



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 powers, by the allied powers, the Germans had somehow the luxury to benefit from solidarity by its partners but not to take part actively when practical solidarity was called for. So it was very crucial that the German Government and indeed all the leading political parties were ready and showed readiness also to take [an] active part in this fight against terrorism – [which is] what they did. And you must see where Germany came from. Just 12 years ago, it was unthinkable that Germany would take part in any form of military fight as long as it is not in very direct self defence. So we had Kosovo this experience which was already quite a challenge for the Germany psyche after the Second World War – after the disaster we had with the Hitler regime. And now to go one step further, in as far as the government committed Germany's participation – not only in undertakings in Europe but globally – was quite a challenge. And therefore it was very important that we expressed that in an unreserved form – also openly within Germany but also to the outside world – and I think that the reaction in Washington, at least my [re] collection, my memory, of the reaction of Washington was very grateful and they probably did not expect this very clear commitment of Germany to take part in this fight.

STOURTON: I'd like to talk in a bit more detail about that in a moment or two. But just going back a stage, I think I recall Tony Blair came to see the chancellor before he went to Washington during that first week after 11 September. Can you tell me anything about that meeting – what was said, what message the chancellor sent Tony Blair to Washington with from Germany?

STEINER: The chancellor made it clear that the Europeans would have a common interest that the Americans understand that they are not alone in this fight. You should also remember that at that time, immediately after 11 September, many in Europe feared that there would be a sort of cowboy reaction from Washington and a reaction which was not calculated and efficient but would be just a reaction to satisfy public or emotion. So the feeling in the Chancellery was and the message of the chancellor was – and I think Tony Blair totally agreed to that – we had to express that we are with the Americans. Also to avoid any just emotional reaction. In the end it turned out that this was not necessary because there was no danger in Washington of an emotional unreflective reaction. But I think it was very important also that the Americans realised that they had friends in the world in such a situation and the Chancellor encouraged Tony Blair to express this. We had the feeling that it was not necessary that at this early stage for the chancellor to also go to Washington because we felt this might overdo it. He went a bit later which I think was wise. I was sent several times to Washington beforehand to talk about the details of how we could help the Americans on this side.

STOURTON: Well the most concrete evidence I suppose of your desire to help and show solidarity came with a cabinet decision to approve an offer of nearly 4,000 German troops to take part in the campaign on 11 November. How difficult was it to prepare the ground for that decision?

STEINER: The government is a red/green government, so you have quite a number of pacifists supporting this government. So it was not so easy for a German government to commit itself. But the Chancellor was very clear that for him this was a make or break

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 on but it didn't appear to be making much difference, civilians were getting killed and wounded, and there was talk of a wobble in support for the campaign. Were you one of those who began to have your doubts at that stage or did you think it was going to be alright?

STEINER: Nobody knew that it would be as successful as it turned out in the end. There had been, you're right, criticisms also in Germany. The chancellor all through that time was very confident that this policy was right and made it clear in internal talks too that he had the feeling that this would become successful.

STOURTON: One of the long term impacts of what happened seems to be a new relationship between the United States and Russia, a much closer relationship. Germany has I suppose traditionally, or certainly in the last couple of decades, been Russia's

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 after the 11 September when hundreds of thousands went to the Brandenburg Gate for this demonstration. So I would not be worried about the feelings in the population. I think what is important for us in Europe is that also institutions are functioning – the UN functions, the Security Council of the UN does function, that Nato functions, that Europe functions – and that we address problems when they emerge in the world also in a co-operative way because, as I said, nobody can do it alone.

STOURTON: What was your response, particularly in the light of what you've just said, to George Bush's remarks about an "axis of evil" and what did you advise the chancellor about the way he should respond to that?

STEINER: You have it very often that you would express things in a different way. We wouldn't talk in these religious terms about phenomena in the world. That is also a different culture probably. In Europe you would not use these terms. But that's not important how you express yourself, what words you use. What is important is that you are in one line in fighting these tremendously negative phenomena and in fighting these phenomena you must of course also address, root out, the support scenery. And in order to root out the support in some corners in the world, you must look how this support comes about and very often you find that the reason is that people are suffering under feeling that injustice is done to them. You need also to bring, of course, a feeling of justice to the population in order to have terrorism not supported by some.

STOURTON: It was about that time that Chris Patten, the European Commissioner – again rather different now – says he said the United States was in danger of going into "unilateralist overdrive", that was his phrase. Would you endorse that sentiment? Do you get any sense of that in your dealings with the Americans?

STEINER: I think that this danger is there, this is undeniable, and that is always the risk. If you are a mighty power, if you are a super power, and if you are the only super power then you are under this danger and Chris Patten is surely right in pointing that out. In the end a policy which relies on itself and doesn't rely also on partners is a less efficient

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?

STEINER: Of course the Americans insisted on following all information in that action. Indeed some of these guys lived in Hamburg so we had every interest to investigate very intensively. We had every interest to activate police efforts in this area and of course the Americans insisted on that too, this is all too understandable. I think the important point is that the police acted in a rather quick way and had also some astonishing successes.

STOURTON: If I can just return briefly to the question of the use of forces from Europe, or the lack of use of forces in the end, by the United States. There are those who argue that what the whole experience demonstrated is that Nato, even though you might admire and like it, actually didn't show its relevance in these sorts of circumstances. Do you think that's true and do you think there's some disappointment about that in Europe?

STEINER: I think that Nato has of course had a certain role in a certain territory – it was concentrated on the situation in Europe and the immediate surroundings, let me put it this way. So it's quite natural that if you have a phenomenon which is a global phenomenon that you then try to address it also in a global way. Now, in fact, Nato has helped also in this global aspect. But you are right it was not at the centre and is not at the centre of this fight simply because allies were also needed in the region. It didn't happen in Europe, it happened in the United States and in Asia. So it's normal that the perspective of the Americans had been slightly more global.

On the other hand, as I said, I think over all this experience and over all these events, we should not lose sight of the importance of Nato, which in the end would be a pity to damage simply because the challenge is a global one. I think Nato has its role here to play and in the end is also playing this role in the interest of the United States.

STOURTON: And your own offer of troops, you talked about the huge symbolic importance of making that big, big step to approving the idea of German troops being involved in combat outside Nato's area. But none of them were actually called upon to fight in it.

STEINER: This would be a bit premature to say that none of them have been called. Some of them are engaged under circumstances one doesn't talk about. But I think what Germany has been requested to contribute and Germany has promised to contribute, they have done so and I think the Americans have a very reliable partner.

STOURTON: Michael Steiner, thank you very much indeed.