



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 was happening here but the principal thought that struck me was that this was not in essence a law enforcement matter. It was an act of war. And the United States had reacted for 10 years or so to a series of significant attacks on the United States by sending out the FBI, by sending out criminal investigators, by sending out prosecutors and it struck me that the key thought at that particular moment was that this was a war and not in essence just a crime.

STOURTON: Is that where that idea of a war came from, because it was very striking to the rest of the world when Colin Powell said, I think it was first used then, "we are at war" was that from your memo?

FEITH: No it was not from my memo. As I said, I said that very carefully. I said it is now clear in retrospect that the same thought was occurring to various people in this administration, I imagine simultaneously. I in no way want to claim credit for having planted that idea throughout the US government but it, what is striking is the harmonisation of thinking across the agencies of the US government on that point, the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon and elsewhere.

There was a recognition that we couldn't handle this the way we had handled attacks on Cobalt Towers or the Coal or other types of attacks that the United States had suffered in the preceding period.

STOURTON: Before going back did you manage to talk to your Russian hosts at all and if so, how did they respond to what had happened?

FEITH: Yes, it was while we were in the suite of the defence attaché in our embassy in Moscow that we received calls from, I believe both, the number two in the Russian Defence Ministry and from the Defence Minister, saying that they wanted to convey their condolences and offer whatever assistance they could put forward for us and it was a sign of the kind of relationship that we were hoping to develop with them, that they would respond so quickly and really so well, immediately.

And then later we learned that I believe the first call that President Bush received from a foreign leader after the attack was from President Putin.

STOURTON: Within 24 hours NATO had responded by calling this an Article 5 action, attack on one is an attack on all. How significant was that?

FEITH: I think that was significant in a number of respects. It was a vindication of this initial strategic insight that this was war. It was a sign of solidarity that continues to be much appreciated in the United States and it was, I think, the beginning of what has since become a pretty complete answer to the question of whether NATO has any significance or relevance in the current period. The alliance recognises that we, as a community, have an interest in fighting this war and the allies have worked with us, contributed to the war effort in various ways implementing that invocation of Article 5, sending AWAKS airplanes for example to the United States which has been a really significant contribution.

STOURTON: What stage did you start, here in the Pentagon, drawing up practical options, military options?

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 Taliban 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 strategises to fight this network is attacking the network at various places simultaneously to try to collapse it and whenever you attack the network in a given place it causes effects elsewhere that then raise targets and so you have to be adaptable. We're working in, to help various countries that want to work with us, develop capabilities whether it's intelligence or special forces types of capabilities or equipment or training. We're working with various countries that are part of the war against this global terrorism network so we've got work that we're doing in the Philippines, we're going to be doing work in Georgia. We're co-operating with the Yemenis. That's all in the military area.

We're also working with numerous countries on imposing financial controls on money flows that finance terrorism. We've got law enforcement co-operation in Europe, South East Asia and elsewhere against terrorism. So the war is multiple activities in multiple countries simultaneously and I think that's right now the nature of the war.