



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister

STOURTON: Can we begin with the day itself, 11 September? Tell me how you discovered what had happened, and what you did?

BLAIR: I remember it very, very clearly obviously because I was about to give a speech to the Trades Union Congress in Brighton, and so I was preparing my speech and the television was on in the background. You saw the first plane crash, and then people came in and started to brief me on it, and then of course it became clear a short time afterwards that this was not simply a terrible accident but was almost certainly a terrorist incident, and then of course everything changed.

STOURTON: You came back to London obviously. Can you describe what you did when you got back here?

BLAIR: Before I left Brighton, we had already agreed that we would have an emergency meeting of ministers and of our own internal security people to make sure that we were making every protection we needed to against any possible attack ourselves, because at that time nobody knew what was happening and there were people worried about Canary Wharf, worried about possible attacks on the Houses of Parliament...or wherever. This was such a huge and brutal thing to happen in circumstances, in a place where no-one would have contemplated it happening, that we would obviously look to our own internal homeland defence first.

STOURTON: And what were your first calculations about the potential political and diplomatic impact this might have?

BLAIR: I thought instinctively, right from the beginning, that it was going to be huge, that it would be a defining moment for American foreign policy, and their attitudes towards the world, but also that it presented a momentous challenge to the world at large because it was clear that this was directed at America, but at America as a symbol of the western world and the values we held and there was no doubt in my mind, one that we had to stand very, very closely with America, that America should realise straight away that it wasn't alone in such a situation, and two that we should regard this as if it was an attack on any of us, and all of us.

STOURTON: You talked to President Bush the next day, can you tell me about that conversation?

BLAIR: Yes, he was obviously shocked, but calm, and I simply expressed my total solidarity and support for America, and we agreed we would have to review all the possible military options, since it was very likely that it

was the Al-Qaeda right from the beginning. So that was on the agenda straight away, and obviously there were certain key issues to do with their own security that they had to take care of straight away, but the moment that cleared a little bit we agreed to come back and go through all the issues that needed to be discussed.

STOURTON: A lot of people at that stage thought the Americans might do something very quickly, some kind of knee-jerk reaction. Is that something that you were reassured about during that phone call?

BLAIR: It wasn't so much that I was reassured. We both agreed that as George Bush put it to me, there was no point in just pounding sand. We had to make sure that we took action that was effective, and I was very much on that track myself, that we had to make sure that we took on this Al-Qaeda network and dismantled it, and that would almost certainly involve action in Afghanistan, and that what we needed to do was prepare for that properly and make sure it was effective and not worry about people expecting us to take action that day, the next day or even the next few weeks. What was important was to make sure that we could do it right, and my sense was that it was such a catastrophic event and its consequences were so manifest that the public wanted us to do the right thing even if it took time, rather than just lash out. In the sense that the attack was so huge that you almost got the permission, if you like, from people to think it through, make sure that we had got a plan in place that would deliver truly effective action against the authors of the deed.

STOURTON: A few days later you flew over to America yourself and on the plane you made a phone call to the Iranian leader, President Mohammad Khatami. Can you explain why it occurred to you to do that in mid flight?

BLAIR: I was determined that we built a strong coalition, both amongst the western world, I knew that we all had to, Europe and America, Russia etc, we all had to hang together with the Americans. I was sure of that, but also in the area, that we got on board all those countries that might have been unsympathetic to the American position. And so it was important we made copious efforts with Afghanistan, with all the various 'Stans circling Afghanistan, and of course with Iran. And so, it was an unusual thing to do, but I thought these were unusual times and it took unusual actions.

STOURTON: What do you remember about that day in New York, your first stop in America?

BLAIR: What came across to me most about New York, was the sheer scale of the destruction and the sense of a city both in grief but strong in its determination. It was America at its most impressive, because there was no doubt people were grateful for the support they were getting, they were absolutely rock solid and determined and I was very impressed by the fact, and I said this at the time I think, that the best response to the terrorism was the spirit that they showed in New York. The way the people came together, the way the public services operated, the sheer relentless focus on not being defeated, but on getting back up again and fighting back.

STOURTON: You were a bit late at the White House I seem to remember because of traffic that day, but you had dinner with the President and I believe had

a private word with him in the course of that. How had things moved on since your conversation with him on 12 September by that stage?

- BLAIR: Well, we were both thinking through the consequences of what needed to be done, of how we handled Afghanistan. Whether there needed to be an ultimatum to the Taleban. All this type of stuff was being discussed. About how we made sure that the coalition really was strong and bolted down in all respects.
- STOURTON: And you were then in the audience when he made that speech to Congress. Were you taken aback at all by the warmth of what he said about Britain which was quite striking really, wasn't it?
- BLAIR: I was honoured by it actually because I thought it was an indication of the strength of the relations between our two countries. From the beginning with this I never really had, in some political situations you have doubts, and I have never had any doubts about this. I have never had any doubts about the rights and wrongs of it, or about what to do. So it is curious in a way. There are lots of political decisions that you take where things are finely balanced, and the judgements are very nice and sometimes you can agonise. And I never found myself agonising, and in a sense I think the British people didn't really agonise either, so in a way when he paid that compliment to Britain, he was recognising that, that we had simply instinctively come shoulder to shoulder with America and that's where we would stay.
- STOURTON: What about that very clear line he drew among the nations of the world where he said you are either with us, or with the terrorists, and the way that that message of being with or against us came across? Was that something you were happy with?
- BLAIR: Yes, I was actually, because I really did feel that was the case, which is why I thought it was so important to talk even to nations like Iran and say to them, look this is a defining moment for American foreign policy. Here is America, subject to a brutal terrorist outrage, killing thousands of its citizens. There is no, well let me see for a moment which side I am on. There is this side, and that side and again, as I say, I am often somebody who likes to see both sides of an issue and to feel my way consensually but there are moments, and you have got to recognise this in politics, where there is no meeting of minds. As I said myself a few weeks later, the people that carried this out didn't have a negotiating strategy. There wasn't a dialogue that you were going to get into; there wasn't a change of heart that was going to come about as the result of talking to them. There was the simple brutal fact that they had annihilated thousands of people without any compunction at all, and indeed would have annihilated many thousands more had they been able to do so. I am afraid there is no point in mucking around with that situation. You either get them, or they get you.
- STOURTON: You then made your party conference speech at the beginning of October which was full of ambition, ambition in the sense of what governments can achieve across the world, which suggests that you saw this as an opportunity as well as a challenge.
- BLAIR: Yes, I did very much see it as an opportunity to give some effect to the global order around us, to take action against terrorism, of course, but also to try and tackle some of the underlying causes of disaffection and

disillusionment in the world, to deal with issues to do with poverty and deprivation, in Africa and elsewhere, to make sure that we cemented the new alliances which were happening, because one of the things that happened almost immediately was the very strong support from Russia. This was important for American relations, and NATO's relationship with Russia, so there were a whole series of things I could see emerging from this that were going to be important.

STOURTON: You went to Russia very shortly thereafter and you spent an evening with President Putin in his dacha. Can you describe that?

BLAIR: It was a fascinating talk because we were very, very close together, and I find him a very good person to deal with, and he had no doubt whatever that America had to be given full support, and so it was a very unusual conversation between a British Prime Minister and a Russian President in the sense that there was no diplomatic circling at all. We were just straight talking as to what the best thing to do was, and I remember during the course of the dinner that George Bush actually phoned, so we had a three-way conversation between George Bush, Vladimir Putin and myself, and that was unusual too, but there was a very clear sense that Russia had made a choice immediately, partly of course because of their own problems with extremists who were abusing the cause of Islam to wreak havoc in Russia, so it was a good meeting, and a meeting which also allowed us, I think, to start thinking about well, how does this reshape the world around us, what are the other things that flow. And one of the conversations we had that evening was about Russia's relationship with NATO, and how we changed that and made it a better one and a more modern one.

STOURTON: Is it easy to have that kind of conversation with somebody like President Putin in those rather more relaxed circumstances somewhere out in the country, rather than in the formal way that you presumably usually meet?

BLAIR: Yes it is, and I think it is very important that leaders do that with each other. That you don't just sit around the conference table. With a lot of these summits, a lot of the main work in talking is done outside the formal arena, and that's the way it should be and it is a strange paradox of today's world that in some respects governments are less powerful, but at certain critical moments, governments are very, very powerful indeed, and the personal relationships between the people are of fundamental importance, far more so than people I think could ever guess from the outside, and you need to be able to know that you can trust that other person.

STOURTON: You went from there to Pakistan. What was the essence of your message to President Musharraf?

BLAIR: That this was the moment of choice for him and for Pakistan, and that it was essential that Pakistan chose America's side and removed itself from any support for the Taliban and also to say that if Pakistan was to go down that path and reject the extremists, then we would be there to support them, because I recognised that it was a very brave thing for President Musharraf to do.

- STOURTON: The bombing began just after you got back from that trip. Did you feel any sense of nervousness about the outcome because for all the preparations, you were stepping into uncharted waters at that stage?
- 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 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. Because I was also sure from everything I knew about the Taleban, and I knew a lot more then than I had a few months ago, that the people of Afghanistan would probably be fairly liberated if they went.
- STOURTON: At the end of October, you went on a tour of the Middle East, Syria initially, and there was that press conference at which President Assad said various things, which he must have known as he said them, were going to be picked up by the British press. What was it like standing there with him, coming out with some of things he did next to you?
- BLAIR: Well, I have never minded about that because I have done press conferences like that 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. When these big things happen, you should put aside the normal rules. It doesn't matter in the end, so you go and have a press conference with someone, and then you get a bloody nose, or they disagree with you. It really doesn't matter. What matters is to be going around everywhere with the same message, which is to say there is a big chance, there are lots of good things that we can do coming out of this, but everyone has got to know that there are certain rules if you want to be part of the community of civilised nations, and if you do want to be part of that, there is the hand of partnership for you and friendship. And if you don't, you have got to realise that we are deadly serious about dismantling this terrorism.
- STOURTON: You went from there to Israel and saw both Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat. There were people at that stage who thought that there was a real window of opportunity, a possibility of progress in the Middle East. Was that what motivated that visit?
- BLAIR: Yes it was, and I thought that there was, and in a way even despite everything that has happened, I still think there is, but I would certainly have wanted to have seen a lot more progress in the Middle East.
- STOURTON: What impression did you form after seeing the two of them, were those hopes justified or not?

BLAIR: Well, I think the problem with that.... I mean the Middle East is a different issue. 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.

STOURTON: When Kabul fell, it took a lot of people by surprise at the speed of it, and there were concerns about what might happen as a result of that, were you at all worried that things were spinning out of control in Afghanistan at that stage?

BLAIR: Well, it was an odd thing, wasn't it, because a few weeks before people were saying you're not making any progress and then suddenly people were saying maybe you are making too much progress, too fast. But I again had a feeling that really if Kabul did fall, it would be good, not bad. It's a very important reflection this, and I think will become more so as time goes on, when you do get the possibility of regime change in countries where there is deep political repression. For the majority of people in any country where there is a brutal dictatorship repressing the people, most of them really want the same as anyone in Britain wants, or in America, or in Europe, or anywhere else, which is the chance to bring up their families properly with some sort of rules and order where they can go to work and have political freedom. And really it is not much different. Therefore when people say there might be some great bloodbath after Kabul, I was always thinking well actually I think it is more likely that the moment the Taleban are booted out the people will be quite relieved really.

STOURTON: The military operation went on after that obviously because bin Laden was still free and Al-Qaeda was still operating. How close do you think we came to capturing bin Laden during that period?

BLAIR: The truth is we cannot be sure, but probably pretty close. I don't think there is any point in saying more than that really.

STOURTON: What do you think went wrong? Why did we fail?

BLAIR: I think it is terrain in which it is notoriously difficult to track people down and we have just got to keep pushing and trying. But let's be clear, the Al-Qaeda network within Afghanistan is dismantled. Now, it still exists elsewhere in the world, which is why it is so important that we carry on this fight, and why we must understand that there is still an active and real threat for countries like Britain. But we will carry on pursuing him, if he is alive, until we get him.

STOURTON: The next phase, I suppose, of the war, or the next front was opened really by President Bush's address to Congress in January when he talked about the Axis of Evil and included Iraq in that. What was your reaction to that phase and specifically to the mention of Iraq?

BLAIR: It did echo something I said literally three days after 11 September when I made my first Statement to the House of Commons. I said the next issue on the agenda is weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt about that in my mind at all. This is a wake-up call. We knew

that Al-Qaeda was operating out of Afghanistan for years. We had had a series of events in which people had been killed, in reasonably large numbers, nothing like 11 September, by the Al-Qaeda terrorists. We knew also that there had been attempts in Germany and France, foiled recently, that could have had very serious loss of life. We knew Afghanistan was a failed state. We didn't act. We didn't act for perfectly understandable reasons. Public opinion wouldn't have understood it if we had acted. They would have said why are you suddenly going off and doing this. But after 11 September I think we have got to take that as a wake-up call to us to say if there is a real threat and danger, don't wait, deal with it before it becomes a threat that has materialised in the form of some devastating attack.

STOURTON: How would you describe the way policy towards Iraq, both you and the Americans, has evolved since that speech?

BLAIR: I think it has evolved since 11 September in the way that I described. What has happened is that we have seen what happens when you leave a problem whose dangerous consequences are evident, when you leave that problem to fester, what happens is that at some point it materialises, and that is what has changed. What has changed in relation to Iraq or any other part of the world is the clear understanding that if there is a threat it has to be dealt with and cannot be ignored, and we shouldn't wait until that threat then materialises.

STOURTON: Where would you say we are in the implementation? What stage have we reached towards doing something of the kind you describe?

BLAIR: Well, as I say to people constantly, no decisions have been taken on this yet. We know there's a threat. We know we can't ignore it. Ignoring it is not an option ... but it is entirely open as to what decisions we take. And there's not much point in me speculating on them until we take them.

STOURTON: You said a moment ago that the Middle East was a slightly different thing, but everything that has happened there does seem to be seen in the context of 11 September and the way things have developed since. The Palestinians had a sense, after the fall of Kabul which roughly coincided with the Karanian stint and the first serious suicide bombings, that the Americans simply stopped caring, they just forgot about them. Do you think that's fair?

BLAIR: I don't think the Americans forgot about them at all, but I think that the Americans take the view, rightly in my judgement, that there can't be any complicity by the Palestinian Authority in terrorism, and if there is then that's inconsistent with any peace process. And that is the way the world has changed. Look, it's like Northern Ireland here. The IRA and Sinn Fein got a lot of support from people in America over many years. I don't believe that if they returned to violence today, and I don't believe they will incidentally, but if they did I don't think they would get any support. The attitudes in America have changed for good. They do not sympathise with terrorism. They are totally against it, in whatever form, and they are the friends of those countries that are trying to defeat it, so I think in that sense the attitudes in America changed fundamentally and changed for perfectly obvious and understandable reasons.

STOURTON: You said a moment or two ago that you didn't think the Middle East would be solved without outside intervention. Were you disappointed that you couldn't persuade President Bush to change what he said about Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian leadership?

BLAIR: No, I never tried to persuade him to change that. What I think is more important is that on the basis of the framework he has laid out which is support for a viable Palestinian State, support for the key UN Resolutions 242 and so on, support for a settlement based on the 1967 situation. I think for all those reasons he has shown a way forward, a vision for the future, of an Israeli State, confident in its own security, a Palestinian State that is a viable entity. He has shown the end vision. The key task is to work intensively, and engage intensively, to make that vision a reality, recognising that the Israelis and the Palestinians will not come to this themselves alone.

STOURTON: A lot has been said about the impact of 11 September and what has happened since on relations between Britain and the United States, which have obviously been very close. Some, as you know, have said too slavish from our point of view. Leaving the rhetoric aside, can you give me an illustration of perhaps one occasion when you feel you have influenced American policy as a result of that closeness, and one when they have influenced our policy?

BLAIR: First of all, our relationship with America is not one of us pleading with America and America deciding whether to change its mind or not. It's just not like that at all. It is a strategic partnership based on shared co-operation and values. We share basically the same world perspective and values. For example, when we worked with America to deliver a new relationship between Russia and NATO, that was very much as a result of a close partnership and a shared sense of purpose. When we have recently, with America, co-operated on issues to do with Africa and the G8, it has been for the same reasons, and it is really less a question of us going along and pleading with them, or them coming along pleading with us, there is a sense of trying to make sure that we work in very, very close partnership with each other.

STOURTON: I suppose that was really what I was trying to get a sense of, in this two-way communication between you, just something concrete that can give one an idea of how that works because there must presumably, if it is going to be a fruitful relationship, be times when you think well perhaps you will just tweak this a bit, and they think the same about what you are doing?

BLAIR: I think NATO-Russia is a good example. I think what happened in Afghanistan was a good example. I think there was some reluctance in certain quarters to have a security force in Afghanistan. There were issues to whether America would remain committed in the long term for that. Those issues are resolved. So I think that you will always find in this relationship between Britain and America, there will be parts on the Left, because they are anti-American, who will oppose it, and there will parts on the Right who for very opportunistic reasons want to sow problems between a British Labour PM and a Republican American President. I just think both in the end miss the big points for our countries which is that our interests are served by us working together, and co-operating together, and I would never agree to do something with America if I thought it was wrong, but that's not how I have found

it. And, for example, over Kosovo, when I was absolutely passionately convinced that the West had to act to stop Milosevic and stop ethnic cleansing, America came to our aid in those circumstances, and 85% of the assets in Kosovo were American, when heavens above it is miles away from America, and if you really have to argue this case to the American public in terms of their pure narrow strategic interest, you might have had a difficulty, but they did it, and that is why it is so important that America and Europe hang together, and I won't have any truck with anyone who pulls the two apart. It is disastrous for the world if that happens, and the very reason why I think you can see a gathering alliance between America, Europe and Russia and countries moving forward, and other countries who are pro-American coming into the European Union, is precisely on the basis of those shared values. Now there will be difficulties every so often on steel, or on climate change, or farm policy or something there will be differences, but that is just part of life. There are differences between close allies. But what we have in common wipes out any of those differences in my book.