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## Interview of the Vice President by Jonathan Karl, ABC News

Vice President's Ceremonial Office  
Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building

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Q Mr. Vice President, there has not been a terrorist attack in the United States in more than seven years. How important have your administration's policies on surveillance, interrogation, and detention been in protecting the homeland?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think they've been crucial, Jonathan. I think that anybody who had looked at the situation the morning after the 9/11 attack would never have bet that we'd been able to go this long without another attack.

We've been able to defeat or disrupt all further attempts to strike the homeland. It's enormously important. I think those programs are crucial. The President made some very tough decisions, and we had some very able and talented people involved in the military and our intelligence services, making certain that we were able to keep the country safe.

Q But you've heard leaders, the incoming Congress saying that this policy has basically been torture and illegal wiretapping, and that they want to undo basically the central tenets of your anti-terrorist policy.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: They're wrong. On the question of terrorist surveillance, this was always a policy to intercept communications between terrorists, or known terrorists, or so-called "dirty numbers," and folks inside the United States, to capture those international communications. It's worked. It's been successful. It's now embodied in the FISA statute that we passed last year, and that Barack Obama voted for, which I think was a good decision on his part. It's a very, very important capability. It is legal. It was legal from the very beginning. It is constitutional, and to claim that it isn't I think is just wrong.

On the question of so-called "torture," we don't do torture, we never have. It's not something that this administration subscribes to. Again, we proceeded very cautiously; we checked, we had the Justice Department issue the requisite opinions in order to know where the bright lines were that you could not cross. The professionals involved in that program were very, very cautious, very careful, wouldn't do anything without making certain it was authorized and that it was legal. And any suggestion to the contrary is just wrong.

Did it produce the desired results? I think it did. I think, for example, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was the number three man in al Qaeda, the man who planned the attacks of 9/11, provided us with a wealth of information. There was a period of time there, three or four years ago, when about half of everything we knew about al Qaeda came from that one source.

So it's been a remarkably successful effort. I think the results speak for themselves. And I think those who allege that we've been involved in torture, or that somehow we violated the Constitution or laws with the Terrorist Surveillance Program, simply don't know what they're talking about.

Q Did you authorize the tactics that were used against Khalid Sheikh Mohammed?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I was aware of the program certainly, and involved in helping get the process cleared, as the agency, in effect, came in and wanted to know what they could and couldn't do. And they talked to me, as well as others, to explain what they wanted to do, and I supported it.

Q In hindsight, do you think any of those tactics that were used against Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and others went too far?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't.

Q And what is your advice to President-Elect Obama, then, on this? Because he's been quite critical -- I mean, he might have supported FISA, but President-Elect Obama has been very critical of the counterterrorism policies in this administration.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, the counterterrorism policy is designed to defeat the terrorist. It turns on intelligence. You can't do anything without collecting first-rate intelligence, and that's what these programs are all about. I would argue that for the new administration, how they deal with these issues are going to be very important, because it's going to have a direct impact on whether or not they retain the tools that have been so essential in defending the nation for the last seven and a half years, or whether they give them up.

I think it's vital that they sit down and -- which I believe they're doing -- and look at the specific threat that's out there to understand these programs and how they operate, and see the extent to which we were very cautious in terms of how we put them together -- and then make a decision based on that with respect to whether or not they're going to continue. They shouldn't just fall back on campaign rhetoric to make these very fundamental decisions about the safety of the nation.

Q And what if he does fall back on campaign rhetoric and rolls back those policies -- what's the danger?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think that would be -- I think that would be very unfortunate.

Q And on KSM, one of those tactics, of course, widely reported was waterboarding, and that seems to be a tactic we no longer use. Even that you think was appropriate?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I do.

Q More than two years ago, President Bush said that he was -- wanted to close down Guantanamo Bay. Why has that not happened?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's very hard to do. Guantanamo has been the repository, if you will, of hundreds of terrorists, or suspected terrorists, that we've captured since 9/11. They -- many of them, hundreds, have been released back to their home countries. What we have left is the hardcore. Their cases are reviewed on an annual basis to see whether or not they're still a threat, whether or not they're still intelligence value in terms of continuing to hold them. But -- and we're down now to some 200 being held at Guantanamo. But that includes the core group, the really high-value targets like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

Now, the question, if you're going to close Guantanamo, what are you going to do with those prisoners? One suggestion is, well, we'll bring them to the United States. Well, I don't know very many congressmen, for example, who are eager to have 200 al Qaeda terrorists deposited in their district.

It's a complex and difficult problem. If you bring them onshore into the United States, they automatically acquire certain legal rights and responsibilities that the government would then have, that they don't as long as they're at Guantanamo. And that's an important consideration.

These are not American citizens. They are not subject, nor do they have the same rights that an American citizen does vis-à-vis the government. But they are well treated. They also have the opportunity, and the process has just started now to be heard before a military commission with a judgment, fair and honest judgment made about their guilt or innocence, to be represented by counsel provided through that process.

So they -- I don't know any other nation in the world that would do what we've done in terms of taking care of people who are avowed enemies, and many of whom still swear up and down that their only objective is to kill more Americans.

Q So when do you think we'll be at a point where Guantanamo could be responsibly shut down?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think that would come with the end of the war on terror.

Q When's that going to be?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, nobody knows. Nobody can specify that. Now, in previous wars, we've always exercised the right to capture the enemy and then hold them until the end of the conflict. That's what we did in World War II with thousands, hundreds of thousands of German prisoners. The same basic principle ought to apply here in terms of our right to capture the enemy and hold them.

As I say, the other option is to turn them over to somebody else. A lot of them nobody wants. I mean, there's a great resistance sometimes in the home countries to taking these people back into their own territory.

And it's not a law -- it's not a traditional law enforcement problem. One of the things that happened on 9/11 was we went from thinking about a terrorist attack as a law enforcement problem where you prosecute an individual, to rather it being a strategic threat to the United States where we need to use all of our capabilities to be able to defeat the enemy.

And these folks are, in fact, unlawful combatants, adversaries of the United States, members of al Qaeda. And I think that's true for most of them there. And I say, there's a regular annual review of each of their cases to make certain that we're still justified in holding them, and if not, to send them back to their home country if they'll have them.

Q But basically it sounds like you're talking about Guantanamo being -- it sounds like you're saying Guantanamo Bay will be open indefinitely.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, a lot of people, including the President, have expressed the view that they'd like to close Guantanamo. I think everybody can say we wish there were no necessity for Guantanamo. But you have to be able to answer these other questions before you can do that responsibly, and that includes what are you going to do with the prisoners held in Guantanamo? And nobody yet has solved that problem.

Q What's the danger in doing this too soon, to make this symbolic gesture to shut the place down?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, if you release people that shouldn't have been released, and that's happened in some cases already, you end up with them back on the battlefield. We've had, as I recall now -- and these are rough numbers, I'd want to check it -- but, say, approximately 30 of these folks who've been held in Guantanamo, been released, and ended up back on the battlefield again, and we've encountered them a second time around. They've either been killed or captured in further conflicts with our forces.

Q I don't know if you saw, but on Sunday, John McCain said that the national security team that has been established by President-Elect Obama -- Clinton, James Jones, Robert Gates -- that this is a team that he could have assembled. How do you assess this incoming team?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I must say I think it's a pretty good team. I'm not close to Barack Obama, obviously, nor am I -- do I identify with him politically. He's a liberal, I'm a conservative. But I think the idea of keeping Gates at Defense is excellent. I think Jim Jones will be very, very effective as the National Security Advisor. And while I would not have hired Senator Clinton, I think she's tough, she's smart, she works very hard, and she may turn out to be just what President Obama needs.

Q Should he keep the intelligence chiefs, as well?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't want to get into the business of encouraging them on one course or another -- it could be the kiss of death. He's already made his judgments about Jones and Gates, and as I say, I think they're both very talented people and they'll do well. For me to get into the business of commenting on individuals where decisions have not yet been made, frankly, I think that would not be fair to them and that process.

Q So it was reported that when you went up to lunch with the Republicans shortly before the auto bailout vote, that you said that if the auto companies go down it will be "Hoover time." Do you believe that to be true?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, that's not quite what I said. This was a report that came out of a meeting where we did discuss the subject. What I said basically was that the crisis in the auto industry could not have come at a worse time, because we're in the midst of major financial crisis, we're on the downside of what may be the worst recession since the end of World War II, and we're in the middle of a presidential transition from the Bush to the Obama administration; and that under those circumstances, for the automobile industry to be allowed to collapse, or at least the American portion of it, I thought would be extremely unfortunate, and that we needed to do everything we could to try to prevent that. That's sort of the basic picture I made. I did make a reference to Herbert Hoover, but I can't recall the exact words for it.

Q But if the government doesn't act to save these companies, or give them a lifeline, do we risk -- headed to "Hoover time"?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I -- not so much in terms of the time, but I would be concerned if, under these circumstances, we did not, as an administration -- and we're still -- have major responsibilities for another month -- if we didn't do everything we could to avoid those consequences, and that it would have a lasting impact, if you will, on how we're perceived.

Q What do you think when you hear the Democrats talk about a stimulus plan of a trillion dollars?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, it depends on what goes into it. I'm not sure it's needed or necessary. It's not clear to me that it would have any short-term effect. That doesn't mean there aren't things that could be done on some of these longer-term projects, but I think caution is in order here. And to date, I have not seen the proposals, I haven't seen the arguments for why this is appropriate, or why it would be good economic policy at this time.

We clearly are involved now in a recession; we see that around us every day. But I think part of that is a fallout from the financial crisis we had earlier this year. And it's a global problem. It's not just the United States that's affected here. This is really both -- whether we talk about the recession, or we talk about the financial problems, these are global issues that are going to affect everybody worldwide. And it seems to me you cannot sort of treat this just as an isolated problem inside the United States, as has often been the case in the past with our recessions. This is one that's going to occur on a global basis.

Q You've been called the most powerful Vice President in history. Help me understand how a guy that didn't even seek this job out managed to do that.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, whatever I've been able to do as Vice President, it's been because that's what the President wanted me to do. And I have enjoyed very much my time as Vice President. It's been a tremendous experience. It's not anything I sought, as you mentioned. The President asked me to take it on, and I agreed to do it. And I think it was exactly the right decision from my standpoint.

In terms of how I'm viewed as a powerful Vice President, or an influential Vice President, I think that's something that we'll have to leave to the historians. There are a lot of people out there with opinions, and I'll let somebody else sort them out.

Q What do you say to those that say you've changed? I mean, you've seen -- Brent Scowcroft says, "I don't know Dick Cheney anymore." I mean, really he's known you as long as just about anybody in this town. What do you say to that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I -- the way I think of it is -- in terms of whether or not I've changed, I think a prime motivation for me in much of what I've done was 9/11. And being here on 9/11, going through that experience, and reaching the conclusion that somebody said the other day, that I said at that point, that's not going to happen again on my watch. And we've done everything we could -- the President has, I have, a lot of the people that we work with -- to make certain that didn't happen. And we've succeeded.

But when you contemplate a 9/11 with terrorists, instead of being armed with the box cutters and airline tickets,

equipped with a nuclear weapon, or a biological agent of some kind in the middle of one of our cities, you think about the consequences of that. And I think we're justified in taking bold action; I think it's incumbent upon us to take bold action and make certain that never happens. And as I say, we've been successful for seven and a half years now.

And have I changed? Well, not in the sense that I've gone through some fundamental psychological transition here. But I have been, since that day, focused very much upon what we needed to do to defend the nation. And I think the policies we've recommended, the programs that we've undertaken, have been good programs. I think those have been sound decisions. And if that's what they mean by saying I changed, I'm guilty.

Q What did you think when you saw that shoe flying at the President?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I thought the President handled it rather well. He had some good moves, the way he ducked and avoided the shoe. And then what was his response -- that it was a size 10. I guess he could see that as it went by. No, I think it was an incident where an Iraqi reporter threw shoes at the President -- I don't attribute any special significance to it.

Q But when you were told during another interview that the America public was overwhelmingly against the war, you said, "So?" Do you regret saying that? Would you take that back?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No. And, in fact, what I did was the person that made the statement didn't ask a question; then after they'd made a statement, I said, "So?" -- you know, expecting a question. And I didn't get a question. And they took "so," to mean that I didn't have any concern for public opinion. I do. But I don't think, and the point I made then, is that we could not have done what we've done if we'd been reading the polls.

If we'd responded to the polls, I think the world would look very different today than it does. I think Saddam Hussein would still be in power. I think the progress that we've made in liberating 50 million people in Iraq and Afghanistan might well have not happened. You can't base public policy, or tough decisions in a presidency simply on what's happening in the polls. They change from week to week. You can take two polls on exactly the same day and get totally different results. It's just a bad way to make policy. And we didn't do that.

What we did was what we thought was right for the country. We stood once for reelection, and were reelected. And we've continued to pursue those policies throughout our time in office. Our objective has not been to see how high we could get our poll numbers by the time we left office; our objective has been to do other things such as defend the nation, pursue a successful counterinsurgency program, to prevail in Iraq and Afghanistan, to reform the education system, add prescription drug benefits to Medicare, cut taxes -- those are all things that I think we've succeeded on. They were not all popular. And especially what we did in the national security area I think has been controversial. But it was the right thing to do, and the President and I were elected to make decisions, not to read polls.

Q President Bush recently said that his greatest regret was that the intelligence was wrong on weapons of mass destruction. Was that your biggest regret?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I wouldn't -- I understand why he says that; I certainly share the frustration that the intelligence report on Iraq WMD generated. But in terms of the intelligence itself, I tend to look at the entire community and what they've done over the course of the last several years.

Intelligence -- it's not a science, it's an art form, in many respects, and you don't always get it right. I think I would -- while I would mention that as a major failure of the intelligence community -- it clearly was; on the other hand, we've had other successes and failures. I think the run-up to 9/11, where we missed that attack, was a failure. On the other hand, we've had great success since 9/11 in terms of what the intelligence community has contributed overall to the defense of the nation, to defeating al Qaeda, to making it possible for us to do very serious damage to our enemies.

Q You probably saw -- Karl Rove last week said that if the intelligence had been correct, we probably would not have gone to war.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I disagree with that. I think the -- as I look at the intelligence with respect to Iraq, what they got wrong was that there weren't any stockpiles. What we found in the after-action reports after the intelligence report was done and then various special groups went and looked at the intelligence and what its validity was, what they found was that Saddam Hussein still had the capability to produce weapons of mass destruction. He had the technology, he had the people, he had the basic feedstocks. They also found that he had every intention of resuming production once the international sanctions were lifted. He had a long reputation and record of having started two wars, of having brutalized and killed hundreds of thousands of people, some of them with weapons of mass destruction, in his own country. He had violated 16 National Security Council resolutions. He had an established relationship as a terror-sponsoring state, according to the State Department. He was making \$25,000 payments to the families of suicide bombers.

This was a bad actor. And the country is better off, the world is better off with Saddam gone. And I think we made the right decision, in spite of the fact that the original NIE was off in some of its major judgments.

Q So your 30-some -- how many more days do you have left?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thirty-five.

Q Thirty-five more days left? Who's counting? What advice do you have to Joe Biden coming into this role? You've already seen that Harry Reid has said that Biden will not be invited into the policy lunches up at the Senate. Biden has already signaled that he's going to be scaling back some of this office, what you've done to this office. What's your advice to Biden?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, the most important element in deciding what kind of vice presidency any administration is going to have is what the President wants to have done. He's the boss. He's the one who's got to decide what kind of authority he wants to entrust to his Vice President, how he fits with the other folks in the administration, what kinds of policies he wants him involved in. And it's really unique for each administration.

I've had one meeting with Joe Biden since he won the election. He and his wife came by the house and we were able to show them the official residence and had a pleasant chat. We didn't get into policy in any major way. But Joe Biden is an experienced senator. He's been around a long time. He knows a lot. Whatever contribution he's allowed to make to the Obama administration is really up to President Obama. He'll decide what his role is going to be.

Q What are you going to miss most about this job?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm looking forward to return to private life. This is the fourth time I've transitioned out of government to the private sector. But I'll also miss it. It's really been just a tremendous -- tremendously remarkable experience. I think the people that I've been pleased to work with, including some of my colleagues in the administration, especially the men and women of our Armed Forces and the intelligence community who have done so much to keep us safe over this period of time. It's been 40 years since I came to Washington to stay 12 months. And I think it's about time I went and did something else.

Q Regrets?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Oh, not a lot, at this stage. I think I'll have a chance to reflect on that after I get out of here and see whether or not anything immediately comes to mind. I think given the circumstances we've had to deal with, I think we've done pretty well. My experience goes back -- this is the fourth administration I've worked in. Things that were cited as a regret at the time -- Jerry Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon, for example -- 30 years later looked pretty good. So I'm cautious, in terms of making judgments at this point. A lot of other people can do it. I'm not yet out of office, and I'll withhold judgment for a while.

Q The attacks don't seem to bother you, but when they make a political ad out of you in the last week of the campaign, to be seen at one event and, you know, that the approval rating -- I understand your position on the polls, but do those attacks on you get to you? Do they bug you?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No. If they did I shouldn't take this job. You know, we talked about how Senator Clinton

referred to me as Darth Vader. And I asked my wife about that, if that didn't bother her, and she said, no, it humanizes you.

So it's -- you've got to have a sense of humor about it, don't take it personally. You've got to have a thick skin, or you shouldn't be in this business. You can turn on the Jay Leno show or David Letterman on any weekday night, and over the course of a week there are likely to be two or three shots fired in my direction. You just -- you really can't worry about it. Most of them are pretty funny.

Q And then finally, what are you going to do next? What's the final act for --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know yet. I've -- as I say, I've got 35 more days to go here with the President. And then I'll decide after that. I'm not ready to retire yet, but I do get a chance to spend more time with the family. Got some rivers -- got some rivers I want to fish, maybe write a book. I haven't decided yet.

So there will be, hopefully, plenty of years left to engage in those other activities. And my experience has been when you get to one of these major turning points in your life, a major milestone where you leave one activity and have to do something else, on the other side usually are good things. So that's always been my experience.

Q All right, Mr. Vice President, thank you for your time.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Jonathan.

Q Appreciate it.

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: There's something I want to show you, if it's still here. This is a shot of Pershing's office, when General Pershing had this right after World War I until 1947. And this desk is the Pershing desk, and it's the desk I had when I was Secretary of Defense. It's now over in the Pentagon, and has been there for years -- a beautiful, huge desk. And Rumsfeld had it, and of course, Bob Gates has got it now.

But I told Rumsfeld at one point, I said, "I want that desk back. It belongs in my office." (Laughter.) And he said, "You can't have it." And he said, "Besides, you can't prove it." So I've got this picture, which proves that it was in here in Pershing's day, but he still wouldn't give it --

Q He still wouldn't give it? Does he know that he no longer outranks you? (Laughter.)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know. That's a beautiful desk. But this one that replaced it was -- I think Teddy Roosevelt was the one who originally acquired it.

Q When he was Vice President?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, when he was President.

Q When he was President?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes. And it's been used by a number of Presidents. And of course, it's been the desk of the Vice President in the Ceremonial Office here, really -- in one of these drawers -- which one is it? Yes, this is it. It's got the names and signatures of a lot of the Vice Presidents. Here's Harry Truman, George Bush -- and they've got the dates they had it. Truman signed it in 1965, obviously long after he'd been Vice President. Mondale, Dan Quayle. I can't read it -- oh, Rockefeller, Nelson Rockefeller.

Q Well, your signature is not in here yet.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Mine is not in there yet.

Q I've got a pen if you want to do it right now.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I think we're going to have a little ceremony --

Q Oh, okay. I thought we could take the opportunity.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I actually brought my jack-knife here, I could carve it up. (Laughter.)

Q You won't get in trouble for defacing government property?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, it's got plastic over it -- I think I'm allowed to do just the one -- but it's -- of course, we had a bad fire in here, what, about a year ago. And there was an awful lot of smoke damage. This room didn't burn, but the one next to it did. And they've come back in and done just a tremendous job of restoring it to its original decor -- if you look at wood and the painting in the ceiling, and so forth, this is what it looked like when the building was built back in the late 19th century.

Q Where were you when that fire happened?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I was across the street in my office --

Q The West Wing?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: In the West Wing, and where I spend most of my time. And all of a sudden, there were fire engines coming up West Exec Avenue, and smoke coming out of the building over here. And I looked out and said, "That's my office." I had no idea. But it was an electric closet back, right next to it, and something shorted out in there and started a fire.

Q But what did you think? You must have thought, oh, my God --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I was worried about a lot of it -- over here we've got this globe. This is one that was in an early photograph that I'd seen after I got here. And then it disappeared. And I had them do a search to see if they could find it, and they found it in the Library of Congress. And it was all beat up. It had holes poked in it and so forth. And so it's been restored as much as they could restore it. And it's a great old piece, but it belonged here; it was here originally in the office. And so we've been able to bring it back and restore it, too.

Of course, right next door is the -- for a while it was the office of the Secretary of the Navy; next door was the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. And both Teddy Roosevelt and FDR occupied that space when they were Assistant Secretary of the Navy, before they ever became President.

It's a great old building. They're now going through it -- the Secretary of War's office has been completed over on the west side of this building, and in much the same decor as this one. But it's a beautiful space --

Q You're going to miss it, huh?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, no question about it. I mean, there's some -- I've loved being Vice President and I've loved my time in government -- being Secretary of Defense, or Ford's Chief of Staff. So -- maybe I'll write a book.

Q Yes, I think there could be some --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: There's a few stories there.

Q All right, sir. Well, thanks for being so generous with your time. Appreciate it.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Good to see you.

Q Take care. We'll see you again.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

END 2:39 P.M. EST

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