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Interview of the Vice President by Kelly O'Donnell, NBC News

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Q This has been, I think, a particularly interesting trip, especially looking back at your role when you were, sort of, in a different position in the Cold War, as Secretary of Defense. It has been interesting watching you come back to this part of the world, given that history.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Right. No, it's changed remarkably. And the perspective from 15 years ago, the Balkans, or Eastern Europe, or of parts of the old Soviet Union is tremendous. It demonstrates, well, the power of the President's freedom agenda. You see millions of people motivated by that desire and making enormous achievements, changing their whole lives, rebuilding their governments, and their economies. And you go to Vilnius, and there's the Latvians -- or Lithuanians, and the Estonians, and the Georgians, and the Malaysians, and the Ukrainians -- all part of the old Soviet Union.

Q And being a student of history because that's obviously what got me into this side of the business, I was interested in watching that part of your address, and of course, speaking to the room, in addition, to a message that goes much broader than that. And we're going to have you here, sir.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Okay.

Q And assuming that that had to have been kind of a unique personal experience for you, as well, how things change in the course of your own personal experience.

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Q Mr. Vice President, thank you so much for making some time for us.

Critics of outgoing CIA Director Porter Goss say that during his time the agency was politicized, there were some good CIA people who were forced out, and morale suffered. How have you seen that damage the agency?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I -- first of all, I'm a fan of Porter's. I think he's a very able and talented public servant. He didn't have to take the job. He



took it on at a very difficult time, and I think he's done a reasonably good job at it, too.

It's been a tough time for the agency. They came through the whole period before 9/11 and missed 9/11 and obviously were criticized for that. The report about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the Gulf War -- before the war in Iraq was another instance where there was a breakdown in the system. It didn't produce the quality intelligence that was needed, so Porter took on the assignment at a very difficult time. And now he's leaving. I think he ought to leave with honor that he's owed, and the respect that he's owed, and the thanks for having done a very difficult job. And the President will soon announce a replacement, and we'll move on.

Q Is the President prepared to name General Hayden?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I can't announce that today, Kelly. He will -- he'll make an announcement very soon.

Q The President did describe Porter Goss as a transitional leader. What must the next CIA Director bring to that job?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, having to make a lot of adjustments. When you think about the intelligence community and the way in which the threat has evolved, it's imposed huge demands for change in the way we do business. We used to just be able to count missiles and silos. That was relatively easy to do from overhead satellites. We've built a whole system around technical collection that worked very well during the Cold War. But now when we're faced with trying to find ways to figure out what a small group of terrorists are going to do, they're difficult to penetrate, difficult to track by national technical means. It's a whole different kind of a target. It places a much heavier emphasis on human intelligence than was required necessarily before. So there are big changes underway in the intelligence community. We've seen the Director of National Intelligence created, major legislative reforms that have occurred that we've implemented. And those changes are necessary. They're important, but it automatically places a burden on whoever is in that job as Director of the CIA.

Q You made some news during this trip with some of your comments about Russia, particularly interesting given your own history during the Cold War. Mr. Vice President, you talked about Russia in strong language. You said they have restricted some of the rights of citizens in terms of personal freedom. You talked about Russia blackmailing, using its own energy resources. Russia's Foreign Minister says that it has never broken an oil contract, and Russia's Foreign Minister says that it expected that kind of language from a low-ranking politician, not the Vice President of the United States. Is Russia dismissing you or U.S. concerns?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, the thing that was remarkable about the speech, Kelly -- it was carefully crafted. And I did point out our view that Russia is backsliding on democracy to some extent, and also there's no question but what they're using their control over energy resources -- both production and transportation of natural gas, for example, to Europe -- to try to gain leverage over those governments that used to be part of the old Soviet Union. And if you talk to the people I talked to in Vilnius, in the Baltics, in Poland and Ukraine and so forth, they've all been subjected to a lot of Russian pressure.

The intriguing thing about that conference was I didn't give the toughest speech on the Russians. The toughest speech on the Russians was given by a man named Illarionov, a Russian himself, who issued a blistering indictment about what's been happening to democracy and democratic processes in Russia. The remarkable thing is he used to be President Putin's economic advisor. He's a very prominent man who runs an economics institute in Moscow. So the concerns about what's happening domestically inside Russia with respect to freedom of the press and the role of nongovernmental organizations and the whole series of steps that have been taken with respect to businesses, for example -- that the Russians are not demonstrating as firm a commitment to democracy as I think many people thought they would.

Q Russia is going to host the G8 Summit of Industrialized Nations. That's considered, in many ways, a privilege for a nation to do so. Do you think they

fully represent what a host country should be?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think the G8 summit in St. Petersburg is important. It's important that it go forward. And Russia has been invited to participate in the past. And now, as they rotate that chairmanship, it's their turn to host it -- been some controversy about that. But I think a good, free, open exchange of ideas among the leaders of the eight, including Russia, will be basically a positive and healthy thing. I think it needs to happen. I think there'll be an honest addressing, hopefully, of some of those concerns.

Russia has a tremendous opportunity here, obviously, to be a strategic partner and ally of the United States and the other major democracies in the world. They've undergone a fundamental transformation since the days of the Cold War and the Soviet Union went out of business some 15 years ago. But we're all hopeful that they'll see their way in the future to be that strategic friend and partner of all of us, and that they will, in fact, be committed to democratic practices and procedures inside their own country, as well as a policy with respect to their neighbors that is friendly and supportive and doesn't fear other democracies.

Q How did you weigh the criticism of Russia as possibly alienating them at a time when the U.S. needs Russia in the Security Council to try to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we have no desire to alienate Russia. But you also need to speak truth to your friends. And the President has a good relationship with President Putin. They get on well, and they have very frank conversations and discussions. And this was certainly intended in that vein.

But it's remarkable. What I find of concern when I look at Russia, in part, is that they operate as though those new democracies in Eastern Europe are somehow a threat, that what's happened in the Baltics, or in Poland, or in Ukraine, Georgia all constitutes some kind of a threat to Russia itself. And they clearly don't.

The best neighbor that a government can have is another democracy, somebody that's committed to a free and open society and respects the rights of its own citizens and pursues friendly relations, if you will, to their neighbors. None of those governments in Eastern Europe constitute any kind of a threat to Russia. The fact that many of them are now members of NATO does not constitute a threat to Russia. It's hard, though, sometimes to get the Russians to believe that. And so we need to have these conversations.

Q They're not yet helpful with Iran.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Not yet. We hope they will be. They have -- their effort earlier to offer to enrich uranium for Iran for civilian reactor purposes was a helpful contribution. And they're an important member of the U.N. Security Council, so we'll continue to work with them. We do have many common interests around the world. But it's important with respect to the Iranian situation that the international community come together and adopt a unified effective position vis-a-vis Iran if we're going to avoid having a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

Q Coming back to White House for a moment, the President's approval rating has been in the 30s. Yours has slipped to the teens. Do you think you need to do more to better serve the President to improve how Americans perceive you?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I do my job to the best of my ability. I am there specifically to serve him and not to worry about my ratings in the polls. I'm not there -- I'm not running for anything. I call them like I see them. I give him the best advice I can. He doesn't always agree. Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn't. But we don't spend a lot of time looking at the polls. You can't. There's not enough hours in the day to worry about all of that. We've got a job to do. We've got a mission to accomplish, big things that we're about -- both in the international arena and domestically -- and so I think for both

of us, as I say, we don't spend a lot of time on polls.

Q If people felt differently about the administration might that help you to achieve some of the things you're looking to accomplish?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not sure that's the case. I think the important thing is that we get people to focus on problems, that we get the Congress to focus on problems. We've done some pretty amazing things in the course of a little over five years now. But there's a lot left to do. There's always more work, if you will, if you think about it in those terms. And we'll continue to push very, very hard. And the President is one of those who believes in taking on big issues. You don't always prevail when you take on big issues. You can play small ball and deal only with small items at the margins. But that's not what we went there to do. We went there to address big issues.

And when you think back about what we've done over the course of the last five-and-a-half years, we feel very good about our record, and I think the American people will, too.

Q The President has a new Chief of Staff who is making some changes. In the last year or so, there has been a lot of attention on your office, some of that coming from the CIA leak case. The hunting accident was a distraction. Do you believe your influence in the White House has changed in any way?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Not that I'm aware of. The President is the key to all of that, of course. And I feel like he gives me the access that I need to be able to do my job. He listens. As I say, he doesn't always agree with me, but that wasn't the deal. The deal at the outset was I'd be an important part of the team and have an opportunity to weigh in on those issues I wanted to weigh in on, and he's kept his word.

Q You have said you will not seek the presidency. You will complete your term. When you consider what it might mean for the Republican Party, would there be any benefit if you were to retire, to allow the President to choose someone else who might then have an advantage in 2008?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not sure it would be an advantage. But that's not my concern. I, in effect, took on the obligation when I put my name on the ballot at the request of the President -- both in 2000 and again in 2004 -- that if elected to serve out my term, I feel I've got a contract, if you will, with the American people, a constitutionally elected officer, my term ends in January of 2009, and barring some unforeseen disaster, that's what I'll do.

Q What role do you think you play for 2008?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, it's -- at this stage, obviously, it's too early to get into the business of endorsing any candidates. We've got a lot of good candidates out there. At the appropriate time, I'll be happy to campaign for the ticket in 2008, if they want me to. They may not want me to. That will be their call. But until then, I'll keep focused on the job at hand, doing what the President needs to have done.

Q You have been out campaigning for Republican candidates.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q Midterm elections are coming. Many Republicans are concerned that the party may lose seats. Do you expect the Republicans to lose seats?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't. But I think it's going to be a hard fought contest. It always is when you're in the midterm election of a second presidential term. And we're working at it harder than we ever have before. I've already done 57 events this campaign cycle that are campaign events to help members

of Congress running for reelection, or to help some of our challengers. But in terms of trying to forecast what will happen in November, difficult to do at this stage. What I find when I get out around the country is that we've got some great candidates running out there, some great challengers, very talented people who are willing to step up and put their name on the ballot. And I think it will ultimately boil down to sort of race by race, congressional district by congressional district around the country in terms of deciding who is going to control the next Congress. I feel pretty good about our prospects, but I learned a long time ago not to make hard and fast projections.

Q I'd like to ask you about two of the comments that you have made that have gotten a lot of attention with respect to Iraq. Much has been made about what you said about being greeted as liberators, and about a year ago when you said the insurgency was in its last throes. More recently, you defended that as, "basically accurate." With all due respect, sir, isn't that wrong?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Which?

Q Both of those?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Both of those. No, I think with respect to the question of were we greeted as liberators, I think we clearly are viewed as liberators by the vast majority of the Iraqi people. No question we've had problems with a group of terrorist insurgents, but that's a very small minority. And I really believe that when the history books are written that what we'll find is that 2005 was the turning year, the watershed year for Iraq operations. Why? Well, primarily because that's the year which the Iraqis first had an election in January, when they elected an interim government. That's the year in which they wrote a constitution -- the most up-to-date modern constitution in the Arab world. That's the year when they ratified that constitution, and finally, you had national elections. They had three national elections last year. In their last national election, they turned out by the millions to participate in that process.

And I think when we look back from the perspective of history, we'll see that that was the turning point, that was the period of time when the Iraqis stepped up and began to take responsibility for their own fate, for their own affairs, developed a political system and put it in place, as well as participated in a major way in the training of their own security forces -- now got some 250,000 of them in the field. And that will have been the time when we turned the corner, when -- in effect, got on top of the situation in Iraq and will ultimately succeed in completing our mission.

I don't think you can judge it just day by day, or what's happened this week, or what happened last week. I do think you need to have some historic perspective on this, and I think if you take a historical perspective on what we've done in Iraq, that, in fact, that will have been the watershed year, if you will.

Q Back in February you talked about the hunting accident as one of the worst days of your life. Since then it has become a punch line -- even for the President. Are you okay with that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes, I am. Fortunately, Harry Whittington is in great shape, and no lasting damage done. But I say it will always be a difficult memory for me in terms of what happened to Harry that day. But, yes, people have had a lot of fun with it. And I've even used it a few times myself in remarks. And it's -- you need to have a sense of humor if you're Vice President. There's no question about that.

Q At that time you also said you needed some time to think about whether you would hunt again. It has been an important hobby for you. Will you hunt again, sir?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I expect I will.

Q I also want to ask you about some other personal things for you. Mrs. Cheney is an author. Now your daughter Mary has written a book, and in it she talks about her life in politics. And included in that, she recounts how she came out to you and Mrs. Cheney. You've been very private about that.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I have.

Q How do you feel about her making that public and putting it in print?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, Mary -- that was Mary's choice. And she wrote the book and had a lot of fun doing it. I can't say it was a family enterprise. We all talked about it. We spent several hours, the four of us, two daughters and Lynne and myself, sitting down around the table recalling events that Mary wanted to put into the book. It is -- I think for Mary it was a very personal kind of endeavor to write about it. It's her life. She's entitled to talk about it if she wants, and I certainly support her.

Q Is it harder to be the protective father when she chooses to make it public and to put it in --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm a very private person. And that hasn't changed. From the standpoint of Mary's own life, I think it's perfectly appropriate for her to talk about it if she wants to. And she choose to do that. And I think it's a good book.

Q Speaking of books, Valerie Plame Wilson has gotten a book contract, the CIA officer who became known through the CIA leak case. Any interest in reading that book?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I didn't read her husband's book either.

Q You have been in public life for a very long time. Do you think the American people really have a sense of who you are?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, some of them do, perhaps. But that's not why I got involved in public life in the first place. I feel enormously privileged to have had the opportunity over the years to work for several different Presidents. When I started in the White House back in the Nixon administration, I was one of the youngest people in the West Wing, now I'm the oldest. The intervening periods, I've worked directly for four Presidents and worked closely with others from the perspective of the Congress. It has been a remarkable career from my perspective. I've loved it and still enjoy very much doing it. History will decide how I did. Others can evaluate my performance. A lot of voters have had that opportunity over the years. Fortunately, I've never lost an election. That doesn't mean that I might not lose one if I continued long enough in the business, but I'm not going to be in the business that much longer anyway.

Q Mr. Vice President, thank you so much for taking time to talk with us.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Kelly.

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