

BBC NEWSNIGHT

INTERVIEW:

TONY BLAIR, PRIME MINISTER

FEBRUARY 6th, 2003

Please note "NEWSNIGHT" must be credited if any part of this transcript is used.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Good evening, welcome to a Newsnight special in which we'll be cross-examining the Prime Minister on the confrontation with Iraq. After yesterday's performance at the UN America looks more determined than ever to go to war. Our government is George Bush's closest ally yet many here and around the world would not believe the case for war has been made. Tonight in the Baltic Centre in Gateshead we've invited the Prime Minister to face an audience of ordinary people from here in the north-east, all of whom are sceptical about the arguments for war with Iraq. Facing them is the Prime Minister. He has confessed himself worried he has not yet made the case for war. Tonight, taking questions from our audience and from me he'll have the chance to do so.

Prime Minister, for you to commit British forces to war there has to be a clear and imminent danger to this country – what is it?

TONY BLAIR:

The danger is that if we allow Iraq to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons they will threaten their own region, there is no way that we would be able to exclude ourselves from any regional conflict there was there as indeed we had to become involved last time they committed acts of external aggression against Kuwait.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

But right now there is no danger, it's a danger some time in the future.

TONY BLAIR:

I've never said that Iraq was about to launch an attack on Britain but if you look at the history of Saddam Hussein there is absolutely no doubt at all that he poses a threat to his region. If he was to use chemical, biological and nuclear weapons in the rest of his region, there is no way that Britain could stand aside from that, or indeed the rest of the world. And that is precisely why we have had 12 years of United Nations resolutions against him.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Well you said of those UN resolutions and the sanctions which followed them in the year 2000, you said that they had contained him. What's happened since?

TONY BLAIR:

I didn't actually, I said they'd been contained him up to a point and the fact is - ...

JEREMY PAXMAN:

I'm sorry Prime Minister - we believe that the sanctions regime has effectively contained Saddam Hussein in the last ten years, you said that in November 2000.

TONY BLAIR:

Well I can assure you I've said every time I'm asked about this, they have contained him up to a point and the fact is the sanctions regime was beginning to crumble, it's why it's subsequent in fact to that quote we had a whole series of negotiations about tightening the sanctions regime but the truth is the inspectors were put out of Iraq so -

JEREMY PAXMAN:

They were not put out of Iraq, Prime Minister, that is just not true. The weapons inspectors left Iraq after being told by the American government that bombs will be dropped on the country.

TONY BLAIR:

I'm sorry, that is simply not right. What happened is that the inspectors told us that they were unable to carry out their work, they couldn't do their work because they weren't being allowed access to the sites. They detailed that in the reports to the Security Council. On that basis, we said they should come out because they couldn't do their job properly.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

That wasn't what you said, you said they were thrown out of Iraq –

TONY BLAIR:

Well they were effectively because they couldn't do the work they were supposed to do

JEREMY PAXMAN:

No, effectively they were not thrown out of Iraq, they withdraw.

TONY BLAIR:

No I'm sorry Jeremy, I'm not allowing you away with that, that is completely wrong. Let me just explain to you what happened.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

You've just said the decision was taken by the inspectors to leave the country. They were therefore not thrown out.

TONY BLAIR:

They were effectively thrown out for the reason that I will give you. Prior to them leaving Iraq they had come back to the Security Council, again and again, and said we are not being given access to sites. For example, things were being designated as presidential palaces, they weren't being allowed to go in there. As a result of that, they came back to the United Nations and said we can't carry out the work as inspectors; therefore we said you must leave because we will have to try and enforce this action a different way. So when you say the inspectors, when you imply the inspectors were in there doing their work, that is simply not the case.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

I did not imply that, I merely stated the fact that they were not thrown out, they were withdrawn. And you concede they were withdrawn.

TONY BLAIR:

They were withdrawn because they couldn't do their job. I mean let's not be ridiculous about this, there's no point in the inspectors being in there unless they can do the job they're put in there to do. And the fact is we know that Iraq throughout that time was concealing its weapons.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Right.

TONY BLAIR:

Well hang on, you say right, they were concealing their weapons, they lied both about the existence of their nuclear weapons programme and their biological weapons programme and it was only when people were interviewed, when they defected from the Iraq regime and were interviewed, that we discovered the existence, full existence of those programmes at all.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Has not Colin Powell demonstrated yesterday, quite conclusively, that a regime in which those weapons inspectors are back in Iraq is one in which it is impossible for Saddam Hussein to continue developing weapons of mass destruction?

TONY BLAIR:

No, because what he is doing is engaging in a systematic campaign of concealment and what Colin Powell was doing yesterday was giving evidence, for example, intelligence evidence and other evidence, of direct conversations which are evidence of the concealment is happening. We still don't know, for example, what has happened to the thousands of litres of botulin and anthrax that were unaccounted for when the inspectors left in 1999. So, you know, the idea that –

JEREMY PAXMAN:

And you believe American intelligence?

TONY BLAIR:

Well I do actually believe this intelligence –

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Because there are a lot of dead people in an aspirin factory in Sudan who don't.

TONY BLAIR:

Come on. This intelligence is backed up by our own intelligence and in any event, you know, we're not coming to this without any history. I mean let's not be absurdly naïve about this –

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Hans Blix said he saw no evidence of hiding of weapons.

TONY BLAIR:

I'm sorry, what Hans Blix has said is that the Iraqis are not cooperating properly.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Hans Blix said he saw no evidence, either of weapons manufacture, or that they had been concealed.

TONY BLAIR:

No, I don't think again that is right. I think what he said was that the evidence that he had indicated that the Iraqis were not cooperating properly and that, for example, he thought that the nerve agent VX may have been weaponised. And he also said that the discovery of the war heads might be – I think I'm quoting here – may be the tip of an iceberg. I think you'll find that in that report.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

You produced a dossier last September in which you outlined Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. All the sites in that report were visited by UN

inspectors who found no evidence of the weapons or no evidence of there having been hidden.

TONY BLAIR:

I'm sorry, it is absolutely clear what has been happening over the past few months, which is of course, I mean the moment we mentioned those in our intelligence reports we were aware of the fact that the Iraqis would then have a significant period of time in which they could conceal these weapons. But, you know, if this were some country that we had no history of this problem with and this was the first time anyone had ever raised the issue, there might be a point in what you're saying. It is absurd in the case -

JEREMY PAXMAN:

But you concede it's true -

TONY BLAIR:

I don't concede it's true at all. It is absurd...

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Well, your own foreign minister Mike O'Brian said it is true.

TONY BLAIR:

It is absurd to say in a situation where Iraq has definitely had these weapons, developed them over a long period of time, concealed them, that there is nothing to be suspicious of when they can't even account for the weapons that we know were there when the Inspectors left in 1999.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Right, let's hear from our first member of the audience. Lesley Farrow, what do you make of the evidence?

(Male 1)

I don't think there's sufficient evidence at the moment, like when Mr Bush yesterday come out with this supposedly new evidence I don't think there was anything there.

TONY BLAIR:

Well what there was, was evidence, I mean this is what our intelligence services are telling us and it's difficult because, you know, either they're simply making the whole thing up or this is what they are telling me, as the Prime Minister, and I've no doubt what the American Intelligence are telling President Bush as well. And that is that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, we know they were there before, but the Iraqis are now trying to conceal those. But although they're allowing the inspectors access to sites they're not actually fully co-operating with inspectors, for example, they're not allowing the experts that worked on these programmes to be interviewed properly by the inspectors, and what Colin Powell was talking about at the UN yesterday was the systematic attempt to try and conceal this, to disperse it into the country so that it couldn't be found by the inspectors. So, we're faced with a situation where, I mean, here am I as Prime Minister, this is the evidence that's coming to me day in, day out, and I think it would just be wrong of us and irresponsible of me not to act on that. Now, if Iraq wanted to co-operate with the weapons inspectors they could do it perfectly easily. They could say here are all the experts that have worked on our programme, come and interview them free from Iraqi minders, not in designated places, this is what has happened to the stuff that was left over from the inspectors before. If they did all that they would be co-operating, and then I agree with you, it would be a different situation.

(Male 1)

So how come America has got spy satellites and they can't seem to pick anything up.

TONY BLAIR:

Well they are of course picking things up.

(Male 1)

They don't seem to be picking any mass weapons up of anything other.

TONY BLAIR:

Well they're picking up certainly movement of material and one of the things that Colin Powell was talking about yesterday was the movement of material shortly before an inspection took place. So, you know, you've got to put it all together and make a judgement.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

The gentleman next to you.

(Male 2)

Prime Minister, you must see the evidence that was presented yesterday as laughable, it was Morecambe and Wise-esque – the warhead sketch. It was just absolutely laughable what Colin Powell put in front of the UN yesterday.

TONY BLAIR:

Well I don't think it was laughable at all.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

You've put your point of view, the Prime Minister has said that he accepts the evidence. Monica Frisch.

TONY BLAIR:

Well can I just deal with this for a moment. Look, leave aside what's been happening in the last few months and all the debate about whether we have a war in Iraq or not. I mean, you wouldn't dispute with me that this is a barbaric and appalling regime.

(Male 2):

I would say to you Prime Minister that the war is to get rid of a despotic dictator who has no real democratic mandate, who's very destabilising, who commits human rights violations. Is Mr. Bush next perhaps?

TONY BLAIR:

Well, you think Saddam's the same as George Bush.

(Male 2)

I'm saying Mr. Bush has a lot of comparisons.

TONY BLAIR:

I think that's a bit unfair you know. I don't think George Bush has quite done that.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Right Monica Frish.

Female 1:

I'm totally opposed to anyone having, or developing nuclear weapons. But that goes for British and American nuclear weapons as well. This country has lots of nuclear weapons and the United States has nuclear weapons. The United States has dropped nuclear bombs, don't let us forget that. How can we possibly justify criticising Iraq for developing nuclear weapons when we're doing so little to get rid of our own. Isn't it incredibly hypocritical?

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Prime Minister?

TONY BLAIR:

I don't believe so for two reasons. First of all we're obviously part of a whole lot of agreements to do with nuclear weapons. Secondly, Britain has not menaced and used external aggression with these types of weapons against our neighbours. You know, Saddam, every time he has been allowed to do so has started a war with the countries around him. He used chemical weapons against the Iranians some years ago. He invaded Kuwait shortly afterwards. I mean he is, you know, in a sense I can totally understand the argument about whether the war is right or wrong and I understand the concerns that people have, I genuinely do, which is one of the reasons I wanted to do the programme tonight – to try and answer some of those concerns. But the one thing I hope we can all agree on is that Saddam Hussein is in a different category from virtually any other regime in the world in terms of his use of appalling repression against his own people, external aggression against other people and the fact is, he is the one power in this world that has actually used chemical weapons against his own people.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Prime Minister, if you're looking at countries in the Middle East that have got arsenals of chemical weapons, I mean what about a country like Syria which has the biggest chemical weapons arsenal in that part of the world, and whose president you invite to this country to have tea with the Queen.

TONY BLAIR:

But he has not started a war with his neighbours, using those weapons.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Yes - well - not using those weapons – he's had wars with Israel.

TONY BLAIR:

Well, I mean, look, well there is a real issue to do with Syria and terrorism which is important. –

JEREMY PAXMAN:

It's a state sponser of terrorism

TONY BLAIR:

Hang on, Syria has not started a war with its neighbours. Saddam twice, in fact every time he's been allowed to. First of all the war with Iran in which a million people died. Secondly, the invasion of Kuwait. Now Syria is not in that category. I'm not saying there aren't issues to do with Syria. There are issues to do with Syria and we can get on to those. But the one point that I'm simply making to you is that this is not an issue that comes with no history and a history particularly relevant to the nature of this regime – that's all I'm saying.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Is there one more person from the audience? Yes.

Female 2:

Yes, I think we should be adopting a policy of contain and deter with the Iraq conflict.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Contain and deter?

Female:

Yes, and I'm very concerned that we're following the US along a line of conflict and war and I don't understand why we're taking that line.

TONY BLAIR:

Well, let's go back to this issue of containment, because I agree of all the arguments against this, this is the best one. I mean, OK Saddam's a bad man, he's a terrible man, he's got these weapons but can't we work out a policy of containment. Now the reason I was saying to Jeremy earlier, containment worked up to a point is this, that there were two methods that we had to contain him. One was the method of sanctions which, because of the way he implements those sanctions is actually a pretty brutal policy against the Iraqi people. Sixty per cent of the Iraqi people need food aid in order to survive, even though it's actually a wealthy country and the fact is, with a different regime, without these weapons, sanctions could be lifted and the Iraqi people would in fact be far better off. But anyway, that's one element of the containment which is sanctions. But what we were finding, really in the year 2001 when we were trying to negotiate a new sanctions regime, was that those sanctions were no longer working properly. What the sanctions were supposed to do was to stop him selling oil except for food and medicine. But we were finding, and I think in 2001 round about \$3 billion worth was being leached away through illicit sales of that oil. So the sanctions weren't working that well. The second part of it was the inspectors, and as we were saying earlier, I mean you can split hairs about did they leave or were they thrown out. But the fact is they couldn't do their job. And therefore, the second part of containment we weren't able to do. Now the reason for going back down the UN path, some people wanted to go to war last year. I said no, we have got to go down the UN path. Put the inspectors back in there because we could have then, if the inspection regime was working properly we could have made the policy of containment work. But the inspectors can only do their work with the co-operation of the Iraqis.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Right, you said of those weapons inspectors that they needed time and space to be able to do their job. How much time?

TONY BLAIR:

The time to make a judgement as to whether Iraq is co-operating or not, because the inspectors aren't there as a detective agency, it's not a game of hide and seek. What is supposed to happen is that the Iraqis are supposed to co-operate, actively, as Kofi Annan said, with the inspectors. They're not doing that at the moment.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

OK, so they report back next week. Will you give an undertaking to this audience, and indeed to the British people that before any military action you will seek another UN Resolution, specifically authorising the use of force.

TONY BLAIR:

We've said that that's what we want to do.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

But you haven't given an explicit commitment that those are the only circumstances under which British forces will be used.

TONY BLAIR:

I haven't but what I've said is this – those are the only circumstances in which we would agree to use force except for one caveat that I've entered. And I'll explain exactly why I've done this. If the inspectors do report that they can't do their work properly because Iraq is not co-operating there's no doubt that under the terms of the existing United Nations Resolution that that's a breach of the Resolution. In those circumstances there should be a further Resolution. If, however, a country were to issue a veto because there has to be unanimity amongst the permanent members of the Security Council. If a country unreasonably in those circumstances put down a veto then I would consider action outside of that.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

But Prime Minister, this is, you say, all about a man defying the wishes of the United Nations. You cannot have it both ways. If one of the permanent five members of the Security Council uses its veto and you, with your friend George Bush, decide somehow that this is unreasonable, you can't then consider yourself absolutely free to defy the express will of the Security Council. What's it for otherwise?

TONY BLAIR:

First of all, let me make two points in relation to that. Firstly you can't just do it with America, you have to get a majority in the Security Council. Secondly, because the issue of a veto doesn't even arise unless you get a majority in the Security Council. Secondly, the choice that you're then faced with is this. If the will of the UN is the thing that is most important and I agree that it is, if there is a breach of Resolution 1441 which is the one that we passed. If there is a breach and we do nothing then we have flouted the will of the UN.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

We have flouted the will of the UN.

TONY BLAIR:

If we don't act in those circumstances. Look ...

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Are you saying there's already an authorisation for war?

TONY BLAIR:

No, what I'm saying is this. In the Resolution that we passed last November we said that Iraq, it's actually interesting to look at the Resolution. Iraq had what was called a final opportunity to comply. The duty of compliance was defined as full co-operation with the UN Inspectors. The Resolution then goes on to say "any failure to co-operate fully is a breach of this Resolution and serious consequences i.e. action, would follow". Now, we then also put in that Resolution that there will be a further discussion in the Security Council. But the clear understanding was that if

the inspectors do say that Iraq is not complying and there is a breach of that resolution, then we have to act. Now if someone comes along and says, OK I accept there's a breach of Resolution 1441 but I'm issuing a veto I think that would be unreasonable. Incidentally I don't think that's what will happen. I think that we will, if the inspectors do end up in a situation where they're saying there is not compliance by Iraq then I think a second resolution will issue.

FEMALE:

Do you not agree that most of Britain don't want us to act alone without the United Nations, and do you not agree that it's important to get France, Germany and Russia on board with support to help us?

TONY BLAIR:

Yes I do. I agree with that. That's what I'm trying to get. So...

JEREMY PAXMAN: Why not give an undertaking that you wouldn't go to war without their agreement.

TONY BLAIR:

Because supposing one of those countries – I'm not saying this will happen, I don't believe it will incidentally. But supposing in circumstances where there plainly was a breach of Resolution 1441 and everyone else wished to take action, one of them put down a veto. In those circumstances it would be unreasonable. Then I think it would be wrong because otherwise you couldn't uphold the UN. Because you'd have passed your Resolution and then you'd have failed to act on it.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

And who are we to say it's "unreasonable" as you put it?

TONY BLAIR:

You say that, if in circumstances where the inspectors – not us – have come back to the UN and said we can't do our job. Now look – I think it's a perfectly simple way of putting this thing and incidentally, I don't believe we'll get to the stage of vetoes and so on. I think we'll be in the position that you're talking about. Now the reason

I wanted this to go down the UN path last year. I mean, in the summer people were thinking you were about to start the war. Myself and other people said, no, we've got to take this back to the United Nations and go through the UN route. And I think we will be in circumstances where the UN passed the second Resolution and I take it in the sense from what you're saying I think this is where the majority of people are. Is that if the UN did pass a second Resolution people would support it.

LAURA SEWELL:

I'd like to know if the UK and the US just ignore the UN, just go ahead with war without a UN Resolution. How can you expect any other country to listen to the UN in the future?

TONY BLAIR:

Well, that comes back to the point that we're making. The first thing is that it would be odd to say that we'd ignored the UN since ...

LAURA SEWELL: What if you go against a UN Resolution, are you not ...

TONY BLAIR:

We mustn't go against the UN Resolution.

SEWELL: If you go without the UN Resolution.

TONY BLAIR:

The point that I'm making is this. There are only one set of circumstances. I mean the reason I won't give the absolute undertaking that Jeremy was asking me to give, is because of this one set of circumstances where Resolution 1441, the one that has been passed, where everyone's agreed on. If that is breached and the inspectors say, no I'm sorry we can't do our job and in those circumstances the Resolution 1441 effectively says well then a second Resolution issues. If someone then at that point vetoes wrongly, what do we do?

FEMALE: It's only you that thinks it's wrong, like George Bush thinks that they're doing that unreasonably.

TONY BLAIR:

No, no ...

FEMALE: It's the point of the veto, not that that can happen in that sort of situation.

TONY BLAIR:

What happens is that there are 15 members of the Security Council, there's five permanent members and the five permanent members have got the veto. The other ones don't. Now, the issue of a veto only arises if we've got a majority of people on the Security Council with us, so there's not – Britain and America that would be doing this on our own in any event.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Who else is concerned about this business of the UN. Yes, you sir, right in front there.

MALE:

Prime Minister – do you not think that this war could cause even more conflict in the Middle East in that this could cause other rogue states to actually go and sit behind Saddam and actually support him – countries like Syria that Jeremy mentioned before. Iran, countries like that.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Yes, I think we're going to come to that point and some of the broader possible implications later on but, yes, you sir right in the back row.

MALE:

I agree with something that the Rt. Hon Member for Texas North said a few minutes ago,

TONY BLAIR:

I gather you're not wholly in favour then.

MALE:

...which was that there is not likely to be a veto in the Security Council because when Bush (sic) comes to shove I think everybody will fall in line. But aside from that, on the point of the inspectors – isn't it strange, Mr. Vice President that with the information that was displayed to the world by Colin Powell yesterday, that the video evidence, the photographs taken from satellites, why is it then that if this information was available to the US way back in November, December, that it was not given to the UN inspection team to give them some pointers as to where to look at. Because, one of the things that was said there was the topsoil was removed to take away all traces of chemical agents. So why wasn't that information given to Hans Blix and his team, to say go and look over there>

TONY BLAIR:

There's a very simple explanation for that. In respect of much of this information it's only coming to light now. Some of the intelligence about what has happened earlier has only come to light now. In respect of other stuff however, we are co-operating with the inspectors. We are trying to give inspectors the whole time to allow them to do the work.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

These were satellite photographs that were taken before, and in one case during, and other cases after, UN inspections. So they could have been made available to them at any time. Did they lose them?

TONY BLAIR:

No we do make the information available to the inspectors but where, for example, you have evidence that they're moving stuff before the inspections, obviously then there's not much point in the inspections taking place in those circumstances. Now in fact I think in this particular instance they did do the inspection but you know, don't be under any doubt at all, we are trying the whole time to co-operate with the inspectors and give them what intelligence we can. But there isn't really much doubt about what is going on inside Iraq. They tried to conceal the stuff.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

The question referred to you by the way, Prime Minister, as Vice President and Honourable Member for Texas North. But it's not just him. I mean, when a great world figure like Nelson Mandela calls the British Prime Minister the American Foreign Minister – don't you feel embarrassed?

TONY BLAIR:

I've huge respect for Nelson Mandela. But I don't feel that I'm doing the wrong thing and I may not be doing the easy thing but I do believe I'm doing the right thing.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

So when people say you're a poodle..

TONY BLAIR:

Yeah, well you know, you can do that and be the Right Hon Member for Texas and all that. Look, it depends whether you want to deal with this at the level of humour and satire or whether you want to try and make sense of what are difficult issues. Now, look, I'm faced with a situation here where you know, we know the history of Iraq, we know these weapons of mass destruction. We can see in our own country for example what is happening with the problems of international terrorism. I simply tell you, you can believe it, don't believe it. Now hang on a minute. I just want to finish this thing. Because this is the reason I'm doing what I'm doing, even though I know that it is difficult and unpopular in certain quarters. It is a matter of time before these issues of chemical biological nuclear weapons which are now increasingly easy to get hold of with irresponsible, unstable states proliferating them. It is a question of time before that comes together with international terrorism in a devastating way for this country and other countries in the world. And, I've said this before, it may be, even if I'm the only person left saying it, I'm going to say it. It's a threat and a danger that we have to confront and there's no reason for these people to have these weapons in this way, there is no reason why they can't co-operate with the UN and these terrorist groups out there they are trying every day as we speak to get hold of this stuff and use it. These are not separate threats, they're related and linked.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

You know your defence intelligence assessment is that there is currently no link between Baghdad and Al Qaeda.

TONY BLAIR:

No they didn't say that what they said was which is absolutely right is that historically al Qaeda which wants these Arab states to become religious states. That Al Qaeda obviously would regard Iraq as a secular state and relations between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein would not have been of any great historical importance, that is not to say in circumstances where Iraq faces a threat from possible military action and Al Qaeda have also been subject to action being pursued at international level they aren't coming together and there is evidence that links the two. I've never suggested that

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Hang on, with respect, I mean this is the defence intelligence staff terrorism analysis sell a paper to you on the 12th January, there have been contacts between Al Qaeda and the regime in the past. It is now assessed that any fledgling relationship foundered due to lack of trust.

TONY BLAIR:

First of all, it wasn't a paper to me. I mean I know the BBC ...

JEREMY PAXMAN:

What, you're on the circulation list?

TONY BLAIR:

I'm not actually on the circulation list. I know the BBC keeps saying it's a paper to me and I'm on the circulation list since we keep telling them that it isn't. The papers that I get are from the joint intelligence committee. That was a paper primarily actually about the relations between Iraq and terrorism more generally and I can absolutely assure you the evidence that we have is not that Iraq was responsible for the 11th September or some such thing. I don't suggest that. But

what Colin Powell was talking about yesterday is correct. The poison factory in northern Iraq, not strictly under the control of Saddam, is run by operatives that have people in Baghdad and the stuff that they are producing there which includes ricin and other poisons we believe is being dispersed throughout the world. Now, I'm not sitting here and saying to you that's the reason why we're taking action against Saddam, it isn't. But it would not be correct to say there is no evidence linking Al Qaeda and Iraq.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

If that danger that you and George Bush perceive apparently independently is as real as you suggest, where else are you prepared to follow him in action?

TONY BLAIR:

You say apparently independently. I mentioned this issue of weapons of mass destruction in February 2001, I majored on it in my press conference with George Bush, before 11 September had happened. Three days after 11th September when I went to the House of Commons I said that the next issue on our agenda is weapons of mass destruction. The worry is not just Britain and America. As you can see from the eight other European leaders that signed letters last week, in fact the ten Eastern European Union leaders, and this is a worry to anybody who looks at this seriously. To be fair to France and Germany, France and Germany may have a difference about how we're tackling this problem but they don't have any difference with us in that it is a problem.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

All right, let's take some of these other countries. I mean, you were asked about North Korea in the Commons last week and you said we have to confront North Korea about its weapons programme. Well when someone shouted when do we stop, you said we stop when the threat to our security is properly and fully dealt with. What does that mean?

TONY BLAIR:

It means that in respect of each of the countries that poses a threat with these weapons of mass destruction, we confront them and try and deal with it and you would deal with it in different ways in different countries.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

So you are willing to attack North Korea

TONY BLAIR:

No, I'm not saying that. But what I am saying is that you cannot ignore the risk. North Korea is a country, its people are starving, that is virtually living on the export of ballistic missile technology. Their nuclear scientists are people who are working for other countries as well as North Korea and I'm simply saying to people, if you allow this stuff to proliferate, if you allow it to be traded in, and there are companies so-called supposedly respectable companies in the world trading in this stuff, the terrorists are trying to get hold of it – they will succeed at some point unless we deal with it.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Prime Minister, you said of Iraq that it was only the threat of force that got the UN weapons inspectors back in there, and you're not prepared to say the same about North Korea which has, as you know, thrown out inspectors.

TONY BLAIR:

Well. I'm not saying that in respect of North Korea that I agree with them throwing out the inspectors. What I'm saying is you will adopt different strategies for different countries and the UN as you know will have a discussion about North Korea.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

So there's no threat of force against North Korea? And when the North Koreans say today that they will themselves engage in pre-emptive strikes if there's an American military build-up are they not merely following the example that has been set them by the threats that you and George Bush have made?

TONY BLAIR:

No – because as you know, North Korea have withdrawn from the non proliferation treaty, that's extremely serious. We are trying to work with other allies now to make sure they come back. That's one of the reasons why this is an issue we've been discussing, I had a conversation about this with President Putin a few days ago. This is a serious issue.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Yes.

TONY BLAIR:

Well we're going to have to deal with each of these countries that is doing this.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

OK, Ian Davies

Davies:

Yes, Mr. Prime Minister. I mean the question has almost been asked already.

TONY BLAIR:

There's a compliment for you.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Let's see what it is first!

Davies:

Since September 11, obviously the United States has sort of been aggressive towards Afghanistan and now Iraq. Where it's going to stop, who's going to be next?

TONY BLAIR:

Well, you know, where does it stop. It stops when we've dealt with these two twin issues which is, as I say, unstable states who are developing weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism. I think this is the threat the world faces.

Davies

But does that mean that we'll be tagging along on Mr. Bush's shirt-tails all the time?

TONY BLAIR:

No, but it means ...

Davies

Well that's what it's looking like at the moment.

TONY BLAIR:

No, we've got to do what's right for us. OK, and what I'm saying to you is I believe this is a threat that concerns us. You see, I think that the world we live in today which is an interdependent world, there is no way that any of these states could use this type of weaponry and us not be involved in this in some way. You saw with Afghanistan or the 11th September attack, there's no way Britain could have stood apart from that. I mean we could have taken a back seat, but we were still involved. You know, the terrorists that are operating in countries today, they're operating in Britain yes, but they're operating in France, they're operating in Sweden, they're operating in Italy, they're operating in countries that haven't taken a high profile in this.

Davies

But it was only last week that the US warned Pakistan about its terrorist links. Are they going to be next, and bearing in mind that our historic links with Pakistan, what position does that put us in?

TONY BLAIR:

We've got different strategies, I say, for different countries., Some we will sit down and negotiate with. The reason why the strategies we have in relation to Iraq is that we've gone through a history of aggression from Iraq and the United Nations Resolutions are there because of Iraqi aggression. But you're not wrong, there are

real issues to do with Pakistan. India and Pakistan and the potential for conflict there, is still a huge issue.

Davies:

Yes but the US warned them regarding their terrorist links last week, it was reported in The Times. So where do we stand with that warning?

TONY BLAIR:

Well, we fully support that warning. In fact we've been talking to the Pakistanis ourselves about doing this. But, let's be clear, the difference is that Pakistan does not launch an external war of aggression. Now, that's not to say there aren't real issues to do with weapons of mass destruction and Pakistan.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Not recently anyway. Gentleman in the front row.

MALE:

Prime Minister, this has been going on now for 12 years. Why have we had to wait 12 years to get to this state that we're in now – why?

TONY BLAIR:

Because we went through a whole process where the inspectors went in...

MALE:

With respect, 12 years – a process – that's nearly three terms of a government.

TONY BLAIR:

You might say having had 12 years it's about time you got rid of the weapons.

MALE:

Well I think that should have been done a long, long time ago.

TONY BLAIR:

Well can I just explain the 12 years, as to what happened.

MALE:

What are we going to accomplish with war?

TONY BLAIR:

Disarmament of Iraq, of the weapons of mass destruction.

MALE:

And then we move round the world?

TONY BLAIR:

No, we don't move round the world creating war on everyone, but what we do do is we do confront those countries that have this material and if we can do it through partnership and by agreement with them, we have to reduce the threat that they pose. Because otherwise this stuff will carry on proliferating and it will be traded round the world and that causes a threat to us. And just, I'd like to deal with your 12 years. Because what actually happened was, in April 1991 when the first UN Resolution was passed people went in. The inspectors were supposed to be there, a few weeks. I mean, the way the inspectors are supposed to work is the way they worked in respect of South Africa.

MALE:

With respect, when there was this problem with South Africa, South Africa said that's where they are, that's where they are, that's where this is, that's where this is. Why hasn't somebody told Saddam 12 years ago either do it that way, come out in the open and say you've got these things – they're there. Take them away from him.

TONY BLAIR:

But that's what we've been saying for 12 years. But he's not done it.

MALE:

12 years!

TONY BLAIR:

What you're really arguing for is that we should have taken action earlier.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

There's a chap here in the front row who's had his hand up for ages.

MALE:

The difference between Korea and Iraq is it purely based on oil, because Iraq's an oil-producing country and Korea isn't.

TONY BLAIR:

No, let me just deal with the oil thing because this is one of the ... we may be right or we may be wrong, I mean people have their different views about why we're doing this thing. But the oil conspiracy theory is honestly one of the most absurd when you analyse it. The fact is that, if the oil that Iraq has were our concern I mean we could probably cut a deal with Saddam tomorrow in relation to the oil. It's not the oil that is the issue, it is the weapons, which is why the UN Resolutions have gone over 12 years in relation to the weapons and why we've actually allowed Iraq to export oil but we've had to try to keep it in an account used for food and medicine because of our worry that otherwise it would be used to buy arms.

MALE:

The three biggest countries against the war at the moment are Russia, China and France and they've all signed agreement with Saddam to explore the western oilfields. Is that why they're against it because they're frightened that if the US and Britain go in the contracts will be torn up?

TONY BLAIR:

No, I don't think that's the reason either actually. Let's wait and see where France and Russia and China end up on this. I mean, there have been differences between ourselves and France, between those countries you've mentioned and ourselves and the United States. But let's just be clear where we're all in common. We're all in common on Resolution 1441. We're all in common that Saddam has to disarm. We're all in common that the inspectors are the best way to do it. But actually,

we're all in common also that if the inspectors can't do it it's going to have to be done by force. The only issue between us really is well, when do you make the judgement that the inspectors can do it or not.

MALE:

So at this moment in time, in Great Britain everything over the economy everything else, the most frightened thing I should be scared of is Saddam Hussein?

TONY BLAIR:

I think the thing you should be most worried about in terms of security, obviously there are economic issues in our country and the rest of the world today. But the thing to be most worried about, I would say, yes, is the link between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Can we look, Prime Minister, if it does come to war, about what the possible implications are for us in this country and elsewhere. You were one of the very first to realise the moment that this all got serious – the importance of addressing the whole Israel-Palestine question. I suggest to you that going to war with Israel as a tacit ally is likely to make the threat of terror in this country a great deal greater.

TONY BLAIR:

I don't think it will. First of all, we're going to be at risk of terrorism in respect of what happens. Where did the last major terrorist event happen? In Bali, in Indonesia, a Moslem country. There are arrests being made, there have been something like 3,000 arrests made in 90 different countries over the past few months. If you hide away from this issue you're not going to stop being a threat. France has just been arresting people in connection with terrorist events and they're supposed to be on the other side of the argument.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

There have been 66 arrests in Europe in the past two months, 29 of them have been in Pakistan, there have been something like 16 from Algeria, 14 from elsewhere in North Africa, not one of them has been an Iraqi.

TONY BLAIR:

What do you prove by that?

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Well I'm just asking you about the connection between terrorism and the looming war on Iraq.

TONY BLAIR:

Well, that's a different issue actually, what you were asking about I thought was will we make ourselves a bigger terrorist threat, or more threat from terrorists if we engage in military action in Iraq and my point to you is that we are a terrorist threat, we're going to be a terrorist threat frankly, irrespective of what happens there. But I do believe that it is very very important that we push the peace process forward on the Middle East. But I think that's important in its own terms, irrespective of what happens in Iraq.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Do you consider this a just war do you, if it comes to war?

TONY BLAIR:

I wouldn't go to war if I didn't consider it right. But I just want to point this out to you, we could still avoid war today if Saddam did what he should do, and as the gentleman just said there, it's not a mystery – South African did it. When they had their nuclear weapons programme shut down they called in the inspectors, they let the experts be interviewed, the experts said well this is what's happened to the programme, the inspectors said fine – they shut it down. That's all he needs to do. It's not a mystery. There's no difficulty in him knowing what it is we need him to do.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Gentleman in front row.

MALE:

Could America – because George Bush has said that his object is regime change in Iraq. We might be able to avoid war but can Bush without regime change?

TONY BLAIR:

Well, George Bush has gone along with Resolution 1441 as well and it was absolutely clear, last thing we both said last November – if the Iraqis obey this Resolution and as I say, it's not a mystery what they have to do, all they have to do is agree to do what the inspectors say. If they did that we wouldn't even be sitting here having this discussion. Now, the choice in the end is for them and the reason why I wanted to go through the United Nations is to give them a last chance, is to say, OK you know, we've had this long history of this thing, there is still an issue here. We've got to confront this issue but let's confront it peacefully so that the UN inspectors do their work. Now what's actually happening at the moment, there is massive intimidation going on of their experts and their witnesses to this programme. They're effectively told they'll be killed if they give proper evidence. They're not being allowed to come and be interviewed by the inspectors except with a colleague alongside them that is obviously there for the purposes of intimidation. You know, it could be done so easily if he wanted to do it. And therefore, when people say you're hell bent on this war, I've tried to avoid being in this position and I honestly thought there was some prospect last November when we passed the UN Resolution that he would realise we were serious about this and that if he didn't cooperate he was going to be in trouble.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Rabina Ahmed, in the back row, there, you have concerns about the possible domestic consequences of any war.

FEMALE

Yes Prime Minister, I am a Muslim and I live in Britain. When you said we have to do what is right by us, does that include me, because I feel that a lot of Asians up and down the country feel threatened if Britain goes to war with Iraq. Unfortunately Saddam is a madman, in my view – sort him out! Why do the Iraqi people need to suffer? Why do the Muslims in this country, not just the Muslims, the view that

British whites have of Asians is everybody is a Muslim. There is prejudice, there is growing racism –

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Do you think it will make race relations worse?

FEMALE

It will – it will definitely make things worse, it has already reached that point where things are getting bad.

TONY BLAIR:

Well I mean I've been in, I mean I totally understand the point you're making. I've been involved in conflicts twice before. The first was Kosovo when we went to the help of Kosovo Albanians – who were Muslims – to stop ethnic cleansing, and where we took on Milosevic who is a orthodox Christian.

FEMALE

Yes.

TONY BLAIR:

Now I hope that's some indication that we're not singling out –

FEMALE

But people have forgotten that.

TONY BLAIR:

Well let's remind them.

FEMALE

After September the 11th everything is linked to Muslim. Everything seems then to be linked to anyone with a colour that is not white.

TONY BLAIR:

Well I mean I agree that that is a perception amongst certain parts of our Muslim community but let me just say this to you. When we entered Afghanistan, a lot of people said to me then, if you take military action against Afghanistan, this war, this is a problem for, for Muslims. But actually what has happened in Afghanistan is Afghanistan remains a Muslim country, but people are free – you know, I was just talking to the president of Afghanistan the other day and he was telling me, look we've got huge problems still in this country but people are free, they can go about their daily business, we've got now three million children in school, one and a half million of them are girls, girls weren't even allowed to go to school. You know, those two conflicts, I think are some indication that we try and do what we have to do with care and I just simply say to you, if we do have to come to military action in Iraq and remove Saddam, then I honestly believe the people who will rejoice first will be the Iraqis because they have been the victims of Saddam.

FEMALE

But so many Iraqis, so many British people, so many Americans are going to die. Innocent blood is going to flow.

TONY BLAIR:

If you get into war and conflict it is true –

FEMALE

Can it be avoided

TONY BLAIR:

Well it can be avoided if Saddam abides by the United Nations – if we do take military action, we have to do everything we possibly can to minimise the civilian casualties. Of course we've got to do that. But I simply do say to you, the people that have suffered most from Saddam are the Iraqi people themselves. I mean I spoke to ten Iraqi exiles the other day, who were women, who described to me, not just the deaths of members of their family, but the appalling human rights abuses, torture, the fact that they were still, some of them, under threat of death - living abroad - from this guy. I mean, you know, this, this is not a humane regime –

FEMALE

No coming back to my question.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

No one denies the man's a monster.

TONY BLAIR:

Yes, but that is of importance then in asking how do you deal with someone – okay let's accept –

JEREMY PAXMAN:

She's asked you about deaths of innocent people, I mean as a Christian how do you feel about innocent people dying? As they always die in war.

APPLAUSE

TONY BLAIR:

That is why you avoid war if you possibly can, and that is why we went through the United Nations. Now there were innocent people, I'm afraid as well as guilty that died in Kosovo, and in Afghanistan. But in the end I felt on both occasions we had no option but to do this. And I remember at the time of Kosovo, I remember saying no let the peace negotiations go on several more weeks in order to try and get them sorted so that we didn't have to take on Milosevic. But when you say that Saddam is a monster that is irrelevance, I'm afraid, to how you deal with the situation because a monster is not somebody you want to allow to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

The question is what freedom he has under the current inspection regime but we've discussed that already, I want to explore a little further about your personal feelings about this war. Does the fact that George Bush and you are both Christians make it easier for you to view these conflicts in terms of good and evil?

TONY BLAIR:

I don't think so, no, I think that whether you're a Christian or you're not a Christian you can try perceive what is good and and what is, is evil.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

You don't pray together for example?

TONY BLAIR:

No, we don't pray together Jeremy, no.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Why do you smile?

TONY BLAIR:

Because – why do you ask me the question?

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Because I'm trying to find out how you feel about it.

TONY BLAIR:

Possibly.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Right, would anyone else like to have a question?

FEMALE

Yes, I would like to ask do you believe that the people of your country are behind you at the moment?

TONY BLAIR:

I think that, I think if there were a second UN resolution then I think people would be behind me. I think if there's not then there's a lot of persuading to do.

FEMALE

Because I don't, I don't share any confidence that the people are behind you at the moment. Everybody that I've spoken to within my circle oppose what's happening at the moment.

APPLAUSE

TONY BLAIR:

Supposing there were a second resolution then, would that make a difference?

FEMALE

Yes.

TONY BLAIR:

Well.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Prime Minister but you said, in your view, it may be necessary to go to war without a second resolution.

TONY BLAIR:

Well I said that in one set of circumstances.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Yes, an unreasonable veto, as you put it. But if that happened, would you be prepared to go to war despite the fact that apparently the majority of people in this country would not be with you? ...

TONY BLAIR:

Well you can only go, obviously, with the support of parliament but I think that if you do get to a situation where the inspectors say, look we can't do, you know, Saddam's not cooperating with us, we can't do this through inspections and there wasn't just the United States and Britain but other countries too were supporting us in that view, so you had a majority of countries in the UN Security Council, I think that would be, I think that would make a difference to people. And I also think that as, as more emerges about the nature of this regime, as well, I think people, at least I hope they

can realise why it is not safe to allow a regime such as this the freedom to develop these weapons. I understand it is not an easy task because I think the very first point that Jeremy was making to me is the point that is most difficult for people, what is, you know, why now are we suddenly doing this? And my answer to that is actually this does have a long history to it and I think the one thing that has changed my thinking about these issues, in relation to the 11th of September, is that, you know, I keep having this mental picture in my mind of August 2001 and coming along to people and saying there's this terrorist organisation in Afghanistan, they are evil people who will try and mount major terrorist attacks on our country, we've got to go into Afghanistan and deal with them. I think people would have said to me, you know you must be crackers what on earth are you on about. I mean people wouldn't have even have heard of who Al Qaida was but a month later it happened. And I think that if these people could have got hold of an even worse weapon than the weapon they used, in a sense, which was the planes, they would. And you know, Jeremy talked about 90 arrests, actually as I say, there's something like 3000 that have gone on in the last few months worldwide. I just think these, these dangers are there and I think that it's difficult sometimes for people to see how they all come together but it's my honest belief that they do come together and I think it's my job as prime minister, even if frankly I might be more popular if I didn't say this to you or said I'm having nothing to do with George Bush, I think it's my duty to tell it to you if I really believe it and I do really believe it. I may be wrong in believing it but I do believe it.

JEREMY PAXMAN:

Prime Minister, thank you. And thank you all and goodnight from the Baltic Centre.

ENDS