

## Pentagon Attack

Interview with Paul Wolfowitz  
April 19, 2002

Cameron: This is an oral history interview with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. It is taking place at his office in the Pentagon on April 19, 2002. The interviewers are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Rebecca Cameron.

Goldberg: You may know that we are conducting a large-scale project to document and record the history of the attack on the Pentagon. All of the military services are involved. We have been conducting a large number of interviews throughout the Department of Defense with people who were involved in some way with the attack, including civil agencies throughout the area. There are well in excess of one thousand interviews at this point. The Army has done most of them thus far, using historical detachments they have brought in from the field. There will be a publication of some three or four hundred pages, probably some time next year, on the complete story of the attack. At the same time we are collecting a great many documents that will be archived, and also artifacts. Congress has given the Smithsonian \$5 million to do something of the same sort, to collect artifacts and find some way to preserve the memory in the museum. There are others involved, too. We are doing it strictly from the DoD standpoint.

We thought it important to have an interview with you and with Secretary Rumsfeld. You were here in the Building and had something to do with what happened during the course of the day. We can start by asking where you were on September 11, what you were doing, and what was your first reaction to the attack?

Wolfowitz: I will back up an hour. We had breakfast that morning with a group of congressmen, who I think were selected because they were DoD supporters. I can't remember the selection. We got on the subject of missile defense and I made the point that it seemed to me that the opposition to missile defense was placing a bet on the wrong side of history, because there was bound to be some ugly surprise that would make opposition to missile defense look pretty mindless. They asked what I had in mind. My two examples were an Iranian nuclear test or North Korean test of a long-range missile. I had no idea it would be a missile attacking the Pentagon. That conversation was an illustration that some people would say missile defense is unique and some people would say they were warning us all along about terrorism. But in reality I think people were saying that the world was a safer place and we could stop worrying.

Afterward I came back here for a meeting. Someone said to turn on the TV and something about the World Trade Center. We saw the second tower hit, and Rumsfeld, for some reason, had the presence of mind to go out of his office. I sat here thinking that something terrible was going on in New York, but it was up there, not here. We went on with our meeting, and suddenly the whole Building shook. It felt like an earthquake.

Cameron: Did you hear anything, or did you just feel the concussion?

Wolfowitz: I think I heard it, a dull thud-like noise. My recollection is that it was clear something had happened, but it still wasn't clear that there was anything to do. I didn't put two and two together even then. I cannot remember, but I think that not until someone said there had been a bomb at the other end of the Building did I get up and

start moving out. The idea that there would have been three, or much less four airplanes all at once, was—

Goldberg: How long after you heard the thud did you get out?

Wolfowitz: Pretty quickly. A few people came in and said to.

Cameron: Did people first tell you that it was a bomb?

Wolfowitz: I think so. By that time the alarm bells were going off and people were streaming out into the parking lot. The Marine sergeant who works outside Rumsfeld's office was very anxious to get me away. I thought that something terrible had happened, but that it was all over. She was probably right that it was a dangerous place for a couple of thousand people to congregate at that point, but there we were.

Goldberg: You were outside the Building?

Wolfowitz: Yes, on the parade ground, moving away from the Building. Then I got word to come back in, which I was eager to do.

Goldberg: From whom?

Wolfowitz: I think, again, someone from Rumsfeld's office. I had my car and driver out there, we drove up here and walked into the Building. We went into the NMCC, where the Secretary was, and General Myers. General Shelton was in Europe. We proceeded with discussions by secure video conference. One issue was what to do about the plane over Pennsylvania, getting orders to get fighters up to intercept it, and the Secretary getting approval from the President to shoot it down. I think we were there when we were first told that it had been shot down. That was the first report, and they are usually wrong.

Cameron: News reports indicated that the order came from the Vice President, but it was the Secretary, in fact, who made the decision?

Wolfowitz: The Secretary gave them the order, by he got approval from the President. I am pretty certain of that. Things have blurred, but he would not have considered that the Vice President had the authority. I am reasonably certain I was there for that conversation, in fact.

Goldberg: Who were involved in the video conference?

Wolfowitz: I think at different times there was that basement room at the White House where the Vice President was. And there was Omaha, where the President was. I don't remember whether we saw other agencies on the screen or not.

Goldberg: This is fairly soon after, isn't it? You couldn't have been out of the Building long.

Wolfowitz: No, it was less than ten minutes.

Goldberg: It had to be, given the time interval of the planes.

Wolfowitz: Right. It was all happening pretty fast. I was out there long enough to realize that the cell phones didn't work. They were already completely jammed up.

Another issue working was the plane that came in to Alaska, squawking on the wrong frequency, using a hijacking warning frequency. Later it turned out to be a fuel problem or some other problem. Fighters were scrambled to intercept it, and ultimately escorted it to land. At some point someone from the NSC staff phoned over to suggest to me that the Secretary might want to get some provisional authority from the President to shoot the plane down. The Secretary's immediate and pretty violent reaction, slightly misinterpreted—it is true that the suggestion from the NSC wasn't worded as an

instruction—was that he didn't take his instruction from the NSC staff, only from the President. That in the end turned out to be a non-problem.

The other problem that came up while I was still here was a plane due in from Madrid that had seemingly disappeared and which eventually turned around and went back to Spain. There were two or three planes over the Atlantic that were the object of some uncertainty at that point.

Meantime, we were down in the NMCC and there was a strong acrid smell of smoke the whole time, and it was getting worse. We told Rumsfeld to get out of the Building, but he didn't pay any attention. Again, after five or ten minutes we told him he ought to get out of the Building, that there might be something in the smoke. But he ignored it. After another ten minutes I also told him he ought to get out, and he said no, that I should get out and go up to Site R. They arranged helicopters to take a bunch of us up to Site R.

Goldberg: Where did they come in?

Wolfowitz: They landed out on the parade ground, right in front. There were two in our group. The Secretary and Myers stayed. As we were flying up to Site R, Nighthawk (the code word for the White House Marine helicopter) overtook and passed us and landed. They dropped our group off. One of the first people I remember seeing was Tom White, who had been ordered up there also. He was looking almost green, I could really see the tension in his face. I didn't realize at the time just how bad the Army had been hit. One of their three-stars was killed, and Tom was unhappy at being up there when he thought he should be down here. When we got into the cavernous place I was able to get Rumsfeld's approval to send White back down, which we did quickly. The

rest of the afternoon was kind of nutty. Equipment didn't work, communications didn't work, and in any case the people weren't particularly interested in communicating.

They had their hands full with plenty of other things to do.

Goldberg: You mean back here they didn't work?

Wolfowitz: No, up there they didn't work. I wouldn't overstate it, but they were rusty.

We certainly exercised Site R big time, as the Vice President would say. More frustrating was the fact that there weren't any communications, rather than that they didn't work very well when there were. People were just too busy to bring us in. The sense of isolation up there was powerful, reinforced by the windowless cavernous atmosphere and, I suppose, also the fact that we were isolated and learning next to nothing.

Goldberg: And imagining the worst.

Wolfowitz: Also just wanting to be there, sensing that a lot was going on and wanting to help. It was the helplessness that got to me more. I thought the worst was over.

Goldberg: Did the Secretary go up there at all?

Wolfowitz: I don't think he's ever been there. It was set up so that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the military had much better facilities than the little OSD cubicle.

Goldberg: That's not surprising.

Wolfowitz: Not at all, just symbolic. We quickly moved down to their quarters, because it was absurd to be even more isolated than we were.

Goldberg: It was really their setup to begin with, wasn't it?

Wolfowitz: Yes. It tells you who was supposed to run the war once the balloon went up. There was no difficulty in real life integrating with them. There was supposed to be

a video conference set up, and there was great difficulty in doing so. Some of the difficulty was setting it up and some was actually getting people together to have it happen. Originally Shelton was to join me up there (he was coming in from Europe), but he sensibly decided that it was no place for him. Around 4:00 in the afternoon I got the idea that I could be useful somewhere else and proposed to the Secretary that I go to Langley and get briefed on what we knew about what went on, and he said to go ahead. We shipped out by car, my driver was up there. I decided to just go home and came in here very early the next morning. I honestly don't remember what happened that night.

Goldberg: Did you have any security people with you?

Wolfowitz: I didn't have any then. They surrounded me pretty fast and moved me out of my house and into quarters at Fort Myer for a few days. That turned out to be very convenient, because for the first two weeks I was leaving very late and coming in very early, so there was no point in going all the way out to Bethesda.

Cameron: When you got into the Pentagon the next day, were most of the people still evacuated?

Wolfowitz: Most of the people we were looking for were all around here. It seemed like a normal crisis day.

Goldberg: The Secretary said he wanted the Building up and running.

Wolfowitz: And it was, it was seamless from that point of view. I must have come in here that night, but I don't remember clearly doing so.

Goldberg: That kind of fog of memory is normal after such an event.

Wolfowitz: Which is also why you would rather get to people a month after, not six months after.

Cameron: Did you go out to the crash site very soon after you came back to the Building?

Wolfowitz: Yes, almost immediately, and quite a few times over the next few weeks. Frequently at night, partly because that was a more convenient time, but also a time when the chaplains and others said it was good for folks to get visits. It is surprising to me that people like VIP visits as much as they do, but they do. It was pretty grim work, especially for the people pulling out bodies. There was a terrific spirit out there.

Goldberg: Rumsfeld went out, too, didn't he?

Wolfowitz: Regularly, yes.

Goldberg: He's agreed to an interview also, but I don't know when.

Cameron: Besides these visits you made on a humanitarian basis, did they brief you regularly as to progress with body recovery, debris, and the renovation?

Wolfowitz: Yes, I got periodic briefings, and I went once over to Crystal City to visit where General Van Alstyne was working.

Goldberg: He did a considerable job.

Wolfowitz: He did a remarkable job, really extraordinary.

Goldberg: He's a self-effacing man, too.

Wolfowitz: That's part of how he did such a great job, he is selfless. I asked if there was anything I could do to help and he said he was bringing the families in to see the site for the first time—this must have been a month afterward—and said if I could join



them it would be helpful. I came and he was terrific about moving me around and introducing me to people.

Cameron: To what extent did you become involved in reconsidering Building security?

Wolfowitz: Pretty heavily. And John Batiste, my senior military assistant, has done a lot in organizing the security of the Building and the biological detectors and those hazards. I held one meeting where the man who supervised the Pentagon reconstruction, Lee Evey, briefed us on Pentagon security. In the course of it, it became apparent how dangerous that underpass is. We agreed that we couldn't stop traffic there, but we could stop trucks. Gen. Batiste got in touch with Gov. Gilmore's office and we had the governor in and spoke with him. That's why those police cars are out there, to keep trucks off the road.

There was an episode about six weeks ago where some guys ran past the roadblocks and the sirens. They were finally stopped. They were Middle Easterners, and one had multiple IDs. One tried to hide some IDs in the tread of the truck. They were detained for a few days, and eventually it was decided that they were harmless, for some reason. The family had the gall to complain to the newspaper that they were picked on because they were Middle Eastern.

Goldberg: Have they sued yet?

Wolfowitz: That's probably happened, too.

Cameron: Did you express an opinion about whether Reagan National Airport should be reopened?

Wolfowitz: I certainly got a big earful from many members of Congress about the importance of doing it. And I weighed in on the side that it was important to do it, both

symbolically and logistically, that you just can't protect yourself against everything. I think that with the extra security provisions they have for Reagan, it is a reasonable risk.

Cameron: What about moving Route 110?

Wolfowitz: We may have to do that, in the long run. It is expensive. Or move the Building!

Goldberg: Did you get involved in the plans for repairing, renovating, and making changes to the Building? Was Evey reporting to you?

Wolfowitz: Yes, he was, and to the Secretary, who had gotten involved also.

Goldberg: Both of you had some positive thoughts about what ought to be done?

Wolfowitz: Yes, we did, and at my level we gave serious thought to whether this might be the occasion to completely reorganize the way we do business and distribute our activities more widely. But we haven't been bold enough to try that.

Goldberg: You mean move them out of Washington? Decentralize?

Wolfowitz: Yes.

Goldberg: That was suggested during the Eisenhower administration, you know.

Wolfowitz: I'm not surprised.

Goldberg: It was suggested, but it wasn't done.

Wolfowitz: I noticed. We have much better technology now, which is a huge difference, and ought to enable some things like that. But the magnetism of the E-ring is a little too powerful.

Goldberg: It's like turning an aircraft carrier around, its entire length.

Cameron: So the reorganization is not finished with the establishment of the Northern Command?

Wolfowitz: I don't think so, there's a lot more to do. I would hope that over the next ten or fifteen years whole layers would disappear from the way we do business. That may be too optimistic, but it has certainly been the clear tendency of what technology has enabled in the private sector. Admittedly, we are different from the private sector, but I don't think we are that different. All these layers slow us down. What all this technology makes possible is speed, and to lose the speed that the technology makes available because you've got a Prussian order of battle. . .

Goldberg: You can lose a lot of records with all this speed, too. I am sending you an action memo on preservation of the records since September 11, Noble Eagle and Enduring Freedom. We put one out ten years ago. Secretary Cheney signed one in connection with the Persian Gulf War, and I think it is desirable to do it again. People need to be reminded to hold on to these records, they will be important in the future.

Wolfowitz: I agree.