

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Donald H. Rumsfeld
December 23, 2002

Cameron: This is an interview with Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, held in his office at the Pentagon on December 23, 2002. The interviewers are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Rebecca Cameron.

Goldberg: Mr. Secretary, you know about the project we are working on. At your request we interviewed a number of your staff people, including Ms. Clarke over here.

Rumsfeld: Did you get Di Rita and Cambone?

Goldberg: Yes, we got them all, all that you specified. Now we've come to the last of about 1,400 interviews that have been conducted. The Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines did most of them. You are either the fifty-fifth or fifty-sixth by our office, the final interview, and the work of writing the book is already underway. We would like to talk with you about 9/11 and your role at the time.

Cameron: Before the actual attack, to what extent had you talked or thought about the possibility of a terrorist attack on the Pentagon itself?

Rumsfeld: Obviously, the Pentagon is a target, like any large important government building in the United States. We always have force protection levels here, and we have a variety of ways to provide for security, so I had thought about those kinds of problems in general. I had gotten involved with terrorist attacks back when I was Middle East envoy for President Reagan, and have given a great deal of thought to terrorism—the advantages that accrue to an attacker, and the vulnerability of a free people.

Cameron: Dr. Chu and Admiral Giambastiani mentioned having been in conversations or meetings with you prior to 9/11 in which you all talked about Pearl Harbor and the element of surprise. Do you recall your thinking on that subject?

Rumsfeld: We spent a good deal of time reading and thinking about the Pearl Harbor book by Roberta Wohlstetter in 1998 when I was chairing the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission. We spent a good deal of time talking about surprise, and concluded in the report that we were living in a period of little or no warning and that we ought to expect to be surprised. The only thing that ought to be surprising, is if, in fact, we are surprised. We live in a world where nations have big navies, big armies, and big air forces that you can see and can prepare yourself to deal with. It is totally different to try and prepare to deal, not with armies coming from different nations, but a whole series of asymmetrical threats coming from, possibly, nations or networks of nations. It is a difficult problem. When I was asked in my confirmation hearings what I worried about most when I went to bed at night, my answer was "intelligence."

I was having breakfast that morning with a group of congressmen who were talking about the concerns that their colleagues had with respect to social security and going into the so-called lockbox—they were worried that people would mostly be concerned about that. I opined that between now and any time they would be up for election again they would have some other incident to worry about that would involve national security. I had no idea what it would be but it was clear that we needed to be able to deter and defend against the asymmetrical threats of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and terrorist and cyber attacks, which I think is the issue of the 21st century.

Goldberg: There had been terrorist attacks abroad against us before then, of course, over a number of years.

Rumsfeld: Exactly. I became the Middle East envoy the day after the Marine barracks was hit in Beirut and two hundred and forty-one Marines were killed.

Cameron: Since 9/11 there has been considerable public discussion about the holes in our intelligence gathering. Do you think that we had to learn that lesson the hard way?

Rumsfeld: You use the word "holes" and learning the lesson the hard way. I would phrase it differently. I would say that this is a big world, and it is not possible to know everything that is going on everywhere in the world. The rest of the world is going to school on us in terms of denial and deception capabilities, and they now know how we do things to a great extent because of leaks of information, and they have the ability to deny and deceive and they do it quite skillfully. That information is proliferating just as ballistic missile and WMD technologies are proliferating. So too are the techniques of avoiding detection. I think that suggesting that the United States is going to be capable of knowing everything that is going on every place in the world at all times is a stretch, we are simply not going to be able to do that.

Goldberg: We are an open society and our opponents, even in wartime, have generally known more about us than we knew about them.

Rumsfeld: Because of the fact that we are a free society—there is some truth to that. In some wars we have had better intelligence gathering than some of our enemies and have been able to know through code breaking and a variety of other means some things that they didn't know we knew. Knowing a lot is one thing, knowing things that they don't know we know is a separate thing.

Goldberg: I was thinking of public knowledge; we are so much more public in making things known. We have an obligation to the public to make things known, so we do so far more than others do. As you say, in dealing with a terrorist group, that is completely asymmetrical.

Cameron: To what extent had you begun to think about homeland security prior to September 11?

Rumsfeld: We had been engaged in what was called the Quadrennial Defense Review. So, well prior to September 11 we had been talking about the defense of the homeland and discussing how we were going to be able to deal with that problem. We had elevated it to the top of our priority list.

Cameron: Did the QDR change very much after September 11?

Rumsfeld: Because of all the concerns we had about intelligence and about homeland defense, I suppose it didn't change as much as one might think. I hope that September 11 informed it in some ways. I don't remember the timing.

Di Rita: Our final draft was published at the very end of August.

Rumsfeld: So it wasn't informed by September 11, then.

Di Rita: It was more or less complete by then. I think that we discussed among ourselves subsequently to what extent it was elevated by that event.

Goldberg: But your concern about intelligence was greatly intensified by 9/11.

Rumsfeld: No.

Goldberg: It was as great as before?

Rumsfeld: Yes. I was concerned about it back with the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission. I was concerned about it when I was chairing the Space Commission,

and when I was being confirmed. Of all the things in the world I could have answered, I answered "intelligence" when they asked what I was worried about.

Cameron: To go to the actual day, what was happening, where were you, and what was your first reaction on September 11?

Rumsfeld: I was at the breakfast with the congressmen and someone came in and said that a plane had hit a World Trade Tower. I believe we discussed that briefly. The breakfast ended, and I came back for my intelligence briefing. I was sitting here when someone said that a second plane had hit the other tower, and soon after that . . .

Clarke: It was right before your intelligence briefing. Larry came in to tell you about the second plane.

Rumsfeld: We were sitting here when the plane hit the Building.

Cameron: Who was with you at the time?

Rumsfeld: Denny Watson, my CIA briefer. The plane hit the Building and the Building shook and the tables jumped. I assumed it was a bomb. She left and I went out to see what was amiss. I saw the field out there sprayed with pieces of metal.

Cameron: You went outside the Building with whom?

Rumsfeld: No one. A security person trailed along, I think. I was out there for some period and came back in. I came into the office first, and then went down to the Executive Support Center and then to the National Military Command Center.

Goldberg: What did you do while you were outside?

Rumsfeld: I tried to get some folks to help out and helped out a bit myself. I talked to some people about what had taken place.

Goldberg: Did you get a pretty good picture?

Rumsfeld Yes

Cameron People knew right then, you could see pieces of the plane?

Rumsfeld Hundreds of pieces of metal all over the lawn

Cameron And fire, obviously

Rumsfeld Oh, my Lord, the whole place was burning People were being pulled out and stretchers were being carried to ambulances

Cameron Our historian who is writing this story wants to know whether you helped put people on stretchers

Rumsfeld Yes, I did

Cameron Were you dragged back in, so to speak, or did you just decide your place was here?

Rumsfeld I decided I had done what I could, there were enough people there, and came in

Cameron Once inside, did you find that communications were adequate to deal with your staff?

Rumsfeld They are never adequate, never perfect There is always something that is imperfect Cell phones weren't working, some people were at another site, you're not in your normal office, so everything is a little different, you are dealing with a group of people in the command centers who you don't deal with every day But all in all I was able to talk to the situation room at the White House, with the Vice President, and with the President, both on the plane and at Offutt

Goldberg You talked with him after you came back in?

Rumsfeld: Yes, I couldn't call from out there. I was able to deal with the Norad folks and everyone I needed to talk to, reasonably well.

Cameron: How early did you begin to think about a military response?

Rumsfeld: Not in the first period of hours. The Building was burning, and filling up with smoke. It was hard to see, your eyes were smarting, and it was hard on your throat. We were busy, concerned about other aircraft hitting other targets, we had aircraft squawking "hijack" and other aircraft that weren't squawking anything and should have been. We had to develop rules of engagement on the fly and give guidance to interceptors as to what they should do in the event it looked as though some other target was being put in jeopardy. I would say that went through most of the day, from 9:00 to 5:00 or 6:00 at night, at which point we began to start thinking what it meant, what were the implications and how to stem further damage. We had done the things we needed to do in terms of force protection and changing the defcon level, developing rules of engagement and talking to other people. After getting that piece of it set we began to think about what it meant and what might be done about it.

Goldberg: Did you change the defcon level?

Rumsfeld: I did.

Cameron: How long did it take you to establish the rules of engagement to possibly shoot down any other planes that might come in?

Rumsfeld: They were probably established pretty fast in my mind, and then we refined them. Dick Myers and I talked about them.

DiRita: I would say it was within the first two hours, because I left after about two hours and you had worked a lot out in conversations with the Vice President.

Goldberg: You knew there was another plane involved, too, didn't you?

Rumsfeld: Yes, and potentially still others.

Cameron: You made the decision, I gather, not to evacuate the Building.

Rumsfeld: I made the decision to send the deputy to the outside site and I made the decision to stay here as long as I could.

Goldberg: You made him unhappy.

Rumsfeld: That's life. That's what deputies are for. The rule was just the opposite, of course—I was supposed to go.

Cameron: But you decided to stay and not evacuate the Building.

Rumsfeld: True.

Goldberg: The Building was evacuated.

Rumsfeld: Major portions were.

Cameron: But you and your senior staff remained, for the most part.

Rumsfeld: As long as we weren't putting them into undue harm, I was comfortable staying.

Cameron: You all stayed in certain parts of the Building and decided not to relocate the NMCC, is that correct?

Di Rita: It was the NMCC while the Chairman and the Secretary were here.

Rumsfeld: It's where I am. It was the vice chairman for most of the day, until early evening.

Cameron: Did you spend a lot of time dealing with your military commands regarding security around the world?

Rumsfeld: Yes, we had to look at force protection throughout the world.

Cameron: General Myers was with you throughout the day?

Rumsfeld: He was vice chairman.

Clarke: He had been named.

Cameron: Named but not confirmed.

Rumsfeld: General Shelton wasn't here physically, he was on an airplane coming in.

Cameron: Was it your decision to ask General Shelton to go out to site R?

Rumsfeld: I didn't ask him to go out to site R, he just happened to be traveling and happened not to be here.

Goldberg: What about authorization to shoot down United #93? Did that come from the Vice President?

Rumsfeld: Technically, it couldn't, because the Vice President is not in the chain of command. The President and he were talking and the President and I were talking, and the Vice President and I were talking. Clearly he was involved in the process.

Cameron: It was reported that the decision came from the Vice President.

Rumsfeld: He might have recommended that.

Cameron: But the rules of engagement came out of your office.

Rumsfeld: Sure.

Cameron: It was also reported that the Arlington County assistant fire chief asked you to evacuate the Building but you decided not to. What was your thinking?

Rumsfeld: I don't know what my thinking was. I was here, there was a lot happening in real time. I had no desire to take a lot of time to physically move to another location, being out of communication. The smoke was a problem, but it was not killing people in the part of the Building we were in at that moment. Had it started to, we would have

had to do something else. We had several alternatives we could have implemented that would have moved us to a different location where we could communicate. But absent an urgent need to do that, I made the decision that the limited number of people involved with me would stay where we were.

Cameron: You gave the order that the Building would be opened the next day. Was that based on information about safety factors?

Rumsfeld: I hadn't talked to anybody when I said that, it was more attitude. My impression was that the smoke and problems had declined and that there were undoubtedly significant portions of the Building that could be occupied safely, and so I just decided. I thought it would be a good thing for the Pentagon not to be shut down.

Cameron: And when you spoke to the press and the world, you wanted to be here in the Building? You did that very consciously, felt that it was important?

Rumsfeld: Absolutely.

Cameron: Did you go out to the site after that first time?

Rumsfeld: I was out there every day afterwards.

Clarke: You went out that afternoon with Levin and Warner.

Rumsfeld: That's right. They called and asked if they could come over, and I said it was a good idea. We went out there and they joined us for a press briefing. By that time Shelton was back. I was out there every day after that.

Cameron: Did the security people ask you to wear protective clothing when you went out there?

Rumsfeld: There was no one out there to be worried the first time. People were out there trying to save people's lives. Later, I have no idea.

Clarke: I don't remember anyone saying that in his presence.

Di Rita: I am not aware that Chief Jester or anyone else was concerned about stuff like that.

Rumsfeld: Every time I went inside the Building during the aftermath I wore protective equipment, because it was still smoldering.

Cameron: A lot of it was improvisational, wasn't it, people stepping up and trying to figure out how to deal with problems.

Rumsfeld: Sure.

Cameron: After the first few days, did you have regular briefings about the status of Pentagon security and renovation?

Rumsfeld: No. Larry Di Rita handled most of that and made most of the decisions.

Di Rita: We did a lot of work with respect to making proposals on how to restore electronics and have redundancy that we didn't have at the time.

Rumsfeld: I was busy worrying about the war on terrorism.

Goldberg: Did the PenRen people, or Mr. Evey, have some recommendations for changes in the Building?

Rumsfeld: I'm sure they did. Di Rita would fill me in, and I'd say, "good."

Cameron: So in a very short time you turned your attention to the war on terrorism.

Rumsfeld: The same day.

Clarke: By early to mid-afternoon on the 11th you had sat down with Myers. You had gotten a fairly good fix on the planes and which planes were still behaving strangely, and you said you wanted to talk about responses. So you started the process on the afternoon of the 11th.

Goldberg: Do you know why Ms. Clarke's recollections are so good? She took notes.

Rumsfeld: So did Larry, and Steve Cambone.

Goldberg: So did Admiral Giambastiani.

Rumsfeld: Yes, I was a little busy. Thank goodness they did.

Goldberg: Yes, they have a good record of it.

Cameron: As you reflect back upon those first days, is there anything about your feelings or reactions at the time that surprises you?

Rumsfeld: I think the whole idea of people taking American aircraft, fully fueled, filled with Americans, and flying them into buildings, killing themselves and everyone else, is clearly surprising. It's an unusual weapon or implement to kill innocent women and children. The second thing is the thought that you would have to give an order to shoot down another airplane filled with Americans, innocent people, and shoot it down before it flew into the White House or other major structure where it could do even greater damage. That continues to be a thought that is not part of normal operations.

I just went through it in Prague. I was involved in the chain of command for the protection of the Prague Summit participants—the heads of state from forty-six countries, with foreign ministers, defense ministers, presidents, and prime ministers. We had three or four incidents there that involved conference calls to determine why planes were heading towards the conference center without the proper authorization. It remains an unusual and surprising—unnatural—set of problems that you have to deal with. I will say that the people in the Pentagon handled themselves superbly. Dick Myers did a wonderful job and all of the staff here were focused and responsible.

Goldberg: You all got over the initial shock pretty quickly.

Rumsfeld: I can't speak for anyone else. They all did a good job. Whether they got over the shock, I don't know.

Goldberg: Do you consider the security measures put in place since 9/11 adequate protection for the Pentagon?

Rumsfeld: No. There is no way to protect anything at any time against every conceivable type of attack. The attacker has the advantage. You do your best and take reasonable precautions, but you keep living, using the Building, having people come in and out. But is it still vulnerable to a chemical, biological, or radiation attack? The wind changes here, and when the wind pattern is right you will see planes fly right in front of this window. It goes on all the time, day and night. My intel briefer Denny Watson sits over here by the window in the morning, and these planes go flying by. She was there that day, so she always leans back when they go by. But you can't stop living.

Goldberg: So the current security precautions are in place indefinitely.

Rumsfeld: I wouldn't say that. We will do what we have to do, having the least inconvenience, cost, and stress on the force that we think is prudent, and whatever levels seem to be appropriate when the threat levels go up. All the time recognizing all the assassins that have killed people in our lifetimes. How do they do that? Killing people who have protection, secret service, and so forth? Persons who are willing to give their lives to take the lives of others have a great advantage.

Goldberg: There is always the element of chance present, which you can never plan against. It has been a major factor in history.