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United States Department of Defense

News Transcript

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Secretary Rumsfeld Interview with Parade Magazine

(Interview with Lyric Wallwork Winik, Parade Magazine)

Q: Let me start by asking you, most of us are programmed to leave a building with smoke. What made you go towards the fire here a little over a month ago, and what was going through your mind?

Rumsfeld: Well, I was sitting here and the building was struck, and you could feel the impact of it very clearly, and I don't know what made me do anything I did, to be honest with you. I just do it instinctive. I looked out the window, saw nothing here, and then went down the hall until the smoke was too bad, then to a stairwell down and went outside and saw what had happened. Asked a person who'd seen it, and he told me that a plane had flown into it.

I had been aware of a plane going into the World Trade Center, and I saw people on the grass, and we just, we tried to put them in stretchers and then move them out across the grass towards the road and lifted them over a jersey wall so the people on that side could stick them into the ambulances.

I was out there for awhile, and then people started gathering, and we were able to get other people to do that, to hold IVs for people. There were people lying on the grass with clothes blown off and burns all over them.

Then at some moment I decided I should be in here figuring out what to do, because your brain begins to connect things, and there were enough people there to worry about that. I came back in here, came into this office. There was smoke in here by then.

We made a judgment about where people should be. The chairman was out of town, so he was separate. The vice chairman was with me. We had my deputy go out to another site. At a certain point it got too bad and we went into a room about 30 yards away here in this building, in the same general area but back that way that is sealable. But as it turns out it wasn't sealable for smoke and so forth. We worked in there, and we kept being told the building had to be evacuated completely except for the people that were in that group that were assisting me, and they kept saying you should get out of here because these

people have to stay if you're here, as I recall. I said fine, we'll do that at the appropriate time.

They were able to get enough of the fire out and then move some air out that the increasing smoke stopped. It did not disappear, but it stopped. We were in there throughout the day, and never did go to (inaudible).

The advantage for me was I could be here near where the problems were and I had full communications from the area -- to the president and the vice president, the secretary of state. I guess he was out of the country, wasn't he? It was the deputy.

Q: In the interest of time I'm going to move you along. I'm sorry if I seem rude --

Rumsfeld: Not at all.

Q: This is a question that's been asked by many Americans, but especially by the widows of September 11th. How were we so asleep at the switch? How did a war targeting civilians arrive on our homeland with seemingly no warning?

Rumsfeld: There were lots of warnings. The intelligence information that we get, it sometimes runs into the hundreds of alerts or pieces of intelligence a week. One looks at the worldwide, it's thousands. And the task is to sort through it and see what you can find. And as you find things, the law enforcement officials who have the responsibility to deal with that type of thing -- the FBI at the federal level, and although it is not, it's an investigative service as opposed to a police force, it's not a federal police force, as you know. But the state and local law enforcement officials have the responsibility for dealing with those kinds of issues.

They [find a lot] and any number of terrorist efforts have been dissuaded, deterred or stopped by good intelligence gathering and good preventive work. It is a truth that a terrorist can attack any time, any place, using any technique and it's physically impossible to defend at every time and every place against every conceivable technique. Here we're talking about plastic knives and using an American Airlines flight filled with our citizens, and the missile to damage this building and similar (inaudible) that damaged the World Trade Center. The only way to deal with this problem is by taking the battle to the terrorists, wherever they are, and dealing with them.

Q: Please briefly explain to our readers why it's not enough just to get bin Laden and al Qaeda. Why this threat ought to extend beyond that.

Rumsfeld: Well, because they have trained any number of people that are spread all across the globe, but there are a number of terrorist networks in a number of countries that have harbored terrorists, and to deal with one and ignore the rest would be to misunderstand the nature of the problem.

There is a correlation, really, between the countries that sponsor terrorism, and the countries that have been weaponizing chemical and biological, and they're working diligently to develop nuclear capability for the most part. Not in each case. But that nexus is something that ought to be of concern to people. Were

that connection to occur, obviously you're talking not about thousands of people, but hundreds of thousands.

Q: What it sounds like you're saying too in this process then is that we're going to need to address Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, particularly in the light of even the evidence that with inspectors Saddam continued to build his arsenal through the 1990s and now we don't know what exactly has happened. Is that going to be a top priority as well?

Rumsfeld: Those are decisions for the president, but he has been very clear that he is deeply concerned about the problem of terrorism. He is going to find terrorists and keep them out and root them out, and he's going to create an environment that suggests to countries that are harboring them that they ought to stop.

Q: Unlike some of our previous conflicts abroad, a lot of our efforts at the moment are concentrated in a part of the world where portions of the population are hostile to us, both allies and enemies. A Washington Post editorial spoke pretty eloquently to this subject yesterday.

Can you talk a little bit about your thoughts about the balance we have to strike between the politics of the region, even some of the propaganda that exists in the region, and our own security interests?

Rumsfeld: We have to look at our security interests for sure. Given the lethality of weaponry today and the proliferation of those technologies, we have no choice.

By the same token we have to be sensitive that there are inevitably going to be at least the potential for secondary effects or non-intuitive threats that could occur. Some of those can be advantageous. That is to say people can change their ways, or there may be new alignments where we share common problems, that our relationships with people three, four, five years down the road might be notably different than they were previously, for the good.

By the same token, to go to the heart of your question, you're right. It is important that we do everything humanly possible to do what we must do in a way that is sensitive to our many allies in the region and the problems they have because of, to use your words, the propaganda that is being put forward by terrorists. This effort clearly has nothing to do with any religion, it has nothing to do with any race, it has nothing to do with any particular country. It has to do with terrorists and terrorist networks. In the case of Afghanistan they've pretty well taken over the country. But not totally.

Q: In hindsight, might the last decade be called the decade of neglect? We didn't even maintain spare parts for our military planes. What lessons should we as a people and our political leaders learn from the 1990s?

Rumsfeld: You're correct. They called it a procurement holiday, which is a euphemistic way of characterizing starving the defense establishment from needed capabilities.

The lesson is a lesson that it's a shame, but we really ought not to have to keep

learning it. One would think we would be wise enough as a people to learn from history and to know that today we're spending a very modest percentage of our gross domestic product on defense. When a crisis occurs we suddenly say oh, my goodness, we can spend all we need to. Well, of course we can. But the thing to do is to spend it when you don't need to. Then you don't have to spend as much. Then it's the deterrent effect and the capability effect that you have that dissuades people from doing things like this. But to the extent you get relaxed and say well, my goodness, there's no real threat today, we can not worry about things, and allow your investment to decline, you then find that you have to increase it more than you otherwise would have and you have to do it because of a crisis. I guess Benjamin Franklin or somebody said that necessity is the mother of invention, but this country can afford to spend anything it needs to on our national security.

When I first came to Washington in the Eisenhower/Kennedy years, we were spending 10 percent of our gross domestic product on national security. When I was here as secretary of defense some 25 years ago, it was 7, 6, 5, percent, in that range, as I recall. Now it's down in the 2.8 or 9 percent.

We are perfectly capable of spending whatever we need to spend. The world economy depends on the United States [contributing] to peace and stability. That is what underpins the economic health of the world, including the United States.

To think that we want to skim on our national security and put in jeopardy the world economy, put in jeopardy our economic circumstance in this country it's so short sighted and so immature and reflects a lack of a capability to understand history.

Q: Looking forward as well as looking back, you've been very forward looking in your plans for the RMA. Now we're looking at transforming the military under duress and in an accelerated timeframe in a conflict. How do you prepare for the next war while you fight this one?

Briefly.

Rumsfeld: You're looking for bumper stickers.

Q: No, not bumper stickers. You can go more in depth than that. We can handle it.

Rumsfeld: Well, one would hope our country would be wise enough to do it skillfully, but what we have to do is not look at existing threats, meaning countries or people. We need to look at capabilities. The kinds of capabilities that exist across the globe and that are revolving and spreading.

So rather than having a threat-based strategy we have fashioned a capability-based strategy that says we can't know of certainly knowledge where a specific threat will come from or when it will come because capabilities are so widely disbursed today. But we can expect those threats to come, and we can make a reasonably good estimate as to what kinds of capabilities we will need to deter and defend against those threats when they do occur, regardless of where they come from.

It was a paradigm shift in thinking that has been lost as a result of these terrorist attacks. But it is a significant conceptual transition or paradigm shift for our country that has taken place.

Q: Bio-terrorism is threatening a lot of Americans. How serious is this threat? Do we need a new Manhattan style project to deal with this? Are there other asymmetrical threats that you're more concerned about? And then one little tag on the end of that, given the concentration of political, government, and military leadership in Washington, how safe is this city in particular?

Rumsfeld: I worry about all the asymmetrical threats. One must do so. We know there are not significant armies, navies and air forces that can [test] us. Now one of the reasons there aren't is because we have capable armies, navies and air forces, and that dissuades people from thinking that that could be an asymmetrical advantage for them if we lacked a Navy or an Army or an Air Force.

Now therefore, what do they do? They go to the seams. They look for ways that they can advantage themselves using our technology, our capabilities, because of proliferation, things that we have pioneered, and for which we do not have ready defenses, and those are the ones you mentioned. They are terrorism, they are ballistic missiles, they are cruise missiles, they're weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological, and nuclear, and cyber attacks potentially.

I mean of all the countries in the world, we are more dependent on space and more dependent on information technology than any nation on the face of the earth, and they're all, they all represent weaknesses, if you will -- strengths on the one hand, but weaknesses on the other, because we have not hardened ourselves against those kinds of threats.

In the case of terrorism, because it's so difficult to do; in the case of -- We're working on cruise missiles and ballistic missiles, but there's been some sort of a battle in our country on the issue for many years, which has delayed and impeded progress. With respect to cyber warfare and weapons of mass destruction, those are things that are going to take a great deal more effort on our part. And homeland defense clearly was part of our defense strategy review well before the September 11th attack for the very reason that you suggested in your question, because of these asymmetrical attacks.

I'm talking as fast as I can.

Q: You're doing a great job. You're making life much easier.

Mr. Secretary, what goes through your mind when you commit American troops to war?

Rumsfeld: Well, if you're going to put people's lives at risk you better have a damn good reason.

Q: If things become difficult in this war -- it looks like it's going to be long, if there are setbacks or losses, what will you turn to for strength? What are you drawing strength from now?

Rumsfeld: Say that again.

Q: If this war becomes increasingly difficult, lasts for a long period of time, if there are setbacks or losses as there almost always are in most wars, what will you turn to for strength? What will you draw upon? And is there anything in particular that you're drawing upon already now?

Rumsfeld: Well, I guess you'd say the United States of America represents something so important to the world, our way of life, our free way of life. If one looked down from Mars on earth you would find that only a handful of countries are really capable of providing for their people, and where the people provide for themselves. That is to say where the political and economic structures are such that the maximum benefit for the most people is achieved.

That is a big idea. That is something that is important. And we have to see -- if you care about human beings across the globe, you have to care that that example and that model, that engine for prosperity that benefits not just the people in our country but people across the globe, succeeds.

And in a world where, as human beings we know that people are imperfect and there are a lot of people who are, for a variety of reasons, engaged in doing evil things. And vicious things. And lethal things. Therefore, if we value that and if we value the people of the United States, there's no question but that we have to be willing to defend that way of life and to do that, people have to voluntarily put their lives at risk. Thank goodness we've got wonderful people, men and women in the armed services, who are willing to do that.

Q: Finally, one last question. Many people today shun public service, avoid public office. Why serve? Why did you choose to serve again?

Rumsfeld: I guess I had a practice of that over the decades. That plaque says, "Fighting for the right is the noblest force the world [affords]." (inaudible).

Q: I need to wait for the photographer to come in.

Are there any special challenges that we're facing as a nation as part of this war? Something that you think the American people need to be aware of?

Rumsfeld: There is one. Throughout our history, free people are free to be wise, and to be unwise. That's part of what freedom is. We've concluded that it's better than philosopher kings or dictators. If that's the case and one looks at our history and knows that that's the case, that means we can make mistakes, and if we're what, 260 or 70 years old, 80 years old as a country, we know we've made some mistakes. We've behaved in ways that have allowed crises to turn into conflicts through inattention, by thinking something was improbable, like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; by saying something that led people to believe it was okay for them to do something like invade Korea. We survived all of that in reasonably good form. There's been a lot of loss of life in human treasure as well as material treasure. But that was a different period. That was before weapons of mass destruction. We do not have that, what do you call it, a margin for error?

Q: That luxury.

