

Event: **Strobe Talbott**
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Location: 2100K
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Background:

Talbott was confirmed as the Deputy Secretary of State in February 1994. Counterterrorism was one of a number of priorities at the State Department at the time and this was a result of the first WTC attack and the ongoing threat of Islamic fundamentalists. [U]

Other DoS priorities in the mid 1990's came under the rubric of global issues. Such topics included non-proliferation, combating international crime (i.e. narco-trafficking), democratization, human rights and the environment. Talbott's personal portfolio under Secretary Warren Christopher included the former Soviet Union, the Balkans and Haiti. [U]

Talbott first met Bill Clinton in 1968 when the two were Rhode's Scholars. They were roommates and soon became good friends. Talbott described Clinton as a person with an insatiable curiosity and eclectic interests. Generalizing Clinton's world view, according to Talbott, is difficult but can be done; Clinton was very concerned with globalization, American leadership and international institutions. Clinton had always been fascinated by the "shrinking of the world" and the "elimination" of borders and upon entering the White House, he was concerned about how America should approach globalization in order to preserve its interests, and the interests of its allies. [U]

Clinton was also concerned about managing the "dark side of globalization." This included drug trafficking, terrorism and the degradation of the environment. Talbott mentioned that Clinton saw international institutions as the primary vehicle to address these problems. [U]

World Trade Center One as a Watershed Event:

WTC I was a "wake up call" as to the determination of groups bent on destroying America on its home soil. However, because the terrorists' success was limited it did not create the outlook which was adopted after 9-11. Nonetheless the USG did increase its counterterrorism efforts after WTC I and Talbott cited the USG's ability to stop the millennium plots as evidence of this. [U]

South Asia in the Early to Mid 1990's:

Talbott said South Asia was often overlooked in the 1990's. He faults the first Bush and first Clinton administrations on this and said the region was a victim of the post cold-war neglect. Talbott said that Clinton hoped to improve relations with India in his first administration but did not have a chance to approach the issue with seriousness. Also during the first half of the decade, Congress had essentially hijacked Pakistan policy by controlling the levers of influence with the sanctions regime. [U]

He described Afghanistan as a "white pawn in the chess game we were playing against the Soviets and it became a black knight played back at us in a game we didn't really fully understand until we got hurt." [U]

Talbott said that with one exception, he was not heavily involved in South Asia until the May 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuke tests. This exception was a trip he took early in his tenure (1994) to discuss nuclear issues with New Delhi and Islamabad. He is convinced that he discussed Pakistani support for the Taliban during this meeting with Benazir Bhutto, but stressed that this was not the primary reason for traveling to the region. [U]

Pre May 1998 Pakistani Policy:

From early 1991 through May 1998 our Pakistan policy was essentially unchanged. Priorities during this period included: 1) non proliferation; 2) Indo-Pak relations and 3) the nature of the Pakistani state, with terrorism being a subset of number 3. ~~[S]~~

The most fundamental and difficult issue before the May 1998 nuke tests was the nature of the Pakistan state. [REDACTED]

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Talbott said his greatest concern was Pakistan's nuclear program. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] To restrain Pakistan on the nuclear issue, the Clinton administration sought to use a combination of carrots and sticks. But, as discussed below, this was not always possible. ~~[S]~~

In connection with implementing a diplomatic approach, Talbott was upset with the Congressional amendments which limited State's flexibility. The Executive branch, he stressed, which is mandated to lead foreign policy, did not have full control over the diplomatic instruments. As a result of the Congressional sanctions, State could not offer carrots. The Pressler amendment became a stick not only towards Pakistan but against the Executive branch, he added. [U]

Talbott said Congress was pro-India, and noted that it is "easy to be pro India" because it is a democratic and pluralistic society with a growing economy. Moreover, Indian-Americans are very active politically in the US. [U]

In May 1998, the nonproliferation issue became much more urgent. But Talbott stressed that the three major topics mentioned above were interwoven and when one topic became more important it did not mean that the others were neglected. [C]

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May Through August 1998:

Talbott said the Indian nuclear test of May 1998 was an incredible intelligence failure. DoS learned about the Indian tests on CNN and Talbott immediately called DDCI John Gordon who was unaware of the tests. Talbott said, "we [the USG] just weren't paying attention." [S]

Talbott, who had previous experience with nuclear issues, was immediately tasked to this case. And his first assignment was to persuade the Pakistanis not to conduct a test in response to India's. [C]

Talbott's discussions with the Pakistanis that May focused exclusively on the nuclear testing issue. Terrorism was not discussed and there "was no topic other than 'don't test'"

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From May to August of 1998, the DoS debate on Pakistani policy centered between two bureaus. These were the narrowly focused Non-Proliferation bureau and the South Asia bureau, which was more sensitive to the wider range of issues relating to US-Pakistani relations. Talbott tried to reconcile the two as much as possible as he saw their concerns as intertwined. During the summer of 1998, the policy broadened somewhat to include

general Indo-Pak relations, but the Taliban/Afghan issue was not the benchmark issue until after the embassy attacks. [S]

Talbott reminded the Commission staff that nuclear proliferation was important in the overall counterterrorism campaign so as to deny fringe countries, or groups such as Al-Qaeda, nuclear material. He continued to say that "it burns me when some commentators... suggest that we let non-proliferation or the danger of nuclear war in South Asia eclipse what was "really important", and that was terrorism... that's bullshit." [U]

August 1998 and Beyond:

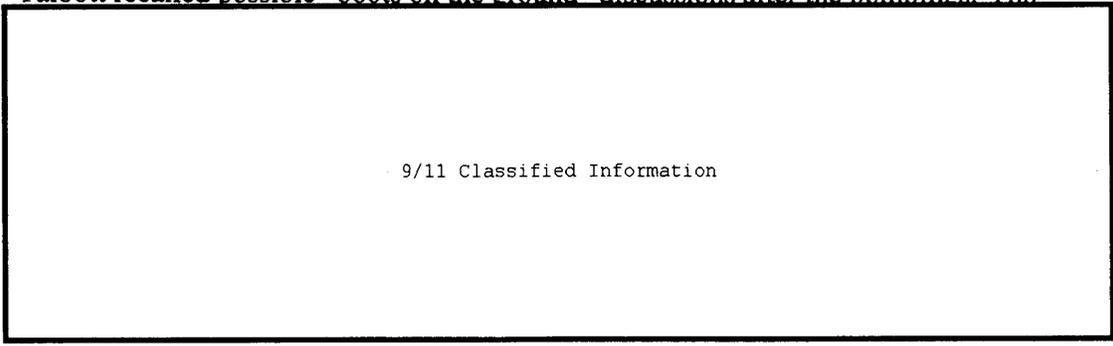
After the August 1998 embassy bombings, State's internal Pakistan debate added a third player, SCT's Mike Sheehan, who heavily stressed the UBL/Taliban issue. Because of the embassy attacks, the USG sought to "use every instrument and channel available" in pressuring the Pakistanis to move on the Taliban problem. [U]

Talbott participated in the meetings, which discussed retaliation for the embassy bombings. He remembers the evidence about the Al-Shifa plant and it appeared conclusive to him. Also, there was no doubt in Talbott's mind that we nearly killed UBL when we launched the TLAMs. [S]

Talbott discounted the "wag the dog" allegation. He met with the President shortly after Clinton's televised speech on the Lewinsky affair and was impressed by the way Clinton kept his focus. Talbott recalled that "in the oval office... [Clinton], was the only one in the room who showed no evidence whatsoever of being preoccupied or "down" as a result of the firestorm that raged in the Capital, the country and in the White House." Talbott said "it was all business." Talbott gave Clinton an "A plus" for his attention to important issues during that period. [U]

Talbott noted the amount of criticism the administration endured for going after UBL that August. To him this was ridiculous given the fact that Americans had been killed. He noted that it took a 9-11 to bring the "national political will" to mobilize and support the type of military response seen today. He agreed that a 9-11 response required a 9-11 event. [U]

Talbott recalled possible "boots on the ground" discussions after the bombings. His



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Talbott recalled that the July 4, 1999 discussion between Sharif and Clinton did, to a degree, involve counterterrorism. Clinton, in an attempt to get progress on Kargil, threatened to issue a negative press statement which would include Pakistan's connection to terrorism. Because Sharif was willing to cooperate, this did not happen; but Talbott used this event to stress that "Pakistan was on thin ice" with the United States on a number of issues including Afghanistan and terrorism. [U]

Unfortunately, Sharif was politically dead for the rest of his tenure. The October 1999 coup fundamentally changed Talbott's enterprise and he could not recall traveling to Pakistan after Musharraf took power. With Musharraf in place, Washington initially cooled it's high level relations with Islamabad while warming to New Delhi. From this point on, the proliferation discussions made little progress. But at about this same time, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Rick Inderfurth was increasing discussion on Afghanistan and terrorism, albeit through lower channels in the Pakistani government. Ultimately, Clinton wanted to raise the level of attention on Afghanistan with Musharraf, and that, Talbott lauded, is why he risked his life to travel to Pakistan in March 2000. By meeting with Prime Minister Musharraf, Clinton hoped to preserve the threads of the US-Pakistan relationship and to have a frank conversation on terrorism. [S]

Talbott recalled that there was some concern about dealing with Musharraf because he was tightly linked to the military, came to power through a coup and had little contact with America (unlike previous military and civilian leaders). [S]

Working with the Northern Alliance:

Talbott was against giving aid to the Northern Alliance. Talbott said he [redacted] did not want to prolong the Afghan civil war. [redacted]

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Fear of upsetting Pakistan was not a reason for State's stance towards the Northern Alliance. Talbott stood by his decision. [S]

U.S.S. Cole:

Upon leaving office, Talbott had not heard of definitive evidence linking Al-Qaeda to the Cole attack. Unlike in August 1998, there was not a "presidentially accepted conclusion that Al-Qaeda was the perpetrator." Furthermore, we did not know where UBL was and, of course, if the USG did, Talbott insisted, we would have struck him regardless after the Cole attack. [S]

Russia's View of Afghanistan:

According to Talbott, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan for two reasons. Primarily, they wanted to move towards a warm water port. They also sought to counter US influence in the region at a time when Washington had close ties with Tehran and Islamabad. [U]

When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, Moscow essentially gave up on the country. However, their attention was drawn back after the 1994 Chechen war when Moscow feared a link between the Chechen rebels and the Islamic radicals in Afghanistan. [U]

Talbott said that in September of 1999, President Clinton met with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at an economic summit in New Zealand. During a break, the two discussed terrorism and Putin stressed his concern for radical Islamists operating in Chechnya and the ties they had to Afghanistan. [U]

Miscellaneous:

Undersecretary Pickering was Albright's "plus one" for terrorism issues. Talbott would attend DC meetings on issues he was responsible for, such as proliferation. [U]

Talbott said that in 1997, and probably into 1998, he would have viewed Iran as the principal counterterrorism concern.

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Talbott never meet with any Taliban representatives. [U]

He saw the second Bush administration's concern for CT as the same as the Clinton administration's. He then asked the rhetorical question "Had the Bush administration conducted Operation Enduring Freedom in the spring of 2001, would 9-11 have still occurred?" [U]

Talbott believed that Sharif had just enough control over the military to defuse the Kargil situation, but this probably set the ball rolling for his overthrow. [U]

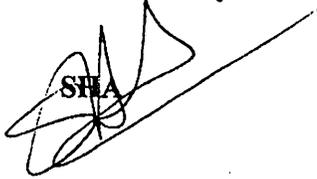
One thing that was not completely understood when crafting our Taliban policy was the extremely tight relationship between UBL and Mullah Omar. Talbott said the Taliban and Al-Qaeda eventually became the same thing. He noted the Bush administration's post 9-11 ultimatum to Omar to render UBL as evidence of the unbreakable bond between the two. Even faced with an imminent and overwhelming attack, Talbott stressed, the Taliban would not part with UBL. Talbott added that we just did not understand the relationship until it was too late. [U]

Talbott recalled that after the Millennium threats, Richard Clarke created an after action report and suggested that the 9-11 Commission investigate to what extent Clarke's suggestions translated into long term policy. [C]

9-11, he said, was preventable. This was because there was a lack of coordination between the agencies. Talbott cited things that were (or should have been) discovered but were not "handed off" properly

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Talbott cautioned that the campaign against terrorism runs the risk of limiting itself to military solutions. Also, the US is doing great damage to itself by restricting foreigners from entering the US. Finally, the US must do a better job working with the world community on counterterrorism. [U]


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