

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH SENATOR JOSEPH BIDEN (D-DE),
DEMOCRATIC
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

SUBJECT: "PROMISES TO KEEP"

MODERATOR: JERRY ZREMSKI, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MR. ZREMSKI: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press
Club.

My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm president of the National Press
Club and Washington bureau chief for the Buffalo News.

I'd like to welcome our club members and their guests who are
here with us today along with those of you who are watching on C-SPAN.
We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards, I'll ask as
many questions as time permits.

Please hold your applause during the speech, so that we have as
much time for questions as possible. And for our broadcast audience,
I'd like to explain that if you hear applause during the speech, it

may be from the guests and members of the general public who attend
our luncheons, and not necessarily from the working press.

I'd know like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to
stand briefly when their names are called.

From your left -- from my left, I should say -- Greg Jaroth (ph), Congressional Quarterly; Amy Werden of the Philadelphia Inquirer; Suzanne Struglinski of the Deseret Morning News; Bo Biden, Delaware State attorney general, and son of Senator Biden; Ed Epstein of the San Francisco Chronicle; Hunter Biden, son of the senator; Jean Biden, the mother of the senator (applause); Angela Greiling Keane, Bloomberg News, and chair of the National Press Club Speakers Committee, who is not related to Senator Biden; Senator Biden; Jill Biden, the wife of the speaker (applause); Jonathan Allen with the Congressional Quarterly, the Speakers Committee member who organized today's event; Will Lester of the Associated Press; Bill Walsh of the New Orleans Times-Picayune; Natalie Ben David (ph) with the Chicago Tribune; and Jennifer Glooey of Hearst Newspapers. (Applause.)

Two decades after his first run for the presidency six-term senator Joe Biden of Delaware is again looking to move down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he can look down the dais at the other current and past presidential hopefuls, first Chris Dodd of Connecticut, then the 2004 Democratic nominee John Kerry, and finally, a bit further down the line, a gentleman whom you may have heard a little bit about in recent months, Senator Barack Obama.

But Biden's foreign affairs experience and his unique perspective on the way forward in Iraq separate him from his competitors for the Democratic presidential nomination. While many Democrats are scrambling to support the quickest timeline available for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, Senator Biden has challenged them on the wisdom of a too rapid withdrawal.

He has said it is unrealistic to think that U.S. forces could be withdrawn safely in less than six months without endangering the lives of thousands of civilians working in Iraq.

Senator Biden also voted for a supplemental spending bill for the Iraq war that Senators Dodd, Obama, Clinton and Representative Kucinich all voted against. He said he couldn't vote against -- he couldn't vote for a measure that contains -- I'm sorry, could not vote against a measure that contained money for mine-resistant vehicles to protect the troops.

And unlike his competitors Senator Biden has long advocated partitioning Iraq into Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurdish sections.

While the Iraq issue is sure to come up at some point during the next hour, Senator Biden is here today to discuss his memoir, Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics.

In his book he recounts the tragedy of losing his first wife and young daughter in a car accident shortly after he was elected to the Senate in 1972. He also writes about his involvement in 35 years of political battles and bargains, and his unwavering belief in the value of public service.

I remain captivated by the possibilities of politics and public service, he says. In fact, I believe that my citizen profession is a noble calling.

I should say that Senator Biden also seems somewhat captivated by the possibilities of speaking at the National Press Club. This is his seventh appearance at a National Press Club luncheon.

So Senator, thanks again, welcome back. (Applause.)

SEN. BIDEN: Mr. President -- has a very nice ring to it -- thank you for having me back. I am delighted when I get asked back once to a place. This is a great honor.

Mom, permission to speak? All right. Y'all think I'm kidding, don't you. (Laughter.)

Mom and I and my wife Jill, we live together in the same -- the same location, the same property. And I just want to make it real clear: she looks sweet and gentle, but she still runs the show, so don't screw around with her. And my worry, whatever you say on the way out, make sure you say something nice about me, all right, no matter what you think, otherwise you've got a problem with mom.

I'd like to begin by introducing a couple of people who made this improbable journey of mine in writing the book possible. I've been asked occasionally, like I suspect everyone in public office has, to write a book. And I, up to now, and maybe even now, never thought there was anything that I could say that was worthwhile enough for anyone to purchase a book that I might write. But with the help of a really great guy, a good author in his own right, a fellow who has produced a number of documentaries for PBS, he's been working there the last 12 years and recently did I think a landmark piece on the Supreme Court, who helped me with this book, I would like to acknowledge him, Mark Suwannasir (ph). Mark, where are you? Would you stand up? (Applause.)

And sitting at the same table with him who also, one of my closest friends in the world, a guy who used to work with me in the United States Senate, and ran the Judiciary Committee for years when I was in charge of that committee, and a guy who helped me refresh my recollection on a whole lot of things that I ended up writing about, Mark Gitenstein, who is a prominent lawyer here -- (inaudible) -- want to recognize him. (Applause.)

Mr. President, I find myself, which is unusual, self consciously uncomfortable. I'm used to being here speaking about matters relating to war and peace and the criminal justice system and the Supreme Court. But a memoir? I find it, from my perspective, I'm much too young and not important enough to write a memoir, and I'm too old and know too much to not know what I think.

And so this book has been a journey for me, to places I never quite frankly expected to go. When a good friend, Richard Ben Cramer, who is a genuine author like Mark Suwannasir who encouraged me to write a book. He's the guy that wrote the book, What It Takes. He encouraged me over a period of literally a decade and a half to write a book about American foreign policy from my prospectus -- my perspective, and how -- he kept insisting how my personal value system informed my decisions on public policy.

And in that decision to go ahead and write which we made in the summer of 2004 -- and many of you in this room have written books; I had no idea how difficult it was to write a book, and how time consuming -- but decided to give it a shot. And I must say, warts and all, the book is about, as I went back and stitched the chapters together, it's about really who I am and what I believe.

And I believe that the future for this country is very, very bright if -- if we keep our promises. For, as I write in this book, the single greatest resource this country has is the grit, the resolve, the determination, the courage and the basic decency of the American people, and a stubborn pride, a stubborn pride, the pride of my mother and father, those of my old neighborhood, of millions of our fellow Americans who come from very ordinary circumstances.

When we -- when the wall came down we inherited a profound obligation of leadership, and even a more profound obligation to get it right. American values and principles have taken center stage like no other time in our history, and in the global theater.

How we perform on that stage is as much about our honor, our decency, our pride, as it is about our strategy policy. I don't believe our national interest can be furthered, let alone achieved, in splendid indifference to the rest of the world's view of our policies.

Our interests are furthered when we meet our international obligations and when we keep our promises.

I went on to say, when I made that speech I just recounted, that we'd diverted all our money, withdraw from arms control treaties to address the least likely threat the nation faces. Continuing to quote from that speech: while the real threat to our physical security comes to this country in the hold of a ship or the belly of a plane.

Mr. President, I made that speech at this podium on September 10th, 2001, and I believe it was exactly correct then, and it's correct today. We cannot operate in splendid indifference to what the rest of the world thinks, and we better get it right.

And so I decided that the best way for me to talk about something I'm uncomfortable talking about, and that is a book that I wrote, is to literally let the book speak for itself. And I'd like to read a few passages from the book.

The twin towers had collapsed by the time we got on the road to Wilmington, Delaware, and the death estimates for -- in New York were five (thousand), six (thousand), 7,000, maybe more. When I got home and put on the television, I saw that Americans were still -- had a heart that was still beating very strong. Doctors and nurses were standing at the hospitals in New York ready to treat the wounded. Snaking through the streets and up the avenues were long lines of New Yorkers waiting to give their blood, even though the word was being passed that no more blood was needed.

I could see it in their faces: they were hungry to do something, anything. Nobody was talking about war footings or payback. They

just wanted to do their part. That was the day that reminded me that even in a moment of almost total silence from their leaders in Washington, Americans would rise to the occasion.

Watching these people on the blood lines, I was convinced that the country would get up off the map, face the new challenges head on, and emerge stronger for having faced them.

To me, this is the first principle of life, the foundation principle, a lesson you can't learn at the feet of any wise man or woman: get up. The art of living is simply getting up after you've been knocked down. It's a lesson taught by example and learned in the doing.

I got that lesson everyday while growing up in a nondescript split level home in the suburbs of Wilmington, Delaware. My dad, Joseph R. Biden, Sr., was a man of few words. What I learned from him I learned from watching. He'd been knocked down hard as a young man but he never stopped trying. He was the first one up in the morning, every morning, in our home, clean shaven, elegantly dressed, putting on the coffee, getting ready to go to the car dealership to a job that he never really liked.

My brother, Jim, said most mornings you could hear dad singing in the kitchen. My dad had real grace. He never ever gave up, and he never complained.

The world doesn't owe you a living, Joey, he used to say. But without rancor. He had no time for self pity. He didn't judge a man by how many times he got knocked down; he judged him by how rapidly he got back up.

Get up -- that was the phrase. That was the phrase, and it's echoed through my whole life. If the world dropped on your head, my dad would say get up. If you are lying in bed feeling sorry for yourself, get up. If you got knocked down, you got knocked on your ass on the football field, get up. Bad grade, get up. A girl's parents won't let her go out with a Catholic boy; get up.

It wasn't just small things, but big ones as well. When the only voice I could hear is my own, after the surgery, Senator, you might lose your ability to speak. Get up.

The newspapers are calling you a plagiarist, Biden. Get up. Your wife and daughter -- I'm sorry, Joe, there was nothing we could do to save them. Get up. Flunked a class in law school; get up. Kids make fun of you because you can't pronounce your last name, you said Bi-Bi-Biden. Get up.

There was no daylight between my mom's philosophy of life and my dad's. She just was more vocal about it and continues to be. He couldn't stand people who abused power of any kind. He never laid a hand on any of us, and if we all heard him, time and time again, say, it takes a small man to hit a small child. No man has a right to raise a hand to a woman under any circumstances.

It was always about getting up and standing up, standing up to

the abuse of power, if it was in the hands of a neighborhood bully or to a dictator. When I was in eighth grade I got invited to the Presbyterian Church for a mixer for all the kids who went to public school. I was the Catholic kid in Mayfield, and there weren't many Catholic families.

I had to wear one of my dad's dress shirts. It was a big deal to go to that dance, but the dress shirt was too long. So I'll never forget, my mom rolled up the sleeves twice, a French cuff shirt, and then she couldn't find any cuff links. And my dad worked on Friday nights, and we couldn't find them. So my mother went down to the washing machine in the laundry room, and picked up the tool box, and out of the tool box she literally got a nut and a bolt. You think I'm kidding, I'm not. (Laughter.)

And my mom came up from the basement and started to put them into my sleeves. And I pulled away. I said, mom, I'm not doing this. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to do this, mom, they're going to make fun of me. And my mother, as all of her kids and grandkids and great-grandchildren have heard, said, Joey, look at me. I said, mom, I'm not doing it. I'm not doing it under any circumstances. She said, Joey, look at me. If anyone says anything about these nuts and bolts to you, you just look them right in the eye and say, you don't have a pair of these? (Laughter.)

And I said, mom, I'm not doing this. (Laughter, applause.)

I'm not doing this. But I wanted to go to this dance in the worst way. All the best looking girls in 8th and 9th grade were there. So I went, nuts and bolts and all. And literally, as I was standing at the punch bowl, one of the sort of bullies of the neighborhood reached out and he held up my arm, and he said, look. Look, Biden, look at his cuff links, nuts and bolts. And at first I felt just so embarrassed. Then I felt more angry than I was embarrassed. And I looked him straight in the eye, and I said, Frank, you don't have a pair of these. It was dead silence -- true story. (Laughter.) And he looked and he went, yeah, yeah, I got a pair of those too. (Laughter.)

Well, I want you to know, I want you to know, it always reminded me, taught me, that it's not about whether you're barefoot or wear Guccis. It's not about whether you have nuts and bolts or fine cuff links. It's about who you are; it's about what you believe.

On my 50th birthday my best friend, my sister -- Val, would you stand up? I want you to meet my sister, she's incredible. (Applause.) My sister went to Tiffany's and had a pair of sterling silver cuff links made. They are nuts and bolts. She got them for me to remind me -- to remind me where we come from, and remind me about -- about how to judge a person. Never forget. Never forget.

From time to time he'd talk about the holocaust, my dad. He could never understand how people could be persecuted for just being who they were. The world was wrong, Joey, at the dinner table, where we all had only one rule, when my dad came home every night from the dealership. The one rule was, at dinner was the only place you were expected to have impeccable manners. There were no excuses.

There was a place where we sat to have conversations, and occasionally eat. It wasn't about eating.

And my dad would respond to what he thought were these terrible things. He said the world was wrong failing to respond to atrocities against the Jews. We should be ashamed. He also was very critical of Jews who did not want to establish the state of Israel. He couldn't quite understand it, and my father was not Jewish.

We each had personal responsibility, he told us, just like the nuns told us. It wasn't sufficient to point out something was wrong. It was obliged; you were obliged if you had the capacity, if there was any way you could impact on it, to intervene.

In April of 1993 I traveled to Belgrade to meet Slobodan Milosevic. Come in, Senator, he said. Let's talk. We sat down at his conference table, and he talked. You know you got us all wrong, Senator. You got us all wrong. It's the Muslims and the Croats; it's not us.

I brought up Srebrenica, a largely Muslim town that was trying like hell to hold off the Serbian soldiers who were firing on civilian neighborhoods from artillery pieces that ringed the town, who were plundering the humanitarian relief effort and the -- pummeling their convoys.

No, no, no, the U.N. has preceded this. The recent bombings are not us. They are doing it to themselves to make us look bad. He tried to me tell me that all sides in Bosnia have artillery batteries and tanks, including the Muslims.

Mr. Milosevic, I said, you are the person in the world who would say such a ridiculous thing. Milosevic could tell that I'd just about had it with his lies, and at one point he looked at me from that table, about 10:00 o'clock at night, with all those maps arrayed in front of him.

And without any emotion he said, what do you think of me?

And all I could think of was my father. And I said, I think you're a damned war criminal, and I'm going to do everything in my power to spend the rest of my life seeing you're tried as one.

He looked right back at me as if I had said to him that I thought he was a wonderful guy. It had no impact on him.

But it was about keeping your promises. It was about keeping your promises to yourself, as well as keeping your promises on what your country stands for.

Dr. George, my neurosurgeon, said what he was about to do was going to be difficult, but he had done many of these before, and he was going to be assisted by a world class surgeon.

But he recommended I speak to my family. It might be my last chance, he said.

Jill went out to get the boys so I could talk to them alone. Dr. George hadn't given me much time, but I figured this talk with my sons was maybe the most important five minutes of my life. If this was the last time I was going to speak to them, I had to do it right. If this was to be the last image of their father, I wanted them to -- I wanted them to have one that they could honor.

Two days earlier restoring my reputation to the world seemed vital to me, but now everything felt different. The rest of the world could have their doubts about my integrity and my character. Thousands of Washington, D.C. epithets, good and ill, be damned. Now was for the people who meant the most to me. They were the one true thing that mattered in my life.

My sons were trying to be upbeat when they came into the ICU unit and stood at my bedside. You are -- you're great young men, I told them, and I'm really proud of you. So I know you'll live up to your obligations. I know you will take care of your mother and sister.

Don't say that dad, both said. You're not going anywhere. Look, I'm probably going to be fine, guys. But the event something happens, you know what I expect of you. Take care of each other; take care of your sister; take care of your mom. And I'll know you'll do it.

By the way, I said, on my tombstone, I don't want any of this senator stuff. I want it to read, son, brother, husband, father, athlete. (Laughter.) They laughed. And it made me smile, because I could only imagine my two brothers, when the boys relayed the information. Athlete, they'd explain? Oh god, he's been delusional to the end. (Laughter.)

But it's about keeping promises to yourself as well. Just after Thanksgiving I made my further trip to Iraq with three of my Senate colleagues -- Chuck Hagel, Diane Feinstein and Lincoln Chafee. What I saw was disheartening. The disconnect between the administration's rhetoric back in Washington and the reality on the ground was greater than it had ever been.

The president kept insisting that freedom was on the march. In fact the so-called Sunni dead-enders were digging in and launching more frequent attacks against our troops who were dying in greater numbers. Al Qaeda, which had not been in Iraq before the war, was getting a real foothold in the west, threatening to turn the country into what I called a Bush-fulfilling prophecy. And sectarian tensions were starting to heat up.

By virtually every measure the country seemed to be going backwards. There were 14-hour blackouts in Baghdad, raw sewage in the streets that rose above the hubcaps of the Humvees we rode in on, and oil production fell below prewar levels.

There were no jobs, far too many guns and explosives, some 800,000 tons from ammo dumps we hadn't secured for lack of a plan and sufficient numbers of troops.

I was happy to get out of Iraq and head home for Christmas. It

was right (ph), and it was night. We were filed into the C-130 transport plane on the tarmac at Baghdad Airport. Usually we'd share that cavernous hollowed out plane with soldiers who were shipping out, civilians taking leave, or huge crates of supplies. This time the place was empty -- the plane was empty except for a long metal box draped in an American flag, secured tightly to the floor.

For a long minute we all stood there without talking, paying silent tribute to the unknown soldier in that coffin. At that moment that plane was turned into a cathedral. We'd be his or her companions for their final trip home. We had promises to keep. ;

In June of '06, at the tail end of my trip back to Iraq, I took a detour visit to a refugee camp in your country, Mr. Ambassador, in Chad, in West Africa. The desert camp that the ambassador can tell you is home to literally well over 100,000 refugees. But the one I was going to, the most northern portion closest to the Darfur border, it was home of thousands of families; we were told 30,000 who had fled the genocidal violence of neighboring Darfur.

There were already 30,000 people been forced to flee their homes in Darfur. We landed on an airstrip that was really just a dirt road in the middle of the desert, two long lines of boulders defined the edge of the runway. There wasn't so much as a scrub tree to be seen.

We rolled to a bumpy stop, and then I stepped out of the back of that CODEL, a young African aide worker emerged from the settling dust, extended his hand, Mr. Ambassador, and he said thank you. Thank you, America, thank you for coming.

He escorted me into an open area amid the thousands of tents where young families swarmed around me. I couldn't understand a word they said, but I saw in their eyes the same look I saw in Bosnia and in Kosovo in the '90s, when we saved tens of thousands from slaughtering -- the slaughtering hand of Slobodan Milosevic.

It was the same look I had seen just a few days earlier in Iraq among the Shi'ites who no longer had to hide from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist thugs who had killed well over 100,000 of them in the decade before. It was a look of hope, and a look of expectation, as if America could make a difference in their lives.

The people in the camp at Darfur would have reacted the same way to any American official who visits. The refugees didn't see a middle aged guy in a rumpled pair of pants getting off a plane with a baseball hat on. I believe they saw vaguely outlined, Mr. Ambassador, in that swirling dust, the promise of America. That's what they saw.

Ladies and gentlemen, that's a promise we still have to keep. There's so many promises to keep, and I am absolutely positively confident that if we keep the promise of who we are, that we can literally change the world. And if we fail to do it, we cannot. (Applause.)

Thank you very much for listening, and have a happy -- (inaudible). (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much, Senator.

We have a lot of questions, a lot of them on national security issues and Iraq, starting with this.

On September 10th, 2001, you told a press club audience that America's greatest terrorist threat could come from airplanes flying into urban areas and buildings.

What do you consider the greatest security threat to America today?

SEN. BIDEN: I think the greatest security threat to America today is more likely to come from a train in a tunnel. Today at 5:30 there will be more people sitting in aluminum tubes underneath New York City in the six tunnels than in 24 full 747s. We've done

virtually nothing -- virtually nothing to protect them. There is no ventilation. There is no lighting. There are very few police. There's no escape.

But the greatest threat to the United States of America is to continue to operate under the delusion of my neoconservative friends that this is a matter that can be handled merely by the use of force, and by the force of arms. It can't.

Force is necessary but not sufficient, and the sooner we figure that out, the better off we're likely to be. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Senator Obama said in a speech today that he would send troops into Pakistan. Do you think this is a good idea, or does this show inexperience in foreign policy?

SEN. BIDEN: Yes. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Does this show inexperience?

SEN. BIDEN: My answer was yes to the question.

MR. ZREMSKI: Would you pursue al Qaeda in Pakistan?

SEN. BIDEN: I've been proposing that we pursue al Qaeda in Pakistan for five years. I have written about it extensively. But I believe the way you do that is, we already have -- and I'm told Senator Obama announced today -- Senator Lantos and I already wrote into the law a requirement that the aid to Pakistan be conditioned upon their support for us going after al Qaeda in their western province. It already is a law.

The question -- the way to deal with it is not to announce it, it's to do it. The last thing you want to do is telegraph to the folks in Pakistan that we are about to violate, quote, "their sovereignty," putting Musharraf in a position that makes it virtually impossible for him to do anything other than do what he's done -- basically, he cut a deal with the warlords along that border, to our great detriment. So it's not something you talk about, as president, it's something that I would do and we've been talking about that for a

long time.

MR. ZREMSKI: Where do you come down in the recent debate between Senators Obama and Clinton about foreign policy? And, would you meet with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Cuba and Venezuela if you were president?

SEN. BIDEN: I would have my Secretary of State, my National Security Adviser, my Secretary of Defense meet at the ministerial level with each of them if they were prepared to meet. I would open up. I would make it clear -- as I've been calling for for five years with Senator Lugar, for direct talks with their governments, but I would not put myself in the position that President Bush put himself in, and others have occasionally done, of calling for a meeting and squandering what little prestige we have by finding out it's a publicity stunt being used by those with whom we agreed to meet.

Would I make a blanket commitment to meet unconditionally with the leaders of each of those countries within the first year I was elected president? Absolutely, positively, no.

MR. ZREMSKI: One guest in the audience asks simply, how would you shut down the Iraq war?

SEN. BIDEN: By implementing the Iraqi constitution. The Iraqi constitution says, in Article I, "We are a decentralized federal system." Sometimes I believe I suffer from the only one to have ever read their constitution.

(Laughter.)

It has Section 115-16-17 and 18 -- it lays out in detail how any one of the governorates could choose to become a republic -- a region, I should say. A region is essentially what a state was under the Articles of Confederation in this country. What makes us think -- why do my Democratic friends and the Republican president, from totally

different perspectives, continue to cling to the single, most serious, flawed strategic notion relating to Iraq? And that is, in the lifetime of anyone in this room, that there's a possibility of having a strong, central unified government in Baghdad that has the trust and respect of all the disparate elements within that country.

I was deeply, deeply involved in our policy relating to, leading up to -- as I read to you today from my book in "Moving On Milosevic," -- I urged us to go to war. I urged the president for two and a half years and 285,000-dead later, we finally acted. We did it in the right way. We did it in a way that when, in fact, we were able to gain control, we put ourselves in the position where we separated the parties under the leadership of a brilliant U.N. ambassador, we -- what did we do? We separated the parties -- the Republic of Srpska, Bosnia-Herzegovina. We let their militias become their own police forces. We've had, on average, the West, 20,000 troops there for 10 years. -- (Knocks on wood.) -- Knock on wood, not one has died. Not one has died.

The genocide has stopped and they're reuniting, trying to become

part of Europe. Why do we keep trying to push a rope? There is no possibility. But I must tell you, the Biden-Gelb plan may not be available to me when I'm president, or whomever is the next president. It may not be available because we continue to careen off the road. Faced with a false choice -- more of the same and hand it off to the next president. Or in the case of some of my Democratic colleagues, leave and hope for the best. Neither is a rational option.

MR. ZREMSKI: How do you get buy-in from Turkey for your plans for a more decentralized Iraq, given their fears of an independent Kurdish state?

SEN. BIDEN: They know what all of you know in this room. We cannot stay beyond next Summer, our military points out. And when we leave, I am not concerned about Iraq breaking into three parts. I'm concerned about Iraq fragmenting into -- not only on religious lines, but tribal lines. The last thing Turkey needs is for Kurdistan to declare its independence on the grounds that there's no country to be part of. And they're figuring it out. I am not at liberty to tell you of my conversations, but I assure you, they're figuring it out. It is much, much, much, much better for Turkey to have a semi-autonomous Kurdish region within a united country than it is to have a united Kurdistan standing on its own.

If the latter happens, there will be war. Turkey will move. You will see Iran move. You will see chaos and you will see that civil war metastasize into the region. And you think we have a problem now -- if you think we have a problem now, wait until then. Everybody is figuring it out, if you notice -- from General Garner acknowledging Biden and Gelb were right from the beginning, to Secretary Kissinger and Secretary Madeleine Albright, to even some of the critics -- not the preferred solution, the only practical solution -- (absented, absented ?) the fragmentation of Iraq, will cause the very nightmare the Turks are most worried about.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you believe the Senate will be able to come together with 60 votes to pass legislation for a new direction in Iraq before President Bush leaves office? Why or why not?

SEN. BIDEN: Even possibility. It depends on the calculation of my Republican colleagues. And I don't -- I'm not being a smart guy when I say this. You've heard me say for well over two years in the national Press that I don't believe there's 12 Republicans -- I don't believe there's a dozen Republicans in the Senate who agree with the president's policy.

Nor do I agree -- do I believe that half of the major players in his foreign policy team agree with the present policy. So what's stopping them from responding? Well, number one, if they respond too soon and abandon the president's position, they're fearful that the 30 percent of the hard right in their party will never, ever forgive them, no matter what happens.

Conversely, they know if they wait too long and cling to this failed policy they will lose their seat in the United States Senate. I mean that literally -- they will lose their seat in the United States Senate. So what you're seeing is a calculated gamble here as

to "How long can I stay with the base before it becomes so overwhelmingly obvious that the policy will not work -- that I can change and move away from the president?"

If that comes -- if that comes by November, which is possible, then we have a chance of ending this war somewhat responsibly on this president's watch. If it doesn't -- if it doesn't -- it's beyond the pale, and the next president is going to be left with virtually no margin for error. No matter how old you are in this room, there will never have been a transfer of power from one president to an incoming president, where the incoming president is left with so little margin for error. He or she will have to end this war without mortgaging our future for a generation in the region, and in turn, immediately move to other hot spots in the world before they erupt into conflict. This is the single most important election any of you -- any of you in this room -- will ever have voted on.

MR. ZREMSKI: Congressman James Clyburn said on Monday that a strongly positive report on progress in Iraq by General Petraeus would very likely split the House Democrats and would, quote, "be a real problem for us." Do you agree?

SEN. BIDEN: It wouldn't in the Senate but it would in the House I suspect. But I -- General Petraeus I've known for years, I find him to be a totally honorable man. I expect he'll come back with the following assessment: "We're making military progress but virtually no political progress" -- no political progress.

Find me a single person you respect, who thinks there's any possibility that we can deal with the situation in Iraq without

substantial political progress. So I think what he'll do is tell the truth about the military. And I would note parenthetically, think of where we're having success. We're having success in those places where we've localized the problem -- where we've moved away from the central government, where we've empowered the local tribal leaders to have control over their own physical security, which, in fact, the Iraqi constitution calls for.

Do any of you think you'll see, in your lifetime, a Sunni police force patrolling Fallujah? Do any of you think you'll see, in your lifetime, a national police force keeping order in the streets of Basra?

So folks -- he'll tell the truth, but we'll have to be able to ask him the right questions. And when you do, I think he'll give the answer honestly.

And the honest answer is there is no political progress on the horizon. Absinent (sic) -- this is a tragic mistake to keep our folks in the middle of a situation where the best you can hope for is the status quo. America will not tolerate that, and as president, I will not permit it.

MR. ZREMSKI: How much interest do you think there is among the various factions in Iraq in the plan that you're talking about?

SEN. BIDEN: I know from my personal experience and my seven trips there, and Puni Talwar (sp) who handles Iraq for me is here -- he is literally in constant contact on a daily basis -- it's not an exaggeration, is it, Puni?, with various factions and leaders within Iraq -- Sunni, Shi'a, and Muslim who we -- I mean -- excuse me, Sunni, Shi'a and Kurd with whom we've built relationships over the last five years, and there are a whole lot of people in Iraq who have reached that conclusion. You know, they used to have an expression when I was in catholic school. You get in trouble, the nuns would make you write 500 times on the board when they make you stay after school, and I used to say, "But Sister, I thought," and she'd write -- she said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." And the other one you had to write was, "Everyone can solve a problem except he who has it." The truth of the matter is those in power now in Iraq are incapable of generating a consensus government but they're also incapable on their own initiative to give up that power. There's an awful lot of people -- Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurd -- who know the only answer lies in local control within a limited central government within defined boundaries.

MR. ZREMSKI: When interviewed on NPR, you stated that politicians authorizing the use of force in Iraq mirrored viewpoints expressed in the editorial pages of many major newspapers, yet the media lacked access to a great deal of classified information that would have been available to senators. Do politicians or the media bear the greater burden of skepticism here?

SEN. BIDEN: My point wasn't to blame the media. My point was when I asked a question, they said, "Everybody knew this." This reporter said everybody knew. I said, "Everybody knew?" What about all those editorial boards who were writing about what in fact I spoke about, which was that the whole purpose -- if you go back and read the resolution authorizing the use of force, it was extremely conditional. It was conditioned and the purpose of it was to avoid war. The purpose of it was to get U.N. inspectors back in. The purpose was to force the rest of the world to screw down the sanctions on Saddam.

Remember the context which we all forget. The context was we were getting beaten up -- up and about the head by foreign -- by journalists in foreign countries, by leaders in foreign countries as well as by the Left in this country -- that we were causing all the death of all those children. We were the reason why they had no hospital supplies. We were the reason why this was awful. We had to lift the arms embargo. I remember Paul Wellstone and others talking about it. Wonderful people -- wonderful people. And the whole purpose was how can you get the United Nations to insist upon the reintroduction -- insist upon the reintroduction of inspectors -- insist upon the Iraqis keeping the commitments and the 14 resolutions that they essentially signed onto.

That was the context. The context was to avoid war. The president as late as the fall -- as lately as being -- guaranteed me personally and others that he had no intention of going to war. It took what, from September until March before that occurred, but the way everybody talks about it now it's like everybody knew this president was going to take us to war the day after. He had acted responsibly after Afghanistan.

Remember all of you press people writing and calling people like me in December the year before -- has Bush become an internationalist? Remember that whole -- that whole orgy of has he become an internationalist -- every major paper in America? You all kind of forget that, you know. And so the question was why didn't we know? The reason we didn't know is there are people like me who believe that Powell, the chairman -- the Joint Chiefs of Staff and others who we dealt with every day who we knew did not want to go to war, did not -- the military did not want to go to war -- who we knew -- we assumed this was a competition for the heart and mind of the president. Little did we know, and the tragic mistake I made was underestimating the influence of Cheney as well as Rumsfeld, and under -- overestimating the competence of this administration.

Had I known then how incompetent they would turn out to be, and how misleading they would be engaging in the commitments that they made under that resolution, I would have never given them that authority. But had I been president, I would have asked for the authority. I would not have used it, but I would have asked for the authority to demonstrate to the world America is united, and the answer wasn't lifting the embargo on Saddam. The answer was screwing down the sanctions and getting inspectors back in. And that's the context in which this took place. That was the context of the answer. The question basically was we all knew he was going to go to war. Well, no one was writing it at the time and it had nothing to do with classified information. I shouldn't say no one -- few were writing it.

MR. ZREMSKI: How much did you damage your standing with the Democratic base when you said that immediate withdrawal from Iraq wasn't possible?

SEN. BIDEN: Certain things are worth losing elections over. Certain things are worth losing primaries over. I have been critical of the Republican Party and this president for not leveling with the American people. How can I as -- forget me as a presidential candidate -- how can I as one of the, quote "leading" or most often heard voices in the Democratic Party engage in the same series of non-truths to the American people? What about the mother, the wife, the husband who has a child in Baghdad -- who has a child in Fallujah -- a husband or a wife? What does it say to them to tell them something that is flat not true? Go ahead and elect me and I'll get them home next month. It is not fair -- it is not true. The truth -- speaking truth to power is what this nation needs, and the American public is much more sophisticated than those of us inside this Beltway give them credit for. They can handle anything.

My colleagues in the Senate are tired of hearing me saying it for the last five years -- I said it time and time again. I thought the one thing we all learned from the Vietnam War whether we went or didn't go -- whether we were for it or against it -- that no foreign policy can be sustained in America without the informed consent of the American people. The Democrats at a minimum have a requirement to inform the consent of the American people. It may have hurt me just like my vote may have hurt me -- the only Democrat to vote for that funding, but I fought like hell to get enough money to build 2,500 up-

armored vehicles -- vehicles called MRAPs that the statistics show would save between 66 and 80 percent of the lives lost in injuries caused in Iraq. Seventy-five -- 70 percent of all the deaths in Iraq occurred because of roadside bombs -- 70 percent. Seventy percent of all the 25,000 injuries are caused by roadside bombs. How in God's name in good conscience, when you know you could put out up to 2,500 of those vehicles by the end of the summer, saving scores of lives, how could you to make a political point vote no when you know that absent having 67 votes you cannot stop this president? All if we had done -- we only got 14 votes by the way -- the strongest anti-war critics consistent -- Carl Levin, Joe Biden, Jack Murtha -- we all voted for it. So as I said, there's some things worth losing elections over.

MR. ZREMSKI: Have some more political questions. Someone in the audience asks, "Senator, why aren't you attending the yearly Kos convention this week?"

SEN. BIDEN: To tell you the truth, I thought I was but I don't know the answer to that question why I'm not because I don't know my schedule. I either made a commitment to do something else -- it's not because my reluctance to go to the Daily Kos convention. They're a major part of the Democratic Party. They are not the Democratic Party -- they're a major part of the party. They warrant being listened to and they warrant hearing what we have to say, and -- but I am not failing to go for any political purpose. If I'm -- where -- oh, I know why I'm not going. I'm not going because ahead of time Random House had set up -- I know why I'm not going. There's a major event

in Delaware where there's a book party and a book signing and that's why I'm not going. I love you, Kos, but you ain't Delaware. (Laughter, applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Well, you can always blog from Wilmington, right?

SEN. BIDEN: I couldn't remember why I wasn't going.

MR. ZREMSKI: With Governor Mark Warner no longer in the campaign why haven't you captured the moderate base of the party?

SEN. BIDEN: I have. (Laughs, laughter, applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Mrs. Clinton is running on experience. Aren't you glad the front-runner has made this an issue?

SEN. BIDEN: Yes. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you think debates at this point should be limited to candidates with a certain approval rating or have raised a certain amount of money?

SEN. BIDEN: Oh, I think it should be about money. That's the democratic way. (Laughs, laughter.)

Isn't it wonderful -- isn't it wonderful -- you've got to raise \$100 million to be the nominee. This is obscene, ladies and gentlemen. This is flat obscene. Let me say it again: it's obscene,

the idea that you expect to have a free, unfettered ability to make decisions that affect the nation in a dispassionate way and you think you need \$100 million to run.

The single most important thing we could do to change politics in America is what I introduced with a guy named Dick Clark, who runs the Aspen Institute now, in 1974: public financing of elections.

And the other thing I'd point out, when you all figure out -- find me a single poll in America -- in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina or Nevada -- where it shows that more than 10 percent of the people in the Democratic Party have made up their mind for sure. Find me one. Find me a single poll at this time in the -- since 1952 that's turned out to be right. Find me a single time when the national press has been correct. (Laughter.) Not a joke. Not a joke.

Remember, as late as I think it was December or January, just before Iowa caucus, the 50 leading pundits in the United States of America -- political pundits in the press -- were asked who was likely to win the nomination, who was likely to win Iowa. Not one picked John Kerry. I think it's time we all start to, again, tell the truth. The truth is no one's made up their mind yet in the Democratic Party. The truth is I may not be the nominee, but I may. And the truth is I believe at the end of the day ideas matter more than money, as long as you have just enough money to make sure your ideas get across. And I'll have enough money. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: The Commonwealth Fund says that none of the candidates have a comprehensive health care plan. Do you?

SEN. BIDEN: Yes and no. Let me explain what I mean by that.

There's a lot of good health care plans out there. But let me ask you all -- you're probably one of the most informed audiences in the country that I could speak to. I'm not being facetious. Can any one of you explain to me Senator Obama's health care plan? Can any one of you explain to me -- would you be willing to come up here and explain to me John Edwards' health care plan? I'm not -- they're good plans. I am not denigrating those two men. They're good plans.

But that's the point. The point is not the plan. The point is having the leadership ability to be able to take on the special interest groups so that you can, in fact, have a prospect the plan can survive. Does anybody think we're going to take \$2 trillion in the economy -- that's the amount of money we spend on health care -- and move it in one vote from here to here? Raise your hand. Anyone?

So, as they say in my old neighborhood, "Let's get real here." We cannot make the perfect the enemy the good. That's why I would immediately begin to build a consensus to undercut the ability of the insurance companies, who will spend a half a billion dollars this time, with Harry and Louise, as they spent a quarter of a billion (dollars) last time, taking one element or two elements of a plan out of context, as they did with Clinton, and beating the living bedevil out of the plan. If you can't explain it -- I'm experienced enough to know if you can't explain it to people, you can't win it.

And so what I would do as president of the United States is immediately insure every single solitary child in America. It would cost \$27 billion. I'd provide catastrophic health insurance for everyone in America, fundamentally altering the cost to business as well as the uninsured would be -- in fact, not live in fear every night. I would spend about \$7 billion to invest money to make money by requiring a fundamental change in recordkeeping in the United States of all the medical records, which would save they say as much as 30 (percent), I think it's more like 18 percent.

And then I would move to underwrite the states' experimentation for the next several years. It would cost about \$8 billion. Let them experiment with their universal coverage. What for? Not because I expect the states to come up with the answer. They will come up with good answers, but it's to build a bulwark around the consensus for health care so when the onslaught comes from the industry, it will survive.

This is about building consensus. And I will say unequivocally no one in either party running for United States -- or for president of the United States has been as much of a consensus-builder in my career: the national crime legislation, the violence against women

legislation, treaty alteration. Not a single solitary person running has the record I have in the United States Senate on building consensus. And ladies and gentlemen, you'd better have a president that's tough enough to take on the special interests if you think there's any possibility of getting national health care, which I do and I will.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, we're almost out of time, but before I ask the last question, I just have a couple of other important matters to take care of.

First, let me remind everyone of our upcoming speakers. On August 7th, Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the House, will be here. On August 14th, General George Casey, chief of staff of the U.S. Army. And on September 7th, William Brody, the president of Johns Hopkins University.

I also just want to mention that after the speech there will be a book signing. The senator will be staying here for a while to sign books, so we'd like you to please just hold in your seats at the end of the event so that the senator can get out to the book signing first of all, and secondly if you could exit through that door that's where he's going to be signing books.

Also, as you know, Senator, we have some traditions. As if your wall was not crowded enough.

SEN. BIDEN: Well, I thank you very much. That's very nice of you.

MR. ZREMSKI: And, of course, you have enough of these now for an entire subcommittee, probably. (Laughter.)

SEN. BIDEN: (Laughs.)

MR. ZREMSKI: National Press Club mug.

SEN. BIDEN: Well, I hope I have an opportunity for more. Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: And our last question: Which Republican presidential candidate would be most difficult for you to beat, and why?

SEN. BIDEN: My mom has an expression: be careful what you wish for, you may get it. (Laughter.)

I will not presume to suggest who would be the easiest candidate to beat, but I'll end by saying that if any Democrat thinks that we are going to be able to win the presidency in 2008 without anteing up unimpeachable credentials on national security and terror, they're making a tragic, tragic mistake. Every single election since World War II, every Democratic nominee has had to overcome the accusation

that they are not tough enough, they are not strong enough, they are not resolute enough on foreign policy. I can tell you one thing that I am looking forward to, whether it's my good friend -- and he is truly a good friend of Jill's and mine -- John McCain, whether it's Rudy Giuliani, whether it's a one-term governor, I can hardly wait to debate them on national security and terror.

Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you, Senator.

I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC library for its research. Thank you. We're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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