Library of Congress' analysis reports from the late '90s. You can't place that burden on the national security adviser and say, "Well, you should have known all of the reports that were done by the Library of Congress."

MR. RUSSERT: Should the CIA and FBI briefers, however, have provided that information?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Perhaps, but, again, you know, if you wanted to go out there and look at chemical weapons as an alternative to attacking the United States, and did a search down through the agencies and the bureaucracy or the Library of Congress, you can probably find a lot of information about the use of chemical weapons in the United States by terrorists. Hasn't happened yet. You know, you've got to be able to establish some priorities and figure out what is actionable and what you can actually work on, and that's why you work with the agencies, you work with the professionals that are there. They do the best job they can. The new administration coming in does the best it can to engage as well, too. We kept a lot of people from the Clinton administration in this area. But, you know, I--you know, it's human beings doing the best they can under difficult and extraordinary circumstances. And sometimes we get it right, but not always.

MR. RUSSERT: You mentioned earlier the Phoenix FBI memo and the situation with Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called 20th hijacker, arrested in Minnesota, I want to talk about those two cases. And here's how the Daily News framed it.

"In July, an alert [FBI] agent in Phoenix sent the bureau a memo urging it to investigate why a number of Arab men had enrolled in an Arizona flight school. He feared aviation-related terrorism by foreign nationals. And his memo mentioned Bin Laden in the very first sentence. ...Then, in August, a Minnesota flight instructor became duly suspicious of a student who wanted to learn to fly a jumbo jet--but not how to take off and land. The FBI arrested the pilot of limited skills, Zacarias Moussaoui. Aware that Moussaoui had an interest in New York, one agent wrote in his notes that the suspect might be planning to 'fly something into the World Trade Center.' Was Minnesota aware of the Phoenix memo? Were the CIA and FBI talking? The CIA chief clearly knew about Moussaoui--and knew enough to tie him to the atrocities immediately afterward. Why not before?"

What happened there?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't know. That's one of the things that we need to find out. It's one of the reasons why we've supported the efforts by the intelligence committees, the oversight committees, to go back and review all of the events prior to September 11. There's been this charge made that the president and I are opposed to a congressional inquiry and that's simply not the case. We worked very hard with the committees to do that, provide 185,000 almost 200,000 pages of documents to the committee, 184 people have been interviewed, and there's a major effort under way to answer these questions.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Tom Daschle said last week that you called him several times and urged him not to investigate the events of September 11.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Tom's wrong. He has, I think in this case--no, let's say a misinterpretation. What I did do was work, at the direction of the president, with the leadership of the intelligence committees and say, "We prefer to work with the intelligence committees. They've got the expertise. They've got the staffs. They've got the procedures for dealing with classified information," rather than have four or five other committees running around trying to investigate the events of September 11. In part because we're very concerned about the classification and confidentiality, in part because the people that are being assigned to this--you know, 200 FBI agents, for example, reviewing documents for the committee--our resources were taking away from getting ready for the next attack or trying to anticipate the next attack. And so it needed to be handled in an intelligent fashion.

I did actively discourage the notion, for example, of a national commission or some special committee. The

oversight committees are the right way to go. They're bipartisan; one chaired by a Republican, one by a Democrat. They know what they're doing in this area, and we're comfortable working with them, and they can get to the bottom of whatever needs to be done. Investigation's important because there are lessons to be learned, like that. Those are all questions that have got to be answered. Why didn't we know what was going on in Minnesota and Phoenix? Did they talk to each other? Why didn't that get to the CIA or to the national level? Good questions. We want answers to those questions, but the way to get them is working through the established committee structure, set up by Congress, the oversight committees that have expertise in this area, not by creating, frankly, what might become a circus atmosphere where, you know, the dominant play is the headline of the day rather than getting to the bottom of what happened and figuring out how to fix it.

MR. RUSSERT: After Pearl Harbor, there was a national commission set up, a special tribunal. Why not have a similar national commission now and report back in six months as opposed to simply having a congressional investigation?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, because any commission you set up is immediately going to have to go into button-down mode. Most of what we need to talk about here should not be talked about in open hearings. There's probably a place for open hearings, but most of the relevant information has to deal with classified matters. A lot of what's involved here--I'm trying to think how to state this carefully so I don't cross over the line in terms of what's classified and what isn't. This is not a discreet event. This is an ongoing campaign of terror against the United States.

A hypothetical: Let's assume we've got information on some guy who was involved in the East Africa embassy bombings, and it's classified. We got it from sensitive sources. And now we see him crop up someplace. Maybe he shows up in the United States, and we've got reason to believe he may be planning another operation. So if you go back and you analyze the East Africa bombings and you make public the information that was collected at that time, you may tip him off that we know about him and that we know who he is and we lose our window into the next attack against the United States.

Congress has a tendency to want to say, "Well, September 11 is what we care about." If you look at the mandate on the committee or the one that's there, they go back 10 years, but they stop September 10. The terror campaign doesn't stop September 10. There are threads running from, whatever the next attack is--you can be absolutely certain--back through the events of September 11, probably to the Cole bombing, maybe to the East Africa bombing as well, too. So if you reach in and you grab a chunk of that and you make it public, you're going to seriously damage our ability to run those threads ahead and try to defend ourselves against that next attack. So it has to be done in a calm, cool, professional, confidential manner.

And I must say, having served on the Iran-Contra Committee myself, having been involved in the White House during the Church and Pike committees back in the '70s, it's very hard for that kind of commission to do what needs to be done in terms of safeguarding the nation's secrets. And I think there's a tradeoff here, frankly, between safeguarding the national interest, which is very much at stake here, and satisfying what sometimes becomes a search for headlines on Capitol Hill, and I'd much rather focus on the former than the latter.

MR. RUSSERT: Clearly you wish you and the president had seen the Phoenix memo and the Minnesota memo. Are you confident now that steps have been taken, coordination is improved that if there are similar memos involving a future event you will have access to them?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I certainly hope so. I think the odds are significantly improved. And again it's not--I don't think you're going to have the president or the vice president sitting there reading field reports from the FBI. There are 56 bureaus out there. They generate hundreds of reports. The answer is to have a mechanism in place in the government--ideally in the FBI. Bob Mueller's working on that. One of the things he's done--the traditional way of doing business there is decentralize. The bureau conducts the investigations, works for the local U.S. attorney, and the local office controls that operation and nothing gets shared at the national level. Wrong way to go if you're dealing with a counterterrorist threat in intelligence. There you want everything coming to the center. So Bob is pulling all that counterterrorist authority back into the center, establishing an analysis center here in Washington so there'd be a group of people sitting down looking to see what's being reported out of Minnesota, what's being reported out of Phoenix. And it's at that level you've got to pull this together and say, "Hey, we've got something here that's worth looking at that we need to pursue."

That can't happen in the Oval Office. I mean, the president and I see just the tip top of the iceberg. That's all we've got time for, given everything else we've got to do, and we're not intelligence experts. We're policy-makers who need from the intelligence community the best information we can get. But there has to be a mechanism there that does, in fact, collect, analyze, collate and then put in useable form for policy-makers relevant information.

MR. RUSSERT: When we spoke on September 16, 2001, I asked you about the nature of the operation that we had seen unfold on September 11. And let me play your answer to me.

(Videotape, September 16, 2001):

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Certainly we were surprised in the sense that, you know, there had been information coming in that a big operation is planned, but that's sort of a trend that you see all the time in these kinds of reports, but we didn't...

MR. RUSSERT: No specific threat.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No specific threat involving really a domestic operation or involving what happened obviously, the cities, airliner and so forth. We did go on alert with our overseas forces a number of times during the course of the summer when we thought the threat level had risen significantly. So clearly we were surprised by what happened here.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Is there anything that you would change or amend in that comment?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No, I think it's pretty accurate.

MR. RUSSERT: That there was no specific threat, no domestic concern that was finite enough that you could have taken actions?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No. No. I don't know what it would be. I mean, when you go back and look at all of that period, and I've certainly thought about it. I know others have as well, too. I'd give anything in the world to be able to go back and defeat those folks before they did what they did to us. But I don't see anything in the record that would in any way lead me to the conclusion that there was anything we might have done that we did not have actionable intelligence.

MR. RUSSERT: We're going to take a quick break, Mr. Vice President, and come back and talk to the vice president about some of the political reaction we have watched unfold across the country this week right after this.

(Announcements)

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

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: And we are back with Vice President Dick Cheney. Mr. Vice President, let me show you on Thursday night issuing a warning to Democrats in Congress:

(Videotape, May 16, 2002):

VICE PRES. CHENEY: And what I want to say to my Democratic friends in the Congress is that they need to be very cautious not to seek political advantage by making incendiary suggestions, as were made by some today, that the White House had advance information that would have prevented the tragic attacks of 9/11.

Such commentary is thoroughly irresponsible and totally unworthy of national leaders in a time of war.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Who made incendiary comments that were unworthy of national leadership?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, Tim, I didn't name names there. I'm trying to state a proposition and I'm going to try to stick with that this morning. And it was the rush to the floor of the House and the Senate in front of the cameras saying, "What did he know and when did he know it?"; people waving newspapers--the one you showed at the outset; the New York Post saying, Bush Knew. This is far too important a subject, and, frankly, I also had,

and still have, a deep sense of anger that anybody would suggest that the president of the United States had advance knowledge that he failed to act on. I thought it was beyond the pale, and I spoke in a restrained fashion, but I thought it was an accurate statement, and I stand by it.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you the comments made by the senator from New York who represents many people who had died at the World Trade Center; it's Senator Clinton of New York:

(Videotape, May 16, 2002):

SEN. HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON, (D-NY): I am simply here today, on the floor of this hallowed chamber, to seek answers to the questions being asked by my constituents, questions raised by one of our newspapers in New York with the headline Bush Knew. The president knew what? My constituents would like to know the answer to that.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: The next day the White House press secretary said that Hillary Clinton tried to divide the nation-- and he brought it up--and the headline White House blasts Hillary! What's your reaction to Mrs. Clinton's comments, and was the White House response to her appropriate?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I think we'd all be better off if everybody sort of cooled off and calmed down, operated based upon assumptions about good faith of one another. I can't say we always get it right in the administration, and certainly I don't think my colleagues in the Senate always get it right, either. But I've been a member of Congress. I've been on investigating committees. I was the ranking Republican on the Iran Contra committee years ago. There is a right way and a wrong way for us to conduct ourselves during this period of time, both in the executive and the legislative branches, and we all need to adhere, I think, to a very high standard. We need to restrain ourselves and avoid the kinds of comments or criticism back and forth that adds nothing to what ought to be our mutual effort to deal with one of the most serious threats this nation's ever faced.

MR. RUSSERT: Democrats will say, "Well, thank you, Mr. Vice President, but the Republicans politicized September 11," and they point to this photograph, which has now become famous, of President Bush on Air Force One talking to you on September 11, and that was used in solicitation for campaign funds. In hindsight, wouldn't it have been appropriate not to have used that photo in campaign literature?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I didn't have anything to do with selecting that photo. I signed the letter after we revised it, but it's--for us to be actively involved in the campaign, it strikes me as perfectly appropriate. This is an election year. That a picture of the president talking on the telephone is hardly a unique kind of picture. I think from this standpoint I was surprised that the outrage that was voiced by some on the other side was as great as it was. Frankly, I didn't think that it merited that kind of reaction, really.

MR. RUSSERT: But September 11 is unique.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, it is unique, but it's also one of the key tests for this president. Part of what elections are all about is evaluating and holding accountable our leaders for their performance. And I don't think there's anything wrong with our making certain that we believe, and, as we talk with the American people, that we believe that we've done an effective job of dealing with the crisis the nation's been in since September 11, and I would hope the American people would take that into account in evaluating our performance.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you the comments by the two Democratic leaders in the Congress, Dick Gephardt on the House side, and Tom Daschle on the Senate side:

(Videotape, Thursday):

REP. DICK GEPHARDT, (D-MO): We need to know what information was given to the White House, and what they did with it, and we also need to know why it's taken till now to find this information out.

SEN. TOM DASCHLE, (D-SD): I think two things need to be done quickly. First, I think the president should turn over the entire briefing that he was given to the joint bipartisan Intelligence Committee investigation today or tomorrow, at the earliest possible convenience. And, secondly, I think it is important that the president release the Phoenix FBI memorandum as soon as is possible.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Should the president turn over the August 6 CIA briefing to the Senate Intelligence Committee?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: In my estimation, Tim, it would be a mistake for us now to get into the mode where we're going to start throwing out on the record some of the nation's most important secrets. That presidential daily brief is developed from some of our most secret operations and it has to be treated that way. It's never been provided to the Congress before, to my knowledge. The president will have to make the decision about the extent to which we want to provide that kind of information. My own personal recommendation is we should not. Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't have a conversation, perhaps with the chairman and ranking members of the committee, have somebody find a way to satisfy their concerns so they know what's in there.

This is not about trying to protect the, you know, interests of we Republicans in the White House, it is very real about protecting our capacity to deal with these threats in the future. And the kind of feeding frenzy we've seen in the last 48 hours is exactly the thing I fear most if we don't have a responsible investigation. And the kind of things that are being talked about--here we've got the Senate leader, Tom Daschle, responding to a leak--a partial leak of an August 6 memo, and now asking for raw FBI report from Phoenix to be released. What if that FBI report from Phoenix, you know, relates to an ongoing investigation? What do you do then? We simply have to have everybody focus on how we carry out our responsibilities and, as I say, I think that in this case I--the idea that we'd release the PDB...

MR. RUSSERT: Or the Phoenix memo.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: ...or the Phoenix memo--I think the Phoenix memo is fair game for the committee, but ought to be done on a confidential basis and it should not be released at this point to the press and public. It would destroy our capacity to deal with future threats.

MR. RUSSERT: Richard Shelby, the vice chairman of the committee, weighed in with this observation. He said, "Members of the congressional committees investigating the pre-Sept. 11 warnings said Thursday that there is far more damaging information that has not yet been disclosed about the government's knowledge of and inaction over events leading up to Sept. 11. 'We've just scratched the surface,' said Richard C. Shelby (Ala.), ranking Republican member of the Senate intelligence committee." Do you think that's accurate?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't have any way of knowing. I know what we've seen in the White House and I haven't seen anything like that that would fit that description. The committee's looking back over 10 years. They're going back to 1993 with their requests and we're fulfilling those requests. What's down in the bowels of the FBI or the CIA, I don't have any way of knowing, but I'd be amazed if there was anything that went that far. I have not seen anything at this point. Nothing's come to my attention at this point that would lead me to the conclusion that the senators come to.

MR. RUSSERT: In the remaining minutes, a couple of other subjects. The vice president of Iraq said yesterday that he expected the United States to attack Iraq regardless of whether or not they allowed U.N. inspectors.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, the issue with Iraq isn't inspectors. That's just a piece of the equation. The inspectors are a means to allow the international community to assure itself that Iraq has come into compliance with U.N. Resolution 687. Specifically they agreed to give up their weapons of mass destruction, to allow international supervision to see that it had all been dismantled and destroyed. They've never done that. They kicked the inspectors out so that the world doesn't know what they've got.

My concern is that we'll see an agreement to allow inspectors back in but they'll be constrained. They'll be limited. They won't have the size or the right of the penetration that's necessary to be confident that this guy has not developed nuclear weapons or developing biological and chemical agents. We know he's got chemicals and biological and we know **he's working on nuclear.**

MR. RUSSERT: If we overthrow Saddam Hussein, what, who do we get? Could it be worse?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: One scenario by which it would be worse is if we do nothing and one of his sons succeeds him. He's no prize, but his offspring leave a lot to be desired. He's got one son who beat Saddam's personal valet to death with his bare hands back in the 1980s. This is not--there's no reason to be optimistic about the succession in Iraq if the outside world allows Saddam to continue doing what he's doing.

MR. RUSSERT: Another suicide bomb this morning in Netanya, Israel. Twenty injured. Yasser Arafat--does he have control of the situation? Can he, in fact, stop suicide bombings? Does he have the will to do that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: There's a huge debate as to whether or not he can. I think there clearly is a class of bombings that he can't that relates to groups supported, for example, by Syria and Iran, the Hezbollah and Hamas factions, that don't come under his purview and that have in the past indicated they're prepared to do everything they can to destroy the peace process.

On the other hand, there have in the past been bombings by elements of the Palestinian organizations that come under his control and there he clearly has the capacity to act. The hope was under Oslo that he would have sufficient forces so he could take care of the other problem as well, too. That clearly hasn't occurred. And this morning I don't know who is taking credit for this or what the origin of the attack was and whether or not he was in a position to be able to do anything about it. But we've got to find a way to get a handle on it because we're not going to get that peace process back on track until the violence ends.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Joseph Lieberman said he was going to issue a subpoena for all White House documents regarding conversations with Enron officials. Will the White House honor that subpoena?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Our counsel, Al Gonzales, has been working very closely with the committee and with Senator Lieberman to try to satisfy their desires, and that process continues. I haven't been involved in the discussions, but we certainly want to do everything we can to cooperate with the committees. We don't have a reason not to, but we also do have to safeguard and protect the prerogatives of the presidency. And there ought to be a way, hopefully, here where we can work this out. We'll see.

MR. RUSSERT: I live just a few blocks from the vice presidential residence, and I sighted something through the fence the other day that I want to show you and our viewers. Is that a potential security risk? It is a Segway, which I will show you people in operation. That's what it's used for.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: Dick Cheney is a Segway man?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I have been privileged to receive on loan from Dean Kamen, who invented it, one for a test drive. It's an amazing piece of equipment. It does give the Secret Service problems, because it goes too fast for them to be able to run and keep up, and yet, they can't hardly follow me around in a car. So it's..

MR. RUSSERT: Dean Kamen also invented the very stent that's in your heart.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: He did, indeed. I'm a testament to the success of his ventures. He's a very good man.

MR. RUSSERT: Heart is good?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Heart's great. Segway's great.

MR. RUSSERT: No fibrillation.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No defibrillation. They check me every few months, and so far, it hasn't gone off.

MR. RUSSERT: And September 11's been an emotional roller coaster.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: It has been.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Vice President, as always, we thank you for joining us for the full hour, and we'll be watching you very closely in the war against terrorism.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Thanks, Tim.

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

(Announcements)

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