

Recollections of 9/11

Interviewer

Today is April the 9th. We're in the studios of the Center for Oral History at West Point with General John Abizaid for another installment of his what we hope will be multiple episode.

John Abizaid

Yes.

Interviewer

Interview with the Center. We're grateful for your being here. General, tell me we're going to leap ahead from where we were last time.

John Abizaid

Okay.

Interviewer

And go right to 9/11 and forward, and then we'll come back and do the Persian Gulf War, probably at a later date on that. But where were you on 9/11?

John Abizaid

I was in Kiev, in the Ukraine. I was the Joint Staff J5, and I was leading a delegation for Joint Staff talks between the Ukraine and the United States. We had about 10 members of the U.S. delegation, 10 on the Ukrainian side. We'd finished our work for the day.

Interviewer

What kind of work was it? What were you.

John Abizaid

Well, we were of course, this is then the period following the fall of the Soviet Union, right?

Interviewer

Yeah, and at that day of an area.

John Abizaid

Yeah, all working very hard to cement good relationships with various countries that really hadn't existed for a long time, and the Ukrainians had a lot of strategic interests with the United States. We wanted to do some joint training we wanted to have some opportunities for various forces to appear in Ukraine and do some work there. They wanted to send some of their troops to our country for some training. There was an awful lot of work that was done within a framework called Partnership for Peace that they were always interested in participating as part of. And of course, their strategic interests they want to have American interests in the country. They had a government at the time that was not particularly pro Russian that's changed since then and they were very

interested in making sure that the United States at least had enough interest to make the Russians blink a little bit about their strategic interests there.

Interviewer

Who else was in the American delegation when you were there, do you recall?

John Abizaid

Oh, I can't really recall. I was the head of the delegation. I think Keith Dayton was the senior person on the delegation. My Executive Officer was with us. I would have to go back and look to see, but off the top of my head, it's.

Interviewer

How'd you hear the news, then, that.

John Abizaid

Well, it was funny. So we were planning a big gala event, and we were going to have an opportunity to eat a lot, and undoubtedly drink a lot, with our Ukrainian hosts that night. And they were going to have various customs displayed to us, like dancing, and this, and that, and people in native dress, and I mean these things always a lot of fun, and it's a good way to end up a conference. And they really wanted to do it, and we were looking forward to do it. So we went back to change, to get ready for this, and I went into my hotel room, and I'm looking at the television of course, it's all in either Russian or Ukrainian. And here's a plane had just hit the first tower. And I'm looking at it, and of course I can't make out what's being said. It's obviously a feed from somewhere. But I thought, my first thought was it was a Ukrainian or Russian movie, and I thought, "Gee, that's pretty high quality." And then all of a sudden, somebody comes down, said, "Are you watching television?" And they said, "Flip over to CNN." There was a CNN channel in English, so I did, and then all of a sudden, I realized what was going on. And so the first tower had already been hit the second tower was hit while I was watching, and then from then on, things went downhill, as you well know.

Interviewer

Did you have any sense early on of who had done it?

John Abizaid

My suspicions were immediately towards al Qaeda or a similar group some sort of jihadist group coming out of the Middle East made the most sense to me. They had certainly talked about being able to mount attacks on the United States before. This one seemed particularly well orchestrated, and I think probably, in retrospect, I realized a lot of it was probably luck, when I think about it these days. But the fact that they had been able to do this I thought the casualties were certainly much higher than they were. It was interesting to be in Kiev and know that the place that you work, which was the Pentagon at the time, had been hit. And communications were bad, because everyone's phone in the world was out of action. The Pentagon was being evacuated. It's really one of the first times in my military career that getting back to the homeland was a problem. And so we also knew that the airspace was closed, so I had to get back right away. I got word

back to the Chairman that I needed to get back, and I wanted help to assemble somewhere, get on a military aircraft, and get back to the United States.

Interviewer

Who was the Chairman at the time?

John Abizaid

Dick Myers. Oh no, I take that back it was General Shelton for a few weeks after that. But Dick Myers was going to be Chairman, and we all pretty much knew he was going to be the next Chairman. I think he'd already been selected, so it was only a matter of, you know, the timings. So we figured that we could get to England, get to an American base either Rammstein in Germany, or Mildenhall in England. Get on some sort of an American aircraft, probably a tanker, and get the delegation home, because I needed the delegation, because I knew there was a lot of work ahead. I think all of us recognized.

Interviewer

A lot of work coming out of 9/11, you mean?

John Abizaid

I mean it was war. It was an act of war. There would be a response. It would be a major response it wouldn't be minor. It probably emanated from somewhere in the Middle East, or somewhere in a place like Afghanistan, where we knew al Qaeda was operating. I didn't immediately think that it was al Qaeda, but it was hard for me to think of any other group that would mount it. But then there's a lot of groups in the Middle East that don't show themselves until they do something rather spectacular. That having been said, it was pretty clear to me where it emanated from. Doug Feith and a delegation happened to be in Germany. He was the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

The Middle East, and Middle East Policies

Interviewer

We actually have an extensive interview with him in the Archive, and he talks about coming back on the plane with you.

John Abizaid

Yeah. And so we all finally met in first of all, European airspace wasn't affected at all, so it was no problem to get on a plane from the Ukraine and fly to we flew to Frankfurt, and then from Frankfurt to London. It wasn't a problem. And then we got there and it was clear that because of Feith and a couple of other delegations that were over there that we would all get on that tanker, and we'd get back. And it was just a matter of getting the tanker fueled up, and we would go. So got on the plane, and we had a chance to talk, and there was a point where Doug and I were talking and we both agreed that it was probably some sort of a jihadist group. I can't remember what the exact words that we used. And my staff was around me, and his staff was around him. I think we were actually on the airplane. And he said, "I think that the Iraqis are involved in this." And I said, "No. No way. The Iraqis aren't involved in this." "The Iraqis don't support al Qaeda. They don't support Islamist groups, and they

wouldn't do anything as reckless as this. I just don't buy it. I said, 'œl.

Interviewer

What was he basing it on? It was Feith saying this to you? What was he basing his supposition on?

John Abizaid

Well, with this Administration that had just come in, they were always talking about Saddam Hussein and Iraq all the time. And they regarded him as a clear if not present danger they regarded him as a danger. I think there was a belief that they would do whatever they needed to do to break out of these sanctions. And there was a certain amount of intelligence that suggested it although I thought it was very weak. In retrospect, I still think it was actually weaker than I thought that suggested that there was some conniving between the Iraqi intelligence services and some of al Qaeda. But you know there's always conniving going on in the Middle East with all sorts of different people at all sorts of different levels. But it wasn't it just didn't make any sense to me that there was a connection there, and I told him so. And we had a pretty heated debate about it, and.

Interviewer

Did you think he was leaping to a conclusion for because he wanted to connect the dots, let me put it that way?

John Abizaid

I wouldn't really want to speculate on what he was doing. I would say that he was wrong. And I was convinced that he was wrong, I told him that he was wrong, and then I told him in no uncertain terms that he was wrong. I said, 'œThat doesn't change the notion that we're going to have to do something we're going to have to come up with some sort of strategic rationale for how to approach the problem. And most importantly, rather than sitting here arguing now, we're going to have to get a certain amount of intelligence that gives us a much clearer picture. And we won't get that till we get home.'

Interviewer

But he had no again, was he just basing this on his own supposition, based upon what he knew from intelligence, or did he have a piece of information that was the tipping point on Iraq for him?

John Abizaid

No. No, look I generally had access to what he had access to, and his point of view of understanding the Middle East was very different from my point of view. We had disagreed a lot about the Middle East and Middle Eastern policy, and I was like I say, I was very, very sure that he was wrong. And we know today, of course, that he was wrong there was no Iraqi connection to that. That didn't mean that the Iraqis were unhappy. As a matter of fact, I think the Iraqis very early on issued some sort of a statement that had to be interpreted that 'œhey, look, we weren't part of this.' But you know it's hard to trust anybody at those times. It was a traumatic event. Everybody was wondering what was going on.

Interviewer

Did you.

John Abizaid

The Pentagon had been hit.

Interviewer

Right.

John Abizaid

That's my place of duty. That's Doug Feith's place of duty.

Interviewer

Did you think when he was making this argument that it was an argument being made to go to war with Iraq eventually?

John Abizaid

No, but I would say that throughout this period, from the very beginning, when the Administration came in, there were high level members of the Administration that I dealt with in my J5 job that would very often talk about Iraq as being a much bigger problem than I thought it to be. I thought of Iraq as a problem, but I also thought that over time, things would eventually change. The notion that Iraq was strong enough or capable enough to break out, or that they had some sort of nuclear program, for example, that was about getting ready to break out, there was no intelligence that I saw at that time that I thought was credible.

Interviewer

During the time when it was widely believed, Chalabi had a big influence on the Administration isn't that right?

John Abizaid

Well, yeah. Look, there was a period there you know I know it's not your intentions to go previous to 9/11.

Interviewer

Well, go ahead it's fine.

John Abizaid

Â Â Â But it's probably.

Interviewer

Well, you're in the period of the sanctions, so.

John Abizaid

Yeah, itâ€™s probably worth talking like it was clear that the Administration wanted to ratchet up the pressure on the Iraqis.Â And there was an Act it was called the Iraqi Freedom Act, or the Defense of Iraq.Â In other words, they empowered the Iraqi opposition.Â This happened well before 9/11.

Interviewer

That happened in the Clinton years, I think, isnâ€™t that right

John Abizaid

Yeah.Â And it was essentially ratified by the Bush Administration, and it was some of the punitive measures of it were ramped up.

Interviewer

But most of it was on the sanctions of all this, right?

John Abizaid

Yeah, and our strikes were increasing in rapidity and value.Â It was clear to me that they wanted to really push the Iraqis hard. To say that they had come to the conclusion that they wanted to go to war with Iraq before 9/11, Iâ€™m not prepared to say that I believe that.

Interviewer

But they were interested in seeing regime change, at the very least, is that so?

John Abizaid

Yeah, they were advocates of regime change they always advocated regime change, and you would come across this quite often.Â And one discussion that I had when I was a J5, the J3 and I Greg Newbold, Lieutenant General, Marine Corps he and I were at a very early National Security Council meeting.Â I think it was at the Deputyâ€™s.Â Wasnâ€™t really National Security levelÂ it was Deputyâ€™s level.Â And we were over there, and Scooter Libby said, â€œWhy arenâ€™t you guys hitting the Iraqis harder?â€ And I said, â€œWhat do you mean, why arenâ€™t we hitting them harder?Â Weâ€™re hitting them according to our rules of engagement, which are issued by you.â€ I said, â€œSo if you want us to do something different, you need to tell us what it is that you want us to do, and it will flow from the President through the Secretary of Defense to the Chairman, and then weâ€™ll issue the orders.Â But so we donâ€™t make up what weâ€™re doing, weâ€™re within the framework thatâ€™s been provided.â€ So I took it and that was probably within the first week of at least him being on duty within the Administration and I took it from that that there was a real concern about Iraq within that group of people that had come to power.Â And then when Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary Wolfowitz showed up at the Pentagon, I would say that concern continued.Â But I wouldnâ€™t call it a march to war I would call it a way to figure out how to get regime change to work.Â In other words, it was a search for more pressure. That it ultimately culminated in going into Iraq weâ€™ll have to let the historians sort that one out, because I wasnâ€™t in a position to know.Â But my focus was not on the Iraqis, to get back to where we were.

Interviewer

Yes, let's come back to that.

John Abizaid

My focus was on the jihadists, and on the radicals and the extremist jihadi groups, that from the time that I was a young officer I always feared in the Middle East.

Interviewer

You went over some of this in the previous interview.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

About being in Jordan and other places where you'd see a lot of this, right?

John Abizaid

And so and plus I served in Lebanon, and I saw Shiite radical Islamic groups operate against the Israelis. And I knew how deadly they could be, and how determined they could be, and how capable they could be. So it was clear to me that there was going to be a national level response, and it was also clear to me that my role as a J5 would be to suggest to the Chairman strategies that could move forward. And of course when there is an interesting story that we have to get on the tape, right? As we're flying back, as we got on the plane, somebody said that these groups of offices in the Pentagon had been hit. And of course all of us knew they were in the Army Staff area, and.

Interviewer

You knew people who died.

John Abizaid

Yeah. Matter of fact, my West Point roommate, Karl Eikenberry, who went on to become the Commander in Afghanistan and later became the Ambassador to Afghanistan, was in that area. And so before I got on the plane we sent a message back, and I said, "See if you can find out if Karl's okay." And the word came back saying, "He's missing we don't know where he is." And then the word came back again saying, "His office was destroyed, and we don't know where he is, so for now he's missing in action." But the person that sent the message through my Executive Officer said, "We're not hopeful." So I thought my longtime West Point roommate was dead. So after we got through talking about some strategic ideas that we had about how we had to approach this problem with my staff and with Secretary Feith's staff, I had sat down and I wrote the eulogy of my roommate, which was really good. It was quite good it was excellent. And then we.

Interviewer

And you never got to use it.

John Abizaid

Yeah. Then we landed, and I found out right away that he was okay. So I called him up and I said, "Hey, I want you to know I wrote your eulogy." And he said, "I want to see it." I said, "I destroyed it, because not a word in it was true." But anyway, there was a lot of discussion on the plane on the way over there about what we were up against. We knew there'd be a requirement for some kind of military action. There were members of the team that were with me that tended to believe it was probably coming out of Afghanistan probably al Qaeda. By that time, the news was starting to speculate on who it was, and we were starting to get some intelligence as well from the intelligence nodes that were in Europe. And the picture was forming relatively rapidly, and the first thing that entered my mind was the problem associated with military operations in Afghanistan, with Russia on one side, Central Asian republics bordering Afghanistan to the north, Pakistan there to the south, a bit of China over there on the east, and India nearby, Iran. I mean it was going to be a very tough place to operate. And so as soon as we were able to send some traffic back and forth to the J5 guys in Strategic Plans and Policies, they do the military political relationships, not only with your own government, but also with other governments. So we sent word back to form teams to get ready to go to Central Asia. And General Chilton, who's famed for his astronaut work and later went on to be the four star Commander of STRATCOM, was one of my one-star leaders, and he had the Afghanistan area and Central Asia, etc. And I finally got a hold of him, and I told him to meet me as soon as I got back to the Pentagon. And we talked and I told him he needed to get some teams ready, and he needed to go to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan.

Interviewer

All the "stans.

John Abizaid

And I called my friend in Russia, who was my J5 equivalent. We had negotiated nuclear arms reductions for a while together, and we were enemies, but friends. You know we didn't have common interests for our own countries, but we developed a good, strong liking for one another. And I called him, and I said, "Look, we're going to need to use your airspace, and I know this is hard for you to understand, but we're going to have to use it in some way. And I'd like you to start socializing that with your civilian leadership." And he said, "Well, I expected that I'd hear from you soon." I didn't know it would be this soon. So you know we were able to figure out how and of course, in those days there wasn't a country on Earth that was against us. There were places on the planet where people were happy that we'd been hit. But legitimate governments wanted to assist. People were going out of their way to enable us to do what had to be done. And so we started over this period probably from mid-September there until early October just trying to lay the framework and the groundwork to get U.S. combat power into that region. Not to mention how we were going to use the combat power.

The Mission, The Taliban, and Pockets of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan

John Abizaid

I don't think I'm not one of these people that go back and say "if only we had done this." I don't see where the pieces were on the chess board that could've been moved to have prevented him from escaping. Other people have different ideas. I wasn't a Tactical Commander. I wasn't on the ground. I was watching it in the



Pentagon from Washington, which is not a good place to watch tactical action. And when I looked at it, I thought there was a greater chance that we would kill him in an air strike than we would find him with the very limited forces that we had. And I came to learn that some of the people that we were working with out there were not just working with us they were also working with him. And so, look, this should not have come as a surprise. We all have read about how the Afghan tribes operate, and it's not a matter of Anglo-Saxon loyalty. It's a matter of doing what you can do to get you and your family and your tribe through the toughest of times. So they have their self-interests at stake. They helped us when it was in their interest, and they helped them when it was in their interest. But all this came together to mean that the core of al Qaeda escaped into Pakistan, and when you understand the topography of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, it becomes very clear to you that you're really not crossing a line. You're not moving from the modern nation state of Afghanistan to the modern nation-state of Pakistan. You're moving from one Pashtun tribe and sometimes to the same Pashtun tribe on the other side of the randomly constructed line that the British and the Afghans agreed to.

Interviewer

What was the talk regarding the mission? I mean at this point we knew the Taliban was harboring we knew that there are pockets of al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

John Abizaid

Right.

Interviewer

What were you being told was the mission that we were going to be engaging? I know there was a sort of a standoff with Mullah Omar, wasn't that right at the beginning, over handing him.

John Abizaid

Yeah.

Interviewer

Over and all that, but then eventually, you know.

John Abizaid

Yeah. There was a legitimate hope that Mullah Omar would be persuaded to give up bin Laden and al Qaeda. People that knew Afghanistan, knew the Pashtun culture, knew the Taliban, said, "That's a non starter that'll never happen," and that we're going to have to go in there and get him. And by the way, nobody was hesitating to go in there and getting him. It was setting the conditions militarily to be able to have aircraft, Special Operating Forces, various other tools of you know intelligence activity, etc., stationed and put in the right place to be able to do the right action. And so I mean this was a very interesting time for us, right, to try to figure out what we're going to do. Plus we're also trying to understand the extent of the problem. Many of us knew that there were al Qaeda cells in other places. And in particular, with so many Saudis being part of the attack force.

Interviewer

And how good was our intelligence within Afghanistan?

John Abizaid

Well, it's a great question. We always think that our intelligence is great until it proves otherwise, and we think we have a clear picture, and we still do to this day. We always think we have a clear picture of what's going on. But in those days, our intelligence was not at all clear about where they were, where they were operating, how they were operating. I know I've heard many accounts saying that, "Well, we knew exactly where they were, and all we had to do was put a bomb on that site." Well, it's never as simple as that. They certainly knew there would be retaliation they were moving. Our clarity into what was going on there was not nearly what we thought it was. We thought we could rely on the ISI. The ISI was telling us things. To this day, I'm not sure that I know whether they were true things or not. There may have been people in the Pakistani government.

Interviewer

The ISI, for the viewers, the Pakistani secret intelligence, which was compromised by the Taliban, right, in the.

John Abizaid

So I mean it was very complicated problem. But you know, to the credit of our armed forces and our intelligence people, I mean everybody was pulling together in a very good way. And the question came up are we going to try to go in there with a lot of force, or are we going to go in with minimal force? Are we going to try to go in there and punish the Taliban, and destroy the Taliban? Or are we willing to destroy the Taliban if we have to, or push the Taliban out if we have to, in order to get bin Laden? And are we going to use a lot of force to do this, or are we going to use limited force to do this? And my advice and the advice of other military people, although there was a robust debate within the Joint Staff about how to approach it I mean part of the problem was the laws of physics, right? In order to get a lot of force in that part of the world, you need a lot of time, and we didn't have a lot of time. We thought the longer we delayed, the greater the chances would be that bin Laden and his gang of merry men would escape. And so my advice was, "Look, minimum force, raiding strategy, Special Forces, intelligence forces get them in there, hit the nodes that we're certain that they're located in, and whatever we do, don't occupy Afghanistan." And there were arguments that we had with Secretary Feith over who was responsible for what, but there was very little argument over it not being a good idea to occupy lands in the Middle East. Feith agreed with that, Rumsfeld agreed with that, and Wolfowitz agreed with that. I mean these are the very early days, right? People wanted to go in there, get at the source of the trouble, and then continue to look for that trouble wherever else it might exist. And it was also during these days where you start hearing from the OSD Staff these notions of connections between the Iraqis and al-Qaeda, the Taliban, etc., which.

Interviewer

That turned out to be false, right I mean.

John Abizaid

John Abizaid: Well, I don't know there might have been some very minor connections, at very low levels of intelligence operatives, etc., etc. But to my recollection, I never bought any of them. I did not think that there were those connections.

John Abizaid

It did not make sense to me.

Interviewer

Al Qaeda would not want anything to do with Saddam. Because of his I mean they were.

John Abizaid

First of all, Saddam was rational. And by the way, so was bin Laden. We all think of them as being crazy madmen, but they all have their own rational point of view of what they're trying to accomplish. Saddam is not interested in going to war with the United States. He barely survived the first one. He probably figured that if there was a second one, he wouldn't. And it was his mission was to hold his regime together, to hold Iraq together. And he certainly wanted to confront Iranian power and prevent the expansion of Iranian power, which he feared very much.

Interviewer

You say all this, but he, in the end, could've prevented the second invasion if he'd come out and said there were no weapons and actually let them see that there were no weapons of mass destruction, right?

John Abizaid

Well, look, he's.

Interviewer

So that's irrational.

John Abizaid

Well, I don't know that it's irrational, or I'm not sure. You know, when you're in his shoes, he's got a bunch of people around him, not all of whom are loyal. He's holding things together by, you know, the most brutal of means. He has to torture people in order to keep people in line. He has to bribe people to keep the various elements doing this and doing that in order to protect his regime. And at the end of the day, he probably said that the Americans aren't ready yet it's too soon. And if the Americans think that I have some sort of a capability for a nuclear breakout, maybe it'll give them some hesitation. Certainly it'll give the Iranians some hesitation. So look, I'm not in the business of thinking what Saddam thinks, or what anybody else thinks. I only know what I thought, and I did not think that there was a connection between what was going on in Iraq, which was not for the interests of the United States, and what was going on in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I thought that a quick campaign would isolate bin Laden and his primary people, that the Pakistanis would help us in a very constructive way, and that elements within the Pashtuns that were clearly already breaking with Mullah Omar would help us as well.

Interviewer

Did you think we had to depose Omar and the Taliban in order to achieve our objective because of course that would lead to the current instability that would require a bigger footprint for the U.S.

John Abizaid

Well, I thought that there was a way to do it without necessarily having to change the entire balance of power. But I think on retrospect it was clear that you had to change the balance of power there in order to create a dynamic that allowed bin Laden and his people to show themselves. And his allies and his allies were not going to give him up. So the fact that we had to depose the Taliban, that we had to destroy their forces in the field, that they had to sense American power I think that that was a rational act. The fact that we had more trust in Pashtun allies and Pakistani allies than we should have is something I would probably chalk up to naivety on our part. Certainly we didn't want bin Laden to get away nobody wanted bin Laden to get away. And I have read all sorts of critiques about General Franks and how he failed to prevent this and that, but he only had certain forces available. And it was decided at the highest levels of our civilian government that it would be minimum force that we went in there with, on the ground. We used a tremendous amount of air power. But there's a lot I still don't know about Afghanistan after having fought there for all this time.

Interviewer

How close were we to getting him in those early months?

John Abizaid

I don't think we were ever close.

Interviewer

Really. Not in Bora Bora or any of these places, huh?

John Abizaid

I don't think I'm not one of these people that go back and say "if only we had done this." I don't see where the pieces were on the chess board that could have been moved to have prevented him from escaping. Other people have different ideas. I wasn't a Tactical Commander. I wasn't on the ground. I was watching it in the Pentagon from Washington, which is not a good place to watch tactical action. And when I looked at it, I thought there was a greater chance that we would kill him in an air strike than we would find him with the very limited forces that we had. And I came to learn that some of the people that we were working with out there were not just working with us they were also working with him. And so, look, this should not have come as a surprise. We all have read about how the Afghan tribes operate, and it's not a matter of Anglo-Saxon loyalty. It's a matter of doing what you can do to get you and your family and your tribe through the toughest of times. So they have their self-interests at stake. They helped us when it was in their interest, and they helped them when it was in their interest. But all this came together to mean that the core of al Qaeda escaped into Pakistan, and when you understand the topography of the Afghanistan Pakistan border area, it becomes

very clear to you that you're really not crossing a line. You're not moving from the modern nation state of Afghanistan to the modern nation-state of Pakistan. You're moving from one Pashtun tribe and sometimes to the same Pashtun tribe on the other side of the randomly constructed line that the British and the Afghans agreed to.

Interviewer

And their identification is minimally nationalist, I suppose mostly tribal, not even aware in some cases of what part of the divide they're on.

John Abizaid

Yeah. Well, there's also which I regard as being one of these cultural sorts of commitments that they have to once they have given sanctuary to an outsider, that under no circumstances are they going to give that person up. It's a matter of deep cultural pride, and to have for us not to fully understand the dynamics of that was certainly a mistake on our part.

Were We Prepared for Irregular Warfare?

John Abizaid

I didn't hear those arguments early on that the arguments came about later it was good that the arguments came about. I mean it was.

Interviewer

So there was a great weakness, it seems, in our position to not knowing more about Afghanistan culture, tribal culture, that part of the world. Am I right?

John Abizaid

Well, if you had expected to go to war in Afghanistan, then there was a great weakness on our part. If, on the other hand, you had not expected to go to war in Afghanistan which we had not I would say your intelligence priorities were elsewhere. They were on Iraq. They were on China. They were on Russian nuclear forces. They were on all sorts of different things. And while we had talked about the threat posed by al Qaeda, we had a failure of imagination, as was noted in the 9/11 Report, at all sorts of different levels. It was hard for us to imagine that there could be a terrorist attack like that mounted on our soil, with that degree of decisiveness. Now, I had given a talk at the National War College three or four weeks before 9/11, and it was difficult for me to articulate a threat that would really cause the United States to have to worry about its strategic future. I mean when you think about things in August of 2001, not only are we the most powerful nation on Earth, we're what the French describe as the hyper-power. And to think that we could be attacked by an entity that's not even a nation state that's a small group of people that have a very bad idea in mind for us was hard to think of. But when somebody said to me at this meeting at the National War College what keeps me up at night? I said, "Some sort of very, very devastating sort of terrorist attack, mounted as a result of the enemy having come into possession of a weapon of mass destruction." I said, "I think that's possible, and it's becoming increasingly more possible." But even in having said that, I didn't envision them using our own methods against us to create a devastating outcome. It's pretty interesting.

Interviewer

You were trained here, and all your military experience up to that point, except with what you saw when you were in the Middle East, would seem to me mostly focused upon nation state vs. nation state kind of warfare. And the notion of what was now evolving into this, as it was coined, a global war on terror, on some non-national, non state actors operating throughout the world can't negotiate with them. They don't wear uniforms. All the things we talk about with respect to it being irregular kind of warfare. Were we prepared for that kind of challenge?

John Abizaid

We weren't. I think it's safe to say we weren't prepared for what happened to us, and there was and again, this is in retrospect, of course. The strategies that we employed really didn't solve the problem. If I look at the problem today of jihadist activity around the world, it's actually worse now than it was on 9/11. So the question for us is how best to get at this problem. Of course, one answer is you empower the good people in the region to fight this cancer that they recognize as cancer themselves to be able to do the job on their own. But you know what, Todd? After 9/11, you know how it was. We weren't listening to anybody else, and we weren't interested in what other people thought about our problems. We were going to solve our own problems. And whether you like it or not, we were very fearful in those days. We as a people were very fearful, and we didn't know what other surprises might be out there awaiting us. And so often I take all these notions of conspiracy and boil them down to how things were on the 10th of September and how things were on the 12th of September. And the world changed in that one day, and when they changed, our fears went from zero to one-hundred miles an hour in no time at all. And in that period it is undoubtedly true that there was bad judgment, hasty judgment, but not conspiratorial judgment. Not in my view not from what I saw. That later things moved towards this inevitable confrontation with Saddam in Iraq, it's hard for me to be able to trace how that happened. I never was for that, but that happened nevertheless.

Interviewer

It sounds like you really feel that the war in Iraq was a mistake.

John Abizaid

I don't think that taking Saddam Hussein out was a mistake. I think that the method and the timings were wrong. I think we rushed to war. I think that there should've been a much bigger Iraqi contingent that participated with us that there could've been a much more refined Iraqi government in exile, with a plan to move in and do something. Moving as quickly as we did in 2003, I never quite understood what the rush was. I think there was a rush from the political leadership because they believed that weapons of mass destruction could emerge at any time. And again, when you go back into the mentality of 9/11, I think it's fair to say that the President in particular was not going to take a chance that they didn't have it. And to be fair, most of the intelligence community was pointing to the notion that they had a program. Now, I wouldn't say that most of them were pointing to the fact that there was something imminent. But I would like to come back to this point that you asked about a few minutes ago with this notion of, well, we were prepared for state to state stuff. The truth of the matter is we were very well prepared for this sort of group vs. group combat and action. We'd spent many years in Bosnia. We'd just come back from Kosovo. We'd been all over the Balkans, where it was

precisely this irregular style of warfare that was being practiced, and that we were in the middle of. We were separating sectarian combatants every day out there. I had served in Lebanon. In Lebanon, Hezbollah was fighting the Israelis. I was in the UN. I witnessed it every day. So these tactics, techniques, and procedures they weren't a surprise. And this notion that groups such as that could do things to create havoc on the peripheries wasn't surprising. What was surprising was that they could create such a devastating attack and inflict so many casualties in our own country. That was game changing. And that created a need for action that moved us in the directions that we moved.

Interviewer

Do you think we're safer because of what we did?

John Abizaid

Yeah, I think we probably need to have this interview about 20 years from now, because I don't think we know the answer to the question. I don't know how things are going to shape up in the Middle East. And by the way, I'm not of the opinion that whatever's going on in the Middle East, we caused. We're kind of an egocentric sort of a nation. We believe that all things are related to us directly. What's going on in the Middle East right now is a civilizational revolution of epic proportions. It's possible that our involvement in Iraq in particular may have pushed it in one direction or another, but this civilizational change is yet to play itself out. And it'll either end up being the best thing that's ever happened for the globe, because people will move towards more accountable government, and maybe the opportunity for democratic transition. Or it will move towards a very extreme form of Islam that will square off against us in a way that will make what we've just been through look like a cakewalk. And because that is so uncertain, I'm very concerned that without strategic dynamics to guide us forward, that we're leaving an area very much in need of American power not necessarily direct American power, but indirect American power while the situation is very much still unknown in what direction it will travel.

Interviewer

It's very good. There are some people who believe that the weapons of mass destruction argument the Administration put forward for the invasion of Iraq was actually a cover for a deeper philosophical mission, which was to plant the seed of democracy in the Middle East that would.

John Abizaid

Yeah. I would call that that was ex post facto.

Interviewer

You didn't hear those arguments.

Interviewer

But isn't that a neoconservative.

Interviewer

Do you think well, I've been leaping around a little bit here but if so.

John Abizaid

Â But look, there was a problem with the whole thing, right?Â I mean the problem is we wanted democracy to form in the middle of the Middle East, which was a very noble cause. But our methods caused us to empower sectarian parties, not secular parties.Â If there's anything that we should've learned over the years, it's that the notion of our nation and what we stand for and what our values mean, it's all about secularity, not sectarianism. But in our rush to want to leave Iraq, because we really didn't want to be involved there forever, we empowered precisely those forces that are the most destructive forces in the region, and that's the sectarian forces.Â And now that's continuing to play itself out.Â So I mean what I would like to do is come back a bit and say I don't know, maybe we had this discussion before.Â You have to stop me if we did.Â But I was on the Joint Staff as the J5. And the J5, Strategic Plans and Policy, and then General Myer selected me to be the Director of the Joint Staff. And then I was the Director of the Joint Staff as we went through the planning efforts of getting into Afghanistan, and then seriously started thinking about what we were going to do for Iraq.Â And there was a war plan that came forward from CENTCOM that I thought was very much under-resourced, and I thought it was under-resourced because the civilian leadership in the Pentagon was forcing it to be under resourced.Â And I thought it was dangerous, so I suggested to the Chairman that we have a war game. And we had a very robust war game that clearly showed the force was under-resourced, and we got permission from the Secretary to increase the size of the force, which was hugely important. But in this period, there were

Interviewer

Still not big enough, by a lot of people's judgment.

John Abizaid

Certainly it was big enough to do what we said we were going to do, which was go in there and leave.Â Go in there, install a friendly government, and then leave.Â That was the plan.Â Nobody ever wants nobody seems to ever remember that, but I do.Â It was don't occupy Iraq.

Interviewer

But not big enough to maintain the peace in the insurgent period going forward from there.

John Abizaid

No.Â It was because we had a false assumption, and the false assumption was that we were liberating Iraq.Â You could only liberate people that want to be liberated.Â And some of them wanted to be liberated, like the Kurds to the north, but the Sunnis, they stood to lose everything, and the Shia didn't trust us, for a lot of good reasons.Â Not the least of which was back in 1991 and '92, when they rose up against Saddam, we didn't lift a finger to help them.Â So I mean there's a lot of bad feeling in the various three major communities about what our arrival meant. And plus absolutely nobody that I ever met in Iraq believed that a government of a bunch of playboys that were hanging out in London, who hadn't suffered under the Saddam regime, could come in and do anything positive for Iraq.Â There was absolutely no support for any 'emigré at all, and that was something we should've known.Â But I'd like to come back to this notion of



liberation, and a discussion that was held in the Pentagon. And as the Director of the Joint Staff, I wasn't involved there was a very closed group of planners, and I wasn't involved in that particular part. I would catch glimpses of it, and the Staff Officers that were in it would come back and back brief me. Even as late as mid 2002, I did not think that war with Iraq was inevitable. Many of my colleagues believed that it was. I'm not sure. But there was a conversation that we had in the tank at the that I happened to be at as the Director, and the civilian leadership was in there. And some of the civilian leaders and I'm not going to name who they are. We'll let somebody else figure out who said what to whom, because my memory's probably not as good as it used to be. But these are very senior civilian leaders, and they're saying, "Look, going into Iraq will be like the liberation of France in 1944, and we will be essentially greeted as liberators." We have a very good relationship with the free Iraqi government in London.

Interviewer

Well, Dick Cheney said a lot of this publicly, didn't he?

John Abizaid

Yeah. No, I mean all this stuff was stuff that people were talking about, and I said, "Look, I disagree." I said, "I'm one of the few people in the room that spent a lot of time in the Middle East, and I can assure you we're not going to be greeted as liberators there." I said, "First of all, Iraq is not France 1944. It's not Catholic. It's not homogenous. And it doesn't look very kindly upon foreign occupiers never has. Look at the British occupation in the 1920s and how that went."

Interviewer

What was the reaction to your saying that in the tank?

John Abizaid

I was told in no uncertain terms that I was wrong, and I wasn't with I didn't quite understand everything that was going on out there. And I really didn't understand what was going on with the free Iraqi government.

Interviewer

Was there a vigorous argument, or was it a.

John Abizaid

Yeah, there was a vigorous argument for me.

Interviewer

Right. But I mean from the other side of this equation.

John Abizaid

No.

Interviewer

It was an exchange of ideas by which everyone understood what your position was and what the opposite position was, and decided to do what they did with their eyes open.

John Abizaid

Well, first of all, this wasn't a decision making meeting that I said this.

Interviewer

I understand that.

John Abizaid

But it was pretty well known that I was not in favor of invading Iraq. I didn't think Saddam was a good guy, and when I got the word to go be General Franks's Deputy, which I got in I guess September or October or so, I was raring to go. And by then I knew we were going to go it's just a matter of time.

Interviewer

Right. Was there any concern that as General Franks's Deputy that you had not believed in the rightness of the invasion?

John Abizaid

I thought it was a strategically bad move, and I made it clear to my military superiors and to my civilian superiors. But once the decision was made, like any good soldier, I said, "Fine, and by the way, I'm happy to go do it." So no qualms, no problem with it I was very concerned, and I was very concerned about two things when I was the Deputy Commander. Number one, that there wasn't enough force for the occupation phase, even if it was going to be a short occupation phase. And it was unmistakable, by the way, that we were to build a program that would not get bogged down for any length of time. It was go in, install a new government, get out, keep the Army together, keep the Baathist Party relatively intact, let the new Iraqi government I mean all these things that seemed to make sense then, in the scope of history will not have made sense. You know it never was going to work.

Interviewer

Did you anticipate the insurgency as well? Is that part of what your argument was that it was coming?

John Abizaid

Well, I had told several people I thought we would move into an insurgency phase when I was the Deputy Commander. And people would say, "No we're not, because we're not going to be there." So you know, look, these are very hard things. We had a great force to go in there and do the decisive combat phase, but then we undermined all of our assumptions very quickly. First of all, we didn't find weapons of mass destruction. And you also have to remind people we didn't find Saddam until December of 2003. So for people who thought that the war was over in May, I don't know how they could ever come to that conclusion, because you really weren't done until you broke the Baathists and you didn't break the Baathists until

December of 2003.

Interviewer

So the President didn't understand it or something.

John Abizaid

And then you went into it not speaking for the President. I'm speaking for John Abizaid. I have a lot of respect for the President.

Interviewer

But he's the one who said operations are over and we, so to speak.

John Abizaid

I don't know how he said what he said, and when he said it. I happened to be in Qatar at the time, and I was in the region, and I was fighting the war as the Deputy Commander for Operations. And it was a very good use of military force. It was very decisive use of military force. It quickly achieved most objectives, but not all of the objectives. And the place where the biggest problem was going to be was going to be in the Sunni heartland, and that's precisely the place that we didn't have any forces early on, because they hadn't reached that area yet. Again, I think I don't want you to be misled by the way that I state some of these things. I was I thought it was a strategically bad move to go in there, and for me, it was really a matter of timing. It wasn't that it was the wrong thing to do. I didn't think it was wrong to go into Iraq and take out Saddam. I thought it was wrong to go into Iraq and take out Saddam without international support firmly behind us. We had plenty of national support, but we didn't have an international coalition, and I didn't see what the rush was.

Interviewer

And we could've brought him down, perhaps, without the loss of life we ended up having to endure.

Interviewer

So you thought we rushed to a military solution too quickly.

John Abizaid

Â Â Â I did.

John Abizaid

Once you cross the border, things were going to happen in Iraq, especially if you did not preserve the Baathist infrastructure, which we didn't, and hold the army together, which we didn't. Now, there's no doubt that the army left. The army went home. The army got beat. Parts of the army stayed and fought we need to give them some credit. There were places where there was a lot of heavy resistance. And there were places all up and down the lines of communication where Saddam Fedayeen came in and challenged the lines of communication, and that was really hard fighting. And that's what led me to believe during the campaign that there was trouble ahead, because there

was too much ferocity of those forces. This was not welcome, thank you, we're happy to have you here. This was local people getting together under the local Baathist leadership and attacking in a very ferocious manner our forces on the ground, and the lines of communication.

John Abizaid

So much so that we had to put the whole 101st Airborne along the lines of communication and police it up, because we were in danger of losing supplies to the main tip of the spear of the combat forces.

Interviewer

It sounds to me like in the picture that you described of that, and with this rush to military solution, that the American system's set up where the civilian leadership is what is ultimately responsible, right? But in this case the civilian leadership goes a little more bellicose much more bellicose, in your argument than the military leadership with respect in other words, you had told the Army.

John Abizaid

I can't speak for the rest of the military leadership. I didn't see the rest of the military leadership agreeing with me when I said I thought it was going to be hard. There was a lot of caution. There's always caution from soldiers before you go to war. I mean we always know that unexpected things can happen. So I think there were debates. And by the way, Secretary Rumsfeld made us compile a big list of all the things that could go wrong. And that was a pretty accurate list, and he took it and he shared it with the President. So it's not as if people went without having examined the down side. There were substantial down sides in this, and everybody recognized it. But the timings were perplexing to me. And the other thing that was perplexing to me was not that there was debate between us and the civilian leadership, which there was not a lot, but there was. I was an outlier, and I was probably an outlier because I was a Middle Eastern person.

John Abizaid

I had hung around that part of the world for a lot of my life, and I understood some of the complexities, so people probably discounted it for other reasons as well. But it was clear to me that there was no debate from the press, no debate from the political parties, no debate from all those people back in the '60s that were ready to tell us not to do anything under any circumstances, and protest, and do this and that and everything else. I mean the lack of debate was actually astounding to me, and I could only term it the 9/11 effect. That had to be it.

Interviewer

Well, could it also be the volunteer Army effect, because.

John Abizaid

It could be indeed. And it's funny that you mention that I just got through talking to a bunch of officers in the Soc Department. I said, "You know we actually need to have the debate about whether the professional military lengthened the war because it was able to, because the rest of society didn't participate in it." I said, "So even though as a

professional soldier, I only wanted professionals with me, and I always said that when I was on active duty. In retrospect I've wondered would we have even gone into Iraq had we had a draftee Army or at least a national service Army, which could be somewhere in between fully professional and draftee. So I think it's amazing to me how little debate there's been on these sorts of points. There's another point that has to be discussed, which is 12 years of the indecisive use of military power, and how did that happen, and why did it happen? And what are the lessons that we really should've learned from that? And I think that's.

Interviewer

What do you mean by that? 12 years marking it from when to when? You mean from.

John Abizaid

From September 9/11 to now.

Interviewer

Indecisive use meaning that we.

John Abizaid

Can you tell me of any decisive victory that we've had?

Interviewer

Well, there is regime change in Iraq, right? Saddam is gone.

John Abizaid

What is the decisive strategic outcome?

Interviewer

Well, as you said a minute ago, we may have to wait 20 years to find out.

John Abizaid

Yeah, we don't know yet.

Interviewer

We don't know, yes.

John Abizaid

That's a lot of effort. But it's indecisive use of military force, because you get bogged down in campaigns that you hadn't fought your way through properly.

Interviewer

Well, and then and this is probably a question to ask in the next installment I think we're running out of time. But the counterinsurgency approach that leaves us in a position to be occupiers for the long term means that all those outcomes that we're

seeking are probably require a commitment weâ€™re not ready to make.

John Abizaid

Yeah.â€” I think weâ€™re probably going to have to examine this at another session.

Interviewer

Yeah.

John Abizaid

Because itâ€™s so complex. We have to talk about the weapons of mass destruction issue, and we have to talk about the dissolution of the army issue, and we have to talk about the de-Baathification issue.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

John Abizaid

When you take a country thatâ€™s like this and you turn it like this. And then you say youâ€™re going to leave it, and itâ€™s impossible to understand how youâ€™re going to get it like this, which is where we wanted it.

Interviewer

Or how theyâ€™re going to get it like that, because youâ€™re essentially

John Abizaid

Right.

Interviewer

Walking out in the middle of the process, right?

John Abizaid

And I think that those all-important questions werenâ€™t properly examined, either by military leaders or by civilian leaders, and it was clear to me that we had under-resourced the post decisive campaign force.â€” And when I became the CENTCOM Commander I was able to reverse a lot of that and bring a lot more forces back in, but I had no illusions. I knew that the forces that were going to come in were coming in for the long haul.â€” Thatâ€™s why I called it â€œthe long war,â€” and it was a hard thing to get through to people that it was going to be a long time.â€” I said to Secretary Wolfowitz once, â€œLook, if weâ€™re not there for six months, weâ€™re going to be there for six years. So if we canâ€™t get this thing calmed down enough in six months to know that itâ€™s on a proper path towards stability, weâ€™ll be here at least six years.â€” I was fairly close fairly close. I underestimated it.â€” But the weapons of mass destruction and you know, look, Iâ€™m not trying to say I knew, or that I was morally opposed to it.

John Abizaid

I don't want you to think that. I'm a soldier. I was happy to participate in this great adventure, and I thought it was the right thing to do given the information that I had. But I was very concerned about where it was headed, and there were places that you can say all along would have caused things to be done differently. But I very carefully looked at the weapons of mass destruction issue. And almost all the intelligence agencies, to include the foreign intelligence agencies, said that there was no doubt that there was a program of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Nobody talked about a breakout capability, but everybody thought that they were closer than proved to be true. And so I can understand why that motivated the political leadership to move fast. If we had had a correct reading on that, I think we could've delayed. We could've put pressure. We could've mounted the international pressure. We could've gone through a series of more investigations of international agencies, etc., etc., and come to a different conclusion. But like I say, I think the 9/11 effect propelled us across the border before we needed to go.

John Abizaid

It caused us to be hasty in our decision making. It forced us to make some very strategic moves that I still can't to this day understand where they came from. Our plan was to keep the army intact, and to keep the Baath Party at the highest levels intact, except for a very, very few top officials, and to turn the government over to a group of people that largely came from the inside. And when the army disintegrated, we still had a plan to recall the army. So this notion that somehow or other it was gone, and therefore it was too late, was wrong. I was the Deputy Commander for this.

Interviewer

By the way, we interviewed Paul Bremer and that's exactly what he said that it was already gone, and he couldn't reconstitute it.

John Abizaid

It could've been reconstituted. I told him several times it could be reconstituted. I told him the plan calls for it to be reconstituted. I showed him on paper how it could be reconstituted. He and I and General Sanchez and Walt Slocum had a very sharp disagreement over this. I said to him, "There's no army on Earth that's going to be limited to 30,000 people. That's not how things work out here." I said, "It's going to have to be a big army, and it's going to have to be officered by its former officers." Now, I think Paul Bremer came out there with orders from Washington to disband the army and take de Baathification very deep, so that all of a sudden went from a quick military strike turnover to a largely intact governmental sector to major surgery. And that decision, whoever made that decision, why that decision was made.

Interviewer

Do you know who made that decision?

John Abizaid

I have no idea. People will attribute it to Bremer, but I think it had to come out of Washington had to. That problem created all subsequent events. Because there was no structure of the government, it created a Sunni insurgency. The Sunni and I want to emphasize it was not an al Qaeda insurgency it was a Sunni Baathist insurgency. We defeated it. Then the insurgency became a Sunni Islamist insurgency. And then by 2006, it was a

Sunni Islamist insurgency, and a Shia Islamist insurgency that was supported by Iran. And going through these various different stages in the campaign, which I think people haven't articulated properly or understood properly, leads me to the belief that this massive tinkering with the internal mechanisms, based on incorrect assumptions about what we did in Germany in 1945 and Japan in 1945, moved us down a road that had absolutely no applicability in a sectarian hodgepodge that was always prone to violence known as Iraq.

John Abizaid

And so having said it was wrong, there were always points along the way where things could have been, where the ship could've been righted. But this insistence on, in my view, of not allowing true Sunni leadership to emerge for the entire time that we were there, to take up the important place that they needed to take up in Iraq, has prolonged the civil war, which continues to this day.

Interviewer

Thank you for coming in today.