
## **With Us or Without Us:** extended interviews

**Interviewer:** Edward Stourton
**Interviewee:** John Bolton, US Arms Control Negotiator

STOURTON: If we can, in fact, begin with your memories of the day itself. How you found out what had happened, and what you did.

BOLTON: We were in a meeting on checking ambassadors just before nine o'clock when we had the first word that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Centre and we kept on working because, I guess in my mind's eye, it was a Piper Cub or something like that. And then as we finished the meeting we heard the second plane had crashed into the other tower. It was obvious at that point this was no coincidence. So I ran back down the hall to my office and literally as I walked in the door one of my staff said a plane has crashed into the Pentagon. My window is right on the corner of the State Department and I looked outside and I could see the smoke and the flames coming up, so it was obvious the country was under attack. I ran down to the State Department operations centre, which is our communications room, and spent the rest of the day there. The Secretary of State was in Peru – he was coming back. We had an immediate all-day-long conference call over a secure video system with all relevant parts of the government to try and find out what had happened and begin to respond to it as best we could.

STOURTON: What was your first reaction, in terms of making a political or diplomatic calculation about what this might mean?

BOLTON: I think the first question, obviously, for all of us was who could have done it and speculation began to turn very quickly to terrorist groups, as it was not any kind of military attack, it was not launched by a known military power. It was planes being hijacked. So that narrowed the focus and I think those who are experts on the subject begin to think of al-Qaeda almost immediately. I think the question of what to do then turned to what steps to take about al-Qaeda and certainly the first issue there was what would happen with Pakistan because of the involvement of Pakistan in Afghan affairs through the support of the Taleban and the rest of it. And that really began to move very quickly with Richard Armitage's meeting the next day with the head of the Pakistani intelligence service.

STOURTON: And did you at any point in those very early days consider the possibility that Iraq might have been some way involved, or that this was an occasion on which some kind of action should be taken against Iraq? Because clearly that debate was going on within the Administration even, during that first week.

BOLTON: My first concern was that although the September 11 attacks were obviously tragic in and of themselves, the next step might be al-Qaeda or somebody else possessing a weapon of mass destruction, nuclear, biological or chemical. And that the next attack whether it was in the United States or somewhere else in the world, would involve such a weapon and concern about that and what our response would be. In terms of state sponsors, I think our speculation went to the entire list of state sponsors – Iraq being one possibility right from the start.

STOURTON: Within a week you were in Moscow. Can you tell me about that trip and what you discussed?

BOLTON: I had actually been scheduled the night of September 11th to fly to London for consultations and then on to Moscow. We were in the middle at that point of talking about the anti-ballistic missile treaty of 1972, trying to persuade the Russians to find a mutually acceptable way forward from that treaty. We felt it was important as part of our desire to have a new strategic framework with Russia, that we get back to that business as quickly as possible but obviously the discussions were very much affected by the potential implications of September 11th. Only a week later it was hard to know what those would be but we certainly talked about a lot of different possibilities that might flow from the attacks.

STOURTON: So you talked about the possibility of American forces using central Asia, the 'Stans and the former Soviet republics, as a springboard?

BOLTON: We did not have conversations with the Russians at that point. I later actually went to Uzbekistan in connection with possible deployment of American forces and talked with them at that point.

STOURTON: Did the Russians say 'I told you so'? Not as brutally and literally as that, but they do say that they have been warning about the dangers posed by Islamic extremism for some time and that when this happened that message came home to the United States.

BOLTON: I think in that meeting the week after September 11th there was reference to the on-going conflict in Chechnya and in fact part of the Russian response to American and other complaints over the years, about the conduct of the war in Chechnya was that they were fighting Islamic radicals and terrorists and that in a way, now we had some sense of what they had been up against.

STOURTON: You were, as you say, in Uzbekistan a week later, presumably by that stage it was rather clearer that you would need some kind of help from those republics?

BOLTON: I think it was a couple of weeks later, actually, but …

STOURTON: … by the end of the month, in fact?

BOLTON: It's hard to tell the days apart, but, the Pentagon had obviously begun planning for military action in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda and Taleban and the question of what would be safe locations to base military activities was much on their minds. Just given the geographical location of Afghanistan – completely landlocked – and with the delicacy in the India-Pakistan relationship, it was obviously a significant potential advantage to be able to base operations north of Afghanistan and come in south. And Uzbekistan was the principle site that they were looking at, at that point.

STOURTON: Was it apparent by that stage that Saudi Arabia, the bases there, might prove difficult because of the sensitivities involved?

BOLTON: I think the military felt that we had adequate capabilities from the sea, from the south, and the real question was both for search and rescue missions and for other kinds of operations to see if there might not be some possibility of land-based forces in the north.

STOURTON: Were they receptive to this, the Uzbeks?

BOLTON: Well, they were very receptive to it. In fact, although there were difficulties, and really the reason for my visit to see the president and minister of defence, and foreign minister, was to work through some of those difficulties. The perhaps surprising

outcome was the clear Uzbek desire to have the United States present, not just for the immediate needs of the Afghan operation, but over the long-term as well.

STOURTON: What was behind that, do you think?

BOLTON: I think that the Uzbeks felt that American, continuing American presence in central Asia would help the reinforcement of their independence from the former Soviet Union and would also be of assistance to them in their struggle against Islamic fundamentalism.

STOURTON: What sort of thing did you ask for but you didn't get?

BOLTON: Well in the immediate period of my visit what we wanted was landing, basing and access rights and all of those were successfully negotiated. Secretary Rumsfeld came a few weeks later and actually signed the formal agreement. I think that the subject of what the US military would be in a variety of the former Soviet central Asian republics is something that we still have under consideration, but what was interesting was the comparison of the Russian and Uzbek attitudes. I think a very significant step by President Putin was his decision to welcome an American presence in central Asia for the purposes of the struggle against terrorism. But the Uzbeks didn't think they needed permission from the Russians. They thought they were going to make that decision on their own. And they did.

STOURTON: I think you went back to Russia to talk to them immediately after that?

BOLTON: I flew from Uzbek to Russia because we wanted to have further consultations on the strategic issues – missile defence and offensive weapons – but also to tell them what I'd said to the Uzbeks about the basing of American forces. We didn't see any reason not to be transparent with the Russians – it was perfectly obvious what was going to happen and we felt it was important, especially given President Putin's co-operative attitude to fill them in on what we had talked about.

STOURTON: Did you, as a matter of interest, ever consider asking the Russians for direct military help? After all, they know more than anybody else about what it is to fight in Afghanistan.

BOLTON: Well there were conversations with the Russians about a variety of things, including access and possible assistance in search and rescue missions. The Russians made it very clear in early meetings that I attended between Minister of Defence, Ivanof and Secretary of Defence, Rumsfeld, that they would not put Russian combat forces into Afghanistan for the obvious historical reasons. But they worked with us in terms of providing military equipment to the Northern Alliance and were very co-operative in sharing intelligence and sharing their own experiences from their Afghan experience.

STOURTON: Moving on a bit to November, you made a speech in which you named countries that you felt were in violation of the biological weapons treaty and you said that you wouldn't have done that had it not been for September 11th – and that had really changed the equation. What did you mean by that?

BOLTON: I think we believed, given the risks that al-Qaeda and perhaps other terrorist groups might acquire biological or other weapons of mass destruction and would likely acquire such weapons through the co-operation of states that had them or that were seeking to acquire them, that states following the biological weapons convention – their compliance with it -had become that much more important an issue and therefore this conference which was scheduled once every five years to review the health of the biological weapons convention was an important point to say we know that there are states that are signed up to this treaty that purport to be bound by its obligation and yet

which are flatly violating it. We are all at risk as long as there are states out there doing that.

STOURTON: You said, I think, at that time that you regarded Iraq's biological weapons programme as the next most important threat after al-Qaeda. Does that mean that in your mind you were already contemplating the possibility of a second front in the war on terrorism, which would be directed against Iraq?

BOLTON: The policy of the administration had long since been that regime change in Baghdad was what was necessary because of the continuing threat that Saddam Hussein posed to his neighbours and to us and our friends and allies and interest in the region. I think the question of direct Iraqi support for al-Qaeda was less important then and is less important now than the overall threat that Iraq poses.

STOURTON: But you say it had always been policy – the rhetoric went up a notch or two at the very least during that period didn't it?

BOLTON: I think our preparations also began to proceed and move ahead. We were working on two tracks: one was the regime change; the other was the reintroduction of UN weapons inspectors into Iraq. I think those who followed the prior UN inspection effort believed that where the UNSCOM inspectors were least successful was in the biological weapons area. In any event, almost at that point three years – now almost four years – have passed since UN inspectors were present so that there's no base line to judge, not only what the Iraqis are doing on biological weapons, but what capabilities they've acquired in the chemical, nuclear and ballistic missile areas as well.

STOURTON: While this was happening, you were at the same time continuing your negotiations over the big arms control treaty with Russia and I assume about the anti-ballistic missile treaty as well. To what extent was the atmosphere of those talks affected by the new feeling of co-operation with the Russians after September 11th?

BOLTON: Well we were really carrying on three separate conversations with the Russians at the same time: one on strategic defensive questions - the future of the ABM treaty, strategic offensive questions – dealing with what to do with the nuclear warhead and forces of both countries and the third was the area of non-proliferation and particularly Russian co-operation, for example, with the Iranian nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programme. The September 11 attacks added an important fourth dimension, which was counter-terrorism as well. But certainly all of these separate lines of conversation were affected by what we perceived to be the changed geo-strategic environment. For example, on the ballistic missile defence point, it became clear to us – even though it was very clear before – after September 11, having a defence against ballistic missile attack for the United States and its friends and allies was even more important than before, therefore the intensity and importance of the conversations with the Russians to get beyond the restraints of the ABM treaty became that much more important.

STOURTON: Do you think you would have got the big nuclear weapons treaty that you signed and the Moscow summit – the new relationship between Russia and Nato – do you think you would have got all those things without September 11th?

BOLTON: I think we would have achieved those results without September 11th – whether we would have achieved them in the time that we did or in the way that we did, I think is open to question. I think at the same time we were obviously responding to September 11th – we were trying to shape other significant forces in the world as well and I think that the relationship between the United States and Russia was changing before September 11th. I think it accelerated after September 11th – I think the co-operation and solidarity with us and the West as a whole that President Putin showed in

the immediate aftermath of September 11th was extremely important and it has continued to the present.

STOURTON: You got mixed up in a sort of transatlantic verbal spat with Chris Patten just after the axis of evil speech – something you said upset him a lot. Do you regret that?

BOLTON: To tell you the truth, I don't remember what it was he was upset about. I'm sure I've said a lot of things that have upset him.

STOURTON: You apparently said something about his dealings with Iran and he quoted you to a journalist as saying that multi-lateralism was a threat to American sovereignty. He says himself that the tone of his comment was perhaps, as he put it, saltier than it might have been because he was so cross with you.

BOLTON: I have never said and I don't believe that.

STOURTON: Right. But what was your reaction to what he said in response to that when he said it.

BOLTON: I didn't know that he said it.

STOURTON: Ok. Looking back to May when you lengthened the axis of evil – you joined Libya, Syria and Cuba on. Was that a wise thing to do particularly in the light of all the criticism that the axis of evil remarks attracted in the first place?

BOLTON: Well I think the President's description of the axis of evil was a very important statement to identify exactly what it was he was talking about in mobilising support for the campaign against global terrorism and I think perhaps the most significant aspect of the State of the Union speech where he articulated his feelings about the axis of evil was his comments about the risks and the dangers of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. I think it's fair to say that the State of the Union speech fused the global campaign against terrorism with the efforts we had been undertaking against weapons of mass destruction. The President said, we cannot allow the world's most dangerous leaders to have the world's most dangerous weapons and he said time is not on our side – and that really also laid the basis for his West Point speech on the United States taking pre-emptive action where necessary against weapons of mass destruction. So I think overall the pointing out that terrorist states – states that were sponsors of terrorism – were essentially the very same states that were seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction highlights the nature of the risks that we face and the steps that we need to defend ourselves against them.

STOURTON: The Syrians responded to that by saying it showed there were people within the administration who wanted to widen the sphere of the war without due and objective cause.

BOLTON: I can tell you, because we don't discuss matters of intelligence publicly, that we are firmly of the view that Syria is attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction and I don't need to reveal the details to the Syrians in order to say to them and to everybody that we are basing our policies on the knowledge that we have.

STOURTON: What does that justify your policy towards Syria being - the fact that you say you know and if you put that together with what the President said about the right to pre-emptive action - what does that mean you can do in your view?

BOLTON: Well the President said in his speech to the joint session of Congress right after September 11th that we would consider states that continue to sponsor and abet terrorism as responsible for the terrorist acts. But he held out the possibility that states

could withdraw terrorism – could renounce their links with terrorism – could basically get past that and that we would take that into account. That's true for all states that are on our list of state sponsorship of terrorism and others that we may find out about. But it's important that their conduct changed, not just their rhetoric.

STOURTON: What do you make of the – more broadly – lack of support or lack of enthusiasm for action against Iraq among America's allies, particularly the Europeans?

BOLTON: I think it's a question that we have to engage more effectively diplomatically on that. I think we have to perhaps explain better than we've done the risk of the threat that we face from Iraq and its campaigns to acquire weapons of mass destruction. We have to do more to show the threat to peace and stability in the region that it poses. But I think, just as in the case of the Persian Gulf conflict of 1991, this isn't something that happens overnight. In the very first days after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, I think a lot of people felt that there would never be military action there either and there was not an immediate coalition of support to repel the Iraqi invasion militarily. It took time to build up, it took diplomatic effort to build up – it was a question of building political coalitions in the United States.

I think one major difference now is that there is almost no hesitation politically in the United States about what to do about Iraq. We may have other work to do internationally to build support for it but I think one other thing is true – after Saddam Hussein is removed, you will find almost unanimous support for it.

STOURTON: In your view, it is after not if?

BOLTON: That regime has to change for the benefit of the Iraqi people let alone for peace and stability in the region.

STOURTON: And your response to the accusation which has been heard more and more frequently and was certainly behind what Chris Patten said earlier in the year – the accusation that America has, since the Afghan campaign, become increasingly unilateralist and high handed.

BOLTON: Well I think that's ridiculous. I think the President has put together an international coalition against terror. I think, for example, not often publicised but very important is the co-operation among financial regulators in countries around the world to cut off the flow of assets that are critical to al-Qaeda's terrorist network. I think there are whole ranges of steps that we have taken that are fully multilateral. For example, in Kananaskis, the G8 leaders agreed on a $20 billion programme over the next 10 years for the destruction of Russia's weapons of mass destruction. That's multilateralism spelled M-O-N-E-Y.

STOURTON: Thank you very much indeed.