Hugh Hewitt: You’ve served four commanders-in-chief: President Nixon, President Ford, the first President Bush, and of course the second President Bush as his vice president. What’s the most important aspect of being Commander-in-Chief?

Richard B. Cheney: It starts with someone who understands the world we live in; who earns the support of the American people by his wisdom, his thoughtful care and concern about the nation; and who is prepared to make unbelievably difficult decisions. Especially when it comes time to deploy military force to keep all of us safe and to make certain that we are able to prevail over any enemy.

ISIS and Iran

HH: The tensions between the present administration and our Middle East allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, are well known. How long will it take the next president to repair those?

RBC: It will take time. This president’s term will be up in a year, and last time I was out there visiting I made the point that this is a historic relationship between the U.S. and our friends in the region; there will be a new administration. But they were very concerned at that point, so I think it will take some serious effort to reestablish those relationships. Our friends will be relieved that Obama is no longer president, and they will expect to see a fairly quick change in policy, but the other thing they’ll watch is whether we rebuild our military. They count on the state of the U.S. military, and it has been badly weakened by this administration.

We must eliminate the caliphate.

HH: Right now in the Middle East there is the Iranian problem and there is the ISIS problem. Which is the greater threat, and how would you advise the next president to manage a potential two-front war?

RBC: We have in Syria a civil war that has helped precipitate the creation of ISIS, the Islamic State. The ISIS caliphate is a big deal. It has great religious meaning to Muslims all over the world, and it has now become a sanctuary from which they launch attacks against us, such as San Bernardino and Paris. It’s very important that the caliphate be eliminated. We ought to build a strategy around that objective.

With respect to Iran, the first thing we have to do is to abrogate the agreement Obama signed with the mullahs on nukes. That agreement is a travesty; it will clearly allow the Iranians ultimately to acquire nuclear weapons. And it’s going to give them $150 billion that has been locked up by the sanctions. With this, Iran will continue to fund terrorism—remember, they are the biggest state sponsor of terror in the world today—so Hamas and Hezbollah and all the organizations they support will become even more active.

Nuclear Proliferation

The other thing this deal will do is to encourage the proliferation of nuclear technology in that part of the world. Friends of ours such as the Saudis, the Emirates, and the Egyptians—who have not developed nuclear weapons, always relying instead on the United States—will all try to acquire their own capability when the Iranians become armed with nuclear weapons. Based on recent events, they feel they can no longer count on the United States, and that means a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.
Putin is feeling his oats.

That’s a tremendous problem. We’ve already had proliferation in that part of the world in the past. Saddam Hussein built a reactor at Osirak in 1981; the Israelis took it out. He rebuilt his program in 1990; we took it out. After we took down Saddam in 2003, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya surrendered his entire nuclear program to us because he was afraid he was next. The North Koreans built a reactor in Syria; Israel destroyed it in 2007.

So the only thing that has stopped proliferation in the past has been the use of force or the threat of force. This time Obama didn’t do that. Instead he bribed them to come back to the table, gave them everything they could conceivably ask for, and said that force wasn’t an option. It’s a terrible mistake, and it will do enormous damage 10 or 20 years down the road.

A Dangerous Man

HH: President Obama frequently counsels President Putin of Russia on what he should or should not do. I don’t believe Putin listens very much, but he might listen to Dick Cheney. Is he making a strategic error by aligning Russia with Assad and the Iranians?

RBC: Remember that Putin is ex-KGB. People say they looked in his eyes and saw his religious convictions. Wrong. His only convictions are his loyalty to the principles of the KGB. That’s what he was, and that’s what he still is today. He’s a dangerous man.

His big objective is to recreate at least part of the old Soviet empire. He has said one of the greatest disasters to befall mankind was when the Soviet Union broke up. He’s now thinking about how he can reassemble some of that. He’s done it with Crimea and part of Ukraine. I think he has aspirations with respect to the Baltic states – Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

He has now reestablished Russia in a significant way back into the Middle East. He’s selling arms to the Iranians, and he’s running air strikes in Syria — bombing the very people that Obama has been supporting. So Putin is feeling his oats.

He believes Obama is weak, giving him opportunities to reclaim some of that old territory. I think he’d love to threaten the Baltics to the point where they decide to withdraw from NATO. If the Russians can prove NATO is weak and ineffective, that’s a major victory.

HH: You’ve dealt with so many generals, these great war-fighters: Schwarzkopf, Petraeus, Odierno, McChrystal, Mattis. What do you think is the attitude in the military right now about the President and his Secretary of Defense?

RBC: Our senior officers are all loyal Americans. They understand the principle of civilian control of the military, they honor it, and that’s as it should be. But you have some who have retired and are speaking out.

Take General Michael Flynn, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. A normal tour in that post is about four years; he left after three. There’s speculation about whether he left or was pushed. If you watch for his words in the press, his commentary on TV, he says that all this time Obama has been spinning out a false narrative about how Al Qaeda’s been defeated, the ISIS is the “jayvee” and they’re contained.

General Flynn has said publicly, since he left, that this White House keeps ignoring the intelligence warning that Al Qaeda and ISIS are on the march, the threat to the United States is growing, there’s great danger ahead. Obama has chosen just to ignore the facts, Flynn says.

Rebuilding the Force

HH: So when you look at the Pentagon from the perspective of someone who served as Vice President for eight years and previously as Secretary of Defense, how much rebuilding is there to do, and how long will it take?

RBC: Building that magnificent armed force that we’ve had in the past is the work of years. After Desert Storm, I called former President Reagan and thanked him for all the weapons systems he bought, back in the 1980s, that were available for us to use in the ‘90s to defeat Saddam Hussein. The Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, the Abrams tanks, the F-15 fighters, that entire magnificent force trained and
But if you think about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East and the proliferation of terrorist organizations, it’s very concerning.

If they can get a device on a ship and sail into the middle of New York harbor, or put it in a semi and drive it around the beltway outside Washington, then all they need is somebody who knows how to set it off and is willing to die for Allah. And that seems increasingly possible.

So it’s a mistake to think that we’re safer than we were at the time of 9/11. The world has become a much more dangerous place. Our adversaries are deadlier. They’ve spread dramatically from a geographical standpoint. ISIS is a whole new ballgame: tougher, meaner, more vicious than what we face in Al-Qaeda.

People who think that 9/11 was a one-off event, or the recent attacks in Paris and here in the United States are one-off, they’re just wrong. And Barack Obama, it seems, doesn’t understand or pretends not to understand. It’s as though he has a worldview that’s different from what most of us hold, and when facts are brought to show that he’s wrong, he just ignores those facts and stays on his set of beliefs.

Is America no longer respected?

Safer than Before?

HH: Are we vulnerable right now to a 9/11 or a Pearl Harbor-style attack?

RBC: Yes. I remember a magazine interview in the spring of 2001 where I was asked what was the biggest threat facing the country. I said it was terrorists equipped with weapons of mass destruction: chemical or biological weapons or nukes. Instead, what happened on 9/11 was that 19 guys with airline tickets and boxcutters were able to launch an attack on the homeland that was worse than Pearl Harbor. It took down the World Trade Center, smashed the Pentagon, killed 3000 of us, and would have taken out the Capitol or the White House if it hadn’t been for the courage of the folks on United Flight 93.

That was 14 years ago. Things have come a long way since then, and I think the threat level today is greater than it was after 9/11. You’ve not only got the proliferation of Islamic radicalism and the recruitment of all these extremists. They are now launching attacks into Europe and into the United States. There’s no longer any geographical limitation on it.

Anybody who still thinks we’re safe behind our oceans and we can turn our back and let somebody else worry about it, forget that. Ask the folks in San Bernardino if we’re immune from those kinds of attacks. Some say it was just two people armed with rifles and pistols and they only killed 14 of us.

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Alienated Allies

HH: We have a lot of friends and allies in the Muslim world. Amid all the headlines about Syrian refugees, visas, immigration policy, how do we communicate with them both our worries about the radical Islamist fringe and, at the same time, our reliability as allies and friends?

RBC: First of all, most of them don’t trust us right now. Take Al-Sisi of Egypt, whom I spent time with while he was still a general before he became president. I was very impressed with him. As a Muslim Egyptian leader, he went to one of their most important religious institutions, the al-Azhar University, and laid it on the line. He was willing to lecture some of the religious leaders of his own faith. I haven’t heard anybody else do that.

Al-Sisi told me something very disturbing. Remember this is a guy in command of their military, armed with U.S. weapons systems, U.S. training, accustomed to working closely with our military. He said he would have liked to come to Washington, but instead he had gone to Moscow.
It wasn’t because he wants to make nice with the Russians, but because the people of Egypt are convinced that this administration supported the Muslim Brotherhood, the group that got Morsi in office, the radical Islamist president that they eventually overthrew and who has since been imprisoned.

In other words, his domestic political body is so convinced the U.S. and the Obama administration are the bad guys that it’s not politically safe for a president of Egypt to come here.

**Thousands of Prayers**

**CCU Student:** Some of us were wondering, sir, here at a Christian university, are you a follower of Jesus Christ?

**RBC:** I am a Christian. I was raised in the Methodist Church and married a woman from the Presbyterian Church and we got married in an Episcopal Church. But having also been through serious heart problems a few years ago, I’ve had the personal experience. After we left the White House, I was in end-stage heart failure. Through a very difficult set of surgeries they put in a pump that bought me 20 months.

Then I was able get a heart transplant four years ago. That was a religious experience. It’s not only thanks to a donor and to modern medical technology, but also thanks to the prayers of thousands of people all over the country, that I’m here today.

**HH:** Colorado Christian University is one of the institutions that have sued to protect their religious liberty under Obamacare. Do you worry about the state of religious liberty under this administration and this Supreme Court?

**RBC:** Years ago, I would have said religious liberty was here to stay in the United States. It’s part of our founding principles. My ancestors were Puritans who came here to flee persecution in Europe in the 1630s. But today I am worried. We need to reinforce that basic principle and guard against its erosion. There may be politicians out there who want that, but there are an awful lot of Americans who would man the barricades to make certain it never happened. Thanks to organizations like Colorado Christian University and all that it stands for, our freedom of religion remains a bedrock foundation of this country.