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Presenter: Ambassador Bremer

Sunday, October 26, 2003 11:30 a.m. EST

CPA Interview with George Stephanopoulos, ABC

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Also this morning, the "Washington Post" reports that U.S., British and Australian investigators have determined that the Bush administration's key pre-war claims about Iraq's nuclear program are insubstantial or untrue. It is now clear, the "Post" reports, that Saddam Hussein had no active programs to build the weapons, produce its key materials, or obtain the technology he needed for either.

And on the cover of "Newsweek" - Bush's 87-billion-dollar mess, waste, chaos, and cronyism. "Newsweek" reports that by the end of next year, the full cost of the war and rebuilding effort in Iraq will be at least 130 billion dollars.

All this leads to an interview George Will and I recorded a short time ago with our headliner, Ambassador Paul Bremer.

Ambassador Bremer, thanks for joining us. This attack on the Al Rasheed hotel last night was one of three major attacks in Iraq over the last 24 hours - the downing of a Black Hawk helicopter, an attack on a civilian contractor convoy. It certainly seems like the security situation in Iraq is getting worse, not better.

MR. BREMER: No, I don't think that's true. We certainly had a bad day. And as I've stressed all along, we're going to have good days and bad days. Fortunately, the good days do outnumber the bad days. This was a particularly unfortunate one.

As the president said yesterday, freedom still has its enemies in Iraq and we've got to expect that we're going to have to defeat these terrorists and these Ba'athists before we get to a more secure situation.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: You say the good days have outnumbered the bad days, yet earlier this week, General Ricardo Sanchez, who runs the U.S. troops in Iraq, said the number of attacks against U.S. troops has actually risen sharply in the last month, 20-35 now a day. It was only about 10-15 a day this summer.

MR. BREMER: Well, as he said in his press conference, General Sanchez pointed out that there is evidence that the terrorist groups are getting better organized and they are using now more sophisticated approaches, in particular, the use of these improvised explosive devices alongside our convoys. And that is a danger -- there was an attack against a convoy yesterday, as well, out west of Baghdad. That's a serious problem and it's one that we're going to have to continue to get at.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: They also seem to have some good intelligence. There was also a report yesterday that one of these rockets was found on the route that Secretary Wolfowitz was taking.

You actually got it ahead of time. But they seem to have some advanced knowledge of the whereabouts of key American officials.

MR. BREMER: Well, I'm not sure about that. That was a road that's traveled an awful lot by a lot of convoys. They could have been after anybody. They tend to put these IEDs, as they're called, these explosive devices, along the routes where convoys go. That's why sometimes our convoys go onto different routes.

MR. WILL: On a small matter of intelligence, was it obvious that Paul Wolfowitz would be staying in that hotel?

MR. BREMER: No.

MR. WILL: So they had to know something?

MR. BREMER: Ah, not necessarily. And they may not have been after Dr. Wolfowitz. We have several hundred people staying there all the time. The last time Wolfowitz came, he didn't stay in that hotel.

MR. WILL: Well, these are what they call "high value targets." The question is is their objective to say if the Americans can't keep themselves safe, they certainly can't keep you safe -- to communicate that message to other Iraqis.

MR. BREMER: No, I don't think this was a message to Iraqis. When you talk to the Iraqis about security, they are frankly not that concerned about attacks against coalition forces. They are concerned, understandably, about Iraqi on Iraqi crime. The fact that Saddam let 100,000 hardened criminals out of jail, and these people are out -- convicted murderers, rapists, burglars, and those are the kinds of people that the Iraqis are most concerned about.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Well, perhaps they're not concerned because they're going -- they're more against the U.S. occupation forces right now. A new poll released yesterday showed that 60 percent of Iraqis now oppose or strongly oppose the U.S. presence. That's rising, as well.

MR. BREMER: Well, I think we have to recognize that as time goes on, the -- being occupied becomes a problem. But you also got to look at the good news here. And a very good point is what we did last night, which was to lift the curfew in Baghdad. Now, we did that because the restaurateurs in Baghdad came to us three or four weeks ago and said "We've got so much business at night now, we want to be able to stay open later to deal with all the people moving around the streets." So there's a lot of good news going on in Iraq all the time. There is also bad news, such as we had in the last 24 hours.

MR. WILL: A moment ago, you referred to these people as "criminals" and this morning Paul Wolfowitz said "these criminals who did this." These are not criminals, these are guerrillas, aren't they? I mean, they're in this for political reasons.

MR. BREMER: Um, it depends on which people we're talking about.

MR. WILL: The people who fired 20 rockets --

MR. BREMER: Yeah, those are terrorists. I was talking -- when I said "criminals," I was talking about the murderers and the rapists and so forth. That's what worries the Iraqi people.

MR. WILL: It's an old axiom of guerrilla warfare that the guerrillas move within the population like fish in water, that is, they depend on support, compliance of some sort from the general population. Are these people getting that from the Iraqi people?

MR. BREMER: No, there's no evidence of that. Except it is true in the area - the heavily Ba'athist Saddam area north of Baghdad, where about 90% of all the attacks against coalition forces take

place, which was a traditional area of Saddam's tribal and political support. That's the only area where you see this.

The north of Iraq is quiet. The Shiia south, south from Baghdad, all the way to the Kuwaiti border, is essentially quiet, with very few exceptions.

MR. WILL: But in his celebrated memo, his "hard slog" memo this week, Secretary Rumsfeld asked the question, are they, the mullahs and the people who produce terrorists, producing them faster than we can dissuade, deter, or kill them? What's your -- on your experience in Iraq now, are they multiplying faster than we can dissuade, deter, or kill them?

MR. BREMER: No. And I think the Secretary's memo was not addressed particularly to Iraq, but to places where we have radical madrases, which is not the problem in Iraq. Most of the terrorists that we're seeing in Iraq are not Iraqis. They're coming in from Saudi Arabia, from Yemen, from Sudan, across the border from Syria.

MR. WILL: The border south of San Diego is fairly porous. The borders, obviously, of Iraq are very porous, indeed. Until you control the borders, can we be hopeful of progress?

MR. BREMER: Well, we have a major problem with border control. The borders of Iraq in total are the same length as our border with Mexico. And we know how difficult it's been to seal our border with Mexico. And from a topographical point of view, they're much harder than the Mexican border.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: I know the U.S. had hoped that Turkish troops would help with both the border situation and the security situation in Iraq. The Turkish Parliament approved it, yet there's been great resistance from the Iraqi Governing Council. Are you still counting on having Turkish troops in Iraq?

MR. BREMER: Well, we think it would be useful to have other foreign troops there. Not just Turkish, but from other countries. We understand the sensitivity of Turkish troops in Iraq. After all, they were the colonial power for more than 400 years. And we've encouraged the Governing Council to open a dialogue with the Turkish government about their sensitivities and I hope --

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But they're not ready yet? The Iraqi Governing Council to accept the Turkish troops.

MR. BREMER: Well, no, what they've done is they've invited the Turks to send a delegation, to discuss it further. And we'll just have to see how that dialogue goes. I think they need to talk directly to each other.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: The president's 87-billion-dollar package still is in the Congress, in the Conference Committee, it passed the House and the Senate. And I want to play you an ad by one of the opponents of the 87 billion dollars, Senator John Edwards, he's going to be on the program coming up and he's taking this directly in New Hampshire.

SENATOR JOHN EDWARDS [In ad]: Eighty-seven billion for Iraq with no plan in sight, billion-dollar giveaways for the president's oil industry friends like Halliburton, and no help from the allies he shut out. Is this our America? Well, I will not give this president a blank check.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: No plan, no bid contracts, no enough allies. What's your response to Senator Edwards?

MR. BREMER: Well, let's step back and look at this a little bit. We just came off a highly successful donors conference in Madrid. I was there with Secretary Powell, Secretary Snow. We had 73 countries there. That's a lot of countries. We raised 13 billion dollars and probably more once we get all the figures in and the trade credits are counted. We had 332 companies from 46 countries there. This is

already a very broad, international effort to reconstruct Iraq. So I simply don't accept the proposition that we're doing it alone. That's not true.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: How about a plan? No plan.

MR. BREMER: We have a plan. We've had a plan since I got there. I produced the first of our strategic plans in early July. We try to update it once a month. It's a very long -- it's 128 pages long. It lists our plan and essential services, economics, strategic communications, governance and so forth. And we execute on that plan. That was the plan, incidentally, that set out the goal of returning electricity to pre-war power by October 1st, which we did.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Finally, all of the Democrats bring up this no-bid contract to Halliburton. This is back in the news and the "Newsweek" report shows that Halliburton is importing gasoline for \$1.59 a gallon, and the Iraqis say they can deliver it for 98 cents a gallon. That's a huge difference.

MR. BREMER: Well, first of all, let me just say the supplemental, which I hope will get through Congress this week, which is new money that I will be responsible for. I have committed to Congress in my testimony when I was here in September that all of the contracts will be full and open competition. So there isn't going to be any question about that.

In the case of the Halliburton gas contract, you've got to remember that we engaged them to acquire, transport and distribute gasoline in a very hostile environment on short-term contracts. So it's a little hard to make -- you can't make apples to oranges comparisons here. It's expensive. If we can find cheaper ways to do it, we will.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Finally, sir, "Newsweek" reports also this morning that the total cost of the Iraq operation, both the war and the reconstruction, will be at least 130 billion dollars by the end of next year. Do you agree with that?

MR. BREMER: I have no idea where the numbers come from. Don't forget, I'm not responsible for the military part, which is, of course, ninety percent of this goes to the military for the war on terrorism. So I can't comment on that. I know that the 20 billion dollars that we've asked for from Congress will be spent on reconstruction. Some on security, and the rest on reconstruction.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But this will not be the last request of the Congress?

MR. BREMER: Well, I have testified that this will be -- we are not going to make another request for supplemental. If we need more money, and I hope we don't, we will do it through the regular appropriation process and it'll come back in the 2005 budget.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Ambassador Bremer, thank you very much.

MR. BREMER: Nice to see you.

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