



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Richard Armitage, US Deputy Secretary of State

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QUESTION: If we can start with the day itself , September 11th. Where were you, and what did you do when you heard what was happening?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I was seated in this very room, and my executive assistant came in and said one of the towers in New York had been hit by an aircraft. I ran in there, immediately picked up the phone and called to the assistant secretary for counter-terrorism. Even before the second airplane went in, I thought it was impossible to have this happen actually on a clear day and said, "We've got a problem." About that moment, the second aircraft went into the tower, which I watched on television. Immediately after that, I was told to go to the operations center here to get on call to the vice-president, and I spent the rest of the day in the ops center with the vice-president.

QUESTION: How quickly did you work out who it was, who it might have been?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We were quite suspicious of Osama Bin Laden. Around the 1st of April, the State Department had announced to the rest of the administration that although we had a policy in Afghanistan, and South Asia more broadly, that unless we got a handle on Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, then we couldn't have any policy in South Asia. So we were quite suspicious of Osama, but it took us several days for that noose to tighten significantly enough to make the president absolutely confident that he could point the finger.

QUESTION: You very quickly thought about Pakistan, though. Can you tell me your conversations with the secretary of state and the way that you drew up the list of demands you made to Pakistan with the secretary of state?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We took advantage, the day after the attack, of having here on a visit to the CIA, Lieutenant General Mahmood of Pakistan, and just told the secretary he was here, that I thought I better call him in. I had - in the previous administrations - had a relationship with Pakistan during the Soviet war, the government of Zia al-Haq and subsequent governments. [We] had him in, explained to him on the 12th that this was not a time for negotiation. That as far as we were concerned, history began today, that if he was going to co-operate with us, he ought to get back to his president and make a decision, with us or against us. And [we] put before him a list of seven key demands which the secretary and I drew up here, and they were very stiff and very strong. And Mahmood said that he would check with the president, [he] thought the president would be for this. And in effect, we were asking for the keys to kingdom. They both came back the next day. He accepted, in the name of his president, all of these demands.

Almost immediately upon completion of that meeting, I went to see the secretary, who called President Musharraf to make it crystal clear and make it clear in our minds, that they had indeed accepted these demands and that Musharraf himself was aware of the enormity of what we were asking. And he acknowledged that he was on board, and at two o'clock that afternoon, that is, only a few minutes after the completion of the call,

the secretary and I were on a secure conference call with the president, explaining to him what we had done.

QUESTION: The President said, not long after that, we will have to see what President Musharraf's statement means, which suggests that there was still a bit of scepticism about what the result of those demands would be.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, there wasn't any question in our mind that Musharraf understood the demands and had accepted them. Musharraf was fighting against people in his own street, and I think that there was no doubt in the State Department's mind that Musharraf had accepted. But I don't know the statement to which you refer. Eventually, Musharraf made very strong statements - and lived up to them, as far as I can see.

QUESTION: In those early days, Pakistan made various attempts to persuade the Taleban to hand over Osama Bin Laden. Did you think that those were serious, or was that just a form?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I think they were serious. They certainly thought that if they could get the Arabs out then the people in whom Pakistan had been investing for the previous almost decade, that is, the Taleban, might be able to stay. And indeed, if you'll remember, we didn't initially demand the Taleban's removal. We demanded they hand over al-Qaeda. It was only after the bombing started that we upped the ante on Mullah Omar and his colleagues, by saying they had to go as well. So the Pakistanis were using what leverage they had, and it was a very good leverage, trying to remove the foreign presence from Afghanistan and keep the Taleban in power. But the Taleban wasn't smart enough to listen to the advice they were getting from Pakistan.

QUESTION: I think I've seen you quoted as saying you had a hand in drafting the president's speech to Congress in that first week or so. What was your contribution?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, listen. Only a president writes his own speeches. You know that. The contribution of staff is to make sure that we're not getting in any errors, we're not saying something that doesn't absolutely, totally hold water against all sides of the question. So in that regard I had a hand in it, but the president and his colleagues did the major drafting.

QUESTION: Were you happy to hear him say effectively to the world, "You're either with us or against us"?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I was thrilled with it. It was exactly what we said to Mahmood on the 12th of September. So there's no grey in here. It's black and white. You're either with us or against us. So I was thrilled to hear him say that.

QUESTION: On September the 15th, you met the Japanese ambassador and said to him, it's time Japan showed the flag. What did you mean by that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We had a private meeting on a Saturday, and explained that we were at war, just as we were at war in 1991. Unlike 1991, didn't want the same kind of controversy we'd had with Japan. It was necessary that Japan, as a good ally and as a good citizen of the world, would join this coalition and do something visible. When asked by the Japanese ambassador, "What do you have in mind?" I said, "You've got to show the flag and show the flag in far-flung locations from Japan."

QUESTION: Are you happy with the way they responded?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Absolutely. So was our president, which is even more important. He had the occasion to tell Mr. Koizumi that.

QUESTION: How much talk was there about Iraq being a target in the war at that stage?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: At that stage there was a lot of talk about it because of the historic predilection of Iraq for terrorism, and we had some preliminary information about some possibility of an al-Qaeda tie-in. We have not, in our investigation since then, found large doses of al-Qaeda in Iraq, but we are attentive to it.

QUESTION: How close did you think America came to taking action against Iraq at that stage?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: At that time, no, I think we were concentrated on Afghanistan. If we had found direct evidence, I can assure you there would have been subsequent action against Iraq. But we didn't find it and we concentrated on Afghanistan. And out of that, we have also, through the use of intelligence, through the use of law enforcement... and of course we've made some - with the help of a lot of friends - some rather major busts in far-flung parts of the world, from Singapore to Oman.

QUESTION: You were in Moscow less than a week later. Can you describe the conversations you had with your colleagues there, and how you persuaded them to act as they did?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: We had an already existing body called the Afghan Working Group. I went with colleagues from the CIA and military, and we had what I describe as a "no shit conversation" about a threat we had, and we felt a threat Russia had as well. And we made it very clear to our friends in the Russian Federation that we were going to prosecute this war, and we'd like their help, [that] they had some expertise, particularly in Afghanistan, and we'd like to make use of it. They started sharing some of their experiences at that table, subsequently sent teams here to work with us, and our co-operation on Afghanistan has been exemplary.

QUESTION: Did you find it difficult to persuade them of the idea that America should have a presence in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, there was no question that we were going to have a temporary presence in Central Asia in order to prosecute this war. I told them that, although we desire the ability to exercise, the ability to have a periodic presence there, that we did not desire a long-term permanent presence in the area, but we do want to have mil-to-mil relationships to complement our overall relationship that we're developing with the 'Stans. I think thus far the Russian Federation has believed us.

QUESTION: Did they want anything back for their assistance?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, there was no quid pro quo. I think in a very real way, beginning to get an understanding the problem, they had from the Arab Mujahedin in Chechnya was the beginning of a payback. But, no, there wasn't a specific quid pro quo. There was never a question of assistance or aid or anything like that.

I think the Russian Federation and particularly President Putin realized the sincerity of our president from their first meeting, and his desire to have a very congenial, helpful, healthy relationship with the Russian Federation. And I think, to some extent, that's the payback.

QUESTION: But they said, "Now you understand what we've been going on about... the Chechnya...".

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, among other things, yes. They also made it clear that a lot of the people that they refer to as Tajiks in their own society are actually Afghanistan, or people from Afghanistan, and I think, 20 percent of their population was Muslim, and that they didn't want the Russian Federation to have this disease spread. So they had a lot of self-interest at stake as well.

QUESTION: On the 12th of October, you made a comment which the Syrians interpreted to mean that they might be next on the list. Can you tell me about that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yes, I said that again, either you're with us or against us, 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.

QUESTION: You were happy they did?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I was delighted they did.

QUESTION: Why?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: They didn't miss the signal.

QUESTION: Do you think it damaged the attempt to build relations with the Arab world there?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No. Do you?

QUESTION: (Laughter.) I have the luxury of asking questions, rather than to answer them.

When the bombing began, what was your role? Did you have to ring around the region and tell people what was going to happen?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Yes. Prior to the bombing, we had the senior leadership of the administration determine who would call whom and what time prior to the initiation of us doing [this]. They had quite a bit of notification on Capitol Hill. It's very important for us to keep our Members of Congress involved. And we were involved in all of that.

QUESTION: Can you tell me who you had to call?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No.

QUESTION: In those early days of the bombing, there was a lot of talk in Pakistan that there was going to be an uprising, that Musharraf was going to be overthrown and so forth, which didn't prove to be the case. What was he saying to you diplomatically?

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

QUESTION: Were you worried about that at all?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, not after he told us that. It was a consideration. You don't turn a blind eye to that, particularly as the chattering classes were chattering quite a bit about it. But the president of the Republic said that I can manage this. I know the pulse of my people, and I need to get a handle on this, and I shall.

QUESTION: Was there any period when you became concerned about feeling, particularly in the Arab world, about the time apart from anything else, that it was taking for the whole thing to be finished. There did appear to be, just after Ramadan began, just the beginnings of voices raised saying, "Hang on, can we get this over with?"

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, no. I'm surprised by your question because I think most people were surprised by the rapidity with which the United States was able to, one, mobilize a huge international coalition. Number two, put a lot of ordnance on target, sometimes without the luxury of forward basing. Three, the ability of the United States to put very rapid mobilised forces into the region and then get them out if we chose.

So, I'm a little surprised at the question. I think we moved quite rapidly. And most people were surprised with the rapidity with which we worked. But what did bother me, to get to the beginning of the question, was the fact that it took us two or three weeks to wrap our public diplomacy machinery into high gear and to be able to really understand what voices the Muslim world was listening to and to whom we might respond to some of the more radical voices that were raised in the Muslim world. And you may have talked to my colleague, Ambassador Ross. He can go on for some time, at some length, about this. He was a key, key answer.

But once we got mobilised and got moving, understood the sort of the depth of the problem in the Arab world... and I think you'll see that, at least from public opinion polls, et cetera, that things appear to change, and a lot of the actions that our president took here domestically, visiting mosques, visiting a Muslim community centre - the US Congress had an imam open, one session of Congress - we made it clear that this was not a war on Islam. Quite the contrary, it was a war to preserve one of the great religions and to keep it from being hijacked [by] those who would cynically misuse it for secular aims.

QUESTION: How important did you think it was to address the Palestinian problem as part of the process of taking account of Arab thinking?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, Osama Bin Laden's ability to even speak the word "Palestine" and "Palestinian" was... his inability, actually, to speak it was well-known. And only when he got in trouble - Osama Bin Laden - did he begin to wrap himself with the Palestinian cause. So it was not a main concern in the war in Afghanistan. It has been a concern of successive administrations, and a search for peace in the Middle East and a search for peace for Palestinians in that regard has been a staple of American foreign policy for a long, long time, since well before Camp David.

QUESTION: But the Palestinian leadership's perception - we were in Beirut last week - is very much that a great deal of attention was paid to them in the early days of the campaign.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Now, you were talking about the Palestinian leadership in Beirut?

QUESTION: Well, it was some of those who went to the summit there.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Oh, really?

QUESTION: Yes. But that great attention was paid to them at the beginning of the campaign. They were rather dropped once America had won.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, we're still in the campaign, and we're still in the war, and we haven't dropped this. That's why Secretary Powell is travelling tomorrow to Jerusalem. But there can be no doubt that the Palestinian leadership has let down the Palestinian people. I don't think this is open to much question. Here you have a president of the United States who stood up at the United Nations, the first time 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 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.

QUESTION: You told us what the feeling about Iraq was in the early days. When the president made his address to Congress and talked about an "axis of evil" and included Iraq in it, what was the thinking about Iraq at that stage?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, the thinking was that here's a state which has had, like Iran and like North Korea, a historic affection for terrorism. Here is a state, like Iran and North Korea, that seeks to develop weapons of mass destruction. Here is a state, like Iran and North Korea, which is an implacable enemy of the United States, and here is a state, like Iran and North Korea, who also is an implacable foe of our allies. And when you look at it through that lens, you see it's a pretty narrow club, which consists of three members, and the president named them. We were actually quite surprised that the words "axis of evil" brought forth such "sturm and drang". It seemed so patently obvious to the naked eye as to not be worthy of much comment.

But having said that, I'll note that the three members of the "axis of evil" club in recent months have all made some rather interesting gestures. The Iranians turned over certain al-Qaeda members to the Afghan Interim Authority. The North Koreans returned a two-year hostage, a Japanese reporter, to the government of Japan, and has indicated a willingness to talk to the United States. And the Iraqis have desperately sought to engage the United Nations in some sort of way to work themselves out of a cul-de-sac they put themselves in regarding UN inspectors. So it seems to me that the "axis of evil" comment worked.

QUESTION: Specifically on Iraq, how had the calculation changed since that first week when you decided not to include it in any action in that speech, which appeared to have signaled some, or at least a more concentrated...

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I would say that the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Mr. Tony Blair, this weekend in Crawford hit it dead on. It's a problem. In my words, it's a problem we're going to have to deal with. It's a problem that we will deal with at a time and place and method of our choosing.

QUESTION: Just returning to Pakistan, you talked about the immediate response. What about the way President Musharraf has behaved during the last few months. I mean his decision to go for a plebiscite to confirm him in a position of power, for example?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, the question of the plebiscite. Our own view is we believe that the people of Pakistan have deserved better governance than they've gotten from recent governments. And we notice that, at least at first glance, the decision of President Musharraf to go for a referendum seems to be in line with the constitution. If that's the case, then what's wrong with it?

QUESTION: You mention Tony Blair. How important has he been to your diplomatic efforts in building and sustaining the coalition?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, look, you can't isolate the British and just say how important they were to the diplomatic (inaudible). As a major leading voice in Europe, they are incredibly important diplomatically. But let's not forget that they've got boots on the ground, side by side with the United States, a contribution that is very gratefully accepted and in which the British forces have acquitted themselves quite well. So it's not simply diplomatic. Great Britain also put their money where their mouth was and put their young men at risk in this grand endeavour, and we are mighty grateful.

QUESTION: Also, a couple of questions before we finish about the way the world has changed or hasn't changed. Firstly, relations with Russia. What dividends has the new harmony, if you like, between Russia and the United States paid?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, we trust that we'll see dividends when President Bush goes to Moscow. As you know, one of the things that Secretary Powell is trying to arrange for our president and Igor Ivanov, the foreign minister of Russian Federation, is an agreement on a strategic framework which will lower the balance of terror significantly for the world and reduce strategic offensive weapons. That would be bang on, what we would call a deliverable, if you will, in this relationship. We have also found that the Russians have been helpful in Afghanistan, both politically and in terms of intelligence they shared with us. I think that's a benefit. We have worked together in the Balkans. I think that's a benefit. So there's a lot going on.

I would note that the comment today, the so-called "quartet comments" in Madrid, where the Russian Federation, Kofi Annan, the Spanish as the presidency of the EU, and the United States all issued a very powerful statement on the need for peace in the Middle East and how to get there, right down the line with President Bush's speech of April 4th. I think this is another deliverable or benefit of this relationship.

QUESTION: And America's self-confidence, a lot of people say that's ...

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: America's what?

QUESTION: Self-confidence.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: What about it?

QUESTION: In terms of the way it acts on the world stage.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: You know, if you had been here 12 years ago, you would have seen, right prior to the Gulf War, a very unconfident United States. We were just coming out of a rather lengthy recession. The eagle wasn't soaring very high. Over the past years, notwithstanding the recent dip in our economy, which we seem to be out of, the eagle has soared quite high.

And the thing that we are very mindful of is the admonition. In fact, the rule of our president [is] that we must be excellent in the conduct of foreign policy, without being arrogant. We are often accused of being unilateralist, particularly by our European friends, and then when one asks the follow-up question, to please point out the area in which we were being unilateralist, the conversation comes to a screeching halt, because it's very difficult. I could ask you the same question.

QUESTION: Just... Well, as I say...

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: It came to a screeching halt again, too. Let the record show!

QUESTION: It did. It did. A screeching halt. I plead guilty (laughing). That's because I don't want to use up too much of your time.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I would say you couldn't, because it's a screeching halt. But what is the area that we've worked unilaterally on?

QUESTION: I...

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, I mean, okay you get the point.

QUESTION: I do, I do. Finally, do you feel ever and think in the back of your mind about another war which you were involved in - the Vietnam War - in this process? I mean, do you think the ghost of that still haunts?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No.

QUESTION: Screeching halt? Do you want to elaborate on that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: No, I'm not a victim of my past. I learned from the lessons of it. The key lesson of the Vietnam War was that a government can't deceive the people in a democracy. And so I learned from that. I was the deceived. I wasn't the deceiver. And what I learned out of that is if I'm ever in a position of governance at any level, always stick to the truth. It's easier, it works, and you don't have to remember what you told people if you're always telling the truth.

QUESTION: There is one question I wanted to ask which is about Tony Blair's diplomatic role. When there came some discussion about the parceling out of diplomatic efforts, were there some things that it was thought that Britain, or Tony Blair particularly, could do better because of contacts maybe in Southeast Asia?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, that doesn't immediately spring to mind, but the combination of Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair, and laterally Mr. Straw and Secretary Powell, working so well together on a whole host of issues, they seem to work in a compatible way. And I don't think we subcontracted or, for that matter, Tony Blair didn't subcontract to us. It seems to me we work in a complementary and compatible way.

Whether it was on the question of the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan, or to keep the temperature down in South Asia regarding Pakistan and India, we were working complementary to each other. There wasn't any subcontracting one way or the other.

QUESTION: And in Britain, Blair is quite often accused of being sort of a poodle of the Americans.

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Well, I've heard that some people accuse [him of] that, but they certainly aren't in on diplomatic discussions. I haven't found your prime minister, or for that matter your foreign secretary, to be reticent or shy or poodle-like at all. Quite the contrary, maybe English bulldog comes to mind.