

With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Doug Feith, US Under-Secretary of State for Defense

FEITH:

On 11 September I was in Moscow negotiating with the number two person in the Defence Ministry about the new strategic framework for US-Russian relations and we had just completed a day of our talks and we emerged from the talks, stood up in front of a bank of cameras and microphones and did a joint press session and then immediately upon concluding that I was heading off to do another press event - when somebody from our embassy in Moscow whispered to me there's a report that an aeroplane hit the World Trade Center.

We then jumped into the car to drive over to the next press event and a few minutes later, when we go there, the same embassy person said there's a report that a second plane hit the World Trade Center. And at that point I went into the second press event - which is another room full of journalists and TV cameras - and immediately was asked about the attack on the World Trade Center and I remember, I had been told when I first took this job that, they said the first report of anything is wrong and so never just assume that some report that you hear is correct. And I was being asked a series of questions about the attack on the World Trade Center and I did not want to answer them in a way that seemed to confirm that there had indeed been an attack because I didn't know. All I had heard was the press report. And this was literally within minutes of the first report.

Now obviously people, other people, had seen it on television but I hadn't and so it was rather an awkward moment for me to be answering questions in front of the press.

STOURTON:

Once you knew it was true what did you do?

FEITH:

First, we finished our talks with the Russians. We went back to the hotel, collected our things and then decided to go to the American Embassy in Moscow where we would be mostly likely to get information. By that time of course we had learned that there had been an attack on the Pentagon also.

We went to the embassy, our whole delegation. We at first disrupted the work of the ambassador and the deputy chief of mission and then eventually went up to the Defence Attaché's area. We watched television to get the reports on whatever we could learn. It was very frustrating being away at a crucial moment like that and feeling that you couldn't be here to help in whatever way one might help. I composed a, I mean out of a sense of wanting to do something, I sat down and at least composed a memorandum on a way to think about the attack and my position as the head of policy. I wanted to try to answer what is the policy or the strategic way of understanding this attack and it was clear that the same idea was occurring to people throughout the government.

It was - it is now clear I should say - that the same idea was occurring to people throughout the government and I was isolated over there so I wasn't, it wasn't entirely clear what

FEITH: I think that got underway more or less immediately.

STOURTON: And what did they cover? I mean did they, for example, cover Iraq at

that stage, which was certainly something that was being talked about

within the administration?

FEITH: The initial focus was on the base of operations for the people that we

believed were responsible for the 11 September attack, not because we were interested in retribution or revenge but because we believed that the people who were responsible for the 11 September attack represented the greatest threat of new attacks against the United States so our goal was military action to prevent future attacks against us and the decision was

made that the greatest threat came from al-Qaeda.

STOURTON: But did you consider Iraq at that stage, because I know it was being

talked about within the White House certainly or was that not really...?

FEITH: Once we focused on al-Qaeda, once we had an understanding that it was

al-Qaeda that was behind the attack, then the effort was concentrated on al-Qaeda and the Taleban that gave them their base of operations in

Afghanistan.

STOURTON: And once you reached that conclusion how essential did it become to

involve Pakistan in the effort?

FEITH: It was clearly important to involve Pakistan because Afghanistan is land-

locked and the requirement for over-flight rights and a place that we could, we could do search and rescue for our operations from was of obvious importance and President Musharraf responded in a ... very forthright fashion and he, he made very quickly a strategic decision to

work with us in the war and it has been of enormous value.

STOURTON: And at what stage did you consider involving the Stans, the Uzbekistanis

and the Tajikistanis, as part of the effort?

FEITH: The first thing I would say is the United States has had an interest in the

central Asian countries for quite a while. Before 11 September, one of the things that Secretary Rumsfeld pointed out when we went to Uzbekistan in October just before the US military action in Afghanistan began, was when Secretary Rumsfeld first came into this current, his current position at the

beginning of 2001 and he went to Europe.

One of the few countries with whom he had a bi-lateral meeting at an early, I think it was a NATO meeting, was Uzbekistan, which was there as one of the partners for peace countries in NATO and he chose - out of all the countries that were represented there - he chose to meet with the Defence Minister of Uzbekistan because of our general interest in central Asia. So what happened after 11 September was a confirmation that central Asia is an important place for us strategically and it turns out that using facilities in those countries to help with humanitarian assistance and other missions was an important part of our overall work in Afghanistan which involved not just military operations but humanitarian aid distribution on a very large scale and initially what we were doing with

Uzbekistan was crucial to that effort.

STOURTON: Did you find it difficult to persuade the Russians that you were going to

have a military presence in Uzbekistan?

FEITH: No. We talked to the Russians, everything that we did was known to the

Russians and they understood what we were doing in Afghanistan and

they understood what kinds of support we needed to do it.

STOURTON: How did our relationship with them develop after 11 September? I mean

did you find it easier to get them to agree to things like that?

FEITH: We had put the US-Russian relationship on a pretty good footing

beginning in the spring and we had had fairly intense dialogue underway from the summer forward of my being in Moscow and 11 September was an element of that. We had Defence Ministry meetings at my level and at the ministerial level. We had State Department foreign ministry meetings again at the ministers' level and at the under-secretary level and we were talking about a new strategic framework the essence of which was that we were not going to balance our military capabilities against the Russians in order to preserve a nuclear balance or terror. Rather we were going to try to work together to focus on threats from third parties, and that all sounded very theoretical until 11 September occurred and then it became quite clear that this idea that we could work together against threats that we faced in common became operational and we actually did work together with the Russians and they worked with us on various aspects on

the war on terrorism including intelligence sharing.

STOURTON: Bringing things a bit closer up to date, people say that the world changed

on 11 September and is never going to be the same again. What you've been talking about with Russia is perhaps an example of that. Are there any other examples that you can see where things have changed radically

and will never change back?

FEITH: There's so many ways of approaching that question. It's hard for me --

STOURTON: If Afghanistan was phase one of the war on terrorism, what is phase one?

FEITH: We are working with countries around the world on aspects of the war on

terrorism. What's peculiar about the war on terrorism is that it's not against a state or a set of states, it's against a network and one can even say it's a network of networks, of terrorist organisations, and the way one