

**Interview of Mr. Mike McConnell
Director of National Intelligence**

With Diane Sawyer – ABC's Good Morning America

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Transcript – As Aired**

DIANE SAWYER (ABC): We want to turn now to Mike McConnell, who is the Director of National Intelligence, to ask the question: What is the White House thinking about the state of American safety this morning, six years later? We just spoke to Director McConnell in an exclusive interview.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

SAWYER: Director McConnell, thank you for being with us this morning.

I understand you brief the President six days a week on national intelligence. What will you be saying to him this morning about the new bin Laden tape? What signs do you see in it? Do you see any triggers for action for anybody around the globe?

DIRECTOR McCONNELL: No, not at all.

As you would imagine, we look at these tapes very, very closely. We've looked at them for a number of years. This is the first time that he's released anything in three years. Quite frankly, the real intellectual leader of Al Qaida is not Osama bin Laden, but it's the number two, Zawahiri, who's an Egyptian, which is an interesting contrast. Most of the leadership positions in Al Qaida are Egyptian, not Saudi, and certainly not Osama bin Laden.

SAWYER: Well, as we know in the search both for bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, 25,000 troops have been deployed in Afghanistan, a \$25 million reward, there have been drones, there have been spy planes, spy satellites, and yet a retired member of the CIA, one of the experts, said, "We are still shooting in the dark in outer space. The chances of hitting anything are zero."

McCONNELL: Diane, finding a single human being on the -- with -- in the billions that are on the Earth who wants to remain hidden, who reduces his profile, who does not communicate through normal means, makes it very, very difficult.

So Al Qaida has ensconced in that tribal area between Afghanistan and Pakistan and are virtually enjoying a safe haven.

SAWYER: Is it true what we hear, that in the intelligence community bin Laden has been called Elvis?

(LAUGHTER)

McCONNELL: Some would, perhaps, make light of it in that regard.

However, we take it very, very seriously. He is our number one focus, number one target. And if we could find him, we could finish this situation.

SAWYER: So it is still important to find him? Because we keep hearing mixed signals from the administration, some in the administration saying it's just -- he's just a symbol, it doesn't matter anymore, he doesn't matter anymore. Does he matter?

McCONNELL: I think he does matter. As I mentioned, the intellectual horsepower or the intellectual heavy lifting in Al Qaida's done by al-Zawahiri. But Osama bin Laden is a figure and even if we were able to find him and remove him from the scene, he would be looked at as a martyr. So it's more a figurehead than anything else.

We need to take out all the leadership: not only the top two, but the top 10 or the top 15.

SAWYER: Are there are sleeper cells in the U.S.? How many, do you estimate?

McCONNELL: We worry about that. We worry about sleeper cells in the United States.

There are Al Qaida sympathizers. We worry about the lone wolf, someone who self-radicalizes. But so far we have not been able to identify them.

I'm often asked, "Are we safer today?" My answer to that is we're safer today but we're not safe.

The worry is that we have to maintain our vigilance. We have stopped many efforts to come into the United States, to have additional terrorist attacks, so we've been successful. But we can't let our guard down.

SAWYER: Is there anything new about the ability of the terrorists to get hold of radioactive material?

McCONNELL: No evidence that they've obtained it. That's one of the things we focus on most closely.

But the way to think about it is they have stated intent. And once you state intent for mass casualties with nuclear weapons, a nuclear yield, then that's the area we have to focus on. But so far we haven't been able to identify anyplace where they've obtained nuclear material.

SAWYER: So, on this sixth anniversary of 9/11, as you go in to brief the President, what is your level of concern today, tomorrow, for Americans and for the safety from terrorism?

McCONNELL: We're safer, but not safe. Al Qaida intends to have an operation in the United States that would result in mass casualties, and so we have to be ever-vigilant to prevent that from happening.

We have stopped some efforts. We must stop all efforts.

SAWYER: And how sure are you you can stop all of them?

McCONNELL: I'm not 100 percent sure we can stop every one of them. But I am sure, if we maintain the right posture and surveillance and commitment, we will stop most of them.

SAWYER: Again, Director McConnell, thanks very much for being with us this morning. It's good to have a chance to talk to you. Thank you.

McCONNELL: Thank you, Diane.

(END)