Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Former Vice President Dick Cheney

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I: Secretary of Defense Cheney (00:15 – 10:37)

KRISTOL: Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and honored to have with us today Vice President Dick Cheney.

CHENEY: Good to be here, Bill.

KRISTOL: Thank you, Mr. Vice President. And you've had such a distinguished career from working in the White House as a very young man, becoming White House chief of staff as a young man, and then serving in Congress and becoming whip in Congress, Secretary of Defense, Vice President, staying involved in public life even when you weren't in public office. I'm just curious, which of these many interesting jobs that you've had, which of them did you enjoy the most?

CHENEY: Well, I don't want to offend any of my former bosses.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right. You loved them all but –

CHENEY: No, I, if I had to pick one job that stands out and I can think of all reasons why the Ford experience, the being there for the transition from the Nixon to the Ford White House starting on August 9, '74. Or I loved being in Congress, putting my own name on the ballot for 10 years and so forth. Vice President, those are all phenomenal jobs.

But the one that stands out, the one I probably enjoyed most of all was Secretary of Defense. It was a time when we had a magnificent force and being because of the Reagan Administration the investments that had been made in our equipment and training and the quality of the people that were involved. Because it was the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union was going out of business; the Berlin Wall came down. We had major military operation in Desert Storm in the Gulf when Saddam when invaded Kuwait.

And most of all, the people, there were 4 million people then working in the Pentagon, 2 million active duty military, a million reservists and a million civilians. And I as the Secretary of Defense, it was a very special privilege to be there. But it also happened at a time when sort of everything was right in the sense of the support of the American people, the capacity of our military, the quality of the folks I worked with in Bush 41 – George H. W. – Jim Baker, Brent Scowcroft. It was a very unique time and team, and that was probably the highlight.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. What would surprise people who've obviously never been Secretary of Defense or maybe never been in the Pentagon about that job? I mean, it's such a daunting job, the idea of supervising the entire armed forces, the huge civilian personnel there, all the responsibilities you have in defense and foreign policy. I mean, you were familiar with it, having been White House Chief of Staff and a congressman, but I'm sure some aspects of it surprised you when you actually took over.

CHENEY: Well, first of all, I was surprised when I got the job. Remember the first choice was Senator [John] Tower from Texas, he had been a strong supporter of President Bush when he campaigned. I was pursuing a career in the House, I really wanted to be the speaker of the House or the Republican leader, and I'd gotten to the number two slot and I was on that track, and all of the sudden, the Tower nomination went down. I got a phone call from the White House; one thing led to another and the President offered me the job and I signed on.

KRISTOL: I think people would be interested. How does that happen exactly? So John Tower gets as I recall –

CHENEY: It was defeat –

KRISTOL: Get to the floor and defeated in committee –

CHENEY: No. It went all the way to the floor. Yeah, he'd been – there were questions about his personal conduct and so forth.

KRISTOL: So then what, that day, the next day, two days later, who calls you, how does it work?

CHENEY: That morning, the morning of the day, the committee had already voted and had reported it out but it was his committee – he had been chairman of that committee before. No senator had ever been rejected by the Senate before; it was total shock in effect. But they reported it to the floor and the –

KRISTOL: The negative – negatively, right?

CHENEY: And the Senate voted that evening but before the vote, I got a phone call from Brent Scowcroft and John Sununu at the White House, and they asked me if I could come by.

KRISTOL: The Security Advisor and the Chief of Staff.

CHENEY: The Chief of Staff. And they invited me to come on down and wanted to talk about what to do next. This was a few hours before the vote, and I told them I couldn't get there at the time. They wanted me to do Evans and Novak talk show. So on the show, it was interesting because Bob Novak and Evans – really, Evans – were speculating about who the next Secretary was going to be because it was clear Tower was going down. And Novak said, "I've got it on the highest authority it's going to be Bobby Ingram," from – had been in the Navy, Admiral and had been heavily involved in intelligence business and so forth.

But, of course, I was sitting there waiting to go to the White House, I couldn't say anything, I didn't say anything. I went down to the White House after that, had a meeting with Scowcroft and Sununu and they, I assumed they wanted to consult with me because I was part of the leadership. But after one question,

they asked me if I had any recommendations, and I did, in fact, recommend somebody. And they said that will never work, what about you, would I be interested? It was all an effort to recruit me to the effort, to the job. I said I'd have to think about it. We talked about it a bit. We left it that I would go home that evening and the next day if I was interested in pursuing the matter, then they'd set up a meeting with the President. They sort of wanted to screen me first and see if I actually was interested in it.

So that night, I went home and when I got home, I got a phone call from Jim Baker. Jim was the new Secretary of State, was an old friend of mine, we'd worked together back in the Ford years, and were fishing buddies. He called and urged me to take the job. I talked with my family that night, and the decision I had to make really was to give up a career in elective office because I'd worked for 10 years at that point and moved up to the number two slot and I was in a position to succeed Bob Michel, a leader when he retired or even run for speaker if we captured the majority. And that was my career path and I'd worked hard to get there. And going to the executive branch and giving all of that up was a significant decision to make.

But I decided I definitely wanted to pursue it. I had a vital interest in national security matters and defense; to be Secretary of Defense, a brand new administration with Baker and Bush and Scowcroft sounded like a remarkable opportunity. So the next morning, I called Sununu, and he set up a meeting at noon for me in the White House with the President. I came in the Southeast Gate so the press couldn't see me, and I had a car and driver then as the Republican whip. But walked into the south diplomatic entrance, got in the elevator and rode upstairs to the second floor and went to the President's private office that's inside the residence itself.

I can remember as I walked in looking up on the wall, and there was a famous painting, I think it's called *The Peacemakers*. It's Abraham Lincoln, William Tecumseh Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, and Admiral David Porter on a ship, a steamer off Richmond just as the Civil War is ending, a few days before Lincoln was assassinated. My great-grandfather had served under William Tecumseh Sherman throughout the war, and it occurred to me as I was in the room as I walked in to talk to the President about becoming Secretary of Defense, I wondered what he would have thought that his great-grandson would someday be in the White House with the President talking about taking over the reins of the U.S. military. But I signed on and never regretted it. It was a tremendous opportunity, and I loved every minute of it.

KRISTOL: That's a terrific story about the painting. I remember people subsequently, who were younger, you know, think of you as Secretary of Defense, Vice President or –

But I remember being surprised in the sense that you were – Bob Michel was only going to serve probably another term or two – as leader, you were, would have been a total consensus choice to succeed him as Republican leader. Republicans at that time hadn't been in the majority in what 35 years in the House but there was – people had the sense that it might one day happen, and you would have been Speaker. And I remember being surprised actually when your name was floated – I don't think it was floated much, I think it was pretty much announced.

So you met with the President at noon?

CHENEY: Met with the President at noon. He didn't offer me the job but we talked about it. Talked about what needed to be done at Defense and so forth and some of the issues. And then I left, and he and I had spent about an hour together. Sununu showed up right at the end, and I got –

KRISTOL: Just the two of you though?

CHENEY: Just the two of us up until that point. And then Sununu arrived. We ended the meeting. I got in my car and was driven back to Capitol Hill, and I had been back there about 15 or 20 minutes, and the phone rang and it was the President. And he said, "Dick, I'm offering you the job. I want you to be my

Secretary of Defense." And I said, "Yes, sir, I'm happy to accept." And he said, "Well, come on back down here, and we'll announce it."

So I went right back to the White House and that afternoon just 24 hours after Tower had gone down in defeat, we, he and I went into the press room in the West Wing of the White House and announced that I was the next nominee to be Secretary of Defense.

KRISTOL: That's pretty fast.

CHENEY: It was fast and it was, part of it was, I think, the committee had been through a very difficult time with the battle over Tower and my confirmation from the time the President announced me until I was finished with confirmation was about 7 days, it was nearly a record but I'm sure there have been some shorter than that. But it was a unanimous vote. They were eager to get somebody else onboard.

I think I benefitted by the fact that I'd spent 10 years in the House, and the new leaders and members both in the House and the Senate, Sam Nunn was chairing the committee, and we were good friends that worked on various things. So it moved very smoothly from that point on.

II: The First Gulf War (10:37 – 35:14)

KRISTOL: And you had so much to preside over in those years. I remember them from my much lesser vantage point there. I was the Vice President's Chief of Staff. But downsizing the military after the Cold War without preventing, trying to prevent too much downsizing, the Gulf War, obviously.

What about Gulf War? It seems to me that's something that also is taken for granted after the fact. "Well, of course, we were going to kick Saddam out of Kuwait; of course we were going to send half a million troops over to Saudi Arabia," a nation that I think it never had foreign troops on its soil, right? I mean, talk a little bit about that. Where were you when you learned that Saddam had invaded Kuwait? Do you recall or –

CHENEY: Well, I was –

KRISTOL: Did you expect it a day or two before?

CHENEY: We had – what happened was we had concerns. Saddam had been throwing his weight around. The Iran-Iraq War had ended. Economically, he was in some difficulty. He had accused the Kuwaitis, for example, of undercutting the oil price and that hurt him because he was almost totally dependent on oil revenues for his government. And he had actually moved troops down to the Kuwaiti border. And the advice we got from our friends in the area was don't do anything to upset him, this is just a show of force, he's trying to negotiate a better deal on oil prices and so forth, and he'll never invade. And that's what we got from the region.

At one point, the United Arab Emirates and the run-up to the actual invasion, they were concerned and they called and wanted us to loan them a couple of tankers for refueling their aircraft. The UAE has a pretty good air force, it's small but good equipment and well-trained. So we sent them over. And while they were en route, Pete Williams, my Press Secretary, announced that to the press, they got very upset, they didn't want Saddam to know there were American tankers in the region.

But we had briefings that basically said he's prepared but all of the sudden then we started to get reporting in that he was moving his tanks, his armor, his artillery out into positions where they would be if he was actually going to do it. And then all of the sudden, he did, he marched into Kuwait, in about 24 hours, he had taken the whole country. It's not a very big country and the government, the royal family had fled to Saudi Arabia.

But all of a sudden, we were presented with this coup d'état, if you will, in a sense, this dramatic action by him that raised a question about whether or not we had a strategic interest in this. There were those who wanted to argue that look, Kuwait, it's a little, bitty country, it's a long ways away, half the Kuwaitis spend their summers in the south of France, it's not exactly, you know, a normal kind of country.

KRISTOL: Saddam will keep on selling the oil, so what's the issue with that?

CHENEY: And from my perspective, I thought it was of strategic interest to the United States, that if he got away with that, that he was only a couple hundred miles within being able to strike at the Saudi oil fields, which are primarily in eastern Saudi Arabia south of Kuwait. And if he did that, he would be in control between Iraqi and Kuwaiti reserves plus the Saudi reserves, close to 40 percent of the world's oil reserves at that point. He'd also be in a position to shut down the flow of oil out of the Gulf if he wanted to do that, and there wasn't any way, there wasn't anybody over there who could stop him, he had, I think, the world's fourth largest army, and he'd just been through years of warfare with Iran.

So I believed it was a strategic threat, so did the President. And so we ended up at Camp David that weekend. As I recall, the invasion was on a Thursday and that weekend we had a big meeting at Camp David on Saturday of the National Security Council and that included State and Defense and CIA, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, etc.

And while we were there on that Saturday, there were some phone calls between the President and the Saudis, and eventually what came out of that was a decision to send me, as the Secretary of Defense, to the region to go visit specifically with the Saudis and the Egyptians, which I did. So is the Sunday after the invasion, which had been on the previous week. And I flew into Saudi Arabia –

KRISTOL: I didn't remember it was that was fast.

CHENEY: It was very fast. And I went over. I had, I took General Schwarzkopf with me, he was the CENTCOM Commander and he flew over with me, as well as a couple members of his staff. I had a State Department individual with us who was our ambassador at that time to Saudi Arabia, had been home on leave and we were getting ready for my meeting with the Saudi king seeking advice and so forth. And the advice I got was "Don't talk about bringing a large force, that will scare them; don't expect a quick answer, you may have to sit there for days before they can make up their minds" and so forth. None of that was accurate.

What was accurate was the briefing I got from Bandar who was then the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., a pilot himself, had trained in the U.S. Something, somebody well-known in Washington, and I knew Bandar pretty well. And I had talked with Bandar the night before I left, he'd left. But before he left, he told me, he said, "Remember what Jimmy Carter did."

In '79 when the Shah fell, the Saudis had asked for some show of force or support from the United States, so President Carter sent a squadron of F15s to the kingdom and when they were halfway there, he announced they were unarmed. From the standpoint of the Saudis, they were not impressed, you know, if you're going to send us aircraft, and we're going to take the political heat for that, at least, let them have weapons on them.

Anyway, we went on over, met with the king, King Abdullah then in charge, not Abdullah, King Fahd. Abdullah, now the king, was the crowned prince in those days. He was in the meeting as well as the king, as well as the deputy of defense minister. Prince Sultan, my counterpart, the Saudi defense minister was en route back but he was out of the country at that time.

And Fahd, who I met with many times over the years, always began a conversation with small-talk or he'd begin by talking about what he was doing on some domestic issue building colleges and universities, for example. We got right straight to the business and I had going over, I had listened to the

brief that the CIA had prepared and they'd sent a briefer with me. I didn't like it and so I cut him out, and Schwarzkopf and I basically did the presentation. I talked about the threat, the problem, the fact that we needed a quick decision if we were going to come because we didn't have a lot of time to wait. At one point, one of the Saudis had said that in the translation that I found out later said that they did have plenty of time, and the king responded by saying, "Well," he said, "the Kuwaitis waited, and now they're all living in our hotel rooms."

So we had about a two-hour presentation. Bandar translated, and then he stopped talking while the conversation continued in Arabic between the king and his advisors. And then the king turned back to me after a couple of minutes and he said, "Okay, we'll do it." But he had two conditions. One that you bring enough force to do it right and to get it done. And secondly, that you'll leave when it's over with. And I committed, gave him my word on that basis. I knew that's what the President wanted to do anyway.

KRISTOL: The President had already in effect authorized you to – had said –

CHENEY: I was there to close the deal, in fact. And the – so that was the moment at which they signed off on our coming. And it ended up we sent 500,000 men and women in the U.S. military to Saudi Arabia, primarily.

I also then had to on the way back stop in Egypt and see Mubarak. There were two key players out there, and one was King Fahd and the other was President Mubarak in Egypt. He was down in Alexandria. I had a big, one of the big old 707s with a full load of fuel that couldn't get off of the airport down in Alexandria. So we left it in Cairo and flew in a little beach craft two-engine prop job that belonged to the embassy down to Alexandria. And we landed right next to a big jet in Alexandria that belonged to the Iraqi Vice President, Foreign Minister who was running around ahead of me trying to put out the fire that they'd caused when they invaded Kuwait.

And so I went to the palace there on the sea in Alexandria and I had to wait for the Iraqi to leave. But it was a perfect setup because by the time he left and I went in, Mubarak was steaming. I mean, smoke was coming out of his ears he was so angry with the Iraqis. And I told him what we were going to do, that we were sending troops to Saudi Arabia, the king had approved it, the President approved it. We weren't going to announce it till I got back, and the President could announce it.

And he asked, "Well, what do you need?" And I said, "Well, we need overflight rights to be able to get our aircraft into and out of the region." I said, "We need the ability to bring our nuclear carriers through the Suez Canal." They don't like nuclear carriers going through, they'd had always responded negatively oftentimes. He said, "When do you want it?" I said, "We'd be there tonight." I had already ordered one of our carriers that was in the Med to head for the Suez Canal. And then he said, "The Egyptians would be happy to participate," as well, and they too would send divisions.

I got up and left, and on the way back, I got a phone call from the President saying, "Stop in Morocco." King Hassan in Morocco, he had been on the phone with the President so I stopped there. Had a late-night session with the king and his aides, and then told the king I needed to see him alone, so just he and I and the interpreter went off into a private room. And I told him what we were doing and didn't want to do it in front of the larger crowd.

But before we started, he asked me, he said, "Is this classified?" And I said, "Yes, sir, it is." And he reached in his pocket, and he pulled out a little silver box that had a copy or a piece of the Koran in it, and he talked to his interpreter in Arabic, and then he took it and put it back in his pocket. And I watched all this. This was kind of amazing. And I asked him about it and he said, "Well," he said, "that's a piece of the Koran," and he just swore on pain of death that he will not reveal what we're about to talk about. I thought I could use one of those.

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah.

CHENEY: But again part of the success was the President. George Bush 41 knew all the people we were dealing with, he had dealt with before at the United Nations and his time as Vice President and so a lot of them were personal friends, and you couldn't have a better introduction to the king of Morocco or Saudi Arabia than if they'd had a call from the President and former Vice President of the United States.

And by the time I got back, we announced, I think it was about Tuesday morning, maybe. And we had an NSC meeting, and then the President went on TV and announced that we were deploying forces to the Middle East of the kingdom to reverse Saddam Hussein's aggression.

KRISTOL: What was most amazing to me, I think, in those months from the invasion to our counter-invasion and expelling Saddam, but also generally in that White House, in that administration, was the degree – and I didn't realize it at the time because it was the only White House I'd been in – was the degree of cooperation and coordination among Cabinet agencies, with Cabinet agencies in the White House. And now I think looking back, I think it's unusual to say the least. I mean, don't you think?

You and Defense stayed, National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, the President himself. I mean, it was pretty remarkable, wasn't it? And how did that work in practice? I mean, you gave this account now and made it sound sort of simple – you got on the plane. But, of course, a huge amount of coordination with the State and the National Security Council in the case of this emergency, what 24/7, really coordination up and down the line, too, at your level, but at the second and third tiers. So how did it work, just you talked to Baker every day, five times a day, you guys met every week?

CHENEY: It worked very well. I've – let's see, there have been five Republican presidents since Eisenhower. I worked for four of them and worked closely with a fifth – the Reagan years when I was part of the House leadership. The best national security team I ever saw was that one. The least friction, the most cooperation, the highest degree of trust among the principals, especially.

We had a practice that Jim and I and Brent would meet in Scowcroft's office in the White House, the National Security Advisor, at least once a week, usually Wednesday mornings for breakfast. Now, we couldn't always do it. Sometimes, somebody would be out of town. But the three of us would get together.

KRISTOL: Just the three of you, no deputies, no –

CHENEY: No deputies, no staff, just the three of us. And we had all worked together before and back in the Ford years, I had hired Jim to be the campaign chairman for the fall campaign. Before that, he'd been our delegate hunter in the battle with the Reagan forces in Kansas City. But at Kansas City while we were there, the President and I decided, Roger Morton was the chairman, he really wanted to step aside. And so I called Jim in and offered him the job to manage the Ford campaign in '76. He and I had been friends for a long time, taken pack trips together in Wyoming and hunted and fished together. Been a close, close friend.

Brent Scowcroft and I were promoted the night that I became White House Chief of Staff under Ford. Brent became the National Security Advisor. He had been Henry Kissinger's deputy; I'd been Don Rumsfeld's deputy. So the three of us already had a good, well-established relationship.

And then the boss is George H. W. Bush. He's been Vice President for 8 years; he's an experienced aviator who flew Naval, flew off carriers in World War II, shot down in the Pacific; he's been director of the CIA; he's been ambassador to the United Nations; he'd been ambassador to China; he'd been chairman of the Republican National Committee. I don't know if he had a design of president to manage a crisis, you'd be hard put to find anybody better than George Bush.

And Jim, he and Jim were especially close, but Brent as well, too. And I'd known him, I'd first met him when I was staffer on the Hill many years before, wasn't as close obviously as Baker or Scowcroft. But

we all worked well together. And to my knowledge, there were never any leaks out of those meetings. The word fairly quickly got out about the three of us, that if you had a problem you really wanted solved, a good thing to do was to get it on the agenda for those Wednesday morning breakfasts, and we'd sort it out. And if we couldn't sort it out, we'd take it to the President. Most of the time, we could sort it out among ourselves.

And there was a degree of trust and confidence there that I've never experienced in any other administration – not that others weren't good, they clearly were, I was part of other teams as well, too. But I've always looked back on that one as probably that was the way to do it.

KRISTOL: And I seem to remember you had a private meeting with the President. Is that also the case, was that once a week or every other week? I can't recall but –

CHENEY: What I did was –

KRISTOL: Is that customary for the Secretary of Defense or was that something President Bush wanted to do or –

CHENEY: It's the way we chose to operate. Just about weekly, I'd send him a memo, just sort of a quick summary of what was going on in the department kind of thing. I'm sure other Cabinet secretaries were doing the same thing but it was written material. But I also had private time with him on the schedule every couple of weeks, I guess. I could go in, I could get in any time I wanted to. Lots of times, Brent would be there. There were occasions when Brent and I would have differences, and it would go to the President. But there were things we did that were, I think, unique in that administration.

One is the Defense budget. That's one of the biggest things you've got to worry about if you're the Secretary of Defense. And we worked out an arrangement where I would sit down with the President and Scowcroft and Dick Darman who was then the budget director. And we'd agree on a topline for Defense at the beginning of the process. I'd get a number. And that was what I had to operate the Department of Defense with. And I could put together the budget then the way I wanted it. We did not – I didn't have to – I didn't get nickeled and dimed by the OMB guys.

Occasionally, there would be an issue that'd come up. But it gave me great credibility and authority in terms of dealing with those issues inside the department, it was also helpful on the Hill. I sat down at the beginning of each budget session with Jack Murtha from Pennsylvania. Jack's a Democrat, a Marine that served in Vietnam, the first Vietnam vet ever to be in the Congress. He was also Chairman of the Armed Services, the Defense Appropriation Subcommittee. And he'd come down to breakfast, and we'd sit down and get out a piece of paper. And on one side of it, we'd put what he had to have that year. On the other side was what I had to have that year. Those were our priorities, and that was pretty much the bill. We once passed the Defense appropriation, thanks to Jack, because he was also close to Tip O'Neill. We passed it on a voice vote under suspension of the rules, no amendments, no debate. It was a successful way to function.

The operations in terms of how we functioned together – the President was in my mind very, very good in terms of supporting you. There was a point at which, for example, I became very dissatisfied with the Air Force Chief of Staff. This was early in the Gulf crisis, and he'd gone off to the Gulf for an inspection visit in the early weeks and took some reporters with him. We had been advised don't take reporters, there are some over there and you don't need to have a bunch of reporters with you on the plane.

Well, he took three reporters with him, and he spent 14 hours with them on the aircraft on the way home and that resulted in a big front-page story in the *Washington Post* sort of about how the Air Force is going to win this singlehanded and, you know, the American people won't stand for a lot of casualties when the body bags started coming home.

It was at a time when we were working hard to promote joint, jointness between the services. This was the first administration – I was the first Secretary of Defense who spent all his time operating under the provisions of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, a major reform that had been adopted recently. But I got up on a Sunday morning and on the front porch, there's a *Washington Post* with that story on there, and I mean –

KRISTOL: It's pre-Internet days. These days you would have seen it online Saturday afternoon.

CHENEY: And somebody would have called. But it was very disturbing. It made me angry, obviously.

So I went and took a long walk on the C & O Canal, which I did occasionally, got some exercise and came back and re-read the story and got mad all over again. I called the President that Sunday up at Camp David and got him off the tennis courts and said, "Mr. President, I may have to relieve the Air Force Chief of Staff, and I wanted you to know in advance." And he said, "Okay, Dick, whatever you've got to do, do it, I'll back you up." No second-guessing, no, you know, "Well, you've got to come brief me before you do it" kind of thing. He trusted my judgment.

The next day, I called the general in and asked him if, in fact, the story was accurate and he said, "Yes it was." And I said, "Well, I want your resignation by sundown." And Bush backed me all the way. Now, that was no small thing. You don't often relieve members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

But there was never a time when I didn't feel I had his total support, his willingness to back me up and that, coupled with very close relationships with the rest of the team and the opportunity to use that magnificent force that had been created back in the 80s that was available in 1990 and '91 because of the decisions that had been made 10 years before by our predecessors.

KRISTOL: And funded by Congress, which you were part of. One last thing about that period. I can't remember when the decision was made to go to Congress to get the authorization to use force, which as I recall the decision was made late in December. And then we actually went to Congress and the vote was in January.

You had been in Congress. I remember there was a pretty interesting debate within the Administration on that. What was your view? And talk a little bit about how that decision was made and also just what lessons you learned from that in retrospect.

CHENEY: There's always been a debate certainly since the end of World War II about the authority of the president to commit the force and so forth. And we'd had the War Powers Act adopted in the aftermath of Vietnam. My view was that we had all the authority we needed; we didn't have to go back to Congress.

For example, we were party to the United Nations Charter, Article 51 provided for us to go to the aid of a fellow member of the United Nations who was under attack. That had all been ratified in a treaty by the United States Senate, so from a legal standpoint, we had all the authority we needed.

KRISTOL: And we had sent hundreds of thousands of troops over to the region already so it was a little odd to say that we now needed authority –

CHENEY: That's right. But the President decided he wanted to go for the vote. I think he was right, and I was wrong. I think he made the right decision because we won.

My main concern I had was that we'd get a large contingent of troops over there, you'd get the Congress to vote; if you couldn't get it passed, what were you going to do? He later said – and I don't blame him – he said, "I wouldn't have had any choice, I would have had to go anyway on the basis that I already had the legal authority, even though Congress had voted against it." Now, fortunately, that didn't happen, we won but it was very close.

KRISTOL: It was pretty close in the Senate, right?

CHENEY: Senate, we won by about five votes. Sam Nunn, who was Chairman of the Armed Services Committee and ordinarily would have been a strong supporter voted no. Sam told me years later that that was the worst vote he ever made.

I always suspected – and he never said this to me – but I always suspected he was thinking about running for president himself in '92 and that he couldn't get the Democratic nomination if he was sort of a pro-war candidate kind of thing.

But in the end, we did prevail and it was interesting in part because the first thing we did was to get the UN resolution approving it. That may sound kind of backwards but the way it worked in those days, and still does, the chairmanship of the UN Security Council rotates among the countries, each month, somebody else chairs the meetings. And I think it was November was our turn.

So Jim Baker went up and chaired, actually chaired the meeting. We'd worked very hard and lobbied very hard, the President especially with the heads of government of all the countries that then had seats on the council. And we were worried about Russia with a veto or China. And in the end, it carried, and with the UN behind it, the Congress could hardly turn us down. I mean, you know, the UN is going to vote for war and the Congress isn't – not likely. So politically that's the way we handled it, and it worked very well, and the President made the right call, although we cut it a bit close, about five votes in the Senate.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I guess the Democrats controlled both houses. I think we went to the House first, right, where there's a bigger margin. Les Aspin was for it, and, but the Senate was – Well, the irony is Al Gore was one of the key deciding Democrats to go for it.

CHENEY: That's probably why he got to be Vice President.

KRISTOL: Isn't that an irony? So, Sam Nunn may have decided he couldn't be for it because of his national ambitions and the guy who actually gets on the ticket and becomes Vice President of the United States actually.

CHENEY: You never know what's going to happen.

KRISTOL: Isn't that interesting? Yeah, it's an interesting lesson.

III: From Nixon to Ford (35:14 – 53:23)

KRISTOL: You mentioned there have been five Republican presidents since Dwight D. Eisenhower. You've served with four of them and were a leader in the Congress when the other one, Ronald Reagan, was President. Why don't we just go through them and tell us about them and about also how you – Maybe just begin with how you ended up in the Nixon White House. How'd that happen?

CHENEY: Well, I had a spotty academic career, if you will. It took me a long time to finish.

KRISTOL: We could go into that in great detail, if you'd like.

CHENEY: You can leave that part out. But I ended up a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin. I had worked for the governor on a fellowship. And while I was – as I was approaching the time to take my prelims, which I did at Wisconsin to get ready to do the dissertation, I was, had the opportunity to come to Washington as what's called a Congressional Fellow – American Political Science Association used to sponsor these. And it provides for a year on the Hill, you study Congress, work for members of Congress, you're free help to them, your salary is paid. So that's how I came to town in the fall of 1968.

This is after the Bobby Kennedy assassination, Martin Luther King assassination. We'd had riots in the streets. It was a difficult time in our history. And I had never worked in Washington, this was my first go. I went to work for a guy named Bill Steiger from Wisconsin, initially. I had interviewed with Don Rumsfeld but he'd thrown me out of the interview, he refused to hire me.

KRISTOL: He was then what, a first- or second-term congressman?

CHENEY: He had been elected in '62 and this was '68, he was newly reelected. He had spoken to the group, and I was impressed, and so I went and made an appointment to see him about becoming his fellow. And he asked me what I was doing. I explained I was working on my Ph.D., I was going to become a professor, go back to the University of Wisconsin and so forth. And when I got to that part, he stood up and said, "Well, this is not going to work, thank you very much." He kicked me out. I'd been in there about 10 minutes.

I was a little put off by all of that but I went down the hall. I went to work for Bill Steiger, a great guy who was then the youngest member of Congress. I had known him in Wisconsin when I worked for the governor. So Bill took me onboard. And some months later, Rumsfeld was picked by Nixon to be director of the antipoverty program, the Office of Economic Opportunity [OEO]. And I sat down one night unsolicited and wrote a 12-page memo to Rumsfeld telling him how he ought to conduct himself in his confirmation hearings, what he ought to do with the agency once he got confirmed and so forth. And I gave it to Steiger. Bill really liked it, and I asked if he could send it on – he was advising Rumsfeld on his confirmation and so forth. So he sent it onto to Rumsfeld.

I didn't hear anything for a couple of weeks and then Rumsfeld got confirmed, and I got a phone call that day from a guy named Frank Carlucci. Frank later preceded me as Secretary of Defense. He was then an old buddy of Rumsfeld's from Princeton days, he was helping Don with the transition. He wanted to know if I'd come down the next day to the OEO to become part of the team, just a bunch of advisors.

So I went down the next day, about 50 of us there. Rumsfeld came in and spoke, talked about his hopes and aspirations for the agency. It's his first day on the job and he left. His secretary came back in and said, "Is there anybody here named Cheney?" And I held up my hand, and she took me back down the hallway into his office, and he was there at his desk but the place was a dump. I mean, there were pans on the floor catching the rain leaking through the roof. And he was working on something, I had to stand there for a couple of minutes and then he looked up at me. And he said, "You, you're Congressional Relations. Now get out of here." He didn't say, "I'm sorry I threw you out last time" or "Would you like a job?" or "I liked the memo" – "you're Congressional Relations, now get out of here." So I went out and said, "Where's Congressional Relations?" And they told me and I went down and took over Congressional Relations.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

CHENEY: And that was the beginning of what's become a lifelong friendship.

But later on after while I was a Congressional Fellow still operating as part of the program, I was actually running Congressional Relations at OEO. And then later that summer as the fellowship ran out, he hired me full-time as his assistant. And so I had worked for Don throughout the first Nixon term. We had done the antipoverty program, then we were full-time at the White House. Always had a closet I shared with another guy on the second floor of the West Wing because Don was dual-hatted, he was an assistant to the President but he was also director of OEO.

Later on, we ran the Wage Price Control Program – he was the director, I was the assistant director. I was in charge of 3,000 IRS agents trying to enforce controls. That's a book. I never put that on my resume. But at the end of that first term, Don went off to Brussels as ambassador to NATO. He had offered me the chance to go with him but I had young kids at school, and I really didn't want to take off

then and I had an offer from the private sector here in Washington – a small investment advisory firm – and so I signed up with that. So the beginning of '73, he's off to NATO and I'm out of government in the private sector here in Washington. That was one of the better decisions we ever made because the next 18 months were the months of Watergate. That's when the trials going on.

KRISTOL: So that wasn't clever planning – clever planning on your part to get out of the White House then?

CHENEY: It had nothing to do with planning, how I was going to advance my interests. But –

KRISTOL: Did you deal with President Nixon much, as you were sort of one cut down, I guess?

CHENEY: No. You know, I had met him a few times but I was the next layer down. And at a Cabinet meeting, Rumsfeld had a presentation, I was the chart flipper.

I was not close to the President but I was in the West Wing, had an office in the West Wing most of those years and got to know a lot of the people. And then when Watergate unfolded as it did, I was sitting on the outside here in Washington just watching the administration come apart at the seams.

And that August, August 9th as I recall, I think it was the night before August 8th, Nixon went on television and announced he was not going to continue as President, he was going to step down the next day at noon and Jerry Ford, Vice President, would take over.

I got a phone call that night. I had been with friends having dinner when we watched the announcement and went home and Lynne and the kids were still in Wyoming from our summer vacation, and I was at the house when the phone rang and it was Rumsfeld's assistant in Brussels calling to ask me to meet his plane, which was going to land the next afternoon at Dulles. So the next morning I went to work, I watched the television coverage of Nixon's farewell address in the East Room. And then caught a ride out to Dulles and met Don's plane. We got in a White House car that had been sent for him and he was handed a letter from the President, asking him to come straight to the White House, that he wanted him to take over as head of the transition. And so we drove down. This is –

KRISTOL: Rumsfeld and Ford had known each other from the Hill?

CHENEY: They had served together on the Hill. Don had been an important part of the organization that overthrew Charlie Halleck and got Ford elected as leader. And so they were very close. And we went to the White House and Don took over running the transition. And I was – he asked me if I could free myself for a few days and help, and I said, "Absolutely." This is an historic moment, the first time a president had ever resigned. And so we went and did the transition in terms of putting together a plan and so forth. Then –

KRISTOL: What was that like?

CHENEY: Well, it a little chaotic.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it must have been crazy. I mean, no one had ever been through this, right?

CHENEY: Yeah. I mean you have situations where a president had died in office but we'd never had a situation where you had – I always thought of it as sort of after the Civil War, the worst Constitutional crisis we'd had in the last hundred years. And it was – we had to put together an administration on the fly.

There hadn't been any prior campaign; there wasn't a staff there to draw upon. The occupant of the Oval Office had never sought the Oval Office; he's been drafted. It was really a unique time. And so we did the transition plan. Ford was very precise in that he wanted us to focus on the domestic side, on budget,

domestic council, domestic agencies. He did not want us to get into the foreign policy arena. That was a stipulation he laid down that very first afternoon. And that was –

KRISTOL: He had Kissinger as Secretary of State, I suppose.

CHENEY: He had Kissinger. And if you remember the night before Nixon announced he was going to resign the next day, the first thing that happened was the cameras were set up in front of Ford's townhouse over in Alexandria and he came out of the house –

KRISTOL: No Vice Presidential residence then, right?

CHENEY: No Vice Presidential residence.

KRISTOL: He just lived in his regular house.

CHENEY: Yeah, just you and me. He was – but he came out, and the very first thing he said was not, you know, "I'm going to try to be a good president" or whatever. He said, "I have asked Henry Kissinger to continue as Secretary of State, and he has agreed" – the very first words out of his mouth.

He had a problem in the sense that there were two conflicting objectives. One was you've got to convince the American people the crowd that brought you Watergate is no more, they're gone, they're no longer here. Secondly, you've got to convince your allies and your adversaries around the world there's no fundamental change in U.S. policy in the international arena. We've got the same Secretary of State, same basic fundamental policies so you've got emphasizing change, on the one hand, and continuity, on the other.

KRISTOL: That's not exactly a quiet and peaceful time in foreign policy. Vietnam –

CHENEY: Vietnam was still ongoing, although most U.S. troops are out by then. And the economy was shaky, to put it mildly. We, after we'd finished the transition, Don went back to Brussels, I went back to my company but a couple of weeks later, I got another phone call from Rumsfeld saying, "Would you meet me at the Marriott, the Key Bridge Marriott, tomorrow morning?" He was coming in from Brussels.

KRISTOL: The Key Bridge Marriott, not even the Hay-Adams or –

CHENEY: Not the Watergate. It was kind of nervous about the Watergate.

But I met him over there, and he said he was on his way to the White House. He thought the President was going to offer him the job as the White House Chief of Staff and wanted to know if I would sign on as his deputy if he agreed to take it and I said, "Certainly." So he went and met with him.

There was some doubt about whether or not he would, and it was a difficult time partly, too, for the President. It was about that time that Betty Ford was diagnosed with breast cancer. It is – there's a lot of stuff happening all at one time. And anyway Don signed on, and he told the President he wanted me to be the deputy, and the President signed on for that, no questions asked.

I didn't know Jerry Ford. I had been in a crowd once that he'd spoken to up on the Hill but that was it. And so the Sunday we went into the White House, went into the Chief of Staff's office. This great big huge desk that Haldeman had built that was there. And it was a magnificent piece of equipment but a lot of wiring involved in it and the ability to record stuff. There was also a safe under the cabinet that nobody could open, nobody had the combination. And Al Haig had been there for 14 months, he'd never been in the safe. And so, of course, we got very curious about that so we finally got the Secret Service to get somebody to come in and open the safe, which they did. We didn't know what was in there – money,

floor plans for the Watergate. It turned out nothing was in there. We used to joke it was probably a bologna sandwich in there but it was empty.

But we were, we operated especially in those early months under the shadow of Watergate. In those first days of course you've got the problem of the continuing investigation, potential prosecution of Nixon, and in addition to the policy issue itself, there's the whole question of Watergate. When Ford made the decision to pardon Nixon was that period of time after the transition but before we went back.

KRISTOL: So the pardon was before you were back?

CHENEY: Yeah, pardon was about a month after he'd been sworn in, it was around the 8th or 9th of September, he'd been sworn in a month before. And we were back late September is when we took over. But I can remember going to the Hill with the President when he had to testify, wanted to testify before the House Judiciary Committee.

KRISTOL: And the only time I think a president has testified, maybe –

CHENEY: That's correct. There was some talk that maybe Lincoln had at one point but that didn't really pan out. But Ford wanted to go before the committee and –

KRISTOL: This was about the pardon, sort of whether it was improper somehow –

CHENEY: It was about the allegation that there had been a deal, that he had promised a pardon if, in fact, Nixon would step down and let him become president. That was not true, it was never true.

But Ford wanted to go up, and it made a lot of sense, partly because he'd been the Republican leader. Everybody knew and trusted him and so forth. But I went up that day with him and sat in the gallery within the public section of the committee room. And that was shortly before the November '74 election, which turned out to be a real train wreck.

I can remember Don and I set up a deal where we'd alternate trips. He'd do one trip and I'd stay in the White House, and then the next trip I'd do and so forth. And this was my trip, my first trip that I'm taking on the charge on the road. And we went to Kansas City and spoke to the Future Farmers of America where the President delivered what we laughingly referred to as the "lick your plate clean" speech. He'd given an economic speech to the nation early on, and it wasn't one of our better efforts and it was very long so he cut it in half, gave the first half of the speech on TV and then the last half to the Future Farmers of America in Kansas City.

We went and landed in Los Angeles, and en route to Los Angeles, the President got a phone call on Air Force One. Nixon was very, very ill in the hospital down in Long Beach Naval Hospital, and the President decided he wanted to go see him. And my argument was, "Mr. President, look, you know we're trying to get as far away from that as we can. If we go down and you visit President Nixon in his hospital room," I said, "you know, that's going to be everything, it's going to be all the news and the headlines. And the last thing we need going into this election is that association." He said, "Damn it, Dick. He's a friend of mine. We served together. He appointed me Vice President. Now I'm President of the United States. I'm going to go see him." So I had to get helicopters sent out. They landed in the parking lot of the Century Plaza Hotel there in downtown Los Angeles.

The next morning, got up, we loaded the President, and flew down to Long Beach Naval Hospital in Long Beach, landed there and went into the hospital and up to the floor where the President was, President Nixon. And the press is all gathered in this big open area, and, of course, they see us coming, they know we're going to be there. We're met out there, as I recall, by Pat Nixon and the girls. And then we had to go through another set of doors down the hallway to get to Nixon's room.

Well, that whole wing, the floor, he was the only patient in there. It was brand new. So we went through the doors. The doors closed behind us. We got down to the door to Nixon's room, and we couldn't get the door open. It was stuck shut. We ended up getting a carpenter up there to get the door open. And Nixon is in bed, he's got tubes running in every part of his body, he's a very sick individual, and the door is jammed to his room. I don't know what would have happened if they had a crisis at that point. So, finally, we get the door open. The press never figured out what was going on down there but the President saw former President Nixon. It was strictly a matter of friendship and sympathy and respect for the years that they'd worked together. And then we left.

We traveled up California, Oregon, down through Colorado. In Colorado, we had a great stop where the rally was for Peter Dominick, who was a senator from Colorado running for reelection, and we had a rally in Grand Junction at the baseball field. The voters were all in the bleachers and so forth around the field. The speaker's platform was a flatbed trailer that was parked over this pitcher's mound and lined up on the trailer were the beauty contestants of the homecoming queen for the local junior college, La Mesa Junior College in Grand Junction, Colorado. The President got up to speak, and he looked down the row at all these lovelies – there are 7 or 8 attractive young girls, 19, 20 years old in their finery. And so he walked down the row, and he gave each one of them a kiss. And then he came back to the mic to give his speech, and looked down the row and he went back and did it a second time. And that made headlines.

Then we flew to Kansas, and we appeared for Bob Dole. Bob was having a very tough race for reelection, and we were there in a terrible rainstorm. I mean, virtually everything you could think of went wrong on this trip. The only guy, as I recall, who won reelection was Bob Dole. Everybody else we campaigned for got beat. So that was my first experience on the road running, you know, the presidential cavalcade. I was sure Rumsfeld would never let me out of town again.

KRISTOL: But he did. And President Ford didn't blame you for – I remember '74 was sort of beyond anyone's control at that point.

CHENEY: It was, I think. It was, you know, we were down, I think, what about 140-something members in the House. It was a situation that we were carrying the weight of Watergate. It wasn't at all surprising that it was a bad year. But that was the start to our time in the White House.

IV: President Gerald Ford (53:23 – 1:10:09)

KRISTOL: But President Ford really pulled it together in '75, '76. And I think history now judges, maybe, more than the people at the time what a service he did to the country and just in a way getting things, at least, on something like an even course.

Obviously, Vietnam was terrible. He tried to save South Vietnam in early '75 but Congress prevented that, I guess. That must have been a very rough week or two or month or so to be in the White House, watching the helicopters taking off. I mean, I'm feeling that you wanted to do something that had been stopped. That must have been very difficult, I should think.

CHENEY: He had – the arrangement by then, all the U.S. forces are out and this is the spring of '75. And the north has invaded the south basically. We still had people at the embassy in Saigon and still had a contingent. We were flying people out of, especially orphans out of Tan Son Nhut there in Saigon. It was a difficult, dark period of time, and the President had the authority to go ask Congress for additional help and the way Nixon had handled the withdrawal before was pretty much a commitment to the South Vietnamese that if they got into difficulty, we would – we'd support them.

KRISTOL: Especially a flat out North Vietnamese invasion, contrary to the treaty, I mean.

CHENEY: Exactly. So, but the Congress shot that down. I can remember being down at Tulane University in Louisiana when the President was making a speech down there and that was the day that it sort of all got, that it was clear there wasn't going to be any further involvement by the U.S.

And then we ended up back up here in the West Wing. There was a state dinner under way that night. This is the night that the embassy was surrounded by Vietcong and by the North Vietnamese. Now, we'd been told by our ambassador on the scene through Jim Schlesinger over at Defense, Secretary of Defense, that all the Americans were out, when in fact, they weren't. We still had 50 Marines on the ground surrounding the embassy trying to secure it while we're lifting people off by helicopter from the embassy roof.

I eventually got that sorted out but then there was no shortage of difficulties. Mayaguez occurred a couple of weeks later, an American merchant ship captured on the high seas by Cambodian rebels.

KRISTOL: During this time, you're deputy to Rumsfeld's Chief of Staff?

CHENEY: I was the deputy until the fall of '75.

KRISTOL: Kissinger is still National Security Advisor and Secretary of State?

CHENEY: He had both jobs.

KRISTOL: That must have been kind of bizarre. I mean, I can't imagine it somehow. Think how hard Brent Scowcroft worked as National Security Advisor and Jim Baker as Secretary of State. The idea that you could do both, it's –

CHENEY: It depends on how you define bizarre, Bill. You know, we were seeing a lot of things nobody had ever seen before. But Henry did a great job. He was an enormous factor, a reliable, steady, experienced hand, and the President loved working with him. They got along very well. And –

KRISTOL: He was mostly in the White House, I take it?

CHENEY: No, actually, he split his time. Henry had come in as National Security Advisor, and at the end of the first term, and I think also in the throes as Watergate was starting to unfold, the President made him Secretary of State as well. Bill Rogers left. And Henry was in a very strong position.

And I see a lot of him now. He used to stop in and see me on a regular basis when I was Vice President. I really have a great respect for him. But he also is a very strong personality. I can remember a time when we were traveling through Europe; I think we'd been to the Helsinki Summit. And it was an official presidential trip. I was charged with the trip. Henry was with us, as often was the case overseas. And we landed, after we left Helsinki, we landed in Warsaw, Poland.

Got the President squared away in his official quarters, and then I left and went out to a private home in the suburbs of Warsaw where I had a meeting, unannounced meeting with John Sherman Cooper. He was the former senator from Kentucky, and at this point he's our ambassador to East Germany. There still was an East Germany in those days. And spent the afternoon with the senator and we had a great time, talked. And then he left and went back down to East Berlin, and I rejoined the presidential party. Well, the next day, Henry found out I had had a secret meeting with one of his ambassadors in Warsaw and he just exploded. I mean, it was, you know, hood to head kind of thing. It took me about 20 minutes to get him calmed down enough to explain what I was doing. I was there because the President asked me to be there. I was there because we expected to have a primary in the next year in '76 in Kentucky, and there was no better politician where Kentucky was concerned than John Sherman Cooper. So it was legitimate business. He calmed down after.

I figured out years later when I read a book Sy Hersh wrote about Henry – Henry, I think, thought I was doing to him what he'd done to Bill Rogers, and he'd set up reporting relationships all over the world with ambassadors, sort of bypassing the State Department while he was still the National Security Advisor. And I always suspected that Henry believed I was organizing things and dealing independently with his people, the folks that were working for him.

But we had two assassination attempts on the President. The first one, of course, was Squeaky Fromme, one of the Manson protégées who as the President was walking across the Capitol grounds in Sacramento on his way to visit with the governor, she was standing in the rope line and as he came up to her, she pulled a 45 out of her purse and, fortunately, Larry Buendorf, one of the agents, saw what was happening and reached over and grabbed the 45 and put the skin between his thumb and forefinger down between the hammer and the cartridge so the gun never went off.

Not long after that, we're in San Francisco – I wasn't, these are both Rumsfeld's trips. I said –

KRISTOL: As you like to remind him.

CHENEY: But later on, he's coming out of the hotel in San Francisco where he had been speaking to a building trades group, it was the same group that Ronald Reagan was speaking to several years later when he was shot here in Washington. No connection, it just happened to be that unique kind of an arrangement.

But as he had been coming down on the elevator to get in the motorcade, he'd stepped through one of these freight elevators where the door rises up instead of moving sideways. The elevator door went up, the President started to step through and it came down and hit the President on the top of the head and split his scalp open and we had to take him, they had to take him back up to the hotel room and get the bleeding stopped and get a BandAid on it and so forth.

And they got back on the elevator and walked out to get in the limousine, and Sara Jane Moore who was across the street fired a shot at him – missed, fortunately. But, you know, there was one time after another.

KRISTOL: So then when was the shakeup where, really, President Ford put his own stamp, I would say, even more on the presidency, and you became Chief of Staff and Don Rumsfeld became Secretary of Defense? Kissinger was, I think, became, stayed as Secretary of State but was no longer National Security Advisor. What was that, November of '75 or something?

CHENEY: It was, I think it was announced in November of '75.

KRISTOL: That was a – I think that was one of those classic cases where the press interpreted it as "Oh my God, they're desperate, they're moving the deck chairs on the Titanic." But actually it was the beginning of a, really, very big comeback for the Ford presidency when you think about. He beat back the primary challenge. He almost won president, reelection. He had a pretty good year in '76. I think he turns policy.

CHENEY: He beat Ronald Reagan for the nomination.

KRISTOL: Well, that's not nothing.

CHENEY: That was tough going. No, we by the fall of '75, one of the things that we'd never dealt with was that decision the President had made the night before he was sworn in when he said, "I've asked Henry to stay, and he's agreed," and then he told the transition team, "Don't get into the national security piece," which we didn't. So there was that sort of piece of unfinished business, and there was a question of Nelson Rockefeller on the ticket going into '76.

KRISTOL: So he'd become Vice President.

CHENEY: He'd become Vice President and close to Ford. He was never happy as a Vice President. We could do a whole show on that, as a former Vice President, I have a certain sympathy, but I was the cause of a lot of the problem. My job was to often times say no to him as the Chief of Staff, and he never forgot it.

But that November when we made a lot of switches sort of to clear the decks and get ready for the year ahead, and Henry gave up the NSC advisor slot and Brent took that over – Scowcroft did. Rumsfeld went to the Pentagon, and I became the Chief of Staff. George Bush came back from China and became the director of the CIA. So there were a number of moves we made at that point, which –

KRISTOL: Was the Rockefeller decision made, I can't remember, was that made then that he would not be on the ticket in '76? And announced then?

CHENEY: It was announced. It was during –

KRISTOL: So sort of a lame duck Vice President for a whole year?

CHENEY: Well, it was the arguments on Rockefeller, of course, if you looked at the situation we faced, it was clear by then we were going to have to run against Ronald Reagan for the nomination. And Ronald Reagan who had very strong support on the conservative side of the party, there wasn't any way we could win the nomination if we didn't have some conservative support on our side.

And Nelson Rockefeller was anathema to the conservative wing of the Republican Party. He had been the guy who had gone against Goldwater in '64 in California and it – and he was very unhappy as Vice President, too. And so that was part of the package was that he would step down and we would announce it then, which we did.

And the other thing that did was that opened up the possibilities for others who might think maybe they'd get a shot to be Vice President. And it didn't hurt going into the battle with the Reagan forces that a number of prominent people in the party might look at that vacant or soon-to-be vacant post as Vice President and think, "Gee, maybe that could be me." And so we sort of dangled that out there and that was part of the strategy as well, too. And in the end, it all worked.

KRISTOL: It was probably one of the biggest shakeups – when you think about it – of an administration that I can think of. You know, we think new Chief of Staff, new Secretary of Defense, new National Security Advisor.

CHENEY: New CIA Director. New Commerce Secretary.

KRISTOL: Rockefeller told that he wouldn't be on the ticket. I mean, but you had a good year in '76.

CHENEY: We did, and it was almost as though that was the completion of the transition that we'd never really had a chance to complete before because of the press of business, circumstances, and so forth.

By then, the President knew what he wanted and what he liked. He had strong feelings about Jim Schlesinger at Defense. He and Schlesinger never really hit it off. One point the President had been critical and told him he needed to do a better job of getting money for the Defense Department up on the Hill. And Jim went out and held a press conference in which he said not very nice things about the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, George Mahon, a Democrat from Texas. Well, Mahon was one of Ford's closest friends. They had been together 25 years in the House, they had both served on

the Appropriations Committee and the Defense Appropriations. And that was the wrong, wrong message for Schlesinger to try to deliver.

So there were certain parts of it that the President felt he was happy to do, if I can put it in those terms, or the parts where he did things that were difficult but were the right thing to do. And as the new Chief of Staff, I had signed on but I always remember the day before this all announced, it's starting to leak. That Sunday morning, I had brought Schlesinger and Bill Colby into the White House early on a Sunday morning, and the President had fired both of them. Bill Colby was happy to go; Schlesinger, the President later told me it was one of the toughest meetings he ever had.

But he had pulled the trigger on the CIA Director and Secretary of Defense, and then we got on Air Force One and flew to Jacksonville, Florida, for a summit meeting with Anwar Sadat. And on the way down, the President called me up to the cabin of Air Force One and he said, "Dick, you get on the telephone and get Rumsfeld to agree to be Secretary of Defense," because Don hadn't agreed at that point. And so I found myself, as we're flying into Jacksonville, on the telephone trying to persuade my boss – yesterday as Chief of Staff, now I'm Chief of Staff – persuade him he's got to do what the President wants him to do, which is take that job as Secretary of Defense, which he finally did.

Thirty years later what it was, I'm on the phone talking to Rumsfeld about being Secretary of Defense in the second Bush Administration. So you know, it's interesting coincidences.

KRISTOL: And say a word about Jerry Ford. I mean, an accidental president, I guess, who ran a good reelection campaign; you ran a good reelection campaign for him and almost got elected in his own right but people forget how he came from what 25 points down.

CHENEY: We were down 25 points. After the Democratic Convention, we ended up, I think, we only lost by about a point. It was very close.

KRISTOL: Yeah, but he was, I mean, I think, an underrated man in the White House. I mean, what was he like to work for, what was it you were –

CHENEY: I loved Jerry Ford. He was – well, from a personal standpoint, he was a very important figure in my life from the day I walked in and Rumsfeld introduced me as his deputy, he totally trusted me, treated me the same way he treated Rumsfeld.

KRISTOL: And you really didn't know him? That's kind of amazing to me, don't you think? To be Deputy Chief of Staff is such a – I mean, it calls – when you need such trust and rapport, really, with your boss.

CHENEY: Remember a few months before, he's the Republican leader in the House and now he's the President of the United States. I mean, it was all at once there was a lot of change going on.

Or another way to think about it is, in adversity, there is opportunity. The adversity was Watergate, the opportunity – I told somebody not long ago, I said, "Look, if it hadn't been for Watergate, I'd never have been White House Chief of Staff." And it was one of those occurrences. It's like the Tower defeat, John Tower, if he gets confirmed as Secretary of Defense, I've got a career in the House but I'm not going to be Secretary of Defense. Stuff happens.

And with Jerry Ford, it was a very special privilege to work for him under those circumstances. The country had never seen anything like that before. Some of those relationships with people that I worked with then are lifelong friendships – we still meet every year, what's left of the Ford crowd, the White House staff and the Cabinet. And it gets thinner every year because that was a long time ago.

But it was, he was what you saw was what you get. I mean, there wasn't a private Jerry Ford. The deep, dark, brooding personality – some people would describe Nixon. Jerry Ford was Jerry Ford. He was

straight, he was direct. He could be tough when he had to be tough. You knew he was approaching the boiling point when the red spots appeared on his cheeks, and he clamped down on that pipe. He apparently as a young man – he told me this story once – had had a bad temper, and his mother had taught him to control it and he did a great job of that. He had a great sense of humor about himself. He was there when the country needed him, and he was exactly what we needed.

I – one of the things that I always appreciated was that he asked me to deliver the eulogy when he laid in state in the Rotunda of the Capitol. Sometimes, a president leaves office with a package of plan for his state funeral that the military, District of Washington, is all prepared. And he can change it, he can make modifications. Ford lived 30 years after he left the White House, and he made changes in the plan, and I always really appreciated the fact that he asked me to do that for him.

V: The Reagan Years (1:10:09 – 1:23:48)

KRISTOL: So you leave the White House after President Ford's narrow defeat by Jimmy Carter. You go back to Wyoming, you get elected to Congress. You quickly become a member of the Republican leadership in Congress. But I guess you were in the leadership throughout the Reagan Administration, and you must have dealt with them a fair amount on legislative matters and other challenges of those very important eight years.

CHENEY: Well, they were sort of – there was a foursome among House Republicans. Bob Michel was the leader, Trent Lott was the whip, Jack Kemp was the conference chair, and I was the policy chair.

And so we did a lot of work over there, and those were, Bob had had a hand in shaping that. He had suggested through an intermediary that I run for a policy chair, even though I was still a freshman – that was the end of my first term. And but I figured out that that's what – that he was behind it, he couldn't be public about it because he had a race himself. But that really set the stage, and it made a world of difference in terms of my own career. I mean, I'm a congressman from Wyoming, a freshman. You know, your opportunity to operate is limited under those circumstances.

I had been White House Chief of Staff. A lot of people wondered, "Why in the world did he ever run for Congress?", but I really liked putting my name on the ballot, and I knew I wanted to pursue a political career. I didn't like being in a position where my career depended upon somebody else's luck at the polls, which was the case if you were working for a president, which I had loved. But so it turned into a fascinating 10-year period of time. One of the things I did was I was on the Intelligence Committee for –

KRISTOL: Yeah, let me just interrupt that, I'm just curious. Were your colleagues in the House, were they friendlier to you because you had this kind of very unusual experience for a freshman congressman of having been White House Chief of Staff, or was it a little bit of like wariness? I'm just – it must have been kind of funny to show up in the House with that, you know –

CHENEY: But it's interesting. I knew a lot of the guys; obviously, I had worked with them as White House Chief of Staff. But also I came in with a very active, aggressive group of freshman. There were 37 of us in the class, included Newt, Newt Gingrich.

KRISTOL: So this is the class of '78?

CHENEY: A class of 70 got elected in '78, and there were some bomb-throwers in the class, Newt, among them, who believed we could get to be the majority. No Republicans thought we could be the majority, and he did. Of course, ultimately, we did; ultimately, he became Speaker.

But this was about the time they started televising the House proceedings. And the members would get down, and Newt had a lot to do with this, would go down into the well of the House at the end of the day

and get a special order. And they could talk for an hour down there, and it would be broadcast. Now, not a lot of people were watching initially.

But I can remember talking about how I was viewed by my colleagues, one day during special orders, I was at the back of the chamber, leaning over the rail, watching whatever was going on down on the floor. One my colleagues was pounding on the podium and condemning those nasty Democrats who had committed some outrage in the Carter Administration. And one of the older members came out of the cloak room and he looked at all this, and he walked over and he put his arm around me. He said, "You know what I like about you Cheney?" And I said, "No, what's that?" He said, "You're the only son of a gun in your whole class that doesn't drool when he speaks." I took that as high praise. It was because of my prior experience, and because I was close to Bob Michel and some of the other guys. I ended up being a bridge between my colleagues who were new, relatively new to the business.

When Newt got in a lot of trouble, sometimes he'd come see me and say, "Okay, Dick, what did I do this time?" And on the other hand, from the standpoint of Bob Michel and the other leadership folks, I was somebody they could talk to as representative of that group, and I have this, a bridge, if you will, between the old guard and the new guard, and that was one of my strengths that helped me through that period of time. But it also meant that I went through those leadership elections every term after that, and I never had any opposition, I was elected unanimously, after that first election, elected unanimously for Conference Chair and ultimately for whip in '88.

KRISTOL: And you helped shepherd the Reagan agenda through the House, which everyone forgets was a Democratic House, so it wasn't obvious that he would get his major things through.

CHENEY: Well, and Reagan had a very special ability. We had, remember early on, we had Boll Weevil Democrats. You can't find a Boll Weevil Democrat today. But in those days, there were a significant chunk of Democrat members, Phil Gramm, foremost among them, perhaps. And on economic issues and budget issues, they basically would side with us, with the Republicans.

And in that first Reagan term, we had the ability, really, to control policy in that area. That was enormously beneficial from our standpoint. Reagan had a great relationship with Tip O'Neill. I mean, they argued and differed on everything but Reagan being Reagan, he had a very special talent. I became a strong supporter of Ronald Reagan. For a while, I felt a little guilty about having worked to beat him so hard back in '76. On the other hand, if we'd won in '76, he probably never would have been president. So it all worked out. He never held it against me. I had the opportunity to work with him a lot over the years, and he always treated me very well and basically on good terms.

KRISTOL: Yeah I think you have one story about – I remember this at the time actually when I was Vice President Quayle's Chief of Staff after the war, I think after the first Gulf War. You were in California for some reason, and you went to see President Reagan, is that right? He was –

CHENEY: Yeah, I'd – right after the Gulf War ended – this is February, March of '91 – I had called the former president out in California and thanked him for what he'd done back in the 80s when he was president because he had a huge hand in creating that magnificent force we had to go to war with in '90 and '91.

That's why I worry very much about one of the things that happens today as we go through the debate about defense, we're not making decisions for just what the force is going to look like now; we're limiting the options of future presidents 10, 15 years down the road. So it's a big problem.

In that particular case, this was right after the war was over with, there were "welcome home" events all over the country and I was in California and was invited to stop by and visit with the former president and Nancy in their home there in Beverly Hills. And when I went into the house, they sat me down in a big easy chair, and then the President pulled a hassock up, a footstool and put it right in front of the chair and

then he sat down on the hassock and looked me right in the eye, stared at me, really focused on what I was saying. I think he was already by then – this is, say, early '91 – having problems with respect to Alzheimer's.

But he was very interested in what I had to say, he wanted to know about Desert Storm, very interested in the Russians and Gorbachev. And so I spent about an hour with him that afternoon and it was the last time I talked to him, and it was a special event, partly, because I had great respect for him.

One of the other things that helped, frankly, and this sounds strange to say, was the assassination attempt. Now, he's been in office just a few weeks, coming out of the Washington Hilton after speaking to a group and when he was shot, and a very serious health crisis, nearly died and but survived. And he handled it with such grace and dignity and humor that I think people all across the country liked him, even if they disagreed with him. And he had an amazing capacity, I think, partly because of the way he dealt with that particular set of events that he won a lot of friends who would support him in a pinch.

KRISTOL: I came to Washington in '85, and I remember '86/'87, thinking – you know, I was a huge fan of President Reagan, thrilled to be a very little foot soldier in his Administration – but I thought, "Oh my God, are we just going down the tubes, Iran-Contra."

Now, people have sort of a footnote in history almost, but at the time, it seemed like it could be another Watergate and really a huge damage to the Administration and to the country and to his legacy. You were someone – you were not involved in Iran-Contra, I don't want to say that in the wrong way – but you were on the committee, I believe, the joint committee that investigated and then you authored the minority report, is that right?

CHENEY: Yeah, Bob Michel when Iran-Contra broke, it happened, first started right after the '86 election, and there was a plane in Central America was shot down or crashed, and it was supposedly a private flight. It turned out it was really part of a CIA operation to smuggle arms to the Contras.

But when it broke, the Administration was looking for people to brief, and it happened right after the '86 election, and everybody had left town and I was getting ready to go on an elk hunt in Wyoming but I was still here. And I got a phone call from Bob who was out of town saying, "Look, the White House has asked for a special meeting, you're the only one still there in leadership, you've got to go." So I went.

And it was Bobby Byrd, and I think Bob Dole and myself and Jim Wright. Jim Wright was the new Speaker then. And the four of us sat down in the Situation Room of the basement of the West Wing and were briefed basically on this operation that had been going that became noted as Iran-Contra. But we were smuggling arms to or selling arms to the Iranians, supposedly the Iranian moderates, whatever that was, and then taking the cash and using that to support, covertly support the Contras, the anti-Communist rebels in Nicaragua, which the Congress had banned, you couldn't use official funds for that purpose.

And it was a stunner, needless to say. That resulted in Bob asking me as we put together the investigation, congressional investigation – decision was made – the leadership involved and so forth – that we would have a joint select committee, House and Senate, Republican and Democrat. And that's what we did. It frankly was a good way to proceed to do legislative business; we didn't have any of this having 35 or 40 members, each getting 5 minutes to ask the witness the same question. And it was much better organized, we were able to assign witnesses to individual members and they had to be expert in their field and so forth.

And I was the senior Republican on the Iran-Contra Committee. Bob had appointed me. I was not senior to all the other members of the committee but I was part of the leadership and so he put me in charge. And we spent most of '87 investigating Iran-Contra. In those days, it was a big deal, a lot of television coverage, hearings, Ollie North.

KRISTOL: I remember that so vividly while sitting at the Education Department totally out of it, clueless but watching on TV with Bill Bennett my boss, Ollie North's testimony. That was a moment.

CHENEY: Later that year, I was on a trip to Italy walking through a train station in Rome, for some reason, people would come up, they'd seen it on television. It had gotten a lot of notice and a lot of attention. But it was very serious. It had a lot to do with the basic age-old struggle between the executive and the legislative over who controls foreign policy and national security matters. And it was a serious attack on the President.

On the other hand, he had given them an opening. He had a situation where there had been a dysfunctional arrangement, if you will, in terms of the national security staff. You had the questions about who was running the CIA, and Bill Casey was involved in those days, involved in this operation but died before he could ever testify before the committee.

And the debate was a very significant one. We ended up writing a minority report. Unlike Watergate where most of the Republicans signed on with the Democrats in condemning Nixon, this was a situation where I felt very strongly that there had been some screw-ups but I also felt very strongly that this was, to some extent, being used by the Democrats to take shots at Ronald Reagan and that it did not approach the scale of what had happened in Watergate. And in the end, I think that was an accurate judgment. There had been some mistakes made but that minority report is significant to this day, I think, because it lays out my view and the view of other members of the committee, sort of, the proper role for the executive and the legislative with respect to the conduct of foreign policy.

KRISTOL: I have friends who teach political science who still assign excerpts, at least, from that report in their courses because it is such an interesting and clear, I think, account of at least one point-of-view of the executive's role in foreign policy.

VI: Dick Cheney on 9/11 (1:23:48 – 1:39:33)

KRISTOL: So then skipping forward, you end up back in the executive branch as Vice President, unanticipatedly, I think, on your part. And it's your new administration, getting organized, various minor crises really, and then suddenly 9/11 happens. How surprised were you? I mean, how worried? You had been worried about terrorism and about these kinds of attacks it seems to me more than most people in Washington.

CHENEY: Yeah, I'd, of course, I'd been Secretary of Defense and then went off to the private sector and been running Halliburton, a big energy services company down in Texas operated on a global basis. And George W. Bush, then the governor, asked me to – at first, he asked me if I wanted to run with him as Vice President and I said, "No way, I wasn't interested." Then, he asked me to help him find somebody, and at the end of that process, I was a failure as a headhunter, and he came back to me again and that's when I signed on.

KRISTOL: I forgot that. So he'd asked you beforehand? Before the search even? So he just wanted you to be the VP?

CHENEY: I think so. At the time, I said no for all kinds of reasons but I don't think he ever gave up on the idea and by putting me, I had the opportunity to work with him for a couple of months as we went through the search process on what he was looking for and heard him think about and talk about what he was looking for in a Vice President, and he really had given it a great deal of thought. And in the end, I think it worked well. He –

KRISTOL: What was at the foremost of his mind, foreign policy experience, which he presumably didn't –

CHENEY: National security was very much there but also that it was a substantive position, it wasn't going to be just funerals and fundraisers. And, of course, I never found a Vice President who really enjoyed his time there unless he got to be President, and then something unfortunate had usually happened if that was the case.

But he was looking for somebody who could play a major role in his administration and be a part of the team, part of the process. He didn't pick me – I'm from Wyoming, you know, we're the smallest state in the nation population-wise, three electoral votes. Turned out we needed all three of those electoral votes, it was that close.

But I think he used that search process partly with the expectation that he might be able to persuade me once I'd heard him on the subject and talked with him about it and looked at people, that in the end, I was the guy he wanted and that's what he finally did. After our last review down at his ranch in Texas –

KRISTOL: Just out of curiosity, if you had stuck to your determination not to come back as Vice – not to come – not to be Vice President, not to accept his offer, maybe you've said this already, I don't know, who would have been the Vice Presidential nominee?

CHENEY: I've never revealed that.

KRISTOL: Oh, would you like to? I mean –

CHENEY: No, well, just I never talked about the people we looked at.

KRISTOL: It was a short list, I guess.

CHENEY: It was a short list. You have a long list and a short list. The long list includes the guy who calls up and said, "Look, Dick, I've got a really tough race at home this year. If you'd let the word out that I'm under consideration, that would really help." Okay, you're on the short list – the long list, not the short list.

So it was, it was fascinating. It was the second time I'd done it because I'd done it for Ford when he picked Dole in '76. And but in the final analysis, we got down to having reviewed everybody, and I knew what he wanted but he looked me in the eye after I finished that last review down at the ranch in Texas and he said, "You're the solution to my problem." And I said, "Okay, I'll see what I would have to do to make it possible" because I had to worry about Halliburton, who's going to take over there. I've got to get the family on board. They were not enthused. Well, my daughter, Liz, was enthusiastic. Lynne and Mary weren't. You can imagine what it's like when you go home at the end of the day and say, "Honey, sell the house, I quit my job, we're going back into politics."

But I'm glad I did it, it worked out well. One of the reasons the President wanted me was national security, obviously, because of my background in defense and Intelligence Committee and Chief of Staff and so forth. And so when we took over, I spent a lot of time in those first months getting reacquainted with all the folks in the intelligence community, spending time at the CIA, DIA, NSA, and so forth and getting up to speed.

I gave an interview in the spring of '01 where I talked about – I was asked about the biggest threat facing the country – and I talked about the possibility of a terrorist attack with terrorists using something deadlier, a weapon of mass destruction, for example. That was in April. When we got down to 9/11, obviously, it was airline tickets and box cutters but we saw what they were able to do with that in terms of taking down the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and killing 3,000 of our people.

That morning, I was in my office. As I recall, it was a Tuesday. And John McConnell was with me, my speechwriter, and we were working on an upcoming speech, and my secretary called in from the outer office and said, "An airplane just –

KRISTOL: This is the White House office or the –

CHENEY: The White House.

KRISTOL: Because you have an office in both. You have a big office in the Old Executive Office Building.

CHENEY: I spent most of my time in the White House.

KRISTOL: Yeah smaller but better location. It's location, location, location.

CHENEY: That's right. But I – she said, "A plane had hit the World Trade Center," and we turned on the TV set, and we're watching this unfold and we saw the second plane go in, and that's when we knew it was a terrorist attack.

I arranged to talk to the President on the telephone. I can't remember whether he called me or I called him. We had a quick conversation in my office, people starting to gather – Condi Rice came down the hall; her office was not far away from mine. Scooter Libby, my Chief of Staff, came in and we ended up with half a dozen people there, and the President and I went over the first statement he made down in Florida. He was down at a school.

And then after we'd finished the conversation, all of the sudden the door burst open and my Secret Service agent came in, Jimmy Scott, who was on my detail, and he'd been posted outside my door that morning. He came in and came rapidly over behind the desk and he said, "Sir, we have to leave immediately," and put one hand on the back of my belt, one hand on my shoulder and literally propelled me out of the room. You know, I didn't have a choice. He didn't say "please," and he didn't say, "Come with me." He said, "We're leaving now," boom and away we went.

He got me down to a tunnel underneath the White House that leads to the presidential emergency op center; it was under the East Wing, built back during World War II, really. And but on the way there, there was a place where –

KRISTOL: Had you been there before because for various drills when you were –

CHENEY: Yeah, well, when I was Chief of Staff, you know, they used to work for me and so forth. But part way there, there's a stair that comes down, and then there's a door at each end of a section of the tunnel that you can seal off. In there, there are some lockers. A lot of my agents had gathered there. They're pulling out weapons, gas masks, and so forth. Nobody knows for sure what's going on. But everybody is heavily armed by that point.

And there that's where Jimmy Scott told me that the Secret Service had gotten word that there was an airplane flying at low altitude at a high rate of speed out near Dulles headed for "Crown." "Crown" was the code word for the White House, and the airspace over the White House, obviously, is protected.

But they believed it had been hijacked. And it was. It was flight American 77 that came in and did a big circle and then went into the Pentagon. And there was a television set there, and I could see on the television, starting to get some pictures of the attack on the Pentagon. I got the President on a secure phone again.

KRISTOL: So this is a whole bunch of you? This is the famous photo of you and Condi Rice and –

CHENEY: That was a little later.

KRISTOL: That's later, okay.

CHENEY: That was down in the PEOC; this is on the way to the PEOC. But my wife was there. Lynne had been downtown and the agents, her agents brought her over, and she joined me in the tunnel at that point.

And I got the President on the phone and urged him not to return to Washington because Washington is under attack, not only has New York been hit, but now Washington has been hit. We don't know how big the threat it is, we don't know what's planned out there. But I argued strenuously that it was important that he stay away from the city until we could get this sorted out. He didn't like that. The Secret Service made the same recommendation. So he agreed, reluctantly.

Andy Card has talked about the President was very rough on Andy that morning, he was with him. But it made no sense for both of us to be here, obviously. And what you really had to worry about was an attack that would decapitate the leadership of the government, and so he agreed and went off to Barksdale and then to Offutt Air Force Base up in Omaha.

They took me, we finished in the tunnel and got down to the PEOC, and about the same time that I got there, Norm Mineta arrived. Norm was our Secretary of Transportation, a former Democratic congressman from California, a good guy. I've known him for a long time. And Norm had a list of six aircraft with the tail numbers that they believed at that point had been hijacked. And so we started working off that list. We could account then for three – the two in New York and the one that had gone into the Pentagon.

But we're trying to get all the planes down out of the sky. Norm is basically issuing orders that everybody has to come down. Traditionally, a pilot gets to make that decision. That morning, pilots didn't make that decision; Norm insisted, we insisted that everybody is down out of the sky now because that was the only way we could separate good guys from bad guys.

We also talked with Denny Hastert, for example – Speaker, he's second in line after me and if something happened to the President and me, Denny would be president. I got hold of him out at Andrews, and we got him relocated to a secure location. Conversations like that we were focused on.

And part way during that process, an Air Force officer came into the room in a bit of a hurry. And he said, "Sir," he said, "there's a plane headed this way. Are we authorized to take it out?" And I said, "Yes, take it out." He stepped out, and then he came back in again as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd said, and I said, "Yes, if it won't divert, take it out." And passed on an order, I had a conversation with the President earlier about what the rules of engagement would be with our airplanes. We had never practiced anything like this. We got to give them ROE, rules of engagement. It turned out that that message never got passed to the pilots. It's not clear they would have executed if they did.

At the time, I had given the order; a short time later, we heard there was a plane down on the Pennsylvania border. And for a while, we thought we'd taken it down. It turned out it was United 93 and that the passengers had taken it down. The plane had been delayed on takeoff and by the time they were airborne, they were beginning to get messages from the ground that the hijacking, the attack was under way. And, of course, then they decided to take on the terrorist themselves and did. That action, though, obviously, saved probably either the White House or the Capitol Building, our guess was one of those two was probably the target for the attack.

The – we had all kinds of information coming in. Some of it was valid, some of it wasn't. There was a reporting of a car bomb at the State Department, a plane flying over the ranch in Texas. There was a lot of noise in the system. We ended up spending the day down there. We had to stop all incoming flights from overseas, so we were diverting everything over the Atlantic. Most of them went to Canada. We had one flight, a Korean airliner coming over Alaska headed for the States, coming over the top. They were

beeping the signal that they'd been hijacked. There's a code that you can beep and that was actually beeping that signal. So we scrambled fighters out of Elmendorf, Alaska. Turned out it was a mistake.

But there was one of the big things that helped me was that I had spent time during the Reagan years in what's called the Continuity of Government Program. And it was a program that was put in place when we were in the midst of the Cold War, faced with the possibility of an all-out global war with the Soviets using nuclear weapons. And that, and if you think about it, that's a huge problem, how do you deal with that situation? And there was a program that was actually established that I was part of for several years.

And we dealt with questions, as bad as 9/11 was, a nuclear attack on the United States by the Soviets would be far worse. And the basic challenge is to figure out how do you preserve the legitimacy, the constitutional legitimacy of the government of the United States so you've got a functioning government in place? And we actually did exercise this. We'd deploy and practice and so forth. And that training was enormously helpful that day, partly because as bad as it was, we had practiced for far worse – some of us. And that kicked in, that training kicked in from the Reagan years and was helpful.

I stayed here at the White House until the President came back from Offutt. We had a National Security Council meeting. He went on the air and addressed the nation about 8 o'clock at night, and then we again met briefly downstairs and the – Lynne and I flew off the South Lawn on one of the white tops, Marine Two – it was Two, One was with the President on – and flew up to Camp David. That was my secure, undisclosed location oftentimes. We, they put us in Aspen Lodge, the presidential lodge because it was the most secure and we, that's where we spent the night. Liz was up there by then with her family. Mary was down in the Caribbean on a scuba diving trip so she didn't get back until later.

But sat up all night and watched the re-runs of the day, that's all television had going on it, and began to think about how do we deal with this, what are we going to do, what's the right approach, how do we find the guys who did it, how do we make sure it doesn't happen again?

And that became sort of the be-all and end-all of our administration. The President had campaigned on tax policy, prescription drug benefits for seniors and so forth, but after 9/11, that was a watershed event – not just for our administration, but I think for a considerable chunk of time here before 9/11 terrorist attacks or law enforcement problems after 9/11, it was a war. We had lost 3,000 people – more than we lost at Pearl Harbor – in the homeland, in the economic heart of America in Manhattan and here in the Pentagon in Washington. So it was a life-altering experience, I think, for an awful lot of us, especially those of us who were in the bunker that day trying to deal with the crisis as it unfolded.

VII: Threats We Face (1:39:33 – 1:51:39)

KRISTOL: And all in all, looking back, I'm sure there are things you now think you could have done differently. But I personally think the Bush Administration, the Bush/Cheney Administration did a much better job than people appreciate if you think how things could have gone over the next seven years. But any particular lessons or thoughts and sort of now six years later at the end of that Administration, we're 13 years after 9/11? Hard to believe, actually.

CHENEY: Well, I thought we did pretty well. Some of the decisions we made were controversial. They are to this day. I still defend them. Things like the terrorist surveillance program created a great flap over the NSA, and the assumption is the NSA is listening in to your phone call to Aunt Fanny. They aren't. To my knowledge, that program has always been operated to the highest standards, very careful to protect people's civil liberties.

And another program that was very controversial was enhanced interrogation techniques. But when you do have the kind of problem we had and you've got a handful of individuals, the terrorists and the leadership of the terrorists who know what's going to happen next or know how they did the last one. We didn't know a lot about al Qaeda. We knew about the organization. We knew bin Laden. But when we

began to capture high-value detainees, especially in Afghanistan and people like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11, what are you going to do, just say, “Please, please, pretty please, tell us what you know”? It’s not going to work. This is guy is going to die for Allah if he gets the chance and kill every American he can in the process.

So we developed a series of techniques. They’re not new in the sense that they’re the same techniques we used training our own pilots and our own people who may find themselves potentially captured by the enemy at some point. Water-boarding is part of that process. The guy who got water-boarded more than anybody else was KSM. The CIA produced a report subsequently in about ’04 that said Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, preeminent source on al Qaeda. That’s where we got most of our information about al Qaeda was from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

KRISTOL: You saw the intelligence every day after that and you do believe – I’m just confirming this – that it saved a lot of lives?

CHENEY: Yeah, I do believe that. And it prevented another mass casualty attack against the United States for the next seven and a half years. And I, you know, I’m very familiar with the program, I was actively involved in helping get it started and supporting it. And I don’t think we have any apologies to make. I think if in a similar situation today, I would do exactly the same thing.

And they were – you know, if you get to the terrorist surveillance program, there was a point where some controversy had arisen about it. We set the program up back in ’01 and about ’04. There had been leaks and so forth. And we briefed the Congress but always kept it very small, just the Chairman and ranking member on Intel Committee.

But on this day, we brought down the leadership. We had the Speaker, the majority and minority leader, the majority and minority leader in the Senate, the Chairman and ranking member of the Intel Committee, got all of them in the Situation Room. Called in Mike Hayden, who was then running NSA and running that program, had Mike brief on what we were doing and what we were getting out of it. And then I went around the room and asked anybody, “Does anybody here think we should close this program down?” Absolutely not. Nobody wanted to close it down, too valuable. The room contained Nancy Pelosi. Nancy was there on the Intel Committee.

Then the second question I asked was, “Do you think we should come to the Congress and get more authorization for what we’re doing?” Absolutely not, if you bring it up there, it’ll leak. This was the unanimous view in the room. Now, a lot of people have forgotten after it became controversial that they signed up to it, signed off on it. But it was a great program. It was very well done, both of those programs were, I think, when all is said and done, that’s two of the most important things we did. And that counts in no small part for the fact that we kept the country safe for the next seven and a half years.

KRISTOL: And probably safe for the next 13 and a half years. We still haven’t had a big attack, successful attack here. It’s hard to believe it’s 13 plus years ago. And I spoke at a college recently, and the freshmen there were what 5, 6 years old when 9/11 happened. How do you think we stand as a nation and as a government in sort of a post-9/11 world? Do you, I mean, I know you have quarrels with this Administration but do you feel that the country has sort of come to grips with the 21st-century challenges we face? Do you think –

CHENEY: I’m really worried. It’s more, you mentioned the point how rapidly the population ages. Of course, this year I gave the Forrestal Lecture over at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. It was a great crowd. 4,500 Midshipmen and so forth. And they’re with it, they wanted me to talk about leadership and I was talking about Desert Storm.

But partway through the speech, it dawned on me that nearly everybody there in the brigade hadn't been born yet when I was doing Desert Storm. That was back in 1990 and '91 – this is 2014, 24 years later. And you know they weren't around.

And I worry that as a nation, we sort of forget that experience and that it's good that periodically we go back and remind ourselves of that. But the problems we've got now, the dramatic spread of terrorist organizations like al Qaeda or related to al Qaeda. Rand Corporation recently put out a report saying there had been a 78, or excuse me, a 58 percent increase in the number of jihadist groups simply between 2010 and 2013, a four-year period of time.

We've seen a proliferation of areas now that are available, whether it's in Mali or Nigeria or all the way across North Africa up through the Middle East around Indonesia, places where terrorists can find sanctuary and safe harbor. All we had to worry on 9/11 about was Afghanistan. Now, it's much broader than that.

And I'm especially concerned about the proliferation of nuclear capability. We see Iran very close to having their own nuclear capability. They clearly have the technology; they have the raw materials; they have the weapons design. I worry very much that the Administration is going to leave office, and we'll find ourselves with a nuclear-armed Iran.

And we've come very close before to having that capability fall into the hands of people that we'd rather not have it. On our Administration we had in '07, we discovered, thanks to the help of the Israelis, that there was a nuclear reactor in Eastern Syria at al Kibar built by the North Koreans. A nuclear program for the Syrians, one of the biggest terrorist sponsoring states in the world. It's not there anymore because the Israelis took it out. But you can imagine what would have happened if ISIS, the group we're now worried about having chemical weapons, that we're concerned about, if instead the question was who's got the nukes?

In Pakistan, we've got a nation that has significant inventory of nuclear weapons. They also have a significant number of, I'd say, radical Islamists that are part of the political scene. In Pakistan, we had the Taliban where President Obama released five of their leaders from Guantánamo this year. Recently, launched an attack on the Karachi Airport, killed some 40 people. There's talk about a possible coup attempt in terms of the government, and they've got 50 to 100 nuclear weapons. The guy that was building the Libyan program, Muammar Gaddafi was the father of the Pakistani program, then he went into business for himself. Now, he claimed publicly in the newspapers that the North Koreans got their uranium enrichment technology, which is now state of the art, which is now operating at a couple thousand centrifuges, that they got that by bribing Pakistani officials.

So for us to look at that part of the world and think we can hide behind our ocean and everything is fine, that's crazy. You've got to be a fool to believe isolation as a strategy is the way to go. We have no choice but to be involved in that part of the world, and if we're not actively involved, there are some very bad things that are going to happen. I think if the Iranians get nuclear weapons, it will only be a short period of time before others in the region also have nuclear weapons.

So we're in a very dangerous period. I think it's more threatening than the period before 9/11. I think 9/11 will turn out to be not nearly as bad as the next mass casualty attach against the United States, which if and when it comes will be something far more deadlier than airline tickets and box cutters.

KRISTOL: I don't want to end on such a come down – but you have hope, you have hope for the future? What actually gives you the most, I'm curious? Honestly, I mean, what sort of what if you look around?

CHENEY: When I look back at our history, we've been through some very difficult times before. Think about going from the Depression in the 1930s to World War II, and we had a period of time then when because of World War I and the League of Nations and the isolationist sentiment, America First

sentiment that was very strong back in the late 30s. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had to deal with a nation that was overwhelmingly hostile to the idea of American involvement abroad. We had a military at the time of Pearl Harbor that was 17th in the nation; Romania had a bigger army than we did. We overcame all that and mounted that magnificent effort that was World War II and won a tremendous victory and set the stage for 70 years basically of relative peace and stability in the world.

That's in danger now, partly because there aren't very many people left who remember it, partly because we don't teach it in the schools anymore. And partly because the technology gap that has always worked to our advantage is getting smaller and smaller, vis-à-vis the Chinese – excuse me – for example. Then we get into the whole area of cyber-warfare, they're very good at what they do and they're working on it all the time.

So I think we're entering a period of considerable danger with the United States that relative to other nations is weaker than we ought to be, that our military force is being dramatically reduced when it shouldn't be and what we need is strong leadership. And we need a President and a Congress who understand the nature of the threat.

Hopefully, we will rise to the occasion now as we did in the past. But it's very important that we do so. This is not a time for us to rest on our laurels or think we can cut the defense budget and spend all that money on highways or whatever else we might want to spend it on.

We really need a strong leader, and we need somebody who can step up and remind the world what the United States is capable of and demonstrate the ability and the willingness to do that.

KRISTOL: That's a good note, I think. I'm hoping we have that strong leader, that we will have such a strong leader in 2017. I hope his first phone call is to bring you into the White House, not to ask you to be Vice President or Chief of Staff or SECDEF, thought that would be fine with me, but at least to get your counsel.

And thank you so much, Mr. Vice President, for spending this time today. Thank you for your service over the years, which has really been exemplary, I think, just speaking personally for me as a model of what a public servant should do. So thank you very much.

CHENEY: Well, thank you, Bill.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us again for CONVERSATIONS.

[END]