With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton
Interviewee: Chris Patten, EU Commissioner for External Relations

PATTEN: I was in my office having a series of meetings and one of my private office came rushing in saying "Turn on the television, something terrible is happening". I turned it on and it was just after the first crash into the twin towers with people saying, what an extraordinary accident but can it have really been an accident, how could the pilot not have missed? Then as we were still debating that in a sort of frenzied huddle the second hit took place and then it was rubble and smoke and death and speculation of the extent of the calamity.

STOURTON: What did you do?

PATTEN: The first thing we did was to check on our own security in the European Commission, to check that we could get people out of buildings rapidly, to check that there were proper checks on doors, to remind people of the need to check for parcel bombs and letter bombs and then we had, pretty early as this story began to emerge, a meeting to discuss what we should do first. And that moved in the next few days into some pretty rapid decision-making about the work we needed to do in order to give Europe's efforts to deal with terrorism more shape and more urgency.

STOURTON: Pretty quickly it became clear that there was a crisis that was beyond terrorism. It was going to influence all sorts of things. What sort of review would you give to the way the EU institutions reacted in those first days?

PATTEN: I think it went pretty well, I think particularly on the justice and home affairs side, the decisions that were taken about the common arrest warrant, about definitions of terrorism, the way debates which had ambled on for a year or so were put into fast forward, I think that went pretty well. There was an urgent meeting of the general affairs council, there was an urgent meeting of the foreign ministers of the European Union. There was an urgent meeting of heads of government which gave some shape and impulse to those decisions and then it was decided pretty rapidly that - after President Musharraf had made it clear that he was on the same side in the fight against terrorism as the rest of us - it was decided that the then Foreign Minister who was in the chair in the council, Louis Michel and Xavier Solana and the next foreign minister, Joseph Picquet and I should go to Pakistan and Iran and other countries in the region to bolster the support for the coalition.

STOURTON: We'll come to that in a moment or two but I think you made a speech on about 15 September in which you started talking about the importance of cooperation in meeting this threat. Were you one of those who was concerned in those early stages that there might be a knee jerk American

reaction, we might wake up and find a cruise missile had been leashed off somewhere?

PATTEN: Not really. We had pretty early discussions with Colin Powell and we all knew that Colin Powell had been one of the decisive influences in the Gulf War in assembling patiently a coalition of the willing against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait so I think we were pretty confident about the way that the administration would handle things. I think there was some wild talk but that was principally by commentators not by the administration.

STOURTON: Just tell me. I assume that you are talking about your Washington trip on I think it 20 September, you went over with the Prime Minister, is that right?

PATTEN: We went over with the, not with the Prime Minister we went over with, can I hold on a minute I'm just remembering…

On the 20 September we went over to see Colin Powell. We went, Solana and a couple of foreign ministers and myself, really to give the Americans a very clear read-out on what we were doing, on how we wanted to cooperate with judicial and police cooperation with them, the sharing of intelligence and so on. It was very much to keep them in the picture about the efforts that we were making as part of our campaign and it of course came just before our regional visit to Pakistan and Iran and elsewhere.

STOURTON: And to make a point about what Europe would like to see in the way the Americans responded?

PATTEN: I think we were underlining what the Americans recognised that all their allies, their closest and most positive allies, were hoping that they would be careful and patient in building an international coalition but I don't think there was any hysterical nervousness that they weren't already persuaded of that way forward.

STOURTON: What exactly was the purpose of that visit to Pakistan in particular? Because by that stage both the Americans and the British were beginning to engage with Pakistan diplomatically and it was already on side as you say.

PATTEN: We thought we could play a role particularly in Pakistan and Iran in consolidating the support that they were giving to the international coalition. We had a very strong message for Pakistan. We'd negotiated a couple of years ago slightly before that an agreement with Pakistan on development cooperation, on trade, on political cooperation but it had been put in the freezer after General Musharraf's coup. Now General Musharraf had in August made a speech recommitting his administration to the establishment of democracy. Taking that and his support for the international coalition, we thought: one, we could take the agreement that had been put in the freezer out and re-engage with Pakistan; two, that we could offer Pakistan specific financial help; three, and perhaps most important, we offered Pakistan a basket of trade preferences particularly for textiles which were worth I suppose about a billion in all which enabled Pakistan business, particularly in Karachi, I think to survive in better shape than it would have done. In the first few months of this year Pakistan's textile exports to the European Union have gone up by about 8% where as they have gone down by almost a quarter to the United

States so it had some effect I think in enabling them to keep up economic confidence even when it was taking a pounding.

STOURTON: What was the subtext, if you like, to that diplomatic activity? Were you helping with America's diplomacy or were you trying to show that the EU had a diplomatic weight of its own, in what I suppose is the gravest crisis to blow up since the kind of ambitions that the EU has for diplomatic relations?

PATTEN: I don't see us being involved in a sort of World Cup, in an endless competition, with the United States. We have the same objectives and we were using our own authority, our own power if you like, to work in parallel and in close cooperation with the US. So I think both in Pakistan and perhaps more particularly in Iran we were doing that.We see eye to eye on a great deal more with the United States than we disagree about and I think that doesn't mean we are always acting in the same way but I think very often acting in parallel and when we do it is much better for the rest of the world.

STOURTON: How did you come to hear that the bombing had begun?

PATTEN: I was in my car on the way from my home in Barnes to London City Airport on a Sunday afternoon the day before a general affairs council meeting, and Jack Straw phoned me up on my mobile.

STOURTON: And what was your reaction?

PATTEN: I was interested that there were, as the phrase goes, British assets involved, and I was interested that it had started then because it had been rumoured to start for some time but I think, to borrow a phrase, they had needed to get their ducks in a row.

STOURTON: It quite quickly became apparent, that despite the involvement of British assets, as you put it, this was going to be very much an American operation. What calculations at that stage were you making about the impact all this might have in the longer term both on Nato but also on the European Union's defence ambitions?

PATTEN: I think like the Kosovo campaign what we have been reminded of is the huge technological and military gap between the United States and Europe. Now I don't think that European electors are ever going to vote for governments which go in for such huge increases in defence spending as we have just seen in the United States. The United States have just asked the administration for a $48bn increase in defence spending at the same time as health and education had been squeezed. I just think that if that is the entrance fee to the club, Europe is not going to pay it, but I do think that Europe does need to make some increases in defence spending and I think that we have seen in Afghanistan as in other conflicts exactly where the money has to go.

We have to spend more on precision-guided munitions. That's one reason why the United States took such a large part of the air war in Afghanistan as in the Balkans before. We have to invest more in air lift capacity in order to get our forces, even our special forces to places quicker. We certainly have to invest more I think in special forces which is an area of military activity I believe where Europe is particularly good and we have to invest more in military telecommunications. My fear is that unless we do

that the imbalance between the United States and Europe is going to grow and it will be more difficult to persuade the sceptics, not Euro-sceptics necessarily but sceptics, about Europe in Washington from taking us as seriously as we wish to be taken.

STOURTON: You went to central Asia I think at the end of October, what was the purpose of that trip?

PATTEN: Well I went from Pakistan to Iran, I went to Saudi Arabia, I went to Egypt and I suppose that the most significant of those visits was the one to Iran. We were very keen to get across to the Iranians with whom we had started to have a dialogue, we were very keen to get across to them the extent to which they were able to open up to the rest of the world, the extent to which the rest of the world would be prepared to offer a hand to them would obviously be affected by their behaviour in this international campaign.

STOURTON: Why do you think that went wrong in the end? I mean it, a promising start in relations with Iran wasn't there, but it did go wrong?

PATTEN: I'm not sure how wrong it went, if you're talking about dealing with the elected government. The problem is, as everybody knows, in Iran that the reformists in government don't control as much as one would like. That doesn't mean that one shouldn't try to work with them but you have to do so with your eyes open. I don't think anybody sets about trying to develop a dialogue with moderates in Iran in a disingenuous spirit. There are obviously some elements in the state apparatus which are controlled by the "conservative" clerics and I think there are some rogue elements who try to embarrass the government whenever they can and I expect that's what happened to some extent over the "Karine A" affair.

STOURTON: What was your reaction to the "axis of evil" remark by the president in his address to the joint houses of Congress?

PATTEN: My remark was perhaps saltier than it would have been in other circumstances because a very nice, very competent journalist from *The Guardian* came in to interview me just after a senior official in the State Department had criticised Europe's attempts to begin to develop a relationship with the moderates in Iran and I thought that was a pretty silly bit of criticism so I wasn't in the most mellow of moods and it just didn't seem to me that whatever the different problems posed to the international community by North Korea, by Iraq, by Iran, that there was in any sense a sort of conspiracy between them. There are after all other governments which are probably bigger weapons proliferators and there are some others who have perhaps been as involved or more involved with terrorism. So I didn't think that as a statement of policy it was the best remark I had ever heard, though I recognise that sometimes things are said for rhetorical effect.

STOURTON: I suppose that covers half of what you said, I mean when you talked about being dangerously absolutist and simplistic but what about the other half? The comments about going into unilateralist overdrive?

PATTEN: That reflects something that I've been arguing for some time. Indeed I gave a widely unreported speech on the subject in America last summer. There is a debate that is going on in the United States between unilateralists and multi-lateralists. It's not new, it's been going on for

some time during the Clinton years. We had disagreements with the administration about the International Criminal Court, anti-personnel land mines and other issues but I think that even while opinion polls show that support for international cooperation outside the beltway in Washington is pretty well what it has always been, and even though one knows that Colin Powell has an 86% approval rating and he is well known to be in favour of multi-lateralist, multilateral solutions whenever possible, there is I think in the think-tanks on Capitol Hill and perhaps in parts of the administration a more vigorous discussion of unilateralist options than there has been before with the influence of people like Richard Pearl being felt. Now I don't think that failing to share Richard Pearl's world view is a demonstration of America phobia. I mean after all there are millions of Americans who don't share Richard Pearl's world view and I think where there is a debate between unilateralists and mulitilateralists in the United States or anywhere else, Europe because of our view of the world and because of our experience, should be uninhibitedly on the side of the multilateralists. What does that mean? It means that no nation however big and however mighty, even what that marvellous former American ambassador to London calls the *superduper* power of the United States, that no country can do everything on its own, and multilateralism isn't by definition always right but it's usually right, by which one means either coalitions of the willing to use that phrase, or accepting a rule book, a global rule book, WTO, International Criminal Court, environmental diplomacy.

STOURTON: Do you think in terms of that debate, the Americans have won, won almost unhelpfully easily in Afghanistan?

PATTEN: No because I think that we all recognised that as in the Balkans, with failed states there we needed to work together to deal with the common menace posed by a failed state. Let's take one example of that for us in Europe. It's not just the export of terrorism and instability. We also have to face in Europe the fact that 85%, maybe 90% of the heroin on our streets in London, in Paris, in Berlin comes from Afghanistan so there is a common menace.

STOURTON: Did anyone ring you up and complain after those comments?

PATTEN: About three or four days later I had an extremely polite and genial conversation with Colin Powell. I'd been criticised by one or two people. Indeed, I was regularly criticised in *The Times* newspaper in the *OpEd* columns. They never actually reported what I'd said. I wrote a piece, or wanted to write a piece for *The Times* but they wouldn't print it so I wrote quite a long piece for the *Financial Times* which is a serious newspaper and they printed it. In response to that I had a perfectly genial conversation with Colin Powell who suggested that we should talk about these matters further but it wasn't, I think, a slap on the wrist. It was a perfectly friendly conversation and we've had conversations on other occasions when I have written pieces in the American press or elsewhere with which he has agreed.

STOURTON: Did what you said to any extent reflect a frustration and a sense that the EU was being left on the top table in what had happened in the previous months?

PATTEN: No, it reflected something rather different. It reflected my view as an America-phile, that America was not acting in her own best interest and I

don't belong to that school of thought, that you can never say anything critical about your friends. I think there is a difference between being a candid critic and being spiteful and unhelpful. I think there is a difference between diplomacy, hard engagement and supine poodle-like behaviour and I think that it is much more sensible with everybody to say not entirely in public what you say in private but say at least a bit of what you say in the one in the other.

STOURTON: With your aid and development hat on, do you think that the war on terrorism has in more general terms skewed the international agenda, that there is more attention to fighting war than dealing with the fundamental problems?

PATTEN: Well look, I think that the war on terrorism is a reminder of the interconnections of foreign and security policy, the new agenda of foreign and security policy and so much else. First of all I don't think that a political cause justifies terrorist atrocities. But I do think it's plainly the case that you have to address political issues in order to drain the swamp in which terrorism otherwise thrives. That after all was our experience in Northern Ireland. There was both a security dimension to what we were doing and a political dimension. Beyond that I've been making speeches for years about the interconnections between security these days and a whole network of issues - environmental degradation poverty, drug trafficking, organised crime, money laundering, failed states - all these things interconnecting so that nowadays when you have a meeting of foreign ministers, you invariably find that they're not just addressing the traditional matters like the Middle East, like Kashmir but actually talking about issues that foreign ministers weren't talking about in the past, like organised crime, like illegal trafficking in human beings, like the drugs trade. I think that the appropriate focus for multilateral diplomacy is trying to prevent state failure, is trying to recreate the institutions of government where states have failed and in trying to mobilise international consent and international support for addressing some of these really difficult issues on the international agenda. All that will be made much more difficult if we allow a gulf to open between for example the Islamic world and the world of Europe and North America, a gulf which was alas indicated recently by a terrifying poll which I think the Pugh Centre did, which appeared in the International Herald Tribune, and based on interviews with ten thousand people in Islamic countries, in nine or ten countries and it was a very worrying outcome.

STOURTON: Just two quick questions on those two subjects you do mention. In the Middle East, there was a great deal of frustration back in April about the way the Americans were dealing with it. Colin Powell made a great show of stopping in Madrid to talk to Europe's leaders. Is there any evidence that Europe actually affected the way the Americans went about dealing with that problem?

PATTEN: I think that there is a perception in the United States that America is more likely to be able to make progress if it's working with Europe, the UN, the Russian Federation and I think Colin Powell puts an awful lot of work into that. I think we on our side have to recognise as Hubert Vedrine said the other day after leaving office, let it be said that we are not going to get peace in the Middle East unless the United States is very vigorously engaged, and I think that will involve the United States administration doing and saying some things which won't be hugely popular with the Likud party.

STOURTON: You went to India and Pakistan in May. What was the purpose behind that? It almost seemed as though the idea was to keep as many famous people as possible going though those capitals?

PATTEN: I'd been intending to go to Afghanistan anyway because Europe had been the biggest ledger of support at the Tokyo reconstruction conference. We had pledged about 50% of the reconstruction assistance and I wanted to go myself to see what we were doing on the ground to talk to the government about how we could support them and to learn more from the government about what I think is a serious paradox that we face in Afghanistan: on the one hand we have been trying to establish a decent administration which can carry political authority right across the country. On the other hand there has been to some extent support dribbled out to the warlords in order to engage them in the military campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taleban, and I think we have to be very careful not to reinvent the warlords and therefore make it more difficult to accomplish our main strategic purpose which is to establish a decent government in Afghanistan. Since I was going to be in Afghanistan I wanted to add our voice from Europe to those which were pressing the Pakistani government to live up to its obligations under the Security Council resolution and not allow Pakistan to be used as a base for terrorist activity into Kashmir and I wanted to encourage the Indians if the Pakistanis took the right sort of measures on the line of control to abate the tension. We were extremely worried about what was happening. I went, and Jack Straw went the following week. Both of us, I know, were in touch with Colin Powell and Dick Armitage. Armitage went the week after Jack and then Donald Rumsfeld after that and I think that the steady patter of diplomatic activity helped. But it's certainly in my view the case that we can't allow this sort of crisis to blow up every six months. It's just too potentially ghastly. Two of the poorest countries in the world, two countries where there are more poor people living than in the whole of Africa who are constantly on the brink of a confrontation which might descend into nuclear exchanges. It's a very, very grim prospect so it needs to be sorted out.

STOURTON: Finally if you look at American foreign policy today would you use the same kind of salty language that you did back at the beginning of the year?

PATTEN: Oh yes because I can't change the sort of person that I am and I've spent much of my life involved with American politicians or in American politics. I started off in politics in an American campaign. Most, or several of my political heroes are Americans: George Marshall, Adley Stevenson. There isn't a year when I don't go to America three or four times or more. I've written in American newspapers and I await the arrival of *The New York Review of Books* every fortnight with passionate enthusiasm. But I have a view of America and of America's international leadership which presupposes that Americans understand the importance if you are the biggest kid on the block of establishing a moral consensus for what you want to do, and I think America is much mightier when it does that, much mightier when it shows that, I think, beguiling humility.

STOURTON: With India and Pakistan, how much do you think the tensions between those two countries were effected by the events of 11 September?

PATTEN: I was always nervous that there might be some in Pakistan who thought that they were so crucial to the campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan

that they could close an eye to the use of the terrorist threat as an adjunct to diplomacy in Kashmir and I think it was extremely important that the world disabused any people in Pakistan who thought of that dangerous notion.

STOURTON: Were you surprised at how quickly China gave its support to the coalition? Were you?

PATTEN: I wasn't surprised that China and Russia supported the coalition so rapidly and so comprehensively. They both have anxieties about what they see as Islamic terrorism, and I think they also both saw an opportunity of making a sea change in their relationship with this particular administration.

We went to Washington in late September. It was one of those in and out trips, we were only there for twenty-four hours if that. We had good meetings with Colin Powell. We had a lunch with Powell at which we set out in some detail precisely what measures the European Union was taking on terrorism, on judicial cooperation, on police cooperation with the US administration. But for me almost the most extraordinary feeling was that of a wounded sense of almost innocence, that here was America which had felt invulnerable for years which had never experienced anything like this. Admittedly what happened in New York was far greater than anything however horrendous that we have seen in the UK because of terrorism or Spain because of terrorism or Germany because of terrorism but nevertheless we've been sort of accustomed to living in a rather unstable world. That hasn't been the case in America. And I had this extraordinary sense as we were driving through the suburbs of Washington one lovely autumn evening, this terrible sense that something had changed in America and it was going to be very, very difficult to put all that self-confidence back in shape.

STOURTON: Do you think that that has happened?

PATTEN: I think that all of us outside America are constantly in danger of underestimating the impact on American policy-making and above all on the American psyche of what happened in New York and what has happened subsequently.