

â€œPrelude to Warâ€  
Interviewer

Okay, today is November 17, 2010. We are in Washington, DC, at the Hudson Institute interviewing Douglas Feith. Doug, would you spell your name for the transcriber, please?

Douglas Feith

F like Frank, E-I-T-H.

Interviewer

And Iâ€™m going to start with your experience on September 11, 2001. If you could tell me where you were on that date, and what transpired as you heard the news coming out of New York and Washington.

Douglas Feith

I was in Moscow. One of the major early national security initiatives of the Bush administration was to try to create a relationship with Russia that would leave the Cold War entirely behind us. And so we were talking about a framework, strategic framework, for a new U.S.-Russian relationship, and in that connection, I was in Moscow talking with my counterparts in the defense ministry on arms control, missile defense, and related issues.

Interviewer

What was your title at that timeâ€”were youâ€”

Douglas Feith

I was the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Interviewer

How many Under Secretaries are there?

Douglas Feith

There were, at the time, I believe fourâ€”there are now five.

Interviewer

And so your area of focus was onâ€”

Douglas Feith

National security policy.

Interviewer

So tell me more. You were in Moscow there for a meeting, right?

Douglas Feith

I was in Moscow. I was meeting withâ€”my counterpart was a General Bolievsky, essentially the number two guy in their defense ministry, and we had a long discussion

about—mostly, if I recall correctly, about missile defense and nuclear arms issues. And at the end of the afternoon—I guess the time difference, it was, I believe, sometime after five p.m.—at the end of the afternoon when we finished our day’s work, we were doing a stand-up in front of Russian television cameras.

Douglas Feith

And when we finished that short report to those cameras about what we had talked about, somebody from the U.S. Embassy, a public affairs officer from the U.S. Embassy, said to me, as we were about to leave to go to another press meeting with Western press, “There’s a report that an airplane has hit the World Trade Center in New York.” And I said, “Okay,” and I remembered that one of the main things that I had been told when I came into the job—and I had just come into the job a few weeks before, in the middle of July, 2001. One of the main things that various people who were briefing me had said was, “First reports are almost always wrong, so just be careful, and never go off making public statements about first reports.” And so that was one of the things that came to my mind, it was just a story, an airplane hit the World Trade Center—didn’t know what to make of that. It could’ve been an accident.

Douglas Feith

We got in the car, we went from the defense ministry back to the hotel where we were going to meet with the Western reporters, and I recall that the public affairs officer from the Embassy handed me a cell phone, and somebody on the other end of that cell phone had a phone up to a television.

Douglas Feith

And I was listening to President Bush saying something to the effect that—it was his first statement, that, “This act of terrorism will not stand.” And I remember being struck by that, and talking with my colleague, the Assistant Secretary of Defense, J.D. Crouch, and saying, “Boy, that’s an interesting phrase that the President just used.” His father, President Bush senior, had really only said, as I recall, two memorable things when he was President—two phrases that everybody remembered. One was the famous, “Read my lips—no new taxes,” and the second was, “This aggression will not stand,” when Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. And so for his son to react to this by saying, “This act of terrorism will not stand,” struck me as it couldn’t be a coincidence.

Interviewer

Put away that. Did you already know if this was an act of terrorism? You went from thinking it could’ve been a stray plane to—

Douglas Feith

No, because apparently, I think what had happened was the second plane had hit in the interim, when we were going from the defense ministry to the hotel. I think it was in that period that the second plane must’ve hit.

Interviewer

It was your first encounter with the gravity of what had happened—hearing President Bush speak.

Douglas Feith

Yes. The first thing that confirmed to me that something serious had happened, and that it wasn't just an accident, was the President saying "I believe it was" maybe we can check the chronology on this. But I believe it was after the second plane hit, the President, having been pulled away from that classroom where he was reading to the children, made a statement, and his statement was that this will not stand, this act of terrorism. I think he called it an act of terrorism "will not stand." Cause by the time the second plane hit, it was clear that it wasn't an accident. But I remember being struck by the fact that he was striking a war-like note in response to this.

Interviewer

You think it was purposeful, that phraseology was "yeah. That was your instinct.

Douglas Feith

It struck me either as a remarkable coincidence, or he was basically putting out an allusion to his father's famous remark, which was a prelude to war. And I just remembered that "it struck me as a remarkable phraseology.

Interviewer

Did you know at the time "was your instinct immediately to think that this was Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, radical Islam that was at work, or?

Douglas Feith

No, I had no information other than this snippet, and so I wasn't jumping to any conclusions.

Interviewer

Now, you're with J.D. Crouch, who was the Assistant Secretary. Tell me the difference between Under Secretary and Assistant Secretary.

Douglas Feith

The structure at the Pentagon is "you have the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary essentially occupy the top box. In other words, they are one layer, because the Deputy is essentially the Secretary's alter-ego, and does certain things for the Secretary and substitutes for the Secretary as the acting Secretary if the Secretary's abroad.

Interviewer

Deputy Secretary at this point was?

Douglas Feith

Paul Wolfowitz. So the Secretary and the Deputy occupy, as I say, a box on a single level, as it were, at the top of the department. And then the next level down are the Under Secretaries, and the Under Secretaries then have, within their domains, responsibilities that are divided and each of those major responsibilities is under the control of an Assistant Secretary of Defense.

Interviewer

So how many Assistant Secretaries of Defense were working for you then?

Douglas Feith

Oh, four or five.

Interviewer

And J.D. Crouch was the one who was working on this particular area.

Douglas Feith

He was the one whose—the assistant secretaries of defense in my domain had a combination of geographic responsibilities and functional responsibilities. And J.D. had the geographical responsibilities that included Russia. He also had the functional responsibilities that included nuclear weapons policy. So he was the right guy for this trip.

Interviewer

Who else was with you on this trip? General Abizaid, I thought, was with you on that trip.

Douglas Feith

Well, no. What happened was when we learned what had happened in New York and Washington, we arranged through the European command to get an airplane to take us back to Washington the next day. And that airplane left from Germany, and we collected the various defense officials who were scattered all over Europe and the Middle East, and one of them was General Abizaid, who happened to be in Ukraine. My assistant—another one of the assistant secretaries that worked with me, Peter Rodman, who had the geographic responsibility for the Near East, was in Egypt with one of his deputies, a Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Near East, a man named Bill Luti. And so Luti and Rodman and Abizaid met us in Germany. Somebody else who—another defense official who was somewhere in Europe at the time was Dov Zakheim, who was the Under Secretary Controller. I mean he was the chief financial officer of the Pentagon.

Douglas Feith

And so all of us got on this airplane that the European command had provided for us—it was an aerial refueling aircraft, a KC135. And we met in Germany, got on that plane, and flew home.

A New Approach to Terrorism

Interviewer

Which is a remarkable setting—from your book, I found this an incredible scene. It's almost like a scene from the theater. Here you have, on the plane, about six individuals, all who are going to have an intimate relationship with the event that just happened and its repercussions, and you stand in the bay of the plane talking about what to make of it. Can you describe that?

Douglas Feith

Yes. That was—it really was extraordinary. If I recall correctly, the only information we had at the time was that this was a purposeful attack on Washington and New York, and there was general view that the airplane that had crashed in Pennsylvania was heading toward Washington. We did not know who had done it, although there had been a lot of speculation on the various news programs that it was, it might've been al-Qaeda.

Douglas Feith

But there was no confirmation of that at the time. And we had the President having made the remark that it was terrorism and it would not stand. And we were heading back on the morning of September 12th to get back to Washington, and we knew that when we got back, the question was going to be, "How do we understand this attack, and what should our reaction be?" [Phone rings] Let me see if I can turn this off. And so we got into a discussion that was quite unusual, because normally if you're in Washington and some major event occurs, there are enormous pressures on your time.

Douglas Feith

And so even things that deserve "maybe even require" long discussion are often given short shrift, just because of the pressures of time. Here we were on this airplane, with no phone calls coming in, no real-time communications, and we had hours, while coming across the Atlantic, to try to think through what we were dealing with and how to think about it. And essentially what we discussed ran along these lines "we said, "What do we think is at stake? If this is "we discussed the fact that our traditional approach, as a country, to dealing with terrorist attacks had been to treat them as law enforcement problems, send out the FBI, try to identify the perpetrators, and apprehend them and try them.

Interviewer

So this is retrospective so to say.

Douglas Feith

So we said, "You know, what we've done for years, when we've had terrorist attacks, is taken this law enforcement approach." We said, "That doesn't seem adequate, given the magnitude of this attack," and we inferred "and it turns out later that we had inferred correctly" that the President didn't think it was adequate. I mean the use of the term, you know, "will not stand" maybe we were spinning a lot out of those few words, but it turns out we were accurate. The President did not want a standard, law-enforcement reaction to this attack. This was a much larger-scale attack than anything we had suffered before, and the President wanted a major effort. I mean so major that he called it a "War on Terrorism."

Interviewer

But tell me what "what convinced you that traditional law enforcement wasn't appropriate or adequate? Was it the size, the magnitude of this terrorist act, or was it that this revealed a network that was "potentially could execute further terrorist acts?"

Douglas Feith

Well, one of the things is that the law enforcement approach is, in essence, a reactive approach. It's not entirely reactive, but it's largely reactive. What you're really dealing with in law enforcement is going after criminals after they've committed crimes. Now, there is an element to law enforcement of trying to deter other people from engaging in crime, but

Interviewer

Or to break up networks and syndicates.

Douglas Feith

Or to break up networks, but on the breaking up networks, thatâ€™s not the main thing, and itâ€™s also it was not at all clear that if youâ€™re dealing with an international terrorist phenomenon that the normal mechanisms of law enforcement would be adequate to go after these terrorist networks, which were far-flung all over the world, andâ€™

Interviewer

But why not do it after the Cole, for instance? I mean, whyâ€™ what was it about 9/11 that changed the landscape on this very question, to make it a war rather than a crime approach?

Douglas Feith

Well, one of the things was this was a much larger scale attack thanâ€™ I mean the Cole was a bomb against a military target, and it was big, it was important, it killed peopleâ€™ but it doesnâ€™t even come close to an attack that destroys the tallest buildings in New York City. It justâ€™ you know, buildings in which something like 20,000 or 20â€™

Interviewer

So because it was civilian, or again, because of the magnitude ofâ€™

Douglas Feith

It was a combination of it. I mean the magnitude, the fact that it was civilian, the fact that it was on American soil. Also, it wasnâ€™t just the World Trade Centerâ€™ it was the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I mean this was an extremely serious attack on American soil, against major American institutions. I mean an institution relating to our economy, and an institution relating to our government and our defense.

Interviewer

Did you see immediately as a symbolic attack, given the nature of the targets? Did you see this as an attack on the American way of life, as I think you put it in the book?

Douglas Feith

Well, we saw theâ€™ we saw it as an attack on targets that were obviously highly symbolic. You couldnâ€™t miss that. These were not, you know, random buildingsâ€™ this was the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, so they were obviously carefully selected for theirâ€™ for what they represent. The point aboutâ€™

Interviewer

Does that make it more in the war category than the crime category?

Douglas Feith

Well, what it focused us on was our vulnerability as a country. I mean here you have people, without having to defeat our military, did the kind of damage inside our country that in an earlier era, a foreign hostile power couldnâ€™t do unless they defeated your military. I mean this wasâ€™ it really drove home that we were in a new era, and the ability of small numbers of people to completely circumvent the armed forces and do devastating damage at home was there on display.

Interviewer

So that makes me curious as to whether this conversation on the plane on the way back—were you aware, or did you feel, that this was a twenty-first century act, with new definitions of what war was going to be, how we were going to fight it, and the nature of our enemy? Because it seems like it really has different character.

Douglas Feith

Well, it does. I want to be careful, though. I don't want to make it sound as if we were completely prescient, and we were on the airplane anticipating everything that was going to unfold over the next, you know, four or eight years. So I mean I have to be careful not to claim too much for the conversation.

Interviewer

Yes, I understand, but nonetheless—nonetheless, it was a dramatic historical moment that you were in.

Douglas Feith

But it was, but it's also worth pointing out we were not thinking about these matters for the first time. Terrorism had been a subject that some of us had given quite a bit of thought to over the decades. I know that Peter Rodman had thought a lot about it, because he and I had written about it, had talked about it, had participated in panels about it, for 20 or 25 years already by the time—or in the case of Peter Rodman, even a few more years than that, maybe 30 years—before the 2001 attack. And some of what we had talked about—the business about the law enforcement approach vs. a more aggressive approach was not something that was thought out for the first time in 9/11. There were people who had criticized U.S. counterterrorism policy for many years on the grounds that it was too narrowly circumscribed by law enforcement considerations.

Interviewer

Claire Sterling has a reference like that.

Douglas Feith

Right. And then there's also this question of what is the nature of the threat, and is it an international network, and I reference the fact that Claire Sterling had written a book in the late '70s or 1980s or thereabouts where she talked about the terrorist network at the time being a network. I mean she wrote a book called *The Terrorist Network*, I believe, and she was in conflict with a large part of the U.S. intelligence establishment, who tended to say that these different terrorist groups that we were dealing with in the 1978–79–80 period, were really local phenomena.

Douglas Feith

And that it was just right-wing paranoia to suggest that these different groups—Arab groups, African groups, German groups, Italian groups, Japanese groups, Armenian groups—were part of an international network that the Soviet Union was helping to train and supply and finance. And what Claire Sterling did in these debates with the intelligence community, the intelligence community tended to say, "Each of these groups has its own local agenda, and it's wrong to think of them as simply tentacles of the Soviet Union."

Douglas Feith

Now, the fact is sophisticated people were not saying there were merely tentacles of the Soviet Union, but they were saying that viewing them as simply as separate, distinct groups with local grievances missed an important point.

Douglas Feith

And they were, in some respects, local groups with local grievances, but they were also part of a network. And while they weren't necessarily instruments or merely tentacles of the Soviet Union, the fact was the Soviet Union and its client states were providing these groups with different kinds of resources—training and finances and plastic explosives and other things. So this debate was going on then, I was conscious of that, I had read a lot about that—so had Peter Rodman. And when this happened on 9/11, one of the things we discussed on this airplane on the way back is we knew that there were international terrorist groups from around the world that were part of a network.

Douglas Feith

And it wasn't quite the same network that had existed—you know, the world had changed since 1980-81, and the Soviet Union didn't exist anymore, so I mean there were major changes in the world. Nevertheless, there were these different groups, and they were part of a network, and one of the things that we said—the first memo that I had written, which I wrote before I left Moscow and sent to Secretary Rumsfeld—just like a paragraph or two—said, “We should recognize that this is a problem that involves a network of terrorist groups and their state supporters, and we should try to take action that will make people in this network believe that the terrorism business is a bad business to be in.”

Douglas Feith

Because anybody who's in the terrorism business can be held responsible for what these international terrorist groups do. And it was one thing about breaking away from the law enforcement approach was instead of looking just for the individuals who were specifically related to this attack, what we were worried about was who might attack us next. And we wanted to—at least I thought it was a good idea—to try to get a message, a serious message, out to all of the major actors in the terrorist network—including state supporters—that if the United States is going to get hit, as we were on 9/11, then they are all liable to be hit, whether they were directly involved in the 9/11 attack or not. And if they don't want to be held responsible, they should get out of the business of supporting terrorist groups and sponsoring them.

Interviewer

So this was shifting the philosophical approach from reactive to preventative.

Douglas Feith

Correct. That was actually one of the most important points, was that—and we talked about this a bit on the airplane, and then it became—it was quite clear.

Douglas Feith

By the way, I don't mean to suggest that the people on the airplane who discussed this—Rodman and Luti and Abizaid and myself and others—I don't mean to suggest



that we invented this, because it was clear that the President and others in Washington had invented the same thoughts independently and simultaneously. Because when we got back to Washington and then plugged ourselves into the interagency deliberations on the subject, it was clear that there had been discussions in Washington that paralleled the discussions that we had had on this airplane.

Interviewer

Right. Alright—had any of these discussions—you—™ve said that the literature was there, but had any of these discussions predated 9/11 in terms of understanding what the potential was for a terrorist network, before this horrible day?

Douglas Feith

Yes. There were discussions within the U.S. government on terrorism policy.

Interviewer

That incorporated this notion of whether or not it was to be reactive or preventative.

Douglas Feith

I don—™t think there was much of an argument for a serious, aggressive, preventative policy before 9/11, because—™

Interviewer

There wasn—™t the will for it?

Douglas Feith

It was—™right. I mean to do the kinds of things that you would have to do for a serious prevention program, you—™d have to take action for which there was no political support until the 9/11 attack occurred. There were some discussions—™and I mention this in the book. There were discussions about al-Qaeda in August of 2001, because we had predators that had spotted a person that our intelligence agencies thought was bin Laden in Afghanistan.

Douglas Feith

And there was a question of could we arm those predators with hellfire missiles and do a strike on bin Laden, because we had known that al-Qaeda was responsible for the East Africa embassy bombings and for the Cole bombing, and so there was a thought that we could take action against them. And there were debates about it, but as I pointed out in the book, the debates lacked the urgency that these discussions, of course, developed after the 9/11 attack. I mean 9/11 gave enormous urgency to a subject that had otherwise been treated as, you know, one subject among many for a new administration.

Nuanced Complexities of a War on Terror

Interviewer

Was Secretary Rumsfeld in contact with you at all on September 11th or September 12th, when you were in Moscow, and then on the plane coming home?

Douglas Feith

No. When I was in Moscow, I sent a note to him. I decided not to try to call him—he was extremely busy, and I figured that the best thing for me to do was figure out a way to get back to Washington as quickly as possible, and see how I can be helpful once I got back. I didn't think it would be particularly helpful.

Interviewer

And was there unanimity among those people on the plane and to this discussion, or was there an area of difference between all of you? I understand there were arguments, but I mean in terms of a sort of a

Douglas Feith

Well, there's never—when you have thoughtful people discussing complex subjects, there's never unanimity. I mean different people emphasize different points, and I mean one of the things we did discuss was this concept of a network.

Douglas Feith

And I remember we said, "if this is going to be viewed as an act of war—if the 9/11 attack is going to be viewed as an act of war, and we're going to respond within the framework of a war—that requires a lot of thought." Because this is not a conventional war, and it's not even easy to identify the enemy. I mean who would you say is the enemy? We were having these discussions before we even knew who did 9/11.

Douglas Feith

Sure. Sure. No, but we specifically—and on the airplane, I do remember we talked about several major elements of what it would mean to be at war. One is how do you define the enemy? And we played around with the idea that, you know, it's very challenging, because it's an unconventional enemy.

Interviewer

Or what the chain of command was, right? I mean how could you resolve a war on terror, right? I mean all these questions would have to be

Douglas Feith

It's not like you can say country X, or the alliance of countries X, Y, and Z. I mean this was a terrorist organization which was part of a network of terrorist organizations. Do you say that your enemy is that organization? Do you say that your enemy is a list of organizations? Do you say that the enemy is the list of organizations, plus all the states that provide one degree of sponsorship or another? If you're going to say that all states that support terrorism in one way or another are enemies—we discussed this on the plane. We said, "We're going to wind up with a list that's going to include a number of countries that we consider to be friends." Cause we knew that there were countries in the Middle East and South Asia that had records of being friends, in some respects, but also supporters of terrorist groups in others, and so depending on how you define this, these would be gigantic problems. Also, if you come up with a list of five, 10, 15, 20 countries that you say are terrorist-sponsoring countries, to declare them all to be enemies in a war, so that overnight you're at war with 15 or 20 countries—I mean that clearly was not practical. And we had not completely resolved this question—how you identify the enemy—when the plane landed.

Douglas Feith

Now, what was interesting was the way the President handled this was he didn't call it a war against an enemy, he called it a war against an activity. He used the phrase "war on terrorism," or "war on terror." And there are drawbacks to that terminology, and various people pointed out it doesn't make sense to talk about war against a method of warfare "terrorism" rather than war against an enemy. But given the problems that you have in defining the enemy, it was actually quite a clever device, because what the President did was he said it's a war against an activity that is inherently evil. Right? "terrorism" the purposeful targeting of civilians for political purposes. And so it allowed you to set aside and resolve later the question of which specific organizations or states you're going to focus on, and so it was a place mark "a placeholder, I should say. And it actually rather cleverly fulfilled that purpose, even though it's not an ideal term.

Interviewer

Because it bought some time, essentially, too.

Douglas Feith

It bought time, and it bought time for serious analysis. Interestingly enough, to this day we don't have a comfortable short definition of the enemy, because the enemy is this kind of largely amorphous group of terrorist individuals, organizations, state supporters "I mean it's really a network, and"

Douglas Feith

And as many people pointed out at the time, we won't know when this war is over, because there's no one who'll surrender to us.

Douglas Feith

Who speaks for all?"

Interviewer

Yes.

Douglas Feith

Speaks for all of these different?"

Interviewer

Even at a microcosmic level, the War in Afghanistan, when the Taliban has been decapitated essentially, we don't know who's going to surrender for the Taliban, that becomes a problem even there.

Douglas Feith

Right.

Interviewer

So this notion of when does the war conclude "which was a very difficult one. Also, this is a very different animal than we've ever used the term "war" for before.

Douglas Feith

That's™s right, and it was very strategically and intellectually challenging, and remains so for years. I mean this was not a problem that we eventually just, you know, solved with a snap.

Interviewer

Do you feel that you resolved any of those questions, though, in the interim between then—we™ll come back to 2001—between then and now, though? What is your thinking about it?

Douglas Feith

I think we, as a government, developed clearer understanding of the core problem. I mean there was the broader problem of Islamist terrorism. There was over the years, at least in some quarters, an increasing comfort with the distinction between Islam and Islamism, and a recognition that you can oppose the extremist ideology that motivates the terrorists without opposing Islam as a religion.

Interviewer

Islamism is the extreme form, is what you™re describing.

Douglas Feith

Right—the political Islam, as a political ideology, as opposed to Islam as a religion. But even that remains a problem. I mean America, as a liberal democracy, is uncomfortable, or many officials remain uncomfortable talking about this ideology as part of—you know, as our problem that underlies the terrorism. And they™re uncomfortable with it, they don™t want to be accused of being anti-Muslim—which is proper, we shouldn™t be anti-Muslim.

Douglas Feith

But I mean it remains a difficult issue, and there are still people within the U.S. government who are uncomfortable with it. But I think, over time, there were at least elements of the government who started understanding more the nature of the networks, the nature of the interconnections among groups like al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah. And even the Shiite groups like Hezbollah, and the way countries like Iran, even though it™s a Shiite country, could support both Shiite terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Sunni terrorist groups, like Hamas. And so our understanding of the nature of the network, our understanding of the nature of some of these ideological points, improved in certain quarters as the years went on.

Interviewer

I want to come back to the timeline, but I also just as a final element on how peculiar this was, ask you to speak a little bit to this notion of a shifting sense of global identity. I mean because the nation-state is sort of in decline in some respects. Even if we declare the nation-states we™re supporting were harboring terrorists as targets, it doesn™t necessarily get us to the network. The network is another form of identification. Islamism is another form of identification. Islam is another form of identification. There are all these multiple layers upon which people can attach themselves and identify themselves, which is different historically than we™ve ever been before.

Douglas Feith

It's different in some respects, and there are some historical analogies. Communism, right, or Marxism, was the ideology of an international movement for decades before people from that movement took over a country, and they took over the Soviet Union. And this radical kind of Islam is a movement that has been going on for decades. There are a few countries that have governments that are subscribers to this ideology: Iran, Sudan, Taliban Afghanistan, for example. But the aspiration of this group is to set up a universal caliphate, not to just take over a country.

Interviewer

These similarities, Paul Berman has written about this, right?

Douglas Feith

Oh, various people have written "Berman"

Interviewer

The analogies between twentieth century totalitarian movements and the radical Islam movements of the twenty-first century have more in common than they have as differences.

Douglas Feith

Yes. The main writers and organizers of radical Islamism in the twentieth century were doing their work, to some extent, under the inspiration of the fascist movements of the '20s and '30s, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was created by people who were admirers of Mussolini and Hitler. Which was also true, by the way, of some secular movements, like the Baathist movement that got started in the same period, also in admiration of the fascist movements in Europe at the time.

“What Do We Lose If We Lose?”

Interviewer

So take me back to the timeline. So now you've arrived September 12th, and you go immediately to a meeting at the White House, is that right?

Douglas Feith

Right. But before we get to that, there's one other thing that happened on the airplane that's worth talking about, because it was, I think, very influential to the thinking of a number of us. After some discussion, which didn't quite come to a conclusion, on how you think of the enemy, we had quite an extensive discussion of if we're going to make an effort that's more than law enforcement, and that would be called a war, how would we define our war aim? And one of the things we immediately said was this can be an enormously consequential decision—the label, the formulation that one gives to a war aim—because we remembered in the Gulf War of 1990-91, early on, the United States defined the war aim as the liberation of Kuwait, and then put together this large, international coalition.

Douglas Feith

And when Kuwait was liberated, there was then a debate about should there be military action beyond the liberation of Kuwait, and one of the things that became a strong argument for not taking any additional military action was, “Well, you know, we put the Coalition together on the basis of a specific war aim, and we've achieved that war aim,

and so there we are. And we said, you know, that shows how powerful the formulation of a war aim early on can be in shaping policy, even when circumstances change later, so we should keep that in mind and be very careful in formulating a war aim here.

Douglas Feith

And then we started talking about how would one formulate a war aim, and we talked about things like would you say that the war aim is to eliminate terrorism? And then we said well, that's not a very good war aim, because no president can credibly, properly promise something that ambitious. How could you promise that nobody's ever going to blow up a bomb for political reasons ever again? That's a problem. So then we started trying to come up with lesser formulas, like damaging the ability of terrorists to operate, but we said well, but that's a very low bar, "cause"

Interviewer

And very subjective, too, right?

Douglas Feith

Well, it's subjective, but it's also "if the President wants a major effort, you can't say that the major effort aims at a very low bar of simply damaging the ability of terrorists to operate. And as we were talking of what we're trying to accomplish, we were having difficulties coming up with a formulation that was " that fulfilled all the criteria that you would want a war aim to fulfill. It had to be motivational, it had to be important, it had to be realistic, it had to be achievable. And we were thinking about it and having a problem, and somebody then said "and I don't remember who it was, could've been myself" somebody then said, "Why don't we tackle the problem the other way around? Instead of focusing on what do we win if we win, why don't we ask what do we lose if we lose?"

Douglas Feith

And that made the stakes of the problem much clearer. What we were concerned about was if we do not succeed in preventing a series of terrorist attacks like 9/11, the consequence could be changing the nature of American society, perhaps permanently, for the worse.

Interviewer

Describe that. What does it look like, in other words, if September 11th is followed by September 12th and 13th and 14th and 15th, each graduating in severity.

Douglas Feith

Well, graduating in severity or not "I mean if you had a series of major terrorist attacks in the United States "and we talked about this on the plane and said, "What would be the consequence?" The consequence is you would start having enormous pressure for clamping down on freedom of movement, freedom of people to travel in and out of the country. Within the country, you would start having protections"

Interviewer

The First Amendment would be destroyed, essentially.

Douglas Feith

You could have restrictions on political activity. You can start having demands for ethnic profiling. I mean we anticipatedâ€”

Interviewer

With political supportâ€”with popular support, probably, right?

Douglas Feith

Not with popular support, at popular demand. I mean this would not be a bunch of people in the government saying, â€œOh boyâ€”we get to destroy the civil liberties of the country, and maybe we can get political support for it.â€” Thatâ€™s the wrong way to look at it. Nobody wanted to destroy our constitutional system within the government. What you would get is popular demands to the government saying, â€œDo what you have to do to prevent the next attacks.â€” I mean if you had a series of these attacksâ€”if buildings started falling down in every major American cityâ€”you could get vigilantism, you could get different groups deciding that the government had not fulfilled the social contract and was not providing the basic thing that it was supposed to provide, which was security, and so some local groups under local militias are going to start defending their own regions. I mean you could have extremely severe damaging consequences for the country, andâ€”

Interviewer

Nonetheless, how could you have, though, a war mission that is not to lose?

Douglas Feith

Well, noâ€”what I was sayingâ€”thatâ€™s not the mission. What I was saying is, in tackling the problem of how you formulate a war aim, tackling it first in the affirmative way of â€œwhat do we win if we winâ€”didnâ€™t lead to a satisfactory result right away, and it didnâ€™t demonstrate so much whatâ€™s at stake. When we flipped it around and said, â€œWhat do we lose if we lose,â€” we got a clearer idea of what was at stake.

Douglas Feith

And what was at stake was the free and open nature of American society. Basically, our civil libertiesâ€”but itâ€™s more than civil liberty. I mean civil liberties are enormously important, but itâ€™s our entire constitutional system of government that was at stake, because at some point, as I said, if the government could not defend the country, and people felt that the government wasnâ€™t fulfilling its basic obligation to provide security, public safety, you could have a splintering of the country. I mean really fundamental threats to the survival of our constitutional system. And so we said, you know, if this 9/11 kind of attack were to get repeated, and the government looked impotent, looked incompetent to deal with it, the consequences could really be as large as you could imagine.

Douglas Feith

And they would relate to civil liberties, but they would also related to the basic integrity of the countryâ€”whether it hangs together as a country. And the kinds of restrictions that the public would demand would interfere with commerceâ€”would interfere not just with politics and with freedom and civil liberties from that point of viewâ€”it would interfere with commerce. It would interfere with America being open to the world for goods to come in and people to travel and all the rest of it. So the way we saw it isâ€”we have to make sure that we can defend the country, and we also considered that if the approach to defense of the country is purely defensiveâ€”in other words, the way you defend tall buildings or

airplanes is with a perimeter around the building or guards at the doors to the pilots, to the cockpit—that is a hopeless task. And it turns the country into a police state. So the way you have to defend against that is not by trying to put a narrow perimeter around every tall building in America—it’s you’ve got to go after the people who might try to knock down those buildings, and you’ve got to go after them where they are—abroad, where they are recruiting and training and planning.

Interviewer

So this is essentially the corollary to treating September 11th as a rise to a war model as opposed to a criminal defense model—that’s that we have to be not passive, but aggressive, in pursuing preventing the next attack.

Douglas Feith

Right. And so what we were thinking about—which turns out to jive completely with what the President and his National Security Council were thinking about in Washington—cause as I said, they didn’t get the idea from us. We were quite gratified, actually, that we had been thinking it through along the same lines that the President and his national security team had been thinking it through. The essence of the point was that the purpose of our reaction to the 9/11 attack should not fundamentally be punishment of the people who did it. And punishment is important, but that’s not the fundamental purpose of the moves that we needed to strategize to respond to the attack. The fundamental purpose was preventing the follow-on attacks that we anticipated were in the works.

Interviewer

And did you imagine that this would receive some political argument, this approach—a preventative war?

Douglas Feith

Well, sure. I mean we understood that whatever one does in a democracy is going to be challenged by somebody. By the way, it should be—one of the good things about democracy is that you have built-in challengers in the system to anything that the government does, and that’s good, I mean that makes everybody think better, and it holds people accountable.

The President Said, “We’re at War”

Interviewer

And when you arrive back, you go to this meeting at the White House, so tell me the story.

Douglas Feith

No, actually the meeting I went to when I got back was the President’s first visit to the Pentagon after the 9/11 attack. We arrived in the afternoon on September 12th at Andrews Air Force Base, and my office told me, “The President will be here at the Pentagon—I believe it was at six p.m. And they said, “If you can get back here within—whatever it was, an hour or so— you’re in the meeting, but if you’re late, you’re not in the meeting, ’cause the President doesn’t admit latecomers to meetings.” And I got back to the Pentagon a few minutes before the meeting started, and I remember dashing up the stairs, getting in the room. And I remember the whole building smelled of smoke—I mean it was really awful to go in and realize that



the building was on fire. I mean it was still—the building was still smoldering on the afternoon of September 12th, and it just reeked of the smoke from the destruction.

Interviewer

And had you lost any colleagues and friends in the Pentagon?

Douglas Feith

It wasn't—I hadn't—since I had just arrived at Andrews, and came in straight to this meeting, I had not gotten fully briefed on what had happened. But the initial word that I had gotten was that nobody from the policy organization had been killed, although there were some people who had gotten hurt, and there was an area of offices that belonged to the policy organization that had been incinerated as a result of the attack. But at that particular moment, I had not been fully briefed on what was happening.

Interviewer

Did you lose any friends or colleagues?

Douglas Feith

No. I didn't know the people who got killed.

Interviewer

Or anyone in New York?

Douglas Feith

No, I didn't—I didn't know anyone.

Interviewer

So you go to this meeting—the President's first trip to the Pentagon since the events of September 11th. How did you begin the meeting?

Douglas Feith

I don't remember precisely. What I remember were a few general impressions, and the President said to—this was a meeting of the President and a few of his top people—Condi Rice and I believe Andy Card was with him. I don't recall that the Vice President was there, no, he wasn't, in fact, —cause you wouldn't have the President and the Vice President together at that point. I mean, they were—

Interviewer

Well, the Vice President was still off—

Douglas Feith

Right. The Vice President was off in some undisclosed location at that point. So the President was there, he had a few of his top White House people with him, and in the room, representing the Defense Department, were Secretary Rumsfeld, the Deputy Secretary, the Under Secretaries, the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and—

Interviewer

Who at this point were who? Who was the Chairman and the Vice Chairman?

Douglas Feith

It was General Shelton was the Chairman, and General Myers was the Vice Chairman. This was September of 2001. Beginning October 1st, General Myers was going to move up from being Vice Chairman to being Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. So anyway, it was Shelton and Myers, and then the service chiefs—the military heads of the Navy, Army, Air Force, and Marines. And then you also had the civilian heads of the Navy, Air Force, and Army Departments.

Interviewer

The Secretaries.

Douglas Feith

The Secretaries of the services.

Interviewer

But not the combatant commanders.

Douglas Feith

No, the combatant commanders were off at their combatant commands around the world.

Interviewer

Right. So, again, how does the meeting begin?

Douglas Feith

Well, what I remember is the President said, “We’re at war.” And he said, “I don’t want war plans from you that represent your best thoughts on what we need to do about this threat.” And he said, “And I understand that those war plan proposals you’re going to make are going to involve casualties.”

Douglas Feith

And this was a very significant statement, because the general view at the Pentagon was that under the previous administration, when the President was given war plans, he wanted war plans that did not involve American casualties, which was the reason that, for example, when we did the Kosovo action, American military action was limited to bombing from high altitudes. And the President sets the parameters for military planning, and he says what he wants and what he’s willing to commit in the way of national resources—and blood, for that matter. And for the President of the United States—he said, “I don’t want you giving me plans that more or less guarantee no American casualties.” He said, “I realize this is going to be”

Interviewer

He was drawing an effective line there between himself and his predecessors, and also between this terrorist act and any terrorist act that preceded it, because response had been to shoot from the shore, in line, and not to engage fully.

Douglas Feith

Right.

Interviewer

And he wanted that distinction made because he wanted a more dramatic response.

Douglas Feith

Right, and he said, you knowâ€”I mean one thing that obviously everybody had in mind was the possibility that we would go in on the ground in Afghanistan, which was the base for al-Qaeda, because even though this was September 12th, there was a general viewâ€”even though it hadnâ€™t been confirmed, there was a general hypothesis that it was al-Qaeda that had done the attack. And so everybody knew that al-Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, which meant that one thing that you would clearly take into consideration is the possibility of going into Afghanistan on the ground. And if you were going to do that, you could do that only if you were willing to take casualties, â€”cause nobody could guarantee that you could do a major ground operation in Afghanistan without casualties.

Douglas Feith

And the President was basically saying, â€œDonâ€™t just give me high-altitude bombing options. Iâ€™m willing to listen to options that involve putting people on the ground, even though that will involve U.S. casualties.â€

Interviewer

And even though, if everyoneâ€™s imagining Afghanistan at this point, it is known as â€œthe graveyard of empires,â€ and itâ€™s a place where the British had failed and the Russians had failed, and so it had to be a rather challenging thought of how you were going to craft a war plan based upon a place in the world where wars had been pretty nasty ventures.

Douglas Feith

Thatâ€™s right. And now, the President didnâ€™t get into that level of discussion at this meeting. I mean one of the things that also struck meâ€”and I remember thinking this at the timeâ€”was the President had this meeting at six oâ€™clock. He kept it to a half an hour. He didnâ€™t engage in a lot of speechifying. He had two or three main points that he wanted to convey. He conveyed them, with spare rhetoric, but he was quite emphatic. He said, â€œThis is war.â€ He said, â€œI want your plans. I want you to give me unconstrained best adviceâ€”and it was unconstrained by the idea that it has to be no-casualty options and the like. He said, â€œI understand we may have to take casualties to execute these plans. Give me your best thoughts.â€ And I believe he called onâ€”

Interviewer

Did anyone else speak?

Douglas Feith

Yeah, I think Secretary Rumsfeld may have said some things.

Interviewer

Did you speak at this meeting?

Douglas Feith

No, I didn't. I don't think too many people spoke, I mean maybe the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had something to say. I don't remember precisely. But what struck me was the President delivered his message. He delivered it at a very high level—kind of strategic level. He gave the guidance that is useful for a president to give to his military commanders when he wants them to prepare plans, and at six thirty, he ended the meeting promptly. And I know that because I have a photo of the President going around the table shaking hands at precisely six thirty, when he ended the meeting. I mean he didn't use it as a brainstorming session. He didn't use it to get into kind of long, elaborate strategic discussions. He had specific guidance that he wanted to deliver. He came there—he delivered it, and then left the whole Defense Department to do its work.

Interviewer

But he's asking you for plans, which means—how does that work? How is it coordinated? The plans are drafted up through the Secretary, and then he delivers the plan that he endorses—is that the way it works?

Douglas Feith

The way war plans work is the—normally, the strategic guidance for war plans comes from the civilian leadership. It comes from the President and the Secretary of Defense. They tell the military what they want the military to plan for, and if you think about it, you don't want the military officials deciding for themselves where they want to plan wars, right? Civilian control of the military means the President and the Secretary of Defense, who are the two civilians in the military chain of command, think about what they are concerned about in the world. They go to the military, and they say, "We are concerned about these problems. We want you to do military plans addressing these problems, and when you do them, take this into account, take that into account. We're worried about can we get cooperation from these countries—might we find ourselves getting hit by nuclear weapons or chemical." In other words, they raise question, they raise strategic issues.

Douglas Feith

They will give guidance along the lines of if we're going to do a plan like this, we want you to try to do the plan with allies, or we would want you to do this by yourself. Those kinds of things are the kind of strategic considerations that the President and the Secretary of Defense give to the military. The military then develops plans in the combatant commands. In other words, the war plans are not developed by the Army or by the Navy—they're developed by the Central Command, or the Pacific Command, or the European Command—the regional—or the special operations command. But the war plans come from the combatant commands, and they're supposed to be addressing the strategic guidance that was given to them by the civilian leadership.

Douglas Feith

Now, in this case—what I just described is the general, routine arrangement. In this particular case, obviously, you had a special, urgent situation where the President comes, he delivers his guidance to the Department [of Defense] leadership, and then Secretary Rumsfeld went out to his combatant commanders and said, "Give me your thoughts on what can be done within your geographic areas to disrupt an attack."

“States Have Known Addresses”  
Interviewer

The mission still has not been fully articulated.

Douglas Feith

Right. It has still not been articulated, but it basically was, “Tell us what you think can be done to help prevent the next attack.” And I mean that was the main guidance. Now, what happened was the discussion that we had in the airplane—that I had with these several colleagues in the airplane—was written up when we got back, and

Interviewer

By you?

Douglas Feith

By me, and by Peter Rodman, and then we gave it to Secretary Rumsfeld, and the Deputy Secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, and to the military leadership. And they had their own memos, and things got discussed, and what ultimately resulted a few weeks later was on, I believe it was October 3—so about three weeks after the September 11th attack. The Secretary put out strategic guidance for the department, which did lay out objectives, strategic considerations for the planning of responses to 9/11, and that was a document that I discuss in the book. It was the first strategic guidance that the Secretary gave to the Defense Department after 9/11.

Interviewer

And what was in that document?

Douglas Feith

There was quite a bit in that document. I meant that was the

Interviewer

Right—but summarize the principle points of the mission.

Douglas Feith

That we were dealing—that the enemy was a network. That we were dealing with a network of organizations and state supporters, and that we needed to disrupt terrorist networks as best we could, using all reasonable means to do that. I’d have to go back and refresh my memory by looking at that document, but I mean I remember that part of our thinking was we didn’t have good, precise intelligence on the whereabouts of specific terrorist operatives. And so if our job as a department was to disrupt these terrorist networks, we had a problem—that the key people, the key operatives, were individuals who were in hiding. Not just bin Laden, but in all the key operatives. And so one of the things we thought about was, how can you disrupt this network when you don’t know where the key operatives are?

Interviewer

Now, is this a failure of the CIA?

Douglas Feith

It's not just a failure. I mean I don't want to—I mean we had limited information about this. It's very hard to get it, even when you—I mean, naturally, we concentrated more resources on the issue after 9/11 as a government than we did before 9/11. But it's very hard to know where individuals are in the big world, right? So the—I mean even when they were tracking bin Laden in Afghanistan, as I said, in August we had these films that had been taken by predators, but it's not entirely sure who that figure is. Anyway, it's

Interviewer

Well, but it goes to the heart of why this is, again, a peculiar war, though, doesn't it, because the

Douglas Feith

It absolutely does. But here's the main operational point—what we said was if we don't know where the key terrorist operatives are, we at least know where the key state supporters of terrorism are. Right? States have known addresses. And so what we said is if our goal is maximum disruption of the terrorist network, to prevent the next attack, and we don't know directly how to get to the key terrorist operatives, we at least can know how to deal with them indirectly, which is find ways to put maximum pressure on the state supporters of terrorism. Because if the state supporters get really worried that they're going to be held responsible if the United States gets hit again, then those state supporters could pull the reins in on the groups that they have contacts with, and that was an indirect strategy.

Interviewer

Right, but you're back to your original problem you had on the plane, which is that 15-20 countries, some of them our friends, were state supporters of terrorism.

Douglas Feith

That's right, but we're not talking about going to war with all these countries. We're talking about a strategy for putting effective pressure against those countries, and we understood there could be a demonstration effect. For example, if we took military action against the Taliban, and the Taliban paid with, you know, their power and their lives for what had been done, that could have a major demonstration effect for other governments that are supporting terrorist groups. And we understood that—you don't have to take military action against all of them. You may have to take military action against one or two or three of them

Interviewer

You're setting examples.

Douglas Feith

And set an example, and then the others would decide that this terrorism sponsorship business is not a good business to be in. I mean one of the problems is that, over the decades, there had been a number of countries that had supported terrorist groups, and had gotten various benefits for supporting those groups, and had not paid any kind of price. And what we said is it's important that they understand that they could pay a price.

Interviewer

So this was part of the mission, then.

Douglas Feith

Right. But that was, I thought, quite an intelligent way of dealing with the fact that we did not have specific intelligence on the whereabouts of the terrorists, so we said put pressure on the people who might know. In other words, there are parts of the network that are visible, there are parts of the enemy network that are not visible.

Interviewer

I suppose part of the issue there, too, is that the byproduct of that could be that you get the intelligence that you need in order to

Douglas Feith

Exactly right and that was a major thought, also. We launched, for example, maritime interdiction operations, because once the President decided that we were going to take action against Afghanistan, against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, we understood that that could cause the terrorists, in particular, to flee. So we set up what were called MIO "M-I-O" maritime interdiction operations to try to grab any terrorists who were fleeing across the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and to Africa or elsewhere, from Central Asia. And then we did what were called expanded maritime interdiction operations, which was based on the point that you just made, that we recognize that if you're doing these operations, you may not catch a terrorist, but you may capture information that will lead you to a terrorist.

Douglas Feith

And one of the things we thought about also when the military operations were designed in Afghanistan, the thought was if you do those operations in the right way, even if you miss the individuals that you're going for in a particular compound or encampment, and the individuals flee, you may be able to collect items or papers that will lead you to terrorists elsewhere. And that happened. I mean information that we got in Afghanistan led to the capture in Malaysia or Indonesia of some key terrorist figures. So part of the thinking was how do you act as intelligently as possible on the basis of the intelligence available, and how do you take military actions that could increase your chances of getting good intelligence about international terrorist networks?

Interviewer

So this was the Secretary's charge to the combatant command groups to come up with plans. Now, all combatant commanders?

Douglas Feith

Yes.

Interviewer

Or just CENTCOM?

Douglas Feith

No, he went to all of them.

Interviewer

And tell me about the responses. What kind of plans did you get?

Douglas Feith

Well, the initial responses, I remember, were very unsatisfactory from Secretary Rumsfeld's point of view, because, in general, the nature of the initial response from the combatant commanders was, "If we are given precise information about where terrorists in our areas of responsibility are, we can bring impressive resources against them." And so what the combatant commanders were saying is, "If you give us a target, we can hit that target, and we can hit it from the air, we can hit it from the sea, we can hit it this way, we can hit it that way. We've got these munitions, we've got these capabilities, we've got these Special Forces. We can destroy any target that you point to."

Interviewer

But that's unhelpful if you don't have a target, yeah.

Douglas Feith

But Secretary Rumsfeld said "I mean he used this analogy that he used frequently. He said, "We're like a little bird, and the little bird is sitting in the nest, waiting for the intelligence of the CIA people to come and drop a worm in." And the idea that you can't do anything "I mean we have" what Secretary Rumsfeld said "and he wrote a rather angry memo about this. At the time, the defense budget was approximately a third of a trillion dollars a year, right "it's gone up since, but it was a third of a trillion dollars a year. He said, "The American people are not going to tolerate the combatant commanders coming back and saying that for a third of a trillion dollars a year, there is nothing that we can do unless the CIA gives us "deposits the worm in our mouth."

Interviewer

This is a source of tension between the Secretary and General Franks, right?

Douglas Feith

This was a source of tension"

Interviewer

Uniformly, right, but then with Franks in particular.

Douglas Feith

No, all across the board. No, there were other problems that he had with "there were other related problems that he had with General Franks, related to the Afghanistan war plan and then operations. But this general point, that the military response was not, "Here are a number of creative things we can do," but was instead, "We have all these enormous capabilities that can destroy anything we're pointed to. All we need is some intelligence to point us, and then we'll do whatever you say, Mr. Secretary."

Douglas Feith



And the Secretary said, “That’s not helpful. We can’t do nothing, and if we don’t have good intelligence, then we need to come up with sensible things to do, notwithstanding our limited intelligence.” And one sensible thing would be military operations that could yield intelligence, rather than military operations that are just search-and-destroy missions. And so that was the kind of thing: that he was trying to get the military to think about the problem differently, and don’t be passive, don’t just wait for the intelligence. Come up with things that can be done that can disrupt. And this idea, for example, of taking action that could pressure the state supporters, so that they could pull the reins in on the groups that they’re dealing with, was an example of a creative way to get around the problem of lack of precise intelligence.

Don Rumsfeld’s Apartment  
Interviewer

And you have a kind of deeper understanding of him. Who—if you’re describing him to someone who’s never met him before, what do you say?

Interviewer

This is a good moment, I think, to stop and give me a kind of a quick character sketch of Secretary Rumsfeld, because this strikes me as—this anecdote you’ve just told—as representative of the way that he ran the department.

Douglas Feith

He—

Interviewer

Did you know him before you were—

Douglas Feith

I did not, no, I did not know him before he—

Interviewer

Before you started working for him.

Douglas Feith

Before he interviewed me for the job. And I didn’t know him all that well at this point even after I had the job, ‘cause I had just been on the job for a few weeks, and even within those few weeks, I was not yet in his inner circle.

Interviewer

But, over time, you were—

Douglas Feith

Over time, yeah.

Douglas Feith

Well, he had a remarkable intellect. He saw problems as—he saw problems in both major

dimensions of what I consider to be the two main dimensions of strategic thinking. He saw how things across the world interconnectâ€”how, if you take an action in this area, it can have effects of a non-obvious type, of a non-obvious kind, in other areas. So he saw that what I think of as the horizontal dimension of strategic thinkingâ€”that everything connects to everything, and that if you cause reverberations in some part of the world through your actions, you can be having all kinds of consequences in other areas, as I said, where itâ€™s not obvious.

Douglas Feith

He also saw the temporal dimension of strategic thinking, that what you do now can have affects down the road. And he insistedâ€”he liked to use the phrase â€œlooking around cornersâ€”he insisted that when people would suggest a course of action for him, that they think several steps down the road, and anticipate the kinds of problems that can arise. He did not believe in people predicting the futureâ€”as a matter of fact, his single most important thought as a strategist was uncertainty, and the role of uncertainty in world affairs. And so he didnâ€™t have any patience for anybody who came in and pretended to talk in a categorical way about what was going to happen. â€œIf we do this, this will happen.â€ And you know, his view is, â€œIf itâ€™s in the future, you canâ€™t talk about it categorically.â€

Interviewer

Nonetheless, he wanted you to think about the future.

Douglas Feith

But he wanted you to think about the future, so thatâ€™s the point that Iâ€™m trying to make, is he would emphasize, â€œConsider possible consequences, but donâ€™t pretend to predict.â€ And the other thing that was remarkable about the way that he approached problems is he insisted that the most important part of any war plan was the set of strategic assumptions that should be presented right up front. And he said, â€œIf you have the wrong assumptions, you can brilliantly and logically come to the wrong conclusion. And so the key is working the assumptions: are the assumptions reasonable?â€

Interviewer

Give me a sense of what the assumptions were going into this war. What would he have meant by that?

Douglas Feith

When we actuallyâ€”I remember we laid out a number of these assumptions in that initial plan that I mentioned that came out on whatever it wasâ€”October 3, 2001. I donâ€™t remember it all off the top of my head, but the kinds of things that he would have in mind as key assumptions for the War on Terrorism were things like this point that I made about the demonstration effect. One assumption would be that, while there may be some countries that will not change their policies on terrorism or weapons of mass destruction unless we take direct action against them, there are other countriesâ€”we assumeâ€”that will modify those policies if they see that weâ€™re willing to take strong action against other countries.

Douglas Feith

So you don't necessarily have to take military action against all of them, and that way, you can design a plan that says, "Take military action here, and then put political pressure over here." And your chances of success with political pressure in these cases would hinge on the success of your military action in some other case. I mean that's the kind of thing that could be

Interviewer

But if that assumption is wrong

Douglas Feith

Now, if that assumption is wrong I mean the idea, the way we defined, for purposes of military planning the way we defined the key assumption is a key assumption is something that might be wrong. That's one of the most important points, right? A key assumption is different from a fact, right? Facts are facts. Assumptions are specifically things that might be wrong, so by listing them as an assumption, you are flagging the fact that it might not materialize this way, okay?

Douglas Feith

And a key assumption in a war plan is something that, if it turns out to be wrong, requires a major adjustment of the plan which you can sometimes anticipate and plan for in advance. In other words, you do what are called branches, where you say the main branch is based on the assumptions being right, but if these key assumptions are wrong then we'll go off on these other branches. One key assumption is "if we take military action in Afghanistan, for example, we will be able to get access for overflight rights or basing rights in certain countries. And so we would plan to bring in our forces on a certain timeline through a certain path. Now, if that assumption turns out to be wrong, you may have to rely on long-range bombers.

Interviewer

Well, this happened in Iraq, obviously, right? Because in Turkey, we assumed we would go

Douglas Feith

Precisely it happened in Iraq with Turkey, and

Interviewer

And that war plan changed because for basically that reason.

Douglas Feith

Correct. And when we were doing that planning, one of the things we said is CENTCOM needed to do a war plan based on cooperation from the key neighboring countries, and also based on non-cooperation from the key neighbors. So I mean even though we expected cooperation, we had specifically said plan for the eventuality that we don't get it. But anyway, the point that I was making about Secretary Rumsfeld's approach he would, when it came to war plans, he would often spend the first several hours "two-three hours" of a discussion of a war plan on the one slide. A general would come in with like a 30 or 40 or 50-slide presentation on the war plan, and the Secretary would, first of all, demand that there be a key assumptions slide like as either number

one, number two, number three slide had to be key assumptions.

Douglas Feith

If you got past the third page and there wasn't key assumptions, you had already done it wrong, so he wanted the key assumptions up front. And then he would spend literally two-three hours on those key assumptions, which frustrated many of his briefers, because these four-star generals would be coming in, and they wanted to get through all 50 slides, and the Secretary would stop them and work and rework and think through the key assumptions. And the Secretary's general view was if you get the key assumptions right, anybody could do the plan. The plan's easy once you get the key assumptions right. The hard part is the key assumptions.

Interviewer

Where did this come from, because he had been Secretary of Defense back in the '70s. Did he follow the same kind of strategic approach back then?

Douglas Feith

I don't know. I wasn't with him in the '70s.

Interviewer

Well, I mean but did you have a sense this was something that he had arrived at through experience, or his time at Merck, or his time as a? I mean where does that come from?

Douglas Feith

It's a good question. You should ask him. I don't know where he got this. It was obviously a very highly-developed thought for him by the time

Interviewer

Did you have respect for it? Did you think it was the right way to do it?

Douglas Feith

Yes, I think it was. Now, it happens to be that in his interaction we would have these meetings. There were so many demands on his time there was on all of our parts and I mean we all were under enormous time pressures. Everybody, including the generals, who were doing these briefings. But the Secretary was under enormous time pressure, and he was trying to get the military to think about things in a new, creative, bold way. And especially after 9/11, when everybody's sense of urgency was heightened, he was trying to get people to think creatively, boldly, and quickly about doing things.

Interviewer

This is interesting, because if you back up before 9/11, this had already been a hallmark of his secretary-ship or whatever

Douglas Feith

Right.

Interviewer

Is that he was going to shake upâ€”

Douglas Feith

Transform the department.

Interviewer

Yes, absolutely.

Douglas Feith

But take that, and multiply by a thousand as a result of 9/11.

Interviewer

And now heâ€™s under the pressure, as I think you point out in the book, as you all are, to come up with a war plan. Thatâ€™s something that you had, days before, not anticipated.

Douglas Feith

Right. There was no war plan for Afghanistan on the shelf.

Interviewer

Right.

Douglas Feith

And so this had to be created from scratch, and the assumptions had to be laid out, and, you know, it was quite a project.

Interviewer

But back to this questionâ€”do you think this is theâ€”you have retrospect now, and I mean this as not a critique of him, necessarily, but as an approach to planning a warâ€”this notion of putting the assumptions up front, and rigorously challenging themâ€”a good method?

Douglas Feith

Yes. I think that that, basically, is sound. Thatâ€™s intellectually rigorous. Thatâ€™s a sound approach. His personal interactions with the people briefing himâ€”people that he was basically training to give him information in a way that is useful to himâ€”those personal interactions were sometimes rough, and they sometimes bruised the people who were giving him these briefings, including very high-ranking military officers. And that came at a price.

Interviewer

How roughâ€”just, personally, his challengingâ€”

Douglas Feith

Yeah. He wouldâ€”and one of the things that was a pet peeve of his, but it wasnâ€™t a small thing, â€”cause itâ€™s really quite fundamental. If youâ€™ve spent time in the Pentagon, you would certainly understand this. There are people in the Pentagon who talk

almost entirely in abbreviations.

Interviewer

Yes, I know this. At West Point, they talk all in abbreviations. I know this.

Douglas Feith

And now, if you know the abbreviations, and you're in on the code, fine—"this stuff is more or less clear. But when the Secretary of Defense is dealing with his top military advisors, and giving them guidance for a war plan, and on the basis of what gets said, aircraft carriers can move, and bombing runs can be initiated, and all the rest of that—I mean this is very important. You can't afford miscommunications, and the Secretary of Defense is, after all, a guy who, a few months before, was out of the government for many, many, many years. And so he demanded that his briefers speak to him in plain English. And when they would come in and throw out, you know, these, "Well, we're planning to do a MIO operation in order to do LIO, but we're restricted by our ROEs to do—you know, I mean it becomes almost an impenetrable mass of abbreviations and jargon. And he would stop the briefers, and what he was mainly concerned about was he didn't want people throwing things at him where some key phrase, or it could be an abbreviation that he didn't get, and if he says "yes," somebody's off implementing something that he didn't intend.

Douglas Feith

So he would demand, "What does that mean? What does that mean?" He would stop people and he would say, "Could you please speak English?" Actually, he didn't always say "please." He would just say, "Speak English." And there were a few occasions where he would stop a briefing, and he'd say, "I need somebody to come and brief me who speaks English." Now, did he have a valid point? Yes. Was that the most genteel way of handling it? No. And it caused bruises that lasted for years. I mean there were people who were bruised by those kinds of interchanges who basically decided that they were enemies of his forever, and they were waiting for him to stumble so that they could come back and take revenge, and that happened.

Interviewer

Sounds like he was looking for a precision of communication, though. It's not necessarily gratuitous—it may have been rough in the approach.

Douglas Feith

I agree, and you're making exactly the point that I was trying to make that—I think there was perfect validity in asking for precise communications, in trying to get through and beyond these abbreviations so that you have absolute clarity on these enormously important discussions. But, you know, there are more genteel ways of doing it and there are more brutal ways of doing it, and so—but I think that, while he sometimes was overly rough with people in these personal interchanges, he wasn't overly rough for no good reason.

Interviewer

But now, so we made the point that his approach of going through the key assumptions and rigorously attacking them is important—for the kinds of decision-making he needed to make. The approach vis-à-vis his subordinates in terms of dealing with them could

sometimes be rough, but they were aimed at a kind of precision. Go through, though, again, as a Secretary of Defense, making the kinds of decisions and determinations that he needed to make in a time of war, how would you rate him? grade him?

Douglas Feith

Well, I think that the general process that he put in place for war planning was a serious and sound process, and so I would give him very high grades on the approach that he took to analyzing a problem strategically and demanding rigorous, farsighted planning. There's one other thing that I think is worth pointing out that is kind of characteristic of his thinking and is quite interesting and not all that common.

Douglas Feith

It is very common, when a problem arises—this is true in the government and in the private sector, and I think anybody who's been involved in organizations and committees has seen this. It's very common, when some issue arises and an organization needs to respond to it, that people come together, they sit around, and they immediately start talking about, "What should we do, right? There's been maybe the CEO got hit by a bus, and now what are we going to do? Or, you know, when 9/11 occurs, so the country's gotten hit, what are we going to do? And people immediately start talking about proposed courses of action. Secretary Rumsfeld was the guy who would come into the room—and this happened over and over again. He was the guy who would come into the room and say, "Before we talk about what we should do, can we all get agreement on what we're trying to accomplish?"

Douglas Feith

And it sounds like a perfectly common-sense point, but it's amazingly rare. As I said, you know, I think almost anybody who's involved with an organization, whether it's the board of a school or a business or the government, would appreciate how rare it is that before you launch into this discussion about action, somebody actually demands, "Let's get an agreement on our main purposes." And what Rumsfeld would do is he would say, "What are the national interests that are at stake here?" And he'd say, "Let's, you know, have three, four, or five of them. If you have more than three, four, or five, you're not at the strategic level, so let's identify the three, four, or five main things we're trying to accomplish or avoid in dealing with this problem." And then he would demand that people rigorously formulate those things. Then, when people would propose courses of action, he would say, "Okay, now we can measure the merit of the course of action against whether it's likely to achieve our goals."

Douglas Feith

What happens if you don't go through that exercise of identifying the goals is people think, "Well, we all know what we want to do, we all agree," and yet, if you start going around the room, somebody will say "for example, after 9/11, what's our main goal? Well, some people would say, "to find out who did it and hit them," whereas Rumsfeld would've said, "No, our main goal is to prevent the next attack." Now, just to take those two as options, if you don't—if, immediately after 9/11, everybody gets together and talks about our next action, and they haven't clarified which one of those two main prongs of the fork you're going to go off on—are you basically doing punishment, or are you basically doing prevention? There's a world of difference. So getting that kind of clarity on goals"

Interviewer

Even though your action may be to go find out who did it because that will prevent the next one.

Douglas Feith

Absolutely. But at least you understand what you're doing and why, and what the drawbacks are of different proposals. But you gotta have clarity. Now, the way Rumsfeld always used to put that was, "If you don't know where you're going, any path will get you there," and so he would always insist and people would come to him frequently with briefings, and they wouldn't start with what we're trying to accomplish.

Douglas Feith

So the one thing that came before the key assumptions was the what are we trying to accomplish, and that was basically the structure for the structure for briefing the Secretary was come up with a proper formula of the main national goals involved in this matter, and then your key assumptions, and then you could come up with like key facts "cause sometimes you just needed to know basic facts about a subject to deal with it, and that was important, too. And then you would get to courses of action and the pros and cons of the different courses of action, and then you could evaluate the courses of action against the goals and the assumptions. And that was a very good process.

Interviewer

We need to stop soon, but one last question about Secretary Rumsfeld "did you become close to him personally? Is he a friend?

Douglas Feith

Yes.

Interviewer

Is he someone that you still see?

Douglas Feith

Yes "all of those. I became close to him, I consider him a friend, and I still see him, but it was a relationship that built over time, "cause we didn't start off knowing each other or particularly friendly. And in fact, it was an issue even getting invited to the most important meetings that he had every day, these so-called "roundtable meetings" that he had with Wolfowitz and the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And it wasn't until the end of September that I pressed to get invited to those meetings, "cause I said, "I can't support you "the policy organization can't support you if we don't know what your thinking is, where you are.

Douglas Feith

And I can't know that if I'm not in on the main meetings that you have with your top military leaders. And he liked to keep meetings small, and he was rather reluctant, but then he started inviting me right at the end of September, and from that point forward, the policy organization became a major part of the development of his strategic thinking in the department. I mean we were able to really serve him in a way that we hadn't been able to before.



Interviewer

Let's stop here, and then we'll pick up again another time. Thanks.