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Interview of the Vice President by Wolf Blitzer, CNN "Situation Room"

Vice President's Ceremonial Office

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Q And joining us now, the Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney. Mr. Vice President, thanks very much for doing this.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's good to see you again, Wolf.

Q We heard the President mention Osama bin Laden last night in his State of the Union address. Why can't you find this guy?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, obviously, he's well hidden. We've been looking for him for some time. I think the fact is he's gone totally to ground. He doesn't communicate, except, perhaps, by courier. He's not up on the air. He's not putting out videos, the way he did oftentimes in the past.

Q His number two, Ayman al Zawahiri is --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Zawahiri is much, much more visible. Yes.

Q I mean, he's on television almost as much as I am.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know if anybody is on as much as you are, Wolf -- but he's more of a public figure than Osama is. If you've ever been in that part of the world, it is some of the most rugged territory imaginable. I've flown over it, been on the ground in Afghanistan, Pakistan, up along the Khyber Pass and so forth. And that general area is a remarkably difficult area to get people into -- parts of it have never really been controlled by anybody.

Q Is bin Laden still alive?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think so.

Q And do you think he's in Pakistan, Afghanistan, on the border someplace?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't want to be that precise.

Q Because this is so frustrating to so many people, more than five years after 9/11 -- not only that bin Laden is out there, but that his deputy pops up every now and then on television and makes these threats.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, but look what we have done. We have not gotten Osama bin Laden, obviously, because he's very careful and, say, he doesn't communicate and he's not sort of in direct contact on a regular basis. But we've taken out several times that whole layer of leadership underneath Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri. One of the most dangerous jobs in the world is to be number three in the al Qaeda organization, because a lot of them are now dead or in custody. So we've done a lot of damage to that senior leadership, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and many others, as well, too.

Q The criticism is that you took your eye off the ball by going into Iraq and, in effect, reducing the focus of

attention on al Qaeda and bin Laden.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's just not true. I've heard that charge; it's simply not true, Wolf. The fact of the matter is we can do more than one thing at a time, and we have. And we've been very successful with going after al Qaeda. They're still out there, they're still a formidable force, but they're not nearly as formidable as they once were in terms of numbers and so forth. We have successfully defended the country for over five years against any further attacks.

They've tried, we know, repeatedly -- the President talked about it last night in his speech -- we know they tried last summer to capture airliners coming out of the U.K. and to blow them up over the United States or over the Atlantic. There have been numerous attacks that have been disrupted. It's been a remarkable performance by the U.S. military, by our intelligence services and everything else.

If you had asked shortly after 9/11 what the odds were that we could go better than five years without another attack on the homeland, I don't think anybody would have been willing to take that bet. The fact is, we've been enormously successful in that regard. We still, obviously, want to get Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri, but we've had great success against al Qaeda.

Q Here's what the President said last night:

"We could expect an epic battle between Shia extremists backed by Iran and Sunni extremists aided by al Qaeda and supporters of the old regime. A contagion of violence could spill out across the country and, in time, the entire region could be drawn into the conflict. For America, this is a nightmare scenario."

He was talking about the consequences of failure in Iraq. How much responsibility do you have, though -- do you and the administration for this potential scenario?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, you know, this is an argument that there wouldn't be any problem if we hadn't gone into Iraq. Now --

Q Saddam Hussein would still be in power.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Saddam Hussein would still be in power. He would, at this point, be engaged in a nuclear arms race with Ahmadinejad, his blood enemy next door in Iran --

Q But he was being contained as we all know --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: He was not being contained. He was not being contained, Wolf.

Q -- by the no-fly zones in the north and the south.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Wolf, the entire sanctions regime had been undermined by Saddam Hussein. He had --

Q But he didn't have stockpiles of weapons of --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: -- corrupted the entire effort to try to keep him contained. He was bribing senior officials of other governments. The oil-for-food program had been totally undermined, and he had, in fact, produced and used weapons of mass destruction previously, and he retained the capability to produce that kind of stuff in the future.

Q But that was in the '80s.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: You can go back and argue the whole thing all over again, Wolf, but what we did in Iraq in taking down Saddam Hussein was exactly the right thing to do; the world is much safer today because of it. There have been three national elections in Iraq, there's a democracy established there, a constitution, a new democratically elected government, Saddam has been brought to justice and executed, his sons are dead, his

government is gone and the world is better off for it.

Now, you can argue about that all you want, but that's history, that's what we did. And you and I can have this debate -- we've had it before -- but the fact of the matter is, in terms of threats to the United States from al Qaeda, for example, attacks on the United States, they didn't need an excuse. We weren't in Iraq when they hit us on 9/11.

Q But the current situation there is --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: But the fact of the matter was -- the fact of the matter was that al Qaeda was out to kill Americans before we ever went into Iraq.

Q The current situation there is very unstable.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It is.

Q The President himself speaks about a nightmare scenario right now. He was contained, as you repeatedly said throughout the '90s, after the first Gulf War, in a box, Saddam Hussein.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, he was after the first Gulf War -- had managed -- he kicked out all the inspectors. He was providing payments to the families of suicide bombers. He was a safe haven for terror, was one of the prime state sponsors of terror, as designated by our State Department, for a long time. He'd started two wars. He had violated 16 U.N. Security Council resolutions. If he were still there today, we'd have a terrible situation. Today, instead --

Q But there is a terrible situation.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, there is not. There is not. There's problems, ongoing problems, but we have, in fact, accomplished our objectives of getting rid of the old regime, and there is a new regime in place that's been there for less than a year, far too soon for you guys to write them off. They have got a democratically written constitution, first ever in that part of the world. They've had three national elections. So there's been a lot of success.

Q How worried are you --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We still have more work to do to get a handle on the security situation, but the President has put a plan in place to do that.

Q How worried are you of this nightmare scenario, that the U.S. is building up this Shiite-dominated Iraqi government with an enormous amount of military equipment, sophisticated training, and then in the end, they're going to turn against the United States?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Wolf, that's not going to happen. The problem that you've got --

Q Very -- very -- warming up to Iran and Syria right now.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Wolf, you can come up with all kinds of what-ifs. You've got to deal with the reality on the ground. The reality on the ground is, we've made major progress, we've still got a lot of work to do. There are a lot of provinces in Iraq that are relatively quiet. There's more and more authority transferred to the Iraqis all the time.

But the biggest problem we face right now is the danger that the United States will validate the terrorist strategy, that, in fact, what will happen here with all of the debate over whether or not we ought to stay in Iraq, with the pressures from some quarters to get out of Iraq, if we were to do that, we would simply validate the terrorists' strategy that says the Americans will not stay to complete the task --

Q Here's the Nouri al Maliki --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: -- that we don't have the stomach for the fight.

Q Here's the problem.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's the biggest threat right now.

Q Here's the problem that I see, and tell me if I'm wrong -- that he seems to be more interested right now, the Prime Minister of Iraq, in establishing good relations with Iran and Syria than he is with moderate Arab governments, whether in Jordan or Egypt or Saudi Arabia.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I just think you're wrong, Wolf. He's been working with all of them. They're all in the neighborhood. He's got to develop relationships with all of them, and he is.

Q Because he's a Shia, and these moderate Arab governments are Sunni.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: He's also an Iraqi. He's not a Persian. There's a big difference between the Persians and the Arabs, although they're both Shia. You can't just make the simple statement that he's Shia, therefore he's the enemy. The majority of the population in Iraq is Shia. And for the first time, we've had elections, and majority rule will prevail there. But the notion that somehow the effort hasn't been worth it, or that we shouldn't go ahead and complete the task, is just dead wrong.

Q Here's what Jim Webb, senator from Virginia, said in his Democratic response last night. He said:

"The President took us into the war recklessly. We are now, as a nation, held hostage to the predictable and predicted disarray that has followed."

And it's not just Jim Webb, it's some of your good Republican friends in the Senate and the House, are now seriously questioning your credibility because of the blunders, of the failures. All right, Gordon Smith --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Wolf, Wolf, I simply don't accept the premise of your question. I just think it's hogwash. Remember --

Q What, that there were no blunders? The President himself says there were blunders --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Remember, remember me -- remember with me what happened in Afghanistan. The United States was actively involved in Afghanistan in the '80s supporting the effort against the Soviets. The Mujahideen prevailed, everybody walked away. And in Afghanistan, within relatively short order, the Taliban came to power, they created a safe haven for al Qaeda, training camps were established where some 20,000 terrorists trained in the late '90s. And out of that, out of Afghanistan, because we walked away and ignored it, we had the attack on the USS Cole, the attack on the embassies in East Africa, and 9/11, where the people trained and planned in Afghanistan for that attack and killed 3,000 Americans. That is what happens when we walk away from a situation like that in the Middle East.

Now you might have been able to do that before 9/11. But after 9/11, we learned that we have a vested interest in what happens on the ground in the Middle East. Now, if you are going to walk away from Iraq today and say, well, gee, it's too tough, we can't complete the task, we just are going to quit, you'll create exactly that same kind of situation again.

Now, the critics have not suggested a policy. They haven't put anything in place. All they want to do, all they've recommended is to redeploy or to withdraw our forces. The fact is, we can complete the task in Iraq. We're going to do it. We've got Petraeus -- General Petraeus taking over. It is a good strategy. It will work. But we have to have the stomach to finish the task.

Q What if the Senate passes a resolution saying, this is not a good idea. Will that stop you?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: It won't stop us, and it would be, I think detrimental from the standpoint of the

troops, as General Petraeus said yesterday. He was asked by Joe Lieberman, among others, in his testimony, about this notion that somehow the Senate could vote overwhelmingly for him, send him on his new assignment, and then pass a resolution at the same time and say, but we don't agree with the mission you've been given.

Q So you're moving forward no matter what the consequences?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: We are moving forward. We are moving forward. The Congress has control over the purse strings. They have the right, obviously, if they want, to cut off funding. But in terms of this effort, the President has made his decision. We've consulted extensively with them. We'll continue to consult with the Congress. But the fact of the matter is, we need to get the job done. I think General Petraeus can do it. I think our troops can do it. And I think it's far too soon for the talking heads on television to conclude that it's impossible to do, it's not going to work, it can't possibly succeed.

Q What was the biggest mistake you made?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: Oh, I think in terms of mistakes, I think we underestimated the extent to which 30 years of Saddam's rule had really hammered the population, especially the Shia population, into submissiveness. It was very hard for them to stand up and take responsibility in part because anybody who had done that in the past had had their heads chopped off.

Q Do you trust Nouri al Maliki?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: I do. At this point, I don't have any reason not to trust him.

Q Is he going to go after Muqtada al Sadr, this anti-American --

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: I think --

Q -- Shiite cleric who controls the Mahdi army?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: I think he has demonstrated -- I think he has demonstrated a willingness to take on any elements that violate the law.

Q Do you want him to arrest Muqtada al Sadr?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: He has been -- he has been active just in recent weeks in going after the Mahdi army. There have been some 600 of them arrested within the last couple of days.

Q Should he be arrested, Muqtada al Sadr?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: That's a decision that's got to be made --

Q Because as you know, the first U.S. general there, Ricardo Sanchez, said, this guy killed Americans, he has blood on his hands, he was wanted, basically, dead or alive. Whatever happened to that?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: Wolf, you've got to let Nouri al Maliki deal with the situation as he sees fit. And I think he will.

Q Do you think he's going to go after the Mahdi army?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: I think he will go after all of those elements in Iraq that are violating the law, that are contributing to sectarian violence. They're criminal elements, they're Baathist former regime elements. All of them have to be the target of the effort. He'll have a lot of help, because he'll have 160,000 U.S. forces there to work alongside the Iraqis to get the job done.

Q Here's the problem that you have -- the administration -- credibility in Congress with the American public, because of the mistakes, because of the previous statements, the last throes, the comment you made a year-and-a-half ago, the insurgency was in its last throes. How do you build up that credibility because so many of these Democrats, and a lot of Republicans now are saying they don't believe you anymore?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: Well, Wolf, if the history books were written by people who have -- are so eager to write off this effort, to declare it a failure, including many of our friends in the media, the situation obviously would have been over a long time ago. Bottom line is that we've had enormous successes, and we will continue to have enormous successes. It is hard. It is difficult. It's one of the toughest things any President has to do. It's easy to stick your finger in the air and figure out which way the winds are blowing and then try to get in front of the herd. This President doesn't work that way. He also -- be very clear in terms of providing leadership going forward for what we need to do in Iraq.

Now, fact is, this is a vitally important piece of business. It needs to be done. The consequences of our not completing the task are enormous. Just think for a minute -- and think for a minute, Wolf, in terms of what policy is being suggested here. What you're recommending, or at least what you seem to believe the right course is, is to bail out --

Q I'm just asking questions.

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: No, you're not asking questions.

Q Yes, I am. I'm just asking --

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: Implicit -- implicit -- implicit in the critics --

Q -- your critics are --

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: Implicit in what the critics are suggesting, I think, is an obligation to say, well, here's what we need to do, or we're not going to do anything else. We're going to accept defeat. Defeat is not an answer. We can, in fact, prevail here, and we need to prevail. And the consequences of not doing so are enormous.

Q You've said that Iran as a nuclear power is unacceptable.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q Are you ready to go to war to stop that --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Come on now, Wolf. You know I'm not going to speculate on something like that.

Q Well, how are you going to stop that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Wolf, we've got a policy in place that's I think producing results. We've gone to the United Nations. We've got a unanimous agreement to a sanctions resolution that's now in place with respect to the Iranian uranium program, and we're continuing to work the problem. We want -- we want to solve the problem diplomatically. We'll do everything we can to achieve that. But we've also made it clear that all options are on the table. Now, no administration in their right mind is going to answer the question you just asked.

Q Because you've heard Senator Biden, Senator Rockefeller say they think you need more congressional authorization if you're going to take any military steps against Iran. Do you?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to speculate on military steps, Wolf. You can ask that question all day long.

Q All right, there's a lot of good questions -- let's move on to some other domestic issues. The whole notion of your long-time aide Lewis "Scooter" Libby -- he's in the papers, his lawyer now suggesting on opening day of the

trial that he was basically set up by people in the White House to protect Karl Rove, the President's political aide. What do you make of this?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Now, Wolf, you knew when we set up the interview you can ask all the questions you want, I'm going to be a witness in that trial within a matter of weeks, I'm not going to discuss it. I haven't discussed with anybody in the press yet, I'm not going to discuss it with you today.

Q Are you -- but you've --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Wolf, you've got my answer. You've got my answer.

Q Have you contributed to his legal defense fund?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I am a strong friend and supporter of Scooter's. I have not contributed to the legal defense fund. I think he's an extraordinarily talented and capable individual.

Q Let's talk about illegal immigration right now because a lot of your conservative Republican base, they're upset at the President and at you for supporting a pathway to citizenship for millions of illegal immigrants right now. What do you say to them who are worried that you're going to team up with a lot of Democrats and moderate Republicans and pass this legislation?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we think we need immigration legislation passed, that it would be irresponsible for us not to try to deal with that problem. It's a serious problem. It's very important from the standpoint of the millions of illegals who are already here, from those segments of our economy that depend upon them. But it's also important that we have secure borders and that we have control over our borders. And we've done a lot already to move in that direction. We've doubled or tripled the size of the Border Patrol force in the budget. We've got border security measures adopted in the last Congress. What we need now is a temporary guest worker program, a comprehensive solution that will regulate that flow. I think we can do it. I believe that, in fact, there's sufficient support on both sides of the aisle, and I think we'll get legislation passed.

Q Do you think Hillary Clinton would make a good President?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I don't.

Q Why?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Because she's a Democrat. I don't agree with her philosophically and from a policy standpoint.

Q Do you think she will be President then?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't.

Q Who do you think will be?

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

Q It won't be you?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It won't be me.

Q John McCain.

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

Q Been rather critical of you -- John McCain -- lately?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, John is a good man. He and I have known each other a long time, and we agree on many things and disagree on others.

Q He said the other day, he said, the President listened too much to the Vice President. Of course, the President bears the ultimate responsibility, but he was very badly served by both the Vice President and most of all the Secretary of Defense. That was John McCain.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: So.

Q Want to react?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I just disagree with him.

Q He said, about the former Defense Secretary, "Rumsfeld will go down in history along with McNamara as one of the worst Secretaries of Defense" --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I just fundamentally disagree. You heard my speech when Don retired. I think he's done a superb job.

Q We're out of time, but a couple of issues I want to raise with you. Your daughter Mary, she's pregnant. All of us are happy. She's going to have a baby. You're going to have another grandchild. Some of the -- some critics, though, are suggesting, for example, a statement from someone representing Focus on the Family:

"Mary Cheney's pregnancy raises the question of what's best for children. Just because it's possible to conceive a child outside of the relationship of a married mother and father, doesn't mean it's best for the child."

Do you want to respond to that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I don't.

Q She's obviously a good daughter --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm delighted -- I'm delighted I'm about to have a sixth grandchild, Wolf, and obviously think the world of both of my daughters and all of my grandchildren. And I think, frankly, you're out of line with that question.

Q I think all of us appreciate --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think you're out of -- I think you're out of line with that question.

Q -- your daughter. We like your daughters. Believe me, I'm very, very sympathetic to Liz and to Mary. I like them both. That was just a question that's come up and it's a responsible, fair question.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I just fundamentally disagree with your perspective.

Q I want to congratulate you on having another grandchild. Let's wind up on a soft note. Nancy Pelosi -- what was it like sitting up there with her last night as opposed to Dennis Hastert?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I prefer Denny Hastert, obviously. I liked having a fellow Republican in the Speaker's chair. Nancy is now the Speaker of the House. We had a very pleasant evening.

Q But it's different to have a Democrat --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Sure, it's different to have a -- but it's the way it has been during most of my career in Congress, so I didn't find it all that surprising or startling.

Q How do you feel?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Good.

Q Mr. Vice President, thank you.

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