

Cheney says U.S. can afford Iraq spending

By Lori Santos



WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 — U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney on Sunday dismissed suggestions the United States could not afford the mounting costs of the war in Iraq but conceded the full price tag or duration of the operation was unknown.

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Cheney, leading an administration defense of its Iraq policy in the face of growing public concern, said, "The idea that we can't defend America ... is silly."

He told NBC's "Meet the Press" program: "The notion that the United States can't afford this or we shouldn't do it is I think seriously flawed."

But he said he could not provide a final dollar figure for the cost of the war. He also said: "How long will it take? I don't know. I can't say."

Cheney said he believed weapons of mass destruction -- the primary justification given by the administration for the invasion -- would be found buried in Iraq.

On CBS's "Face the Nation," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the U.S. occupation of Iraq since May had been "moving at a very rapid pace" but he was uncertain how long the additional \$87 billion in emergency spending requested by the White House would last. The administration received \$60 billion in April.

"Four and a half months is just 4 1/2 months," Rumsfeld insisted.

Democratic presidential hopefuls, also on television shows, hammered away at the costs and conduct of the operation, saying the administration misjudged the task, forcing it to seek international help through the United Nations.

Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, a war veteran, told CBS: "The 87 billion dollars is the price tag for their arrogance and their miscalculation and I believe that is continuing."

'MISERABLE FAILURE'

"What is a miserable failure is the president's inability or unwillingness to get the help we need in Iraq," Rep. Richard Gephardt of Missouri said on "Fox News Sunday."

Polls showed the criticism was beginning to have an impact with the public.

A Washington Post/ABC News poll released on Sunday found that 60% of Americans disapproved of Bush's request for \$87 billion more for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bush's job approval rating slid to 52 percent in the most recent CNN/USA Today poll, the lowest level since before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

But Cheney said the expected cost of the war was less than what the Sept. 11 attacks cost the United States. He maintained that the fast-growing U.S. budget deficit, even with the additional spending in Iraq, would be cut "roughly in half" from next year's level in the coming five years.

The White House has estimated the federal budget deficit will reach \$525 billion next year. The government recorded a \$127 billion surplus in 2001, the year Bush took office.

Cheney also said he did not think the numbers of Americans killed -- 138 soldiers before major combat operations were declared over on May 1, and

158 since then -- warranted a change in policy.

"The price that we've had to pay is not out of line and certainly wouldn't lead me to think that the strategy is flawed or needs to be changed," he told NBC.

Cheney maintained that weapons of mass destruction, none of which have been discovered since Saddam Hussein's government was toppled in April, would be found "buried inside his civilian infrastructure."

"They knew they had to hide and bury their capabilities in this region inside their civilian structure. And I think that's what they did," Cheney said.

(Additional reporting by Mark Felsenthal and Andy Sullivan)

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