



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Sir Christopher Meyer, UK Ambassador to the USA

Q: Tell us about the September 11, how you found out what had happened and what you did?

MEYER: It was a brilliant beautiful sunny day, a bit like today, and I was having breakfast with John Major who was visiting the United States as he does quite frequently for business reasons, and my social secretary, Amanda Downs, came up to me at breakfast time and said that there had been a report of a plane crashing into one of the World Trade Center towers. I immediately envisaged some little trainer plane, a private plane crashing accidentally into the towers. First of all it didn't sink in, and she said, "No, a big plane." I went to the television screen and that was the start of it, and it was extremely difficult to take in (a) what had happened, the enormity of it, and (b) what the consequences were going to be. I assumed it was not an accident when I realised it was a big plane.

Q: What did you do?

MEYER: I went straight over to the embassy. I gathered together an inner core of

MEYER: That also came up in that very first conversation, the issue of whether Saddam Hussein had been involved in the attacks, and at the time the jury was completely out. It wasn't clear. Already emerging in British thinking was the notion that if it was Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda based in Afghanistan, any retaliation should focus, first and foremost on them, on that target, and other things - Iraq or whatever - should await a second phase. That was really the thrust of what the prime minister had said to the president. They had another conversation on the 14th of September, Bush and Blair. The evidence was pretty damn overwhelming it was Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda, Afghanistan.. and Tony Blair's very, very clear view was that that should be the focus of our first efforts, and then we would look at what else might or might not need to be done. And then the administration had a great debate about this - so we're told!

Q: At the same time there was quite a lot of public diplomacy going on with the expression of sympathy back at home, the day when the Guards played the Star Spangled Banner at the change of the guard. What do you remember about the way people responded to that here?

MEYER: Well, it really knocked my socks off, to be honest with you. I didn't know they were going to play the Star Spangled Banner on that Thursday morning in London, and I only picked it up later on in the day from an American friend who said this was the most moving thing that he had ever witnessed in his whole life. And then we started to be inundated, not only the embassy here, but all our consulates around the United States, with e-mails, faxes, phone calls, messages expressing in the most emotional terms, gratitude and thanks for this very unusual unique, unprecedented expression of support. It was all over the news here. People got very, very emotional about it and then, and for weeks afterwards, you only had to mention it to an American or they would mention it to you, and people

MEYER: Yes, some people may have been

Crawford, Texas and prime minister Blair met president Bush - one of the things that emerged from that weekend was the prime minister saying that September 11 changed everything. And one of the things it changed was us to realising that an individual like Saddam Hussein, with his record of grotesque brutality, violation of Security Council resolutions, development of weapons of mass destruction, ability to put such weapons into the hands of the terrorists, that with that package of menace, you can't just sit back and wait and see. September 11 tells you that doing nothing is not an option, and that was really where the Americans were coming from. They were saying, it is not an option to do nothing about it. There were some in this administration who had a much more, if you like, messianic view of how you deal with Saddam Hussein. But there's also a pragmatic view, and the pragmatic view is this is too great a danger to leave unattended. So I wasn't surprised it came back.

willingness not only to talk but to do - I mean one thing we do do is put our money where our mouth is - then you get listened to.

Q: What do you make of the poodle stories?

MEYER: Load of balls! Complete rubbish. You know, there is no canine diplomacy over here.

Q: And would you say America is more self-confident as a result of what happened in Afghanistan and its willingness to use its power?

MEYER: The United States is always a pretty self-confident nation. I think they have taken enormous pride from the way in which they've conducted their military operation there and from the way in which President Bush has risen to the challenge. I think a very great measure of self-confidence has shot through the system here like adrenalin.

Q: Are there dangers in the self-confidence becoming over-confidence?

MEYER: Yes, but where's the line? Where's the line between self-confidence and over-confidence? There is a tendency in Europe to criticise the Americans when they don't show leadership, and to criticise the Americans when they do show leadership. Just as the Americans tend to criticise the Europeans when they don't get their act together, and when they do get their act together. This is just a kind of mutually assured schizophrenia which we have to manage.