



With Us or Without Us:

an accident. About 10 minutes later I got to Waterloo
Eurostar to Paris - and there in the waiting room on

accepted the American presence in Central Asia which can't really be very welcome to China. So I think in both those two cases there have been very large consequences which we have yet to measure very fully.

Q. First direct involvement of you that we know of – you may have all sorts of intriguing secrets you want to tell us about as well – was your visit to Damascus? How did it come about that Number 10 thought of you for that role?

A. I have no idea why Number 10 thought of me to go to Damascus. That wasn't ever raised with me. I had been abroad, I had just got back. I was asked to go down to Number 10 and see the prime minister who said, "Look, I have been talking to President Assad on the telephone. We're keen to develop the dialogue, give it a bit of meat". He suggested sending some personal envoy down. I would be grateful if you'd go and how about tomorrow."

Q. But what made you the man to go rather than the British ambassador or someone from the Foreign Office?

A. Absolutely. It is a matter of principle really. I am in favour of using ambassadors wherever you possibly can. I think there are sometimes occasions when an outsider can add an extra dimension. Sometimes they prefer to deal outside the normal channels. Very often, you know, this is related to their own position internally. If they use a local ambassador, then they go through foreign ministries and procedures and everybody knows the details. A special envoy can go in and out without attracting much attention. Indeed, I don't think the media noticed me until about four or five weeks after the event, and that is a help when you want to do things quickly and confidentially. So that is certainly one aspect. Another is, I guess there may be some people by the fortunes of life who have had particular experience of dealing with heads of government and, I suppose, having worked for a very long time in Downing Street in the eighties with a prime minister - two prime ministers - and met face to face with many heads of government and heads of state, you just find it easier to deal with them than other people do.

Q. And when something like that happens what's the form? D'you go and have a chat with the foreign office, or do you forget about them altogether? What did you do? You just bought your plane tickets and just left?

A. I had a talk with the prime minister who told me about his thinking and the points he wanted conveyed to President Assad, and I saw a note of his own telephone discussion with President Assad, and I was provided with some detailed briefing written mostly - given the time factor - by the department and the Foreign Office. The idea that this was done behind the Foreign Office's back or without involving them is completely wrong. They were fully informed, extremely helpful, and indeed our local embassy on the spot were also very helpful and provided me with extra briefing and so on. I've always believed you have got to work very very closely with the Foreign Office even in exceptional situations, and I think this worked admirably in that sense.

Q. And what was the message that Tony Blair wanted you to convey?

A. Clearly I don't want to get into great detail because these were confidential discussions and they should remain so. But I think it is fair to say that, broadly, he wanted to see President Assad understand very clearly the aims of the great coalition that was forming against terrorism, and to ideally to become part of it. [He also want to] to explain the reasons why certain actions would be necessary, particularly against the al-Qaeda terrorist movement in Afghanistan, and to urge President Assad that where there are organisations in Damascus which themselves are terrorist, at least in our view, and that they should be very strictly controlled and prevented from taking any sort of

A. The response was thoughtful. We had a long meeting, nearly two hours, just myself on our side, as it were, and President Assad and one of his most senior officials and an interpreter on the other. We spoke partly in English - his English is good - partly in Arabic when he wanted to explain more precise points and more complicated points. I think he is a rather remarkable man. He was not destined to be president of Syria, he had an elder brother who, I think, was probably more likely to have become president, but who

Q. But you must have given him some guidance too? Did you, for example, say, "If you want to go to Damascus, that would probably be all right."

A. I have to say the whole question of a possible visit by the prime minister to Syria was never mentioned, before I went to Syria, during my visit there or on my return. It was not at the time on the books at all, as far as I know. It was never mentioned to me, it was not discussed with President Assad. It arose later some weeks later. I think there is a widespread hope that President Assad will come here at some point. I think it would be a very good thing indeed if he did.

Q. But that's very interesting. So you sort of filed and forgot. You gave your report and then left it?

A. Yes. I think that is what people used in that way are for. They aren't there to have a continuing role, they are there to do a specific mission if required to do so, and then when you have done it, that's it. I mean I am a businessman, I am a busy businessman. I don't go round looking for this sort of role.

really do not go with all this stuff about designer diplomacy and prime ministers swanning round the world. For goodness sake, in a situation like this when you are facing a new and really dangerous threat, for a British prime minister to go and be criticised for taking an active role in trying to deal with it, that is shameful in my view. You see, it is particularly useful for the Americans. An American president cannot easily displace himself. We all know he has to take a thousand people with him and six large aircraft go ahead with armoured cars and ambulances and communications and a mini White House. It is an impossible situation. A British prime minister is a more modest figure, travels the world with a handful of people and can go at the drop of a hat, and I think, given that quite clearly the prime minister has formed a very close relationship with President Bush, understands his thinking, talks to him regularly, he is in a very good position to speak not just on behalf of Britain, but also on behalf of the United States.

Q. In that case, do you think that that visit achieved anything from America's perspective?

A. Yes I do. I think if you look at the subsequent record, I don't believe that organisations based in Syria have committed any acts of violence since September.

Q. So, despite what many people might see as a rather humiliating end to the whole episode, you think that the whole period, from the time when you went through to that press conference, was worthwhile?

A. I am sure it was worthwhile for the prime minister to meet President Assad, to establish a personal relationship with him. I don't think that everything is clear and settled. There are things which Syria ought to do in my view. I think it ought frankly to expel some of the organisations which it has for long hosted in Damascus, and I am sure the Americans will want them to do that so that there can be no question of organisations based in Syria organising and carrying out acts of violence in the area. So there are certainly steps which need to be taken. But I think there is a stability in the relationship with Syria, and that Syria has played a not unconstructive role in the last few months.

Q. At the time you went, there was some hope that this could be turned into an opportunity for doing something dramatic about the Middle East. It's fair to say that that's evaporated now, isn't it?

A. I am afraid the opportunity now for doing something dramatic in the Middle East has really got lost in the wh Syria, an

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mood indeed, and perhaps in Europe we are little world-weary, a little cynical. We have got used to terrorism, we have never believed that you could stamp terrorism out. I don't think the Americans are like that. They are very can-do people and having now been fired up by what happened to them on the 11th September. They are going to go out there and when they say they are going to conduct a war on terrorism and root it out and decapitate it, they mean that. And if, in the process, they have to attack other countries which are giving shelter or weapons to terrorism, then they will do it.

Q. Is it wise that they should be quite so free from perhaps the counsel of other people who might say bombing Iran, for example, wasn't such a good idea?

A. They certainly won't be free from the counsel of other people. The Americans spend all their time talking to other people and they consult in NATO, they consult across with the European Union and they have a particularly close relationship with the UK. So they get plenty of advice. But what is clear is that their strategy has changed. They are not going to sit there, wait for further attacks on them. They are going to take the war to the enemy, if you like, and President Bush's phrase was, "Either we bring them to justice or we take justice to them", and people I think didn't take that seriously enough in Europe when they first heard these statements. They waved them away as just a bit more rhetoric. It is much more than that.

Q. Do you regard that as a wholly benign development? I mean you don't have any worries at all about it?

A. I think it is a good development. I think it does need to be dealt with very decisively because it will only get worse if the day of reckoning is put off. It is quite clear that several countries are trying to develop weapons of mass destruction. It is true of North Korea, we know it, it is true of Iran, we know it, it is true of Iraq - we know it there too. And if they develop those weapons, it will be harder to deal with them as countries, and there is the added risk that the technology, or in some cases even the weapons or the substances, will fall into the hands of terrorists, either deliberately or because they will be able to obtain them. And that will face us in 10 years time, or five years time, with an even more difficult situation. Of course it is tough, of course it is difficult, of course there are dangers in this, but there is a terrible tendency to over-estimate the dangers, always to wring one's hands and say, "Oh, we can't possibly do this, the reaction in the Middle East is going to be so terrible, the dangers are this, the dangers are that." We faced it in a way in the Gulf War too. There was uncertainty as to whether Iraq in the Gulf War would use chemical weapons against Israel, use chemical weapons against coalition forces, that striking Iraqi chemical and biological installations might simply let loose into the atmosphere dangerous agents which would damage us all. These are risks you have to face up to. I admire the Americans for facing up to the risks and being prepared to take them.

Q. In terms of the style of diplomacy in this new world, do you think there is more of a place now for the kind of personal envoy activity that you were going in for?

A. There are different ways of conducting diplomacy in different times. In the past in Britain we have had a tradition of appointing political ambassadors in some key posts. I can think of at least two or three in Washington. At the United Nations we have occasionally sent political ambassadors. That is one way of doing it. Using special envoys for special tasks is another way of doing it. I don't think it ought to be taken to any exaggerated lengths. I think we have an outstanding diplomatic service, they do a very good job, they are very professional. But just now and again there is a use. Actually, in a way you would expect their use to be rather less because with modern communications prime ministers and presidents can talk much more freely to each other by telephone, they can send each others messages, fax, e-mail, you name it, it is all there. So the

human envoy is less necessary, but now and again it helps to have a sort of face-to-face encounter.

Q. There was a school of thought