



WITH US OR AGAINST US

R4 Final

3. Into Action

THEME/MONTAGE

WITH CORRECTIONS 3/SEPT.

BLAIR: I didn't have any doubt that once we went into it, we had to go into it with the fullest extent of the power we could bring to bear.// **MUSHARRAF:** Everyone I think generally agreed that it should be short, but short is really a comparative term. // **STRAW:** I had foreign ministers on the phone in my office here in the Foreign Office almost pleading with me to do what I could to ensure that 20 or 30 of their military were able to take part.

ED: It is October 7th – less than a month after the attacks in New York. When America's assault begins it is late morning in Washington, mid afternoon in London. Night is falling over the mountains of the Hindu Khush and the Kabul plain beyond.

FX BOMBING AND ANTI-AIRCRAFT FIRE:

ED: Seven thousand miles away, the White House briefing room in Washington.

US ANNOUNCEMENT: (fx press room) Here we go. Ladies and gentlemen we are beginning another front in our war against terrorism so freedom can prevail over fear. The President will address the nation at twelve fifty. Thank you.

BUSH Presidential Address to the Nation: The Treaty Room 1:00 P.M. 7/10] On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against al-Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.

ED: America's technological superiority is overwhelming, and she has the backing of a formidable coalition. The foe she's fighting is so lacking in sophisticated equipment that it looks like an almost embarrassingly unequal fight.

But Afghanistan has become something of an intelligence black hole during the Taliban years. To the uncertainty about the way its people will react, add and mix in a strong measure of clarity about the lessons of its past – you have a recipe for queasy stomachs in coalition capitals. Tony Blair.

BLAIR: You wouldn't be honest if you didn't say that you undertake these things with enormous - trepidation is maybe not quite the right word - but with an enormous sense of responsibility and yes of course, I mean, it was a very difficult thing to do because, first of all we weren't fighting with a whole lot of troops on the ground - it wasn't a normal combat in that sense - and also because of the history of Afghanistan where armies have been bogged down for years, so for all those reasons, yes, there was a lot of probing and questioning before we took the decisions that we did, but I didn't have any doubt that once we went into it, we had to go into it with the fullest extent of the power that we could bring to bear.

ED: The Presidential speeches and the Pentagon press conferences may sound smooth and confident but America is making this up as she goes along. Most of the ground fighting will be done by their newest and most unlikely allies – the Northern Alliance. The mix of airpower, special forces and surrogate ground troops is a new one – Paul Wolfowitz, number two at the Pentagon watches the experiment take shape.

WOLFOWITZ: The fact is -as I think you could well imagine, there wasn't a plan on the shelf for a conflict in Afghanistan on September 10th. We do have plans for many places in the world but if we had done one for Afghanistan people would have said you are out of your minds. The order to begin planning came from the president on September 20th. The military campaign began on October 7th and it was very far from clear how it would turn out.

ED: Osama bin Laden responds by opening a second front; a communications campaign. From somewhere inside Afghanistan the first of his video tapes emerges, and it is eagerly picked up by broadcasters everywhere. Bin Laden calls on Muslims to join a jihad against America.

Al-Qaeda's communications tactics are the spin doctor's equivalent of guerrilla warfare – low tech, relying heavily on ambush, and highly effective against a conventional campaign. Alastair Campbell is Tony Blair's communications director.

CAMPBELL: They were able to operate a communications policy that consisted of hiding in a cave and throwing out a video every now and again, and you guys were just absolutely fascinated by this and it became another propaganda success for bin Laden. If we, if our communications strategy had been to sort of hide in a cave and throw out the odd video, you'd have said we'd, you know completely lost it. Added to which, the Taliban had these briefings in Pakistan which again were a source of fascination to you guys. They were able to operate according to rules that we wouldn't allowed to get away with. I mean you know these guys are sat there, Zaif sat there day after day and just told a pack of lies. And you guys let him, you know you reported them, you - he was commanding CNN live, BBC World live, Sky live and the rest of it.

SEGUE

ED ON TODAY 11/12 OCT: Fx. The Taliban's press conferences have something of a school of theology or philosophy about them. On the closely clipped lawn of their embassy garden the ladies and gentlemen of the press sit like eager students at the feet of the imposing figures of the ambassador and his assistant. The message is clearly designed to play on fears of Islamic reaction to the bombing. [Taliban presser] "It has sparked off the fury of not only the Muslim people of Afghanistan but all Muslim world (Fx phone). We appreciate the Islamic feelings and support shown by all Muslims of the world with the Islamic Community of Afghanistan".

ED: The first Friday of the war is declared a "Day of Rage" in Pakistan.

FX Demo

ED: The Taliban have soul mates here – Pakistan's madrasses have schooled a generation in radical Islamic thinking. There are calls for foreigners to be driven from the country – dire predictions of revolution and even civil war. President Musharraf, who's taken a big risk with his decision to side with America, tightens the security screws – and stays calm.

UPSOF DEMO

MUSHARRAF: I was confident all, all along, because I knew that the people of Pakistan are with me and they have confidence in my judgement, and secondly I knew that the religious extremists in Pakistan are in a very small minority. I know the results of all our elections in the past, I know that they don't enjoy the confidence of the masses, the people of Pakistan, therefore when they were out on the streets I knew that this is a minority and that the majority is very, very strongly with me. I was quite sure and quite confident about that.

ED: America's new ally is proving rock solid – the papers may be full of stories about instability in Pakistan, but in the State Department they heave a collective sigh of relief. Colin Powell's deputy, Richard Armitage.

ARMITAGE: He was telling us he could handle it. The talk in Pakistan to which you refer was primarily among the members of the press stationed there, and much less than in the general population. And President Musharraf had a very good handle on it, and he subsequently was shown to be absolutely correct.

ED: With the war just a week old the American Secretary of State Colin Powell flies to Islamabad.

POWELL: President Bush asked me to come to Pakistan to demonstrate our enduring commitment to our relationship with Pakistan. We are . . . [fades under].

ED: He's bearing gifts. General Musharraf made a shrewd calculation when he decided to back America, and he's holding the line. This is pay day.

MUSHARRAF: In the initial stages I didn't consider it to be correct or even gentlemanly I would say to demand some returns for whatever one is doing. I didn't think it was appropriate at all to be talking of what are you going to give me, there's no bargaining going on, so we, whatever we did and whatever we are accepted to do was without any demands or, or returns, but when Mr. Colin Powell came here, by that time of course he also knew that we required certain things, we have certain problems of our own, and he offered to help us, and then we had to mature our ideas and I was very frank with him when we discussed what are Pakistan's requirements.(Can you tell me what those were, what you did discuss at that meeting.)Well my concern was the economy of Pakistan really and I said there are three elements, one is debt relief, the other is, is fiscal support, budgetary support, and the third is market access for our goods, so I really discussed these three aspects of assistance from the United States. (And do you think they've delivered as you would hope they would have done.)Reasonably I would say. On the debt relief, yes they have, President Bush has promised me one billion dollars write off, so debt relief is there. As far as fiscal support is concerned, yes, in all nearly we've got nearly about one billion dollars in fiscal support, but my regret is about the market access, we haven't got it as yet.

ED: While he is in Islamabad Colin Powell announces a new appointment; one of his most senior officials is to be charged with the task of preparing for a post war Afghanistan. Until now Richard Haass has been responsible for long term planning at the State Department, and he's well known in London because of his special role as America's man in the Northern Ireland peace process.

HAASS: Very early on it became clear that while the military planning was proceeding apace, a lot of people were concerned, as were we on the inside, that the diplomatic planning was falling somewhat behind, or out of synch, and the feeling was that we had to look at things politically that we could do that would help ease the military problem but again be prepared politically, economically and the rest for what would come after. And for some reason, the Secretary of State turned to me.

ED: Richard Haass's appointment is welcome news in Islamabad.

MUSHARRAF: I was extremely apprehensive that once the military strategy succeeded and the operation comes to an end or comes to a culmination, and if we don't have a political strategy and a reconstruction strategy in place, maybe it'll create a void and a vacuum which will be filled again by these warlords and we return to the days of the post cold war period where every, these warlords were fighting and killing each other.

ED: The military strategy carries the seeds of potential post war strife within it. By backing the Northern Alliance, America is aligning itself with some unsavoury characters. Indeed it is not so very long since the Alliance was itself driven from power in Kabul in the face of overwhelming popular discontent.. Stephen Evans is the head of the Afghan Crisis Unit at the Foreign Office.

EVANS: We were well aware of the fact that after twenty years of civil war none of the groups in Afghanistan had completely clean records. And they themselves will admit that. I mean that is a, a sort of I think the result of you know twenty years of civil war and the fact that they were operating within the context of a failed state. But underpinning our approach was the objective of ensuring that when the job in Afghanistan was done, in the sense of dealing with al-Qaeda and dealing with the Taliban, that we didn't see rule by another armed group, but we did see a move towards a genuinely broad based and representative government.

ED: October 18th – Richard Haass meets the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and his special representative in New York. They face a formidable challenge – the bombs are still falling on what is anyway a failed state, and they must come up with a plan to give it stability, economic and political.

HAASS: What we did in that meeting was discussed politically what we might to do help bring about an Afghan opposition, and at that point a lot of the thinking was about essentially how we could encourage Afghans to do it themselves. We also talked about economic plans, humanitarian plans, as well as economic reconstruction ideas, and we also talked a little bit about security arrangement, about what might be done during a struggle and after a struggle to help secure Afghanistan. So what it was was really the first comprehensive conversation between ourselves and the United Nations, and I think what was good about it was we saw the situation quite similarly, and it laid, I'd like to think, something of a foundation of trust and confidence that we were essentially marching in the same direction on this, because we knew that we needed each other for this to succeed.

FX BATTLE: Battery stand by. Fire.....

ED: October 19th - America gets the first troops on the ground in Afghanistan - to the delight of the military leadership in the Pentagon. Paul Wolfowitz.

UP FX: Re-loading . . .

WOLFOWITZ: When I realised some months afterwards that it had only been twelve days from October 7th to the beginning of the bombing to October 19th the first troops on the ground I couldn't believe it because I heard so many discussions between Rumsfeld and General Franks with others of us participating about how important it was for us to get special forces in to get troops on the ground. And the sense of impatience from the Secretary 'Why is it taking so long?'

ED That same days sees the first big diplomatic set piece since the war began - the Shanghai Summit of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. George Bush's host here is the Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

CD 'E': Remarks by President Bush and President Jiang, People's Republic of China).
"I've come to Shanghai because China and other Asia Pacific nations are important partners in the global coalition against terror. [Chinese dips . . .]

ED: There is a moment of light theatre amid the high diplomatic drama. The Chinese provide their guests with stylish silk jackets for a family photograph. That veteran of the world stage Shimon Peres, the Israeli Foreign Minister, is struck by this vivid image of the new world coalition in action. He can't resist a gentle jibe when he meets the American president.

PERES: I saw the meeting of the very interesting coalition in Shanghai headed by Jiang Zemin the President of China, Bush the President of the United States and Putin the President of Russia - all of them in silky jackets, very beautiful blue and red. I told President Bush 'You've developed a very silky relations'. He thought I am saying 'a very silly relations' so he says 'Why did I look silly?', so I says 'No Mr President. You looked silky'. But it is not that all of them fall in love with President Bush but all of them feel in the same camp and this is an ongoing coalition

ED: The Pentagon briefing on Tuesday October 23rd.

US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE News: [fading up] "...the wheels shown on TV by the Taliban officials were, in fact, from a U.S. MH-47 helicopter. During Friday night's mission, the helicopter's main landing gear came in contact with a barrier, which tore the wheels off. The aircraft continued [fades]

ED; No one knows what's happening behind the Taliban lines – the press is hungry, the Pentagon's briefers are anxious.

DoD News Briefing (Coughs.) Excuse me. While there, they took hostile fire, aborted the refueling, returned fire and departed. There were no casualties among the U.S. crew and no reports of casualties on the ground.

ED: As October draws to a close Kofi Annan says he wants the campaign over early so that the UN can get the food supplies rolling into Afghanistan to prepare for the winter.

ANNAN: We were worried that the longer it went on, the greater the impact it will happen on our humanitarian activities. We were also worried that some of the airports may be bombed and destroyed and these are the airports that we would eventually have needed if you had to sort of get emergency supplies in.

DoD News Briefing: (Cough) Also this weekend, two intended targets that were missed: At 11:24 [p.m. EDT] on Saturday, a U.S. Navy F-14 missed its intended target and inadvertently dropped two 500-pound bombs in a residential area north west of Kabul. (Coughs.) Excuse me. The intended targets were military vehicles.

ED: Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Britain's ambassador at the United Nations – has seen nerves fray in the diplomatic community in New York during an earlier campaign.

GREENSTOCK: This always happens. Remember Kosovo in 1999, which was a ten week campaign and after eight weeks, it wasn't just the UN that was jittery, there was a lot of jitteriness within Europe, and after a month, six weeks or so of the Afghan bombing campaign, when some civilians had been killed, there had been some stray bombs, there was jitteriness here, and indeed elsewhere

DoD News Briefing At 9:05 a.m. [EDT] on Sunday, a U.S. Navy FA-18 Hornet missed its intended target and inadvertently dropped a 1,000-pound bomb in an open field -- an open area near a senior citizens' home outside Herat, Afghanistan. The intended target was a vehicle-storage building. . . .

ED: October 26th - the Taliban capture and kill Abdul Haq, who has slipped over the border from Pakistan. He is big figure – a hero of the Soviet war and a member of Afghanistan's dominant Pashtun community. In fact just the kind of leader America needs in its search for a post-war settlement. Richard Haass.

HAASS: Look, it was obviously a bad day. Things were not going well at that point. If you remember, right around then, there was a -- that was still before militarily we had succeeded in bringing down a major population center. So when Abdul Haq got killed, it was not only very sad on a humanitarian basis, but it added to a sense in this town, and perhaps beyond, that things were not coming together.

ED: The beginning of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, is looming large on everyone's horizon. On November 4th General Musharaf tells the American Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that a campaign during Ramadan could offend Islamic sensibilities, and he wants it done and dusted.

MUSHARRAF: Everyone I think generally agreed that it should be short, but short is really a comparative term, I mean it can't be converted into a time frame. Obviously I did understand that it has to be effect related, I mean you have to attain the effects or the results that you want to attain in the campaign, and you cannot stop it on a time basis.

STRAW: Of course the diplomacy had to continue. We had to in fact ratchet the diplomacy up.

ED: The British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw.

STRAW: It's worth remembering that between the time when the decision was taken at the end of September to begin the military campaign and the 9th 10th of November when Kabul fell, no one was quite sure how long the campaign would go on, the military campaign would go on. There were a lot of people in very respectable positions including the BBC raising questions as to whether - and I quote - this wasn't going to be another Vietnam. There were people in the Islamic world and outside challenging the proportionality of the action and suggesting that this wasn't supported by the Afghan population so it required a lot of, a lot of activity diplomatically as well as some pretty strong nerves.

ED: America's strategy is on trial. By devolving much of the fighting to the Northern Alliance they've lost some control over the progress of the war. In the White House the President's National Security Advisor counts away anxious days on the calendar.

RICE: I would say that with the exception of the President, there was time when everyone got a little impatient, because there was a lot of question as to when the Northern Alliance was actually going to move. And there was a little bit of a concern that winter was going to come on, and Afghanistan's a tough place to fight in the winter, and what would really have been achieved by that time, and would we have lost the initiative and the momentum if by, say, the first of December there had not been major advances?

ED: The beginning of November sees the birth of the Coalition Information Centre. An Anglo-American initiative with offices in London, Washington and Islamabad it will co-ordinate the communications campaign – which becomes more critical as each week passes. The CIC is the brain child of Alastair Campbell, and he's drawing on the lessons of the war in Kosovo.

CAMPBELL: What became clear is that in these huge international events, which command attention now right round the world you know where deadlines don't matter, time zones don't matter and it's just a story that is happening all the time, an individual country or an individual part of a government just isn't equipped to deal with it because the media now is so fast and it's so big and what happens in one part of the world now, on the television now can have an impact on every single government around the world that's having to deal with it. Something that somebody says, an incident. So what the CIC was about, which was in a sense a bigger version of what we'd done for Kosovo, was to put together the main parts of the coalition response in communication terms and have systems that meant that they were constantly interconnected so that we all knew the main things that were happening, the main messages that were being put out by the main players, the main vehicles for that to happen and it's just a way of making sure that you're working together and maximising your resources, and that you are helping each other with the problems that arise.

ED Alastair Campbell's political master Tony Blair is still in restless pursuit of the most elusive diplomatic prizes. Syria remains outside the coalition fold - Britain has seduced, America has threatened but all to no avail - at one stage Richard Armitage, the number two at the American State Department, has even warned the Syrians that they might be "next on the list".

ARMITAGE: I said that again – in the line of either you're with us or against, and you can either co-operate as you can or else, if you're harbouring terrorists or if you're part of it, you may yourself become a target. The Syrians chose to view this as a threat, and I was happy they did. (You were happy they did?) I was delighted they did. (Why?) They didn't miss the signal.

ED: Tony Blair has prepared the way by sending a special envoy to sound out President Bashir Assad, and he flies to Damascus full of expectation about what can be achieved with the English-speaking young leader who recently succeeded to power there. But when the two men appear at a joint press conference, President Assad is, as they say in New Labour circles, most definitely not on message.

BBC NEWS REPORT/ Joint press conference President Assad: We cannot accept what we see every day on television screens: the killing of innocent civilians. There are hundreds now who are dying every day.

BBC NEWS REPORT/ Joint press conference Prime Minister Blair: It is difficult because of the history and the differences to come here, to have a press conference such as this. It is an attempt to find new understanding and a new way forward to resolve the differences that we have.

BLAIR: Well, I have never minded about that because I have done press conferences like that with people with people when they have said things that I don't agree with, and you probably wish they weren't saying, but I felt it was very important to go to Syria, because whatever was said at the press conference, there was also a very strong message that I delivered which was that for Syria there was a choice too, and I think that choice still remains, incidentally, that it can either play around with support for terrorism, or it can join the proper community of civilised nations, but it is not in any sense a proper pursuit of a political cause to blow up innocent civilians.

ED: When it comes to putting a gloss on the event, President Bashir al-Assad's spin doctor has the advantage - Adnan Omran, the Syrian Information minister, rather mischievously suggests that the British aren't used to the way a free press works.

OMRAN: One thing which we consider is very natural and normal was misread in London by the media - that was in the press conference when the two men spoke about their position (Mr Blair and Mr Assad) and we took it in our own media as a normal thing. We enjoyed that kind of bit of differences here and there but apparently British media did not expect any party to make his views freely.

CAMPBELL: If it meant getting a couple of days' bad headlines about President Bashir giving him a bashing as the press put it, then so what? I also think it was actually, in part our media are not necessarily used to hearing what the Syrians have to say about us or the way that they say it, and the Syrians are not used to dealing with that kind of event.

ED: It is a sorry end to an enterprise which began with such high hopes and careful planning. The man who laid the groundwork – Tony Blair's special envoy, Lord Powell – watches at a distance in dismay.

POWELL: To be honest I was quite surprised there was a press conference. I think it is unwise to have a press conference in those sorts of circumstances when you are not expecting to be in a position to announce detailed agreements or joint actions or something of that sort. You are down there for a first meeting with somebody who represents a government which has had a very different view from yours in a highly volatile complex political situation. Better not to go for too much public exposure immediately afterwards. (If you'd known that something like that had been going to happen would you have recommended that he went?) Oh I still think Tony Blair should have gone. Yes I think he is brave to have gone and I think he was right to have gone.

ED: The Prime Minister now has an even more ambitious prize in his sights - reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians. Another of his special envoys - Lord Levy, the music business magnate, is already there laying the groundwork for the next stop on Mr Blair's Middle East mission.

LEVY: The work really involved is for me to have met with Prime Minister Sharon and with Chairman Arafat before the prime minister came. I had meetings with them and with their key advisers, with the leaders of the Palestinian authority, with cabinet ministers and with members of Prime Minister Sharon's team, and to try and really get a feel of exactly where the state of play was at, where their mindset was at.

ED The Palestinians, at least, like what they hear. Nabil Sha'ath, is one of Yasser Arafat's senior advisers.

SHA'ATH: All our discussions was about a permanent peace solution, about the necessity of addressing that issue with something v. similar to what the Saudi plan eventually adopted: clarity on the issue of withdrawal, an independent Palestinian state, and on the need to resolve the refugee issue through a negotiated settlement and the need to address the Israeli concerns. Europe then really was led by the Blair attempt at persuading the Americans to adopt a peace process that would be a major success in ending the conflict in the Middle East, bringing stability and allies in the war against terror.

BLAIR: The problem with the Middle East is that I think both sides do actually want a settlement, but both sides have also given up on the other side, and that's why the only way it can ever be resolved is from outside intervention and help to bring people together, and get a framework within which people can start talking. And I can't say I was desperately optimistic coming back from there, but on the other hand I think the opportunity is still there if people want to take it.

ED: The Prime Minister returns empty handed. By this time Washington is becoming frustrated with Yasser Arafat. President Bush is preparing to formalise his talk of the need for a Palestinian state in his address to the annual general assembly of the United Nations - but on November 8th his National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice says he won't meet Arafat there because of his failure to stop terrorism.

RICE: The President has been by far more direct in talking about two states than any American President has dared be. He's called it Palestine, for goodness' sake. And now, that has changed the terms of the debate, so people work, now, toward a two-state solution. In order to get there, we have to have a leadership that is committed on the Palestinian side to dealing with the terrorism in its midst.

ED: That uncompromising judgement from the White House is echoed even in the State Department - which is traditionally more moderate on the matter. Richard Armitage.

ARMITAGE: There can be no doubt that the Palestinian leadership has let down the Palestinian people. I don't think this is open for much question. Here you have a President of the United States who stood up in the United Nations, the first of any US President had and talked about a Palestinian state named Palestine, which existed side by side in peace with Israel, and yet the Palestinian leadership could not find the wherewithal to try to embrace it even that. So the question of Palestinian leadership is one that I think many people are coming to observe has been observed in the breach. There hasn't been much.

ED: The Israelis have another interpretation of the shift in American policy. It is becoming more and more apparent that this really is an American war - fought with American power under American command. This time perhaps there's no need to please Arab nations by pushing for progress on the Palestinian question. Dore Gold advises the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on foreign policy.

GOLD: There were those in Washington who felt that the establishment of a strong American-Arab coalition, as well as other regional states, was a prerequisite for a successful military campaign. But as the military campaign got underway the US establishment I think understood that it was able to reach a decisive outcome, even without this formal coalition existing. There was a world of difference between the Gulf War campaign that required a half a million troops in the Arabian Peninsular, and the campaign against al Qaeda in Afghanistan that was based on special operations and air power.

ED; That week in early November the Italian and German Parliaments both vote to offer troops to serve with the coalition. In Germany especially it represents a profound change in public and political attitudes. But Gerhard Schroeder, the Chancellor, is determined to make good on the promises he's made to George Bush - Michael Steiner is his advisor.

STEINER: You know the government is a red/green government – so you have quite a number of pacifists supporting this government – so that was not so easy for a German government to commit itself. But the Chancellor was very clear that for him this was a make it or break it commitment he has given to the Americans . . . 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.

ED; But it is late in the day. Nothing succeeds like success and everyone is trying to scramble aboard the coalition train. Britain's special relationship with Washington is an object of some envy in Europe now, and the British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, finds himself taking calls asking for favours.

STRAW: The difficulty was actually accommodating all those members of the United Nations who wished to participate in the military action. I had foreign ministers on the phone in my office here in the Foreign Office almost pleading with me to do what I could to ensure that 20 or 30 of their military were able to take part.

ED: Somehow or other the Americans manage to accommodate the enthusiasm of a remarkably large collection of countries - traditional allies like the British lend their special forces but there are units from the Czechs, the Poles, the Dutch and the Hungarians, the Turks and the Portuguese. Never, though, is there any doubt about who's running this war. NATO's contribution is modest, and many of the direct offers of help from its members are politely declined. The NATO Secretary General, George Robertson.

ROBERTSON: Some of them had gone to a great deal of trouble with parliaments and with their own militaries in order to get the decisions made but I think they all understood why it was that the United States couldn't quickly or easily mesh in the offers that were being made but there was certainly some disappointment about, but I think it was understood. (Is it fair to say that the Americans are now so sophisticated, so far ahead of the rest of us that it will never be necessary for them to call on other people in these sorts of circumstances?) It would not be true to say that they've reached a level of sophistication that they will not need people to help. In the particular circumstances that were involved in Afghanistan they were able to do it and to do it on their own.

ED: The 9th of November, the city of Mazar-e-Sharif falls to the Northern Alliance. To most of the watching world a development of middling note in a war that seems to be dragging endlessly on. To old Afghan hands a moment of decisive import. Stephen Evans served in the British embassy in Kabul in the days before the Taliban snuffed out diplomatic life there.

EVANS: I was pretty confident actually. I mean the way things tend to work in Afghanistan is that nothing appears to happen. And then a lot happens very quickly. And it's as if you're pushing at a rotten door, and you push and you push and you'll push. And suddenly all the timbers give way together. (So you perhaps weren't that surprised when Kabul fell - a lot of people were but you weren't?) No. No I had predicted it the week before in the kitchen in the emergency unit. The reason was Mazar-e-Sherif fell and I think it was the day that Mazar-e-Sherif fell, I was having a cup of coffee and talking to a colleague and he said, 'Do you reckon Kabul will go this year or next?' And I said 'It'll go next week'. It's the way it goes. That once the, the Taliban start to pull back and give up they will give up a large swathe of territory very quickly and probably fall back on Kandahar.

ED: The task of preparing the ground for a post-conflict Afghanistan has become a scramble.

HAASS: I'm not sure if that was the end of the beginning, or the beginning of the end.

ED: Richard Haass is the State Department's point man.

HAASS: The fall of Mazar-e-Sharif was clearly not simply the military turning point of the battle, but it was also the political turning point, because once Afghans on the ground saw what was happening, a lot of them recalculated their positions, which is exactly what a lot of us predicted would happen, that once you had a decisive military victory, that would establish a trend, and more important it would establish the perception that a trend was inevitable, which then became self-fulfilling.

BBC NEWS: Our World Affairs editor John Simpson was with Northern Alliance troops as they moved towards Kabul. He described their rapid advance.

SIMPSON: There's hundreds of, perhaps even thousands of soldiers pouring down the main road towards Kabul, passing us. They are carrying their rifles, they are carrying their RPG-7 rocket launchers over their shoulders. They are a conquering army. They have passed through the first two lines of defence towards Kabul like a knife through butter.

ED: It happens with startling speed - the worst of the war is over, the Taliban and Al Qaeda are on the run. And Washington wakes up to a whole new set of challenges. Sir Christopher Meyer is the British ambassador there.

MEYER: I mean some people may have been surprised. I can't remember exactly but all I can say to you Ed is if you're going to have a choice between problems of failure and problems of success, go for the latter every time.