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PROGRAM The Today Show STATION WRC-TV
NBC Network

DATE October 11, 1985 7:00 A.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Senator Leahy/Achille Lauro's Hijacking

BRYANT GUMBEL: Senator Patrick Leahy is the ranking Democrat on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. He has been critical in the past of America's ability to gather intelligence information in the Mideast. He's joined us this morning from our bureau in Washington.

Are you a satisfied Senator this morning?

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: I'm a very happy Senator this morning. I didn't mind the calls half the night or the very, very early briefing over at the CIA this morning. This is a case of success.

I've said, in fact, in interviews with you before that if we're going to use the vast power that this country has to go after terrorists, we've got to have far better intelligence and information than we've had. This is a case where the intelligence worked, worked very, very well, even to the extent of knowing when the Egyptian President said that the hijackers had left, we knew they hadn't. We knew they were in Egypt. And we were able to track them and follow them all the way through. It was a superb use of intelligence and connecting it up with our military assets.

GUMBEL: If all that's correct, aren't you a little bit bothered that the Egyptians lied to us?

SENATOR LEAHY: I'm extremely bothered that they did. I can't guess what their reasons might have been. I think that has to be a demonstration that the United States is going to be in a position to make its own judgment on what people tell us, and not have to take anything on faith.

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GUMBEL: Well, what do we do, then, in reaction to what the Egyptians did? I mean certainly in this case I think you'd have to agree they did not act in a manner befitting a strong ally.

SENATOR LEAHY: No. And I think that there's going to be some real strains as a result of this. They will of course be angry at us for forcing their airplane down. I think our reactions would be, "Don't even talk to us about that. If you've got hijackers, especially those who've murdered an American, you're harboring them, you're just going to have to assume that we're going to come and go after them."

And I think that message has to go to virtually every country, that we want people who have attacked Americans to be brought to justice, wherever it might be. And if it's necessary, we'll go and get them.

GUMBEL: In this case, brought to justice may mean Italian justice. Is that fine by you?

SENATOR LEAHY: I don't have a problem with that because I think that the Italian courts work very well, and it was an Italian-flag ship. But I think eventually I want to see them extradited back here to the United States and tried also in a U.S. court. The Italians have a perfect right to try them, and should and can. But eventually I want to see them tried here in the United States.

GUMBEL: What would be served by that?

SENATOR LEAHY: I think it serves to demonstrate to the world that the United States will watch out for its interests, wherever it might be, and that eventually people will be brought to justice here.

GUMBEL: Whether or not they ever do make it to these shores, is there any move afoot to have these hijackers interrogated by American officials? Is that important to you?

SENATOR LEAHY: It's very important to us. And there are things that will be done very soon. We're going to make sure that we have people who were witnesses positively identify these people, make sure that there hasn't been any switch, that we have the right people.

GUMBEL: To the best of your knowledge -- I mean it seems fairly certain what kind of fate awaits the four hijackers. What about the other two PLO officials who were on board? What's going to happen to them?

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, we're going to have to look at

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whether we have cases that can be brought against them, either as accessories or otherwise.

I think the most important thing, though, is that we've demonstrated that our intelligence is getting better and that we know who these people are and where they are, and it really is not going to do them any good to seek safe harbor in any country. We'll go after them.

GUMBEL: As we talk about how strongly the U.S. reacted, you were in on the CIA briefings on this, as you noted at the top of this interview. Were we prepared to shoot that craft down if they had ignored our signals to land?

SENATOR LEAHY: I agree with Secretary Shultz that that's something that we can not and should not go into. I think that it leaves our options open. And quite frankly, I'd just soon have, if there are going to be future terrorists or hijackers, that they now know exactly what our options are.

GUMBEL: Senator Patrick Leahy, you look like a happy man this morning.

SENATOR LEAHY: I'm very happy, and I'm very proud of the President in this case.

GUMBEL: Thank you very much, sir.