GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH TONY BLAIR

July 7, 2023
London, United Kingdom

Participants

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Russell Riley: Normally, what I do is very granular, but I thought I would begin by asking you just very generally about your sense about where history has your relationship with President [George W.] Bush wrong. If you've had any chance to think about this interview in advance, there may be some things that came to mind that you wanted to make sure to get on the record, and I thought, given the time constraints, maybe I would just start with that general question.

Tony Blair: I don't think so. I mean, the relationship was very close. It was obviously based on president and prime minister necessary interaction, politically, but it developed over time into a strong personal, as well as political, relationship. And even though we came from different sides of the political fence, I enjoyed working with him and found him a very straightforward and always honest person to deal with. And for leaders, at a certain level, when you're dealing with other leaders, those qualities are highly desirable and pretty rare. [*laughs*]

Riley: Right. Let me ask you, you had a relatively close relationship with Vice President [Albert] Gore [Jr.], and we talked about your relationship with President [William] Clinton, which is very well known. But as familiar as I am with the Clinton presidency, I'm not sure I would have known that you had developed a personal relationship with the vice president.

Blair: Yes, I knew Al Gore well. I remember he was the first person to explain the importance of the internet to me. [*laughter*] And at one level, I was very sorry that he didn't become the president because we were obviously politically on the same side. But the moment it was clear, even after the initial disputes, that President Bush would be in office, and as you say, it began simply as a very straightforward thing. I remember President Clinton advising me strongly, once it was clear that George Bush had won, *You've got to meet him, get on with him, get close to him because this is important for the two countries*.

Riley: The British ambassador had made a trip down to Texas on a couple of occasions, I think in '98 or '99. Was that something he had done on his own, or had you encouraged him to get to know the Bushes?

Blair: I don't recall, to be honest, but I'm sure I would have thought it was a sensible idea.

Riley: Yes. And let me ask you, as the Americans are transitioning between the two administrations, how are you going about thinking about developing a personal relationship with this President, given the sensitivities about your prior relationship with President Clinton?

Blair: Yes, so it was obviously something that I had to think about. Now, it transpired that there was an old school friend of mine that actually knew the Bush family well and made the initial introduction and paved the way a little for us to have a first meeting. But the thing about President Bush, as you well know, he's a very genial person. He's not a hard guy to get on with, so it didn't take us long to strike up a good relationship and a good working relationship. But it was only post-9/11 that, because of the intensity of the moment and the hugeness of the moment, the relationship came to a completely different level.

Riley: Right. Do you have many recollections of that first trip to Camp David?

Blair: Yes, it was all a bit bizarre as I recall it because, in classic George fashion, he made some remark about how we shared the same toothpaste or something, which the British media—it never slowed to draw outsized conclusions from any remark, speculating as to what that might mean. But yes, we had a good session there at Camp David. We did it at Camp David very deliberately. It was actually an example of how close the relationship was at the time between the U.S. and the U.K., and that relationship had been strong for a long time. I made it my business, as British prime minister. And I think now that, frankly, the political relationship is not as close as it was. It's bad for my country, and I don't think it's great for the U.S. I consider it, at the beginning, just to be item 1 on the business of being a good prime minister for the country, to make sure you've got that relationship with the American president.

Riley: If I have the chronology right, you actually visited the vice president in Washington [D.C.] before you went to Camp David?

Blair: Yes, I think I did. I don't really have any recollection of that to be honest.

Riley: And what can you tell us about your relationship with the vice president?

Blair: Well, [Richard B.] Dick Cheney is—The thing about Dick is, what you see is what you get. He was obviously definitely not of my politics, as it were, but he was a strong and capable man and, again, someone who was very direct, which I liked.

Riley: Yes, so both of them were direct?

Blair: Both of them were direct. But Dick Cheney was always direct in, let's say, an unadorned way, [*laughter*] whereas with George Bush, he surrounded the directness with a certain amount of intent to charm.

Riley: A different kind of charm from the vice president.

Blair: Yes, yes, the vice president is—yes. But I used to enjoy the interaction with him.

Riley: Yes. Let me ask you this, people will have all of the public records to look at about your relationship, and we see these occasional references to the fact that the President would take you on a walk through the woods at Camp David. What is a walk through the woods at Camp David like? What are you seeing? What are you talking about?

Blair: When you meet a leader who's going to be one of your big and important relationships, it's really important to try and understand them as a person, see what they really believe in, judge the timbre of the character, work out how you're going to solidify your relationship with them, the things they're interested in, the anxieties they have. I always regard these types of situations as an opportunity to draw them out, to talk about themselves, to talk about what they think. And it's worth just saying, at that time when I first met President Bush, he was pretty domestically focused really. Education was a huge thing for him, and foreign policy was, at the beginning, I think, reasonably low down the list of priorities. We were talking about many things.

Riley: Did that include domestic politics?

Blair: Yes, yes.

Riley: Was it difficult for you to have that conversation?

Blair: No, because I've always been pretty centrist in my politics, and so I don't take the view that anyone who is conservative doesn't have a good idea. And I found his interest in education interesting because that was my big theme as a prime minister myself. And his analysis of what was going wrong with certain parts of American society I thought was not 100 percent different than the analysis I have. Maybe the policy solutions would be different, but—of course, when you're getting to know the person, the more you can get them to talk about themselves and what they're trying to do, the more you start to understand what makes them tick.

Riley: Family and sports?

Blair: Family, very much, yes. Interest in sport, but he was interested in baseball, I think.

Riley: Yes.

Blair: Yes, and I was interested in soccer. And so I just remember one really funny time, actually, when I was with him in one of these summits in the middle of the World Cup—I feel it was the 2002 [FIFA] World Cup. I was talking about the American team, which was actually a good team that year. George wasn't much interested in it, really. He said, "I don't know a lot about soccer."

Riley: And baseball is not easy for most Brits.

Blair: The British regard baseball as a kind of warped form of cricket, so [*laughs*] we don't really get that. I've never got baseball.

Riley: Well, I've never gotten cricket. We've seen them play occasionally at Cambridge, and my daughter, who is 14, and I will watch for a while and be totally lost. We're hoping maybe on this trip we can actually sit down and figure out what's going on.

Blair: Right. Well, there's a good cricket game on right now, yes. Well, we're two nations divided by a common language. [*laughs*]

Riley: Yes, exactly. There was a meeting with his staff, I think, on February 23rd where Iraq actually comes up fairly early. Was that an expected part of the discussions at that point?

Blair: Yes, because we would be discussing Iraq often. Saddam Hussein was in breach of UN [United Nations] resolutions. Myself and President Clinton had taken military action against Iraq in 1998. So it was one of a number of topics of discussion.

Riley: Sure. Was there anxiety on your part that that might be a foreign policy area where the administration would be a little more forward-leaning?

Blair: No. At that time, no, I wouldn't say so. No, I don't think he had any thought at all at that point of—people, again, forget this: it was the policy of the American government, under President Clinton as well as under President Bush, for regime change in Iraq. That was their policy. But it wasn't one of these things that President Bush was—He wasn't saying, "We must sit down and talk about Iraq." No, no.

Riley: Right. Well, I have seen one of the few sets of papers that have been released by the [William J.] Clinton [Presidential] Library. It includes a lot of the diplomatic meetings on Iraq, and so that was part of the reason I raised the question, because there were these discussions that you had with President Clinton.

Blair: Yes, it was a problem. People, because of subsequent events in Iraq—

Riley: Exactly.

Blair: —overlook the fact there had been two regional wars started by Saddam. He was in breach of many resolutions. He had used chemical weapons against his own people, against the Iranians, obviously. And so he was a constant factor in people's anxiety as to what might happen because he was plainly both aggressive and operating with the elements in the Middle East that were contrary to our interest.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about what you felt like you needed from President Bush at this time? We've discussed your getting to know him, but there must have been things in the relationship with the United States that you hoped to be able to accomplish. I'm thinking in the interval between January, the inauguration in 2001, and 9/11. What were the kind of things that you—

Blair: For me, it was about establishing that relationship, about trying to make sure we worked together on certain things in the international community. But in that first year or so, there wasn't any burning issue that we were trying to get resolved together. It was just building that relationship step by step.

Riley: Right. What happened after 9/11 is thoroughly documented—

Blair: Yes.

Riley: —so I don't know that I really have anything that I can probe into about that other than just to ask your own reflections about the immediate aftermath and what's most important for us to recall about that period?

Blair: The most important things to recall are, number one, that it was an event that, at the time, turned the world upside down. You had an extraordinary terrorist attack in the United States. Thousands of people died. And whatever people make of subsequent decisions, there's no American president who couldn't have said, *OK, we're now in a new world and we're going to have to act*. And it's important to realize that the anxiety was always that this was a movement that, unless it was taken on, was going to continue to develop, and therefore, it became fundamental that we confronted it. The second thing is that it was important, I thought, that America should not have to deal with it alone and that the reason they'd gone after America is because America was the most powerful country in the West. But it wasn't that they just disliked America, right? They hated everyone who represented that different way of life. For me at least and I think for a majority of leaders around the world, this was an attack on a worldview and not simply on a specific country. And the third thing is that we didn't know how it was going to develop, and it could have developed in many different ways. Looking back, because there hasn't been a repetition of anything as terrible as that, but then you never know, was that because we overestimated the problem at the time, or was it because we actually dealt with the problem at the time in however difficult the ways were?

Riley: There was an attack in London, though. That was—

Blair: Yes, there was an attack on London, and, of course, there was an attack in—Spain?

Riley: Yes.

Blair: There was an attack in Indonesia. It's a continuing problem even today, and there's a whole set of things that happen today as the result of what happened on 9/11, and all the security arrangements—people forget this, you used to walk up to a plane with no problem at all—and so a whole security apparatus grew up around it. And the most important thing to understand about President Bush is that his determination was that this should never happen again. That was his bottom line: It shouldn't happen again. That was his job. And he became the President who had to deal with the aftermath of 9/11, which is difficult.

Riley: You undertook a lot of travel fairly quickly after that, making trips to see other leaders. What was the purpose of those trips?

Blair: To build as big a coalition as possible. I wanted to make sure that we didn't have this idea that America would respond unilaterally because I thought that would undermine the notion that it was an attack on everyone. And American power, it's a big club to wield, and I thought it was important that we made every attempt to build as broad a coalition as possible and also to make sure that we acted not precipitately.

Riley: Could you tell us about your relationships with, and also President Bush's relationships with, Mr. [Jacques] Chirac and Mr. [Gerhard] Schröder? That becomes problematic over time. Was that true at the outset, after 9/11?

Blair: Post-9/11 I think everyone came together and said, *OK, this has got to be dealt with*, in respect to Afghanistan, though I think right at the very beginning there was a hesitation amongst many people about the need for military action. We will never know the counterfactual. Suppose we had left the Taliban in Afghanistan. Suppose we had eschewed military action. Would that have been better? You cannot tell the answer definitively. But we took the view, and I felt very strongly about this, that when you had a country that was effectively being used as a vast training ground for terrorism, that country had to change or you had to change the people in charge of it.

Riley: Right. In retrospect, do you feel like the handling of Afghanistan was done well, from your perspective?

Blair: Well, it was done as well as we could do it. I think one of the huge lessons of the interventions in the Middle East, and the broader Middle East, in any country where you're going to be fighting Islamist fundamentalism: you're going to be in for a long, hard fight. And the problem, frankly, both in respect of Afghanistan and of Iraq—and you can see this then in respect of Libya, and, to a degree, in respect of Syria—the problem is when you intervene in these situations, it's going to be a long, hard battle because you're fighting an enemy that is using tactics of terrorism and disruption that make it very difficult, that end up with the local population being split in their loyalties, and it's just very, very tough. But you had in Afghanistan, regime change and troops on the ground; in Iraq, regime change, troops on the ground; in Libya, regime change but no troops on the ground; Syria, no intervention at all. And all four have had their problems. In fact, the one that's standing is Iraq.

Riley: How quickly after 9/11 does it become clear to you that Iraq is next on the agenda?

Blair: It was clear that it was on the agenda. What exactly we did about it wasn't so clear, but the worry was—it's really important to understand this, the linkage between states proliferating or engaging in proliferation of nuclear, chemical, biological weapons—the anxiety was the connection between those states with extremist leaders allying themselves in some way or other with the Islamist fundamentalists.

Riley: There was evidence at the time that Iraq had been engaged or might be engaged.

Blair: Again, there's a lot of confusion about this. At one level, people like Saddam were completely opposed to groups like al-Qaeda. On the other hand—which is why they were allowed to come into Iraq, and, indeed, even in recent times have come in even with Iran, despite being a Sunni organization, Iran being a Shia power—is because ultimately they do share extremism in common, and they do share an enemy in common, which is basically us. [*laughs*]

There was a worry that these linkages could somehow be formed. One of the reasons for taking the action in respect of Iraq was to deter everybody else in the proliferation space, so you had Pakistan with the A. Q. [Abdul Qadeer] Kahn network, you had Libya, you had Iran, you had North Korea. And at first, by the way, a certain consequence of the removal of Saddam was that the Libyans did come into full cooperation, and that was important. The Iranians—we did revive talks with them. The North Koreans became more reasonable. The A. Q. Kahn network was shut down, and at the beginning, people thought that demonstration of American power—everyone went, "Whoa, OK, so we'd better come into line." Of course, as time went on and America got

into difficulty, and we all got into difficulty in Iraq, then people thought, *Well, we can afford to go back to our games*—at least some people. But there were gains out of Libya particularly, and in the light of the Arab Spring, if these regimes had stayed in place, I think we would have had a lot of trouble.

Riley: Yes. Let me bore down on one piece of this, because I want to make sure I'm hearing you correctly, and that is about the evidence about connections between al-Qaeda networks and Saddam himself. This would have been before we went in. There was some evidence, am I correct, that—

Blair: Preinvasion the U.S. shared intelligence suggesting links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. While there is no evidence the regime and al-Qaeda were working together, it is clear there was a connection between a lot of the extremist groups at the time. And it was also true that Saddam himself, as he was trying to hold onto his regime, had become much, much more sectarian. And if you read the speeches through 2002 and so on, they're very clearly with that kind of religious extremist undertone. But the real point was, unless you shut down the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, biological weapons, then your risk was that at some point there would be a tie-up.

Riley: Exactly, OK. Tell us about your engagement with President Bush in trying to get international approval for action in Iraq, and I'm thinking mainly about the United Nations at this point.

Blair: Yes. Well, it was two things. One, to build the biggest coalition so that America wasn't alone, so that it was seen as the international community acting against the extremism. But the other reason for that was I thought there was a much better chance of getting a peaceful outcome if, for example, Saddam saw that the international community was unified against him, right? Because the only way he was cooperating at all with the inspectors was under the pressure of the threat of invasion. And I thought, if you could have got the international community staying together, you might get an outcome to this, which means that the regime itself changes and goes off somewhere. That was the reasoning behind it.

Riley: How responsive was President Bush to your appeals?

Blair: Well, he was responsive. I think a lot of people, including the vice president, thought we should just go and do it. But he was always cognizant of the fact that it was sensible to keep a broad coalition and, in the end, we did, by and large. People forget this—even a majority of the European countries in the end went with America, and the coalition was about 48 strong in the end. But it would have been better if we'd got everyone.

Riley: Yes. How did you convince him to pursue a second resolution at the United Nations?

Blair: Well, the second resolution is really very much on my personal relationship. First of all, he didn't think it would succeed—and he was right on that—and secondly, he didn't think it was necessary. But I thought it was necessary to try, and I think that was very much for me personally. I don't know.

Riley: Do you recall those conversations?

Blair: Yes, of course.

Riley: Can you tell us about them?

Blair: Yes, I said why I thought it was necessary. I said, "Give me some time to do this because we might be in a situation where—" All the way through, because this had been, at that time, a very active issue for about a year. It was quite a long time. All the time I was trying to think of the ways that you could resolve this without conflict, even though I thought probably it will end up in conflict, but nonetheless do everything you can to avoid it. And he was, I think, sympathetic to that, but on the other hand, he'd come to the view, and I think the American system had come to the view, that there was no way that Saddam could be trusted.

Riley: Right. The Germans and the French at this point were off the reservation.

Blair: Yes, the Germans and the French at this point had just decided that their thing was to be against this, and they were against it, and then they formed, really, the alliance with [Vladimir] Putin. And that then became the alternative pole, really, but it also meant that there was no way you were going to get a resolution through the UN Security Council.

Riley: Right. What can you tell us about Putin, then, since you've raised his name?

Blair: I always say to people about Putin that at the start, he was very much Western-oriented, wanted to build a strong relationship with the West. He and I used to meet in St. Petersburg, at his insistence, because it was the Western-facing part of Russia. He would come to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meetings. He was part of the G8 at the time, and after 9/11, he was in favor of the action in Afghanistan. But then he started to turn and I think started to see American power as inconsistent with his sense of how Russia should be projecting itself, and then became a lot more difficult to deal with.

Riley: I see. Going back to Iraq, was there ever a realistic chance that Saddam would go into exile?

Blair: I'm not sure. I mean, there is an interesting section in the biography of [Sheikh] Zayed [bin Sultan Al Nahyan] of the UAE [United Arab Emirates] where he talks about the possibility of persuading Saddam to go into exile. And certainly that was one of the things I was always working for. If that'd been possible, that would have been a good outcome, but I'm not sure it ever really was.

Riley: OK. And an internal coup, that's iffy?

Blair: I think the view was that that was just highly unlikely to happen because he'd eliminated his opponents.

Riley: OK, OK. As we get into Iraq after the invasion, how involved had you and your government been with the Bush administration in thinking about an occupation?

Blair: Well, we had been deeply involved, and there had been constant interaction between the systems, but it's important to understand two things. First of all, roughly 95 percent of the assets

were American. That's just the reality. And secondly—and this, of course, was the problem—the difficulties we foresaw were not the difficulties we encountered. The difficulties we foresaw were all around the problems of Saddam fighting a protracted struggle to get rid of him, the humanitarian disaster that might be a result of that, his use of WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. Whereas, of course, the problem we encountered, which is now the familiar problem in dealing with these situations, is that you can get rid of the dictator, but then after that you're having to manage a space where there are a lot of conflicting parties, and it's extremely difficult.

Riley: Your government then was engaged with the U.S. government in trying to make plans for what the Americans call "phase 4."

Blair: Yes, absolutely, we were involved, but, as I say, the trouble is it proceeded on a premise that turned out to be incorrect.

Riley: Right. And then in your book, there is a fair amount of discussion about your relationship with President Bush up until the invasion and then in the immediate aftermath, as I recall. But there's not a lot of discussion about your ongoing relationship with the administration in the ensuing years.

Blair: I mean, it's mainly because we were managing the situation, but really, then, the surge came, which he spoke to me about. And I've said before, it was an extraordinarily brave decision to do that, an extraordinarily courageous decision, and it was a very effective one.

Riley: Right. A part of your interest in engaging with him was related to the broader Middle East peace process, and I wonder if you could sort of track through with this.

Blair: Yes, so one of the things I tried to do, because I had this very strong relationship with President Bush, was to say, *Let's look at this in a broader way, how we project Western power*. And we've projected Western power in a military way, but how do we project it in a soft power way? And the two aspects to that, I felt, were really important, one, to make a strong commitment to the peace process, the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, which back in those days did seem to have legs to it, and secondly, what did we do for the poorest continent in the world, where millions and millions of people lost their lives unnecessarily every year through disease, which is Africa. And then there was also a discussion on climate change, where he moved somewhat, I think, on it. But those two elements became very important. To be fair to him, he was committed on the Israeli–Palestinian issue, and even after I left office and I became a Quartet [on the Middle East] envoy, he had the Annapolis Conference, and so on. We published the roadmap, which had been a big, big thing. And yes, that was an important dimension to it. But in the end, now because of the work I did on the peace process and still do, we were overly optimistic about that, or I was, because the truth is that fundamental problems were not capable of being resolved by a conventional peace process.

Riley: Your personal relationship stayed good with him throughout this entire period?

Blair: Yes. Yes, absolutely. Shortly before I left office, he actually came to my constituency in the north of England and—yes, absolutely, yes. And after I left.

Riley: What about your relationship inside the United Kingdom? The impression is that your association with President Bush is an albatross for you here.

Blair: Well, I was a Labour Party leader acting in concert with a Republican president who, at the time, was considered to be on the right of the Republican Party. I mean, now, [*laughter*] times change, but—

Riley: Yes, they have.

Blair: Yes, but at that time, that was very difficult. Very, very difficult. And had Iraq gone well and cleanly, it would still have been difficult. But what was happening around that time was the beginning of an isolationist movement on the Right, and then the Left was always anti-Western really. Within my own party, the far Left, they had an argument to use against me. Obviously, they were opposed to most of the things I was doing domestically, but this gave them purchase.

Riley: Exactly. There was a presidential election in 2004. What was your concept of that election? I mean, you've got a realistic opponent who would be more consistent with your own sort of ideological inclinations. By that time, is your personal relationship with President Bush such that you would prefer continuity, or—

Blair: Even in my own mind, I try to keep out of that. Of course, I have a strong personal relationship. By then we had a strong interest in working together. On the other hand, I did know John [F.] Kerry, and I liked him a lot and subsequently became very friendly with him. I called him, actually, straight up, I think, after he conceded the 2004 election. But by then I'd been in power long enough to know, don't worry about what you don't own. [*laughs*] There's nothing you can do about it one way or another.

Riley: Gotcha. Was President Bush involved in Irish issues at all with—

Blair: Yes, because we were doing the peace process. Although we'd done the Good Friday Agreement in the time of President Clinton, the implementation of it was an agonizing 10-year battle, and so the American president, President Bush, was extremely important on a couple of occasions. He actually came to Northern Ireland. We launched the roadmap [to peace] in Northern Ireland, and that was a big symbolism and important for me politically.

Riley: It was not a place where his involvement was unappreciated at that point?

Blair: Not at all because though the agreement had been concluded in 1998—the Northern Ireland agreement—there were a whole series of different things that had to be implemented as a result of that, and each one was its own complicated negotiation.

Riley: Right, OK. One of the things that I wanted to ask you about was religion because both you and President Bush are publicly religious men. Was this a subject of conversation between the two of you?

Blair: People always wanted to think it was but not really. In U.K. politics, it's different. In American politics, you have to stand up and claim your—

Riley: Of course, [*laughter*] yes, and pray publicly.

Blair: In the U.K., it's not. In fact, in the U.K., it would be considered sort of a little bizarre to do that, so no, we didn't. I guess we must have occasionally, but I can't really remember any conversations where it was.

Riley: On those walks through the woods, you're not—

Blair: No, we're not praying together, no. But I guess it gives you something you have in common, which is important, and it makes you appreciate the other person has certain principles they really do believe in.

Riley: Yes. And there was a passage in your book where you said that you occasionally discuss the infrastructure of Bush's campaign with him, and I guess that would have been—

Blair: In 2004, you mean?

Riley: That must have been 2004. And I'm wondering, do you have any recollections of your discussions about electioneering with him?

Blair: Yes, we did talk about elections and politics and so on, yes. But I said that in my book? That we discussed the election?

Riley: Yes, I'd have to go back and look. I probably have it flagged some—

Blair: [*laughter*] If I said it, it must have happened, but I can't remember.

Riley: Well, it was just a little bit striking, again, because of the distinction—

Blair: Yes, well, you're two politicians, right? So you're going to talk about politics, and all politicians talk about the mechanics of politics, the business of it, the techniques of it, so we probably would have done that, yes.

Riley: OK. Well, I went through and looked at some of the opened interviews, and Karl Rove actually said—and whether it's true or not, I'll leave up to you—that he had done some marginal work when you were trying to get your own Parliament to agree to the war. Do you have any recollection of that?

Blair: Yes, I think he did some analysis of the U.K. political scene and the Labour Party and—Yes, and I know if he was over, I would see him, this type of thing.

Riley: You have a pretty good relationship with him?

Blair: Yes, yes, and I thought he was a very smart operative.

Riley: Yes. All right, because I'm mindful of the clock, I wonder if you could think a little bit more generally about President Bush's leadership and maybe give us an assessment of your ideas about his strengths and weaknesses as a political figure.

Blair: Well, I think there will be an assessment of him that changes over time. Most people just consider Iraq to be a mistake today, and I can argue the case against that, but there's no point in disputing the fact that most people say that. But I think there are three things that are really important about him. The first is that it was his determination that it shouldn't happen again and actually it didn't.

Secondly, no one was in any doubt—I mean, it's very interesting when I'm now out in the world because my institute works in many different countries in the world. We work a lot in the Middle East, we work in Africa, we work in Southeast Asia. And the difference between then and now, in respect of America, is striking because whatever the problems were—and obviously some part of the world disagreed very strongly with the post-9/11 response, but no one doubted America was out in the world with its power, and it was a conditioning force in global affairs. Now today, I think it's not that America is objectively less powerful because, objectively, it's as powerful as it's ever been—its economy, its technology, its resilience, its military, and so on—but there is a lot of uncertainty about that American power today. Can it be relied on? Is it at the mercy of the capriciousness of American politics? Does it really project in the way that makes people sit up and take notice? It's interesting. Now partly that's because a lot of countries have become more powerful themselves, they feel much more assertive. But I think it is also that at that time, there was no doubt at all that people understood America was a force to be reckoned with. That it would use its force—for good and for bad, you may argue—and I personally feel that that was important in making all the bad actors of the world in a constant state of assessment and anxiety, right?

And the third thing is he did an amazing thing in Africa, which is the PEPFAR [U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] program and for which he should rightly be honored. It was the largest life-saving program the world has ever seen in terms of soft power, and that was very much a personal commitment of his. When we did the G8 in 2005 and made Africa a big part of it, I remember he and I arguing, me less with my system but both of us arguing with his system, *Are you going to make the G8 about Africa?* [*laughs*] We said, "Yes, we're going to make it about Africa." And that was important.

Riley: What moved him to take such an interest in Africa?

Blair: I think he was and is a compassionate person, and he saw the great need, but he also saw that there was a means of alleviating that need. In particular respect of HIV/AIDS, where it was obvious if you were able to bring drugs to people there, then you would save millions of lives, that's what he did. That's why, when you go to different parts of Africa, he's fondly remembered.

Riley: "Compassion" is not a word usually associated with President Bush in the U.S.

Blair: No, but he was and is. He didn't choose to be a war president, and 9/11—it's always interesting to think, how would other presidents have dealt with it? Well, maybe they would have dealt with some things the same, some things differently, who knows? But there's no president who could have been president on the 11th of September 2001 and not ended up as a war president because I think people have got to clearly recall what it was like at the time, and I just don't think any American president—certainly, any American president would have had to

remove the Taliban. You can argue about Iraq, but—Put it like this: this would have been the mission of any president.

Riley: Sure. It's interesting to think about what might have happened if President Clinton had been in a position at that time. Have you mused over this question?

Blair: Yes, of course. It's hard to know. You just don't know. And I would argue—other people would dispute this—that the tragedy of both Afghanistan and, in a sense, Iraq too is that even if you completely disagree with the original decision, having done the hard part, we should have kept a sufficient position in both places. We could have done that, which would have been the easy part, and both countries would be in a different place today had we done that. But we came out in Iraq earlier, in my view, than we should have, and the Afghanistan situation was a tragedy. And I'm afraid the contrast is with Putin and Syria, where he basically held firm all the way through the last 12 years with the result that you've got [Bashar al-] Assad still in power today.

Riley: Yes. You think the publics in the U.S. and the U.K. would have accepted that sort of protracted period?

Blair: Iraq in 2010 had a peaceful enough election. People forget this, by the way, when they talk about Iraq destabilizing the Middle East. Between 2003 and 2011, there's not a single regime across the whole of the Middle East and North Africa that changed. The Arab Spring was what precipitated the collapse in the regimes across the region, and if American forces had still been there—because in 2010 they started to come out—then I think it would have been very different. In respect to Afghanistan, I don't think people were really clamoring because it wasn't in the headlines. You hadn't lost forces for some time there. I think we could have kept our position there. I think the withdrawal from both places has had a reverberative effect in people thinking, *These guys, OK, they're with you today, but they're not going to be with you tomorrow*, which is not a good position.

Riley: Exactly. I'm sensing that we have reached our appointed hour. I am very grateful for your time. Thank you so much. It's been a privilege talking with you, and thank you for making the time for us again.

Blair: Thank you very much. It was good to see you.

[END INTERVIEW]