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MTP Transcript for April 29, 2007

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SEN. BIDEN: As of today, I would not vote to cut off all funding if the funding cutoff said there can be absolutely not a single solitary American force left anywhere within Iraq within a time certain.

MR. RUSSERT: I want to go back to 2002, because it's important as to what people were saying then and what the American people were hearing. Here's Joe Biden about Saddam Hussein: "He's a long time threat and a short term threat to our national security."

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dislodged from power." You were emphatic about that.

SEN. BIDEN: That's right, and I was correct about that. He must be, in fact—and remember the weapons we were talking about. I also said on your show, that's part of what I said, but not all of what I meant. What I also said on your show at the time was that I did not think he had weaponized his material, but he did have. When, when the inspectors left after Saddam kicked them out, there was a cataloguing at the United Nations saying he had X tons of, X amount of, and they listed the various materials he had. The big issue, remember, on this show we talked about, was whether he had weaponized them. Remember I was asked about those flights that were taking place in southern Iraq, where—were they spraying anthrax? And, you know, what would happen? And, you know, so on and so forth. And I pointed out to you that they had not developed that capacity at all. But he did have these stockpiles everywhere.

MR. RUSSERT: Where are they?

SEN. BIDEN: Well, the point is, it turned out they didn't, but everyone in the world thought he had them. The weapons inspectors said he had them. He catalogued—they catalogued them. This was not some, some Cheney, you know, pipe dream. This was, in fact, catalogued. They looked at them and catalogued. What he did with them, who knows? The real mystery is, if he, if he didn't have any of them left, why didn't he say so? Well, a lot of people say if he had said that, he would've, you know, emboldened Iran and so on and so forth.

hospitals didn't have equipment is because of what we, the United States, were doing, imposing on Iraq these sanctions. And that was the battle. The battle was do we lift these sanctions or do we in fact increase the sanctions? And everyone at the time was talking about—from the secretary of state to even the president—that this was to demonstrate to the world the president of the United States had the full faith and credit of the United States Congress behind him to put pressure on the rest of the world to say, "Hey, look, you lift the sanctions, you're—we're going to be on our own here. Don't lift the sanctions. Get the inspectors back in." That was the context of the debate, to be fair about it.

MR. RUSSERT: But when you read the national intelligence estimate, which has now been released, there're a lot of caveats put on the level of intelligence about the aluminum tubes and...

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SEN. BIDEN: Absolutely.

MR. RUSSERT: General Zinni, who's been on this program a few weeks ago, said that when he heard the discussion about the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam had, he said, "I've never heard that" in any of the briefings he had as head of the Central Command. How could you as a U.S. senator be so wrong?

SEN. BIDEN: I, I wasn't wrong. I was on your show when you asked me about aluminum tubes, and I said they're for artillery. I don't believe they're for cascading.

MR. RUSSERT: In what way?

SEN. BIDEN: The threat he presented was that, if Saddam was left unfettered, which I said during that period, for the next five years with sanctions lifted and billions of dollars into his coffers, then I believed he had the ability to acquire a tactical nuclear weapon—not by building it, by purchasing it. I also believed he was a threat in that he was—every single solitary U.N. resolution which he agreed to abide by, which was the equivalent of a peace agreement at the United Nations, after he got out of—after we kicked him out of Kuwait, he was violating. Now, the rules of the road either mean something or they don't. The international community says "We're going to enforce the sanctions we placed" or not. And what was the international community doing? The international community was weakening. They were pulling away. They were saying, "Well, wait a minute. Maybe he's not so bad. Maybe we should lift the no-fly zone. Maybe we should lift the sanctions." That was the context.

And on your show, you had that one Sunday the vice president of the United States saying he's reconstituted his nuclear weapons. I was on a simultaneous program, they asked me the question. I said either the president—either the vice president's not telling the truth or he did not get the same briefing I have or he fully misunderstands what he was told. So I did not believe he had weaponized his materials. But he did have material that, in fact, could theoretically be weaponized. And to let it sit there at the time, I wanted the inspectors back in to force him that position of having to give it up.

MR. RUSSERT: You were asked on this program a few months after the invasion of May of '03 about your vote. And you said, "There was sufficient evidence to go into Iraq." And then in '04 you said—a year and

SEN. BIDEN: That's unfair. I said that on your program it was a mistake between, and you make it sound like I went to Iowa and all of a sudden I had people out there saying Biden is...

MR. RUSSERT: Well, there was a change in your thinking from, from being...

SEN. BIDEN: No...

MR. RUSSERT: ...a just vote to saying it was a mistake.

SEN. BIDEN: Yeah, because I learned more, like everybody else learned, about what, in fact, we were told. Even the stuff we were told, the parts that I believed about what was going on with Saddam. We were told at the time, remember, that all these Iraqi generals were ready to, you know, to step up and take on Saddam, that we had—it was implied that we had this ability to go—to do a lot of things we didn't do. We had commitments at the time from the president that he would not move without the international community with us. There were a whole lot of things that changed, a whole lot of things that changed.

The thing that I regret, and I'll say it again, and I said it way before '07 and going to Iowa, is that I regret having had the—believed that this administration had any competence. It is the most incompetent administration I've ever—if I'd known they were going to misuse the authority we gave them the way they did, if I'd known that they were going to, once they used it, be so incompetent in the using of it, I would have never ever, ever given them the authority. If I were president, would I have asked for the authority? I would have asked for the authority in order to demonstrate to the world that they better not be lifting sanctions, they better not be putting pressure on having no-fly

And the other thing people forget, Tim, is everybody said, "Well, how could you not know that?" Almost every major editorial board in the country reached the same conclusion that we reached about the value of keeping the sanctions on Saddam and the need to show the world this pressure was available. And why did they think it? They thought it because he had acted relatively reasonable with regard to Afghanistan. The president had acted rationally with regard to Afghanistan, and on your show—I remember being on your show at the end of that year—and the question was, "Has the president become an internationalist?" Remember that? Remember that whole—those, those discussions? So the idea that everybody should have known that they were going to be as irresponsible in the use of the authority, that they were going to overrule what, what Powell was getting done at the United Nations, that they had inspectors back in and then they were going to do the inspectors like the vice president and president did, maybe I should have anticipated that. But most people didn't anticipate it, and I'm—and that's my mistake.

MR. RUSSERT: Should you have gone or sought out people who had a dissenting view on the level of weapons of mass destruction?

SEN. BIDEN: Oh, I did. I did. And when I was chairman of the committee—I, I can't tell you the details—but I called every intelligence agency before the Foreign Relations Committee, had them all sit there at once. And it was on the aluminum tubes. And I pointed out to all my colleagues who came that there was vast disagreement among the intelligence community. I also said, you remember after this period, that I believed that the one part of George Tenet that I've heard about his book that I believe is right is that the—it wasn't the administration got all bad intelligence; they misused, deliberately misused the intelligence they had. They only told you the down side. They did not

to go, I don't think any of them really believed that somehow he had a nuclear weapon in the waiting. Nobody believed that.

MR. RUSSERT: But despite the doubts you heard, you voted for the war.

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