

© 2008, CBS Broadcasting Inc. All Rights Reserved.

*PLEASE CREDIT ANY QUOTES OR EXCERPTS FROM THIS CBS
TELEVISION PROGRAM TO "CBS NEWS' FACE THE NATION."*

CBS News

FACE THE NATION

Sunday, January 4, 2009

GUESTS: Vice President **DICK CHENEY**
Vice President of the United States

MODERATOR/PANELIST: Bob Schieffer – CBS News

*This is a rush transcript provided
for the information and convenience of
the press. Accuracy is not guaranteed.
In case of doubt, please check with*

FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
(202)-457-4481

BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, an exclusive interview with Vice President Dick Cheney. He's been called the most powerful vice president in history and the most controversial. He's been in and out of government 40 years: White House chief of staff under Gerald Ford, secretary of defense and then to George Bush's number two. He's been praised and denounced. Today we'll ask him how he feels it went as he prepares to leave Washington. Does he believe this administration is leaving the government better than they found it? Then I'll have some thoughts on a year of total surprise. But first, Vice President Cheney on FACE THE NATION.

Announcer: FACE THE NATION, with CBS news chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now, from CBS News in Washington, Bob Schieffer.

SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. The vice president joins us in the studio live this morning.

Mr. Vice President, thank you for coming. You and I have been talking to each other for a long time now. I think the first time I interviewed you, you were 32 years old.

Vice President DICK CHENEY: Mm-hmm.

SCHIEFFER: I was old myself, even in those days.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Right.

SCHIEFFER: And you were the chief of staff to Vice President Ford. And we've had many interviews over the years since then.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: We have, indeed.

SCHIEFFER: And so welcome to FACE THE NATION.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: It's good to be back.

SCHIEFFER: Let's start with the news, the Middle East. Israel has now invaded the Gaza. Did they inform the United States that they were preparing to do this, Mr. Vice President?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: They didn't seek clearance or approval from us, certainly. They have said now for a period of months, they told me on my last trip over there, that they didn't want to have to act where Gaza was concerned. They'd gotten out of there three years ago. But if the rocketing didn't stop, they felt they had no choice but to take action. And if they did, they would be very aggressive in terms of trying to take down Hamas. And that's exactly what's happened. But I think they made the decision, I'm guessing now, after the Hamas, in effect, said the cease-fire was dead on December 19th and resumed the rocketing. And I think under those circumstances that's basically the way the decision was made.

SCHIEFFER: Well, do you think it was a mistake for them to go in on the ground now with this invasion? They had unleashed this bombing attack, killed 400 and some odd people that we

know of. Do you think it was a mistake to go in there? Does this perhaps increase the chances of widening this?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, I think it's--remember--it's important to remember who the enemy is here. The enemy are not the Palestinians from the perspective of the Israelis, it's Hamas. You haven't had a conflict between two UN charter member states.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: You've got a UN member state being attacked by a terrorist organization. And to go after that terrorist organization, I think they probably decided that an air campaign wasn't enough, that they had to go in on the ground if they were going to take down the sites from which the rockets had been launched against Israel. Again, now, I'm speculating based on--it may be informed speculation, but they haven't told me exactly what they plan to do or when they plan to do it.

SCHIEFFER: Well, do you think now they should work for a cease-fire? Is the United--what is the United States' position here? Are we urging them to seek a cease-fire now and stop this? What...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: We've been very concerned, especially about the Palestinian people, that they are the victims, in a sense, of Hamas as well. But we think if there's to be a cease-fire, you can't simply go back to the status quo ante, what it was a few weeks ago, where you had a cease-fire recognized by one side but not adhered to by the other. It's got to be a sustainable, durable proposition, and Hamas has to stop rocketing Israel. And I don't think you're going to have a viable cease-fire until they're prepared to do that.

SCHIEFFER: So at this point--at this point you're not urging the cease-fire?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, no. I think we'd like to see a cease-fire, but it has to meet those conditions. It's got to be sustainable and durable. It can't just be a resumption of what was there that was violated on the 19th of December by Hamas.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, let's talk--and maybe we'll come back to this. But let's talk a little bit about the last eight years. You came here, you and President Bush were elected in 2000. So I guess I'd ask you the question that Ronald Reagan used to ask, are we better off now than we were eight years ago?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, I think we've got--I think we've done some very good things over the course of the last eight years. Defending the country against further terrorist attacks like 9/11, I think, is a major accomplishment, for example. I think we made progress on education with No Child Left Behind, and prescription drug benefits for seniors and so forth. I can point to tax policy, a series of policies and actions that were put into place that were significant progress. There's no question but what the new administration, President Obama, are going to have their hands full with a new set of problems, if you will, centered especially on the economy, upon the difficulties that have developed in the financial markets over the last six months. Just as our task when we came in was ultimately to deal with the aftermath of 9/11 and be--have to take on the

global war on terror. So each administration has its challenges. The Obama administration certainly has theirs.

SCHIEFFER: The situation in Iraq, what do you see there now? What do you think the state of Iraq is right now?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I think Iraq is much better off than it was before we went in in '03. We got rid of Saddam Hussein. I think we are close to achieving most of our objectives. We've seen a significant reduction in the overall level of violence. It's lower now than virtually anytime since we've been there in the spring of '03. We've seen the elimination of one of the world's worst regimes. We've seen the Iraqis write a constitution and hold three national elections. We've now entered into a Strategic Framework Agreement with the Iraqis that calls for ultimately the US completion of the assignment and withdrawal of our forces from Iraq. All of those things I think by anybody's standard would be--excuse me--evidence of significant success, and I think we're very close to achieving what it is we set out to do five years ago when we first went into Iraq.

SCHIEFFER: Do you--I want to ask you this, because I've gotten various accounts about this. When we--back there when we decided to go into Iraq, we told Saddam Hussein to leave or else, to either leave or we were coming in there to take him out. Did you really think that he would stand and fight?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: We didn't know. Now you look back on it, he clearly was into self-deception in a major way. I think he totally underestimated George Bush and what we were prepared to do. He tried to sort of bluff his way through, I guess would be the best way to describe it, and we called his bluff. He'd been in a business--this is a guy who'd started two wars, who killed hundreds of thousands of people, including many of his own, with weapons of mass destruction. It was one of the most despicable regimes in the 20th century. And he thought he could get away with continuing that, and I think he assumed the US would never go in and he was wrong.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think, on reflection, that in fact we did have a bad plan? I mean, when you stop back, people in the military were saying it would take a much larger force than we decided to go in with. And in fact, we had a force that was mobile, it was quick, we were able to get to Baghdad, but once we got there the Iraqis just sort of faded into the civilian population. We didn't really have enough people to guard those ammo dumps that Saddam Hussein abandoned. Wouldn't it have been better, on reflection, to have had a better and a larger force?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, you know, we would debate that forever, and we may well. I think that the original campaign was masterfully done in terms of a small, fast-moving force, as you say, that achieved our initial objectives of taking down the regime and capturing Baghdad. That was a masterful performance. I think the thing that we underestimated, at least I underestimated, was the damage that had been done to the Iraqi population by all those years of Saddam's rule, so that there weren't any Iraqis early on who were willing to stand up and take responsibility for their own affairs. Anybody who'd had that kind of get up and go in earlier years had had their head chopped off. And I think we underestimated the damage that had been done during those years of Saddam's rule, as well as what happened in '91; you may remember when they rose up after the Gulf War and Saddam, you know, very brutally and very aggressively put down those uprisings around the country. So I would--I would chalk that up to miscalculation. I'm not at all

sure that having had four or 500,000 troops there would've achieved the objective we're talking about. The--what we finally did, what we finally sort of got us across the goal line here was the surge the president decided upon, coupled with the counterinsurgency strategy. As...

SCHIEFFER: But isn't that--I mean, isn't that just underlined that the original strategy was wrong? I mean, once you got enough troops in there to handle the situation, things calmed down.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: But the number of troops that we put in weren't that much more than we'd had there before. We added five brigades. This is maybe 30,000 men. And it was up close to where we'd been at the time of the elections, when we had forces there to monitor the elections and provide security for the Iraqis to hold elections. We never went over 200,000 troops. We were always significantly below that, and we still succeeded.

SCHIEFFER: But how do you think we got it so wrong? I mean, we thought he had weapons of mass destruction and he didn't. We thought we'd be greeted with open arms and we weren't. What happened?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, I don't look at it as we got it so wrong, Bob. I think we have in fact...

SCHIEFFER: We got a big part of it wrong.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, certain parts of it...

SCHIEFFER: There weren't any weapons of mass destruction.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Correct. The original intelligence was wrong, no question about it. But there were parts of it that were right. It wasn't 100 percent wrong. It was correct in saying he had the technology, it was correct in saying he still had the people who knew how to build weapons of mass destruction. I think it was also correct in the assessment that once sanctions came off, he'd go back to doing what he'd been doing before. Where it was wrong was it said he had stockpiles and he clearly didn't. So the intelligence was flawed. But you never have perfect intelligence in this business. You got to deal with the best you can in terms of making your decisions.

The question of how we moved forward, you can debate about whether or not we had the right structure in place, for example. Was--would we have been better off with setting up a government in exile with exiled Iraqis and getting that organized and in place before we went in, and then turning it over to them? We made the judgment that if we were going to take down the government, we had an obligation to try to...

SCHIEFFER: But did--do you...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: ...restore the best kind of system we could, and that was to give them a shot at true democracy.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think that perhaps you'd looked at the intelligence and saw what you wanted to see rather than make a real logical analysis of what you saw?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: No, I don't, Bob. I think if you go back and you look at what we were receiving as intelligence from the intelligence community going back to the very we were sworn in--I've seen a report, for example, it was one of the very first we received, that warned about Iraqis' weapons of mass destruction program. As a matter of fact, it was written by a guy who's been one of the public critics of what we did. He was responsible for the first report. We had reporting like that all the time we were there, right up until we went into Iraq. So the...

SCHIEFFER: Yeah.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: You know, it wasn't a matter just of us looking and seeing what we wanted to see. Everybody believed that intelligence. Saddam Hussein had peddled a notion to his senior officers...

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: ...and officials, they all believed he had weapons of mass destruction; the intelligence services of other countries. The Clinton administration that had been there for eight years before we had had exactly the same conclusion that we had, and we had numerous reports afterwards with all the studies that were done, the Robb-Silberman Commission...

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm. OK.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: ...the Senate Intelligence Committee, that said that there was no manipulation of the data, no pressure brought to bear on the analysts, this is what they saw. And they got part of it wrong.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, let's take a break here. We'll come back and talk about this...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Sure.

SCHIEFFER: ...and other things and some more in just a second.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And we're back again with the vice president.

Mr. Vice President, in an interview last month with Chris Wallace over at Fox, you said that in starting in 2001 the administration--and in many cases, you personally--kept congressional leaders fully briefed on the program to monitor America's international phone calls without a warrant. You said that the Republican and Democratic leaders were unanimous, when you briefed them, that the programs were essential and did not require further congressional action. But The New York Times has noted that Senator Rockefeller wrote you a letter in 2003 reiterating concerns that he said he had expressed at those meetings, that the programs raised profound issues and created concern regarding the direction the administration was taking. So were congressional leaders kept fully informed or were they not?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: They were kept fully informed.

SCHIEFFER: Well, why would he have written that letter?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I have no idea. I know when--what happened was the--everybody who was in the room that day, for example, when I got the leadership down, chairman and ranking member of the Intelligence Committees, including Senator Rockefeller, and asked them if we thought they should continue--if they thought we should continue the program, they said yes. Do we need to come to Congress to get authorization for it? They said no. And he was there. He never objected or opposed that in any way. Later on, when this became public, when The New York Times broke the story--which, frankly, I think was an outrageous decision on their part; they were asked by the president of the United States not to on the grounds it would damage national security--then Senator Rockefeller decided he wanted to hark back to this letter. But the fact was he couldn't even find it. He had to call my office for a copy of the letter that he allegedly had written some years before raising some questions that he had about the program. But I always...

SCHIEFFER: Well, I mean, do you...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I always felt it was a bit if a CYA letter. And in those crucial meetings when we sat down to debate the program and tell them about it, in fact, everybody in the room signed up to it. Nobody objected.

SCHIEFFER: Do you feel you went too far, Mr. Vice President, in your surveillance?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Absolutely not. I think what we did was one of the great success stories of the intelligence business in the last century. I think what the National Security Agency under General Mike Hayden, working with the CIA and at the direction of the president, was masterfully done. I think it provided crucial intelligence for us. It's one of the main reasons we've been successful in defending the country against further attacks, and I don't believe we violated anybody's civil liberties. This was all done in accordance with the president's constitutional authority under Article II of the Constitution as commander in chief, with the resolution that was passed by the Congress immediately after 9/11. And subsequently, we have gotten legislative authority signed up to last year when we passed a modified FISA statute.

SCHIEFFER: Do you--do you believe that the president, in time of war, that anything he does is legal?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I can't say that anything he does is legal. I think we do and we have a historic precedent of taking action that you wouldn't take in peacetime but that you will take sometimes in wartime in order to do the basic job that you sign up to when you take the oath of office, to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. If you hark back in our history you can look at Abraham Lincoln, who suspended the writ of habeas corpus in the middle of the Civil War.

SCHIEFFER: But nobody thinks that that was legal.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, no. Well, it was--certainly was in the sense he wasn't impeached. And it was a wartime measure that he took that I think today history says, yeah, that was probably a good thing to do. There have been other examples. Lyndon--or FDR in World War II...

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: ...when he provided for internment camps for Japanese-American citizens. Most people now look back and say that was wrong. But what we did was modest by those comparisons. And I would also emphasize that what we did, we did with the support and involvement, for example, of the Justice Department. Every single time the president reauthorized the terrorist surveillance program, which he did every 30 or 45 days, it was only after the secretary....

SCHIEFFER: Would have--is it not true that the courts and others have now said that some of those orders that the Justice Department was putting out proved to be...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: That was--that was the--those were the rules...

SCHIEFFER: ...not correct?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: ...that we had to operate by. And the attorney general of the United States signed off on every single one of those exceptions. The president would not extend the program without the attorney general's authorization and approval on there. In terms of all of our actions, we worked to stay close to the Office of Legal Counsel. We followed the guidance we got, which is what you're suppose to do and where you're suppose to do it.

SCHIEFFER: The...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: There've subsequently been some controversies that--the Supreme Court's s made some decisions that didn't agree with what we did at the time, but what we did was authorized by legal authorities that were to be the source of that kind of advice.

SCHIEFFER: Let me talk to you a little bit about torture. You have said that you do not believe that waterboarding, for example, was torture.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Right.

SCHIEFFER: You and members of the Cabinet sat in the White House and approved the methods of interrogation that were used by the CIA. Why would something like that reach your level, Mr. Vice President?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, because the CIA did not want to proceed without having a very clear understanding of what was authorized and what was appropriate. And they'd seen situations, I'd seen situations before where the CIA would get out and undertake an assignment or a mission and then find that the politicians would all run for the hills, like Iran-Contra. In fact, what we had here was a situation in where the CIA was being very careful and very cautious. They had prisoners like Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who was the mastermind of 9/11, in custody.

SCHIEFFER: Mm-hmm.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: They wanted to know what kind of techniques they could use going forward and still maintain consistency with the statutes and the international agreements that we're party to.

SCHIEFFER: Would you do it again if you had to make those same decisions again? Because a lot of people now say that some of the things that happened here may be the reason that some of our casualties happened...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Yeah.

SCHIEFFER: ...because people saw the publicity of these things, the kinds of things that happened at Abu Ghraib.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I would absolutely do it again, Bob. I think the loss of life if there had been further mass casualty attacks against the United States over the last seven and a half years fully justifies it. Think of what would happen if there had been an attack and we hadn't taken any of these measures? Then you'd be sitting here today, you know, grilling me, saying, 'Why didn't you guys do everything you could to stop it? Why didn't you find out what the enemy was planning to do? Why didn't you interfere with the attacks?'

SCHIEFFER: So you would suggest that Barack Obama continue those things?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I would. If he were to seek my advice--he hasn't--but if he were to seek my advice, I'd say, look, before you go out and start to make policy based on the campaign rhetoric we heard last year, what you need to do is sit down and find out what we've done, find out how we did it, what the justification was for it, what kind of results it's produced, and then make an informed judgment about whether or not you want to keep these things. But I would hope he would avoid doing what others have done in the past, which is letting the campaign rhetoric guide his judgment in this absolutely crucial area. We were very careful, we did everything by the book and, in fact, we produced very significant results. And I would hope that, for the sake of the nation, that this administration and future administrations will continue those policies.

SCHIEFFER: Guantanamo. You've said it should remain open, but for how long, Mr. Vice President?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, Guantanamo's there to hold people we believe are unlawful combatants that we captured in the war on terror, many of them members of al-Qaeda. They're well treated. Their cases are reviewed annually by military commissions to see whether or not they should stay or go. We've released more than we've held. There've been hundreds who have been sent back to their home country. But the problem you've got is what do you do with the prisoners that are there? Now, if you bring them onshore into the United States, they immediately fall heir to certain legal rights and privileges that'll create problems. And there also, I don't know many congressional districts that are eager to have 200 al-Qaeda terrorists deposited on their soil.

SCHIEFFER: About 30 seconds left.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Yeah.

SCHIEFFER: What's next, Mr. Vice President? You're leaving government for what, about the fifth time...

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Something like that.

SCHIEFFER: ...in the last 40 years?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Yeah.

SCHIEFFER: Will you--what now?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, I don't know yet. I'm looking forward to spending time with the family, obviously. We've got six grandchildren now, and I always enjoy that. We'll split our time between Washington and Wyoming. Maybe I'll write a book. I haven't made any final, firm commitments yet.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Thank you so much, and I hope we'll have you back again.

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I'd like to come back, Bob.

SCHIEFFER: Thank you, Mr. Vice President.

Back in a moment with a final thought.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally today, on our first broadcast of the year I always like to look back to check what I said a year ago to see if I had any idea of what was ahead. This time last year we were in New Hampshire and the Iowa caucuses were already behind us. Can you remember who won Iowa before I say it? Time's up. Mitt Romney poured millions into Iowa, but Mike Huckabee won the Republican contest with just a smile and a shoeshine. I said then it was good to know that money does not always guarantee victory. But neither does winning Iowa, and Huckabee was soon gone. Not so for the Democratic winner. Barack Obama's surprise win over Hillary Clinton was just the beginning. As the year whizzed by, John McCain rose from the political dead and won the Republican prize. Mitt Romney lost more money, John Edwards lost his good name, Bill Clinton lost his cool, Rudy lost Florida, Fred Thompson lost everything but won Bill O'Reilly's radio show. Joe Biden lived up to his reputation for talking, and that got him to the vice presidency, which Dick Cheney had won by keeping quiet. The election that was supposed to be about Iraq turned instead on a financial crisis. A very conservative administration poured government into big industries and banks. Didn't we used to call that socialism? And Hillary Clinton is about to be secretary of state. Maybe somebody saw all this coming a year ago, but I sure didn't. Back in a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And that's our broadcast. We'll see you right here next Sunday on FACE THE NATION.

