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NEW YORK POST, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2001

VEEP VOWS VICTORY

Cheney rouses Al Smith dinner

By DEBORAH ORIN and KIRSTEN DANIS

Vice President Cheney vowed last night at the annual Al Smith dinner that the war on terrorists will end with "their complete and permanent destruction."

At the annual forum for political wit, Cheney served up a few jokes about living in a cave, but the thrust of his speech was very serious and he drew standing ovations from politicos and Catholic Church leaders.

Cheney, who toured ground zero earlier in the day, warned that "we have to assume there will be more attacks," but said that all-out law enforcement efforts have "no doubt" prevented some.

And he drew loud cheers when he said, "I know there is not a man or a woman in this room who does not wait for the day that justice is delivered — and it will be delivered, methodically, unsparing."

Cheney said the war on terror can't end in negotiations or treaties with terrorists — it can end only with "their complete and permanent destruction and a victory for the United States and the cause of freedom."



RED CAPE, WHITE TIE: Vice President Cheney shares a laugh with Bishop Robert Brucato last night at the Al Smith dinner at the Waldorf. "It's nice for a change to be at a disclosed location," the veep said. Reuters

The white-tie crowd at the Waldorf featured Mayor Giuliani and Gov. Pataki, Sen. Charles Schumer, Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik and Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen.

Edward Cardinal Egan wasn't present at the biggest Catholic charity event of the year. But he appeared in a video to extend his blessings from the Vatican, where he is on a mission for the month of October.

Cheney, in a nod to the dinner's history as forum for political wit, poked fun at himself for the recent weeks when he's been all but invisible — kept out of sight to preserve the presidential line of succession.

"It's nice for a change to be at a disclosed location," he quipped, adding that it wasn't true that he'd been on some secret mission over Afghanistan.

He said that rumor got started by White House political director Karl Rove, who said, "We're sending Cheney to the Al Smith dinner and he's gonna bomb."

Earlier, the vice president, on his first visit to New York since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, made a grim pilgrimage to the World Trade Center site.

He walked slowly toward ground zero with his wife, Lynne, and daughter, Liz, silently surveying the damage.

Dozens of construction workers, cops and soldiers lined up to shake Cheney's hand and ask him to autograph their helmets.

Helmet after helmet came, and Cheney kept signing.

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