

Camp David, Maryland
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The Vice President appears on Meet the Press with Tim Russert

MR. TIM RUSSERT: And we are Greentop in the shadows of the presidential retreat at Camp David. Mr. Vice President, good morning and welcome.

VICE PRES. DICK CHENEY: Good morning, Tim.

MR. RUSSERT: This is the first television program to originate from here, which underscores the seriousness of our discussion this morning. The president, the vice president, the national security team have been meeting for the last 36 hours. What can you share with the American people this morning?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, Tim, this is the first chance we've had really since the events this week to sit down and really focus on various plans and propositions, things we ought to be doing going forward. Up till now it's been focused very much on trying to manage the crisis and to deal with the problems of the immediate situation. But yesterday we've been able to come up and get everybody together, a lot of work done, staff work done in preparation for it and sit down and really spend some time looking at what our strategy ought to be and how we ought to proceed.

MR. RUSSERT: When the president went to the World Trade Center on Friday he said, "The people who did this will hear from all of us soon." There's an expectation in the country that we're about to pay back big time, quickly. What should the American people think or feel about that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I think the important thing here, Tim, is for people to understand that, you know, things have changed since last Tuesday. The world shifted in some respects. Clearly, what we're faced with here is a situation where terrorism is struck home in the United States. We've been subject to targets of terrorist attacks before, especially overseas with our forces and American personnel overseas, but this time because of what happened in New York and what happened in Washington, it's a qualitatively different set of circumstances.

It's also important for people to understand that this is a long-term proposition. It's not like, well, even Desert Storm where we had a buildup for a few months, four days of combat, and it was over with. This is going to be the kind of work that will probably take years because the focus has to be not just on any one individual, the problem here is terrorism. And even in this particular instance, it looks as though the responsible organization was a group called al-Qaida. It's Arabic for "The Base."

MR. RUSSERT: That's Osama bin Laden.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: He headed it up and organized it, but it's a very broad, kind of loose coalition of groupings that includes not only his forces but it also includes, for example, Islamic Jihad from Egypt. It includes a movement from Uzbekistan. The groups that are terrorist organizations, people that oftentimes move around them, sometimes share common ideologies that operate on a worldwide basis. And what we have to do is take down those networks of terrorist organizations, and as say I think this is going to be a struggle that the United States is going to be involved in for the foreseeable future. There's not going to be an end date that we say, "There, it's all over with." It's going to require constant vigilance on our part to avoid problems in the future, but it's also going to require a major effort and, obviously, quite possibly use of military force.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you believe that anyone who participated in the events on Tuesday or, in fact, even in a support role, or on a plane that wasn't successfully hijacked, are they still at large in the United States?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We don't know. The possibility clearly exists that there could be additional terrorists out there that were part of this operation that maybe got cold feet and didn't get on the airplane, or for one reason or another were thwarted in their efforts. We have to assume that possibility exists. We had these 19 individuals in the United States, some of them for several years, training, preparing, getting ready for this operation and we can by no means assume now that that's all there is. There may well be other operations that have been planned and are, in fact, in the works.

MR. RUSSERT: When the president said, "Everyone in uniform get ready," did that--does that suggest a massive call-up of reserves?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We've had some reserve call-up. We called up, of course, 35,000 reservists. We felt that was important to do here. I think the way to think about it, Tim, is to think about the target and what our objectives are here. Obviously, we're interested in individuals who were directly involved in planning, coordinating, ordering the attack. And--but those tend to be individuals or small groupings of individuals, cells, perhaps, various places around the world. We need to go find them and root them out. And--but we also--what's different here, what's changed in terms of U.S. policy, is the president's determination to also go after those nations and organizations and people that lend support to these terrorist operators.

If you've got a nation out there now that has provided a base, training facilities, a sanctuary, as has been true, for example, in this case, probably with Afghanistan, then they have to understand, and others like them around the world have to understand, that if you provide sanctuary to terrorists, you face the full wrath of the United States of America. And that we will, in fact, aggressively go after these nations to make certain that they cease and desist from providing support for these kinds of organizations.

MR. RUSSERT: Full wrath. That's a very strong statement to the Afghans this morning.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: It is, indeed. It is, indeed.

MR. RUSSERT: The president said that Osama bin Laden was the prime suspect. Why?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: There is just a lot of evidence to link his organization, the al-Qaida organization, and he is the head of al-Qaida, to this operation. There are some ties, for example, to some of the people involved here back to the U.S.S. Cole bombing in Yemen. We're able to tell--going back now looking at relationships and the way they've operated in the past, we're quite confident that, in fact, as the president said, he is the prime suspect. That doesn't mean we know all there is to know yet. That doesn't mean there weren't others involved. As I mentioned, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad has a very close working relationship with this organization. So there may well be others. We want to continue to investigate aggressively to make sure we've wrapped up and understand fully all who were involved. But clearly, the evidence at this point takes us very much in that direction.

MR. RUSSERT: You have no doubt that Osama bin Laden played some role in this.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I have no doubt that he and his organization played a significant role in this.

MR. RUSSERT: Were you surprised by the precision and sophistication of the operation?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, certainly, we were surprised in the sense that, you know, there had been information coming in that a big operation was 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. On the other hand, in terms of the sophistication of it, it's interesting to look at, because clearly what happened is you got some people committed to die in the course of the operation, you got them visas, you got them entered into the United States. They came here. Some of them enrolled in our commercial aviation schools and learned to fly, courtesy of our own capabilities here in the United States. Then what they needed in order to execute was some degree of coordination, obviously, in terms of timing. But they needed knives, cardboard cutters, razor blades, whatever it was, and an airline ticket. And that's it. They then were able to take over the aircraft and use our own, you know, heavily loaded with fuel large aircraft to take over and use it.

MR. RUSSERT: Intentionally choosing planes that had lots of fuel and a few passengers?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: It certainly looks that way. And the--so the sophisticated--on the one hand it's very simple. It doesn't involve a lot of hardware or complex devices that they have to bring into the United States. They, in effect, turned some of our own system against us, but its simplicity does, in fact, also speak volumes in terms of planning, creativity, ingenuity in terms of how they go about these kinds of operations.

MR. RUSSERT: We clearly will have to revisit our visa procedures.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We ought to look at all aspects of the operation here in terms of what happened. Clearly there are going to be a lot of lessons to be learned from it. But it's important for us, too, not to get trapped into thinking if we just guard against another situation where terrorists can hijack airplanes and use them to hit vital targets in the U.S. that we've dealt with the problem. I'm sure they're out there right now thinking about new, creative ways to come after us that don't involve any of those techniques at all, but something totally new.

MR. RUSSERT: Osama bin Laden released a training video, 100 minutes long, which was obtained by the Western media this summer, and I want to show a portion of that to you and give you a chance to respond to it, and we'll play it right now. These are followers of his chanting, "We have to fight every day, even to the shedding of blood in God's righteous path." There he is himself with his own rifle. They go on to say, "We thank God for granting us victory the day we destroyed the Cole in the sea." That's the U.S.S. destroyer that was hit last year. Those are his supporters marching. There you are as secretary of Defense visiting Saudi Arabia, used in this video to rally support for Osama bin Laden. And bin Laden himself, "We have to practice the way of the suicidal commandos of faith and the heroism of the resistance fighter and we refuse their culture and we will take advantage of their misfortunes and the blood of their wounded." He goes on to say, Mr. Secretary, that, "With small capabilities we can defeat the U.S. America is much weaker than it appears." What's your message this morning to Osama bin Laden?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I think he seriously misreads the American people. I think the--I mean, you have to ask yourself, why somebody would do what he does. Why is someone so motivated? Obviously he's filled with hate for the United States and for everything we stand for...

MR. RUSSERT: Why?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: ...freedom and democracy.

MR. RUSSERT: Why does he hate us so much?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: It must have something to do with his background, his own upbringing. He's the son of a prominent Saudi family, successful business group with significant wealth. He went and served in Afghanistan with the mujahedeen during the war against the Russians, and he has, for whatever reason, developed this intense hatred of everything that relates to the United States. And his objective, obviously, is to try to influence our behavior to force us to withdraw from that part of the world, and clearly he's not going to be successful. And...

MR. RUSSERT: He has stated unequivocally that he wants the United States out of the Middle East. He no longer wants the United States to be the ally of Israel. Will our relationship with Israel change in any way, shape or form because of this event?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No. The fact of the matter is that the--we'll not allow him to achieve his aims. We're not about to change our policies or change our basic fundamental beliefs. What we are going to do is aggressively go after Mr. bin Laden, obviously, and all of his associates, and even if it takes a long time, I'm convinced eventually we'll prevail.

MR. RUSSERT: There is an FBI wanted poster, and there he is himself, wanted for the murder of US nationals outside the United States. He's under indictment for his involvement in blowing up embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. Could we say to the Afghanistan government, "You are harboring a fugitive from justice. Give him over in 48 hours or we're coming in and taking him"?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We could say such a thing.

MR. RUSSERT: Legally?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, legally certainly. I'll simply restate again, Tim, I don't want to get into the business of predicting what specific steps we will take. But without question, the president has been very, very clear that to harbor terrorists is to, in effect, accept a certain degree of guilt for the acts that they commit. And the government of Afghanistan has to understand that we believe they have, indeed, been harboring a man who committed, and whose organization committed, this most recent egregious act.

MR. RUSSERT: You're convinced he's still in Afghanistan?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We don't know.

MR. RUSSERT: Is there any international law or United States law which would prohibit us from killing him if we found him?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Not in my estimation, Tim. But I'd have to check with the lawyers on that, obviously. Lawyers always have a role to play, but one of the intriguing things here is the way in which people have rallied around, other governments have rallied around this notion that, in fact, this is a war. We've seen our NATO allies for the first time in history invoke Article 5, an attack against one is an attack against all. It's never before been done. They unanimously agreed to that proposition earlier this week in Brussels.

I think the world increasingly will understand what we have here are a group of barbarians, that they threaten all of us, that the U.S. is the target at the moment, but one of the things to remember is if you look at the roster of countries who lost people in the bombing in New York, over 40 countries have had someone killed or have significant numbers missing. The British, for example, have an estimated 100 dead and 500 to 700 still missing. So it's an attack not just upon the United States but upon, you know, civilized society.

MR. RUSSERT: A very important country in all this is Pakistan, on the border of Afghanistan. Pakistan--there are reports on the wires today--has sent a delegation to the Taliban government in Afghanistan saying it's time to turn Osama bin Laden over. The Pakistan government is also saying to its people this morning, "We will get more aid from the United States. The United States will lift economic sanctions against us. And we've been given assurances that the Indian government and the Israeli government will not be part of any military operation based in Pakistan." Can you confirm that?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I've seen some communication back and forth at this point. Let me simply say we have had discussions with the Paks. President Bush called President Musharraf just yesterday afternoon from Camp David. They've had a good conversation. We have made certain requests of the Pakistanis. They have agreed to work with us in this endeavor, and some of that's covered in the statement they've made there.

MR. RUSSERT: They will get more assistance from us.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, we'd like to be able to work with them. You've got to remember, Pakistan's been a close friend and ally of the United States in the past. The relationship's been somewhat strained in recent years primarily because congressionally imposed sanctions have had an adverse effect, clearly, on the relationship, and the sanctions were imposed as the Pakistanis developed nuclear weapons. But we're clearly in a situation here where that relationship is important. It's important to us. It's important to Pakistan. Pakistan borders Afghanistan; they one of only three countries that have diplomatic

relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan. They can be very helpful in this case, and we expect they will be.

MR. RUSSERT: And there's nothing wrong with providing economic rewards for helpful behavior.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No. I think you're going to want both the carrot and the stick approach.

MR. RUSSERT: Pakistan also has a nuclear capability. How dangerous is it for that government to come out against Osama bin Laden or be helpful to the United States? Are we concerned about destabilizing Pakistan with nuclear capability, a capability that could fall in the hands of the Taliban or Osama bin Laden?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, we're clearly very sensitive to those kinds of problems. Any time you're dealing in that part of the world in the Middle East, the potential for instability always exists. You could have a change in government in relatively short notice, and we're well aware of all that. But it also--it's one of the reasons, frankly, you'll see the al-Qaida organization, Osama bin Laden, choosing to locate in that part of the world because it is an area of instability, because there are places that nobody really controls. And those are the areas we're going to have to operate in if we're going to be successful.

And again, the key here to keep in mind is that what we're asking nations to do, and which the Paks have clearly made a decision to do, is we're asking nations to step up and be counted. They're going to have to decide. Are they going to stand with the United States and believe in freedom and democracy and civilization, or are they going to stand with the terrorists and the barbarians, if you will? And it's a fairly clear-cut choice. And I'm delighted to see that Pakistan has, in fact, stepped up to the task.

MR. RUSSERT: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan--three critical countries in the Middle East, who have been somewhat supportive of the United States. They also have segments of their population that look at Osama bin Laden as a hero. If we demand that they support us, do we risk destabilizing those governments?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No, I think you've got to recognize from the standpoint of the Saudis, for example, they're a prime target for this organization of terrorists, Osama bin Laden. He adamantly opposes the Saudi royal family. Probably second only to the United States would be his hatred for the current government in Saudi Arabia. With respect to Egypt, for example, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, these are groups and organizations that have threatened the government of Egypt in the past. President Mubarak's been the target of several assassination attempts during the course of his career; some of them promulgated by these kinds of groups and organizations. So I think governments, friends of the United States, the governments you mentioned, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc., they understand very clearly that it's as much in their interest as it is in ours that we end these kinds of activities and that we put a stop to this kind of international terrorism. And I think they'll be prepared to help us.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Vice President, how difficult and delicate is it to send this message that we're going to uproot terrorism and Osama bin Laden and some other cells, but that this is not a war against Islam and not a war against all Arab people?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We have to continually remind folks of that. The president has been very clear, and it would be a huge mistake for we as Americans to assume that this represents some kind of--or should lead us to some kind of condemnation of Islam. It's clearly not the case. This is a perversion, if you will, of some of these religious beliefs by an extremist group. We have extremists associated with, you know, every imaginable religion in the world. But this is by no means a war against Islam. We've got a great many Arab Americans, for example, who are first class, loyal American citizens. We need to make certain that we don't make the mistake of assuming that everybody who comes from a certain ethnic group or certain religious background is somehow to be blamed for this. Clearly, that's not the case. They are as appalled by it as we are.

MR. RUSSERT: When Osama bin Laden took responsibility for blowing up the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, U.S. embassies, several hundred died, the United States launched 60 tomahawk missiles into his training sites in Afghanistan. It only emboldened him. It only inspired him and seemed even to increase his recruitment. Is it safe to say that that kind of response is not something we're considering, in that kind of minute magnitude?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I'm going to be careful here, Tim, because I--clearly it would be inappropriate for me to talk about operational matters, specific options or the kinds of activities we might undertake going forward. We do, indeed, though, have, obviously, the world's finest military. They've got a broad range of capabilities. And they may well be given missions in connection with this overall task and strategy.

We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We've got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we're going to be successful. That's the world these folks operate in, and so it's going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective.

MR. RUSSERT: There have been restrictions placed on the United States intelligence gathering, reluctance to use unsavory characters, those who violated human rights, to assist in intelligence gathering. Will we lift some of those restrictions?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Oh, I think so. I think the--one of the by-products, if you will, of this tragic set of circumstances is that we'll see a very thorough sort of reassessment of how we operate and the kinds of people we deal with. There's--if you're going to deal only with sort of officially approved, certified good guys, you're not going to find out what the bad guys are doing. You need to be able to penetrate these organizations. You need to have on the payroll some very unsavory characters if, in fact, you're going to be able to learn all that needs to be learned in order to forestall these kinds of activities. It is a mean, nasty, dangerous dirty business out there, and we have to operate in that arena. I'm convinced we can do it; we can do it successfully. But we need to make certain that we have not tied the hands, if you will, of our intelligence communities in terms of accomplishing their mission.

MR. RUSSERT: These terrorists play by a whole set of different rules. It's going to force us, in your words, to get mean, dirty and nasty in order to take them on, right? And they should realize there will be more than simply a pinprick bombing.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yeah, the--I think it's--the thing that I sense--and, of course, that's only been a few days, but I have never seen such determination on the part of--well, my colleagues in government, on the part of the American people, on the part of our friends and allies overseas, and even on the part of some who are not ordinarily deemed friends of the United States, determined in this particular instance to shift and not be tolerant any longer of these kinds of actions or activities.

MR. RUSSERT: Even if we take out Osama bin Laden, that will not stop terrorism.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No. No. He's the target at the moment. But I don't want to convey the impression that somehow, you know, if we had his head on a platter today, that that would solve the problem. It won't. You've got this organization, as I say, called al-Qaida. It's--somebody described it the other day as--it's like an Internet chat room, that people who come and participate in it, for one reason or another, engage in terrorism, have sometimes different motives and ideologies, but the tactics they use, the way they operate, their targets, that will continue until we go out, basically, and make the world unsafe for terrorists. And that's a key part of the strategy, in terms of working aggressively with those nations that have previously provided support and sustenance and sanctuary, to see to it that they no longer do that.

MR. RUSSERT: You wouldn't mind having his head on a platter.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I would take it today.

MR. RUSSERT: Saddam Hussein, your old friend, his government had this to say: "The American cowboy is rearing the fruits of crime against humanity." If we determine that Saddam Hussein is also harboring terrorists, and there's a track record there, would we have any reluctance of going after Saddam Hussein?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No.

MR. RUSSERT: Do we have evidence that he's harboring terrorists?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: There is--in the past, there have been some activities related to terrorism by Saddam Hussein. But at this stage, you know, the focus is over here on al-Qaida and the most recent events in New York. Saddam Hussein's bottled up, at this point, but clearly, we continue to have a fairly tough policy where the Iraqis are concerned.

MR. RUSSERT: Do we have any evidence linking Saddam Hussein or Iraqis to this operation?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me turn to the events of Tuesday. Where were you when you first learned a plane had struck the World Trade Center?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I was in my office Tuesday morning. Monday, I had been in Kentucky, and the president had been in the White House. Tuesday, our roles were sort of reversed. He was in Florida, and I was in the White House Tuesday morning. And a little before 9, my speechwriter came in. We were going to go over some speeches coming up. And my secretary called in just as we were starting to meet just before 9:00 and said an airplane had hit the World Trade Center, and that was the first one that went in. So we turned on the television and watched for a few minutes, and then actually saw the second plane hit the World Trade Center. And the--as soon as that second plane showed up, that's what triggered the thought: terrorism, that this was an attack...

MR. RUSSERT: You sensed it immediately, "This is deliberate"?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yeah. Then I convened in my office. Condi Rice came down. Her office is right near mine there in the West Wing.

MR. RUSSERT: The national security adviser.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: National security adviser, my chief of staff, Scooter Libby, Mary Matalin, who works for me, convened in my office, and we started talking about getting the Counterterrorism Task Force up and operating. I talked with the president. I'd given word to Andy Card's staff, who is right next door, to get hold of Andy and/or the president and that I wanted to talk to him as soon as they could hook it up. This call came in, and the president knew at this point about that. We discussed a statement that he might make, and the first statement he made describing this as an act of apparent terrorism flowed out of those conversations. While I was there, over the next several minutes, watching developments on the television and as we started to get organized to figure out what to do, my Secret Service agents came in and, under these circumstances, they just move. They don't say "sir" or ask politely. They came in and said, "Sir, we have to leave immediately," and grabbed me and...

MR. RUSSERT: Literally grabbed you and moved you?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yeah. And, you know, your feet touch the floor periodically. But they're bigger than I am, and they hoisted me up and moved me very rapidly down the hallway, down some stairs, through some doors and down some more stairs into an underground facility under the White House, and, as a matter of fact, it's a corridor, locked at both ends, and they did that because they had received a report that an airplane was headed for the White House.

MR. RUSSERT: This is Flight 77, which had left Dulles.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Which turned out to be Flight 77. It left Dulles, flown west towards Ohio, been captured by the terrorists. They turned off the transponder, which led to a later report that a plane had gone down in Ohio, but it really hadn't. Of course, then they turned back and headed back towards Washington. As best we can tell, they came initially at the White House and...

MR. RUSSERT: The plane actually circled the White House?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Didn't circle it, but was headed on a track into it. The Secret Service has an arrangement with the F.A.A. They had open lines after the World Trade Center was...

MR. RUSSERT: Tracking it by radar.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: And when it entered the danger zone and looked like it was headed for the White House was when they grabbed me and evacuated me to the basement. The plane obviously didn't hit the White House. It turned away and, we think, flew a circle and came back in and then hit the Pentagon. And that's what the radar track looks like. The result of that--once I got down into the shelter, the first thing I did--there's a secure phone there. First thing I did was pick up the telephone and call the president again, who was still down in Florida, at that point, and strongly urged him to delay his return.

MR. RUSSERT: You told him to stay away from Washington.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I said, 'Delay your return. We don't know what's going on here, but it looks like, you know, we've been targeted.'

MR. RUSSERT: Why did you make that judgment?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, it goes to--you know, sort of my basic role as vice president is to worry about presidential succession. And my job, above all other things, is to be prepared to take over if something happens to the president. But over the years from my time with President Ford, as secretary of Defense, on the Intel Committee and so forth, I've been involved in a number of programs that were aimed at ensuring presidential succession. We did a lot of planning during the Cold War, Tim, with respect to the possibility of a nuclear incident. And one of the key requirements always is to protect the presidency. It's not about George Bush or Dick Cheney. It's about the occupant in the office.

And one of the things that we did later on that day were tied directly to guaranteeing presidential succession, and that our enemies, whoever they might be, could not decapitate the federal government and leave us leaderless in a moment of crisis. That's why, for example, when we have a State of the Union speech and we've got the entire government assembled--the president, vice president, congressional leaders, Cabinet and so forth--we always leave a Cabinet member out. He's always taken to a secure location and set up there in case something should happen in the House chambers so we still have a president.

MR. RUSSERT: Did you have any role in Speaker Hastert...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yes.

MR. RUSSERT: ...speaker of the House being taken away?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We evacuated Speaker Hastert to a secure facility, and later, the rest of the congressional leadership. I also ordered the evacuation of Cabinet members. And so we sent Tommy Thompson, Ann Veneman, Gale Norton also up to a secure facility. And in the days since, we've always maintained to say--I've spent a good deal of my time up at Camp David since the president returned to the White House just so we weren't both together in the same place so we could ensure the survival of the government.

The president was on Air Force One. We received a threat to Air Force One--came through the Secret Service...

MR. RUSSERT: A credible threat to Air Force One. You're convinced of that.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I'm convinced of that. Now, you know, it may have been phoned in by a crank, but in the midst of what was going on, there was no way to know that. I think it was a credible threat, enough for the Secret Service to bring it to me. Once I left that immediate shelter, after I talked to the president, urged him to stay away for now, well, I went down into what's call a PEOC, the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, and there, I had Norm Mineta...

MR. RUSSERT: Secretary of Transportation.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: ...secretary of Transportation, access to the FAA. I had Condi Rice with me and several of my key staff people. We had access, secured communications with Air Force One, with the secretary of Defense over in the Pentagon. We had also the secure videoconference that ties together the White House, CIA, State, Justice, Defense--a very useful and valuable facility. We have the counterterrorism task force up on that net. And so I was in a position to be able to see all the stuff coming in, receive reports and then make decisions in terms of acting with it.

But when I arrived there within a short order, we had word the Pentagon's been hit. We had word the State Department had been bombed, that a car bomb had gone off at the State Department. Turned out not to be true, but we didn't know that at the time. We had a report that Norm had provided that there were six airplanes that might have been hijacked, and that's what we started working off of, was that list of six.

Now we could account for two of them in New York. The third one we didn't know what had happened to it. It turned out it had hit the Pentagon. But the first reports on the Pentagon attack suggested a helicopter, and then later, a private jet, and it was only after we got ahold of some eyewitnesses that we knew it was an American Airlines flight. So then we had three planes accounted for, but we still have had three outstanding.

We had reports of planes down in Ohio, turned out not to be true; down in Pennsylvania; turned out that was true. And all of that--excuse me--added with the report of a perspective attack on Air Force One itself, we'd have been absolute fools not to go into button down mode, make sure we had successors evacuated, make sure the president was safe and secure. Offutt was a good location for that purpose, and also the president...

MR. RUSSERT: In Nebraska.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: In Nebraska.

MR. RUSSERT: Are you convinced there were only four hijackings, that there were not other hijacks attempted that we don't know about?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't know. We know there were four, of course. I don't think until we've completed our investigation, looked at all the ties and relationships, we'll be able to say that there were no other plans for additional planes.

MR. RUSSERT: When you made the recommendation to the president, "Stay where you are, go to a secure facility in Nebraska," were you ever concerned, did it ever enter your thought process that there would be criticism of the president for not coming back to Washington during a crisis?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I didn't really think about it. I mean, it was such a clear-cut case, in my estimation, that the most important thing here is to preserve the presidency. We don't know what's happening. We know Washington's under attack. We don't know by who, we don't know how many additional planes are coming. We don't know what all is planned for us, at this point. Within about 35 or 40 minutes, we'd seen this unfolding of this monstrous terrorist attack, and it was absolutely the right decision. I have no qualms about it at all. The president wanted to come back. We talked repeatedly during the course of the day. He made it clear he wanted him back as soon as we thought it made sense. The Secret Service did not want him back. They even talked to me to try to get me to evacuate a couple of times, but I didn't want to leave the node that we'd established there, in terms of having all of this capability tied together by communications where we could, in fact, make decisions and act. And if I'd have left, gotten on a helicopter and launched out of the White House, all of that would have been broken down. And we had the presidential succession pretty well guaranteed, so I thought it was appropriate for me to stay in the White House.

MR. RUSSERT: Symbolisms are so important to terrorists. The fact that George Bush stayed at the White House, you came to Camp David. Are you concerned that that sends a mixed message to the terrorists that they can disrupt our government, or do you err on the side of caution and safety and keep the two key leaders separated?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, we erred on the side of, I'd say, responsibility. The--when something like this happens, we've got certain obligations and responsibilities you've got to carry out. And those took priority. They did for the president. They did for me. Also with modern communications--I mean, the president was in touch with me throughout the day. We talked repeatedly. He made some key decisions that were very important to the operation. Once he got to Offutt, he convened a meeting of the National Security Council again using the secure video conference hookup and...

MR. RUSSERT: What's the most important decision you think he made during the course of the day?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, the--I suppose the toughest decision was this question of whether or not we would intercept incoming commercial aircraft.

MR. RUSSERT: And you decided?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We decided to do it. We'd, in effect, put a flying combat air patrol up over the city; F-16s with an AWACS, which is an airborne radar system, and tanker support so they could stay up a long time. It doesn't do any good to put up a combat air patrol if you don't give them instructions to act, if, in fact, they feel it's appropriate.

MR. RUSSERT: So if the United States government became aware that a hijacked commercial airline was destined for the White House or the Capitol, we would take the plane down?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yes. The president made the decision, on my recommendation as well, wholeheartedly conquered in the decision he made, that if the plane would not divert, if they wouldn't pay any attention to instructions to move away from the city, as a last resort, our pilots were authorized to take them out. Now, people say, you know, that's a horrendous decision to make. Well, it is. You've got an airplane full of American citizens, civilians, captured by hostages, captured by terrorists, headed and are you going to, in fact, shoot it down, obviously, and kill all those Americans on board? And you have to ask yourself, "If we had had combat air patrol up over New York and we'd had the opportunity to take out the two aircraft that hit the World Trade Center, would we have been justified in doing that?" I think absolutely we would have. Now, it turned out we did not have to execute on that authorization. But there were some--a few moments when we thought we might, when planes were incoming and we didn't know whether or not they were a problem aircraft until they'd diverted and gone elsewhere and been able to resolve it.

MR. RUSSERT: And that will be the policy of the United States in the future?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, the president will, I'm sure, make a decision, if those circumstances arise again. It's a presidential-level decision, and the president made, I think, exactly the right call in this case, to say, "I wished we'd had combat air patrol up over New York."

MR. RUSSERT: More and more, Mr. Vice President, we're finding out, it appears, that the fourth plane that crashed in Pennsylvania crashed because of some real heroism by Americans. Jeremy Glick had received a--called his wife to say he'd been hijacked. She informed him that two planes had struck the World Trade Center. And he said, "I think we have to do something."

VICE PRES. CHENEY: It's true. I think the Washington part of the attack was significantly interfered with. I'm speculating. Some of this is informed speculation; some of it's based on some evidence. But clearly, we know the plane that crashed outside Pittsburgh was headed for Washington. We know it was part of the scheme. Mr. Glick and others--Mr. Burnett--were very courageous when they made that decision, knowing that they were doomed.

MR. RUSSERT: And you've told his wife that, haven't you?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I called Mrs. Glick yesterday, as a matter of fact. Haven't been able to reach Mrs. Burnett yet, but I'm going to call her, too. And I'm sure there were probably others on the aircraft who helped, but what they did was to foil, I think, the attack on Washington. My guess is, speculation, that target probably would have been the Capitol building. It's big; it's easy to hit. I think one of the reasons that the White House did not get hit, I think it turned out to be tougher to see than they had anticipated. When you come in from the west, as American 77 did, unless you get up altitude a ways, you can't see the White House because the Executive Office Building is there.

MR. RUSSERT: And Treasury on the other side.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Treasury on the other side. And I'm speculating that the lack of ability to be able to acquire it visually may, in fact, have led them to go back.

MR. RUSSERT: Gave it up as a target...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yeah.

MR. RUSSERT: ...and went to the Pentagon, which is clearly visible?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: And went to the Pentagon instead. And speculation on my part. We'll never know for sure. But without question, the attack would have been much worse if it hadn't been for the courageous acts of those individuals on United 93.

MR. RUSSERT: Two important symbols. Should the World Trade Center be rebuilt?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I think we clearly want to redevelop that area. Exactly what it ought to--what it ought to look like and what will go in there, those are decisions that are going to have to be made by New York officials. But the president's very interested in supporting those efforts, and I'm absolutely convinced that that's the right thing to do. We don't let terrorists prevail in this day and age.

MR. RUSSERT: Should Ronald Reagan National Airport be re-opened?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We've got to find ways to deal with that problem. It's been controversial from time to time over the years. But, of course, we've always kept Ronald Reagan open because of its location. It's very convenient for people living in Washington. The problem we have is, of course, that on the approach or takeoff from Reagan, you fly right up the Potomac and you're within seconds or a minute or two of being able to hit the White House, the Congress, important facilities in Washington. And finding the way to deal with those circumstances is going to have to precede, I think, a re-opening of the airport.

MR. RUSSERT: So it may be closed for some time.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We don't know yet. I mean, Norm Mineta is working aggressively on this and--but we did--especially this week, we wanted to be supercautious. As long as there was the possibility there might be other teams out there that, in fact, planned the same kind of operation that the terrorists undertook on Tuesday. We thought it was prudent to keep it closed for now.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Vice President, we have to take a quick break. We'll be right back with more of our discussion with Vice President Dick Cheney. We're at Greentop in the shadows of Camp David. Be right back.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: A lot more questions for the vice president of the United States, Dick Cheney, right after this.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: And we are back talking to Vice President Dick Cheney. He's been here at Camp David speaking with the president and the national security team for the last 36 hours at least.

Mr. Vice President, a lot of discussion as to our preparedness. The first hijacking was confirmed at 8:20, the Pentagon was struck at 9:40, and yet, it seems we were not able to scramble fighter jets in time to protect the Pentagon and perhaps even more than that. There have been at least five serious reports on domestic terrorism, how to cope with it, one given to you in May, Cheney to Lead Anti-Terrorism Plan. Were we ready for this?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Were we ready for it? I think the agencies responded very well once it happened. I think the courage and the bravery of the men and women of New York, for example, the first responders, if you will, fire and rescue teams, many of whom gave their lives when the towers collapsed, was superb. I don't think you can take anything away from them. But the problem you have here--I mean, if you think about it from the standpoint of aircraft--do we train our pilots to shoot down commercial airliners filled with American civilians? No. That's not a mission they've ever been given before. Now we've got to think about that.

With respect to the intelligence area, there'll be, I'm sure, a lot of sort of Monday morning quarterbacking, second-guessing, if you will, about whether or not there was an intelligence failure. Clearly, we did not learn of this operation or we would have stopped it if we had. But I think it's important to remember that our men and women in the intelligence business out there all over the world 365 days a year, defending and protecting us, oftentimes very successful, oftentimes in ways we can never talk about, but we clearly need to do everything we can to forestall those kinds of activities by improving our intelligence capabilities, and this offers a lot of lessons learned.

At the same time, the key, though, is to go eliminate the terrorists. We may never have 100 percent perfection in terms of our intelligence capabilities to be able to penetrate and know about all these kinds of operations--Timothy McVeigh, for example, in Oklahoma City. But if we go after the terrorists, if we deny them sanctuary, if we take out their bases and their locations where they operate, that's probably the most effective way to deal with this threat. But we have to recognize, no matter how good we are, no matter how aggressively we pursue this, we're likely to be subject to that partly by the very nature of our society. We're an open society, we love it that way, that's very important to preserve that, and not to let the terrorists win by turning ourselves into some kind of police state.

MR. RUSSERT: The chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee said this is a failure of great dimension in terms of intelligence. Will George Tenet remain as director of the CIA?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I think George clearly should remain as director of the CIA. I think--I've had great confidence in him. I've watched him operate now and worked closely with him for the last seven or eight months. I think he and his people do superb work for us. And I think it would be a tragedy if somehow we were to go back now in the search for scapegoats and say that George Tenet or any other official ought to be eliminated at this point. I don't think you can say that.

MR. RUSSERT: When Air Force One returned to Washington, we saw it accompanied by fighter jets.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: General Norman Schwarzkopf, a man you know well, has suggested that perhaps in the short term, at least, Air Force One should be accompanied by fighter jets while flying over the United States just as a precaution.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Perhaps. I don't know that we've made that judgment yet, that decision yet. You know, what happened on Tuesday--of course, once we got all the aircraft grounded, that gave us a fairly high degree of confidence that we were in control. The problem was, there were some 2,000 aircraft up when this operation started, and it took several hours to get them all down. And as long as there were aircraft up and there was a report of a threat against Air Force One, and there were aircraft we couldn't account for, that might, in fact, have been taken by the terrorists, flying cover for Air Force One was very important.

MR. RUSSERT: Would we consider using fighter jets to protect Air Force One for the short...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I think if we believe it's necessary, we absolutely will.

MR. RUSSERT: In Europe, the government provides security at the airports, highly trained, well-paid specialists. Here in the United States, it's a low-paying job hired by the airlines. Would we consider having the government take over airline security, airport security?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We're clearly going to have to look at this whole question and find ways to improve and enhance our security, without a doubt. And it's going to be a prime focus for Norm Mineta and the folks over at the F.A.A. Exactly what the answer ought to be, Tim, I don't have enough information now to be able to judge that. But without question, this was a significant failure there in the sense that they were able to take four aircraft. But again, they didn't do it with guns or explosives; they did it with knives.

MR. RUSSERT: The airline industry is losing \$300 million a day, several teetering on bankruptcy or at least Chapter 11. Would you support a federal bailout of both loans and grants and assistance to the airline industry?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: The president hasn't really taken a position on any particular piece of legislation. And I think we're very interested in finding ways to make certain that in this particular instance, there is no sort of permanent damage, if you will, to our civil aviation capacity. It's very important. We've got people--Norm Mineta's working on it. Larry Lindsey, who heads the economic council, is heavily engaged in it. We're working with the airlines, and I'm sure we'll come up with some...

MR. RUSSERT: So you're open to the concept?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Absolutely.

MR. RUSSERT: About a week ago, we were all discussing the so-called Social Security trust fund and who...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: And the lockbox.

MR. RUSSERT: ...and the lockbox...

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: ...and who spent the surplus. Is that debate now moot?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I think so. I certainly hope so. I think, you know, we've all been concerned to make certain we protect Social Security. But we clearly have a situation here--and that debate was a little bit fallacious anyway, because, in fact, there was never any question but what the United States government was going to pay its obligations to our seniors. We've never defaulted on a debt since Alexander Hamilton was Treasury secretary, so that's never really been an issue.

But clearly, at this stage, we do have a surplus that's generated primarily by the payroll tax, and as has been true oftentimes in the past, that comes in, we were using it to retire debt. Clearly, some of it now is going to be used to meet this emergency, the urgent supplemental that the Congress passed this weekend of some \$40 billion; take those steps we need to take, both to recover from this attack, as well as to do everything we can to prevent future ones.

MR. RUSSERT: The president said he would use the Social Security surplus in case of war and/or recession.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: Do we now have both war and recession?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Quite possibly. We clearly have a war against terrorism and we don't know yet what the third quarter is going to be like. But if the economists come in and revise the second quarter down into negative territory in terms of Gross Domestic Product growth and the third quarter, fourth quarter--third quarter of the calendar year, fourth quarter of the fiscal year...

MR. RUSSERT: And the economic shock from this.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Yeah. If that comes in negative, then we'll have the definition of two negative quarters. That would qualify as a recession.

MR. RUSSERT: What about the debate over missile defense? Many Democrats are saying this now proves that our focus should be on terrorism and counterterrorism and preparedness, and that the primary threat is not something the missile defense could take care of.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Well, I just fundamentally disagree. I mean, there's no question but what there's a threat on the terrorist front, and we've got to deal with that. We've been work it. We'll continue to work it. But there are also--this does not, in any way, diminish the threat with respect to ballistic missiles down the road. A ballistic missile equipped with a weapon of mass destruction, a nuke, for example, a nuclear weapon would be far more devastating than what we just went through. If one of those was to hit one of our cities or to hit a major base overseas where US forces are deployed, the casualty list would be higher. The consequences would be even greater than the terrible tragedy we've just been through.

MR. RUSSERT: So we can afford this war on terrorism and a missile defense system?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't see, Tim, how anybody can argue that we cannot afford to defend America, and we're going to have to defend it against conventional threats. We're going to have to defend it against ballistic missile threats. We're going to have to defend it against the threat of terrorism. And I think for public officials to argue because we got hit with a terrorist assault, we should ignore the ballistic missile threat out there strikes me as irresponsible.

MR. RUSSERT: The stock market has been closed since Tuesday. It reopens tomorrow. Are you concerned?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I think that our economy is strong. I do believe the market's going to open tomorrow. That's clearly the current plan and expectation. I would hope--I'm not an investor anymore, because I had to get out of the market since I'm now a public official. But I would hope the American people would, in effect, stick their thumb in the eye of the terrorists and say that they've got great confidence in the country, great confidence in our economy, and not let what's happened here in any way throw off their normal level of economic activity. We look forward to recovery later this year from the slowdown period that we've been through, and I have every confidence that that will, in fact, happen.

MR. RUSSERT: Would you ever consider undoing or holding off or triggering part of the tax cut in the future if the resources were necessary?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No, I think the tax cut's crucial. And that's exactly what we needed in terms of the slowdown. Having the tax cut out there now means we're going to have a more robust year than would have been the case without the tax cut. It's a key piece of stimulus. And I think the president did exactly the right thing.

MR. RUSSERT: There is such fervor, such emotion, such anger in the country right now. And as we conduct this war against terrorism, as you said, it's going to take, days, months, years. What do we ask of the American people? Will they have to sacrifice in order to help win this war?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I guess I would ask vigilance. Be aware of what's going on around you. Don't operate on the assumption that somehow because we live behind two oceans we're immune to attack. We now know we're not. I would ask, obviously, that they be understanding, if you will, of the importance of the effort that we're going to have to undertake here. We may end up, you know, with more stringent security measures at airports and things like that. But I think there's a unity and a spirit out there that I've not seen for a long time in this country. And I see it on Capitol Hill between Republicans and Democrats. I see it--the workers who were cleaning up the mess in New York where the president visited yesterday. I see it in the people I've talked with. And I think we have to recognize we are the strongest, most powerful nation on Earth. We've got a tremendous set of accomplishments and an enormously bright future ahead of us. There are those in the world who hate us and that will do everything they can to impose pain, and we can't let them win.

MR. RUSSERT: And we'll find them.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: We'll find them.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Vice President, we thank you for inviting us up to the mountains here with you, and we'll be watching you very carefully.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: Thanks, Tim.

MR. RUSSERT: Like all of you, I have spent this week wiping my eyes and grinding my teeth and wondering why. I've drawn strength from a story about a man I knew, Father Michael Judge. The chaplain of the New York City Fire Department, a Franciscan, he raced to the World Trade Center after the explosion to comfort the injured. While administering the last rites to a dying rescue worker, he, himself, was killed by flying debris.

New York's bravest physically carried Father Mike away. They brought his body first to the altar of St. Peter's Church, where it would be safe, then to their firehouse on 31st Street, Hook and Ladder Company Number 24, directly across from the friary where he lived. They wrapped him in sheets and placed him in one of their own bunks. They asked his fellow Franciscans to cross the street and join them. Together--firemen, priests, and brothers--wept and sang the prayer of St. Francis, "May the Lord bless and keep you and show his face to you and have mercy on you." That is the way of New York. That is the spirit of America. From February 1945 at Iwo Jima to September 2001 at the World Trade Center.

END

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