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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Vice President

Internal Transcript

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TELEPHONE INTERVIEW OF **MRS. CHENEY**
BY NEWSWEEK MAGAZINE

Q My hope is to get you to talk about what you were doing in the critical hours, or at the critical time, and what the Vice President was doing, insofar as you know. And like all dramas, a little foreshadowing is always helpful, and a little bit of the aftermath is also helpful. By that I mean, I'd be curious if --the subject of domestic terror has been around for a long time, and the threat has been there for a long time. I'm curious if the Vice President ever said anything to you about it in an ominous way, before all this hit -- that you can recall, if there was any sense of expectation or foreboding or whatever.

MRS. CHENEY: Well, there was certainly the idea it was something we needed to prepare for. Because, as you probably know, the next item in his portfolio, or item on his agenda after he finished up with energy, was homeland defense. And he'd hired a fellow -- I don't know who, you'd have to check with Mary, she knows who -- to direct the project. And, unfortunately, the need for the project became all too apparent all too soon.

Q Yes. Do you remember him ever saying anything? What I'm looking for here is, there have been a million reports -- well, there have been some reports, there had been some media attention, but it hadn't really caught on with the American public. Do you remember him ever saying anything about that? That even though the professionals who were looking at this were serious about it -- and, obviously, so was the White House or he wouldn't have been about to chair a project -- it hadn't really kind of registered on the public. Do you ever recall him saying anything about that?

MRS. CHENEY: No. I'm sorry, I can't help you with that. It just doesn't ring a bell.

Q Yes. Okay. Or, anything that do you remember him ever saying to you that -- anything about, I hope they don't hit before we get our act together on this, or anything like that?

MRS. CHENEY: No. No.

Q Well, let's go, if we can, then, to the morning that it happened. Tell me where you were and what you were doing as this event happened.

MRS. CHENEY: I was downtown. And the Secret Service let me know when one plane had hit, and when the second plane went in. But when the Pentagon was hit, they decided I should be out of downtown, and moved me rather briskly into a car, which went at rather high speed toward the Vice President's house.

When we got partway there, a decision was made -- and I don't know why or how -- that, no, the right thing for me to do was not go to the Vice President's house, but to go to the White House and to go down into the bunker.

And so we made a rather dramatic U-turn in the middle of the street and headed toward the White House. I can remember that I could see smoke. And I was feeling somewhat alarmed because I thought the smoke -- even though it was from the Pentagon and I knew the Pentagon had been hit -- it sure looked to me like the smoke was coming from the White House.

When we got there, I arrived just as the White House was being evacuated. So the guards had no idea who we were and were confused that somebody would want to be coming in, and wouldn't lower the barriers. The Secret Service people who were with me drove onto the sidewalk. And at that point, a fire engine tried to block our way --

Q Wow.

MRS. CHENEY: -- going into the White House. But I finally got in, was taken downstairs -- and as I say, everybody else was leaving the White House at this point -- lower and lower into the White House, and came across Dick, who was already underground. And when I got there, he was on the phone with the President. He was on the phone with the President many times that day. But from that first place where I ran into him, I moved with him into what they call the PEOC -- what is that, the President Emergency -- I don't know what the initials stand for, but you probably do.

Q Right. So when you met up with him, he wasn't already in the PEOC?

MRS. CHENEY: No, he was not. He was in a secure location; it was not the PEOC, but on his way there. PEOC is a conference room with some other rooms that lead off it.

Q So he was in the bunker, so to speak, but not --

MRS. CHENEY: He was below ground.

Q Just to get the, sort of, timing here, they briskly move you into a car. You know, they say with the Vice President they had sort of picked him up and launched him. When you say, moved you briskly into the car -- do you mean that they physically --

MRS. CHENEY: No, they didn't pick me up and launch me, but they did hurry me along.

Q And that was after the plane had hit the Pentagon? So that's after nine --

MRS. CHENEY: That's right. Until then, you know, it wasn't a Washington event. And the Secret Service people who were with me had no knowledge of a plane headed toward Washington.

Q Now, how far did you get before they decided to turn you around? Where did you do your U-turn?

MRS. CHENEY: You know, I wish I knew streets and stuff better to tell you, but I'd say we headed five minutes toward the VPR.

Q But had you crossed Rock Creek yet?

MRS. CHENEY: No. We were going up one of those streets, like 17th or something.

Q And you did your dramatic U-turn?

MRS. CHENEY: Right.

Q Do you have any idea of the time?

MRS. CHENEY: Let's see. I know that the plane in Pennsylvania -- no, let's see -- the Pentagon was struck about 9:40 a.m. So it was between 9:40 a.m. and, you know, a few minutes after 10:00 a.m. that I got there. It was probably close to 10:00 a.m.

Q And people are sort of streaming out the door there? I mean --

MRS. CHENEY: Yes. This was not the scene I've seen on camera, where people are now starting to run or anything -- maybe that had already happened. But people were all going in the other direction in a rather calm way when I arrived.

Q So they immediately get you into the -- below ground, and you find the President (sic) and then --

MRS. CHENEY: The Vice President, yes.

Q The Vice President, excuse me. Both of you -- and he was on the phone with the President at the time?

MRS. CHENEY: Right.

Q And do you remember anything, do you remember what they were talking about?

MRS. CHENEY: No. No, I just remember that he was on the phone with the President.

Q And then what precipitates the decision to go to the PEOC?

MRS. CHENEY: Well, I just think that they wanted a conference room where people could sit around a table and have communications. The PEOC also has television sets in the wall and so on. And it's next to rooms that are loaded with communications gear. I can't be any more specific than that.

I remember, the PEOC is also a wood-paneled room, and it was a surreal experience to go into it because there were cookies on the table. (Laughter.) Store-bought cookies. You know, it was sort of like the polite hostess -- there you are in the middle of this amazing crisis, and somebody remembers to put out cookies.

Let's see, that's a little bit after 10:00 a.m. And I thought it might be useful for me to go over with you kind of what happened in that first 30 minutes --

Q Yes, please.

MRS. CHENEY: -- because it was very dramatic.

Q Please.

MRS. CHENEY: And I do think that not having a job, in this case -- you know, everybody else had work to do -- that I was able to sort of stand back and see everything that was -- the events that were happening.

Not long after we got to the PEOC, so it wouldn't have been much after 10:00 a.m., we heard that there had been an explosion at the Lincoln Memorial. Part of what's interesting here, Evan

-- and I'm sure you'll recognize that this is common -- is how many reports came in that later turned out to be inaccurate. But you had no way at the time of knowing that they were inaccurate. And the first one was that the Lincoln Memorial, that there had been an explosion.

Q Where did that report come from?

MRS. CHENEY: There is a room off the PEOC where there are military personnel who are in charge of communications - - at least I think they were military -- and they come into the room with the information.

Q Did they verbally announce it?

MRS. CHENEY: They tell the Vice President, usually, or they tell whoever is in charge.

Q So some communicator came in and said that -- and told the Vice President that there has been an explosion at the Lincoln Memorial?

MRS. CHENEY: Right. Now, I can't be sure that every one of these events I'm going to tell you came from a communicator, or every piece of information. But that was the commonest thing that happened.

Q Okay.

MRS. CHENEY: Norm Mineta was also in the room and on the phone. And oftentimes, he relayed information.

All right, so, explosion at the Lincoln Memorial. The next thing is, there is a plane 60 miles out headed for D.C. That was the report that came in. The -- I heard the Vice President say something like, the fighters have been cleared to engage, which was, you know, one of those sort of heart-wrenching moments.

Q Yes, I'll say.

MRS. CHENEY: I understood what that meant.

Q Right. Can I stop you on that one?

MRS. CHENEY: Sure.

Q Because obviously, there's tremendous public interest in that. I mean, what could be more horrific for a government official than to order fighters to engage a commercial airliner. Do you know anything more about the back and forth with -- between the Vice President and the President on that subject?

MRS. CHENEY: No. But he talked to the President several times. I don't know in which conversation the President had given that order, but in one of the conversations prior to that time.

Q Right. But your memory is of hearing him say, the fighters have been cleared to engage?

MRS. CHENEY: Right.

Q Did he use those words?

MRS. CHENEY: Close. Fighters cleared to engage is what I wrote down.

Q Right. So you were actually taking notes?

MRS. CHENEY: Yes, I did.

Q Uh --

MRS. CHENEY: And no, you can't have them.

Q Okay. (Laughter.) All right. Well, keep going. Keep going. This is great -- so far.

MRS. CHENEY: Let's see. So then, not long after that, we heard that there had been an explosion on Capitol Hill. Now, we're still in the first 30 minutes here.

Q Right.

MRS. CHENEY: Not long after that, we heard that the plane 60 miles out had been downed. And it wasn't clear how. And, of course, everyone was deeply worried that we had forced it down or shot it down. I should have said at the outset, you and Mary agreed -- right -- this is all on background?

Q Yes.

MRS. CHENEY: You don't quote me, right?

Q Right. That's right. Although you are an actor in this. In other words, I'm going to have your car going up the hill, doing the U-turn, coming back.

MRS. CHENEY: And if there are any quotes that you want from me, I'd be happy to talk to you about that again. I just would like to be able to talk freely.

Q Yes. That's good. That's a good plan. I will promise you that I will clear anything that I stick in your mouth.

MRS. CHENEY: Okay. So, we've got the plane forced down or shot down, and not long after that, the question comes up, not for the first time -- though this is the first time I heard it -- that maybe the Vice President should evacuate, that he should leave the White House, everyone should leave the White House.

And his response was to say that he wanted to stay put because of communications. That was a strong theme throughout the day, was importance of communications.

Then, after the drama of the plane 60 miles out came a report that there was a plane 10 miles out headed for the White House. And a further report that fighters were airborne. Not long after that, we had heard that that plane had hit the ground. So, you see, this is probably -- these reports both probably related to Flight 93. But as far as you knew, if you were sitting down there in the PEOC, there were two flights that had headed toward Washington, got very close, and then had gone down.

Q Right.

MRS. CHENEY: We also then learned not long after that, that there was no evidence from the Defense Department that the planes had been shot down or forced down. And I remember some feeling in the room that the planes must have gone down because of something somebody on board did; some selfless person, I guess we were probably thinking -- a pilot, maybe.

So, this is the context in which the communicator came in the room and didn't say exactly this, because he had code words to use -- said we have a call that Air Force One is the next target. The Vice President called the President to relay that message to him.

Q Let me just interrupt you there. Did that come after these -- the reports of these two other flights?

MRS. CHENEY: Yes. In my notes, it did. And so I was just taking things as they chronologically happened.

Q Okay. Sorry to interrupt you there. So then, what happens? The guy comes in and says we've got a call that Air Force One -- is a target? Then what happens?

MRS. CHENEY: Right. Using code words. I did not understand at first what the deal was, because I didn't know

the words. Shortly after that, we heard there was a car bombing at the State Department. Shortly after that, that there was a plane five miles out.

Q Oh, my God.

MRS. CHENEY: And, you know, the Vice President, again acting on the President's order, said, take it out.

Q Did he use those words, "take it out"?

MRS. CHENEY: Yes, he did. When I was -- I think everyone else was so engaged with the tasks at hand, but I can remember thinking when that decision had to be implemented, the decision that the President had already made, but it was unbelievable. It was like a novel.

Q Right.

MRS. CHENEY: It was absolutely, of course, the right thing to do, but tough to do.

Q Right.

MRS. CHENEY: We're now to about 11:23 a.m. And 200 planes are still up.

Q Two hundred planes are still up?

MRS. CHENEY: Two hundred planes. You know, they've ordered -- by this time, the FAA has ordered all planes grounded, and 200 are still in the air. There is communication between Mineta, Norm Mineta and the FAA about that time, that three overseas flights coming into the United States have issued distress calls, and that they had been received by the Coast Guard. There was a United flight, and Air Canada flight, and a Continental flight.

So I hope you -- I mean, I'm telling you all of this just because I think one of the really not understood parts of it is how even worse it appeared than it was -- awful, awful.

Q Yes, yes. That's fascinating. I had no idea that this degree of incoming information was -- and I guess in retrospect, erroneous incoming information -- was going on. I mean, I knew there was some of this, but I didn't realize the degree of it.

MRS. CHENEY: Shortly after that, we heard that the United flight that they had been worried about was on the ground in Amsterdam; so that was no longer an issue. By 12:00 -- so you see, this misinformation only persisted for

about 37 minutes -- at 12:00 noon, all three of those flights had been accounted for.

About 1:00 p.m., there was a report of a low-flying, high-speed aircraft headed for the President's ranch in Texas. And there was a report not long after that of a KAL flight inbound to Anchorage that was squawking a hijack code.

So the people in the room -- and I say this, obviously, with bias and prejudice -- handled what was truly astonishing in the most calm and collected manner.

Q Yes. I was about to ask you about the sort of tone and feel of the -- the body language, the words, just if you could characterize that for me, especially in regards to the Vice President -- just what he sounded like and -- he's a pretty low-key guy anyway. I would expect him to be cool in a crisis, but it would be helpful to me if you can, with some specificity, characterize it.

MRS. CHENEY: I can't think of the right words to tell you anything specific, because he was just like he usually is.

Q Which is the point.

MRS. CHENEY: Is that -- well, maybe that's the point. I'm just trying to think how is he usually. You know, he doesn't raise his voice.

Q Right.

MRS. CHENEY: People often lean forward to hear what he has to say, because he doesn't raise his voice. He was irritated that they couldn't get the communications system to produce news from the networks and from the cable outlets at the same time that you had communication between the Defense Department and the PEOC, for example. He finally got that fixed, and that was the only time I heard a note of steel in his voice.

Q What did he say?

MRS. CHENEY: Get it fixed.

Q Condi Rice mentioned this to me, too.

MRS. CHENEY: Well, it was frustrating, because you wanted to know what was -- what the public reaction was. It was a situation in which you might have expected there to be frenzy, but there wasn't. People above ground responded in

much the way people who were in the PEOC did, with an astonishing calm.

Well, anyway, not long after -- it was 2:00 p.m., maybe, another KAL plane was reported sending out a hijack signal. And the FAA wanted to divert it, I remember, to Elmendorf, and the plane agreed to do that. But, how many planes is this now? I've never counted.

Q I don't know. But something is screwy about this. I mean, all -- every single one of these is not right.

MRS. CHENEY: That's right.

Q This is not your role in this, but how could that have happened? I mean, did you ever find out how you could have gotten so many, so much erroneous information?

MRS. CHENEY: No. But you know, I heard Dick say many times that first reports are always wrong. I don't know -- maybe people just get nervous. I don't know what happens. But all this time, you understand, we didn't know what had crashed into the Pentagon, either. It took a long time to get that figured out. It was supposed to be a helicopter, someone thought.

I guess the plane went in sufficiently far so that when you looked at it, you didn't understand it was a whole airliner. And in the afternoon, midafternoon when they finally figured out it was the Dulles flight -- what was the number of that flight, I can't remember -- the one that left Dulles that had gone into the Pentagon, then -- by then, it began to be clear that there had been four hijackings instead of a dozen.

Q Eric Edelman, who I spoke to about a month ago, recalled that after the plane went into the ground in Pennsylvania, the Vice President said something about, I think there's been an act of heroism, or made some reference to the idea that somebody had acted heroically. Does that ring a bell with you? Do you have any recollection of that?

MRS. CHENEY: Yes, it does. That whole contact that -- thank God we didn't end up having to shoot this plane down, thank God it went down, but that it wasn't anything that we had to cause to happen. And then you start thinking, okay, how did that happen? The hijackers didn't do it. We figured that somebody on board must have resisted.

Q Right. Anybody eating or drinking anything during -- are the cookies untouched there, or do they get consumed?

MRS. CHENEY: You know, pretty soon, somebody brought some sandwiches in, probably after lunch -- you know, it was not lunchtime because I think nobody realized it was lunchtime. But sooner or later, somebody felt there was a need to provide sustenance. And so it was sandwiches and soft drinks and water.

Q Do you have an appetite during something like this?

MRS. CHENEY: Well, I did, I'm sorry to admit. (Laughter.) Yes. I mean, I don't think -- there wasn't fear and nervousness. It was very, very businesslike.

Q When there were reports of the planes coming towards Washington, was there any specificity about the target, whether it was the White House, or the Capitol? Was there any --

MRS. CHENEY: I think that the planes 60 miles out and 10 miles out, both of which we've heard -- you know, as we later understood -- to the flight that crashed in Pennsylvania, I think everyone believed it was either the White House or the Capitol.

Q Right. But was that ever said? Did anybody ever say that in the PEOC?

MRS. CHENEY: I can't remember that. I mean, it was such a strong assumption on my part, I think we must have talked about it. But I don't --

Q I think Condi Rice recalls that, actually, that there was -- it was finally -- not initially, but there was a reference to it later.

MRS. CHENEY: Have you seen the female air traffic controller on 20/20?

Q No. Is this -- no, no, I haven't. Tell me.

MRS. CHENEY: Well, this is the woman -- I guess she must have been in Dulles -- she does an absolutely spellbinding job of describing how it was to watch that plane, the one that hit the Pentagon, penetrate airspace that you aren't allowed to penetrate. And it was going at 500 miles an hour. And they realized it was heading for the White House. And they called me -- I had wondered where the 54 seconds came in. Because I've heard that, you know, when the Secret Service rushed in to get Dick, they said, there were 54 seconds to get --

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Q I've never heard that. I haven't been watching enough TV, I guess. This is new to me. The Secret Service actually said that when they went to get him?

MRS. CHENEY: That was my understanding, yes. And that

--

Q And that's why they lifted him out of the chair?

MRS. CHENEY: Exactly. And if you watch this air traffic controller, this woman who did this piece on 20/20, you should get the tape --

Q Yes, I'll get it.

MRS. CHENEY: It would, I think, be a great addition to your story.

Q Yes, absolutely.

MRS. CHENEY: Or, maybe talk to her.

Q Yes. No, absolutely.

MRS. CHENEY: She talks about the plane going at 500 miles an hour and being 10 miles out, nine miles out, and they called the Secret Service. And if you figure out 500 miles an hour -- okay, so if it was 600 miles an hour, it would be going 100 miles a minute? Is that right? Or 10 miles a minute.

So if it's going 10 miles a minute and you're 10 miles out, that's why they had that amount of time.

Q --Yes. Wow.

MRS. CHENEY: Fortunately, it diverted. And it's her theory, and it's one that seems credible to me, that because of the way the sun was and the trees and the building, they couldn't see the White House. They were headed there and couldn't see it.

Q It looped -- I mean, I remember seeing the track - - a description of the track. He does a loop. He loops back and then gets lower.

MRS. CHENEY: But at first, he veered. He was headed to the White House and then veered toward the Pentagon. I think what happened then, at that point he realized he was too high. So the loop was a matter of getting lower. And then they hit the Pentagon.

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Q To return to the PEOC in the afternoon, how does this sort of play out? When do you sort of -- when do things kind of begin to calm down, and how does the -- well, how does it play out?

MRS. CHENEY: Well, toward mid-afternoon, you've sorted through all of the information that has come in, and you've got all of the domestic air traffic down, and you basically know what happened. It wasn't a helicopter that went into the Pentagon, it was one of the -- we now know there were four planes. One went into the Pentagon, two went into the World Trade Center, and one crashed in Pennsylvania.

So it becomes -- the crisis becomes regularized, if that's a word you can use in response to a crisis like this -- once you know there were four planes and you know where they were.

Q Right. And when do you actually leave the PEOC?

MRS. CHENEY: You know, isn't it just awful? I don't remember.

Q But at nightfall, or -- I mean -- and where did you go?

MRS. CHENEY: Well, obviously -- I'm not sure I should talk about where we went.

Q You went to some secure location?

MRS. CHENEY: Yes. And it would have been night.

Q The President returned, as I recall, at about 6:45 p.m. or so.

MRS. CHENEY: You know, you probably know that better than I, because I didn't -- I have a note to think about that.

Q But you didn't see him in any case.

MRS. CHENEY: I saw Mrs. Bush, but I did not see -- well, did I see the President? I'm not sure, Evan. I don't want to say if I'm not sure. But one of the reasons I wanted to tell you about all of these things that were happening is in part to emphasize how -- the sensible thing to do was to have the President stay away until you had the thing regularized -- until you knew what the deal was.

Q Right. Yes. No, I hear you. Dr. Rice said that the President (sic) was taking notes on a yellow page,

actually writing down tail numbers and stuff as Mineta was talking to him.

MRS. CHENEY: The Vice President.

Q The Vice President was.

MRS. CHENEY: He tends to take notes, so he probably did. But you know, I don't know that. But he does write things down. And as all of these reports were coming in, it was hard to know whether the plane you had heard about, heading toward Washington with a squawk signal going off saying they had been hijacked, was the same one that you learned 20 minutes later it was safe in Madrid or someplace.

Q That's such a mystery. I've got to ask Mineta about that. I mean, why -- I can't believe the actual -- well, either, for some reason they did squawk that they were being hijacked was hard to believe, or it's just a garbled report.

MRS. CHENEY: Right.

Q And there were a lot of them.

MRS. CHENEY: Yes, there were.

Q Any thoughts about -- one thing I want to do, coming out of this, besides describing the day, is to look back on it a little bit. And I would just be curious to get any reflections you had looking back on the day as there is more time between you and the incident. Do you have any particular reflections about it? Does anything -- do you wake up in the middle of the night thinking about it? Does it come back into your thoughts? Do you find yourself reflecting on it in some way?

MRS. CHENEY: The crisis has continued, you know. So maybe when this has all passed, I'll have more time to reflect on it. But I think the single most dramatic thing was the President's decision that, yes, we had to shoot down those planes if they didn't divert and if there were going to be more people killed.

There's a -- do you remember in the novel, "Failsafe"?

Q Sure. I do. The President has to order the bombing of New York.

MRS. CHENEY: That's right. And I remember thinking that with a sort of chill up my spine that this is the kind of thing you only read about in novels; it didn't happen in real life.

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Q Did you think of the novel, "Failsafe" at the time?

MRS. CHENEY: Yes. I'm not sure I remembered which of those novels it was. I think maybe I thought it was "Seven Days in May." I remembered the plot, but I've since, as I've done more thinking about it, realized it was "Failsafe."

Q This is a question for the Vice President, but has the Vice President said anything to you, looking back on that to the chaos of the day and the need to stay cool, or any aspect of it that sticks in your mind, just as the two of you talked about it?

MRS. CHENEY: That would be very un-Cheney-like. (Laughter.) You know, I mean, the other point is, of course, is that the crisis continues. When it's all over, then there might be more time to reflect.

Q Do you think it's ever going to be all over?

MRS. CHENEY: Well, that is interesting. I do think that there was a seismic shift in the world on September 11th, and we'll never feel as secure again as we once did. It was our -- how shall I say this -- we weren't secure, but we thought we were, and we'll never fall into that way of thinking again, I don't think. So in that sense, maybe it will never be over; but, yes, surely we will manage to pursue justice, find justice, get the guys who did this.

Q Yes. Okay, this is extremely helpful -- extremely helpful, and surprising in the intensity of all of this. Thank you for taking the time. I believe I'm going to get a transcript of this, and -- because I have some past interviews that I've done with Dr. Rice and with Edelman. And I will --

MRS. CHENEY: Be sure to tell Mary that you think that and she'll make it happen.

Q I will do that, and then I will call you if I want to use any particular quote.

MRS. CHENEY: Okay. And if you think of any questions. But I've got to tell you, I really did give you most of the stuff I know.

Q I hope you gave me all of the stuff you know. (Laughter.) Don't hold back on me, **MRS. CHENEY.**

MRS. CHENEY: I gave you all of the stuff I know I know.

Q But I appreciate it very much.

MRS. CHENEY: All right. Bye.

Q Thanks a lot. Take care.

END

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