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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

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INTERVIEW OF THE VICE PRESIDENT  
BY SCOTT PELLEY, CBS

Vice President's Ceremonial Office

3:28 P.M. EDT

**Q** What were you doing in the minute before the first tower was hit?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** I was in a meeting in my office with my speechwriter. And my secretary called in from outside to tell me that the World Trade Center had been hit. It's when we turned on the television and saw the smoke rising from the first building. And then, as we watched -- a few minutes passed, and as we watched, we saw the second plane then strike the other tower.

**Q** And then what happened?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, it got somewhat chaotic. I talked to Condi Rice, she came down to my office. Scooter Libby who was my Chief of Staff, came over. We had -- people got together. We had to get the counterterrorism task force up and running because by the time the second plane hit, it was clear it was a terrorist attack.

Then I had a conversation with the President from Florida. And this was before he went out and made his statement in Florida. And about the time he finished his statement, one of my Secret Service agents came in, and he was all of a sudden standing right next to me, and he said, "Sir, we have to leave immediately," and grabbed by the hand on the back of my belt, another hand on my shoulder, and propelled me out the door of my office.

**Q** Picked you up?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Didn't really pick you up. I'm not sure -- they must train for it -- I'm not sure how they do it, but they just sort of levitate you down the hallway. They move very fast; you don't have any choice but to go the direction they want you to go in. And as I say, we were in the West Wing, and

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we went down, headed for the Presidential Emergency Operations Center under the White House, and stopped -- there's a tunnel down there with a glass door on each end of it, and we stopped there.

The reason they moved me was because they'd had a report from the FAA out of Dulles I believe that a plane was headed for the White House. And this is the one that eventually -- it came towards the White House and did a 360 degree turn and crashed into the Pentagon.

Q As you're being hustled down the hall of the West Wing, what are you thinking?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, at that point, obviously, I'm thinking that somebody is trying to attack Washington, the White House. I knew this was an evacuation. I didn't have time to ask a lot of questions, obviously. They only had a very short period of time to get me out of my office down to a secure facility.

And once we got down there, of course, nothing had happened. If there was a plane headed for the White House, it clearly hadn't hit. But we knew by then that Washington was under attack. And there was a TV set down there that showed -- that's where I first saw that the Pentagon had been hit. And a secure telephone down there -- I picked up the telephone and called the President again -- he was in Florida and on his way to the airport -- and recommended that he not return to Washington, that Washington was being attacked, as well as New York, and we didn't know what the extent of the attack was. It was my strong recommendation that he delay his return to Washington until we could find out what was happening.

Q Let me take half a step back. When the President called you the first time from that classroom in Florida, what did he say?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** We talked about what he should say in his public statement, and agreed -- I mean, the issue, as I recall, was can we say this is, in fact, a terrorist attack. And we agreed that we definitely could say this is an apparent terrorist attack, as I recall. It was a matter of agreeing upon the wording. The President goes out at a moment like that, it's very significant, it's the first thing the country is going to see in terms of him in this crisis. They want reassurance; they want to know their government is in business and functioning. And so he was -- so we compared notes on what we knew, which wasn't a lot at that point, but then he went out and made the statement he made on his way out of Florida.

Q When you entered the PEOC, you're the first one there?

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**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** No, it's manned on a continuous basis, and I was not the first one there. As I recall, Condi Rice was right behind me coming in. My wife by then had arrived and been ushered in, came along with me, as well, too. It was -- Norm Mineta arrived about the same time. I don't remember exact sequence of whether he was there first or I was there first. Anyway, Norm arrived. And he, of course, the Secretary of Transportation with a direct line to the FAA -- we began to work the problem of the airplanes, how many airplanes are there, how many had been perhaps hijacked. Initially we had a list of six that we thought had been hijacked, not four. And by then, the order had already been given through the FAA to take all the commercial aircraft and get everybody down, landed at all the airports, clear the skies.

**Q** How did you come up with that list of six potentially hijacked planes?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** I got it from Norm, and I'm sure he got it from the FAA. And it was the list of flights that were unaccounted for, in effect. Now, it turned out four of the six on there were, in fact, hijacked. The other two -- double reporting, confusion in tail numbers, and so forth. But for a period of time that morning, we thought there were six aircraft, domestic flights that had been hijacked. And later on during the day, we received reports of five additional flights might have been hijacked that were international flights inbound for the U.S. We had one Korean airliner, for example, that we scrambled jets on over Alaska because they didn't respond when communicated with.

So it took a while, several hours during the course of the day, before we resolved all this question of whether or not we could account for every airplane or was there still a commercial airliner out there that had been hijacked and was potentially going to strike a target.

**Q** In fact, threats of many kinds are flowing into the PEOC and to the President, ultimately.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Yes. One of the lessons you learn in that kind of situation is that there's always a lot of misinformation, as well as good information. And it's hard to tell truth from false reporting. And people do the best they can, but there were news reports, for example, that there had been a car bomb at the State Department, another report at one point that there had been an explosion at the Washington Monument. Turned out those weren't true.

We had a report of a plane down in Pennsylvania; of course, that was Flight 93, that was true. Later on in the morning we had another report of a plane that had gone down in the Ohio-Kentucky border that was not true. It turned out that that was

probably American 77 that flew into the Pentagon. It had gone off the radar screens, turned around and headed back towards Washington. And somebody had taken that as an indication that it had crashed down in Ohio, but it never did. It turned around and came back.

So you've got confusing information coming in and you're trying to make the most of it and make decisions and make things happen. The main thing was to clear the skies, and also deal with the problem of continuity of government.

**Q** When you first entered the PEOC, for my information, the Pentagon has not been hit at that moment?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** No, it had been hit, because I saw the report that it had been hit, I believe -- trying to go back and break out all those moments. The plane that hit the Pentagon was the plane that originally triggered the alarm that led to my evacuation from my office. And instead of hitting the White House, which is where they thought it was headed originally, of course, it did a complete 360-degree turn and crashed into the Pentagon, and that was a relatively short span of time. And trying to recreate the timeline here, I believe that I learned that the Pentagon had been hit from the TV set down in that tunnel, when I called the President the second time.

**Q** So, just to be clear, the Pentagon is hit. That triggers your evacuation. You learn of the Pentagon in the PEOC.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** The flight towards the White House is what triggered the evacuation.

**Q** I see.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** That plane never hit the White House, of course, it went back and hit the Pentagon. And during the course of the evacuation, I hear that the Pentagon has been hit, and then arrived in the PEOC shortly after that.

**Q** You must have thought that the White House was a certain target.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Yes. By then the Pentagon has been hit, we've got reports of more aircraft that are missing, that are unaccounted for, and then of course, during the course of the morning we have reporting of planes inbound towards Washington. Those all ultimately got resolved -- some of them diverted and went away, others landed at various airports in the region, and so nothing ever hit. But included within that group of reports obviously was the one on the airliner that had been hijacked, the United flight that was crashed in Pennsylvania.

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**Q** Are you sitting in the Presidential Emergency Operations Center waiting for a thunderous explosion over your head?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** No, that's not the way it worked. There's a lot of work to be done: numerous phone calls to the President, decisions to be made about evacuating the Speaker and other congressional leaders who are in the line of succession for the Presidency, the Cabinet members to be moved to a secure location, questions about when the President can come back to Washington, public statements. So there's a constant, steady flow of work issues to come up that need to be done.

The issue came up during the course of the morning about whether or not I should be evacuated from the PEOC, and the Secret Service recommended it and I decided not to, on the grounds of by then we had a well-established chain of succession, the President was safe and secure, he was at Barksdale and then Offutt on Air Force One. The Speaker, the number three in line, was at a secure location outside Washington. He'd been evacuated and relocated. We had various Cabinet members that we'd also sent to a similar location. So there was no question but what the chain of succession was established.

And from my standpoint and in terms of my ability to be able to contribute to the circumstance, being in the PEOC was the right place to be, because I had good communications. I was in touch with the President, I was in touch with Rumsfeld at the Pentagon. We were linked together with the communications network that was vital. And if I had left the PEOC and went and got on a helicopter to fly someplace, there would be a break there where I was out of touch. And for that reason, I made the decision not to evacuate the PEOC.

**Q** What you're saying is that when you looked at the line of succession, you counted yourself out.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** At that point, yes. But you -- under those circumstances, you don't know exactly what's going to unfold here. You've got the attacks going on. The training on the line of succession is something, first of all, you think about as Vice President. It's one of your major responsibilities.

But also, I had spent a lot of time over the years, during my time as Secretary of Defense, for example, in the Congress, as Chief of Staff to President Ford, dealing with this question of the continuity of government. How do you ensure against a decapitating strike against the government that would take out not only the President, but THE VICE PRESIDENT and other senior leadership?

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And so I had been through it so much and often enough, it's almost second nature, in terms of -- you don't think of it in personal terms. You think of it in terms of, okay, the President is safe and secure. Denny Hastert has been evacuated, he's secure. We've got some Cabinet members located up there, dispersed. They can't get the entire government. And we go on about our business.

But it's important to emphasize it's not personal. You don't think of it in personal terms. You've got a professional job to do.

**Q** As the planes are tracking toward Washington, a discussion begins about whether we should shoot them down.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Right.

**Q** How did that happen?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, I discussed it with the President, because we had -- by this point, they had scrambled aircraft over Washington, put up a combat air patrol. But you know, when you deploy forces, you need to give them rules of engagement. What are they going to do? You know, they've got to have some assignment that they've been given, some authorization they've been given. And the question that was put to me in the PEOC was, are we prepared to order our aircraft to shoot down these airliners that had been hijacked?

I discussed that with the President; he said yes, he wanted to authorize that, and I passed that along, then, to personnel -- who, I'm sure, communicated it out. But at the same time, the President then talked with Rumsfeld as well and conveyed the same instruction to him.

**Q** What a terrible decision to make. That was your advice to the President?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** It was my advice. It was his decision, but it was fairly clear-cut. It was obviously a momentous decision, in terms of what you're asking a pilot to do. But on the other hand, in terms of any evaluation of the cost versus lives saved, once that airliner has been hijacked, it may have American citizens on it, but it's been taken over by terrorists, it's become a weapon, and if they're allowed to carry out their mission -- we'd seen what they'd done to the World Trade Center -- if they're allowed to carry out their mission, then hundreds, perhaps thousands, more people will die.

So the decision, in terms of weighing that, is fairly clear-cut. It was the right thing to do. But, fortunately, we didn't have to do it.

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**Q** When word came in that Flight 93 had gone down, what did you think?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** I thought, because there was no report that we'd shot it down, I thought that the passengers had taken it down. That was my immediate reaction. An act of heroism. These people clearly -- we found out later obviously -- the flight had been delayed enough so they were able to find out after they were hijacked what had happened at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And they then very courageously took on the terrorists and of course the plane crashed in Pennsylvania. As tragic as that was, it was far better than having it hit the Capitol building or Washington D.C. and the White House.

**Q** You know, Mr. Vice President, when you think about it, those people may very well have sacrificed themselves for you.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** It's entirely possible. I've thought about that.

**Q** As the hour wears on, you're watching the TV monitors in the bunker. And the towers start to come down. What did you feel?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, that was the -- to some extent, the emotional low-point, I guess you could describe it in those terms. I mean, to see that first tower crumble, that was -- and the whole morning was unexpected, obviously. We had not anticipated that commercial airliners would strike our facilities.

But there was something very dramatic about that moment. Part of it was, I recalled having been in the World Trade Center complex myself. I'd been there 10 years before. We'd had, at the time, at the end of the Gulf War, when the city of New York welcomed home the troops and General Powell, General Schwarzkopf and I had all been entertained at a dinner one night with the Medal of Honor winners by Governor Cuomo in the World Trade Center complex, which you could see collapsing, that had been struck that morning.

It had had a significant impact, for everybody watched it. And I think a lot of us who had spent time in New York had various ties to it emotionally, in terms of having been there, knowing what it was like, been in Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center.

**Q** But seeing them come down, you knew as well as anyone that there were probably thousands of people in there, and you were witnessing their deaths.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** That's right.

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Q You must have been heartsick.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, if you look at the pictures, there are some photographs that were taken in the PEOC of those of us who were there that day -- myself, Mary Matalin, my wife, Scooter Libby, others, Condi Rice -- the look on the faces of the people in the PEOC, myself included obviously, is stricken at that point. It brought home, in very stark ways, the nature of the attack.

Q Let us jump ahead for a moment to September the 12th, if you will. The President wants to go to war. He wants to go to war. He has said, the bloodlust of the American people was rightly at a boil. You have a President who wants to go to war. What advice are you giving him the next day? What are the pitfalls, the problems?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, you're still -- the next day you're still looking for information. You're trying to pull together various intelligence sources, and so forth, reports from the CIA. By then there were strong suspicions that this was an al Qaeda/Osama bin Laden operation.

Q How did you know?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** One of the tip-offs was that a couple of days before there had been an assassination in Afghanistan that we were all aware of, Massoud, one of the leaders of the Afghan Northern -- really, the leader of the Northern Alliance, had been assassinated, and there had been speculation about that.

I can remember Scooter Libby, who worked for me, suggesting some linkage at that point to al Qaeda and bin Laden. It was during the day on the 11th. We had speculation during the day. I don't know that any of it was all that informed on the 11th, but that this might have been an al Qaeda operation.

By the 12th we're starting to get a better feel for that. This was not a -- not the first time we'd ever heard of this organization, obviously. We've been looking at it previously. Osama bin Laden had launched the attack on the USS Cole in 2000, had hit the East African embassies in 1998. So it was a subject that we had focused on previously as a national security problem.

But as we looked at those events, on the 11th and then on the 12th, it increasingly occurred to us, looked to us like this had been such an attack. It took a while to put together all the pieces of it, to identify the hijackers and all of the other things that went into actually nailing down what transpired. But in those early hours and early days, there was a strong suspicion that this was who it was.

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Q And the advice the President is receiving the next day. He wants to go to war. What do you tell him?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, he does. But he also wants to make sure it's done right. We've got to gather information: where was the attack launched from, is this al Qaeda, if it's al Qaeda they're operating in Afghanistan, so you're pretty quickly zeroing in on Afghanistan and the Taliban and so forth.

But you've also got -- before you can do anything, you've got to start moving assets, and begin to think about putting together a plan. That really came to fruition that weekend up at Camp David. But in these early days, it's mostly a matter -- Wednesday, Thursday, Friday -- a matter of gathering information, what are the options, people beginning to focus on it. It doesn't immediately -- you don't get up the next morning and pull a plan off the shelf, and say, okay, bang, here it is.

But all of the agencies and departments involved have got knowledge, information. CIA had people who had worked in Afghanistan in the '80s, when we were involved there supporting the Afghan Mujahadeen against the Soviets. The Defense Department always has contingency plans of various kinds for various possibilities. So things begin to flow, options begin to be developed, and you begin to think about what the right kind of response is.

Q Did the President ask the next day, what can I do right now -- if I did something now, what would it be?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** I recall it, as the plan developed, being more deliberate than that. He had made a decision fairly early on as part of this whole process, for example, that we didn't want just a symbolic Cruise missile strike on some training camp in Afghanistan; that if we were going to go to war, it was going to be -- and go very, very serious effort, boots on the ground so to speak -- to wrap-up the al Qaeda organization and get Osama bin Laden. And of course we had to deal with the Taliban problem initially. We didn't have an answer from them at the outset, initially. He asked them to produce Osama bin Laden, they eventually refused to do that. But it takes a while for these things to come together.

Now, he can establish, and he did establish very clear intentions -- statements of intent that this is a war, we're going to go all out, this is top priority, we want to do everything we can to prevail. He talked about the importance of building the coalition, the opportunity that existed here to get a lot of nations to work together on a common problem. We talked about, as I recall, the fact that we needed to focus not only on the military, but also on intelligence, and therefore the CIA and our intelligence agencies, on the financial aspects of it -- obviously this led to a significant role for Treasury, law

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enforcement. There's a whole range of capabilities here that had to be marshalled and brought to bear on this bigger problem of the al Qaeda organization.

**Q** There were some in the administration who were advising that Iraq should be part of the initial strike.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** We had that debate fairly early on, that's correct.

**Q** And how did that debate go?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, there were -- and I think generally in the final analysis the decision was made to focus on Afghanistan and the al Qaeda organization. Different people expressed different views on the Iraq situation. But the decision was made, as the one that we carried out, to focus on Afghanistan.

**Q** And why focus on Afghanistan only? Why narrow the focus?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, that was the immediate problem. That's where the al Qaeda organization was located, that's where all of the indicators that we could pick up indicated that Osama bin Laden was operating from there, and he was the focal point, initially.

**Q** By the time you get to Camp David on Saturday, there's some clarity beginning to form on the advice that's going to the President. At Camp David, what is the President hearing from the national security team?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, I think -- we've had so many meetings over the course of the last year, it's hard to sort out any one in particular. We had a gathering of the National Security Council and deputies, met several hours that day in the big conference room in Laurel Lodge, which is sort of the center of the Camp David complex.

We began to focus on the -- as I recall, to focus on the linkage between the intel side of the business and the military side of the business -- that if you looked at Afghanistan, initially there were not a lot of targets there. It's not a target rich environment initially. You've got to be able to develop information on targets before you can go strike them.

Clearly, the CIA had a major role to play. But the CIA had some useful assets there. They had relationships with some of these people on the ground. They had been operating there in the past. So beginning to put together that linkage, if you will, between the intel side and the military side of the house, which was very important.

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We talked a lot about, as I recall, the President perceived an opportunity here to build a coalition, to get nations out there to come work together with us on this problem -- one of the smart things to do, if you're going to be successful in wrapping up this organization, but also an opportunity to get Russia, for example, and others into the loop as part of the effort aimed at fighting the war on terror.

**Q** The President must have asked what the downside was, what the traps were in going to war.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** I recall some conversations and discussion about Pakistan, for example. By then you're starting to look at relationships, what's going on in Afghanistan, the government, the Taliban. The Taliban is a unique organization at that point. They only had relationships with about three countries -- Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and I believe the Emirates, the United Arab Emirates in the Gulf.

The extent to which what needed to be done to mount a military operation and go into Afghanistan and wrap up the al Qaeda, and obviously take down the Taliban, could put strains on -- if we operated out of Pakistan, could create pressures for President Musharraf. President Musharraf, though, stepped right up and was a very courageous and effective leader in this particular case.

**Q** You had to be concerned that if you caused chaos in Pakistan, Pakistan has nuclear weapons, in a very unstable part of the world. One thing leads to another.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Key decision the President made was that he could rely on Musharraf, that he would be an effective partner going forward, and that certainly proved to be the case. You can always create a rationale for not acting. I think one of the President's great strengths was he didn't do that. He heard the counsel, he listened to the various arguments, but he was absolutely committed to going after the al Qaeda organization and doing what we could to build up that coalition and partnership and friendship with other nations. And it worked, I think, very successfully. You can always take counsel of your fears, and you don't want to do that, obviously, and he didn't.

**Q** Explain to me, if you would, this very unusual strategy of using the CIA and special forces and then indigenous friendlies in the country. How -- I can imagine looking at that and wondering whether that's going to work. You're counting on the Afghans for a lot.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** It's true. You always had the option to use more U.S. force, if you had to. And you could always put in a lot more U.S. troops. But, again, the agency had

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relationships with a lot of these elements, the warlords, the leaders of the Northern Alliance. They knew the territory, they knew what they were capable of. You had this long history of warfare between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. And the ability to work together, using our intelligence assets as well as our new technologies, like the Predator, for example --

Q The surveillance drone.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Surveillance drone, unmanned surveillance drone, but that we armed -- that we were able to use the ability of -- to call in precision strikes. That once we put our special operating forces in on the ground, our special forces contingents, with a controller -- air controller in as part of that, the ability to call in strikes from a B-52, precision guided munitions, and to use that capability where in effect we married up the 19th century, if you will, Afghan forces, with a 21st century American military capability, it was absolutely devastating. It was a whole new way to fight a war, and it turned out to be enormously effective in this case. With a relatively small number of a few thousand U.S. troops, we were able to go in and do what needed to be done in relatively short order, and very effectively.

Q How much confidence was there around the table at the end of that Saturday at Camp David? Did somebody look up and say, Mr. President, we can win this, we guarantee it.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** I don't recall anybody saying that in particular. There was a high degree of confidence that we can do what needed to be done here. There were -- people had assignments, they had to go away and go to work and develop plans of various kinds, and figure out how to put together the operation. But I don't recall then any serious doubts about the wisdom of this.

Later on, during the year, as we got closer and closer to winter, as we ran into weather delays and other kinds of problems of getting our people in on the ground with the Northern Alliance, then there were concerns at various times expressed. And we had sessions where we said, look, we've got to get something done here before we get blocked in by winter snows and the forces can't move, and so forth. But that came later, and it turned out to be a concern that wasn't necessary.

Q Just a couple more, quickly, Mr. Vice President. In the early going, there seemed to be a lot of confidence in the administration that this was al Qaeda, by the next day. What was the hard evidence? I know this looked like an al Qaeda pattern, but how did the evidence develop?

**THE VICE PRESIDENT:** Well, as I recall -- you know we had the example of prior attacks by al Qaeda against U.S. -- the East

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Africa bombings, the USS Cole and so forth. The Clinton administration had responded by launching Cruise missiles back in the late '90s into Afghanistan, at the al Qaeda camps. We knew Osama bin Laden hung out there. There was already knowledge in the system about al Qaeda, about Osama bin Laden and about his operations inside Afghanistan.

Then we had the added factor that it happened just two days before, a journalist who went in -- turned out to be a suicide bomber, but a guy posing as a journalist went in to interview Massoud, and Massoud was the only remaining leader of the Afghan Mujahadeen who had defeated the Soviets back in the '80s, but who commanded the Northern Alliance. And it began to look as though Osama bin Laden had done the Taliban a favor by taking out Massoud just two days before he launched this attack against the United States. People began to speculate that you could -- that these are related events.

Q There were some communications intercepts.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't talk about those.

Q All right, fair enough. The Secretary of Defense has from time to time made a case that al Qaeda is in Iraq. Do we believe that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q How do we know? What do we know?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't talk about that. Obviously, we track members of the al Qaeda organization, wherever we can. But Don's statement that we've seen al Qaeda inside Iraq is true.

Q Any reason to believe their under the protection of the Hussein government?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't want to go beyond where I've gone. I don't want to speculate on that. Obviously, it gets us into talking about sensitive sources and methods, and I can't do that.

Q Suffice to say they're there, and we know it, and that's hard evidence, as far as you're concerned.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: (No audible response.)

Q All right, sir. Thank you very much, indeed.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

END

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