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Interview of the Vice President by Richard Wolffe, Newsweek Magazine

The Vice President's West Wing Office

Q Let's start with Iraq, if I may. There's a lot of skepticism on the Hill, even inside the administration about the Iraqi Prime Minister's abilities, desire to take down the militias. Some people have said the militias have put him into power, so why would he take them down or want to take them down. So what gives you the confidence to think that he can actually be up to the job?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think we've got a lot of people who want to judge the success of the Maliki administration after some nine months in office. I think it's a little premature. I think he has been direct and forthright in responding to our concerns. I think there is some evidence that he's already beginning to act in terms of, for example, Iraqi forces rounding up as many as 600 members of the Jaish al Mahdi in the last couple of weeks. His commitment to us is to go after those who are responsible for the violence, whoever they may be -- whether they're Baathist or former regime elements or militia, Shia militia or criminal elements. And I think at this stage, we don't have any reason to doubt him.

Q You don't think it's a token gesture?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think it's -- people are trying to make a judgment on whether or not this plan is going to work I think far too early. And I think in fairness to the Iraqis, they need to be given an opportunity to follow through on their commitments.

Q The President and I think you also have spoken about the possibility of regional war in case of American withdrawal, a chaos in Iraq, and I think the President referred to it as an epic battle between extremists. What's the basis for thinking that it would be a broader war? What lies behind that kind of analysis in your mind?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think it's a concern that the current level of sectarian violence -- Shia on Sunni and Sunni on Shia violence would increase, and perhaps break out in other parts of the country. It's pretty well concentrated right now in the Baghdad area.

There are a lot of other concerns, as well, with what would happen if we were to withdraw from Iraq and do what many in the Democratic Party want us to do. It clearly would have, I think, consequences on a regional basis in terms of the efforts that we've mounted not only in Iraq, but also in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. This is a conflict that we're involved in on a wide variety of fronts in that part of the world. And hundreds of thousands of people literally have signed on in that battle to take on the al Qaeda or the al Qaeda types, in part because the United States is there, because we're committed, because we provide the leadership, and because we're working closely with people like President Musharraf in Pakistan, and Karzai in Afghanistan and so forth.

And a decision by the United States to withdraw from Iraq I think would have a direct negative impact on the efforts of all of those other folks who would say wait a minute, if the United States isn't willing to complete the task in Iraq that they may have to reconsider whether or not they're willing to put their lives on the line serving in the security forces in Afghanistan, for example, or taking important political positions in Afghanistan, or the work that the Saudis have done against the al Qaeda inside the kingdom.

All of a sudden, the United States which is the bulwark of security in that part of world would I think no longer -- could no longer be counted on by our friends and allies that have put so much into this struggle.

Q But would that encourage them to take a role in an Iraqi civil war? There's this idea that regional powers would step in.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I think -- I think when you look at Iraq, you have to look at Iraq in the broader context. And you cannot evaluate the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq only in terms of Iraq. You've got to look at it in terms of what it means in other parts of the globe, really.

Remember what the strategy is here for al Qaeda. Their strategy is that they can break our will. They can't beat us in a stand-up fight. They never have -- but they believe firmly because they talk about it all the time -- that they can, in fact, break the will of the American people and change our policies if they just kill enough Americans, or kill enough innocent civilians.

And they cite Beirut in 1983, and Mogadishu in 1993 as evidence of that, and then they see the debate here in the United States over whether or not we've got the right policy in Iraq, whether or not we ought to stay committed there as evidence reinforcing their view that, in fact, the United States can be forced to withdraw if they simply stay the course that they're on, that is to say the al Qaeda and the terrorist extremists stay the course that they're on.

So Iraq to some extent is a test of that basic fundamental proposition. Is their strategic view that we won't complete the job correct? Or is our strategic view correct, that we can, in fact, organize people in that part of the world, as well as use our forces in order to achieve a significant victory and defeat those elements that, among other things launched an attack on the United States on 9/11 and killed 3,000 Americans.

Q You've made the case that a collapsed Iraq would become a terrorist haven. The President has also said that. Al Qaeda is essentially --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Look at what happened to Afghanistan.

Q But al Qaeda is essentially a new organization in Iraq, a Sunni organization and it has this element of foreign fighters. Isn't there a reason to think that if there was full-blown civil war, the Shia would essentially beat them and neutralize that as being a hostile force as they take control of the country?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: What's the basis for that?

Q There are more Shia.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, let's look at Afghanistan. In 1996, there were no al Qaeda in Afghanistan. That's when bin Laden moved in and found refuge there. A handful of Arabs, foreign fighters, if you will, subsequently opened up training camps, trained somewhere -- estimates range from 10,000 to 20,000 terrorists in the late '90s, developed a safe haven and a base of operations from which they blew up American embassies in East Africa, attacked the USS Cole, launched the planning and training for 9/11. That all took place in Afghanistan under circumstances that are similar to what you've just hypothesized about for Iraq.

Q Okay. Can we talk about Iran? You've traveled the region, you have extensive contact especially in the Gulf, the Saudis, what are you hearing about their concerns about Iran's rise, its role in the region now?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think there's widespread concern throughout the region about Iran, and in particular, Iran under Ahmadinejad. I think a lot of people in the area -- I don't want to attribute this to any one particular government -- but a lot of people in the area feel directly threatened. They're concerned about Iran using surrogates such as the Syrians and Hezbollah, for example, in an effort to topple the government of Lebanon. They're concerned about Iran working through Hamas to prevent any progress of the peace process vis-a-vis Israel. They are concerned about sort of a struggle for leadership of the Islamic world between Shia and Iran and Sunnis elsewhere. They're concerned about Iran's drive to acquire nuclear weapons. And of course, there's a long history of Iran trying to assert itself as the dominant power in the region. It has been a theme that you can find running back several decades.

And one of the unique things I find now as I talk to representatives of governments from the region is they're all pretty much in agreement on that proposition -- greater agreement if you will among the folks in the region than I can recall on most other propositions in recent years.

Q Is there a concern from those allies that America is too tied down, too overwhelmed with the situation in Iraq to deal or have the capacity to deal with Iran?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I haven't seen that. I think most of the nations in that part of the world believe their security is supported, if you will, by the United States. They want us to have a major presence there. When we -- as the President did, for example, recently -- deploy another aircraft carrier task force to the Gulf, that sends a very strong signal to everybody in the region that the United States is here to stay, that we clearly have significant capabilities, and that we are working with friends and allies as well as the international organizations to deal with the Iranian threat.

Q That deployment I suppose raised another round of speculation inside Washington that military action was being worked on, that something was around the corner, can you see a scenario where air strikes on Iran would be justified?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to speculate about --

Q It's my job.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: -- security action. You've got to ask, but the fact is we are doing what we can to try to resolve issues such as the nuclear question diplomatically through the United Nations, but we've also made it clear that we haven't taken any options off the table.

Q Can we switch to some politics right now? Politics of Iraq, especially. There has been little open support for the President's plan for extra troops in Iraq from the Republican Party. John Warner has obviously come out fairly strongly against it. Do you worry that the party has lost the stomach for the fight?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think -- my sense of it is that the election results last November obviously represented a blow to our friends on the Hill, Republicans on the Hill -- to go from majority to minority status. I think a lot of members were concerned or felt that their political fortunes were adversely affected by our ongoing operations in Iraq.

My sense of it is that what's happened here now over the last few weeks is that the President has shored up his position with the speech he made a couple of weeks ago, specifically on Iraq. And I think the speech, frankly Tuesday night, the State of the Union address was one of his best. I think there's been a very positive reaction of people who saw the speech. And I think to some extent that's helped shore us up inside the party on the Hill.

Now, we haven't had a lot of votes yet. The one vote that we've seen was the Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday where -- with the exception of Chuck Hagel -- the Republicans were united in opposing what Biden and Levin and so forth were suggesting. So I think at this stage, that most members on our side of the aisle recognize that what's ultimately going to count here isn't sort of all the hoorah that surrounds these proposals so much as it's what happens on the ground in Iraq. And we're not going to know that for a while yet.

We've got a very good man in Dave Petraeus going out to take command and I think a credible program. And the ultimate test will be how well it works.

Q Senator Hagel said some pretty harsh things about the administration yesterday. He said, there was no strategy. He said --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's not the first time.

Q Well, he said it was a -- the "ping-pong game with human beings." Do you have a reaction to that kind of comment?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I thought that Joe Lieberman's comments two days ago before -- it was when the Armed Services Committee had General Petraeus up for his confirmation hearings were very important. And Joe basically said that the plan deserved an opportunity to succeed that -- I think this was Joe, if it wasn't Joe, one of the other members did -- that we're sending General Petraeus out with probably a unanimous or near unanimous

vote, and that it didn't make sense for Congress to simultaneously then pass a resolution disapproving of the strategy in Iraq.

There are consequences of what Congress does under these circumstances. And I thought Joe was effective in pointing out some of those consequences, both from the standpoint of our people who are putting their lives on the line and for the nation, as well as consequences from the standpoint of our adversaries.

Q So you don't think Senator Hagel -- and now you dodged completely responding to his comments -- but they're not helpful to the cause and to the mission?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Let's say I believe firmly in Ronald Reagan's 11th commandment: Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican. But it's very hard sometimes to adhere to that where Chuck Hagel is involved.

Q May I ask about public opinion here because a series of -- a succession of polls have shown this low level of support for the war, for the President's new plan, looking back, you made some comments before the war talking about being greeted as liberators. You weren't the only one. And of course, the early part of the invasion did go better than people expected. But do you think that people weren't sufficiently prepared, public opinion wasn't sufficiently prepared for the length of this conflict, for the difficulties involved? And do you have any regrets about your own role in preparing public opinion for that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we -- the comments I made were based on the best information we had. I think there's no question but what the struggle has gone on longer than we anticipated, especially in Baghdad, that the events such as the bombing of the Golden Dome in Samarra a year ago was a deliberate al Qaeda strategy that Zarqawi pursued, and it worked. He finally provoked the Shia to retaliate against the Sunni. Things like that, that have I think constituted setbacks.

It does not, though, lead me to conclude that what we're doing in terms of our overall effort, taking down Saddam Hussein's regime standing up a new democracy in Iraq isn't a worthy objective. I think it is. I think we have made significant progress. There's still a lot more to do -- no question about it.

But I guess, the other sense I have that the conflict we're involved in -- not just Iraq but on the broader basis against al Qaeda, against the threat that's represented by the extreme elements of Islam on a global basis now is going to go on for a long time. And it's not something that's going to end decisively, and there's not going to be a day when we can say, there, now we have a treaty, problem solved. It's a problem that I think will occupy our successors maybe for two or three or four administrations to come.

It is an existential conflict. It is, in fact, about the future of civilization on large parts of the globe, in terms of what's represented by al Qaeda and their associates. And it's very important that we recognize it's a long-term conflict, and we have to be engaged. There might have been a time when we could retreat behind our oceans and feel safe and secure and not worry about what was happening in other parts of the globe. But that day passed on 9/11.

And now, when we face the very real prospect that attacks can be mounted against the United States from various parts of the globe, including Europe -- remember, the last threat was out of the U.K. with airliners to be blown up over the Atlantic -- and where the possibility exists that the terrorists could next time have far deadlier weapons than anything they have used to date, this is a very serious problem. And the United States cannot afford not to prevail.

Q The question about the run-up to war, the weapons of mass destruction, do you feel that, in making -- do you feel that your credibility was hurt by that, and that, in a sense, no matter what the warnings are about this broader conflict, that, in some ways, getting beyond the run-up to the war and the eternal debate about the run-up to war, means it's harder to make the case about the broader threats now?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I have my own personal view. Obviously there was flawed intelligence prior to the war. We've seen reports from the Senate Intelligence Committee and the Robb-Silberman commission and so forth -- but that we should not let the fact of past problems in that area lead us to ignore the threat we face today and in the future. It would be a huge mistake.

And the -- in terms of whether or not it adversely affected public opinion, I think it clearly did, but that does not lead me to conclude that we didn't do the right thing when we went into Iraq and took down Saddam Hussein's regime, et cetera.

Q The media has this -- if not the media, public opinion has this caricature of you, the Darth Vader in the bat cave, and various things. You must be very familiar with that. Do you think you get a fair crack from the media?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Oh, I don't worry about it a lot. I'm at that stage in my life where I'm not running for any office. I'm here to do a job for the President of the United States. It's important that I tell people what I think -- and I do. And from the standpoint of the decisions the President makes and the way we try to conduct business, we don't worry a lot about the polls, what they say about us --

Q Or the newspapers?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: -- or the newspapers. If you've been around -- by the time I leave here, it will have been over 40 years since I arrived in Washington, and I've been praised when I didn't deserve it, and probably criticized when I didn't deserve it. And there aren't enough hours in the day for me to spend a lot of time worrying about my image.

Q Let me ask you about events going on at the courthouse down -- not far from here. We think it's fairly unprecedented that a sitting Vice President would testify --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to talk about the trial, obviously.

Q About your decision to testify, about the precedent?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Sorry, I'm not going to discuss it.

Q Had to ask. I just want to end -- because we're running short of time -- President Ford, his recent funeral, did it put you in a reflective mood about that period? Do you draw any parallels to now? What was the sort of overwhelming feeling as you thought about then and now, going through all the private and public moments surrounding the funeral?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I did think about, obviously, the President a lot as we went through that, really, week-long period of national mourning. I was, like I think a lot of us who were close to him and worked for him and are part of this administration, delighted to see the outpouring of tributes to his leadership, to what he represented to the country under very difficult circumstances, and praise for the tough, tough decisions he made -- in particular, for example, the pardon.

And I reflected back on where we'd been 30 years ago when, after he made those decisions and, obviously, suffered for it in the public opinion polls and the press, and how history judged him 30 years later very, very favorably because of what he'd done and because he had displayed those qualities of leadership and decisiveness, steadfastness, if you will, in the face of political opposition that became a hallmark of his administration.

Q Is there a parallel to now?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: There may well be.

Q One other question. Bob Woodward reported that President Ford thought you had justified the war wrongly, and that he agreed with Colin Powell that you developed a fever, I think was the word, about Saddam Hussein, about terrorism. Did you feel that was accurate? Did it surprise you?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I've never heard that from anybody but Bob Woodward.

Q And other comments that -- criticism from Scowcroft about not knowing you anymore -- people have got quite

personal, people you worked with before. You wouldn't be human if it didn't have some reaction.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm Vice President and they're not. (Laughter.)

Q Thank you very much.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

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