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Transcript: Vice President Gore on CNN's 'Late Edition'

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CNN'S WOLF BLITZER: Mr. Vice President, thanks for joining us on Late Edition.

VICE PRESIDENT AL GORE: Glad to do it.

BLITZER: You're going to be going to Iowa and New Hampshire in the coming days. Less than a year from now, we probably will know who the Democratic nominee is, who the Republican nominee is for the president. Why do you want to be president?

GORE: Well, Wolf, I haven't formally announced my candidacy yet, but when I do, I will lay out a vision of what I want to see in this country in the 21st century. And the campaign won't be about me, it'll be about the American people, and I hope they'll choose that vision of a nation with strong families and livable communities, in harmony with all of our diversity and fully prepared to lead the world.

BLITZER: You've created an exploratory committee, though. When do you make the formal announcement? It's not going to be...

GORE: Later this year.

BLITZER: It's not going to be a surprise.

GORE: Well, perhaps not. But it won't come until later this year.

BLITZER: When?

GORE: Haven't picked a date.

BLITZER: Are you looking at some precedents, some previous examples? When Vice President

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Bush, for example, made his announcement?

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GORE: No, I won't base it on previous campaigns, I'll just look at see what seems like the right time.

BLITZER: Some people have suggested that you will try to emerge from Bill Clinton's shadow during the course of the coming year. Others say you don't want to emerge from his shadow. The question to you is, do you want to emerge from the president's shadow?

GORE: Well, I don't feel like I'm in his shadow. I think the job of vice president is very different and very distinct from the job of president. And for the last 6 years-plus, I've concentrated on doing the best job I can as vice president to help he be the best president he can be. And I've really enjoyed that. It's been a great privilege and honor, but as a presidential candidate -- when I become one -- I will be in a very different relationship to the American people. And at that time, I'll be speaking about my vision for what I want to see in this country in the 21st century.

And I'm looking forward to that. I'm very excited about the chance.

BLITZER: And the Al **GORE** vision will not be necessarily completely the same as the Bill Clinton?

GORE: Well, no, because the challenges we face in the future are different from the ones we face in the past. I have been very much involved in shaping our current economic policies, and I feel as if I know a great deal about how to keep our prosperity going.

We have a governing coalition willing to support the ideas that work for the American people. I have also participated in shaping our environmental and education and crime fighting policies and other initiatives, but the challenges are going to be brand new.

You know, the 21st century is not only the beginning of a new millennium, it's the beginning of an entirely new era in human history and we have to take new approaches.

BLITZER: I want to get to some of the substance of domestic and international issues in

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a minute, but let's just wrap up a little bit of the politics right now.

Why should Democrats, looking at the Democratic nomination process, support you instead of Bill Bradley, a friend of yours, a former colleague in the Senate? What do you have to bring to this that he doesn't necessarily bring to this process?

GORE: Well, I will be offering -- I'll be offering my vision when my campaign begins. And it will be comprehensive and sweeping. And I hope that it will be compelling enough to draw people toward it. I feel that it will be.

But it will emerge from my dialogue with the American people. I've traveled to every part of this country during the last six years. During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet. I took the initiative in moving forward a whole range of initiatives that have proven to be important to our country's economic growth and environmental protection, improvements in our educational system.

During a quarter century of public service, including most of it long before I came into my current job, I have worked to try to improve the quality of life in our country and in our world. And what I've seen during that experience is an emerging future that's very exciting, about which I'm very optimistic, and toward which I want to lead.

BLITZER: On this political front, the polls currently see Governor George Bush of Texas and even Elizabeth Dole ahead of you in a hypothetical race nearly two years away from today. Why do you think that's the situation?

GORE: Well, what will decide the outcome of the presidential contest in the year 2000 will not be public opinion polls but the power of ideas, the quality of leadership, the compelling vision that I will offer for the American people and how they respond to it. It won't be decided by public opinion polls.

BLITZER: Although there is one poll that recently came out that did show 45 percent of the voters, 45 percent of the American people, say they've already ruled out voting for you.

GORE: Well, you know, in -- a few decades ago, IBM predicted that the total market worldwide for computers would be a few dozen. Those predictions turned out to be wrong. Other predictions of the future have been famously wrong because they didn't take into account what the reality is.

And polls are simply predictions of the future, in this case of an election that's two years away. And you know the old saying that six months is a lifetime in politics. That means there are four lifetimes between now and then.

And once again, polls will not determine the outcome in any way, shape or form. Ideas will. The compelling vision offered by -- when I become a candidate later this year and when that dialogue with the American people begins, their decision will be based not on polls.

BLITZER: You know, several of your potential Republican challengers, including former Vice President Dan Quayle, have slammed you for saying on that day that the president was impeached that Bill Clinton will go down as one of America's greatest presidents. Do you still feel that way, knowing today what you knew then?

GORE: Well, look at what this administration has done. We went from the largest budget deficit in history to the largest budget surplus in history. We went from a period of high unemployment and high inflation to high employment and historically low unemployment and virtually zero inflation.

The last economic report came out with six percent growth and virtually zero inflation; 18 million new jobs; improved reading test scores for our children; a six-year drop in the crime rate, continuing to decline; a cleaner environment; a new feeling on the part of all of our people that we do have the capacity to make our democracy work for our future and to solve our problems.

We are steadily gaining in our ability to reclaim control of America's destiny. That's what we're intended to do as Americans. Now this has all happened in the last six years. And incidentally, it happened when we changed course. I had the privilege of breaking the tie vote, and there were zero Republican votes for the new plan that's produced -- even though in the country,

Republicans, Independents, Democrats, they all supported the changes that we've brought about.

BLITZER: So even though the president was impeached, and by his own admission did engage in reckless conduct with an intern here at the White House, you still stand by that basic statement, he will go down as one of America's greatest presidents?

GORE: The Bible says by your fruits, ye shall know them. And the fruits of this administration's success are known by the American people to be good for our country. The policies have been tremendously successful.

Now we need to continue our prosperity and use the prosperity to move our country forward and upward, and to make our country not only better off, but better.

BLITZER: Is there any specific strategy you plan on engaging in during the campaign to deal with this issue -- the impeachment issue, the scandal issue, the impact, potential spillover effect on you from the president's behavior?

GORE: Well, Wolf, what the president did was terribly wrong. It was indefensible. He's apologized for it. And you know what the American people want? They want us to move on. They want us to focus on the future and talk about them and work on their problems and build their future, not wallow in the past.

BLITZER: That sounds like a strategy that you will have to work on. Trent Lott, the Senate majority leader, Dennis Hastert, the speaker of the House, are refusing at this point to say they trust the president and to engage in the kind of kind of bipartisan cooperation necessary to move on on issues like education, Social Security, Medicare. Is there any window of opportunity now to get some of these programs off the ground? Or is there going to be deadlock, gridlock right now for the foreseeable future?

GORE: Well, the American people are in charge of our self- government, not the Republican leaders of the Congress. They have an argument among themselves, and the American people have been puzzled as to why they won't focus on the people's business. I hope and expect that eventually they will, because there is a rising demand from the American people that

politicians in both political parties work together and stop fighting ideological battles that are sometimes beside the point. Where the nation's business is concerned, they want us to make progress, keep the prosperity going and solve the problems.

BLITZER: But there are some philosophical differences. On the education issue, the Republicans want local communities to be in control. They accuse the Democrats and you of wanting the federal government in Washington to dictate ...

GORE: No, no.

BLITZER: ... to local school districts the kind of education policy they should be using.

GORE: No, no. We want ...

BLITZER: And there's a deadlock today in the Senate on this specific issue.

GORE: We want accountability, and we want to measure the results so that we are moving in the right direction. And let's take that amendment that is pending today. We know how to improve our schools. The single most important thing we can do is to have fewer students in each classroom, more well-trained teachers, so that each teacher will have more time to spend individually with each student.

You can think back in your own upbringing, I can, and remember the teachers who made a difference. And always, it was the one who had more time to spend with you, who connected and who understood that you learned in a slightly different way from any other child. Because every child is that way.

How do we create that kind of extra time for teachers to do what they do best and give them the training? Well, the answer is about hiring more teachers and giving them the best training in the world.

Let me draw a comparison to what we did in fighting crime. We said we need more community police officers. And so we finally convinced the Congress to pass a law that hired 100,000 new community police officers, greatly expanded the size of the force around the country, and then deployed them on the sidewalks, not in

squad cars, where they could develop one-on-one relationships.

What's happened as a result? The crime rate has dropped in every category for six years in a row.

We know how to solve this problem in the same way we know how to bring about improvement in our schools. Let's hire 100,000 new teachers, give them the training they need, and reduce the class size in the early grades. That's the amendment that's pending. Senator Murray and Senator Kennedy are pushing it forward. The Republican leaders are trying to block it.

The Republicans out in the country are the same as the Democrats and Independents out in the country. They want to see these improvements. They don't want a fight on false ideological boundaries where the real issue is how do we solve the problem.

BLITZER: Let's move on to a key international issue on your agenda today, namely the situation with China. China's been accused of human rights abuses. It's been accused of engaging in unfair trade practices, a record trade deficit with the United States. It has made bellicose statements against Taiwan in recent days, threatening Taiwan. And now there are allegations that the Clinton administration under your watch, that the administration was negligent in dealing with an allegation of espionage of nuclear secrets at the Los Alamos nuclear facility, research facility.

Do you continue to engage in your policy, as you call it, "constructive engagement" with China, in the midst of all of these allegations?

GORE: Well, first of all on the law enforcement matter that you raise, please keep in mind, that happened during the previous administration. That happened back in the 1980s. And as soon as the investigation identified targets of that investigation, then the law enforcement community handled that very aggressively, and it resulted in a presidential directive that completely changed the security procedures in the weapons labs. And as far as the law enforcement aspects of that are concerned, you have to go to the appropriate agencies.

BLITZER: But you heard Senator Lott and Senator Shelby say over the weekend that this

administration was negligent...

GORE: Well...

BLITZER: ... was lax in dealing with the threat that some people thought really existed at that time because of the overall need to engage China.

GORE: Again, this happened in the previous administration, and the law enforcement agencies have pressed it and pursued it aggressively with our full support. And in the course of this, what developed was a brand new presidential directive that fixed problems that we had inherited and changed and vastly improved the security procedures in the national laboratory system.

BLITZER: As you look to these allegations, do you continue this engagement policy with China, or do you pause and reassess where the United States should be going with China?

GORE: Well, China is the most populous country in the world. Its economy is growing, and its role in the world is going to continue to grow whether we want that or not. And so, obviously, having a relationship with them within which we can try to affect their behavior and improve human rights, eliminate unfair trade practices, and bring about the kinds of changes that will lead to further democratization in China, these things are in our interest. We do that without compromising our principles in any way; indeed, by enhancing our ability to speak out on behalf of human rights and more freedom in China.

We have seen now 10,000 local democratic elections in China. We've seen a slow progress towards elections at the next highest level, the county level, it would be seen in our system. And we have also seen some movement toward more reporting and more press activity inside China.

That kind of thing can build upon itself and bring greater reforms. But we're very concerned about some of the practices of China, and we've made that clear to them. We will continue to make it clear to them.

BLITZER: I know you have to go, but a quick question on your becoming soon a grandfather.

(LAUGHTER)

Is this going to change your life?

GORE: Tipper and I are so excited. It's hard to find the words for the thrilling feeling it gives you to think that you're going to be a grandparent for the first time. We're expecting our first grandchild this summer, and we can hardly wait.

BLITZER: Are looking to some other grandfathers for grandfatherly advice?

GORE: Well, that's not a bad -- everybody tells me that it's even better than having children, and I'm looking forward to finding out for myself.

BLITZER: You get the benefits without the pain.

GORE: Well, I must say, I remember seeing my parents and Tipper's parents fawn over their grandchildren in a way that I never experienced when I was their age, and I think everybody gets a kick out of that. I'm looking forward to experiencing it from the standpoint of the grandparent, and that'll be later this year in the summer.

BLITZER: Well, good luck to the grandparents and the parents.

GORE: Thank you.

BLITZER: Thank you, Mr. Vice President, for joining us on Late Edition.

GORE: Thank you, Wolf.

BLITZER: Thank you.

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