

Deciding on Afghanistan

Interviewer

So today is December 13, 2010, and this is the second installment of our interview with Douglas Feith, F-E-I-T-H. So Doug, I think we didn't get very far, but we have a tremendous amount of material. We've got from September 11th to September 12th, I think, which shows you how incredibly important those days were—those first couple of days. But I'd like to move on to Afghanistan now, and to the reaction to September 11th, and several points I think that you bring up in the book. Â

Interviewer

The first one is the degree to which this was a real—is a war an old-fashioned terminology—an intervention—and as a degree to which this was a war of ideas. Â Â You talk about this a little bit. Â Â And if it was a war of ideas, who was going to manage that, and how we were going to carry it forth. Â Â I wonder if you could just begin by speaking to that.

Douglas Feith

Well, initially, I don't think it was a war of ideas in the conception of the administration leadership. Â Â There were people in the senior levels of the administration who understand that there was an ideas element, or an ideological element, to the problem, but that was not front-and-center as a focus of the tension in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Â Â The major focus was preventing the next attack, and therefore doing everything reasonable on a global basis to disrupt terrorist networks so that you would head off what everybody was fearing was going to be the follow-on attack to 9/11.

Interviewer

Let's revisit that just for a second—so it was in your first interview, but I do want to reinforce it here—the notion as to whether we were punishing those who had committed the acts of September 11th, or preventing the second act or the next act of terrorism. Â Â And you spoke to this discussion with I believe it was Secretary Rumsfeld. Â Â Can you repeat that, just to give us a foundation here?

Douglas Feith

Yes. Â Â The initial debate about what should be done in response to 9/11 hinged on this question of what is our main purpose? Â Â And the main purpose that the United States had pursued in the aftermath of terrorist attacks for all of American history before 9/11 was a law enforcement purpose. Â Â Identify the individual perpetrators, and go out and try to capture them, so that you could prosecute them. Â Â What President Bush decided after 9/11, though, was that that would not be an adequate response, and he said that the purpose of our reaction to the 9/11 attacks should be to do everything we can to prevent the next attack. Â Â And that was, as we discussed before, a decision with enormous implications—it was very ambitious. Â Â It was very radical, in its way, because it was a complete departure from past policy, and it was that decision, in my view, that, you know, out of which grew the whole set of efforts known as the “War on Terrorism.”

Interviewer

And that included, really, two parts: disrupting the network of—the terror network, so to speak, but also holding accountable those states who supported or harbored terrorists,

isn't that right?

Douglas Feith

Well, the concept was once the President has said we should be doing everything we can to prevent the next attack, we then had to think through where might the next attack come from in this international network of terrorism?

Douglas Feith

And when we looked at the network, we saw that two of the major elements of the network were the terrorist organizations themselves, and the states that were supporting them, and in some cases, giving them safe harbor. So the strategy had to address both the terrorist groups and the states.

Interviewer

And the immediate target for the second of those was then Afghanistan, right? So in the days after September 11th, the call to give up bin Laden and to respond to the challenge that President Bush was making was direct at Afghanistan right away.

Douglas Feith

Right. The President decided "I gather it was right around the time of the Camp David meetings that he had on I believe it was the first weekend after the September 11th attack he decided either there or immediately thereafter that the first major military effort was going to be in Afghanistan. It was then, as I describe in my book, something of a debate about what our target was going to be in Afghanistan. This is something that's gotten very little attention in the literature, but it's actually quite an interesting debate, because it showed the difference between people who were thinking about Afghanistan more or less as a self-contained operation vs. those who were thinking of Afghanistan as part of a broader strategy.

Douglas Feith

The debate was should we focus on al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan only, or should we be going after both al-Qaeda and the Taliban? And the CIA officials in particular made the point that we should consider going after al-Qaeda targets only, because they were concerned that if we went against al-Qaeda targets and the Taliban, there was a danger that we would be antagonizing the Pashtun population in Afghanistan in general, because the Taliban was largely a Pashtun phenomenon. It didn't mean that all the Pashtuns were Taliban, but it did mean that most of the Taliban were Pashtun.

Douglas Feith

And the concern was that if we went against the Taliban, we might be unifying the Pashtuns against us, and what the CIA officials who spoke on the subject warned about was even if we succeeded in making an alliance with the Northern Alliance and the Northern Alliance people were not Pashtun, they were mostly Tajik and Uzbek ethnically that if we made an alliance with the Northern Alliance, and succeeded in overthrowing the Taliban, there was a danger that you would then have a civil war in Afghanistan between the north and south.

Interviewer

Let's back up for a second, so that the listener/viewers can understand the

distinction. A A al-Qaedaâ€™the difference between al-Qaeda and Talibanâ€™can you draw that line for me?

Douglas Feith

Yes.Â Â TheÂ al-Qaeda people were generally referred to by the Taliban and the Afghans in general as â€œthe Arabs,â€ â€™cause the al-Qaeda people were not Afghans.Â Â They were mostly Arabs.

Interviewer

And Afghans are not Arabs.

Douglas Feith

And Afghans are not Arabs.Â Â They are all Muslims, but the Afghans are ethnically different from the Arabs.Â Â And this Arab organization, al-Qaeda, achieved a base of operations by forging a strategic alliance with the Taliban.Â Â Now, the Taliban were a group of religious extremists whoÂ were mostly Pashtun in their ethnicity, and who achieved a large degree of control in Afghanistan after a period of pretty rampant warlord-ism following the Soviet invasion.Â [Crosstalk]

Interviewer

The distinction, though, between what the Arab al-Qaeda believe and wish to do, and what Taliban, the Afghan Taliban wish to do, was what?Â Â How would you describe it?

Douglas Feith

Well, I think they wereâ€™ideologically, they were pretty simpatico, which is the reason that their strategic alliance worked.

Interviewer

But one was state-centered, isnâ€™t that right, in the sense that they were Afghan.

Douglas Feith

Yeah, the Taliban was Afghan, so they wanted to establish an Islamist state in Afghanistan, which they largely did, although they had a challenge from theseÂ northern groups.

Interviewer

I want to get to that in a second, but whereas al-Qaedaâ€™s more international.

Douglas Feith

Yeah, but al-Qaeda also had an Islamist agenda, so they shared a number of ideas, but the Taliban people were people working to take over their own state, whereas the al-Qaeda people had a more universalistic program, and they were notâ€™they didnâ€™t have any actual responsibility in running any particular state.

Interviewer

Then the Northern Alliance was a challenge to the Taliban.

Douglas Feith

Right.

Interviewer

And they were led, I guess, militarily by Massoud, isn't that right?

Douglas Feith

Right, that was a Tajik, ethnically. He was an Afghan of Tajik ethnicity.

Interviewer

And it was not at all coincidental that he was killed on September 10th, isn't that right, or was it the 9th or the 10th or something?

Douglas Feith

Right, and he was killed by al-Qaeda people. I mean not the world's greatest authority on these subjects, but the Taliban had a serious challenge from the Northern Alliance, and one of the ways that they tried to address and defeat that challenge was by making them a strategic alliance with al-Qaeda. And al-Qaeda gave them manpower and financial resources, and that was a significant element in the Taliban's defense against the challenge from the Northern Alliance.

Douglas Feith

And then part of the help that the al-Qaeda people gave to the Taliban was this operation they did to have some of their people dress up as journalists and go and interview Massoud on the day or two before September 11, 2001. And when they got into his presence, they set off a bomb, which, if I recall correctly, had been hidden inside of a television camera. And they set it off and they succeeded in assassinating Massoud, who was a legendary figure—a major leader.

Interviewer

He was charismatic you said, right?

Douglas Feith

A charismatic figure, and there was a—they undoubtedly hoped that by killing somebody that prominent and talented and successful that they would really cripple the Northern Alliance. But at the same time that they did that, they had this operation going in New York and Washington that was about to put the United States of America in strategic alliance with the Northern Alliance, so.

Interviewer

So were the two linked, though—the assassination of Massoud was strategic in order to defang the Northern Alliance, at the moment when they knew this was going to be going on internationally? Would you say that?

Douglas Feith

Well, I mean they were certainly linked in that one happened after the other within something like 24 to 48 hours, so that linked them. I mean, so that linked them, I don't know that anybody in al-Qaeda has ever publicly discussed

Interviewer

That there was a purpose?

Douglas Feith

Whatever the strategic rationale for that linkage was, but itâ€™s a heck of a coincidence that those two things happened, essentially, immediately after one another.

Interviewer

Nowâ€”so tell me, first of all, your knowledge of Afghanistan andâ€”I mean, thisâ€”before September 11th? Â Â Did you have to become an immediate student once these events happened, or had youâ€”were you up on this story? Â

Douglas Feith

I donâ€™t think anybody was as up on it as they became after. Â Â After September 11th, we all tried to learn a lot fast, and there wereâ€”Â

Interviewer

The difference between a Pashtun and a Tajik. Â [Crosstalk]

Douglas Feith

Yeah, there wereâ€”different people knew different things from history, and, you know, I knew a little bit, but I learned a lot more over time.

Interviewer

And our most recent experience or understanding of Afghanistan wouldâ€™ve come from the Soviet history there in the, was it the late â€™70s and early â€™80s. Â

Douglas Feith

Right.

Interviewer

So that had to inform a lot of the immediate attitudes about how we were going to grapple with the problem of Afghanistan, is that right?

Douglas Feith

Well, it certainly did, and people were generally aware that the Soviets had had, I believe, something like 300,000 menâ€”I donâ€™t remember the exact number, but it was largeâ€”in Afghanistan. Â And despite that enormous investment in manpower, they lost, andÂ people in the Pentagon and CENTCOM were conscious of that lesson, and wanted to make sure that we did everything sensible not to repeat the error that the Soviets had made. Â Â And I think that was part of the inspiration for a light-footprint strategy in Afghanistan, which is the strategy that was adopted with really amazing success.

Making a Point
Interviewer

So come back now to as you began, to this notion of do we go after the al-Qaeda targets alone, do we go after the Taliban—the fears of what that could unleash, and how the argument was resolved.

Douglas Feith

Well, the argument that said we should go after the al-Qaeda people alone struck the leadership at the Pentagon as very nonstrategic. I mean it was one of those examples of—we thought the people who were making that case were, in some ways, missing the whole point of the military operation.

Douglas Feith

As I believe we talked about last time, one of the main thoughts we had in designing the reaction to 9/11 was to do everything we could to disrupt international terrorist networks, as we said, to prevent the next attack. We knew we lacked intelligence about the whereabouts, on the whereabouts of terrorist operatives, and so part of our strategy was an indirect approach, which was we needed to go against state sponsors, because we knew the location of the state sponsors.

Douglas Feith

And they knew, presumably, the location of the groups with whom they were dealing, so if we didn't know the location of the specific groups, we could still influence them if we could effectively squeeze the state sponsors, and those state sponsors, if we brought enough pressure to bear on them, could pull the reigns in on the groups they were dealing with. And this was our, I think, creative and sensible way of getting around the problem that we lacked specific intelligence about, on the whereabouts of these groups. So a crucial part of what we needed to do in Afghanistan was hit the Northern Alliance hard enough that we would be sending a signal

Interviewer

You mean the Taliban.

Douglas Feith

Sorry—hit the Taliban hard enough—by working with the Northern Alliance—to send a signal to state supporters of terrorism all around the world that it's an extremely dangerous thing to be in strategic alliance with terrorist groups that are attacking the United States or the West.

Douglas Feith

And this was a key part of the message, so when people—in particular, at the CIA—made the argument that we should take military action in Afghanistan and carve out a sanctuary, as it were, specifically for the state supporters of al-Qaeda—for the Taliban people—we said, “You're completely missing the point of what we're trying to accomplish on a broader level.” Focusing on al-Qaeda would be in line with the old law enforcement approach to dealing with the terrorism problem—find out the people who were specifically tied to the attack, and hit them. But we were—at the President's urging—trying to move beyond the law enforcement approach to this broader idea of preventing the next attack by disrupting the network, by working on the state sponsors within the network.

Interviewer

I mean help me understandÂ this, because lâ€™we didnâ€™TMt have the intelligence to hit the targets anyway, did we?Â Â Wasnâ€™TMt that one of the failures of the alliance?Â

Douglas Feith

But weâ€™

Interviewer

So that argument sort of couldnâ€™TMt carry any weight to begin with.

Douglas Feith

You mean when the CIA was saying, â€™œHit?â€™Â Â Well, what they were arguing is, â€™œWe can concentrate intelligence assets on locating al-Qaeda targets within Afghanistan, and then concentrate our military action against those targets.â€™

Interviewer

Although I would think that thatâ€™TMs a slow process.

Douglas Feith

Oh, thatâ€™TMsâ€™we thought it would be difficult, it would be slow.Â Â It reduced the total number of targets in a country that was not particularly target-rich to begin with, andâ€™

Interviewer

Right, and ineffectual.

Douglas Feith

And the whole action could be ineffectual, and, as I said, you were missing the big, strategic point anyway, which was to try to makeÂ a point to state supporters of terrorism all around the world that thereâ€™TMs an enormous price to be paid if youâ€™TMre giving safe haven and support to a group that does the kind of thing that al-Qaeda had done to us.

Interviewer

So in this argument, was the CIA on one side, everyone else on the other?Â Â Or was thereâ€™TM

Douglas Feith

No, I wouldnâ€™TMtâ€™I donâ€™TMt know about everybody else on the other.Â Â I donâ€™TMt remember exactly how everybody lined up.Â Â What I remember is that the voices for the much narrower approach tended to be from the CIA, â€™TMcause they were making the point that they understood Afghanistan, they understood the distinction between the Taliban and the Arabsâ€™so-called, to use the Afghan terminology for al-Qaeda.Â Â

Douglas Feith

And they were also concerned that if we support the Northern Alliance, youâ€™TMre laying the foundation for a civil war.Â Â Now, my view on that was that was actually a proper thing to be worried about.Â Â I didnâ€™TMt think that what the CIA was warning about that was silly.Â Â It wasnâ€™TMt sillyâ€™it was quite important.Â Â But it didnâ€™TMt inevitably lead to

the conclusion that we should not be in alliance with the Northern Alliance. A A It just meant that, as we do our work, we should be conscious not to do things that would needlessly tend to drive the Pashtuns in general into the camp of the Taliban. A A And then ultimately, as you know, we wound up having some Pashtuns with whom we could cooperate”

Interviewer

I was about to say”I imagine that rested on”

Douglas Feith

In principle, one being Karzai. A [Crosstalk]

Interviewer

The distinction that Pashtun did not describe the entire Taliban population, nor was every Pashtun a Taliban. A A So there was reason to believe that you could make that division as well.

Douglas Feith

Right. A A And what we did is we took the CIA warning, which led them to a conclusion” that we didn”t think was prudent” the business about targeting only al-Qaeda and not the Taliban” we took their warning about the danger of civil war into account. A A And that, I think, was part of the reason that special efforts were made to try to find Pashtun allies for the actions that we were taking against the Taliban, so that we made it clear that we were not anti-Pashtun, even though we were anti-Taliban.

Interviewer

Right. A A So in order to execute this strategy, the President makes a challenge, isn”t that right, to Mullah Omar, who is the head of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, to turn over bin Laden. A A And that”s the line in the sand”that we wait for him to comply with that. A Can you describe that moment?

Douglas Feith

Yeah, the President decided that before we were going to take action in Afghanistan, he wanted to essentially demonstrate to the world that there was” a cooperation and mutual protection operating between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. A A

Douglas Feith

And, you know, I assume that what the President had in mind was he wanted to make sure that people couldn”t claim that al-Qaeda was there either without the knowledge of the Taliban, or without good relations with the Taliban. A A He wanted to make it clear that the Taliban was protecting al-Qaeda, so he made this demand, and said, ”Turn them over,” and”

Interviewer

Was there any thought at the time that they might comply? A

Douglas Feith

Sure. A A There's always a "when you put something out like that, the world sometimes deals you a card that you're not expecting." And so there was an understanding that that was a possibility, but let's just say it didn't surprise us when the Taliban said, "No."

Internal Dynamics of Afghanistan
Douglas Feith

So now we have to prepare ourselves for an invasion of a country where we know the Soviets, and historically, invading forces have been defeated, by the nature of the terrain, by the tribal nature of the people inside it, and how the civilization in general has been resistant to outside invaders. What made us think that we could succeed where others had failed?

Douglas Feith

Well, part of the idea was to recognize that the Taliban was not, by any means, universally popular in Afghanistan, and that there are many Afghans who would view the removal of the Taliban from power as liberation. The Taliban was very oppressive, and the Taliban was bringing its own Islamist political ideology to bear in Afghanistan in many places that were not receptive to it, and

Interviewer

Describe a little bit of what kind of a regime this was.

Douglas Feith

Well, they had an extremely strict, negative attitude toward the education of women, and toward the playing of music, and other major social and cultural issues, where they were at odds with a lot of Afghans. But there were Afghans who generally had pride in the history of their country, and, you know, including the non-Islamic or pre-Islamic history of Afghanistan. But the Taliban then went in and did something that actually became very famous, at the time "they went into an area in central Afghanistan where there were these enormous Buddhas that had been carved into a mountain, and they literally dynamited them, which was considered one of the, you know, most barbarous acts that a government had committed regarding, you know, the cultural heritage of their own country in a very long time."

Interviewer

This was long before September 11th, too.

Douglas Feith

And this was before September. It was one of the things that gave the Taliban a very bad reputation in various quarters around the world, long before 9/11. And so some of these things were very unpopular with Afghans also, not just people outside of Afghanistan. And so the thinking was one of the ways to avoid the errors that the Soviets made was to design our actions in Afghanistan to be consistent with a strategy of liberation. And I remember Paul Wolfowitz says the Deputy Secretary of Defense wrote a memo, that I think was quite influential, talking about how instead of sending in an invasion force, what we could do is make very good use of special operations forces to get leverage in Afghanistan by using the existing Afghan forces that were anti-Taliban, and linking up with them and creating an alliance with the group known as the Northern Alliance.

Douglas Feith

And if the United States and its Coalition could ally with the Northern Alliance, then, first of all, we would benefit from the numbers that the Northern Alliance can bring into the fight. We would be using leverage rather than a very heavy footprint of our own, and we could make it clear that we were supporting Afghans in liberating their own country, rather than have the United States function as the head of an invasion force.Â

Interviewer

Youâ€™re giving me that sense, here, nowâ€™because the Northern Alliance are not the only group, and not the only non-Taliban group, I should say, in Afghanistan, so there are many different tribal warlords and various factions within Afghanistan. Can you paint that picture a little bit? What percentage, if you can cite it, the Northern Alliance might represent, and then what some of these other factions were that we could have unite?Â

Douglas Feith

I donâ€™t remember the numbers very well, so thatâ€™s something you should talk to somebody who has it fresher in his head, but your pointâ€™s well taken. We understood that there were various factions in the country. The Northern Alliance was the most important military federation, you could say, or organization, opposing the Taliban, but there were also Pashtuns who didnâ€™t favor the Taliban. And what we wanted was to learn as much as we could about the various fissures within Afghanistan and take advantage of them, all for the purpose of making it clear that we were not fighting against all of Afghanistan or all the Afghan peopleâ€™or even all of the Pashtuns. That we were fighting specifically against this group that was fanatical, extremist, very violent, and had killed a lot of people, oppressed people, made itself unpopular in various circles, in Afghanistan, and relied on foreignersâ€™the al-Qaeda peopleâ€™to remain in power.

Interviewer

What did the Northern Alliance, to us, represent, other than being not the Taliban? I mean it was not a Western-style sort ofâ€™Â

Douglas Feith

No.Â On the contrary, I mean they also had people who were influential who had Islamist views, and so, I mean it wasnâ€™t that they were champions of liberal democracy.Â But they were opponents of the people who had allied with al-Qaeda in the attack on the United States, and we were willing to work with them to establish the principle that there was a major price to be paid for what the Taliban did.

Interviewer

What Iâ€™m trying to get at isâ€™was there a distinction of ideas here between these groups, or was it a distinction more driven by history and ethnicity and sort of tribal wars that had gone on?

Douglas Feith

My understanding was you had all of those elements. Â There were differences in ideas.Â Â There were also differences in ethnicity and differences in geographic region, and Iâ€™m sure if you got down to a more fine-grained picture, youâ€™d find that there were individual antagonisms that were also at work.Â Â When youâ€™re talking about

civil war, which is essentially what was under way there for years, even before 9/11, civil wars tend to be very intricate.

Interviewer

And less and less driven by ideas and more driven by other stuff, in a sense, right?

Douglas Feith

Well, they're driven by a mix of things. I mean I'm always suspicious of anybody who tells you that some complex and intricate picture is really all about one thing. And I don't think it was all about any one thing. I think, as I said, you could probably find ideas, ethnicity, personal antagonism, economic issues, and, you know, lots of other policy disputes lots of other issues accounted for the differences.

Interviewer

As a fighting force, though, which is what one of our chief needs was from them, minus Massoud, how effective could they be? Describe to me what the view was. [Crosstalk]

Douglas Feith

Well, there was a serious question when Massoud was assassinated how effective they would be. As it turns out, you had Fahim Qasim stepping in as the successor to Massoud, and then you had various other warlords that participated Dostum in the north and Ismail Khan in the west, and others, and they proved to be quite effective. Now, there was a period of a few weeks after we started the bombing on October 7 in 2001, there was a period of a few weeks when not much was happening on the ground, and our bombing was proceeding.

Douglas Feith

We had been hoping to get a tiny force I mean literally a few tens of people, a few dozens of people on the ground to establish initial connections

Interviewer

The Special Forces you were talking about.

Douglas Feith

With the warlords well, CIA, and then the military groups, the Special Forces groups. We were hoping to get them in early, and then see the Northern Alliance forces start to move, and we were delayed for a variety of reasons having to do with the CIA's making connections, and then having to do with weather, and the difficulties of flying helicopters under bad weather conditions.

Douglas Feith

We were delayed until somewhere around 12 days, maybe 2 weeks, after the bombing started, before we had, even a dozen or two, Special Forces in Afghanistan. And in that period of a week or two at the beginning, I mean every day seemed like a year, and there was enormous frustration on the part of Secretary Rumsfeld, and on the part of the CENTCOM people, and it was a difficult time.

Douglas Feith

And then it was a few days after that that the New York Times ran a piece using the word "quagmire." I mean here we started the war on October 7th, having been hit on September 11th. The United States had no war plan on the shelf for Afghanistan. Afghanistan was as remote as it could be, it was landlocked, and we launched a war in less than a month, and then three weeks later, the New York Times was declaring quagmire. And I mean it was really kind of a remarkable example of journalistic flightiness, and

Interviewer

Well, the other thing about that, it also spoke to the fear that everyone had about going into Afghanistan, didn't it?

Douglas Feith

Yeah, but I mean quagmire is a funny term to use three weeks into a major military operation that had no long period of preparation or anything else. I mean I think it would've been a lot more sensible to be, you know, a little more patient. I mean it made sense for Secretary Rumsfeld to be pushing the system with a certain kind of impatience, but he wasn't going out making grand declarations that reflected completely unrealistic impatience, and this quagmire thing was really just silly.

Douglas Feith

But it's worth noting, because that kind of silliness reoccurs in American history, and it helps, I think if you remember cases like that, it helps you as a newspaper reader or as a consumer of the news media to be appropriately skeptical when one sees things like that, you know, as other wars and other crises develop.

Inside the Halls of the Defense Department

Interviewer

Now, what are you doing through this period? As the Under Secretary [of Defense for Policy], what is your role in the initial days?

Douglas Feith

We were not doing much on the actual military operational planning. I mean that just wasn't the responsibility of the policy organization, and that's not the role that Secretary Rumsfeld wanted the policy organization to play. I mean he was a strict believer in preserving the integrity of the chain of command, and that meant the command that ran from the President through the Secretary of Defense to the combatant commander. And then military operational plans were done within the combatant command, under the combatant commander, and he reported directly to the Secretary.

Douglas Feith

By the way, it's worth noting for the general audience that the Joint Chiefs of Staff are not in the chain of command for military operations and not even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is in the military command. The actual military command for chain of command for military operations goes from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the four-star commander at the combatant command, which is like the central command.

Interviewer

Which in this case was General Franks.

Douglas Feith

General Franks.

Interviewer

General Tommy Franks.

Douglas Feith

Right. Â Also, because Secretary Rumsfeld was so interested in preserving the integrity of the chain of commandâ€”which is a legal matter, itâ€™s set up by statuteâ€”he did not want civilians, he did not want other elements of the office of the Secretary of Defense, let alone people at the White House or outside the Defense Department, to be kibitzing, as it were, with people in CENTCOM, and he didnâ€™t want anybody in CENTCOM thinking that they were getting orders indirectly from other civilians. Â Andâ€”

Interviewer

Your contact with Tommy Franks wasâ€”

Douglas Feith

My contact with Tommy Franks was generally in meetings with the Secretary. Â In other words, when General Franks would come to report toâ€”

Interviewer

So whereâ€”Â

Douglas Feith

I was in the middle of a thought.

Interviewer

Well, letâ€™sâ€”I think you were speaking about what contact you had with General Franks.

Douglas Feith

Yeah, and thenâ€”but I was in the middle of a particular thought, let me just try to reconstruct it.

Interviewer

You started to say it was limited to, and you wereâ€”

Douglas Feith

Oh, yeahâ€”on military operationalâ€”oh, yeah. Â My contact with him tended to beâ€”right. Â Okay, I got it. Â You want to turn on?

Interviewer

Itâ€™s onâ€”I can tell. Â Itâ€™s alright.

Douglas Feith

Okay. Â Right. Â My contact with General Franks, especially in those early days, tended to be when General Franks would come up to Washington to brief Secretary Rumsfeld, I would attend the briefings. Â The military operational discussions in the early days, in September itself, were generally done before I started attending those meetings. Â I started attending those meetings more in October. Â I mean that was an issue that I worked out. Â In the first weeks after I got to the Pentagonâ€”and I started my job in the middle of July of 2001. Â

Douglas Feith

In the first weeks, Secretary Rumsfeld didnâ€™t make it entirely clear how he wanted the policy organization to connect to him, and when I came to him after 9/11, a few, two weeks or so after 9/11, and said to him that I didnâ€™t think that the policy organization was serving him as well as it might, because he was doing various things that I was just not aware of, he made the comment that what he really wanted was the policy organization to come up with creative ideas.Â

Douglas Feith

As he put it, â€œLob an idea or two in front of me every day,â€ and he made a point, â€œIn front of me, not behind me.â€ Â And I said to him that Iâ€™d be happy to try to do that, but itâ€™s very hard to know whether an idea that I was thinking of lobbying toward him would land in front of him or not when I didnâ€™t know where he was. Â And he was deciding positions and having important discussions every morning in his daily meeting known as the round table meeting with the Deputy Secretary and the Chairman and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but I wasnâ€™t attending those meetings. Â

Douglas Feith

And so I suggested to him that if he wanted me to do the job that he was talking about, it would be important that I start attending those morning meetings. Â â€™Cause the problem that I had was we were generating ideas, but we had no idea whether those ideas were something that the Secretary had already considered and dismissed, or whether he would find them useful. Â

Douglas Feith

And so after suggesting this and having Secretary Rumsfeld chew on it for a day or two, I got the call that he wanted me to start attending those daily morning meetings, and that was in the very end of September of â€™01. Â And that was a very important turning point in the relationship of the policy organization to the Secretary. Â From that point forward, I was in on the key meetings that he had with the military leadership every dayâ€”got a much clearer view of where the Secretary stood on various issues, so we understood where we could be helpful to him, and develop ideas that he would say that he was interested in hearing more about, and be able to pose challenges or questions when we heard an idea that we werenâ€™t so pleased with. Â Anyway, that became a very important turning point.

Interviewer

So this is where you wouldâ€™ve met General Franks, and had interactions.

Douglas Feith

Well, then after that point, once I started going to the morning meetings, then when General Franks would come up, it was much more natural to include me in the meetings.

Interviewer

I see. Â What were your impressions of General Franks?

Douglas Feith

He started off in a very rocky relationship with Secretary Rumsfeld, and it was clear. Â He used to, when he was not in Washington, after the war started in Afghanistan, he used to talk to the Secretary pretty much every morning, and there would be phone calls that they had. Â And I was one of the people that would listen in on those phone calls. Â

Douglas Feith

And the tension between the Secretary and the General was pretty obvious in those phone calls, because the Secretary would be voicing his customary impatience, especially about the introduction of the first few Special Forces teams into Afghanistan, and you could hear General Franks resenting itâ€”resenting being pushed. Â But those of us who worked with Secretary Rumsfeld every day knew that this wasnâ€™t anything extraordinaryâ€”he pushed everybody, and was impatient with everybody. Â

Douglas Feith

But General Franks was obviously not accustomed to it and didnâ€™t take to it very well, and so you could hear that there was a lot of tension.

Interviewer

Was this the historical sort of tension between the civilian command and the uniformed command, which goes back to Lincolnâ€”goes back to [George] Washington, really, this notion that the generals donâ€™t want to move until theyâ€™re sure that they know what theyâ€™re going to getâ€”the civilian side control wants the achievement right away. Â Is that what we are seeing, or is this more personality-driven?

Douglas Feith

I think there was some of what you were saying. Â But I wouldnâ€™t want to create the picture that Secretary Rumsfeld was acting like a reckless civilian official, just pushing for things to happen before a person of sound professional military judgment would say they should happen. Â

Douglas Feith

I think they both, Rumsfeld and Franks, were impatient to get the Special Forces in, but it was unpleasant for Franks to have to, day after day, explain to the Secretary why there was yet another delay, and yet another problem. Â There were alsoâ€”what Secretary Rumsfeld tended to do is he trained his team. Â He trained people how he wanted them to work with him, and that training process was not always easy or pleasant, because he didnâ€™t always instruct you in a rudimentary fashion. Â

Douglas Feith

The way he trained is he would let you do things your way, and if your way was compatible with his way, then fine. Â But if your way wasnâ€™t compatible with his way, he would say, â€œThatâ€™s not useful,â€ which was taken as a severe rebuke. Â And four-star generals are demigods in their own domains, and theyâ€™re notâ€”theyâ€™re often not accustomed to being rebuked by anybody. Â And Secretary Rumsfeld was a rather equal opportunity rebuker when it came to dealing with anybody, whether he was four stars or no stars in the military, or civilians. Â I mean he said, â€œThings need to be done in a certain way.â€ Â

Douglas Feith

When I say â€œthings need to be done,â€ Iâ€™m talking about not things that deserve substantive debateâ€”he was happy to have substantive debates about policy or strategy. Â But when it came to presenting information to himâ€”when it came to how you prepare a briefing, when it came to things like making sure that the assumptions of your strategy are laid out up frontâ€”he would receive this information from people, whether they were colonels or four-star generals or, as I said, senior civilian officials. Â And if it wasnâ€™t presented well and it wasnâ€™t thought-through, and the people couldnâ€™t answer three or four questions deep, and they werenâ€™t on top of their brief, he made it clear that he was unhappy.

Douglas Feith

And that was tough for his subordinates, and I think that General Franks got the brunt of quite a bit of that, because General Franks would come to him and present some point, and Secretary Rumsfeld would ask him a question that he didnâ€™t have any answer for. Â And Secretary Rumsfeld would make it clear that he was unhappy that he didnâ€™t have any answer, and, you know, â€œWhy are you bringing me this subject and making this point if you donâ€™t have the answer to these questions?â€ Â

Douglas Feith

And there was some of that, and it created quite a bit of tension between them. Â That lasted for a few weeks, and then it was clear that Secretary Rumsfeld decided he had trained General Franks to a certain point, and then wanted to make nice. Â And it was clear that at some point Secretary Rumsfeld basically started embracing General Franks and making him feel more comfortable, and working with him moreâ€”

Interviewer

Is it that Franks changed, or is it that Rumsfeld thought heâ€™d got everything youâ€™d get out of Franks?

Douglas Feith

Well, I think that Franks changed to try to accommodate Rumsfeld. Â Rumsfeld recognized thatâ€”probably concluded that the particular kind of harsh training had gone about as far as it could constructively go. Â And then there was also the story that General Franks told in his own memoirs, that at one point he was so frustrated with Secretary Rumsfeldâ€™s questions, interrogations, and treatment, that he suggested that he should resign. Â And I think that Secretary Rumsfeld realized thatâ€”

Interviewer

He suggested that he, Franks, should resign.

Douglas Feith

He suggested that he, Franks, should resign. Â He said, “You need a new commander.”

Douglas Feith

Â And Secretary Rumsfeld was not interested in having a new commander”he wanted his commander to be able to answer questions of the type that Rumsfeld wanted to pose. Â And so it was clear that Secretary Rumsfeld didn’t want to push Franks over the side, but he did want to push him to work and think and analyze things and present information in a way that the Secretary considered to be necessary and rigorous and appropriate.

Interviewer

How were the combatant commanders chosen?

Douglas Feith

Well, Franks had been appointed commander of CENTCOM, I believe, in the Clinton administration. Â I mean the way they’re chosen is they’re ultimately nominated by the President”yeah, I believe they’re ultimately nominated by the President on the recommendation of the Secretary of Defense, and”

Interviewer

So this had been a recommendation of Secretary Cohen or someone.

Douglas Feith

I believe so. Â I’m not entirely sure about that, but I believe that’s right.

Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Interviewer

So what is the relationship between the Under Secretary [of Defense] for Policy and combatant command decisions”or is there one? In other words, what was your role with the respect to the actual execution of the War in Afghanistan?

Douglas Feith

Well the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy is essentially an advisor to the Secretary [of Defense]. So we had no actual responsibility”I mean we were not supposed to exercise any responsibility in managing or overseeing the military. We were not in the chain of command, and anybody in the policy organization who might presume to think that his job was to evaluate whether military operations comported with policy or strategy set down by the Secretary would’ve been slapped down by the Secretary, “cause the Secretary”

Interviewer

But you’re in these briefings, in other words, to be another set of ears for the Secretary.

Douglas Feith

Weâ€”our role is to advise the Secretary, and the Under Secretary does have the statutory responsibility to advise regarding war plans, but again, itâ€™s an advisory role to the Secretary. Â And soâ€” and Secretary Rumsfeld made clear that he wanted to keep the policy organization in an advisory role and not in an operational role regarding the military, in general. Â

Douglas Feith

I mean there are some peculiar exceptions to thatâ€”for example, thereâ€™s an organization under the office of the Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, which exists within the policy organization, and because of the special circumstances of how special operations forces were dealt with by the congress in the 1980s, they were treated almost as a separate department, as the Army and the Navy and the Air Force are departments. Â So there was, essentially, a separate budget, a separate department, but they didnâ€™t have a civilian secretary, the way the Army and the Navy and the Air Force do. Â And so this Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict was supposed to function, more or less, the wayâ€”toward special operations forces the way the Secretary of the Army deals with non-special operations forces in the Army. Â So I mean thatâ€™s a peculiarityâ€”thatâ€™s the exception.

Interviewer

So and your relationship with the combatant commander is indirect, in that it goes through the Secretary, too. Â In other words, youâ€™re advising the Secretary, to the degree that you, as you said before, have some advice to render on war planning, it would go through the Secretary to the combatant commander.

Douglas Feith

Correct.

Interviewer

So now, during this period, were youâ€”what sort of advice were you giving the Secretary with respect to the execution of the War in Afghanistan?

Douglas Feith

Well, the plan had been developed at CENTCOM, as it was supposed to be. What happened was when the Secretary began to worry that one of the main premises of our plan might be wrongâ€”one of the main assumptions of the plan might be wrong, which was the assumption that we could use a small American force to connect to Northern Alliance forces, and by bringing them supplies and bringing them air support, we could make those Northern Alliance forces much more effective. And those Northern Alliance forces would then seize ground from the Taliban.

Douglas Feith

There was a periodâ€”this famous â€œquagmireâ€ that lasted whatever, 72 hoursâ€”and this period near the end of October, when the Secretary began to question our assumptionsâ€”is that correct? The Northern Alliance hadnâ€™t started to move yet. The Secretary was concernedâ€”he didnâ€™t want to find thatâ€”

Interviewer

This was an assumption of CENTCOM, right? Or was it aâ€”

Douglas Feith

I think it was an assumption that, as I recall, one of the people who helped create that assumption was Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz in thisâ€”I think rather influentialâ€”memo that he did about the use of special operations forces to link up to the Northern Alliance. But it was an assumption that had been adopted by CENTCOM, and it was a way of addressing the concerns that we not repeat the errors of the Soviets by coming in with a very heavy footprint, so it was a well-justified experiment, alright? As allâ€”

Interviewer

But not only adopted by CENTCOM, but vetted by CENTCOM, I would imagine.

Douglas Feith

Oh, sureâ€”sure. No, I mean if the people at CENTCOM had said, â€œThis is preposterousâ€”no way,â€”that wouldâ€™ve been very influential, Iâ€™m sure. But they didnâ€™t say that. They adopted it. They understood that itâ€”when you have a big strategic problem, like we want to do this operation in Afghanistan, but we donâ€™t want to fall into the traps that the Soviets had fallen in, or that the British in the nineteenth century had fallen into. So there are certain things you want to doâ€”thereâ€™s certain things you want to avoid doing.

Douglas Feith

And then they came up with a strategic approach that allowed us to try to address this range of problems with a small forceâ€”but that was based on certain assumptions. After a few weeks, Secretary Rumsfeld wanted to make sure that we were questioning those assumptions, and readyâ€”the whole point of labeling something an assumption is that youâ€™re making it clear, by calling it an assumption, that it may be wrong, right? Thereâ€™s a very big distinction in planningâ€”in war planning and all planning, thereâ€™s a very big distinction between a fact and an assumption. And the reason you label certain things as assumptions is to make it clear that they are not factsâ€”they are assumptions, and they may be wrong.

Douglas Feith

And a major assumption, or key assumption, is one that, if it turns out to be wrong, requires you to make substantial changes to your plan. That was our definition of a key assumption. And so the Secretary never likes assumptions to get stale, and he didnâ€™t want a long time to pass where, at the end of which, we would then find out that one of our key assumptions was wrong. He wanted us questioning assumptions continually, as we were going along, especially something as important as the basis for our whole strategy.Â

Interviewer

So he would turn to you to question these assumptions?

Douglas Feith

So what he did was, at one point, askedâ€”he had been getting briefings from CENTCOM.Â Â CENTCOM was on a certain path.Â Â They were content to remain on that path for a while longer.Â Â Secretary Rumsfeld was saying, â€œMaybe thatâ€™s right, but maybe itâ€™s not,â€”and so he turned to me and General Pace and the J5 organizationâ€”it happens to be the J5, at that moment, General Abizaid was out of town,

so his deputy at the time, Major General Mike Dunn of the Air Force, joined General Pace and me, and we went off, at the Secretary's instruction, to spend four or five hours preparing a strategic review, sometime in late October of 2001, reviewing the assumptions on which CENTCOM had been basing its operations, and thinking through what could be done differently.

Douglas Feith

Now, this whole exercise was not in itself war planning, because war planning gets done by the combatant command. It was for the purpose of bringing a new set of eyes, outside of CENTCOM, to the problem, and then presenting our thoughts to Secretary Rumsfeld so that he could better engage with General Franks.

Interviewer

Alright, how do you do that? You say just a few hours, and you sit with—is this brainstorming?

Douglas Feith

Yes. This was a remarkable—I mean I remember it to this day, even though it was nine years ago. I mean this was a remarkable moment when the Secretary worried, somewhat frustrated, about the lack of results on the ground, turned to General Pace and me and said, “I want you to think through the strategy. I want you to think through what are the main things we need to accomplish, by when? What are the actions that we’re taking? Are they sound? What are the actions that we should be taking? What new things might we try? Have we done everything we can to motivate our Afghan allies?”

Douglas Feith

Maybe our assumptions about the Afghan allies are wrong. Maybe these people are not good fighters. Maybe they’re not courageous. Maybe they’re not on our side. Maybe they don’t really want to take the Taliban out of power. So you just look at everything

Interviewer

On that kind of subject, though—so how do you make that—you go off into a room, and you need data to be able to understand this, right? You needed to make sure

Douglas Feith

Well, we had all been reading. We had all been reading the intelligence, and so in other words, whatever the U.S. government institutionally knew on the subject that was coming up to the higher levels of the government, we were responsible for being familiar with. And—but the Secretary wanted this in real time. He didn’t want us to turn this into a research project. This wasn’t, “Go out and spend a week reading and then come back and talk to me.” He said, “I want you to think this through.” And we had just had a briefing. I don’t remember exactly what stimulated it, but it was probably some kind of a briefing about what was going on in Afghanistan that the Secretary thought was unsatisfactory.

Douglas Feith

So he turned to General Pace and me, and he said, “Go off, reexamine where we

are. A A Ask, do we have the right assumptions? A A Are we doing things correctly?
Â Â What are we missing that we should be doing? Â Â What are the key things we should
be focused on? Â Â Do we have our eye on the right points? Â Â And he said, “I want
to reconvene this afternoon” “I don’t remember exactly the time” “it was like
reconvene at three o’clock or four o’clock, which was “whatever” “four or five
hours from when he was making the request.

Interviewer

So you go off with General Pace and sit in a room like this and”

Douglas Feith

And so General Pace had grabbed his deputy J5”

Interviewer

Right. Right.

Douglas Feith

And the three of us went into my office, and I sat down at my computer to do a paper, a
point paper, for the Secretary, you know, based on his instructions of reexamining what our
key assumptions are, and what our key goals are, and how important is it to get certain
things done now vs. later, and what kinds of leverage do we have, and how important was
it to open the humanitarian relief route? Â Â I remember one of the issues was how
important is Mazar-i-Sharif, because that would be the place that you could bring supplies
in from Uzbekistan, and” Â

Douglas Feith

[Crosstalk]

Interviewer

But I am curious, if it’s the three of you sitting around, based upon the knowledge you
bring to the table, kind of saying, “Well, what” about this? Â Â What about that?”

Douglas Feith

Yeah. Â Â We were raising questions. Â Â I mean, obviously, anything that we did we
understood would have to be reexamined by the people, you know, who had a finer-grained
understanding of what was going on on the ground, but we were raising, you know,
Secretary-level, strategic-level considerations. Â Â

Douglas Feith

And so I sat there at my computer. Â Â And over one shoulder I had General Pace, and
over the other shoulder I had General Dunn, and the three of us were working, and I
remember joking that we were working like three college students doing an all-
nighter. Â Â You know, there we were. Â Â We had five hours, and we had to get our paper
done. Â Â

Douglas Feith

And we came up with, I think, a very respectable set of questions and ideas to float. Â Â I

mean it wasn't—I mean nobody thought that in five hours, you were going to come up with a definitive set of recommendations. But three people applying themselves for five hours—in the government, that's a lot of time to be—you have to understand that when you're talking about the strategic level of the government, people are extremely busy. And they're often going to meetings and making monumental decisions on the basis of 20 minutes of discussion, it's just in the nature of the government. The responsibilities are so broad, and the issues are so large, that very major issues get dealt with in very short periods of time.

Douglas Feith

And if you want to take academic timelines to deal with subjects, then what's going to happen is your options get foreclosed, because the world continues to turn even when you're thinking about a subject. And if you don't address it in real time, all kinds of options that you might've had if you moved quickly are foreclosed. And so, I mean, five hours is actually—for three senior people to apply themselves for five hours to one problem—is quite an investment of time.

Douglas Feith

And so we came up with some serious thoughts that helped Secretary Rumsfeld decide that the strategy that we had was basically sound and deserved more time, but there were some additional thoughts that we had of things that we could do that would increase the chances of getting our Afghan allies to move on the ground. Anyway, it was very soon—it was literally within a few days of this exercise—that the situation on the ground began to break very favorably to the Northern Alliance.

Our Man Karzai
Interviewer

Which led to Karzai, right?

Interviewer

Who was thinking about the end game at this moment? Cause you're talking about working in real time, you're responding

Douglas Feith

We did. That was something that the policy organization and the joint staff both thought about. And we were thinking, "What happens after the" and at that point, there were interagency discussions. The State Department was involved, the CIA was involved. What happens after we remove the Taliban? And—as you recall, what ultimately happened was the State Department represented the United States in an international effort that was sponsored by the U.N. The action took place in Bonn, Germany

Douglas Feith

Which led to what was called the Bonn Process. It was the invitation to a number of Afghan notables—basically, anti-Taliban Afghans from across society—and they got together and decided on some principles for the post-Taliban government of Afghanistan, and then decided to ask Karzai, a Pashtun from the tribe that traditionally produced Afghan kings—so he had a tribal legitimacy—asked Karzai to become the chairman of the Afghan interim authority. And that came out of what was called the Bonn Process.

Interviewer

Now, you know Karzai. You met Karzai.

Douglas Feith

Yes.

Interviewer

Youâ€™ve sat with Karzai. What is personallyâ€”

Douglas Feith

I didnâ€™t know him at the time, but right.

Interviewer

I understand. But what is he like? How would you do a pencil sketch of Hamid Karzai?

Douglas Feith

Well, when I first met him, it was one of his first visits in Washington, and I mean what struck you right away was heâ€™s very articulate. He speaks English very well. He was very well-spoken, very thoughtful, and measured. I mean he didnâ€™t come across as a hotheadâ€”he didnâ€™t come across, in any way, as a fanatic. He seemed to be a very measured guyâ€¦with some political skills.

Douglas Feith

And he was, you could see, somewhat unsteady on his feet, initially, but over time it was clear thatâ€”when we would meet over the years, that he became increasingly confident. But initially, you could see he was rather overwhelmed by the idea that, all of a sudden, heâ€™s now the head of his country, and it happened, more or less, overnight.

Douglas Feith

I mean after all, the September 11th attack occurredâ€”as I said, a few weeks later, October 7th, the bombing starts, the war starts. And by Christmas, Karzai is the head of the country, and you know darn well that three months before he became the head of the country, it was probably the last thing in his mind that he would ever be the head of the country. It wasnâ€™t like he spent his whole life campaigning for this and preparing for it. So the fact that he was unsteady was not that surprising, and he was learning a lot, fast, as he was going along.

Douglas Feith

But what came across, as I said, was a kind of moderation and thoughtfulness in the way he talkedâ€”also articulateness. So, you know, people were reasonably hopeful, but whether he would actually have the grit to do what needed to be done, and whether he would have the ability to deal with the different political forces in the countryâ€”most of whom were warlords with their own private armiesâ€”was a gigantic question. And he wound up actually demonstrating reserves of political skill that nobodyâ€”probably including himselfâ€”thought that he had in the early days.Â

Interviewer

You mentioned in the book the story of where there was a split as to howâ€”whether we should use Gardezâ€”is that right?Â

Douglas Feith

Rightâ€”with Pacha Khan Zadran.Â

Interviewer

Yesâ€”exactly. Can you tell that story, â€”cause it seems to me itâ€™s a critical moment, and it says something about the way particularly the Secretary wanted to trust Karzai in this case. He didnâ€™t wantâ€”they brushed up against what we were doing there essentially, right? They really did call to question how we were going to execute our role, and that there was a division within the government as to how we should respond to this. [Crosstalk]Â

Douglas Feith

Yes. I think that that story really is an important story in the history of Afghanistan, and of the war there. There was a council in Gardez that had appointed a man named Pacha Khan Zadranâ€”Â

Interviewer

Now, Gardez is what?

Douglas Feith

It is a city south of Kabul, and a Pashtun area. And they had appointed Pacha Khan Zadran as, I think, a local governor. And I believe what happened was thenâ€”and this was wayâ€”

Douglas Feith

Karzai chose him, didnâ€™t he?Â

Douglas Feith

With Karzaiâ€™s consent. And then, for reasons that I donâ€™t remember at this point, the Shuraâ€”the council of elders â€” decided they did not want Pacha Khan Zadran, so they essentially fired him. And he had his own militia, and he got into a quarrel with the Gardez council, and at one point, started shelling Gardez. Now, Pacha Khan was not Northern Alliance, nor was he Taliban, and here, this is where weâ€™re talking about basically something like the March-April time frame in 2002.

Douglas Feith

So the Karzai interim government is a few weeks old, and here you have a commander of a militia firingâ€”and I believe there may have been some civilian casualties as a result of the artillery fireâ€”firing into a town. And Karzai was very angry that Pacha Kahn Zadran was doing this, and they got into a public quarrelâ€”you know, issuing statements to the public, and it was carried in the radio and the press, the angry statements against each other. And at one point, Karzai said, â€œWe canâ€™t tolerate this kind of lawlessness.â€ He demanded that Pacha Kahn Zadran step aside, and he said, â€œAnd if you donâ€™t, I will annihilate you,â€ which is obviously a very harsh threat. Â And so at that point, the question came up, what should the U.S.-led Coalition do about this?Â

Interviewer

Well, particularly because he didn't really have an army, right? I mean he didn't have any way of executing this threat of annihilation.

Douglas Feith

Correct. And so the question was what should CENTCOM do about this? And the first point that got observed was that one of the reasons that Karzai was acceptable to the participants in the Bonn Process, and they were willing to have him be the chairman of the interim government, was that he didn't have any kind of substantial militia of his own. So he wasn't a direct threat to the warlords—if he was going to threaten a warlord, it was going to be based on his authority and whatever legitimacy he had as the man appointed by the Bonn Process.

Douglas Feith

And the Bonn Process was considered an expression of a traditional Afghan council, known as a Loya Jirga, so the idea was there are these—traditionally, the way Afghans chose leaders was not through democratic elections based on universal suffrage. It was based on these councils known as Loya Jirgas, and so the thought was that the Bonn Process resembled a Loya Jirga giving authority to Karzai, but as I said, part of the reason that they were willing to defer to him and give him that authority was that he couldn't directly threaten, with his own militia, the other warlords.

Douglas Feith

And here he is making a threat that requires some kind of force if it's going to be executed, and he didn't have any force. So the question was if Pacha Khan Zadran challenges Karzai on this, and doesn't back down, should U.S. forces back up Karzai's threat, or not?

Douglas Feith

This became a subject of intense debate within the U.S. government in, more or less, April of 2002—April and early May. And pretty much everybody at the senior levels of the U.S. government on the National Security Council—the Vice President, Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor all said, “We have an enormous investment in Karzai's success, and we cannot afford to allow a challenger to defy him. And if there were to be a clash, and if this challenger were to bring his forces and march to Kabul and, you know, maybe fire at Karzai's palace, or assassinate Karzai, then our whole policy for the political construction of a new government in Afghanistan would go down the drain.” And so they said, “We have to back up Karzai”—including with the use of U.S. forces, if necessary.

Interviewer

But one thing that isn't clear in that, this story “was Karzai requesting help? Was he requesting the U.S. government to” [Crosstalk]

Douglas Feith

Karzai was—if I recall correctly, he was putting out feelers. I'm not sure that he made a formal request, but he spoke with certain assumptions that he would get backed up, and I think he made some feelers about, you know, “What do you intend to do to help me deal with Pacha Khan?” I think.

Interviewer

It was reckless of him, declaring such force if he didn't have something to back it up.

Douglas Feith

Right. Well, that was certainly Secretary Rumsfeld's view. But Secretary Rumsfeld, with the support of General Myers, took a position that was at odds with the rest of the National Security Council. And Rumsfeld's view was we would be making an error that could destroy our entire mission in Afghanistan if we started using U.S. forces to get involved in what was essentially a political dispute between Karzai and an Afghan challenger, who was, after all, not an al-Qaeda guy, and not a Taliban guy.

Douglas Feith

You know, it's one thing to protect him against our common enemy, but to protect him against a domestic challenger was a whole other issue, and this is where, also, the consciousness of the problems that the Soviets had played a role. Because what Rumsfeld said was, "We do not want our forces understood to be essentially playing internal politics in Afghanistan. It's one thing to fight against the enemy—the al-Qaeda and Taliban people. But when it comes to the reconstruction of the country, and the creation of new political institutions, and Karzai's working out his relationships with local governors and other warlords, who are not Al-Qaeda or Taliban, if the United States is on one side or the other in that kind of internal politics, then we're going to make everybody who's not on our side an enemy."

Douglas Feith

And he said, "On top of that, we will be damaging Karzai if we—I mean Karzai's request for help from us is not in Karzai's own interest," Rumsfeld said, "because Karzai's real interest is to be able to use all of the many tools that the head of the interim government has at his disposal other than military power to deal with political challenges." Because this was essentially a political challenge, not a military challenge, it wasn't that Pacha Khan started off saying, "I should be the head of Afghanistan rather than Karzai." This was a fight over a local governorship.

Interviewer

So what were the results in the end?

Douglas Feith

And so what Rumsfeld said is—and this was, is his characteristic way of talking about this. He said, "Karzai needs to learn to operate the way the mayor of Chicago operates. He's got to learn how to use patronage, how to use contracts, how to use flattery, how to use diplomacy, how to use every tool at his disposal short of military power to make friends, buy people off, create political coalitions, solve problems." He said, "The"

Interviewer

It's about the business of governance in a free system. It's not the fist, right?

Douglas Feith

Right. And he said, you know, "The real question is Afghanistan going to have a politics

based on compromise and moderation and nonviolence, or is it going to be, you know, a repeat of the problems that brought the Taliban to power to begin with, which was the fights among all the warlords?" He said, "This is a fateful moment." He said, "Also, the U.S. forces should not become the warlord militia for Karzai, because then Karzai is not functioning as the President or the interim head of Afghanistan. He's simply functioning as a warlord among warlords, with the U.S. military as his personal militia."

Douglas Feith

Rumsfeld said, "That would be a disastrous situation." So even though you had very, very high tension in the situation—and I was there when this was debated—and it was very rare, by the way, to have a really passionate disagreement about something important and basic where Rumsfeld and Myers were essentially isolated from not just Colin Powell and Condi Rice, but the Vice President also. I mean it was rare to see that lineup, because usually on strategic matters, the Vice President and Rumsfeld would largely see eye-to-eye.

Interviewer

Well, and the stakes were high here, too, right?

Douglas Feith

The stakes were extremely high.

Interviewer

What if it had ended up where he was toppled by this?

Douglas Feith

Well, as I said in my book, Rumsfeld made this passionate case—which he wrote—I helped draft the memo that he sent to the President explaining how momentous this decision was. How you could change the role of the U.S. military in Afghanistan, and change Afghan history, if you allowed Karzai to function as a warlord, and make threats that he could then execute with U.S. forces in what should be an internal political dispute.

Douglas Feith

And this was argued in an extremely powerful memo that I worked on with the Secretary, and he then sent to the President, and the President ultimately went with Rumsfeld's view rather than the other view. And the upshot was Karzai did work out—Karzai was told, "Don't count on the U.S. military backing you." Karzai eventually did use Chicago mayor-type levers and assets, and worked out a compromise. Pacha Khan Zadran backed down. He eventually got elected to the parliament. He got incorporated into the political system, which was exactly what one would've hoped. And what might've been a calamity was averted.

Douglas Feith

But, as I say in my book, I look back on that and I say, it was terrific, and it was very impressive. Rumsfeld's analysis was good—he was extremely tough-minded and steady at a moment when lots of people were very agitated and worried, and that's all very impressive. But we were also lucky, because had Pacha Khan not backed down, and had he challenged Karzai, and had he, perhaps, killed Karzai, the whole history of the U.S. involvement and Afghanistan's development and everything else might've

changed, and it mightâ€™ve been considered one of the biggest and stupidest errors ever made.

Interviewer

It wouldâ€™ve like hubris, right?

Douglas Feith

And so it looksâ€”I mean itâ€™s an extremely important point that itâ€™s good to have the right analysis, itâ€™s good to be thoughtful, itâ€™s good to be strategic, itâ€™s good to be analytical, itâ€™s good to be steady.Â

Douglas Feith

But itâ€™s crucial to also be lucky, and now, what happens is, in retrospect, you look back, and you say whosever argument worked was the smarter one. Â But itâ€™s worth pointing out that thatâ€™s the retrospective view. Â The role of luck can never be eliminated in these things, and what may be, in some ways, the smarter argument, if luck breaks differently, looks not only wrong, but stupid. Â

Douglas Feith

And so thatâ€™s just an important point, you know, as you read history, to never lose sight of the fact that even the most brilliant people, if they really look brilliant in retrospect, itâ€™s usually a combination of brilliance and good luck.

Interviewer

Weâ€™ll stop there. Â Thank you.