



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Chris Ross, Senior Advisor to the Under-Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Ask people what they remember about the day on September 11th.

AMBASSADOR ROSS: I remember being at home in retirement and turning on the television and seeing scenes of carnage in Lower Manhattan, including the impact of the second aircraft on the southern tower. At first, I thought I was watching some kind of simulation because it was all so neat and clear-cut, but very quickly I realized this was reality and I had quite a shock.

QUESTION: Did you feel frustrated during those early days? I mean this was a field in which you have had all this unique experience. There were a few gaffes, talk of a crusade, calling the operation "Infinite Justice." Did you feel your fingers itching?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: I looked around for something I might usefully do and initially I volunteered my services to assist in handling all of the Arabic language materials that were being picked up here and there as part of the preliminary investigation. For one reason or another that didn't work out and then, lo and behold, in the latter half of October I got a call suggesting that I should come and share some of my knowledge of the Middle East with the new under-secretary for public diplomacy. I came down thinking that's what I was going to do and instead was immediately recalled to duty, at that time, to serve as the Arabic-speaking resource for the Arab media.

QUESTION: What was the concern that prompted your recall? Were people worried that Arab opinion wasn't being given the attention it deserved?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda organization were putting propaganda and that there were not sufficient. It was felt that we were making to counter that were not sufficient. It was felt that was entirely in English, which for speaking audience required either subtitles or dubbing which took away a fair immediacy and strength of positions. So it was decided in the State, before I was even engaged, that the department needed to rally Arabic speaking resources to begin delivering our message in Arabic. They looked at me and they decided that I was the person with the most fluent Arabic on active duty or retired, and here I am.

QUESTION: The first time your reappearance caught headlines is when you appeared on Al-Jazeera to respond to Osama Bin Laden's tape. Can you describe how you prepared for that, whether you watched the tape and so forth?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: That was a fairly intricate and not altogether personally satisfying event because we had seen the tape in time for us to create a response. Creating that response required the usual consultations among a number of parties in

awkward initial performance. I got the points across, but I also got lots of commentary back from the region saying you looked like a talking robot. Subsequent appearances did not require a prepared text and it was easier to be more natural. And I think, for me at least, they were more satisfying experiences.

QUESTION: How did you go about crafting a strategy to deal with Arab opinion?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: The various parts of the State Department that deal in policy and public diplomacy with regard to the Middle East had embarked on consultations among themselves involving elements of that National Security Council staff and the White House, to determine how best to approach the Arab world and, as I say, first there was the determination that al-Qaeda's propaganda should not go unanswered, and second that it was best answered in Arabic on the very station, Al-Jazeera, that he was using to get his message across.

Initially, there was some criticism from the Arab world to the effect that we were paying too much attention to this Al-Jazeera, at the expense of other satellite stations and other media of various forms. In fact, initially it was necessary to focus to a large extent on Al-Jazeera because, number one, it was the only television station with a correspondent in Kabul at a critical phase and, number two, because it was the channel of communication that Osama Bin Laden himself was using.

After an initial phase, we did begin to interact and I began to appear on a number of Arab satellite stations and on a number of Arab national networks. So that by now, I think I've appeared on every major satellite station and a great many of the national networks, in addition to all the radio work that I've done for the BBC and others.

QUESTION: To what extent were you able to influence policy towards the Arab world, which must have been very much a part of the attempt to influence Arab opinion?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: Certainly as the weeks passed into months and patterns of opinion began to emerge, these were reported to the very senior levels of this department, other departments and the National Security Council staff of the White House, and it was at those very senior levels that that was taken into account and had its role in shaping policy. The fact is that September 11th felt as a real blow in the United States, and emotions ran extremely high and we looked to the outside world to understand this. And many did and many expr

be neglecting the important effort to reach peace in the Middle East. What we tried to point out was that our efforts vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the Israelis, and indeed the Arab world as a whole and the Israelis, were long-standing - that we continued to remain engaged. And indeed, as you've seen now in the secretary's latest trip, we are becoming more and more engaged. But there is no doubt that that was an issue of prime importance with Arab audiences, and it's been important throughout this process to demonstrate that we continue to recognize its importance and are prepared to talk about it in all of our exchanges with our Arab friends.

QUESTION: Were you involved in the policy process that led the president to talk about two states - Israel and Palestine - living side by side in his address to the United Nations?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: Not directly. I was certainly involved in conveying the mood of Arab opinion at that time. But, as they say in the State Department, those were decisions taken far above my pay grade.

QUESTION: Did you ever get worried during that period that you might, not so much lose a major ally, but have somebody who really mattered coming out and saying something critical?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: No, insofar as the campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taleban was concerned, we were confident that the coalition and the attitudes, generally supportive attitudes of the international community, would continue because there was such a direct link between the events of September 11th and al-Qaeda, and behind al-Qaeda its Taleban supporters. To go further than that into other steps might raise that question. But certainly with regard to those activities, we felt on fairly solid ground.

QUESTION: The Palestinian leadership, and we talked to Nabil Sha'ath a week or so ago, feel that once Kabul had fallen and the American victory was secure, they were just dropped, people stopped calling. Do you think that's fair?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: I don't think that's fair. The fact is that the Palestinian-Israeli crisis has had a dynamic of its own and there have been moments when it was possible to engage constructively and other moments where it was not possible, whatever one wished to do. We have called consistently for an end to violence, counter-violence,

look at the record, Saddam Hussein, through his oil exports, and through the monies that have accrued in the escrow account, has had ample opportunity to purchase large quantities of food and medical supplies, and for various reasons has not done everything he could in that regard. So the blame for his people's suffering lies clearly on him. But we were conscious of this criticism, this charge, and therefore have been working with members of the Security Council, including the Russians, to clarify the sanctions regime so that it's very clear, once and for all that it is not the sanctions regime that is at fault here, but it is Saddam.

QUESTION: But it can't have made your job any easier. When the president made that remark, you must have had a few of your friends in the Arab world on the phone?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: I think they were more concerned about the notion of an "axis of evil" than they were about the inclusion of Iraq per se. To them it was something of an escalation in the rhetoric. But they knew very well that Iraq had been a longstanding concern of ours and that things had not really changed that much. And at this point, while people were very... remember that very dramatic and colourful phrase the "axis of evil". It's kind of fallen away from the daily litany of complaints.

QUESTION: Which is helpful?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: The simple truth is that when you're the superpower, there's always something to complain about and something that will come along. But we'll deal with it when it does.

QUESTION: You went on a tour of the region in January. What was the message you brought back?

AMBASSADOR ROSS: The under-secretary and I made our first trip overseas in our current capacities, and it was her first trip and my first trip back to the region in some time. We visited Morocco and Egypt basically to give ourselves a sense of what the state of opinion was, what we might do in the realm of public diplomacy to improve communication with the Arab world, to improve the state of our dialogue with the Arab world. The message we got back at one level was very clear. That seemed to be [if] you want to improve dialogue, [then] the single most important thing you can do to improve dialogue is to change your policy. And clearly that's not in the cards. Our policy is our policy. It is a policy that is widely misrepresented and widely misinterpreted in the Arab world. But, be that as it may, it is our policy and it doesn't change because someone here or someone there isn't .&hTT2 ')4.6(mn)-48

AMBASSADOR ROSS: Well, it certainly put me in a tenses mood than I would have been in had I not had car accident.