



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Sir Christopher Meyer, UK Ambassador to the USA

Q: Tell us about the September 11, how you found out what had happened and what you did?

MEYER: It was a brilliant beautiful sunny day, a bit like today, and I was having breakfast with John Major who was visiting the United States as he does quite frequently for business reasons, and my social secretary, Amanda Downs, came up to me at breakfast time and said that there had been a report of a plane crashing into one of the World Trade Center towers. I immediately envisaged some little trainer plane, a private plane crashing accidentally into the towers. First of all it didn't sink in, and she said, "No, a big plane." I went to the television screen and that was the start of it, and it was extremely difficult to take in (a) what had happened, the enormity of it, and (b) what the consequences were going to be. I assumed it was not an accident when I realised it was a big plane.

Q: What did you do?

MEYER: I went straight over to the embassy. I gathered together an inner core of staff representing most of the main sections, departments of the embassy, and we decided in pretty short order watching the television, seeing the second attack, realising now that this was something really terrible ... then there was the Pentagon attack. We took a decision in the course of the morning to send most of the staff home and to keep a core group of front-line staff to keep the embassy's main functions running and also to ensure that we were able to deal effectively with public inquiries as they started to come in.

Of course, I was in touch with our mission in New York where we have a consulate general - they were to take the brunt of all this, particularly the public inquiry - to make sure they were all all right and they hadn't lost anybody. And then it was furious and intensive activity for the rest of the day and for many days thereafter, and indeed I think for many weeks thereafter, until the pace started to calm down a bit.

Q: At that stage I think George Bush was sort of circling in the air, no one quite knew where. Did you get a sense of some confusion in Washington about what was going on?

MEYER: I spoke to Dr. Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security advisor, in the course of the morning to offer condolences and any support that we could, and also to you know find out what I could at that very early stage. There was no sense of confusion from that conversation. Of course she's a very cool calm and collected woman and she was also that morning, and it was quite clear the White House had switched into an emergency mode. And it didn't occur to me that there was any drift or panic. I have to say it seemed to be entirely reasonable that the president who had been out of

Washington should take some precautions about coming back given that one of the planes had come down within only a matter of miles of the White House. It was only later when, as it were, the chattering classes and Washington got going that a few of them said, well the president should have come straight back. With the benefit of hindsight, you know he was doing his level best to do so.

Q: You also had the prime minister's chief foreign policy adviser wandering around in New York, didn't you? What did you do with him?

MEYER: There were bizarre dimensions to this, to this week because, first of all, you know John Major, as a former British prime minister and a friend, was staying with us and he couldn't get home because all of the trans-Atlantic flights had stopped. So we had him in his house with his personal assistant. There were some MPs floating around the place who couldn't get back as well, and the prime minister's foreign affairs adviser, David Manning, who had been staying with me the previous night. The previous night we'd been sitting out on the terrace having dinner with Dr Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, Steve Hadley, talking about foreign security policy. Everything we discussed and all the conclusions we reached that evening of 10th September had to be radically revised in the light of what happened the next day. David Manning flew out there very early that morning, of the 11th September, and as he was coming in to JFK (airport) to catch the connection to London, of course he flew past Lower Manhattan and didn't realise through the smoke that it was one of the towers that had been hit. I think he thought it was a power station. If you're interviewing him, no doubt he'll give you a more vivid description but he found that when he got to JFK, he couldn't get out.

Unfortunately he had a mobile phone that didn't work in the United States and we couldn't find him, and he couldn't get hold of us. All the phones went down and that night he stayed in a local motel of dubious repute I think probably, and eventually we tracked him down, brought him back down to Washington, and he came back into the house. And eventually he and John Major and others returned to the UK in a military plane that left on, I think it was the Thursday morning.

Q: What were your first conversations with London about what had happened?

MEYER: The first thing was to establish the facts of the case: what actually had happened and who did the Americans think were responsible. It was very clear from our conversations with Americans on the day itself that they realised that this was a terrorist attack. It wasn't totally clear who it was at that early stage. The name Osama Bin Laden came into conversation very early on. I can't tell you exactly how early on, but by the time we all went to bed on the first day, I mean I think he was already, already a prime suspect. It was very much a day for offering condolences and is there anything we can do to help. Do you need specialist teams or equipment in New York City to help them dig into the rubble or the Pentagon?

But once it began to solidify that this was a terrorist attack, the very first thing that we wished to establish with the United States was what they intended to do. Was there going to be a very swift retaliation? Or was it going to be something different? And of course on the following day, the 12th September, the prime minister and the president spoke themselves

and a number of these things were already starting to become clear. That first conversation was a very important conversation.

Q: How does that work when the prime minister calls the White House in terms of your involvement? Do you listen in? Are you given a transcript?

MEYER: It is absolutely indispensable to make sure left and right hands know what is happening. So the Downing Street habit - David Manning being the pointman there - is to call me up and say, the prime minister hopes to speak to the president today. If it's the president calling the prime minister, you won't necessarily get early warning. Then David will call me up after a conversation and say they've just spoken. In this case it was the president returning the prime minister's call. I get an immediate oral read-out and then, quite quickly after that, a formal record of the conversation comes within a matter of an hour or so - so you know exactly what is happening. That's one way in which our system works and works extremely well.

So we knew within, I think it was a couple of hours, the detail of what had transpired between Blair and Bush, which then enables us as an embassy to pick out the points and pursue them in detail with the US administration. That is a kind of classic pattern.

Q: You said it was a very important telephone call. What was decided and what was raised?

MEYER: I think a number of points were fixed then which were very relevant operationally as the following days and weeks went by. For example, prime minister and president agreed that it was going to be extremely important to get a very quick and early and supportive resolution out of the UN Security Council. And we said to the Americans at the outset of the Falklands war, after the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands, it had been indispensable to our diplomatic strategy to get a very early Security Council resolution which condemned the invasion and supported us. We said to the Americans you've got to do the same thing in New York as fast as possible, and they were already working in that direction. The other thing that was agreed was that we needed to go to Nato and get an Article 5 decision out of Nato as quickly as possible, and that's what happened.

It became very evident from this very first conversation that the president was not going to do anything knee-jerk. He was not going to do anything precipitous. He was not going to - in the phrase that's now emerged from the Washington Post's account of these days - he was not going to spend whatever it is, fifty million dollars of cruise missile on a tent somewhere. In other words, they were going to be deliberate in deciding how they were going to respond which we - the prime minister - of course heartily approved of. And they started in this very early discussion to discuss the merits or otherwise of presenting the Taliban with an ultimatum. And in the end, when the president made his speech on the 20th September to the Joint Session of Congress he, indeed, presented the Taliban with an ultimatum. And I suppose really emerging from that first conversation came the idea that Blair should come over as soon as the smoke had cleared a bit and talk eyeball to eyeball with the president about strategy. And that's what happened during the following week.

Q: There was quite a lot of talk about Iraq within the administration at that stage. Was that something you were aware of or sought to influence?

MEYER: That also came up in that very first conversation, the issue of whether Saddam Hussein had been involved in the attacks, and at the time the jury was completely out. It wasn't clear. Already emerging in British thinking was the notion that if it was Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda based in Afghanistan, any retaliation should focus, first and foremost on them, on that target, and other things - Iraq or whatever - should await a second phase. That was really the thrust of what the prime minister had said to the president. They had another conversation on the 14th of September, Bush and Blair. The evidence was pretty damn overwhelming it was Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda, Afghanistan.. and Tony Blair's very, very clear view was that that should be the focus of our first efforts, and then we would look at what else might or might not need to be done. And then the administration had a great debate about this - so we're told!

Q: At the same time there was quite a lot of public diplomacy going on with the expression of sympathy back at home, the day when the Guards played the Star Spangled Banner at the change of the guard. What do you remember about the way people responded to that here?

MEYER: Well, it really knocked my socks off, to be honest with you. I didn't know they were going to play the Star Spangled Banner on that Thursday morning in London, and I only picked it up later on in the day from an American friend who said this was the most moving thing that he had ever witnessed in his whole life. And then we started to be inundated, not only the embassy here, but all our consulates around the United States, with e-mails, faxes, phone calls, messages expressing in the most emotional terms, gratitude and thanks for this very unusual unique, unprecedented expression of support. It was all over the news here. People got very, very emotional about it and then, and for weeks afterwards, you only had to mention it to an American or they would mention it to you, and people would get tearful. And already Tony Blair's very first statement after the attacks had stirred American sentiments very, very strongly. Then he gave his party conference speech. So his initial reaction, his party conference speech, the flowers in Grosvenor Square, and then the Band of the Coldstream Guards playing the Star Spangled Banner. Have I got the sequence right? It had a very strong emotional impact over here, and we're still living in the aftermath of that.

Q: You were with him in New York on the 20th. Can you tell us about that day?

MEYER: It was a day of very high emotion. It was a very testing day for everybody, but ultimately very uplifting. The prime minister, if I remember rightly, arrives in New York in the very early afternoon. I think he had been in Germany and had had dinner with Schroeder, and was due to have breakfast with Chirac the next day. Some sort of crazy schedule and there was going to be a significant memorial service at a church in mid- Manhattan, principally for the British victims of the attack on the World Trade Center. We didn't lose any Brits in the Pentagon. This had been put together at very short notice, but pulled together a huge congregation of people. The idea was that the Blairs should go to the service. The prime minister should speak and meet some of the relatives of those who had been lost and then we'd rush out to the airport again, leap on the plane and get down to Washington for talks and dinner with the president, and then go and see him make his famous address to the Joint Session of Congress.

Well, the combination of hideous gridlock in New York, appalling weather, rain streaming down [meant] we were fighting the clock all the time. So we had this wonderful deeply emotional service in the church and then had to get in a cavalcade of cars and fight our way out of Manhattan, gridlocked because of the weather, gridlocked because of the heightened security, gridlocked because every police force except the NYPD was on the crossroads because they were doing something elsewhere. And we arrived rather stressed and late in Washington, so that we lost the so-called formal session of talks before the dinner. But we went straight into the White House, and Colin Powell and Condi Rice were waiting for us with the president. The president immediately seized the prime minister and took him off into a corner of the Blue Room, and they had an important private exchange whilst Powell and Rice looked after the rest of us. Then we went into dinner and it didn't matter that we'd lost the formal session of talks because the Blair/Bush signature is you just get on with the business and you do it without any flim-flam. We just moved through the issues. Dinner finished and then we went off to Capitol Hill.

Q: How important was that private discussion between the prime minister and the president?

MEYER: I think it was pretty important. I think it fixed a few parameters. One of the things that emerged from that evening was that, after quite a powerful debate inside the administration about priorities for retaliation for the attacks, the focus should indeed be on Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and if the Taleban didn't accept the ultimatum, the Taleban also. Things like Iraq would have to wait for consideration to a later date. That was one of the most important outcomes of that meeting.

Q: Is it fair to say that by the time the president sat down that night, the course of the next few months was more or less set?

MEYER: I think that's fair. Some very key decisions were taken very early on, but it was a deliberate and not a precipitous plan. They decided quickly to do things which were going to be done with all deliberation.

Q: That speech was remarkable for some of the things that the president said about Britain, which were I think probably unprecedented in a Joint Session address, "our truest friend" and so forth. Was that something they had talked to you about beforehand or did you listen to that for the first time with the rest of us?

MEYER: I kind of guessed that something like this was coming. At the end of the previous week, as I said to you, we were already planning for the prime minister to come over, and then at the end of the weekend somebody in the White House said to me we've decided the president is going to give a speech. Now we don't know whether it's going to be an address to the nation on TV, an address to a Joint Session of the two houses of Congress or what, but it looks like the timing is going to be probably the same day as when your prime minister comes over, so we may be able to bring these two things together. So a very large light bulb went off in my brain when I heard that, and I said well, if we can do an address to a Joint Session of Congress and Tony Blair is there, terrific! And they said well, you know nothing is decided. We need to think about this.

But that was already, if you like, in the bloodstream at the beginning of the week. And by Tuesday or Wednesday, I think, the Americans had firmly decided it was going to be an address to the Joint Session of Congress which is a very solemn affair. And they said to us, we want your prime minister and your team to be there, with the prime minister sitting next to the first lady in the VIP seat. So I knew that something would be said to acknowledge the presence of the guest, Tony Blair. And over dinner on that evening, I have to say before the speech of his life, the president showed not the least nerves, was very cool, calm and collected. But the president said to Tony Blair, I'm going to make a speech and I'm very glad you're going to be there. I may say a couple of things quite complimentary about you and Britain, a kind of throw-away line. So it didn't come as a surprise to me.

Q: Between the 20th of September and the 7th October when the bombing began, did the pace of diplomacy in this city move up a few gears?

MEYER: It did for us. I don't know about others but the White House, State Department, Defence Department were in a state of permanent meeting. They were very active planning. There was a lot of direct telephonic contact across the Atlantic between London and Washington, and my staff and I were virtually living out of the White House or the State Department. All of us operating at our different levels, trying to ensure at the end of everyday that we were sending coherent messages, we were hearing coherent things. Where there seemed to be differences, trying to work out what this meant, trying to send coherent messages from London to make sure that we were all working from the same page. And one of the things that we did very early on was to institute an arrangement whereby a senior member of the embassy went in to the National Security Council everyday early in the morning and got the basic brief for the day. So we knew what was coming and what had been decided. Then on top of that was built layers and layers of different types of consultation.

Q: What were the principal issues that you resolved, or needed resolving during that period?

MEYER: There was a whole bunch of stuff. By then a very big issue was building a coalition, getting people on board, getting Pakistan and General Musharraf behind the war on terrorism. We were already getting concerned about how to depict this, not as a war against Islam but as a war against terrorism. So how did you do this? We started to think very, very seriously about public presentation. Later on there were these communication information centres which were set up in Washington, London and Islamabad. The seeds of that were already being planted, and Alastair Campbell had drawn some very interesting conclusions from the Kosovo campaign which he thought were applicable to this situation, and we started talking to the Americans about that.

There was a lot of military planning going on. The military campaign for the Americans was run by Central Command out of Tampa, Florida, and we had to get our liaison chaps in down there, and there was a lot of discussion between the two sets of intelligence agencies. So all this had to be set up, got in place, machinery working as well as actually discussing the actual issues. Then when the campaign started, I remember the things that were on our mind. Some days it was the Northern Alliance is going to capture Kabul too quickly, and then it was they're not going to capture it at all. And then was Mazar-e-Sharif going to fall or wasn't it

going to fall? There was all the stuff about the Central Asian republics. Could you get basing arrangements there? If so, on what terms? What about Putin and the Russians? So there was stuff everywhere.

Q: How was it co-ordinated? Did there come a point at which they said to you it would be awfully helpful if Tony Blair popped off to see President Assad or went round the subcontinent?

MEYER: No, it wasn't done like that. Tony Blair, who seized this issue with the firmest of grasps, came to sets of conclusions with his advisers in Downing Street about the places he felt he ought to visit. I cannot remember the exact itineraries now of his various visits. But then the way it went was we would say to the Americans, the prime minister is planning to go to ABC and D, and he plans to say this, and they'd say terrific, or would you like to add this, or have you thought of going there? It was done, done like that. We were never in a situation where the Americans came to us and said, awfully helpful if Tony Blair went to this country or that country. It didn't work like that. He decided where he wanted to go, and we co-ordinated with the Americans thereafter.

Q: What about Jack Straw's visit here, I think it was 24th October? What was the main issue that came out of that?

MEYER: I think the way you've got to look at British/American co-ordination, discussion, diplomacy... it's like a layer cake or club sandwich that everything slots in at its level. Jack Straw has an extremely good relationship with Colin Powell. He wanted to come over and talk face to face with Powell about all this. They talk on the phone and the phone is necessary, but it's not sufficient. Jack hadn't been over since the attacks, so it was very important that he should do so, and also go and talk to some of the other players. He went to see Vice-President Cheney as well, and Dr Rice. At that time we were worried about Mazar-e-Sharif going to fall. There were concerns about chronology and was the campaign falling behind and how the heck were we going to get basing rights in the Central Asian republics. I remember those issues being very, very strongly to the fore, all of which were resolved.

Q: Did you have the sense that Washington was caught on the hop rather - or some people in Washington - by the speed with which the whole thing unravelled in the end?

MEYER: Yes, could never calibrate this with mathematical certainty. The reality was here was this campaign going on, in which a lot of the fighting was being done not by your own nationals, which introduced an element of imprecision. So you couldn't be utterly certain what was going to happen when. I think in the end the Taliban around Kabul in the end folded very quickly and there we were. But we were a damn sight happier to have that than to have them successfully resisting. As soon as the target spotters were in - various shadowy special forces so you had proper air/ground co-ordination - everything started to move much faster.

Q: No, I just wondered what the atmosphere in this city was like. There was certainly in London a feeling of, goodness, one moment, the war's never going to end, and suddenly it's...

MEYER: Yes, some people may have been surprised. I can't remember exactly, but all I can say to you Ed is that if you're going to have a choice between problems of failure and problems of success, go for the latter every time.

Q: When the president made his speech to Congress in January and talked about an "axis of evil", did that come as a surprise to you?

MEYER: I knew he was going to use that phrase from about lunch-time that day, and it took me back immediately to a small and rather cramped kitchen in Moscow in the apartment in which I lived in 1983 - I think I've got the right year - when President Reagan got up and made a speech about the "evil empire". And I thought to myself this is, kind of, the son of evil empire, and at the time the "evil empire" phrase was loudly condemned by many people inside and outside the United States. But with the benefit of hindsight, I think it played quite a significant role in contributing to the downfall of the Soviet Union. And I remember my reaction to the "axis of evil" was, there are going to be an awful lot of people not going to like this, who are going to condemn it for the same reasons as "evil empire". But let us not rush the judgement on this. There could be some important and positive results coming from this phrase.

Q: What was the reaction from London when you rang them up and said, you may not like this but this is what he's going to say?

MEYER: I didn't. It wasn't I personally who telephoned London. I don't know what their instant reaction was, but I remember sending a telegram from here very soon afterwards setting it all in context, seeking to explain what this meant. It was a phrase that was condemned by some as overly simplistic, and one of the points I tried to convey to people in London was that to condemn it as overly simplistic was itself overly simplistic.

Q: What did you do when Jack Straw suggested it was part of an election campaign?

MEYER: What do you mean, what did I do? I heard what he said.

Q: That's it?

MEYER: I wasn't there actually when he said it, but I heard what he said.

Q: There must have been a few awkward phone calls by then?

MEYER: I never got a single awkward phone call from anybody about that.

Q: It just dropped?

MEYER: Just dropped.

Q: Did you get a sense roughly about the time of that speech that the question of Iraq, which you said earlier on had been dropped in the initial stages, was now back on the front burner?

MEYER: We always knew that Iraq was a subject that might go into remission, but would never disappear wholly from the agenda, and the only question was when it would return. And that was clear to us soon after September 11, that this was a subject which the United States was not going to let drop, and I think that - and we're doing this interview just after this weekend in

Crawford, Texas and prime minister Blair met president Bush - one of the things that emerged from that weekend was the prime minister saying that September 11 changed everything. And one of the things it changed was us to realising that an individual like Saddam Hussein, with his record of grotesque brutality, violation of Security Council resolutions, development of weapons of mass destruction, ability to put such weapons into the hands of the terrorists, that with that package of menace, you can't just sit back and wait and see. September 11 tells you that doing nothing is not an option, and that was really where the Americans were coming from. They were saying, it is not an option to do nothing about it. There were some in this administration who had a much more, if you like, messianic view of how you deal with Saddam Hussein. But there's also a pragmatic view, and the pragmatic view is this is too great a danger to leave unattended. So I wasn't surprised it came back.

Q: Just going back to the issue of the Middle East and the period preparing for the war itself and during the war. The Palestinians, who we saw last week in Beirut, were certainly under the impression that the prime minister was pushing America towards sorting that out as part of the consequences of September 11. Were you pushing that message during that period here?

MEYER: Yes, effectively. We have always said to our American friends that part of the whole strategy has got to be one which seeks to unwind the cycle of violence between Palestinians and Israelis. And one which tries to start a process which will also lead in the end to some kind of political settlement. We have said that for a very, very long time, and it wasn't so much a question of pushing, but of debating if you like, the relationship between the Middle East peace process and what we were trying to do in the war against terrorism. And the United States was always accused of having done nothing for months and months and months, and then very recently done a U-turn in the president's statement of last week. In fact they have been very heavily engaged in the Middle East and we forget that towards the end of the year the president went to New York and for the first time ever referred to Palestine, which no American president ever referred to before. And Colin Powell followed it up with a very important speech which elaborated on that.

So there were things that we didn't actually need to say to the Americans on this because they'd already reached that conclusion themselves. But, on the other hand, the importance of the Middle East was something we said was a vital part of the overall strategy.

Q: Do you think you have become more listened to here, or is that just wishful thinking?

MEYER: I would say this, wouldn't I? After four and a half years here in Washington I've never known a time when we're not listened to. I was here previously in another incarnation as the number two in the embassy. I don't recall us not being listened to then. We do have extraordinary good access to the administration and to Congress. We train our people when they come here to do that. It is the kind of automatic reflex of the embassy, and we get to see people and talk to people, that other embassies don't, and I do believe that we're always listened to. Are we listened to more closely? Do we have more influence now than we do at any other time? Very hard to say because I think if we come to the Americans with well thought out positions, clear strategies and a

willingness not only to talk but to do - I mean one thing we do do is put our money where our mouth is - then you get listened to.

Q: What do you make of the poodle stories?

MEYER: Load of balls! Complete rubbish. You know, there is no canine diplomacy over here.

Q: And would you say America is more self-confident as a result of what happened in Afghanistan and its willingness to use its power?

MEYER: The United States is always a pretty self-confident nation. I think they have taken enormous pride from the way in which they've conducted their military operation there and from the way in which President Bush has risen to the challenge. I think a very great measure of self-confidence has shot through the system here like adrenalin.

Q: Are there dangers in the self-confidence becoming over-confidence?

MEYER: Yes, but where's the line? Where's the line between self-confidence and over-confidence? There is a tendency in Europe to criticise the Americans when they don't show leadership, and to criticise the Americans when they do show leadership. Just as the Americans tend to criticise the Europeans when they don't get their act together, and when they do get their act together. This is just a kind of mutually assured schizophrenia which we have to manage.