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Vice President Dick Cheney discusses Iraq

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BOB EDWARDS, host:

This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Bob Edwards.

Major obstacles continue to block American plans for turning over control of Iraq by June 30th. One dispute centers on whether to hold caucuses of selected leaders or nationwide elections to choose the Legislature. The Shiite leader, grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, opposes US plans for 18 regional caucuses. Yesterday in an interview with NPR about the Bush administration's policy on Iraq, Vice President Cheney insisted that it's too early to hold elections. He also defended the president's decision to go to war and said the US might still find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In addition, Cheney continued to insist there is a connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. He spoke with NPR's senior correspondent Juan Williams.

JUAN WILLIAMS reporting:

Vice President Cheney, speaking in the Roosevelt Room in the West Wing of the White House, seemed confident the current election impasse would be resolved with the help of the United Nations, but he maintains Iraq is not ready for what Sistani wants.

Vice President DICK CHENEY: It's a little hard at this stage to work elections, just from a mechanical standpoint. You don't have registered voters, you don't have electoral districts. It's a hard thing to do from a mechanical standpoint, so the proposal is to, say, have caucuses to select the interim government.

Separate, apart from that, is the constitutional process, the process of actually writing the constitution, and there the proposal is that those people, those delegates, should be elected. But that would take longer. Those elections probably aren't really held until 2005, say, but those are two separable propositions.

WILLIAMS: So do you foresee a compromise, in terms of argument, caucus vs. election?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: That's hard to say yet. I don't know how that's gonna sort out. The Governing Council has been working down the road towards the caucus system. Others, Sistani for example, the Shia legislator, has been advocating elections. It's being discussed with the United Nations. That's one of the subjects being discussed with Kofi Annan this past week.

WILLIAMS: Well, speaking of the UN, you were among the most strongly opposed to a big role for the UN in Iraq. Now that the US is asking Iraq and the UN to step in and help with Iraq, do you regret that earlier position?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: No, I think I would argue that it's not been a--I have not been in a position where I've said absolutely no role for the United Nations at all. I think some role is appropriate, as does the president. I think there's a role for them in helping with the political transition, helping set up elections, maybe working with the Iraqis in terms of establishing constitutional processes, how the interim government's gonna work, so there's a role for the UN to play in Iraq.

WILLIAMS: You were also among the most confident of any in the administration that weapons of mass destruction would be found in Iraq. Has the administration officially given up on finding any weapons of mass destruction?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: No, we haven't, Juan. I believe they had programs designed to produce weapons of mass destruction. We still don't know the whole extent of what they did have. It's gonna take some additional, considerable period of time in order to look in all of the cubby holes and the ammo dumps and all the places in Iraq where you might expect to find something like that.

WILLIAMS: When the president says in the State of the Union that we're looking now for weapons of mass destruction-related programs, can that be interpreted as the administration backing away from the assertion that weapons of mass destruction might be in Iraq?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, it's a debate. You know, do you have, say, a stockpile of biological agents, say, anthrax? In some cases we believe part of this was because this was provided by the United Nations and the United Nations got it from the Iraqis, that they did have large stocks of anthrax, large stocks of VX nerve agent. Now this wasn't something we dreamed up or something that was thought about at CIA. Everybody believed it and had good reason to believe it and, of course, they'd used chemical weapons previously, so the presumption would have been that it was, in fact, there. In terms of the question what is there now, we know for example that prior to our going in that he had spent time and effort acquiring mobile biological weapons labs, and we're quite confident he did, in fact, have such a program. We've found a couple of semi trailers at this point which we believe were, in fact, part of that program. Now it's not clear at this stage whether or not he used any of that to produce or whether he was simply getting ready for the next war. That, in my mind, is a serious danger in the hands of a man like Saddam Hussein, and I would deem that conclusive evidence, if you will, that he did, in fact, have programs for weapons of mass destruction.

WILLIAMS: Would you consider what has taken place so far a failure of intelligence, and does it endanger taking some sort of preemptory action on the part of the US government if our intelligence is not sufficiently good to be relied on?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I can't say that, Juan. I think, first of all, it's important to remember it's intelligence. You know, you're trying to collect information about a regime that is doing everything it can to hide that information, about a regime that you've been to war with before, about a regime that's an absolutely brutal dictatorship with only a handful of people likely to know the information you want to get your hands on. So it's a tough intelligence problem just to begin with, and what you have to do is rely on the intelligence community to collect and analyze the data that's available, and then you have

to act on it. You know, you get bits and pieces.

But remember what we had in Saddam Hussein. We know he was running one of the bloodiest regimes in history. We know he had used chemical weapons against the Iranians and against the Kurds. We had information based on the Gulf War that we'd underestimated his program then. You put all that together and you provide that then to the president. What's he supposed to say? Gonna ignore it? Even Bill Clinton in 1998 was making statements about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction that were based upon the same basic fundamental intelligence that we had when we arrived here two years later.

WILLIAMS: Now in Paul O'Neill's book, he suggests that the administration wanted to go after Saddam Hussein even before 9/11 occurred. Is that right?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: Well, you've got to remember the policy that we inherited was the policy of the Clinton administration, and it called for regime change. That's something that Bill Clinton decided on. We continued it. We agreed with it. And it said that Saddam Hussein needed to be dealt with and effectively removed from power.

WILLIAMS: Now we had a recent memo that indicated that there was a lack of connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda, and Saddam had warned, in fact, his supporters against working with al-Qaeda and other Arab fighters. What do you make of that memo?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: I think it's probably the kind of memo that he would put out in order to keep--to try to maintain any control over that connection. But if he had such a connection, and I believe he did, that it would be limited to very few people, handled in a very narrow track, and not widely discussed or known about within his own government. That's not the way he did business.

WILLIAMS: But you continue to believe it?

Vice Pres. CHENEY: **I continue to believe. I think there's overwhelming evidence that there was a connection between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi government.** We've discovered since documents indicating that a guy named Abdul Rahman Yasin, who was a part of the team that attacked the World Trade Center in '93, when he arrived back in Iraq was put on the payroll and provided a house, safe harbor and sanctuary. That's public information now. So Saddam Hussein had an established track record of providing safe harbor and sanctuary for terrorists. He did for Abu Nidal for years. Palestinian, Islamic Jihad, other organizations found safe harbor in Iraq. He provided bonus payments to the families of suicide bombers in Israel. I mean, this is a guy who was an advocate and a supporter of terrorism whenever it suited his purpose, and I'm very confident that there was an established relationship there.

WILLIAMS: Vice President Dick Cheney, speaking in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. On Thursday, the vice president begins only his second trip abroad in the three years since he's been vice president. He travels to Switzerland for the World Economic Forum. He'll meet with the pope and with Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi in Rome. Juan Williams, NPR News, Washington.

EDWARDS: An extended version of the interview with Vice President Cheney is at npr.org.

The time is 19 minutes past the hour.

PERSON: DICK CHENEY (97%);

ORGANIZATION: AL-QAEDA (56%); UNITED NATIONS (55%); UNITED NATIONS (55%);

COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (95%); IRAQ (94%);

COMPANY: AL-QAEDA (56%); UNITED NATIONS (55%); UNITED NATIONS (55%);

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