



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister

STOURTON: Can we begin with the day itself, 11 September? Tell me how you discovered what had happened, and what you did?

BLAIR: I remember it very, very clearly obviously because I was about to give a speech to the Trades Union Congress in Brighton, and so I was preparing my speech and the television was on in the background. You saw the first plane crash, and then people came in and started to brief me on it, and then of course it became clear a short time afterwards that this was not simply a terrible accident but was almost certainly a terrorist incident, and then of course everything changed.

STOURTON: You came back to London obviously. Can you describe what you did when you got back here?

BLAIR: Before I left Brighton, we had already agreed that we would have an emergency meeting of ministers and of our own internal security people to make sure that we were making every protection we needed to against any possible attack ourselves, because at that time nobody knew what was happening and there were people worried about Canary Wharf, worried about possible attacks on the Houses of Parliament...or wherever. This was such a huge and brutal thing to happen in circumstances, in a place where no-one would have contemplated it happening, that we would obviously look to our own internal homeland defence first.

STOURTON: And what were your first calculations about the potential political and diplomatic impact this might have?

BLAIR: I thought instinctively, right from the beginning, that it was going to be huge, that it would be a defining moment for American foreign policy,

was the Al-Qaeda right from the beginning. So that was on the agenda straight away, and obviously there were certain key issues to do with their own security that they had to take care of straight away, but the moment that cleared a little bit we agreed to come back and go through all the issues that needed to be discussed.

STOURTON: A lot of people at that stage thought the Americans might do something very quickly, some kind of knee-jerk reaction. Is that something that you were reassured about during that phone call?

BLAIR: It wasn't so much that I was reassured. We both agreed that as George Bush put it to me, there was no point in just pounding sand. We had to make sure that we took action that was effective, and I was very much on that track myself, that we had to make sure that we took on this Al-Qaeda network and dismantled it, and that would almost certainly involve action in Afghanistan, and that what we needed to do was prepare for that properly and make sure it was effective and not worry about people expecting us to take action that day, the next day or even the next few weeks. What was important was to make sure that we could do it right, and my sense was that it was such a catastrophic event and its consequences were so manifest that the public wanted us to do the right thing even if it took time, rather than just lash out. In the sense that the attack was so huge that you almost got the permission, if you like, from people to think it through, make sure that we had got a plan in place that would deliver truly effective action against the authors of the deed.

STOURTON: A few days later you flew over to America yourself and on the plane you made a phone call to the Iranian leader, President Mohammad Khatami. Can you explain why it occurred to you to do that in mid flight?

BLAIR: I was determined that we built a strong coalition, both amongst the western world, I knew that we all had to, Europe and America, Russia etc, we all had to hang together with the Americans. I was sure of that, but also in the area, that we got on board all those countries that might have been unsympathetic to the American position. And so it was important we made copious efforts with Afghanistan, with all the various 'Stans circling Afghanistan, and of course with Iran. And so, it was an

a private word with him in the course of that. How had things moved on since your conversation with him on 12 September by that stage?

BLAIR: Well, we were both thinking th

disillusionment in the world, to deal with issues to do with poverty and deprivation, in Africa and elsewhere, to make sure that we cemented the new alliances which were happening, because one of the things that happened almost immediately was the very strong support from Russia. This was important for American relations, and NATO's relationship with Russia, so there were a whole series of things I could see emerging from this that were going to be important.

STOURTON: You went to Russia very shortly thereafter and you spent an evening with President Putin in his dacha. Can you describe that?

BLAIR: It was a fascinating talk because we were very, very close together, and I find him a very good person to deal with, and he had no doubt whatever that America had to be given full support, and so it was a very

STOURTON: The bombing began just after you got back from that trip. Did you feel any sense of nervousness about the outcome because for all the preparations, you were stepping into uncharted waters at that stage?

BLAIR: You wouldn't be honest if you didn't say that you undertake these things with enormous - trepidation is maybe not quite the right word - but with an enormous sense of responsibility and yes of course it was a very difficult thing to do because, first of all we weren't fighting with a whole lot of troops on the ground. It wasn't a normal combat in that sense, and also because of the history of Afghanistan where armies have been bogged down for years, so for all those reasons, yes, there was a lot of probing and questioning before we took the decisions that we did, but I didn't have any doubt that once we went into it, we had to go into it with the fullest extent of the power that we could bring to bear. Because I was also sure from everything I knew about the Taleban, and I knew a lot more then than I had a few months ago, that the people of Afghanistan would probably be fairly liberated if they went.

STOURTON: At the end of October, you went on a tour of the Middle East, Syria initially, and there was that press conference at which President Assad said various things, which he must have known as he said them, were going to be picked up by the British press. What was it like standing there with him, coming out with some of things he did next to you?

BLAIR: Well, I have never minded about that because I have done press conferences like that with people when they have said things that I don't agree with, and you probably wish they weren't saying, but I felt it was very important to go to Syria, because whatever was said at the press conference, there was also a very strong message that I delivered which was that for Syria there was a choice too, and I think that choice still remains, incidentally, that it can either play around with support for terrorism, or it can join the proper community of civilised nations, but it

that Al-Qaeda was operating out of Afghanistan for years. We had had a series of events in which people had been killed, in reasonably large numbers, nothing like 11 September, by the Al-Qaeda terrorists. We knew also that there had been attempts in Germany and France, foiled recently, that could have had very serious loss of life. We knew Afghanistan was a failed state. We didn't act. We didn't act for perfectly understandable reasons. Public opinion wouldn't have understood it if we had acted. They would have said why are you suddenly going off and doing this. But after 11 September I think we have got to take that as a wake-up call to us to say if there is a real threat and danger, don't wait, deal with it before it becomes a threat that has materialised in the form of some devastating attack.

STOURTON: How would you describe the way policy towards Iraq, both you and the Americans, has evolved since that speech?

BLAIR: I think it has evolved since 11 September in the way that I described. What has happened is that we have seen what happens when you leave a problem whose dangerous consequences are evident, when you leave that problem to fester, what happens is that at some point it materialises, and that is what has changed. What has changed in relation to Iraq or any other part of the world is the clear understanding that if there is a threat it has to be dealt with and cannot be ignored, and we shouldn't wait until that threat then materialises.

STOURTON: Where would you say we are in the implementation? What stage have we reached towards doing something of the kind you describe?

BLAIR: Well, as I say to people constantly

STOURTON: You said a moment or two ago that you didn't think the Middle East would be solved without outside intervention. Were you disappointed that you couldn't persuade President Bush to change what he said about Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian leadership?

BLAIR: No, I never tried to persuade him to change that. What I think is more important is that on the basis of the framework he has laid out which is support for a viable Palestinian State, support for the key UN Resolutions 242 and so on, support for a settlement based on the 1967 situation. I think for all those reasons he has shown a way forward, a vision for the future, of an Israeli State, confident in its own security, a Palestinian State that is a viable entity. He has shown the end vision. The key task is to work intensively, and engage intensively, to make that vision a reality, recognising that the Israelis and the Palestinians will not come to this themselves alone.

STOURTON: A lot has been said about the impact of 11 September and what has happened since on relations between Britain and the United States, which have obviously been very close. Some, as you know, have said too slavish from our point of view. Leaving the rhetoric aside, can you give me an illustration of perhaps one occasion when you feel you have influenced American policy as a result of that closeness, and one when they have influenced our policy?

BLAIR: First of all, our relationship with America is not one of us pleading with America and America deciding whether to change its mind or not. It's just not like that at all. It is a strategic partnership. It's not a relationship where we have to plead with America to change its mind or not. It's a relationship where we have to work together to solve the world's problems. It's a relationship where we have to work together to solve the world's problems. It's a relationship where we have to work together to solve the world's problems.

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it. And, for example, over Kosovo, when I was absolutely passionately convinced that the West had to act to stop Milosevic and stop ethnic cleansing, America came to our aid in those circumstances, and 85% of the assets in Kosovo were American, when heavens above it is miles away from America, and if you really have to argue this case to the American public in terms of their pure narrow strategic interest, you might have had a difficulty, but they did it, and that is why it is so important that America and Europe hang together, and I won't have any truck with anyone who pulls the two apart. It is disastrous for the world if that happens, and the very reason why I think you can see a gathering alliance between America, Europe and Russia and countries moving forward, and other countries who are pro-American coming into the European Union, is precisely on the basis of those shared values. Now there will be difficulties every so often on steel, or on climate change, or farm policy or something there will be differences, but that is just part of life. There are differences between close allies. But what we have in common wipes out any of those differences in my book.