With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

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QUESTION: What do you remember about September 11th? How did you find out what had happened? What did you do?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: I was in Dublin at the Irish Foreign Ministry finishing up a lunch with senior officials there and about to go into a meeting with the Taoiseach with Bertie Ahern. Someone said, "Turn on the television." We did just that, then the phone rang for me and it was my office calling, and what we had was essentially the confluence of the two.. my office explaining what exactly was going on, what the initial reactions were.

I then went over to see the prime minister and it was rather impossible to go ahead with the meeting as intended. Suddenly, the state of play in the peace process in Northern Ireland didn't seem quite as central - no offence intended. We obviously talked about what had just happened, what it might mean. We did talk actually for a few minutes about Northern Ireland and then Prime Minister Ahern and I went out and did a press conference in which all the questions were devoted to September 11th, to the immediate events and so forth.

I then couldn't get anywhere. Like every other traveller I was stranded, essentially, so I proceeded to take the train to Belfast and did an evening and the next day's worth of diplomacy meetings with all the leaders of Northern Ireland. It was quite extraordinary going to a place, to a city – Belfast - that had been for a lot of Americans, Northern Ireland, Belfast, synonymous with terrorism. And suddenly, quite tragically, it was a lot safer there than it was in New York or Washington, which is not normally what one would expect.

I spent the day doing meetings with everybody there, flew ultimately to London, couldn't get back to the United States, so spent several days working out of our embassy in London, meeting with British officials and, like everybody else, pretty much working around the clock. But I was in Britain, for example, for the initial memorial events and didn't get back to the United States probably until about September 14th.

QUESTION: Before we go on, I can't help just picking you up on that point about being in Northern Ireland at that time. Did you pick up then on something that, I guess a week or so later, people started to talk about, which was whether this would change American attitudes to the IRA?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: I was asked a lot of questions about what this would mean, and the idea that people asked whether this would affect US thinking. All I could say at the time was it would underline our thinking that there was simply no place for terrorism, that we didn't care about what your cause was, there simply was no justification for acting in ways that would hurt innocent men, women and children. It strengthened my hand as an envoy and, indeed, that was the case.

Over the following days, weeks and months, we saw many people in the United States who up to that point had been so sympathetic to the cause of Irish nationalism that they

were often willing to look the other way. And the balance suddenly had changed. You had too many Irish Americans killed at the World Trade Center. It just caused a sea change in people's thinking.

And it's quite possible that that is not unrelated to the fact, for example, that we've seen two acts of arms decommissioning by the IRA since then, that simply the political environment in which diplomacy now is taking place was fundamentally altered by September 11th.

QUESTION: Once you did get back, what was your role in the debate here in Washington?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: My role here as head of the policy planning staff initially was simply to join in with a lot of other people on the staff and elsewhere, simply pulling together various aspects of the US response. This was not something for which we had a detailed game plan. There was inevitably a good deal of improvisation and our role in many ways was helping to pull things together for the secretary of state, both to help him formulate his thinking and preparation for meetings, as well as for some of his public statements.

QUESTION: People talked about Iraq at that stage. It does appear that they were a possible target. Did you join in that conversation?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: No, I think there was some initial reaction about who was behind this and so forth, but there wasn't any hard information about any Iraqi role in the events of September 11th. So any consideration of Iraq at that point was quite speculative. No, the focus very, very quickly turned to al-Qaeda and to the Taleban and hence to Afghanistan and almost from the outset that was very, very clear.

Also clear was the importance of getting Pakistan on our side. Indeed, I remember the first night of the crisis, actually no, this might have been by the second night when I had just gotten to London. The first thing I did is I sat down and wrote a memo to my boss, Colin Powell, and one of the things I noted, like I expect many other people, was Pakistan's centrality and the need for essentially getting them to cut their ties with the Taleban, to become part of the answer rather than the problem. People here were like-minded and it just so happened that a few days into the crisis Pakistan had one of its leading officials here and there was a fairly full, frank and candid conversation between him and the deputy secretary.

QUESTION: You quite early on became involved on the Afghan side. I think on the 4th of October you met the exiled king in Rome. Can you tell me about that meeting?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: Sure. I was heading over to Europe at the time anyhow for one of my periodic swings where I meet with some of my counterparts and other officials in various parts of Europe, and even before then it had already become clear that if we were going to ultimately deal militarily with the Taleban and with al-Qaeda we had to have in place a policy for the morning after, that it wouldn't simply be enough to win the military battle. We had a plan for Afghanistan's political and economic recovery.

One real question then was how hard would the Afghans resist and what would it take to get the Afghans to move away from the Taleban, who were essentially in some ways a hostile implant, and to also clearly move away from the largely non-Afghan al-Qaeda. We knew that the former king could be an important rallying point for Afghans inside the country as well as outside. So the purpose of my meeting was to talk to him and to get a better sense from him not only of his assessment of the situation, but also I wanted to get a feel for what he might be prepared to do.

So the meeting essentially consisted of me asking him an awful lot of questions, making a few suggestions to test his willingness to play a significant role. What clearly emerged from the situation was that he was only prepared to play a quite modest role at that point, which again I think reinforced our thinking that the bulk of the Afghan response, at least initially, would have to come from within Afghanistan itself.

QUESTION: How did your appointment for your special responsibilities to Afghanistan come about because I think it was rather dramatically announced by Colin Powell on a plane to Pakistan, wasn't it?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: Very early on it became clear that while the military planning was proceeding apace, a lot of people were concerned, as we were on the inside, that the diplomatic planning was falling somewhat behind or out of sync, and the feeling was that we had to catch up, if that is not grammatically too incorrect, the non-military sides to the military side. Essentially we had to look at things politically that we could do to help ease the military problem. For example, help bring about defections and the like, but again be prepared politically, economically and the rest for what would come after. And the sense was that this simply wasn't happening, that you had lots of disparate parts of the US government that were working on chunks of this problem but you needed someone to essentially co-ordinate it. For some reason, the secretary of state turned to me.

QUESTION: Quite early on, I think October the 19th, you made a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in which you said no matter how much we may want to solve all the problems we face entirely by ourselves, we can't single-handedly triumph. Why did you think it was so important to make that point at that stage of the crisis?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: You have to remember that for much of the first year of the administration and even early on in this crisis, [there was] particularly in Europe but elsewhere and to some extent even in this country, the United States, fairly widespread criticism that we were overly unilateral. And what I wanted to do at that point was give a speech that essentially did two things: one was counter that charge to the significant extent I thought that it was unfair or inaccurate. But second, to the extent that it was at all accurate, I also wanted to speak more to people on this side to make the case for why multilateralism is not synonymous with weakness but that multilateralism can be a way of leveraging strengths, and that it was clear to me that particularly in a situation like Afghanistan there was no way that we could do this by ourselves. Even if we were going to provide the lion's share of the military dimension of any struggle, we needed overflight rights, basing arrangements and that politically we needed help in pulling together an Afghan opposition - even countries as diverse as Pakistan and Iran - and that afterwards economically we were clearly going to need the help of others.

So it was a way of trying to begin to make the case for international involvement, and again it became a useful example of how to refute the argument that we weren't acting unilaterally because, in fact, we were not.

QUESTION: You also said that it could be a model for US diplomacy in the 21st century which was quite a claim to make for the crisis at that stage.

AMBASSADOR HAASS: I think it's true. I think it was true then. I think it is now. It's a model in two ways. First, the essential multilateral nature of the undertaking, that yes, the United States may have taken the lead in the military combat phase. But when you take a step back and you look at Afghanistan in its totality, you look at the various political, military, economic dimensions, this has clearly been a shared enterprise. It's everything from the United Nations with its resolutions to others providing resources, political advice, what have you.

Secondly, I thought Afghanistan had the potential to be a model in another way, which it showed [in] how we could all be affected by transnational issues, in this case terrorism. But it just as easily could have been HIV/Aids or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or the environment. What it shows you is that borders are no longer these impermeable barriers, that in this modern world, for better and for worse, wonderful things can cross borders, like ideas or e-mail or faxes, or people can fly and it can be a wonderful thing or, obviously, as we saw on September 11th, our globalization could be an extremely dark thing. And what it showed was that it became a metaphor, if you will, for globalization. But also we needed a collective response and that very much, I think, points the way to the future.

QUESTION: On the 18th of October, you met Kofi Annan and Brahimi in New York. Can you describe that meeting?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: It was a very useful session. It was still the early days of the crisis. By then we were roughly a month or so into the crisis and it was very much of the piece with preparing the political side of the coin, that again, the people down in Tampa, the Central Command, had essentially taken good care of the preparations on the military side. We knew very early on that we needed to and wanted to work very closely with the United Nations to help build an Afghan opposition that would both provide something of a magnet or incentive for defections which would ease the military challenge that then would be in place, or at least potentially be in place, to help govern the country in the aftermath of its liberation.

So what we did in that meeting was discuss politically what we might do to help bring about an Afghan opposition, and at that point a lot of the thinking was about essentially how we could encourage Afghans to do it themselves. We also talked about economic plans, humanitarian plans as well as economic reconstruction ideas. We also talked a little bit about security arrangements, about what might be done during a struggle and after a struggle to help secure Afghanistan.

So it was really the first comprehensive conversation between ourselves and the United Nations and I think what was good about it was we saw the situation quite similarly and it laid, I'd like to think, something of a foundation of trust and confidence that we were essentially marching in the same direction on this, because we knew that we needed each other for this to succeed.

QUESTION: During the process of constructing a credible opposition, what sort of message were you getting from Pakistan about what was and wasn't acceptable to them?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: The message from Pakistan initially wasn't that loud. You have to understand that the Pakistanis had invested very heavily in the Taleban and were quite sympathetic to their position. This is throughout the Pakistani government. As the military part of the crisis unfolded, I think the Pakistanis were somewhat taken aback, initially by the speed at which their former clients were essentially being decimated. So we were not getting strong views from the Pakistanis, other than obviously they were concerned about, in particular, Pashtun political sensitivities. And all along we understood - and this is something the UN and Lakhdar Brahimi really made clear to me - that you needed co-operation, or at least a lack of competition between Pakistan and Iran if this is going to work. The reason being that it wasn't simply that they were the two most important outside local players. But if they ended up competing harshly with one another, that would be mirrored internally by the same ethnic groups within Pakistan, between Pashtuns and, say, Tajiks or Uzbeks, or what have you.

So early on we realized that it was important to persuade Pakistan and Iran that what we were trying to do in terms of helping to coalesce an Afghan opposition was not something that would be inimical to new interests. I think we did persuade them on that. We did succeed. As a result we got, perhaps surprisingly, very little pushback or opposition from the Pakistanis on the political side as we proceeded.

QUESTION: This may be a red herring, but I just thought I'd ask you. What was your reaction when Abdul Haq was killed?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: Look, it was obviously a bad day. Things were not going well at that point. If you remember right around then, that was still before militarily we had succeeded in bringing down a major population centre. So when Abdul Haq got killed, it was not only very sad on a humanitarian basis, but it added to a sense in this town, and perhaps beyond, that things were not coming together.

And I would say that was probably one of the low points, right around then, even though our involvement in it was minimal and he took some risks and tragically he paid with this life. But it did come at a time when it was just a frustrating moment to us because militarily we were day in, day out, attacking, attacking, attacking, yet we hadn't had the breakthrough that ultimately came a few days later in Mazar-e-Sharif.

I'm not sure if that was the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end. But the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif was clearly not simply the military turning point of the battle, but it was also the political turning point because once Afghans on the ground saw what was happening, a lot of them re-calculated their positions which is exactly what a lot of us predicted would happen. Once you had a decisive military victory, that would establish a trend and, more important, it would establish the perception that a trend was inevitable which then became self-fulfilling.

QUESTION: But was he one of those you thought might help you build a credible coalition?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: Sure. Abdul Haq was a charismatic guy who was well-known to some Americans and obviously had a reputation within Afghanistan. So he was one of the people who we thought could be a magnet or an individual around whom a credible internal alternative could coalesce.

QUESTION: The fall of Kabul, when it came, came fairly quickly. It caught most of us by surprise, it's fair to say. Were you ready for it politically? Had you got to where you wanted to be?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: We were pretty close. People had a sense that Kabul would likely fall the way it did, that you wouldn't necessarily have a big battle. Indeed, the more I talked to Afghan experts the more I was persuaded that you wouldn't have a classic big battle. If there were going to be big battles they would be more likely to come from only the senior leadership of the Taleban or the al-Qaeda who were essentially non-Afghans and had nowhere else to go. But we thought that places like Kabul might indeed fall rather quickly.

It's true that we then had to scramble. But it wasn't so much that the fall of Kabul came sooner than we had thought or we were prepared for. It was that our efforts to bring together an Afghan opposition were proceeding somewhat slowly. And ironically enough, it was because of good intentions on our side. So many people told us: "Be careful. Don't get too involved. The history of Afghanistan is one filled with examples where outsiders, well-intentioned and not, got overly involved and Afghan nationalism came to the fore." So our initial reaction was to encourage Afghans to forge their own opposition

that could then take over in places like Kabul and anything or anywhere else that was liberated.

But after weeks and weeks and weeks of effort trying to bring together meetings and get people to hop on airplanes and come visit, it simply wasn't working. At that point, the conversations between myself and Mr. Brahimi at the UN, and between also the secretary of state and the president and Kofi Annan… what we decided to do was to take matters more into our own hand. What became ultimately the meeting at Bonn was a recognition that the Afghans themselves would not be able to forge a meaningful opposition if we simply encouraged them and said: "You guys, you go figure out the details and let us know when you work it all out."

I would guess it was somewhere in late October, early November that we came to the conclusion that that behind-the-scene role was not going to be enough and we, together with the UN, had to be much more engaged - maybe more the word is "assertive" or "hands on" - in bringing about an Afghan opposition.

QUESTION: Can you just described what happens when you get views like that, "Kabul is about to fall"? Do you just get on the phone to absolutely everybody straightaway, spend the night here bashing the phones or what?

(Laughter.)

AMBASSADOR HAASS: What you try to do in a situation like that is get as much information as you can. At that point we were getting our best information often from our own CIA and military people on the ground who had formed very close liaison relationships with key local Afghan leaders. That was essentially our main source of information at that point because you didn't have foreign diplomatic missions in the country. And other outsiders, even neighbours, were somewhat like us. They had very limited information.

So by far the best information about what was going on was information that we got from our military and intelligence people on the ground. We could also pick up phones and call individual Afghan leaders. At times people like me, or others, would do that, to talk to them about what was going on and what they were prepared to do.

QUESTION: But in terms of getting the coalition or the opposition into place, what did you do? Ring people up and say, "We've got to get our act together. We've got no time left?"

AMBASSADOR HAASS: At times we rang people up or we would meet with them outside the country. In some cases, we had people on the ground who could meet with them, again the same military and intelligence people that were liaising. And you have to remember that political leaders and military leaders in Afghanistan are the same people for the most part. So it was one-stop shopping.

It was a constant effort of going back and forth trying to get the various groups or parties or constituencies, however you want to describe it, to agree on where to meet and what the ground rules would be and so forth. But it was through any number of meetings that we held, that UN officials held inside the country, outside the country. There was no cookbook for doing this and I expect at times it looked somewhat messy or even haphazard. But there was no way around this. It had been more than two decades since you had anything like normal political life, so we were forced to improvise.

QUESTION: Just come back to the comment you made about America not being able to do things on its own. Quite a lot of people would revise that opinion after the Afghan

crisis because it was so successful, so quick. No? Do you think some people here might say we can do things on our own now?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: I think no doubt there are those who were saying we can do things on our own, but I think that probably exaggerates the reality. Yes, when it comes to fighting wars, we can do a great deal on our own. We have both the quality and the quantity of weaponry and skill on the part of our soldiers that's unmatched. But for any sizeable engagement, we still need bases in the area, we still need overflight rights. And then even in a place like Afghanistan, even if you can largely carry out the military phase of the crisis on your own, what about the post-military phase, the diplomacy, the economic reconstruction, the peacekeeping, which is British-led at the moment in Afghanistan?

So I think the lesson that somehow we have that the United States has enormous unilateral options is simply the wrong lesson to learn. I think it's actually just the opposite. Indeed, the wider effort against terrorism, that's clearly the lesson. If you look at the closing down of the financial networks that provide assets to terrorists, if you talk about efforts to slow or stop the spread of technology that could lead to weapons of mass destruction, the co-operation in law enforcement, intelligence, all of this is truly collective, it's truly multilateral. That's just pragmatic. Again this is true, by the way, not just in terrorism. I would suggest this is true of almost any transnational challenge. By definition, these are challenges that go across borders with impunity and there's no way the United States can deal with disease or drugs or terror or weapons of mass destruction by itself.

QUESTION: Just a couple more questions because it's fascinating stuff. This year, when the president made his comments about an "axis of evil" including Iraq, what was your reaction to that in the light of what you've just said?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: What the president was doing was essentially putting down a marker and speaking plain truth, both to the American public and to the Congress on one hand, but also to an international audience. It was a way of saying that the emerging dominant national security challenge facing the United States was increasingly this nexus, this juncture of terrorism and states with a habit and a history of it and weapons of mass destruction. And these three regimes, in particular the North Koreans, the Iranians and Iraqis, were obviously at the top of the list. It was a way of signaling to the country and to the world that this was going to be a priority, while in individual instances we would have to put together the particular package of instruments. They might be military in one case, diplomatic in another, sanctions in another. The specific response would vary. But it was a way of saying this now mattered more than anything else and that we Americans had to be prepared for that, but so did everybody else.

It was also a message to these three regimes. It was a way of saying you will not be permitted to constitute a massive threat to us. We are not going to wait, to put it bluntly, for new versions of September 11th where we had to deal with the consequences of some rogue regime by itself or working through some terrorist intermediary. We are not going to essentially simply wait for the day to once again exercise the right of self-defence. Self-defence may be necessary but it's certainly not ideal. What we are looking for are ways of preventing or pre-empting these kinds of attacks on the United States or anyone else, and that's essentially the message.

QUESTION: How important do you think it is to maintain the multilateral approach you talked about as you move into the next phase of the war on terrorism?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: So far we are. If the initial phase was Afghanistan, which again was and is multilateral pretty much to its core, what we're doing now is working with governments, largely arming and equipping them to meet their internal terrorist

challenge. You see that in the Philippines, you see it in Georgia, you see it here closer to the United States in Colombia. So that's clearly a collective approach.

The implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1373, shutting down the various financial networks, calling for law enforcement and intelligence co-operation, by definition can't succeed, can't move forward, without the help of others.

Now if you're asking me about a situation like Iraq where we've made no decisions, I would simply think that, to the extent that diplomatic pressure for them to comply with their various UN responsibilities, to the extent that pressure is multilateral, is broad, it sends a stronger message. To the extent we can get broad multilateral support on refashioning the sanctions regime, clearly that sends an impact.

If, indeed, down the road at some point the president decides that we do need to use force, obviously the involvement of others would be not simply desirable but in some cases necessary. So again, it's very hard for the United States to undertake meaningful international tasks on its own.

No, it doesn't mean everyone has to be involved or is going to be involved in the same way. Some things may happen in the UN. Some things, say as in the case of Kosovo, we did through Nato. In other cases, we may simply fashion a coalition of those states able and willing to deal with the particular challenge.

In another setting, I used the expression of multilateralism à la carte, that we're going to have to design our policies and the nature of our response to the particular case at hand. I think that kind of tailoring, or case by case approach, is inevitable in the sort of world we live in. It's simply not as structured. It's not as predictable as the Cold War was where you could have standing alliances that you knew would be perfect for a whole range of tasks. I think inevitably in this global and slightly less structured world you've got to be prepared to have these kinds of more flexible responses.

QUESTION: If I could ask you a final question about the United Nations. You may partly have answered, but if you think back to the Gulf War some ten years ago, at that stage the preparations through the United Nations were very deliberate at each stage. This time you almost felt the UN was catching up with the United States and the other members of the coalition against terrorism. Is that fair, do you think?

AMBASSADOR HAASS: I don't think it's fair. Last time around in 1990 and '91 and at that time I was responsible for the Middle East and the Persian Gulf on this National Security Council for "Bush 41," as we say, we did work with the United Nations. We did have a powerful response, but we also had time. The nature of our military build-up, the so-called Desert Shield period before Desert Storm, gave us roughly six months. Also, in order to prepare the way for international support to use force, it was important that we be seen to try other approaches, including sanctions. The fact that we tried those other approaches and they failed, gave us, in some ways, greater international backing than we might have had otherwise.

But the key thing was time. The one thing we didn't have on this occasion was time. We didn't know when the next terrorist strike was coming. We didn't know from where it was coming. So yes, we were happy to have international support, indeed had a good deal of diplomatic support, military support, you name it. There wasn't a lot we asked for that we didn't get. The one thing we couldn't do was wait, and we didn't want to give al-Qaeda new opportunities to attack us or anyone else.

So we were happy to have international support and we were happy to have support as expressed by various UN resolutions. But we knew the nature of this response was not a response that you could do through the United Nations. It was nice, indeed it was useful

to have its backing. But at the end of the day, we were exercising our right of self-defence, the American right of self-defence. And there was, I think, extraordinary understanding that we had the right, and in many cases, I would say the international community felt we also had the need to do so, to underscore the point that this kind of terrorism could not simply be allowed to be carried out and then not answered resolutely.