

Thanks for listening to The Rest is Politics. Sign up to The Rest is Politics Plus to enjoy ad-free listening, receive a weekly newsletter, join our members' chatroom and gain early access to live show tickets. Just go to TheRestIsPolitics.com. That's TheRestIsPolitics.com. Welcome to The Rest is Politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And we're now doing our second episode on Iraq because we're now at the 20th, it is as you say an extraordinary thing, 20th anniversary of Iraq. And I sometimes think that political careers are very much defined by that, the early stages of your career, that your mind is set by that. And I guess your formative experience is probably your earliest formative experience. This would have been the 80s. In my case, my earliest formative experiences were from 1995 when I joined the Foreign Office. And then when I was deployed to Iraq in 2003, and I served there through 2003 for five, and then returned back to Afghanistan. And that period, which I guess is a sort of a 20-year period, was a sort of age of intervention. It was a period where the US and the UK and its allies got involved in this process of nation building, almost regardless of what we talked about in the last episode, which is the question of the justification for getting involved in the first place. Once we were there, how do we try to conduct ourselves, military, civilian, planning, money? What happens when you try to reshape another person's country thousands of miles away from your own?

Give us a bit of a sense to start with Alistair on your first visits to Iraq, your first impression when you got on the ground, what you began to hear coming back to you, so the invasion happens in March, and Saddam Hussein toppled quickly, statues come down in Baghdad, a famous appearance of George W. Bush on an aircraft carrier in May saying mission accomplished. Mission accomplished, yeah. I'm not sure that was the best piece of communication I've ever seen.

So, give me a sense of your early memories of the post-war period in Iraq.

I think the first thing I'd say is that the military operation went really well in terms of toppling Saddam. That went reasonably, relatively small number of UK, US casualties. I think it happened more quickly than we expected. Whether that gave us a false sense of hope about what would then follow, I don't know. I was very, very uneasy that when that statue was being toppled and they were putting stars and stripes, flags on the top of it. I think then our first visit, very, very conscious of the scale of challenge ahead. Of course, for me, it became very, very difficult, particularly difficult very, very quickly because it was what we were actually in Iraq when the report that led, the report on the BBC that led to the argument we had with them and then ultimately, tragically, the suicide of David Kelly and the Hutton Inquiry that followed, that was actually happening while we were in Iraq. So, I was kind of busy dealing with that. And then in the middle of that, we went from there, I think, to Poland and I had to leave because a very close friend of mine had died in the States and I went to his funeral. I was maybe not with Tony as much as I would have been. But on that first visit, the other sense I had, and who you criticised as in the first episode on Iraq when you said that we were far too keen to praise the military and the intelligence guys and what have you, I was very, very struck by some of our really impressive troops that were there and some of the people we spoke to and the stuff that they were doing. But I think very conscious that, you know, the battle was won, but there

was a long, long, long way to go. And I think we very quickly got a sense that the Persian authority that was being set up, that it was going to be very, very difficult to get that up and running quickly, efficiently with buy-in, because don't forget we were now trying to bring in people who had not wanted to be involved in the military operation, but were prepared to come in and help on the aftermath. And, you know, fairly quickly, it started to feel like it was not in a good place. And then subsequent visits with the Coalition Provisional Authority, I think first with Jay Garner wasn't it, and then with Paul Bremer.

With Bremer, yeah. And then, I suppose you became involved, how far down that process? I first got involved in August and summer. And I was deployed. And so I was 2003, so I just turned 30.

So you were based where at that time?

Well, I was sent off to the south of Iraq.

No, no, no, no, where were you taken from to go there?

Well, when I was sent off, I just finished actually walking across Asia. So I'd been walking for 21 months at 20, 25 miles a day, staying in 550 village houses. I'd taken a break from the Foreign Office. So I'd been posted in Indonesia, posted in the Balkans, Bosnia Kosovo staff, and then I'd taken this two-year break.

And who was it that picked the phone up and said, Rory, we think you should go to Iraq?

Well, first of all, somebody from the Foreign Office desk on Iraq in London called Fergus Cochran Diet. And then I went out to Iraq and I saw a man called Andy Bear Park. Do you remember Andy Bear Park?

I do remember Andy Bear Park very well, yeah.

He had a larger-than-life figure who's now, I think, a yogi in New Zealand. He's gone and become a yogi mystic in New Zealand. So he'd been Mr. Satch, his development advisor. And then he'd been a big figure in Kosovo. And I turned up having got a taxi from the Jordanian border to Baghdad because I couldn't get in in the normal way. And went in to see him. And my first vision was of this enormous palace. So Saddam Hussein's palace, as you remember, had been taken over by the Coalition Provisional Authority. And you walked in and saw these huge marble rooms with great sort of portrait statues of Saddam with tickle halvahs on his head. And written around the inside of the main atrium was, ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country, Saddam Hussein.

I didn't see that. We went, he had so many palaces. Which palace was it?

So this was the main palace, the main big Baghdad palace, which is where Bremer had his office. And we did go there there. Yeah. Andy Bear Park was sitting upstairs. And I went to see him in his office. And he was half his office was one of Saddam's bathrooms. And he had this whole bath full of vodka bottles. Who? Who? Sorry, Saddam had vodka bottles or Andy had bottles. Andy, Andy had vodka bottles in the bathroom. Why did Andy have all these vodka bottles? Well, I think he was he was stocking up so that he could keep keep everybody's morale up. I remember even he then told me he said, Rory, you know, everybody else who we've asked to come out still stuck in the airport, you've managed to get in a taxi from Jordan. So I think obviously you're the guy that we need to send out to the provinces. So he sent me out to the Marsh Arab region of southern Iraq down to a province called Misan. And later I was posted to Nazarene. And initially I was the acting governor of the province. So you have to remember, I'm 30 years old. I'm a British diplomat. And

I'm responsible for a province of initially a million people. And then later a province for another two million people, there's no Iraqi governor in place. The British military have been there, small units of British military, but they're withdrawing. We set up a little office in the center of town. And I'm having from day one to work out how to deal with a small civil war that's breaking out in the middle of town, how to recruit a police force, how to hold basic district council elections, how to get the oil going because there are huge queues outside every petrol station. There's no oil. What to deal with the fact that all the electricity pylons have been torn down in order to get the copper wire off.

And who were you reporting to?

I was reporting to the American, Paul Brammer.

You were directly reporting to Brammer?

I reported directly to Paul Brammer. So Paul Brammer had...

And how many people, how many governors?

There was 14 of us. And I think the Brits had four. So my friend and colleague Emma Sky, who I'm really hoping is going to be writing something about this soon, is...

She should call it occupational hazards, possibly.

Exactly. Was posted up in Kier Cook in the north. There was an ex-British Marine officer called Mark Eddrington who'd been given place just north of me. And then there was a British presence down in Bastra and the Italians were in Nasseria. And it was a very... I mean, it's a period of my life that I feel very conflicted about because on the one hand, of course, it was incredibly stimulating 24 seven, dealing with crises every moment, trying to get this very, very poor, broken province back on its feet. And on the other hand, pretty quickly, it became clear to me that I should never have been there in the first place.

I mean, I've read your book and it did trouble me, actually, because you sort of feel the...

It's almost like you're in a parallel universe to the one that is happening back where policy is being made. That's kind of how it felt. Or that's how it felt that you felt at the time, that you were sort of not clear about what you were meant to be doing, how you were meant to be doing it, who you were meant to be doing it with, and you're having to manage all these incredibly complicated relationships.

Yeah. There's an amazing surreal gap. You've put your finger on it. So, every time I went up to Baghdad, we'd sit in the palace and I'd sit there with General David Petraeus, who'd sit next to me in these conference rooms. And you would hear about all the stuff that the US and the UK thought they were doing for Iraq. And people would talk about rewriting the university curriculum, setting up a stock exchange, getting rid of the trade unions, signing a very complicated constitution. Sorry, getting rid of the trade unions?

Yeah, yeah, getting rid of the trade unions. Yeah, that was something obviously didn't cross your and Tony's desk, but one thing...

It might have crossed Tony's.

One of the things that was going on is that it was a very, very right-wing American ideological drive with American economists coming in, trying to get rid of the trade union movement, trying to create this very radically deregulated state, privatize everything, etc. So, big sort of... Like the sort of stuff they tried to do in Russia after 1989, where they were trying to do in Iraq. Meanwhile, back a few hundred miles south, in the place where I

was based, the lights weren't on, there was no electricity, there were huge demonstrations in the street, provincial council offices were being looted, British soldiers were standing in front of my base, people were standing there with big signs saying death to the governor, death to Rory, this kind of stuff. And I remember Andy Bebhart, this man that I was talking about with a vodka in his bath, turning up to see me. And he was a kind of wily person. He turned up to see me and I tried to give a presentation about all this stuff that we were doing about hiring the police and holding elections. And he said, Rory, if I can come back here in six months time and you can serve me ice cream and there's not a civil war, I'll be pleased. And sure enough, within six months, I could manage the ice cream, but we had a full scale civil war. The place I was based is where there was a huge satirist militia uprising, where a man called Private Johnson Bahari got the Victoria Cross fighting against satirists and surgeons. So it became a real center of Iranian influence, many of the people I was dealing with. And this is one of the stories, of course, for Iraq is essentially what we began to see is that the intervention had handed Iraq to the Iranians. I remember, yeah, go.

I was going to say, wasn't one of the American, I can't remember one of the Congress committee's analysis was that the only real winner of the Iraq war was Iran. It was one conclusion. But I think I said yesterday that that was the thing that we did not foresee, the extent to which the Iranians would, and maybe we should have done, but we didn't.

It was absolutely amazing. I remember I'd been there about two weeks and I was trying to register political parties. And I said to a man who came in, he said, I come from Harakat Hezbollah. And I said, how many members are there of your political party? And he said 1,442. And I said, how do you know so precisely? And he said, because I've issued every one of them with a Kalashnikov. And it turned out that he had been based in Iran and he'd come over with these guys funded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, as the name Hezbollah probably implies. And they were setting up their own armed militia groups, which were then countered by different forms of Islamist militia groups, which were anti-Iranian. And this was spreading all the way through the south. Meanwhile, up in the north, there was this process of debarthification. Did you and Tony Burr get very involved in this? So this decision to sack the Bath Party, which meant that most of the senior civil servants, most of the senior army officers who just worked from Saddam Hussein lost their jobs, and many of those then went over to join the insurgency.

No. And I think we thought it was a terrible mistake.

And how did those conversations happen? I mean, how much influence did you have once the invasion happened about how the U.S. were running these things?

Well, I think the... Because John Soares at some point, a certain point, was there...

But that was a little later, I think, when he went and he was...

No, no, that was earlier.

Because they were running this with Ghana.

Yeah. Soares overlap with the end of Ghana, beginning of Bremer, and then Jeremy Greenstock replaced him. So they were the British people. And oddly, although I was a Brit, I didn't report to them. I reported directly to Bremer.

I was going to ask you, I must tell you a story about Jeremy Greenstock after us.

But when did you... You say you were... Obviously, you were working for the

Coalition Provisional Authority. But were you not sending stuff back to the UK?

Was that seen to be against your...

Please, I copied things to the UK, but strangely, the UK was surprisingly uninterested.

I remember going up to see Jeremy Greenstock, who I liked very much, and he had the opposite of Bremer. And I'd always stop by and brief him on what we were doing. But I got a slightly world-weary sense from him that he didn't really approve of the way that Bremer was running Iraq. He was a bit embarrassed that there were people like me out in these provinces, mapping tribal groups, mapping political parties, trying to do all this stuff.

He probably thought that the Americans were running a colonial government, a kind of imperial colonial government, where Americans and British were directly administering.

And probably because he disapproved of the way things were happening,

I think he found it quite difficult to engage with the detail of what we were doing.

I couldn't really get him to talk to me about how we were trying to deal with the Satterist Insurgency. I could talk to American generals about that stuff, but I think the Brits, and this probably would have been a problem.

I don't know whether it... How quickly it became apparent to you, but at my level, most of the military officers that are sort of major, colonel level, had concluded by about September, October, 2003, that the whole thing was a waste of time, and the quicker we got out, the better. And they were trying to hand over very large swathes of southern Iraq.

In many cases, they were collaborating very closely with Iraqi militias.

And making the Americans very angry, the Americans eventually sent down a large Iraqi unit backed by the Americans to recapture Basra because the British had effectively abandoned it.

Yeah. So you were never involved down in Basra?

No. I was in the two provinces, north of Basra. Although I went back and forth out of Basra, but were you aware, quite quickly, the extent to which the Brits, the British generals, the senior British diplomats, were completely out of sync with the Americans and were essentially saying that what the Americans are trying to do is doom to failure, and the Americans, of course, were thinking, we don't like these guys because they're so pessimistic, they're so gloomy, the Brits have given up. So a very, very difficult relationship began to develop. I mean, there was one occasion on which we went there and spent time with Bremer and John Soares was still there at the time. And I had a sense of Bremer being pretty overwhelmed, probably having a kind of on a mammoth scale, what you were dealing with on a provincial scale. And I do think that the Americans were calling the shots, no doubt about that. And we were trying to make difference at the edges, is how I would put it. And it was very, very frustrating. And I think it was a very difficult place to operate. I think the, I've completely forgotten about Jeremy Greenstock. And I feel quite bad about this. When that funeral I went to in America that I mentioned, while I was there, Tony asked me to go and see Jeremy and find out whether he would

he would consider taking on this role in the Coalition Provisional Authority. And I went and saw Jeremy and had a couple of long chats with him. And he said, well, it's all very interesting and obviously very flattered to be asked. But no, I really think this is not for me. And other things to do with my life now, et cetera, et cetera. I get back to London, I see Tony, I said, I don't think Jeremy's really up for it. What did he say? I said, well, he said it wasn't, you know, it wasn't quite where he wanted to be at the moment. Okay, do you want to get him on the

phone? And so we get Jeremy Greenstock on the phone. And Tony just sort of, it shows you the power of the voice of the Prime Minister himself. I've said to him, you know, Tony really wants you to do this. And Tony says, ah, Jeremy, Tony, yeah, I think you really, really could make a big difference out in Baghdad, you know, I really do think you can make, oh, do you Prime Minister, you know, within days he was there. So no, I think we, we, it was, it was very, very frustrating. And then of course, you know, the day there are many days in this whole Iraq story that kind of seared on my memory. But one of them was when John Scarlett about whom we talked a fair bit in the earlier episode, came in to see me and said, how difficult would it be if it transpires actually, we don't find evidence of the weapons of mass destruction program. And I said, that would be very, very, very difficult. And he said, well, I, I fear that's where we're heading. Yeah, that was a pretty bad moment. I mean, there's so much to be, to be said about Iraq. But did you, did you, did you, did you, did you feel you, did you feel you made any big difference for the better? I felt at the time, often week by week that I was making a difference, but none of it was sustainable or enduring is the problem that did you feel, did you feel that the, the local population, did you have a sense? Because I think the Americans were one of the things that carried them away at the start was that there was a sense day one, day two, you know, Saddam's gone, Saddam's fallen celebration, etc. But that, that evaporated fairly quickly. How quickly do you think it this mood developed that actually there was a kind of rather a sort of occupying force that was seen more negatively than before. And were you, what was your sense of the local population and how the Americans and the Brits was seen? The problem was that we were able to do quite a lot of concrete things relatively quickly. So I was proud of being able to invest in restoring some of the schools and clinics. Immediately after Saddam had fallen, there'd been this looting where everything had been stripped out, all the electricity wires being stripped or copper wires being taken from the electricity pylon. So we restored those things, we got people back into school, we got clinics going again. But reconstructing a totally shattered, impoverished province is not something that you can do overnight. And actually, you know, some of these contracts and rebuilding the schools, of course, we're going to take six, nine months before we could fully refurbish these buildings. Have you been back? I have been back. I was, I was back in Iraq, in fact, just, just in Mosul. Have you been back to the area where you were? I have been back to those places too, yeah. And it's a very odd dynamic because some people remember me, some people even felt that I was trying to do a decent job. But very quickly, you know, within a few weeks, people would say, look, you've got rid of Saddam Hussein. Thank you for that. So this was particularly the Shia population in Saudi Arabia. Very pleased that we got rid of Saddam Hussein. But could you please now get out? And very quickly, they began to feel that they were fighting for Islam and Iraq against a foreign military occupation. And conspiracy theories took off. People would begin to produce placards linking me with Israel claim that we were in the white slave trade that I was trying to dig for an invented material called red mercury, all these conspiracy theories would get going. And having put a lot of energy in it, my final moments were in Nasseria were being trapped in my compound with the man that I'd had lunch with earlier that day, firing 130 rocket propelled grenades and mortars into my compound with my bodyguard team up on the roof for the heavy machine guns, not sleeping for three nights, trying to convince Baghdad to send in an AC 130 spectre gunship, which is a plane that hovers 15,000 feet in the air in order to shoot the insertions around the edge of my compound, trying to evacuate my staff in armored vehicles.

And as they drove out of the gate, the machine gun bullets hitting the sides of those vehicles as they left and eventually retreating back into the military base, handing our compound over to the insertions and seeing a lot of the buildings that I built going up in flames around me. And then when I returned again in 2005 to then find that our leading enemies, the people who'd been attacking me, trying to kill me, were being elected in in the elections that were held in 2005 as the governors of the province, as the provincial councillors of the province. And it was at that point that we really saw the way in which this intervention by Toppling Saddam had given space to two groups in particular, Iranian linked militias. And on the other hand, the beginnings of what became ISIS. And do you think the debathification decision had played a part in that? The debathification decision was absolutely critical to the development of what later became ISIS because many, many of Saddam's senior people went off and particularly in the Sunni areas around Mosul. They felt completely alienated from what they saw as an Iranian-backed regime.

They were Sunni, the other lot was Shia, and they began to create these very, very odd relationships with what was then al-Qaeda Iraq and eventually became an entire state stretching from Syria to Iraq by 2014. I'm going to give you more grist to your anti-intelligent services, Mil, because there was a Joint Intelligence Committee report in February 2003, which said that specifically in the south of Iraq, the key risks that we were going to face were refugees, environmental damage, and the impact of chemical and biological weapon strikes. And so I think we did not see that significant external threat. We also had an assumption, there was an assumption made that there'd be some kind of continuing, functioning, broadly effective Iraqi civil service, which presumably, presumably, what did you see in relation to that?

It had very, very quickly crumbled away, and most of the people that we tried to bring in as directors of different departments, provincially, were completely either bringing in tribal allies or the one group of Iranian militia very quickly took over the Department of Health. So you ended up with a bunch of armed men at the hospitals from one Iranian militia group. Another Iranian militia group took over the Education Department. Meanwhile, the local tribal militia tried to take over the governor's office. So the state had collapsed into tribal and Islamist groups very quickly. One fundamental strategic decision, though, was the decision to create this very heavy foreign footprint. Rather than actually letting the Iraqis take the lead, the decision had been made. And I think this was because we'd learnt the wrong lessons from Bosnia and Kosovo, that instead of keeping a light footprint, which paradoxically is actually what people like Donald Rumsfeld wanted. Donald Rumsfeld wanted to go and topple Saddam and get out quickly, and he had the same view on Afghanistan. He wanted to go and topple the Taliban and get out quickly.

So Donald Rumsfeld then US Secretary of Defense. Very much in the neocon, chainy, axis of evil. Although oddly, Rumsfeld disagreed with them in one way, which was that the extreme neocons like Paul Wolfowitz really believed in the nation-building democratization bit. Donald Rumsfeld was more of an old conservative. He was more real politic. Let's topple the dictators and then let's not try a nation-building. Very successfully in Afghanistan, he had managed to control the number of US troops, initially only 2,500 troops on the ground, Hamid Karzai had been put in charge, and the Afghans were largely running their own affairs. That then went wrong later because we got tempted into doing this heavy footprint in Afghanistan as well. But in Iraq,

the wrong lessons had been learned from Bosnia, where in fact there hadn't been many troops outside the bases. But listening, I think, too much to people like Paddy Ashton, who in Bosnia had said, what we need to do is basically behave more like the British Raj in India. We need to establish security. We need to establish governance. We need to eliminate corruption. And then later,

hold elections and let the locals take over. Bremer in Iraq tried to micromanage the whole thing, run the whole thing himself, and didn't actually trust the Iraqis to do it.

When you talk about learning lessons from previous military interventions, and we talked in the first episode about those which were seen to be much, much more successful, do you think that we learned the wrong lessons from Iraq when it came to Syria, and that one of those lessons at the political level, leadership level in particular, was that, do you know what, even if you think it's the right thing to do, maybe it's best to leave it alone. Because I actually think that a lot of the arguments you made against what we did in Iraq might have played in, in the debate about Syria, where I think you both, you and I both agree, I think, that actually, once Obama's red line of chemical weapons bias had been crossed, that we should probably should have

intervened far more robustly than we did. And is that, do you think that is related to the...

What 100%, one of the tragedies of the failure in Iraq is that it broke the confidence the United States made people like President Obama, who very courageously and very unusually opposed the Iraq war, he was one of the only senators to do so, and took a huge risk with his political career to do that. But he got embedded in his head, as you say, an excessive lesson from Iraq, which is that he began to believe that no form of intervention could then be justified.

So, another consequence of Iraq was not just the humiliation of the US, but the complete erosion of American legitimacy, presence, strength throughout the region, and directly contributed, I think, to the fact that since 2011, one of the reasons the world has become more violent, with more refugees, fewer democracies, more human rights abuses, more authoritarian domination, is the loss of confidence of the US and its allies, which followed the humiliation in Iraq.

Would you take a break?

Absolutely.

Welcome back to the Restless Politics with me, Roy Steward.

And me, Ernest Campbell.

So, in Tony Blair's speech in March 2003 to Parliament, he says that what Britain chooses to do in Iraq, and he says this very presciently 20 years ago, but there's an irony to it that maybe he wasn't aware of at the time, he says it will determine the way in which Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century, the development of the United Nations, the relationship between Europe and the United States, the relations within the European Union, and the way in which the US engages the rest of the world. So, it could hardly be more important. It will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation.

How does that resonate with you now when you hear those words?

I'm going to read you something else.

General Franks, Tommy Franks, who headed up the military operation.

He said there were eight objectives of the invasion.

First, end the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Second, to identify, isolate, and eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Third, to search for, to capture, and to drive out terrorists from the country. Fourth, to collect such intelligence as we can relate to terrorist networks. Fifth, to collect such intelligence as we can relate to the global network of illicit weapons of mass destruction. Sixth, to end sanctions and immediately deliver humanitarian support to the displaced and to many needy Iraqi citizens. Seventh, to secure Iraq's oil fields and resources which belong to the Iraqi people. And last, to help the Iraqi people create conditions for a transition to representative self-government. So, if I look at those as the objectives there. Achieve maybe one or two of them, yeah. Well, certainly one, eight oil fields. Well, the problem is that the oil is pretty, pretty, I mean, it's very, very sad. I mean, as you know, I was back in Iraq recently. I, where I live in Jordan is actually right on the Iraqi border. And very sadly, Iraq really hasn't been able to bring its oil production on stream. So, it remains, remains, and the representative democracy is barely functioning. I mean, the government is so astonishingly corrupt. And despite the oil, it's inability to actually extract oil or use the revenue it gets from oil to begin to invest. I mean, it's heartbreaking, because you're aware that before Saddam Hussein, Iraq was considered one of the most literate, educated, developed parts of the Middle East. And one of the real changes in the world is that, if you put the clock back 50 years, the real centres of the Arab world were Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, these were the places where the intellectuals were, where you went to find great Arab writers and music and books. And part of this story is the collapse of all those places and the shift of the centre of the Arab world towards, towards the Gulf, towards places like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, UAE, which didn't feature. And by the way, I'm not avoiding your question about turning, I just, I just thought I'd give you that assessment as well. I will point out just in response to that though, there was analysis, I think it was the BBC did 10 years after the invasion, we're now 20. It'd be interesting to see if they went back and did the same thing, which basically said that there were huge security concerns, lots of problems, but GDP had grown exponentially, oil output had increased, internet, mobile phone usage taken off, and the number of people in absolute extreme poverty had fallen, and life expectancy at birth was 10 years greater, GDP up, life expectancy up, etc. So that and the problem then is that they did that just before. Yeah. Yeah. Before I know what you're going to say, I know, but I'm saying, I'm saying, that's why I'm saying it'd be interesting if the same people went back and did the, I think, I think, I think on, on Tony's points, let's just read them out again, one by one, let's go through them one by one. So he says, this will determine the way in which Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century. So what do we, what do we define now as the central security threat? A lot of people think, oh, it's the states would say it's China. Yeah, or Russia, I don't think we any longer think the central security threat of the 21st century is lower middle income, Middle Eastern countries with nutty dictators who are trying to develop, you know, biological chemical weapons programs. So it did, for example, one other part of the aftermath that we've not talked about is there was, it did seem that there was a link between the firmness of action against Saddam and the decision of Gaddafi to give up his WMD program. So that, you know, so it could be that actually that that what Tony's saying there can be judged two ways. One is good, one is bad. What's his next bit? And the development of the United Nations. Now, now there I'd say he's right, it does affect the development of the United Nations, unbelievably negatively,

because your decision to go in without UN sanction in an invasion, which Kofi Annan said was technically illegal because it didn't have the sanctions security council, was the beginning of the absolute hollowing out of the legitimacy of the UN, which up till 2003 had had a very good 90s. Period of period of Kofi Annan's domination. Yeah. But there were very, there were very, there were big, there were some very difficult discussions about the decisions in relation to Kosovo in the U.S. I mean, I think people, you know, Tony said it, I remember Tony said in his statement to Chilcot that, you know, the tougher the politics than the often in relation to international law, the tougher the law, the legal questions are inextricably linked with the political. But I look, I would certainly accept whether you could say this is all down to Iraq, I don't think so. But I'd certainly say it played a part in people thinking that UN was not functional. But I think, I remember Derry Irvin said something very interesting, Derry Irvin, who was law chancellor, and he said something very interesting at one of the cabinet meetings. I don't know if he was in cabinet then, but he certainly, he said something that the trouble is you guys have argued and argued so much and fought so hard for a specific second resolution that people think you needed one to take the action that you did. Whereas in fact, it was legitimate under the previous resolutions. Yeah. I mean, it's, I mean, that, that I guess is also something that you with your comms hat on, maybe worth reflecting on. I mean, presumably, Derry Irvin was right that just even from a comms perspective, that was a huge mistake to put, to allow people to put so much emphasis on a second resolution, which you then didn't go for. Yeah. But the point was that we would, you know, we were genuinely trying so hard to get it. So what was Tony's next point? Yep. The relationship between Europe and the United States. None of us predicted Brexit at that time, did we?

Well, he also says the relations within the European Union.

All right.

And the way in which the United States engages with the rest of the world with history. So relationship between Europe and the United States, well, of course, it, it did have a big impact certainly in Germany and France on their vision of the US. And they felt with the benefit of hindsight enormously vindicated. And it very much created the narratives that fed into Trump that the US was becoming a rogue player. And then says the way in which the United States engages,

the relations within the European Union, of course, it was a fracture between Britain, France and Germany. The way in which the United States engages with the rest of the world, well, and paradoxically, what it actually did was spark a period of isolationism, sparked a period which ultimately leads up through Obama to Trump. Of Trump, a loss of his campaign was an anti-Iraq

war campaign, saying these guys are idiots and saying, you know, well, let's listen to George W. Bush, he's some kind of genius. And also America first wasn't just about, you know, the domestic message, it was part of his international message as well.

Absolutely. So then he finishes, so it could hardly be more important, it will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation. Well, it did, it did, didn't it?

Well, I think in relation, if you take it in conjunction with what then happened in Syria, and what's now happening in Ukraine, then I think you can make that case. And again, as you say, you can make it both ways. I think what we've seen here, though, is this happening at a time when this goes back to the point you made right at the start in the first episode,

is that it was flowing from a time when we felt on top of the world in terms of being liberal democracies, on top of the world in terms of our security strengths, and there's been a lot of change since then. And just on the personal side, it's difficult for me to really see in the person that I know today with your views on the world, and what I occasionally tease you about, which is I think you becoming more left-wing as you get older, it's difficult for me to fully recognise the person that I find in your diaries 20 years ago. Do you feel that you've changed over time, and that you think about these things in a slightly different way to the way that you thought about them then? What do you just unpick what you just said, though? In what way do you see the difference between then and now, other than that are maybe a little less frenetic? Well, I think you're much more liable now to be more nuanced, more prudent. You probably, if I try to suggest that we were going to go into Iraq today, I'd imagine you'd be more likely to suck your teeth and say, well, what's going to happen after the event? How's this going to be perceived? You put a lot of emphasis on France, and Germany, and Europe, and keeping them on sight. You don't sound to me any more, as though you're somebody who would be... Yeah, the modern alistar, I don't think, is somebody who'd be pushing as hard into the Iraq war as you did then. I find it very strange that I still get a lot of kind of flak, and I'm always put into the center of these debates, obviously not as much as Tony, but certainly as much as the other members of the cabinet, Jeff Hoon, Defense Secretary, Jack Straw, Foreign Secretary. I think I took a lot of heat, partly on their behalf, and I'm not complaining about that. I think that was a function I played a lot of time as a sort of lightning conductor. But I was at the time... I mean, Tony was genuinely driven by a sense of conviction on this.

I don't think there's any doubt about that. I think if I... Funny, if I was with Sally Morgan, who was one of Tony's key advisors for a lot of the time, including during this period, and I was with her the other day, and you've got to remember, my job was to go out and represent Tony Blair and the cabinet's view to the world. That was my job. That's what I had to do. I've said to you before that Jamie Rubin said to me, after I left in 2003, he said, listen, the hardest thing you're going to find, one of the hardest things is working out what you really think, because you've programmed yourself. But if you read...

On that for a second. So essentially, you're saying, in the end, you were not running the policy. You were not an elected minister. No. And it wasn't fundamentally your job to sit with someone like me and try to work out. If I said to you, Alastair, I've just come back from the ground, it's all a messaging. You wouldn't really have seen your job on being trying to provide a completely independent analysis. No, I would have done that. I would have done that.

And I did have people. I remember lots of people that would come and see me as a way of trying to get a message to Tony or trying to influence him in some way. So I did see a lot of that thing. And I saw it as part of my job to do that. So did Jonathan Powell. So did the rest of us. But the point I was making, I think if you look in the diaries, there is, for example, there's one point where I said to Tony, and I think actually Sally Morgan may have been with me, because Sally was always very, very worried about the politics of this, about where this was going to play out in terms of Tony's reputation and labor's chances and all those legitimate concerns that you should have in politics. And I remember saying to Tony, Tony, look, you know, this was at a time when Rumsfeld had said to Jeff Hoon, listen, we can do this

on our own. We don't need you. You know, Jack Straw had gotten the same message from Colin Powell

and Tony got the same message direct from George Bush. Tony, you know, he said, I think he said to one point that I'd rather have you there as Prime Minister, not having been part of this when we're, you know, dealing with the aftermath and what have you. So don't feel you have to do this for me. And this is another occasion where Tony said, look, I believe this, I believe this is the right thing to do. And I remember saying to Tony, look, if just imagine a scenario where you've had you've won an amazing landslide in 97, you've done some incredible things like the peace process and

the minimum wage and the Scottish devolution and the new deal. And then you've gone into your second

term and you're doing public service reform. And then you go into a third term. Okay. And just imagine if that in terms of a lot of the public mind is wiped out by this, is it really, really, really, really worth it? And he's, and so that was probably at a deeper level where I was kind of coming from. I don't know. Yeah, yeah. And it must, I really must. And you feel it in the preface to volume four of your diaries where you do talk about all the things you were deeply proud of in the labor legacy. And you're obviously aware that actually, 2004 was a less successful election result than the two that you got from 2005. So 2005, much, much less successful, lost a lot of seats. And it was becoming clear to you that Tony Blair probably couldn't run again. And a loss of this is the Iraq war. And you were also presumably having to deal with the fact that most of your friends, I guess, or many, many of your friends will have been deeply against Iraq war. The Guardian was against Iraq war, the Mirror was against Iraq war. Many of your friends were in the Labor Party would have been deeply against it. Well, the one that mattered was Fyodor. I mean, what was against it? Passionately. And, you know, I remember to be fair to her, she didn't go on the Iraq war march. But I know that Jonathan Powell's wife did. And I know that Mike Boyce, the chief of defense staff that his family did. So we were all getting that. And we were also having, you know, we're having Grace, my daughter, who does this. She's a comedian now. I went to see

her new show at the weekend. And she does a whole thing about what it was like going to school, having to fight your way through anti-war protesters. You know, so that, you know, that when a lot of them were local members of the Labor Party, there were people that I knew. And so you found presumably over that period that it changed relationships quite dramatically. It was one of the things that really more than Tony Blair's economic policies or public sector reform was a real break between you and many other traditional members of the Labor Party. I don't feel I lost any genuine friends. I don't feel that anybody who was really close to me became any less close. But I'd say at the next level out as it were, people that I would see around and know well that there'd be a real difficulty attached to it.

And do people come up to you in the street? I mean, do you get people, you know, have you get people shouting at you? Do you get a lot less so? A lot less so. But, you know, I suspect on the back of this, just you and I talking for a couple of hours about this and the way that we've done, there'll be a very mixed reaction. You know, as you've seen, most of the reaction we get to our podcast, including on Twitter, is incredibly positive in the main. It's overwhelmingly positive. A lot of people, they can't see beyond Iraq in terms of Tony Blair and they can't see beyond me other than in terms of Tony Blair. And so, but I find now,

it's very rare now, this could be famous last words, but when I imagine about, I still get a bit, I still get a bit. And, you know, I had it the other day, I was at Sturdy University, there was a protest outside. But that was the first, when I was speaking there, that was the first time for a while. Just to come back then towards the end to wrap up, one of the people who clearly was uncomfortable with the way in which intelligence was being presented around the Iraq invasion before the Iraq invasion was David Kelly. And David Kelly had some kind of conversation

with BBC journalist. It became clear in the Hutton Inquiry that a lot of the things that BBC journalist claimed he'd said he hadn't actually said. But Kelly was clearly uncomfortable with the direction in which intelligence was going, was uncomfortable with the Iraq war. And in July of 2003, David Kelly took his own life, driven, I think, partly by the stress and the tensions around this argument that he'd had around the invasion, the difficult choices he felt he'd had to make weighing up his own conscience, speaking to a journalist against his loyalty to the organisation. And that, again, was something that was brought back to you because you were involved in many of these documents that he was simply criticising. I mean, tell us a little bit about David Kelly, how that struck you, how you think about it today, how your views have changed over time. I mean, it's interesting, we've, you know, we've gone two hours talking about all this and I've felt perfectly calm, perfectly rational. I'm actually very tired because I'm not been sleeping, not to do with this, but and when you started to talk about that, I felt my, I did feel my pulse racing a little bit. The Gilligan is, I don't despise many people, but I despise what he did. Because actually, when I never met David Kelly, and it's very strange to have somebody with whom you're closely identified, who you never actually met. And what emerged through the process after he outed himself, told the MOD that he might be Gilligan's source, he said that he might be because he said, he said some of the things that Gilligan said, and that's, and he did see Gilligan from time to time, but he didn't say the things that became very, very controversial. And also, he wasn't against the war, he wasn't against the idea of taking Dan Saddam. I don't know whether he had worries about the way the intelligence would be presented. I don't know, I saw no evidence and I heard no evidence of that. But the thing was, you know, it was, I mentioned Sally Morgan, Sally Morgan and I had been in America with Tony. Tony made his big speech to Congress, and, you know, he then went on to Japan and I came, Sally and I came back to London, and we landed, he throw, and I turned on my phone,

and there were just like dozens of missed calls. And the top one was, you know, phone duty clerk urgent, phoned Nick Matthews, the duty clerk, and he told me David Kelly's body's been found. And I just, I don't think I've ever had a feeling like it. And it wasn't, it was obviously the tragedy, but he kind of, you know, we, I don't mean this in a callous way, but we'd had lots of bad news like that of soldiers being killed and we'd had the same in other conflicts. And you feel terrible about it, but this felt very, very different. And the reason, it wasn't because I felt directly responsible, because I don't believe that I was. I do, if we talk about blame in here, and I hate playing the blame game in any circumstances, but he should never have felt that he had to take his own life because he'd been put in this invidious position. And he was put there to my mind by Gilligan. And I think a lot of that came out in the inquiry. But I knew that this was this, I said in my diary, you know, there's a, I could feel a juggernaut coming towards me. And, and it was, it was, it was horrible. It was like, and I got home sitting through in the kitchen through

there with Fiona Philip Gould, who was my closest friend. He knew I was going to be in state. He was at the house when I got back from Heathrow. And I just wanted out. I just thought this is the end of the road for me. I've had it. I can't do this another day longer. And Tony persuaded me to stay. Charlie Fortner, Peter Mandelson, I remember I spoke to Neil Kinneck, who's a really, you know, old and close friend who, and they all said, listen, you cannot go. You cannot go in these circumstances because people will put two and two together and make five and more. And so I stuck it out to the inquiry. And then, but I knew, I knew, I knew by then I knew I had to go. Yeah. Okay. Well, as to thank you, thank you very, very much. And I mean, there'll be many, many more questions as you say, the controversies that we will have sparked in two episodes. So huge.

And I think it's very interesting listening to you that the, the sort of the texture of it, which is that on the one hand, as you said in the beginning of the first episode, you still supported on the other hand, I'm hearing a lot of things through it that suggests that you can also, or I also feel that you're reconsidering bits for all the time as times past. No, I think, I think how I'd sum it up is that for the whole, you know, obviously for those soldiers who were killed, who died for all the other people who were, who were killed and injured for all the trouble there has been, I can make the case that a lot of the aftermath problems were created by forces who would be doing other terrible things elsewhere, where it not there, and might even have been doing it there. But at the same time, I recognize that, you know, it's one of those things that you just put into the category, you just wish it had never happened. You wish it had never happened. You wish that Tony Blair and the government had never been put in that position. But they were. And I think, look, I still talked to Tony about this, I talked to him a lot. And I think he thinks about it a lot and thinks about it deeply. And I think if you were to talk to him, have the same conversation with him, I think he'd push back a lot harder. Yeah, well, I have had, I have had. Exactly. And he does, yeah. So I do marry these two things of, I understood at the time, I remember sitting down with Robin Cook when we wrote his resignation letter together. Yeah. And he's him saying to me, I said, I can't believe you're as so strong on this with Tony. I can't believe you don't see why, see the way I see it. And I said, well, I see why you see it that way. I do see that. But at the same time, I'm with him because he's having to make this decision. And, you know, my job's to be there and do whatever I have to do in those circumstances. But it doesn't mean you can't see the nuance now. Thank you, Alice, that thank you for your friends. We're not going to get full closure here. We're not going to solve all these issues. Are you now my therapist? Even in two hours here. But thank you to all the listeners. We're aware we haven't done the usual episodes covering current affairs this week, but we want to do this topic justice. And we'll return next week to our normal episodes. And thank you all very much indeed. Take care. Bye bye.

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