

Vice President Dick Cheney spoke today with CNN's Wolf Blitzer in a television exclusive. The interview, which will air during the 4, 5 and 7 p.m. hours of "The Situation Room," covered Iraq, Iran, Senators John McCain and Hillary Clinton, and domestic issues like immigration.

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BLITZER: And joining us now, the vice president of the United States, Dick Cheney.

Mr. Vice President, thanks very much for doing this.

CHENEY: It's good to see you again, Wolf.

BLITZER: We heard the president mention Osama bin Laden last night in his State of the Union address. Why can't you find him?

CHENEY: Well, he's -- 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.

BLITZER: His number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is.

CHENEY: Zawahiri's much more visible. Yes.

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

CHENEY: Well, I don't know if anybody's on as much as you are, Wolf, but -- no, he's more of a public figure than Osama is.

But 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 and 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.

BLITZER: Is bin Laden -- is bin Laden still alive?

CHENEY: I think so.

BLITZER: And you think he's in Pakistan, Afghanistan, on the border some place?

CHENEY: I don't want to be that precise.

BLITZER: Because this is so frustrating to so many people, for 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.

CHENEY: Yeah, but look what we have done. We have not gotten Osama bin Laden, obviously, because he's very careful. I mean, he doesn't communicate, he's not 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. There's a lot of them dead or in custody.

So we've done a lot of damage to that senior leadership, including Khalid Sheik Mohammad and many others, as well.

BLITZER: 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.

CHENEY: 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. 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.

BLITZER: There's been greater --

CHENEY: We have successfully defended the country for over five years against any further attack. 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 UK and to blow them up over the United States or over the Atlantic. There have been numerous attacks have been disrupted.

It's been a remarkable performance by the U.S. military and by our intelligence service 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.

BLITZER: Here is 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 would spill out across the country and, in time, the entire region would 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 -- you and the administration -- for this potential scenario?

CHENEY: Well, this is the argument, that there wouldn't be any problem if we hadn't gone into Iraq.

BLITZER: Saddam Hussein would still be in power.

CHENEY: 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.

BLITZER: But he was being contained, as you well know, by the no-fly zones --

CHENEY: He was not being contained. He was not being contained, Wolf. Wolf, the entire sanctions regime had been undermined by Saddam Hussein.

BLITZER: But he didn't have stockpiles --

CHENEY: He had 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.

BLITZER: Which happened in the '80s.

CHENEY: 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.

You can argue about that all you want. 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.

BLITZER: But the current situation there is--

CHENEY: The fact of the matter was that al Qaeda was out to kill Americans before we ever went into Iraq.

BLITZER: The current situation there is very unstable. 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.

CHENEY: He was -- after the first Gulf War, had managed to kick out all of the inspectors. He was provided payments to families of suicide bombers. He was a safe haven for terrorism, one of the prime state sponsors of terrorism, 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.

BLITZER: But there is --

CHENEY: 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.

BLITZER: How worried are you --

CHENEY: We still have more work to do to get a handle on the security situation, and the president's put a plan in place to do that.

BLITZER: 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?

CHENEY: Wolf, that's not going to happen. The problem is, you've got --

BLITZER: They're -- warming up to Iran and Syria right now.

CHENEY: Wolf, you can come up with all kinds of what-ifs; you've got to be 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's 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 than the United States will validate the terrorist's strategy, that in fact what will happen here, with all of the debate over whether or not we ought to stay in Iraq, where the pressure is from some quarters to get out of Iraq, if we were to do that, we would simply validate the terrorist's strategy, that says the Americans will not stay to complete the task --

CHENEY: That we don't have the stomach for the fight. That's the biggest threat.

BLITZER: Here's the problem as I see it, 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.

CHENEY: 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.

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

CHENEY: 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. So 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, they'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.

BLITZER: Here's what Jim Webb, senator from Virginia said in the Democratic response last night -- he said, "The president took us into this 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 and the failures. Gordon Smith...

CHENEY: Wolf, Wolf, I simply don't accept the premise of your question. I just think it's hogwash.

BLITZER: That what? There were no blunders? The president himself said --

CHENEY: Remember with me what happened after in Afghanistan. The United States was actively involved in Afghanistan in the '80s, supported the effort against the Soviets. The mujahideen prevailed and everybody walked away. And in Afghanistan, within relatively short order, the Taliban came to power. They created this 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.

CHENEY: We 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. 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. And 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.

BLITZER: What if the Senate passes a resolution saying, This is not good idea? Will that stop you?

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, say, "But we don't agree with the mission you've been given."

BLITZER: You're moving forward, no matter what the Congress does.

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's 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.

BLITZER: What was the biggest mistake you made?

CHENEY: 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's very hard for them to stand up and take responsibility, in part because anybody who's done that in the past have had their heads chopped off.

BLITZER: Do you trust Nouri al-Maliki?

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

BLITZER: Is he going to go after Muqtada al Sadr, the anti-American Shiite cleric who controls the Mehdi Army?

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

BLITZER: Do you want him to arrest Muqtada al Sadr?

CHENEY: He has been active, just in recent weeks, in going after the Mehdi Army. There have been some six hundred of them arrested within the last --

BLITZER: Should he be arrested, Muqtada al Sadr?

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

BLITZER: Because, as you know, the first U.S. general over there, Sanchez, said, This guy killed Americans, he has blood on his hands, he was wanted basically dead or alive. Whatever happened?

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

BLITZER: You think he's going to go after the Mehdi Army?

CHENEY: I think he will go after all of those elements in Iraq that are violating the law, that are contributing to sectarian violence. There are criminal elements, there are Baathists -- 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.

BLITZER: Here's the problem that you have, the administration: credibility with the Congress and with the American public, because of the mistakes, because of 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?

CHENEY: Well, Wolf, if the history books were written by people who are so eager to write off this effort or 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 to try to get in front of the herd. This president doesn't work that way.

He also will be very clear, in terms of providing leadership going forward, for what we need to do in Iraq. Now the 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 -- 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 --

BLITZER: Yes, I am. I'm just asking.

CHENEY: No, you're not asking.

BLITZER: I'm just asking...

CHENEY: Implicit in what the critics are suggesting, I think, is an obligation of saying, 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.

BLITZER: You've said that Iran, as a nuclear power, is unacceptable.

CHENEY: Right.

BLITZER: Are you ready to go to war to stop that from happening?

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

BLITZER: Well, how do you stop them?

CHENEY: Wolf, we've got a policy in place that is, I think, producing results. We've gone to the United Nations. We've got unanimous agreement to a sanctions resolution that is now in place with respect to the Iranian -- the Iranian uranium program. And we're continuing to work the problem. We want to solve the problem diplomatically and 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.

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

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

BLITZER: 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 the 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 that?

CHENEY: 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 it with anybody in the press yet, and I'm not going to discuss it with you today.

BLITZER: You -- but you --

CHENEY: Wolf, you got my answer.

BLITZER: Have you contributed to his legal defense, though?

CHENEY: I'm a strong friend and supporter of Scooter's. I have not contributed to his legal defense fund. I think he is an extraordinarily talented and capable individual.

BLITZER: Let's talk about illegal immigration. A lot of your conservative Republican base is upset at the president and at you for supporting a pathway to citizenship for millions of illegals in the States (ph). 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?

CHENEY: Well, we think we need immigration legislation passed. I think 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 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 we have control over our borders.

And we've done a lot already to move in that direction. We've doubled and 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 to regulate that flow. I think we can do it. I believe that in fact there is sufficient support on both sides of the aisle to get the legislation passed.

BLITZER: Do you think Hillary Clinton would make a good president?

CHENEY: No, I don't.

BLITZER: Why?

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

BLITZER: Do you think she will be president?

CHENEY: I don't.

BLITZER: Who do you think will be?

CHENEY: I'm not going to speculate.

BLITZER: Will it be John McCain?

CHENEY: I'm not going to speculate.

BLITZER: He's been very critical of you, John McCain.

CHENEY: Well, John's a good man. He and I have known each other a long time and we agree on many things and disagree on others.

BLITZER: He said, the other day -- he said, "The president listens too much to the vice president. Of course, the president bears the ultimate responsibility, but he's been very badly served by both the vice president and, most of all, the secretary of Defense." That was John McCain.

CHENEY: So?

BLITZER: No reaction?

CHENEY: I just disagree with him.

BLITZER: He said, about the former Defense secretary, "Rumsfeld will go down in history, along with McNamara, as one of the worst secretaries of Defense --"

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

BLITZER: You know, 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 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 that it's best for the child." Do you want to respond to that?

CHENEY: No.

BLITZER: She's, obviously, a good daughter --

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

BLITZER: I think all of us appreciate --

CHENEY: I think you're out of line.

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

CHENEY: I just fundamentally disagree with you.

BLITZER: I want to congratulate you on having another grandchild.

Let's wind up with the soft stuff (ph)-- Nancy Pelosi. What was it like sitting with her last night as opposed to Dennis Hastert?

CHENEY: I prefer Dennis Hastert, obviously. I like having a fellow Republican in the Speaker's chair. Nancy's now the speaker of the House. We had a very pleasant evening.

BLITZER: But it's different to have a Democrat--

CHENEY: Sure, it's different. They have -- yeah, but it's the way it's been during most of my career in Congress. I didn't find it all that surprising or startling.

BLITZER: How do you feel?

CHENEY: Good.

BLITZER: Mr. Vice President, thank you

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