

## Interview of the Vice President by Tony Snow

The Tony Snow Show  
Via Telephone

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Q Welcome back. Joining me now the Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney. Mr. Vice President, thanks for joining us.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Hello, Tony. It's good to talk to you.

Q So the Democrats now have a plan. They call it Real Security: The Democratic Plan to Protect America and Restore Our Leadership in the World. As far as I can tell, there is nothing in here that actually talks about attacking the bad guys. But let's talk about some of the things that at least have been mentioned in recent days and weeks by Democrats -- number one, the idea of strategic withdrawal from Iraq in order to "strengthen our position in the region."

My question to you is, is there any difference in your mind between strategic withdrawal and retreat?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, and, frankly, that would be exactly what Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda types have been predicting and betting on all along -- it's the idea that if they kill enough Americans, they can force us to change our policy. It would be a strategic retreat. It makes no sense at all to turn Iraq over to the terrorists. We can succeed in Iraq. We can complete the mission. We are making progress day by day. It's tough, hard work, but it's very important that we prevail there, just as we're prevailing in Afghanistan.

Q You mentioned bin Laden who likes to talk about strong horse versus weak horse. He has predicted that the United States would become a weak horse. Are you saying that the Democrats, rather than as they have promised to do, to capture bin Laden, that they'd be giving in to him instead?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't think there's any question about that if you were to withdraw from Iraq. The al Qaeda presence there is significant. Mr. Zarqawi, the top terrorist in Iraq, is the head of al Qaeda in Iraq. He's pledged loyalty to Osama bin Laden; that if we were to withdraw from Iraq, I think the danger would be, obviously, that you'd turn the country over to the worst possible elements, and it would become a safe haven for terrorists. It makes no sense at all, and it's totally unnecessary.

Q I've talked to a number of people who have been in Iraq. The same stories keep coming back, which is that Iraqis increasingly are taking responsibility for military and police actions. Do you think it's conceivable or even likely that by the end of this year, there will be fewer American troops on the ground in Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think that's a possibility, but we've been very firm, Tony, in refusing to put a timetable on it. We talk about it in terms of conditions on the ground. Obviously, there are a number of things happening that should result in that kind of outcome down the road. One is the progress that's being made on the political front as the Iraqis put together a government under their new constitution, and they're working on that very hard, day in and day out; and the other is the progress that's being made training Iraqi security forces and getting them into the fight.

They're now taking more and more responsibility for their own security. And those two developments are key ultimately to our being able to turn the situation over to them.

Q Today's release by Democrats contains a lot of second-guessing about what led up to the war and the early execution of it, including the notion that it was based on faulty security. Recently a number of documents that had been retrieved from Iraq have been translated, and what we're starting to get is a picture of Saddam Hussein actively involved in training terrorists, and even talking about weapons of mass destruction. Is it possible that we actually underestimated Saddam's involvement in the international terror network?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, some of us didn't. I think there are -- there's been a debate, obviously, and we've got a lot of folks who don't believe that there was any kind of a relationship there between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. I

think the record is abundantly clear that Saddam Hussein was, in fact, a prime sponsor of terror. This is the guy who was making \$25,000 payments to the families of suicide bombers. This is the guy who provided a safe haven for Abu Nidal. The track record there is very clear.

George Tenet, Director of the CIA, went before the Senate Intel Committee at one point and said there was a relationship between Iraq and the al Qaeda that went back to the early '90s. So I think what we'll find as we get a chance to go through and analyze these documents -- there's some 50,000 boxes of them that are now being made available here over the next few months -- that we'll see a pretty complete picture that Saddam Hussein did, in fact, deal with some pretty nefarious characters out there. And he was legitimately labeled by our State Department as a state sponsor of terror.

Q Including Osama bin Laden?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, we don't know the full scale of it there yet, and I don't want to make a hard and fast prediction here. But there is reporting, obviously, that we've seen over the years that there was some kind of a relationship there between the Iraqis and Osama bin Laden.

Q I want to be clear because I've heard you say this, and I've heard the President say it, but I want you to say it for my listeners, which is that the White House has never argued that Saddam was directly involved in September 11th, correct?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's correct. We had one report early on from another intelligence service that suggested that the lead hijacker, Mohamed Atta, had met with Iraqi intelligence officials in Prague, Czechoslovakia. And that reporting waxed and waned where the degree of confidence in it, and so forth, has been pretty well knocked down now at this stage, that that meeting ever took place. So we've never made the case, or argued the case that somehow Osama bin Laden [sic] was directly involved in 9/11. That evidence has never been forthcoming. But there -- that's a separate proposition from the question of whether or not there was some kind of a relationship between the Iraqi government, Iraqi intelligence services and the al Qaeda organization.

Q Democrats also argue that they're going to improve intelligence gathering, at the same time they have opposed the National Security Agency's previous program of trying to conduct surveillance on electronic communications from al Qaeda -- known al Qaeda operatives, whether they're abroad or in the United States, and people within the United States. If that program had not been in place, would Americans have died?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's my opinion, Tony. I think, in fact, the terrorist surveillance program has been very helpful in disrupting attacks planned by the al Qaeda organization. I think it has, in fact, saved lives.

The thing I'm intrigued by -- they talk about wanting to improve intelligence -- one of their more prominent senators, Russ Feingold, has introduced a resolution of censure, trying to censure the President because he authorized this particular program. It's a great program. It's very important to the safety and security of the United States. I believe it has saved lives, and it ought to be supported, not criticized.

Q Would you like to see Senate leaders go ahead and call Senator Feingold's bluff by bringing his censure resolution to the floor for a vote?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, they've got to decide how they're going to handle that themselves. I, for one, am inclined to think that the best way to treat it is with a certain amount of contempt. My guess is that if it were to come to a vote, and that were the issue, then, in fact, a vast majority of Democrats would vote against it. I think they'd be embarrassed to have to even consider it.

Q The other thing -- one of the other striking things of the Democratic plan is that they would get bin Laden. Do you think they know how to do it?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think one of the difficulties we've got is that a number of the prominent folks on the other side -- and I don't question their patriotism or their loyalty -- but I do think many of them what I call a pre-9/11 mind set. They've got a tendency to look at the terrorist attacks, for example, in terms of law enforcement and only law enforcement. We saw it back in the '90s where we had a series of attacks against the U.S. or against our interests overseas, and no effective response except in a few cases we were able to arrest individuals and prosecute them; fired off a few cruise missiles once at a training camp in Afghanistan.

But it was only after 9/11, and the President's determination to very aggressively go after these guys, to go after the terrorists, to go shut down their training camps, to go after states that sponsor terror, like Afghanistan. It was only that

aggressive posture, as well as the homeland security measures we took here at home that I think have protected the U.S. from another attack.

We can't guarantee there won't be another one, obviously, but we've gone over four years now. And I think it's been because we've been fighting them on their turf instead of having to fight them here on the streets of our own cities. I don't think --

Q But you don't seriously think they've got a secret plan for getting bin Laden?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't. And I don't believe that -- if you look at John Kerry, who was their candidate in the last election, or Ted Kennedy, I don't think they believe that the aggressive kind of posture we've been pursuing is the right one. I happen to disagree with them. I think being aggressive and using all of the means at our command to go after the terrorists on their own turf is crucial.

Q Okay. A couple of things, I think a couple of minutes ago -- I want to make sure -- you said Osama bin Laden wasn't involved in 9/11 planning. You meant Saddam Hussein, correct? That Saddam Hussein was not involved in September 11th?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Correct. Yes, sir.

Q Okay.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thanks for straightening that out. I didn't realize I'd done that. (Laughter.)

Q Yes. Well, otherwise we'd have a whole lot more stories to deal with.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Oh, yes. All right. Well, I appreciate it.

Q Some radioactive stuff got across the border the other day. We were doing a test, and it turned out that somebody faked some paperwork. Are you confident that we are going to be able to put together security measures that make it impossible -- or make it at least unlikely that somebody is going to be able to bring into this country the stuff necessary to create either a dirty bomb or a nuclear bomb?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we're spending a lot of time on that, and I think we're getting better at it all the time. These kinds of tests, I'm sure, were embarrassing for some folks. On the other hand, it's the way you really pulse the system and find your weak spots. And in this particular case, I'm told, and had a conversation with somebody about it just this morning, that we were able to detect the material coming across. What broke down was the people bringing it across had some phony documents that were not detected.

Q Exactly.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: And so that leads us down another avenue in terms of having to improve our overall systems. But I think that running those kinds of tests is important. I think, clearly, they uncovered a problem here and the problem is now being addressed.

Q What do you make of proposals to put up a wall between the United States and Mexico? For it or against it?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not sure it's the best way to proceed. I think there are parts of the border down there where a fence or a wall of some kind makes sense, and they've done some around San Diego, for example, that have worked well. It depends. In an urban setting, lots of times, that's the only effective way to be able to control the border. There are other places -- out in the wide open spaces -- that border is hundreds and hundreds of miles long -- where you're better off using modern technology -- unmanned aerial vehicles, for example, with night vision capability that lets you patrol large areas and -- remotely and direct your assets and your resources more effectively. So really it depends on the circumstances what the right answer is.

Q Mr. Vice President, got a half a minute, the last question -- do you think Democrats are playing with fire in this? Do you think this attempt to come up with a security strategy is going to backfire on them?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think it is, because if you look at -- let me just give you one example. They talk about improving our security, and yet, Harry Reid went out and bragged about killing the Patriot Act. Fortunately, they didn't get it killed. We were able to beat them on it. But their behavior has been totally inconsistent with what they're now promising they're going to do.

Q All right, Mr. Vice President.

(Sound bite is played.)

Q Thanks for joining us.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: All right. Good to talk to you.

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