



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Geoffrey Robertson, Secretary-General of NATO

ROBERTSON

Question: We've asked everybody to recall what they were doing and how they remember the moment of September 11th.

Answer: Every Tuesday, the permanent representatives to Nato, the Nato ambassadors, meet for a private lunch at a different ambassador's residence and prepare for the North Atlantic Council the following day. So that day we were hosted by the Belgian ambassador and this lunch is strictly off the record - no mobile phones, no messages, no interruptions. It's [as if] the cardinals of Nato were basically in conclave. So we were interrupted unusually, first of all by one of the ambassadors getting a message from his chauffeur, getting a message that something had happened. That was then followed by one of my bodyguards coming in with a mobile phone - so that was two rules broken - and this was my office to say there were reports of one of the planes hitting the World Trade Center. And I must say I thought, and so did the others who I told, that [it was] a little trainer aircraft, perhaps hitting, you know So anyway, a few minutes later another phone call came in to say that a second plane had hit. At that point the lunch was abandoned and we all climbed into cars and came back, and I listened in to the World Service to the unfolding story as it was going on.

Question: Did you think that Nato might be a target when you realised it was or might be a terrorist action?

Answer: It wasn't my first thought because I think one's first thought was of the horror that was taking place, but the moment I came into this building, mesmerised by the pictures on the televisions - one in the room where we are just now over there and another in my room - I suddenly became very conscious that apart from watching this as a spectator, I was also a participant because, of course, we are on a direct flight path to what was then a very busy Brussels airport and these planes were roaring overhead. So we mobilised very quickly, first of all to get non-essential staff home - and that required a script in French as well as English in order to tell people by tannoy that they should go - and then to get down to work to see how the place could be protected and how we might fulfil our role as one of the primary military headquarters in the world

Question: Your first contact with the Americans was when you talked with Colin Powell on the phone. Tell me about that.

Answer: First of all, at a meeting of the Atlantic Council that night I brought the ambassadors together round the table in my conference room. It was a very shocked atmosphere for people who are actually quite used to surprises and, indeed, areas of conflict. It was very sober and very sad, and it was really an exchange of profound expressions of grief and bereavement to the American ambassador, to the Americans. So that set the seal. That was an evening meeting of the North Atlantic Council. But I came in in the morning and spoke to Colin Powell who was doing a round of telephone calls, I think from Peru which is where he had been at the time. That was when I pointed out to him that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty might well be relevant in this case. He said: "I don't know what you mean, George." I said: "Article 5 is, an attack on one is an attack on us all." He said: "I know what Article 5 is. But what is the relevance?" I said: "Well, you have been attacked and I think there are people here who think this is

an issue that you might want to raise, and I have got a draft statement ready." He said: "I hadn't really thought about it. I'll come back to you." So they did about fifteen minutes later and said: "Yes, this is of real interest".

Question: But even at that stage it was clear to you that the real import of what you had done was diplomatic and related to the process of building a coalition rather than military.

Answer: In the first instance, it was political. It was a sign of solidarity and it was also a signal to the terrorists that they had stepped over a real threshold, stepped across a real red line with the international community. Here was Nato, formed in 1949, 52-years-old, never having invoked Article 5 of its founding treaty, saying that these people had gone beyond a red line that the Soviet Union had never got beyond. So it wasn't just politically significant in public relations terms, it had a very strong deterrent effect as well, and I think it gave a message to those who had perpetrated these acts that they were in breach of a normal standard of behaviour that was going to lead them into serious trouble. But it also had a military implication because all of the countries in Nato were offering their militaries for whatever retaliation the Americans were going to use against those who had perpetrated it and very shortly afterwards the Americans came forward with a portfolio of measures that they wanted: the AWACs planes to be transferred to the United States, the standing naval forces, the big fleet of ships in the Mediterranean moved to the eastern Mediterranean partly for deterrent purposes but also partly for interdiction purposes, the access to air space, to ports and harbours, to fuel, to [offer] solidarity with countries that would be affected by the campaign against terrorism. All of these were military measures that flowed from the Article 5 decision.

Question: But in military terms they were quite peripheral measures, weren't they?

Answer: No. These measures are actually fundamental. Unless you have got automatic access to air space then you have to file plans. Unless you have got access to ports and harbours and to fuel resources then you've got problems with the sheer bureaucracy that comes along with it. If you haven't got the Nato AWACs to go and patrol American air space, which they've been doing ever since and are even at this moment over Salt Lake City for the Olympic Games, then you would have to divert valuable resources that were better used in Afghanistan to do that. So these were not small measures and they were what the United States wanted at that time.

Question: The day after you saw the evidence, you saw Vladimir Putin. What did you discuss with him?

Answer: I discussed the campaign against terrorism. After all, Russia opened its air space the same day, as [did] Nato countries, to American war planes and had given a clear signal that bases in Central Asia would be no problem for the Russians. So we talked about that, the unique collaboration that was now taking place between Nato and Russia. We talked about strengthening the Nato-Russia relationship. We both agreed to stop this sort of, as I called it, "diplomatic sword dance" about Russia being invited to join Nato. I told him that they could apply for Nato membership if they wanted, but it wasn't handed out on a plate. You had to apply. We looked at some of the ways in which we could actually make the Nato-Russia relationship more practical and more real, and one of the proposals I made to him that afternoon was to have a conference on the military consequences of counter-terrorism which was actually held in Rome on February 4th - one of the first ever conferences bringing together Nato and Russian military to discuss a very specific subject.

Question: Did you talk about Chechnya?

Answer: President Putin has got a standard line on Chechnya. He believes and has believed ever since it started that he is fighting on behalf of the West and the world in general, that he is in the front line against fundamentalism and I think he now also makes it clear that he believes there are direct connections between the Chechen rebels and al-Qaeda and Bin Laden's network as well.

Question: It was only 3 weeks since September 11th at that stage, and yet it sounds as if huge changes were already taking place in the relationship between Nato and the Russians which perhaps people didn't appreciate at the time. But it does sound as if you made a very dramatic difference very quickly.

Answer: The events of September 11th had an immediate impact on Vladimir Putin himself. First of all, I think he felt there was an element of solidarity because he believes that the Russians have been attacked in the same way by terrorists. Secondly, the twin towers was the biggest terrorist attack on Russians. Over a hundred Russians were killed in the twin towers so there was a direct national involvement at that time. I think there was a feeling that here, for the first time in 60 years, was a common threat, a common enemy for the Russians and the West in general, and emotionally he reacted very, very swiftly. Indeed, it was one of the first telephone calls to President Bush, and after that it didn't let up. The airspace, the central European bases, increased co-operation and intelligence exchange - all of that has gone on and is still robust even to this day.

Question: And other things too? The Russians don't any more seem quite so concerned about son of Star Wars and the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) treaty do they?

Answer: There is certainly a more relaxed attitude to some of those issues because I think the Russians feel that they can work out answers to a number of these problems.

Question: Did the Americans tell you when the bombing was going to begin?

Answer: Yes, I had a phone call from the vice-president of the United States before the bombing started.

Question: Can you tell me what he said?

Answer: He said, " I am calling you because very shortly from now we are going to start a military campaign against Afghanistan. I thought you would want to know in advance and I am phoning a few people to tell them that this is going to happen." He said that it is going to be a heavy attack, but they have refused to give up Bin Laden and refused to expel the al-Qaeda terrorist network and we have no alternative. Therefore, in the circumstances as the leader of our primary alliance, I am letting you know".

Question: When he said "very shortly", how shortly did he mean?

Answer: Within the hour.

Question: So you found out really right at the last minute?

Answer: They were phoning most people at that time. I think that as secretary general of Nato, I was pretty high up in the hierarchy. Most people had been expecting that it was going to happen, but it was a courtesy that I appreciated, and which I think was related to the importance the Americans place on Nato.

Question: You said quite a lot of nations had offered help bilaterally to the United States. Do you think some of them were disappointed they weren't taken up on their offers?

Answer: Some of them were because 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 and easily mesh in a lot of the offers that were being made, and they were eventually picked up. They are being picked up even as we go along. But the nature of the American operation was such that they weren't easily able to plug in a whole series of different offers of different levels of activity. There was certainly some disappointment about, but I think it was understood.

Question: 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?

Answer: 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. But even there, there are limitations to it. They still needed airspace in Central Asia and over Pakistan and the Gulf areas, so they weren't doing it on their own. They needed to have other facilities and other help in order to allow them to be able to act as an American military machine. But that was a one-off situation and the Taliban collapsed very quickly after the assault took place. In future it will not be that easy and the Americans will want allies and will need and will have to have allies. And, of course, Nato is the biggest permanent coalition of allies in the world.

Question: You made the point that the campaign is far from over. That meeting which endorsed the idea that this was something that came under Article 5 gave a sort of blessing to what's happened in Afghanistan. Would it give a similar blessing to things if they would happen in Iraq or Iran, which are being talked about at the moment?

Answer: If the Americans came forward with evidence that linked the events of 11th September with other countries, then the North Atlantic Council would obviously want to listen very carefully to that evidence. But our decision, and indeed the decision on military action by the United States Congress, was specifically related to the events of 11th September, and the Americans produced the initial trench of evidence linking al-Qaeda and Bin Laden to what had gone on. I would expect them to come back with additional evidence if they were to go beyond Afghanistan.

Question: What would be Nato's position be if the Americans did that?

Answer: It's difficult to talk in hypothetical terms, but there is an automatic sympathy with the United States at the present time and a willingness to look very sympathetically at evidence that is produced about linkages with other countries. So far, American spokesmen, both in here and publicly have said there isn't a particular link between Saddam's poisonous regime and the particular events of the 11th September. But there is a lot of new information coming on stream, and if that evidence was to become apparent then we would want to hear about it.

Question : You made the point that you were very much to the fore of making an offer of political diplomatic assistance to America very early on with this idea of invoking Article 5. Do you think the way the Americans are acting at the moment has repaid that in kind?

Answer: The Americans very robustly support Nato and use Nato as their foundation stone for international security. Of course, in areas where a wider coalition is necessary we are not necessarily the first port of call - they didn't come to Nato during the Vietnam

war, Nato was not in the first rank in the Gulf War. But where we are relevant, we are important and we shouldn't be underestimated.

Question: Are you happy at the level of consultation between yourselves and the Americans at the moment?

Answer: The level of consultation with the Americans is first class and misses out very little of what is going on either in terms of military action or military thinking or indeed on the other aspects of the campaign against terrorism. You know this very day, I had a 20 minute conversation with Colin Powell about aspects of this campaign. I met him when I was in New York and we have regular discussions with him but also with Donald Rumsfeld, and indeed with the president too.

Question: Do you think if you said: "Don't do something or I advise against you doing something," they would pay any attention?

Answer: I think the Americans are very conscious of what the opinions are of their key allies. They don't take that frivolously. Even when they are being assertive, they are interested in the views of the alliance. So encouraging them to do something, discouraging them from doing something is part and parcel of the way that the alliance has worked over the years. But the Americans can give just as much as they take.

Question : How has September 11th changed Nato's relationship with Russia? How has it moved Russia?

Answer: There is an emotional feeling among the Russians that suddenly the Americans have felt what they believe they have been feeling now for some years. There is also a belief among them that this is a common enemy and it should be dealt with on a common basis. So it has broken down some of the old barriers both psychological and military, and that we should capitalise upon, that new sense of co-operation, and develop it into other fields as well. I saw it very vividly when I went to Volgograd in November, the old Stalingrad, which happened to be a place I'd scheduled to visit from earlier on in the year, but the sense of the emotional linkage there with the West has probably been never as great now since the days of the Battle of Stalingrad itself. And that was followed the following day with the meetings I had in the Kremlin and with a lot of other agencies in Moscow. So it set an impetus going that I think will transform the Nato-Russian relationship. After we'd discussed it in the Kremlin, President Putin and I, as we left, he said in English to me: "If we can make this work, Mr Secretary General, we'll change the world." Now it maybe over-stating it slightly, but it will certainly change quite a bit in the world if we can get the Nato-Russia relationship much more open and [on a] business-like basis.

Question: Is there a sense that September 11th has created a new world order?

Answer: There is a new world order after September 11th. On the bad side, it has shown terrorists and sometime individual terrorist states that they can attack right into the heart of the civilised world and can have a dramatic effect. But on the other hand, against that [there is] a unique co-operation that has built up out of a shared sense of vulnerability which I think will have a dramatic impact on security relationships right into the 21st century.