



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Michael Steiner, Chief of the United Nations mission in Kosovo

STEINER: I was in the Chancellery and was just out to prepare a meeting of the chancellor's speech. But then I heard in the car the news and I rushed back to the Chancellery. We were sitting in the office of the chancellor - the chancellor, the chief of staff, me - and we just followed CNN and as everybody else we didn't believe it. My first thought was the positioning of the chancellor. So the first thing I did was a communiqué of the chancellor and a letter of the chancellor to President Bush and then we tried just to find out more. And of course as you might remember, Washington was incommunicado - you could not get any firsthand information. I tried to get in contact with Condoleezza Rice but of course she had to do other things at this juncture. So in a way we had the same information as everybody else via TV.

STOURTON: What was the message you tried to get across in that communiqué you drafted for the chancellor to send to President Bush?

STEINER: The message was solidarity. The message was that we wanted to make clear that in such a situation we were standing with the Americans. We wanted to make clear that after what we have received, the Germans specifically in the time when Germany was divided - we wanted somehow, as far as we could, to give back this solidarity. So that's what we expressed with this letter.

STOURTON: What advice were you giving the chancellor in the days that followed - the immediate aftermath of the attacks?

STEINER: Apart from this expressed solidarity, my advice to the chancellor - and it was rather instinctive - was that he should seek as quickly as possible the internal support in the parliament and indeed we had an extraordinary meeting of the parliament where he gave the government's declaration showing the solidarity. But the other point was that I proposed to have as quickly as possible an extraordinary summit of the European Council. I think in hindsight, it was rather unfortunate that this did not come about as quickly as I would have preferred it. The chancellor called the president of the European Union, at that time this was the prime minister of Belgium, Mr. Verhofstadt. There was not unanimous agreement that there should be a meeting immediately. This meeting took place a bit later. I think it would have been good if the European Union would have, as quickly as possible, shown this solidarity together. That taking some time had the effect that first Nato and then also the Security Council of the United Nations expressed themselves as the big organs, the European Union came a bit later. But in fact when they expressed themselves they also showed this European solidarity towards the United States.

STOURTON: But did you think that that made the European Union look a bit as if it was scrambling to catch up and that the other two big multinational organisations were just that bit sharper in the way they reacted?

STEINER: I think that it would have been good if the European Union would have met earlier. In the end I must say the position the European Union has taken - which included

neutral countries, which included as you know also countries which are not in Nato – was very helpful, was also very practical because the fight against terrorism is of course not only a military fight, it's also a fight which includes legal and interior measures.

STOURTON: Did you see this as a test case, not just for the European Union and its institutions but also for Germany – a test of its capacity to play an important role on the world stage in these kinds of circumstances?

STEINER: I don't know whether test case is the right word. But I think it was crucial for Germany to show very quickly where they stand. After the Second World War, somehow protected by the constitution, by the four po

commitment he has given to the Americans and we had to define the details in talks with Condoleezza Rice and others in Washington. We went through the parliament because in Germany you have to have this endorsed by resolution in parliament. We got the majority later for this engagement – this was not easy. Also because the German public is, after the experiences of the past, a very non-ballistic public – war is not popular in Germany and surely participation in war is not popular. But I think the people have understood that in these circumstances it was unavoidable.

STOURTON: You say you talked to Condoleezza Rice about this. At what stage did it become apparent that the Americans were effectively going to do this on their own? That they might like the offers of help of the kind that you're talking about – but they didn't actually need them or want them in the end?

STEINER: Indeed what we have committed ourselves was something the Americans had requested specifically. So it's not fully true that they did want to do it alone – this is also why they forged this alliance against terrorism. But you're right, they took on a very clear leadership role as they continue to do and in the end they would have been ready also to do it alone. So this is why it was so important at this juncture we made it clear that they are not alone and that in the end of course it's in their interest to have a common fight because you can be the strongest country in the world (but) in the end you cannot act totally alone over a longer period of time in a successful way. Even the strongest country needs allies in the world but in this case they had it.

STOURTON: Some Nato members certainly, according to the Secretary-General George Robertson, were disappointed by the fact that the Americans didn't take up all the offers that were made to them. That even though people, like yourselves, went through a quite difficult political struggle really to get these things through, the Americans in the end did turn round and say, very kind but no thank you. Were you disappointed by that?

STEINER: Nato has acted right from the beginning in declaring its solidarity, in declaring an Article 5 case and indeed did help in a number of ways. I think one can understand why in this area in Asia, the Americans looked for a broader alliance. At the same time, it's of course true that very successful organisations like Nato should not in the course of events then suffer from these events. We need Nato and I think we all have the interest to keep this organisation which has been so successful, to keep its role especially in a situation when so many countries who wanted to join it now finally have reached the point where they can join it. It would be strange if, at the moment they join it, this organisation would lose its weight. But I think those who reflect also on the other side of the Atlantic would agree that Nato is an organisation which is irreplaceable.

STOURTON: There were people towards the end of October, beginning of November, who began to be concerned that nothing seemed to be happening – the bombing was going

favoured partner in Europe. Has the new closeness between Russia and the United States affected Germany's relations with Russia?

STEINER: No, on the contrary, the chancellor has always encouraged President Bush to test Putin and has always encouraged closer relations between Russia and the United States – so that's perfectly in our interest that this relation[ship] has so much intensified especially as terrorism is maybe the most important but surely not the only subject we have to deal with in the world. We have a lot of business which we need to finish. De facto in the end to a large extent what happened in Afghanistan was also the effect of unfinished business – that's what we're doing at the moment here, finishing business which we started in 1999 over in the Balkans.

STOURTON: I know that this was after your time in the job and it's a matter of opinion as much as anything else, but in the light of what you've just said, what are we to make of the fact that when George Bush came to Germany he was greeted by crowds of protesters and curiously when he went to the old enemy, to Moscow, he was warmly welcomed?

STEINER: These are democracies in Europe and you have protests of course in Greece, you have them in France, you have them in Great Britain, you have them also in Germany – that's a fact of life, this is what happens in these democracies. But in the end you have to look at the feeling and the sentiments of the majority of the people and this is very clear also in Germany – the big majority has this feeling of friendship towards the American people and this is there – it is unshakably there. You have seen on the day

policy. In the end a common policy is more efficient in the long run than anything you try to do alone.

STOURTON: Finally, a question of the stuff that's come out in the last month or so about the evidence that some of the plotting for 11 September was actually done in Germany itself. During your time with the chancellor did you come under pressure from the Americans to tighten up your own security arrangements for dealing with terrorism at all?