



With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

Interviewer: Edward Stourton

Interviewee: Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor

Date: 1 August, 2002, 16:20 EDT

STOURTON: Can we begin with September the 11th itself? What do you remember about how you found out what had happened and what did you do?

RICE: I was standing in my office at my desk that morning and at 8:47 a.m. or so, my executive assistant came in and said that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. And I remember thinking, what a strange accident. And so I called the president, who was in Florida at an education event, and I said, "Mr. President, a plane has hit the World Trade Center". And he said, "That's a strange accident". And I said, "I'll call you when we know more". Initially, the reports were that it was maybe twin engine planes of some sort, maybe a private plane. And then when I got down to have my morning staff meeting, down in the Situation Room, my executive assistant handed me another note and it said a second plane had hit the World Trade Center. And I thought, my God, this is a terrorist attack. And so I went into the Situation Support Center, and I was going to try to gather together the National Security Council principals. And Colin Powell was in Peru. And I tried to call Don Rumsfeld, and I couldn't reach him right away, and I looked behind me, and a plane had hit the Pentagon. And right about that time, the Secret Service came and they said, "You have to go to the bunker, because we think a plane may be headed for the White House". And so I stopped to call the president, who said, "I really should come back to Washington". We said, "No, Washington is under attack, you mustn't". And I then got down to the bunker and I spent the rest of the day, first of all, trying with the Vice President and the Secretary of Transportation, Norm Mineta, to ground civil aviation and to be able to track where all of the aircraft were, so that you knew what else was happening.

It was a remarkable time. And it was not until very much later in the day when we settled into a National Security Council meeting that we began thinking of how we would respond. We knew almost immediately that it was al-Qaeda. But those first hours are something I will never forget.

STOURTON: The president, as you say, was in the air most of the time for security reasons. You were all in the bunker. Did you ever worry there was a sense the government wasn't functioning, that it wasn't in control?

RICE: It's funny you should ask that, because I, immediately, when I got to the bunker, I called or had my deputy call the then Acting Secretary of State, Rich Armitage, to get the posts around the world to send out a message that the United States of America had not been decapitated, and that it was indeed working. And I think it was my old nuclear war training, you know, that you have to let people know that the government is still functioning. But I was not concerned that we couldn't function, no. It was clear that we still had communications and everything. But somebody might read that we couldn't function or think that we couldn't function, and I thought that was something that needed to be taken care of.

STOURTON: The President came back that night and made the address to the nation. He made that very broad declaration on a war on terrorism that night, which surprised a lot of people. What was your advice to him about that?

RICE: We had talked earlier in a National Security Council meeting by video; the president was out at Offut Air Force Base in Nebraska, and we had talked about how to think about what had happened to us. And the president was very early on convinced that this was something that was global, that it was New York and Washington that had been hit, but that it could be anyplace. He believed, and we talked about the fact, that for America to declare a war on terrorism to protect itself was not something that was deserving of America's attention in quite this way; that we needed to be able to show and to let people know that, even on the night that we'd been attacked, that we believed this was global and this was something that we shared with other freedom-loving people. We talked about the one line that probably was the most important line, which was that if you harbour a terrorist, then you will share their fate. Because that was really the core of what journalists later called the "Bush Doctrine". Not just the terrorists, but that they're state sponsored, those who harboured them, those who were unwilling to go after them also had to be dealt with.

STOURTON: I've seen it reported that on the third day, when you saw the Guards playing the Star-Spangled Banner at Buckingham Palace, you found that a very moving moment. Is that right?

RICE: Absolutely. I found it very moving. I had been up very late. I'm usually a very sound sleeper and I had not slept very well on 11 September and 12 September. And I went home very late on the night of 13 September and I turned on the television for the first time. I'd actually not watched television this entire time, and at Buckingham Palace, they were playing the American national anthem. And it was so moving, I really just broke down. It was really a wonderful, fine example of how our friends were responding to what had happened to us. There were moments like that. There was the moment in which I talked to President Putin. And he said, this was on the day, on 11 September, he said that Russia was standing down its military exercises because they knew that the United States had gone on a higher state of alert. And for an old Soviet specialist, who was accustomed to stories about spirals of alert between American and Soviet forces, to have the Russian president say, we understand that this is an attack on you and that this is a cooperative effort, was very moving. Another very moving moment was when Nato declared Article 5. I came to my desk early on the morning of 12 September, and our Nato ambassador said, "Condi, NATO wants to declare Article 5, an attack upon one is an attack upon all". I also found that very moving. You need friends at a time like that, and it was very good to have friends.

STOURTON: That Saturday, you had effectively a council of war, I suppose, at Camp David. Can you just take me, I know it was a long meeting, through the main options that you went through that day?

RICE: The first task was to establish that indeed the goal and objective was to fight the global war on terrorism. And we had to make a determination, since it was going to be a global war on terrorism, were we first, however, going to focus on al-Qaeda? And that was a long discussion, how broadly should we define the enemy, was this going to be initially Afghanistan? Frankly, the target set in Afghanistan was not all that promising. But we decided that we were fighting a war against al-Qaeda. The president listened a lot that morning. He wanted to hear the military's presentation on what was possible. And it really came down to, were you going to go after this with cruise missiles only, would you do some combination of cruise missiles and bombers but still mostly air power, or were you prepared to put, as it became called, "boots on the ground", to put ground forces in to take care of this problem. The president listened to all of this, he listened to what the Central Intelligence Agency might be able to do with Afghan forces that were

already there, the Northern Alliance in particular. And after listening to this rather intensive briefing and discussion for a period of almost four hours, he said, "I want us all to have lunch, and then I want everyone to go and get some exercise and rest, and then I want you to come back at 4:30 p.m. and I want people to tell me what you think we ought to do". He came back, he listened, there was a lot of, really, a lot of agreement that it had to be global, that al-Qaeda was probably the initial target, that doing just air power had a lot of down sides. But I don't think one could say he was given four distinct options. He was, rather, given the best thinking of his war council. And he said, "I'll let you know". And he ended the meeting and he came back here and the next day he called me into his office up in the Residence and he said, "I know what I want to do". So that's how he conducted that meeting.

STOURTON: So by the time he got on his feet in front of the joint houses of Congress that week, the course of the next few months was pretty much set, was it?

RICE: Yes. It was clear by that time that one of the issues was would we give the Taleban an ultimatum? And so we decided, he decided that yes, he would give them an ultimatum. He had decided that he was going to set in motion planning for integrated operations between the Central Intelligence Agency and the military; that we were going to give the Taleban a clear chance, but if they were unwilling to respond - that is, to turn over al-Qaeda - that we were prepared to try and bring the Taleban down. Most of the really important strategic decisions had been made by the time he gave the 20 September address.

STOURTON: Were there times during the campaign itself, the military campaign that you began to doubt whether it was going to work?

RICE: Well, I would say that with the exception of the president, there was a time when everyone got a little impatient, because there was a lot of question as to when the Northern Alliance was actually going to move. And there was a little bit of a concern that winter was going to come on, and Afghanistan's a tough place to fight in the winter, and what would really have been achieved by that time, and would we have lost the initiative and the momentum if by, say, the first of December there had not been major advances? But as it turned out, none of that turned out to be a problem quite at all. And when the Taleban began to unravel, they unravelled with remarkable speed.

STOURTON: Nevertheless, thinking of Tora Bora and Osama himself escaping, what do you think went wrong there?

RICE: Well, I don't know if we know who did or did not escape at Tora Bora. Tora Bora was an effort to do what we've had to do a couple of other times, which is to take what was a significant pocket of al-Qaeda, a kind of attempt by them to regroup, and to make certain that they couldn't do it. If you think about it, they massed in a way that allowed us to make certain that they couldn't kind of regroup and launch a counter-offensive. And I think we all believe that in that sense, Tora Bora was quite a success. Since we don't really know who escaped or who didn't, I don't think we can assess that?

STOURTON: What's your instinct, though? Do you think he's still alive?

RICE: I don't know. I really don't. I think that he isn't commanding al-Qaeda in the way that he once was. It may be that he's alive; it may be that he isn't. But our goal always was to break up this network, and to break up its leadership, and to break up its command and control structure, and to deny it the kinds of benefits that an organization like this gets from being on the territory of a country. They, in a sense, the al-Qaeda hijacked Afghanistan. And they had all the benefits of territoriality - they had territory, they had training, they had financial networks, they had communication networks. Whatever they're doing, they're doing with far less efficiency as a result

of that operation.

STOURTON: Do you think you've broken them for good?

RICE: I don't think that we believe this war is over against al-Qaeda. There are really still operations that we're conducting in Afghanistan, but we're doing it now with the support of a government that is committed to fighting terrorism on behalf of its people. That's a dramatic change. We also are doing it, fighting, in conjunction with a number of other governments around the world that might have become safe havens for the al-Qaeda, whether it's Yemen, or Georgia in the Pankisi Gorge, or the Philippines. And so the president, in that 20 September speech, said this was going to be a long war, because it took a long time for these organisations to dig in, and it's going to take a long time for them to dig out. Not everything will be done by military power. The law enforcement activities, joint law enforcement around the world; the intelligence net and blanket of an intelligence net that we now have; the cooperative efforts on the financial front to freeze and follow financial transactions - these are all extremely important elements of the war on terrorism. But it's going to take some time for it all to bear fruit.

STOURTON: You talked about a moral clarity being introduced into international affairs by what happened. And when the president signaled what might be the second wave of the war on terrorism, he talked about an "axis of evil" - he used a very moral term. Do you think the moral case for action against Iraq has been made?

RICE: Well, the president hasn't decided how he wants to do it, or how he intends to make the case for particular methods. But by all means, we believe the case for regime change is very powerful.

This is a regime, Saddam Hussein's regime, that we know has twice tried - and come closer than we thought at the time - to acquire nuclear weapons. So, in 1981, with the Osiraq reactor, and then in 1991, when our forces came in on the ground, they found a much more developed nuclear programme than anybody knew. He has developed biological weapons, and lied to the UN repeatedly about the stockpiles and the numbers and the volume of that. He has used chemical weapons against his own people and against his neighbours. He has invaded his neighbours. He has killed thousands of his own people. He shoots at our planes, our airplanes in the no-fly zone, where we're trying to enforce U.N. security resolutions. And he, despite the fact that he lost this war - a war, by the way, which he started - he negotiates with the United Nations as if he won the war. I think it's a very stunning indictment. And so the moral case - that this is an evil man who, left to his own devices, will wreak havoc again, on his own population, his neighbours, and, if he gets weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them, on all of us - is a very powerful moral case for regime change.

STOURTON: There were people right back in the first week after 11 September who thought action should be taken against Iraq then. How urgent do you think it is now, given what you've just said?

RICE: We certainly do not have the luxury of doing nothing. I think that we decided at the time of 9/11 that the most immediate threat was al-Qaeda, because we didn't know how many more World Trade Centers were already planned and ready to go. But clearly, if Saddam Hussein is left in power, doing the things that he's doing now, this is a threat that will emerge and emerge in a very big way. And history is littered with cases of inaction that led to very grave consequences for the world. We just have to look back and ask how many dictators who ended up being a tremendous global threat, and killing thousands, and indeed millions, of people, should we have stopped in their tracks? That's really the question.

STOURTON: And what do you say to those in the region - people like King Abdullah, who's been here - who say that actually, you're going to make things worse if you act against Iraq, that the country will disintegrate and there will be chaos in the region?

RICE: If the United States and its allies decide to take military action, there will be certain obligations that come with that, to the people of Iraq and to the people of the region, to bring stability to the region. It's rather hard to imagine a more miserable life for the Iraqi people than they currently have under Saddam Hussein. But we should aspire to more for them, which is a far better life. And if you look at a place like Afghanistan, undoubtedly having many, many difficulties and troubles, but ask yourself, ten months ago, where were they? With the repressive regime that they had, where girls couldn't go to school, where women were punished severely for allowing their steps to be heard. You can't say that the people of Afghanistan are not better off. And I would think that at the end of any action that we might take toward regime change, that it would be the obligation of all of us to make certain that things are better for the people of the country and the people of the region.

STOURTON: And to those who say that the real next step in the war against terrorism should be sorting out Israel and the Palestinians rather than Iraq. What's your answer to them?

RICE: Well, we've certainly been doing everything that we can to sort out the Israeli-Palestinian situation. It is a very complex situation in which all of the actors have to take on their responsibilities with a renewed energy. The president laid out a very aggressive agenda and a very aggressive vision for a different kind of Middle East, one in which you have two states. He's been by far more direct in talking about two states than any American president has dared be. He's called it Palestine, for goodness' sake. And now, that has changed the terms of the debate, so people work, now, toward a two-state solution. In order to get there, we have to have a leadership that is committed on the Palestinian side to dealing with the terrorism in its midst. We are asking no less, or no more of the Palestinian leadership than we have asked of Shevardnadze in Georgia, or Salah in Yemen, and that is to deal with the terrorism in your midst and to make life safer for everyone. Israel has responsibilities, to nurture and help bring about a Palestinian state with which it can live side by side. The Arabs have responsibilities. We all do. But this is an area in which we've been very active, and in which the president's vision can be fulfilled if everyone will take their responsibilities.

STOURTON: But the President has done a bit more than he's done elsewhere, hasn't he? Because he's told the Palestinians they need to change their leader, which is a difficult message to give when you're also telling them they need to be more democratic.

RICE: Well, clearly through democratic means. I think what the president said is really twofold: first of all, that there will need to be elections; but also, that there needs to be new institutions. The world should want for the Palestinian people what we want for all people, which is that they have a leadership that is constrained in its arbitrariness by institutions - by a legal structure that matters, by a judiciary that matters, by a legislature that matters; by ministers who are actually real ministers; by transparent financial obligations and activities, so that money that goes in is really for the benefit of the people. No people have suffered longer and harder than the Palestinian people through all of this, and they should have a better life. We have pressed very hard on the Israelis to deal with the humanitarian situation; to a certain extent, Israel is responding. They've been increasing the number of work permits lately; they have been trying to deal with curfews that are less oppressive. They have obligations, too.

STOURTON: But isn't it up to the Palestinians to decide who they want to lead them?

RICE: Of course it's up to the Palestinians to decide who they want to lead them. It is up to the Palestinians to understand, too, that there are consequences to leadership that is in bed with terrorists. It simply is not going to be possible to fulfill the aspirations of the Palestinian people if you have a leadership that is on the one hand saying that it wants to negotiate peace, and is on the other hand paying organizations that take responsibility for suicide bombings. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade is a creature of the Palestinian Authority and Yasser Arafat, and it has literally taken responsibility for suicide bombers. How can it be that on the one hand this leadership says it wants to negotiate peace, and on the other hand it has an organisation that is engaging in suicide bombing? It's just not possible.

STOURTON: If you go back to that original "Bush Doctrine", the idea that those who harbour terrorists are as bad as the terrorists, and the idea of being with us or against us, where would you put Iran and Syria within that doctrine today?

RICE: I don't think there's any doubt that we are concerned that Iran is a place where an unelected few are really crushing the aspirations of their people. The Iranian people have had an opportunity that many around the world in repressive regimes have not had; that is an opportunity to express themselves. And their aspirations are clearly for a democratic process, for economic reform, for economic prosperity. I don't think their aspirations are to fund terrorism through Hezbollah in Lebanon or in the Middle East, or to send arms into the West Bank in the "Karine A", the ship that was coming from Iran, or to acquire weapons of mass destruction. And so what we're saying to the Iranians is act like elected leaders, and these unelected few should not be permitted to hijack the aspirations of the Iranian people. But it's very clear that Iran is not on the side of peace. Iran is on the side of the terrorists in the way that it has been, that these unelected few have been carrying out the policies of the Iranian government.

Yes, on Afghanistan, we actually had some fruitful relations with Iran, through multilateral mechanisms, and we'll continue to do that. But Iran cannot have it both ways. It cannot say that it is worthy of trade and worthy of engagement, and at the same time that a very large part, the most powerful part of its government is funding terrorism around the world. So, again, the moral clarity is important. And on Syria, Syria has to make a choice. The Syrians have got to stop doing what they're doing with Hezbollah, and supporting instability there. And that choice is going to have to be made as well.

STOURTON: And what are the implications for your policy towards those countries if you judge them to be so clearly on the wrong side of this very clear division that the president outlined back in last September?

RICE: Well, the President said there can't be two moralities, although we'll have many modalities for dealing with countries. And we're going to do what's smart, we're going to do what we think works. There are, in Iran, people expressing themselves in a way that is impossible in Iraq, for instance. But we will use different means to get to the same end. But the fact is you cannot have a policy that turns a blind eye or wishes for the best, and doesn't deal with the reality of states that are trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction, supporting terrorism, and opaque regimes that are repressing their own people.

STOURTON: But I suppose the logic of that is regime change in Iran, too, at some stage?

RICE: I believe that what you're seeing in different parts of the world is that there are different means to the same end. And there is the possibility of expression in Iran that we hope will be respected, particularly by those who were elected by those people who are not expressing their anguish and their desire to move to a better life. There are

people in Iran who are expressing their desire to deal with the needs of the people, and they need to be listened to. Not every place on the globe has that ability to express. And we have to all, particularly those who have decided to have diplomatic relations with Iran, be very clear with the Iranian government that they cannot have this both ways.

STOURTON: I suppose the underlying question is does the "Bush Doctrine" endure? Or was it something simply very effective, a rhetorical flourish if you like, that was very effective in dealing with Afghanistan. But does it have a continuing relevance as a way of analysing international politics?

RICE: Well, I think that it has changed dramatically the way that we think about terrorism. And countries have largely decided to choose to be on the side of those who are fighting terrorism. It's why the United States is training and equipping Georgians. It's why we have just been training people in the Philippines. It is why we're sharing intelligence around the world. What it really says, and this is really the enduring part, is you are responsible, as a sovereign state, for what happens inside your borders. And you have to make a choice. If something is happening inside your borders that is supportive of terrorism, to stop that activity. If you have not the means to stop that activity, because of weak institutions or the lack of resources, then you deserve our help in doing that. But the responsibility rests with the sovereign state to make certain that terrorists cannot use their territory to attack others.