GEORGE H. W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH SIR JOHN MAJOR

July 13, 2011
London, England

Participants

University of Virginia
Russell Riley, chair
Robert A. Strong

Also present
Dame Arabella Warburton,
chief of staff to Sir John Major

Transcription: The Tape Transcription Center, Boston, MA
Transcript copyedited by Laura J. Wallace, Jane Rafal Wilson, Gail Hyder Wiley
Final edit by Gail Hyder Wiley

GEORGE H. W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH SIR JOHN MAJOR

July 13, 2011

Riley: This is the Sir John Major interview, as part of the George H. W. Bush Oral History Project. We're in London and grateful for the opportunity to visit with you.

I wanted to begin by asking this question. When we began working on the project for President Bush, one thing we were told by many people who worked with him was that because we hadn't done a project on President Reagan, we should go back and do some interviews there, because you couldn't properly situate President Bush without understanding President Reagan. I noticed, in reading your autobiography, that there was no mention of Ronald Reagan in the book, and I wondered if I'm to read anything into that.

Major: No. All you have to read into that is that President Reagan left office two years before I became Prime Minister, and relations between Britain and America tend to operate on a comparable basis; Prime Minister to President, Secretary of State to Secretary of State, and so on.

Riley: I see.

Major: I knew President Reagan, but I got to know him better after he left office. There is nothing to read into the fact that President Reagan is not mentioned. When he left office, I was still Chief Secretary to the Treasury, which is the most junior member of the Cabinet, and so there would have been no reason for me to have any direct relationship with President Reagan. Nothing more than that.

Riley: But you do seem to be a somewhat different kind of conservative than President Reagan, at least from an external reading.

Major: Well, I think President Bush was a different sort of President to President Reagan. Conservatism, in its strands, has many varieties. President Reagan came in at a particular time, with a particular set of problems, a particular ideology. George Bush's background and outlook on life were very different.

George Bush, more than any other leader I ever met, was a citizen of the world. He was as much President of the rest of the world as he was of the United States. He arrived as the Soviet Union was coming toward collapse, and he was looking out at the world with eyes that I don't think anybody else in politics at that time could share. He had experience in China, at the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], with the UN [United Nations], all over the place. So, yes, he was different.

And I was probably a different sort of conservative to Margaret Thatcher, which is probably, if I may say, a better comparator than with Ronald Reagan.

Riley: Of course. You had an opportunity to first meet President Bush when you were the Foreign Secretary, is that right?

Major: Well, yes, we met, but I didn't really come to know him until I became Prime Minister. I became Prime Minister six weeks before the Gulf War, and the time we really got to know one another was when I flew across to America. It would have been just before Christmas, 1990. We went up to Camp David and spent the weekend together. We spent the whole weekend discussing the war; when it was going to start and who would do what, how we thought it would end, and all matters relating to it. And that's when I really came to know him well.

Riley: And what can you tell us about what you were finding out about the person who was President of the United States at the time?

Major: In terms of personality, it was like looking in the mirror. It was a very easy relationship from the start.

A great deal has been said about the relationship between Margaret and Ronald Reagan, and they were ideologically very close. I'm not so sure how personally close they were. I did hear from quite senior sources that the President wasn't always available to take phone calls. [*laughter*] It was very convenient ideologically, on both sides of the water, for the relationship to be close, but I don't know how close it was personally. Perhaps very close, I have no means of knowing.

But I do know that on a personal level, George Bush and I became very close. Indeed, I was with him ten days ago and we speak often on the phone. I still see a fair bit of him, and that started way back then.

Riley: Your political situations were in some respects very similar, following—

Major: So was our exit. We both had difficult economies to handle, we both went through a lot of pain handling them, and we both lost elections because we had handled them, and passed on better economies to our successors. So there's that similarity as well.

Strong: That first meeting in December, I think it was, during bad weather, you ended up in a car, headed out to Camp David. In his memoir, the book with Brent Scowcroft, the President said that he thought it was quite remarkable that in that very first conversation, when he announced plans for when fighting might begin in Iraq or when commitments needed to be made, that you instantly agreed and didn't ask for time to go back and talk to the Cabinet or to military advisors. Was that a remarkable conversation?

Major: It was a very memorable conversation, because it was so easy. Often, when politicians from different countries, even countries with a similar outlook like Britain and America, meet, there are grating bits of personality and grating bits of policy. There were none, but I didn't go into that discussion without having thought about it.

There was as much outrage here, and in my mind, about the way the Iraqis had invaded Kuwait, as there was in America and in President Bush's mind. We both knew we were heading for a war. I didn't know exactly that the President had in mind to start it on the 16th of January, but I knew it was going to be in the first three weeks of January. I was satisfied in my own mind that it was the right thing to do. I was content that I would be able to carry Parliament and Cabinet with me, so there was no need to fuss and delay by saying, "Well, I'd better go back and check this; I'd better go back and check that." I didn't see any particular need to.

Riley: In your recollection, were there any significant points of contention during that very difficult period leading up to the war?

Major: No, there weren't, neither before the war, during the war, nor on the decision to end the war, which I'll come to in a moment, if I may. I found him very easy to work with. He was very frank and open, and indeed the Americans were, generally.

If I can digress for a moment, one of the meetings I had when I was in America on that visit was between our senior advisors and the top of the American military. I was astonished at the ease with which the two sides, at the military level, exchanged the most intricate information. I had not seen and never did see that sort of relationship between Britain and any other country, or British military and the militaries of any other country. It was an entirely open relationship; it was quite astonishing. I had been in politics for a long time. I'd been Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and had been in the Cabinet for a while. Even so, I was genuinely astonished at the openness and ease of exchange of information between the two militaries at that time. It was of course partly because they knew there was a joint intent and a joint view about Iraq.

The President was never in any doubt about it. Margaret made a very injudicious comment at one stage, "Don't go wobbly, George." It was entirely unjustified. The moment President Bush heard about it, he said, "This shall not stand," if I recollect, and he never moved from that. The concept of him wobbling was absurd. It was convenient to the domestic myth over here, but it wasn't justified. It wasn't how I saw him, and wasn't how I found him.

Riley: Were there other parts of the international coalition-building effort that you played a particularly important role in, working with President Bush?

Major: No. In the building of the coalition, we supported what he did and we intervened here and there, but it was his coalition. And it was the most remarkable coalition of nations that any head of government has assembled since the Second World War. I'm not sure that many American Presidents would have been able to do it.

I think it was his outward-going personality, his knowledge of those countries, and of many of the people who were running them over many years that helped facilitate that. Particularly, perhaps, in the [Persian] Gulf and the Arab world, where we had a number of coalition partners whom we would not have expected and whom I do not think every American President would have been able to bring under the umbrella. The fact was, the Middle East saw no ideological risks in George Bush. They liked and trusted him and it was easy for them to persuade their nations that it was right to go with George Bush. That would not necessarily have been the case

with every President and that's what I mean about his capacity to form the coalition. It was a very remarkable act of diplomacy, too.

He and Jim Baker and Brent Scowcroft were a very formidable team, and there were several things they did that history has underappreciated. I don't think history has appreciated the extent to which, more than anyone immediately before or since, they put pressure on both sides toward an Arab-Israeli settlement. Jim Baker, on George Bush's instructions, was much firmer with both sides than anybody else I have seen. I daresay if George had stayed President for a long time, we'd have got closer to and maybe even would have reached a settlement. That still eludes us today. So I think he's very much underestimated on that front. And, if I can anticipate some of your questions, there are other areas where he was particularly impressive.

He wasn't in office long enough, but privately, he and I certainly discussed the extent to which the international institutions were out of date. He spoke of a new world order. I never talked to him immediately after that speech, about whether he meant the collapse of the Soviet Union, or whether he was thinking more widely of the international financial institutions and the UN. But given the conversations we had over the UN and the IFIs [international financial institutions]—And you won't find those in the papers because they were at Camp David and unrecorded—I think it is quite likely that he was thinking of reform of those institutions as well, as the changing world order following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Riley: Was the Camp David meeting entirely wrapped up in Iraq, or were there other things on the agenda that you talked about?

Major: Well, we talked both formally and informally, so there were lots of other things we talked about. Yes, absolutely. There was no dissent about Iraq; there was a common intention. Margaret had been Prime Minister here when it happened in August. She had had no doubt, I had no doubt, and the Cabinet had no doubt. There was no reservation about putting right what had happened. Not only was it a moral outrage, what Saddam Hussein had done, but there was a very real Western interest in stopping him and reversing what he'd done, before he settled in and decided he might move down the Gulf. So there were no difficult decisions to be made about whether it should be reversed and no real doubt about how to do it.

Colin Powell was quite clear in his mind that we needed overwhelming force before we started the war. Our generals concurred and our air force was absolutely clear that you had to degrade military capability before we put troops in harm's way, so we had the air war for five weeks. The unity of opinion on both sides was striking, unusual but striking. But this was a very clear-cut war compared to others before and perhaps since as well.

Strong: The ease with which you and the Americans were dealing with this issue, on all levels, is widely reported, but at the same time you were dealing with one of the most unreliable leaders on the world scene, Saddam Hussein. Were you concerned that he might have done something in that final several weeks?

Major: There was one thing we were concerned about and it's clearly where you're going. Yes, we were very concerned that he might use chemical weapons.

Strong: I was actually going to ask, were you concerned that he might do a partial withdrawal or a striking diplomatic gesture?

Major: Yes, we were. And we didn't want it, frankly. We weren't prepared to. If he had withdrawn, we couldn't have used military force, but we would have been concerned that that would not have solved the problem. But as it happens, he didn't. He was given the opportunities to do that and he didn't take them, and I can only speak for myself.

Of course, one regretted that we had to use military force, but it was a relief that we were then able to degrade his power, to prevent him being a menace over the next decade or so. And to that extent it was quite a relief that he didn't break up the coalition by different means. There was always the possibility that he would; that was one fear we had. The second, and the only military fear, was that he would use chemical, biological weapons against our troops. That was—

Riley: In theater rather than in London or—

Major: In theater. And our estimates of casualties were a multiple higher than what actually occurred. We thought and feared that the casualties would be infinitely greater than in fact they turned out to be.

Strong: U.S. casualties, I believe, were 10 percent of the lowest estimate provided by the Pentagon.

Major: Yes. I can't remember what the figures of estimates were, but our casualties were minimal.

Riley: Did you draw any conclusions about that?

Major: We did. We drew a conclusion that we greatly overestimated the strength and efficiency of the Republican Guard, and we did. I received lots of reports before the war that the Republican Guard was a very efficient fighting outfit and we could expect stern resistance. Well, the stern resistance was that the Republican Guard zipped to the back of the queue pretty quickly, and so the war was a very different thing.

Riley: Right. But was there a concern that the intelligence was not as good as it could have been, or that the intelligence—

Major: Before the war, during the war, or after? Well, the answer is no, there wasn't. I don't think we had any internal informers misleading us—as there were at a later stage.

Riley: And that's obviously—

Major: What you were aiming at, no doubt.

Riley: Obviously, it's impossible to have a conversation about the first war without looking at it through the lens of the second war.

Major: Yes.

Riley: Were there lessons that you drew from the terrific success of that first war?

Major: Yes, there were, but they were diplomatic, not political. I suppose the first thing to ask is, was it right to stop when we did? President Bush was much criticized for that; so was I, not least by my predecessor and by many people here.

It was absolutely right to stop when we did and I will tell you exactly why, very bluntly. The coalition had been set up for a specific purpose, and that had been to evict Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. It was not to go into Baghdad and drag him out by the heels. If we had done that, we would have had to run the country, and that was not an appealing prospect. So firstly, we operated under a UN mandate that was the justification in law for the action, and the UN mandate was to evict him from Kuwait.

If we had gone beyond the UN mandate, several things would have happened: We would have gone to war to uphold international law, and we would have been charged with breaking it. Secondly, we would have broken up the coalition. There is no way the Arab members of the coalition would have agreed to go into Baghdad. And thirdly, looking further ahead, we would have given our word to our coalition partners about what we were going to do, and we would have broken it. Who would have accepted the word of an American President or a British Prime Minister again? And fourthly, toward the end, we were actually fighting untrained kids. British and American soldiers don't kill untrained, poorly armed kids; they just don't do it. It was one of the American generals who called it a turkey shoot, so we stopped.

I have never had a shred of doubt about whether we should have stopped. George Bush consulted; he took the right decision. The British generals thought it was the right decision at the time; so did all the American generals. I heard of none who dissented at the time and I am utterly confident it was the right decision.

The lesson to be drawn for future wars is, we didn't think Saddam Hussein would survive with the sanctions that we had placed on Iraq, and it's highly likely that he would not have, had the sanctions been upheld by everybody. They were upheld by Britain; they were upheld by America. They became very leaky from other countries and that leakiness, I think, enabled him to survive. He clearly thought that he might; he probably anticipated the leakiness, because of his attack on the Kurds in the north, his attempted genocide of the Kurds prior to the safe havens policy.

Strong: I want to come back to the chemical and biological weapons issue. How much planning was being done about what American and British responses would be should those weapons have been used in the theaters?

Major: There were two elements of response: How would we have responded militarily, and how would we have responded to protect our servicemen. On the latter point, a great deal was done. On the former point, Saddam Hussein was told pretty unmistakably by the Americans that it would be very unwise to go down the route of using those weapons, and in the event, they didn't.

Riley: Was there a contingency plan for what the response would be in the event that he did make use of them?

Major: Well, there's not much you can do in terms of a contingency plan, other than have your soldiers prepared and vaccinated against likely risks, and with the appropriate equipment. Those contingency plans of course were done, yes.

Riley: But there was a threat issued militarily? I'm looking to Bob [Strong], here.

Strong: Well, it was a vague threat. It was delivered through several channels and by multiple meetings.

Major: My recollection is that it was delivered by Jim Baker as well.

Strong: It was, and his was the highest level and the most serious.

Major: That was the response that mattered, but it was delivered through third parties, too. But the essential threat was not explicit. The essential threat was left deliberately unexplicit, that he'd better not use them, not even think of it, and he didn't.

Riley: Do you have an evaluation about whether the threat would have been executed in the event he had made use of his weapons?

Major: Well, he didn't. But I'm sure the answer is, if anybody had used chemical and biological weapons against British troops, there would have been a pretty strong response, and I have absolutely no doubt that America would have taken the same view. These are weapons that you shouldn't use. These are weapons that are beyond the normal expectation in warfare, and so the response would have been pretty fierce, I'm sure. Don't ask me to quantify, because I won't.

Riley: Of course. Your domestic situation during this time was firm and your country was behind you.

Major: I consulted leaders of the opposition; I consulted the churches. I kept senior members of Parliament and the churches in regular contact with what I was doing and thinking, and with the exception of the inevitable minority of people who are always opposed to war for humanitarian reasons, we had overwhelming support.

House of Commons votes were 500 to 100 or something of that sort; the figures are on the record, a bit of a megasize—The Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberal Party were both supportive and regularly briefed. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Chief Rabbi were supportive. And so we had very little difficulty. It was not a political problem in terms of party politics and antiwar sentiment. There were not demonstrations against the war, quite the reverse.

Riley: Let me ask you a question as an outsider, about your own transition period. It seems as though you stepped in as Prime Minister in the middle of an extraordinary set of historical developments, and that there was virtually no ripple or adverse consequence to the process of developing the coalition. I'm wondering if you could comment. As Americans, we're so accustomed to our transitions being very messy.

Major: Well, ours aren't; ours are brutal. [*laughter*] I mean, we have a Prime Minister out one day and another Prime Minister appointed the same day or the next day.

Riley: Right.

Major: That's our system. It's cruel. You move out of Downing Street and your furniture and everything goes the same day; that's it. It's cruel on an individual, but it's an efficient way of running government. And of course, unlike America, we don't change our Civil Service. We bring in special advisors, far too many of them these days as it happens, but we have the Civil Service, which is a continuum.

And the change from Margaret to me was a smaller change than it looked in many ways. We were both in the same Cabinet; we both had generally the same view on foreign affairs. She had, after all, made me Foreign Secretary, before she fell out with Nigel [Lawson] and had to move me to the Treasury. So there wasn't going to be a great deal of difference there, nor indeed in substance as opposed to style. There were other issues upon which we did differ, but not on most international issues.

Riley: And those kinds of international issues would routinely have been, if not a formal part of your portfolio, you would have been fully apprised of what was going on and privy to the internal debates.

Major: If you have a war coming, it costs money. It's quite useful to make sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer knows what's going on, so yes, I did.

Strong: Now did it matter, in your relationship with President Bush, that you really got to know each other in this very rapid and intense version of buildup to the Gulf War, as opposed to a new Prime Minister, new President, in more normal circumstances?

Major: There's a lot of misunderstanding about the relationship between the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. People say, "My god, this is a Tory Prime Minister and a Democratic President," or a Republican and a Labour.

It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. On most issues, there is a broadly common outlook on what happens, and although people overdo the importance of the element of friendship, by and large, it is the hard realities of politics and mutual interest that form what Americans call, but the British don't, the special relationship. There have been occasions where there have been differences between Presidents and Prime Ministers that have become public. There are many more occasions where there have been differences that do not become public, and because the relationship is so strong between the countries, not necessarily the individuals, they're sorted out in private. But basically, it is the communal interest of the two countries that is the basis of the relationship, not whether Joe likes Fred or not. That is very much below the salt in terms of the argument.

Strong: Now, would it have been the case, however, that you're on the phone more often? In the Gulf period.

Major: Yes. It's easier if you have a good relationship. Of course, I was much closer to the Europeans than the President. I was much closer to the Commonwealth countries. I say "I," meaning Britain. Our diplomacy was closer to the Europeans than the President and closer to the Commonwealth, so there were areas that we would reinforce the message.

Strong: And was the President, in his phone conversations with you, asking those questions, "What have you heard most recently from [Helmut] Kohl?"

Major: We did talk, yes. "What do you think is the view? You met [François] Mitterrand yesterday, what was he saying?" Yes, of course.

Strong: On the American side, there would have been someone listening to these conversations, taking notes, and writing memorandums.

Major: I'd be very surprised if there weren't. You probably have half a dozen satellites up there.

Strong: Is there this same practice in—

Major: There's a private secretary who would listen in to the conversations and make notes.

Strong: And are those part of a permanent record that eventually opens?

Major: Part of a permanent record that will open in 50 years' time.

Riley: You mentioned a moment ago that it's not uncommon for there to be a group of smaller issues of divisions between the President and the Prime Minister that would be sorted out. Do you have any recollection about any of those specific cases?

Major: With George Bush?

Riley: Bush, yes.

Major: Well, the safe havens policy originated in Downing Street, and I think it's fair to say America was cautious at first. That wasn't a difference; it was just a question of persuasion. [*laughter*] I went first to the Europeans and attained their agreement, because I happened to be attending a European Council meeting. And then the Commonwealth, while we were discussing it with America, and eventually we were all on the same page. But the sequence started here, so conceivably there could have been a difference there. In practice, there wasn't. I can't recall an occasion.

There was one difference I had with Bill Clinton on Ireland, much later. It was soon resolved.

That [safe havens policy] was potentially a man-trap and we thought at official level it was going to be, actually. At the official and at some areas of the military level, there was a distinct sucking of teeth over safe havens. But I think as soon as the President focused on the acts of potential genocide in Northern Iraq, the sucking of teeth stopped and the agreement started.

Riley: You took the initiative to contact him about this?

Major: Yes.

Riley: Can you tell us about your own thought process as you're developing a pulse?

Major: It was not a difficult thought process. We saw genocide of the Kurds. There were tens of thousands—There were many being killed and tens of thousands at risk. They were not in a position to defend themselves. The only defense they could have would be if we created a safe haven with air cover, and it was as straightforward as that. The original idea for the plan came from the Foreign Office, if I remember rightly.

It was put up as a loose idea, and I discussed it at Downing Street with my Foreign Affairs Advisor, Stephen Wall. We discussed it further flying to a European Union meeting. The book probably says where it was. When we got there, I said, "Well look, plainly, if we want European Union agreement, we're going to have to get Germany and France on board." I spoke privately to Kohl; he agreed. I spoke privately to Mitterrand; he agreed. I spoke privately to [Jacques] Delors, to tell Delors that Mitterrand, Kohl, and I agreed and I wished to raise it at the meeting. I raised it at the meeting of European leaders; Kohl and Mitterrand came in, in support.

That was it, Europe had agreed. The moment Europe agreed, the British Foreign Office was contacting Commonwealth partners, to get their agreement. We raised the matter immediately with America and at the United Nations, and it became agreed policy very swiftly.

Riley: You had indicated earlier that this was almost by accident, because you had a prior meeting with—

Major: Again, it was a routine meeting of the European Union, yes. If you are saying, "Did we go behind President Bush's back to get an agreement and force him into a corner?" the answer is emphatically, we didn't. It just so happened that the morning when it had come up and we discussed it, we were actually flying to a European Union meeting. While we were speaking at the European Union, our officials would have been contacting America—So if I gave you that impression, it's wrong.

Riley: No.

Major: Let me be absolutely explicit. There was absolutely no intention of going behind the President's back and twisting his arm up his back. That was not our intention. What we wanted to do was to get the widest possible agreement.

Riley: You're reading my question as a journalist's question rather than a historian's question. It wasn't that way at all. It was more a question about whether, as a routine matter of course, had the meeting not come up, you would have thought it better or more advisable strategically to go get a common European response to the problem to take to the President of the United States.

Major: No. I probably approached him at the same time, possibly even America first. But would I have approached the Europeans as well? Yes, I would, because if America had said no, I'd have tried to persuade Europe that we should do it on our own. So I wouldn't just have gone to Americans and had them say, "Well, we think we have enough to deal with; we're not going to

do that," and let it drop. That would not be the way I'd have operated. I would have gone to the Europeans as well.

Riley: Let me pose a question about the aftermath of that. Was there, during your—President Bush's time was relatively short after this, by comparison with your own. You've already talked about how the sanctions became leaky. Were there any difficulties in keeping the United States on course with either the sanctions or with the safe havens?

Major: No, I think the United States was pretty good on the sanctions. It was France and other countries that began leaking. At this distance in time, I can't remember precisely who started it or where it went, but they became very porous.

Almost certainly with the Russians, because [Mikhail] Gorbachev had been very opposed to the war anyway and had phoned us up every other day saying, "Don't do it," not least because although Russia owed money to the rest of the world, the Iraqis owed money to Russia. So it certainly would have been porous from there, but in many areas as well. Sanctions work if they're unified; even then they take a while. Once they begin to be breached, it takes so long for them to work that they become almost useless.

Riley: Let me phrase the question slightly differently. One of the things that happened in the United States, by the time you get relatively deep into the Clinton administration, was that there was a fatigue with the situation.

Major: But that was quite a while. It took quite a while to form the Clinton administration, a year as I recall.

Riley: But during the course of the Bush administration, you didn't detect any fatigue with the continuation of the no-fly zone and the requirements of maintaining a military presence?

Major: No, but it was very new then.

Strong: I wanted to follow up your comment earlier about the tendency of many commentators to exaggerate personality relations between heads of state. I'm sure that's sound. But in thinking about President Bush, two comments are made about his administration. One you already alluded to. He came to office unusually qualified for the conduct of foreign policy. We more often have Governors or individuals who haven't had that background.

Major: Yes.

Strong: But the other comment that is made about his administration is that he was able to put together a team of senior advisors that was far more cohesive than the American norm. They knew each other well, they had all been in the Ford administration in one capacity or another, and they worked together as a team differently than, say, other administrations of recent experience. First of all, I'm sure that's something you observed. How much of a difference does it make?

Major: Absolutely huge. There's one other difference you didn't mention. President Bush came to office having been Vice President, utilizing people who had been in office as well. He didn't

bring in a campaign team whose genius was in campaigning and winning elections, with no experience of governing after you have won the election. It is a total difference. He effectively absorbed—it's rather arrogant to put it this way—the British system of having people who were already experienced at what they were doing, to advise and help him.

He was extremely lucky. Of all the people I have met in politics over 30 years, I would put Scowcroft and Baker in the top five, without any shadow of doubt whatever. Here you had this remarkable triumvirate of a President who, to borrow my own phrase of earlier, was more of a citizen of the world than any President in my lifetime, and was unthreatening to the world in his personal philosophy and persona, and he was surrounded by two extremely able and equally experienced colleagues right at the top.

Now, I cannot recall anything like that. You might argue that for [Richard] Nixon and [Henry] Kissinger, but where was the third leg of that stool? It didn't exist. And I can't think of any other administration that has been in that position, and with the President coming to power from power, not from outside, with the best part of the first year made up of bringing in people, selecting people, paying off campaign debts, and all the other things that follow the system. So they were on the road and running from Day One, and with an historical memory and experience. From the point of view of the rest of the world, from the point of view of Britain, because we care very much about what happens in America, it was the best transition we'd seen by a country mile.

Strong: And I think there's actually a third feature in which this President is different from others, and again, more like a British leader. He actually likes civil servants.

Major: Yes.

Strong: He worked with them in the CIA, trusted them.

Major: That is true.

Strong: And he didn't carry the same suspicions.

Major: That was something else we had in common. I didn't regard the Foreign Office as some of my predecessors did, as working for foreigners, not the British. I did regard them as actually working for the British, in collaboration with foreigners.

Strong: And actually, if you look at President Bush's career, he is more like a Prime Minister than a typical American President. He's not a great campaigner. He lost two statewide races in Texas; he lost most of the times he runs for President.

Major: But he's a man dominated by rational thought, not ideology. His whole personality is that way around. He is the sort of guy who ought to be President but not necessarily run the campaign. Fortunately, he had Jim Baker.

Strong: Yes. And to the degree that some of his earlier campaigns dabbled in ideological positions, he was never comfortable with that.

Major: No, never.

Strong: He regretted some of the campaign positions.

Major: Ideology is the curse of the thinking classes. It's much too simplistic. The world is grey—it's not black and white—and you have to take account of that. You have to take account of politics. One former British politician once referred to it as "the art of the possible." Ideologues don't regard it as the art of the possible. They think it's either right or wrong and you do it. It's a very simplistic way to look at the world and can earn very easy cheers at any party conference ever assembled, but it isn't the way the world works. It really isn't. George Bush and his top colleagues realized how the world works.

I still go to the Middle East a great deal. The affection for George Bush out there, 20 years on, is still very real, and it is a personal affection.

Riley: Bringing to the forefront the subtext of a lot of what we've talked about, there was a second Gulf War. I'm listening to you talk about ideologues and people who don't think in shades of grey, and it strikes me that those who were responsible for the second Gulf War were different types of political figures from those who were responsible for the—

Major: You're not drawing me on that. I see where you are going, but you're not drawing me on that. I wasn't the incumbent then; I didn't deal with them. I don't know what they saw, I don't know what conversations they had, and I get pretty angry with people who don't know, expressing views as though they were authority.

Riley: Fair enough.

Major: Anything I say would be worth no more than that of an external observer looking at events. I wasn't in the middle, I didn't see it for myself, so I am not going to get drawn on that.

Riley: Fair enough. Let me then—Let's shift gears because of time constraints. We're remaking the world, or you're a party in remaking the world. The Soviet Union has collapsed; Europe is reconfiguring. We've discussed extensively President Bush's role in the Middle East, but can you talk more from the perspective of your place in Britain, about the role of this American President in helping to devise a post–Cold War order?

Major: Well, I don't think he had long enough to do it properly. The Soviet Union collapsed, '89/'90, and then began to reshape. George Bush lost office in '92. If he had been there for another four years, things might have been different. America might have taken a much earlier interest in what was happening in the Balkans than it did, and maybe a different earlier interest than the one it did take.

I think the IMF [International Monetary Fund] might have looked slightly less harshly at helping Russia in the early [Boris] Yeltsin years. The IMF applied strict economic criteria and asked Yeltsin and Russia to do things in return for their loans in a situation of chaos that no secure Western democracy would have been able to do at a time of peace. He might have looked more critically at that and it might have had a different outcome. Would he have looked to reforming the IFIs? Very possibly.

So I think, and I don't mean this as a criticism of President Clinton, the nature of George Bush is that he would have looked at some problems in a different way, and because he did that and because of the power of the American Presidency, they might have evolved into different things. So I think it is a great shame, at a time when the world was reforming, that the man who knew the world as well as any other politician living was no longer in a position of real authority, to judge and to press what needed to be done.

That was one of the fatalities of history, I'm afraid, and however brilliant he may have been, Bill Clinton couldn't have had the back knowledge and experience that George Bush had. So in terms of the reframing of the world, it was a loss—not that Clinton was there, but that Bush wasn't—if you see what I mean.

Riley: On Germany, the perception I get from some of the materials we've looked at is that you had a different position than your predecessor.

Major: Totally. I thought the German reunification was inevitable. And I thought it had better be done by friendly hands and soon, rather than forced with the West kicking and screaming against it when it inevitably happened. So I was very much in favor of the reunification. I also saw it as opening up whole new prospects to the east, whereas Margaret was bitterly opposed to the unification of Germany, remembering the war better than I did. She had a different impetus to her consideration, but I was very much in favor of it.

Riley: President Bush's position and role in this were more consistent with your own?

Major: I think so, yes. As far as I'm aware they were. I don't think we had any dissent with that. Like me, President Bush had a very good relationship with Helmut Kohl. We both liked him. I don't know if you've ever met Kohl, but his great hero was Winston Churchill. He had a bust of Churchill on his desk. He hated the Nazi past. His reason for subsuming Germany in Europe was to ensure that Germany never misbehaved itself in the future, to bury its history and make it part of a larger decision-making clan. It was a wholly noble and civilized attempt to shape the future in a more peaceable way.

Strong: German unification. That story is one of the ones well told. One of the things we try to accomplish in these interviews—They're not widely read. They tend to be read at Presidential libraries, by scholars in the near-term future and then further on, who are going back and trying to figure out what happened and comparing some of the interview material with documents as they begin to open up. One of the things that will really help that group, not so much now but 10 or 20 years from now, is cues. Are there things that didn't get a lot of press attention in U.S.-British relations that went on during this period that scholars ought to go back and look at a second time, or look at more carefully?

Major: What were the things that happened?

Strong: There's a lot for this period of time.

Major: There was the reunification of Germany; as you say, that's a tale well told. There was the Gulf War. I don't think there's much to add that I haven't said, that I'm in a position to add anyway. There were reflections on the IFIs. There was also my view, which George Bush shared

totally, that the G7 was a pretty useless body. We would both have liked to have gone back to the original concept of the heads of government meeting privately for a couple of days with a private secretary each, nobody else there, rather than the way it developed into a sort of formal structure where shapers had to decide what they would decide long before they even knew they were going to the meeting.

So there were things like that we talked about, but I don't know that that's earth shattering. Certainly, those were things we would have talked about as well. There were the safe havens. I can't honestly think of anything else in George's time. It was only a two-year period that we overlapped.

Though there's one thing nobody has ever mentioned, and I am not myself absolutely sure it is correct, so you will need to check it, but history might wish to know it. At one stage during the Presidential election, George was way ahead. Indeed, there was talk at some stage that the Democrats might not even contest the election, he was so popular after the end of the Iraq War. Even given the fact that Clinton was a political genius, and he was, it was still remarkable that he won.

I have never asked George, but I think one might wonder, for posterity, whether he was ill during the run-up to that campaign. I think he had a thyroid problem, but I've never asked George or Barbara [Bush]. I don't wish to, and I wouldn't wish to comment on it in his lifetime or hers, but I think that might have affected the campaigning. I don't know whether you have come across that, but if you haven't, you might just care to look. That may be wrong. I can't confirm that is the case, but I certainly heard that.

Riley: Were you noticing, in dealing with him, any weariness?

Major: No. No more weariness than you normally get in politicians who are working long hours for a long time. So the answer is no. Did I detect him suddenly fading? No, I didn't. You sometimes see it, but I didn't see it.

Riley: Of course. There were two other issue areas. One was South Africa, and I don't know whether there was anything going on with respect to South Africa.

Major: There wasn't as far as I was concerned, but I don't know to what extent George was involved. I can't remember exactly the dates because I didn't think you would raise that**,** but I was certainly involved with South Africa and [Nelson] Mandela's release. We actually provided security for Mandela after his release, and I spoke to him in jail before he was released.

And then I spent some time—this will be utterly irrelevant to American historians—working with other people, trying to get South Africa back into world cricket, because in the Commonwealth, that is an important piece of glue; it's not just sport. But I don't think I was involved with George in any of that. I don't think we even discussed it, other than in passing.

Riley: Let me ask you this question, because you've mentioned Ireland with respect to Clinton. Was Ireland at all on the agenda with the U.S.?

Major: No. I started the modern peace process in the early '90s, but that was very much with Albert Reynolds in Ireland. It was only after we had signed the Downing Street Declaration in 1993 that America began seriously to be involved, and 95 percent of the time, Bill Clinton was very helpful.

The one occasion when he wasn't was when the White House had given Number Ten a categorical undertaking that they would not let Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein into America to fundraise, and after pressure from Senator [Edward M.] Kennedy and others, they did. It nearly upended much of what we were doing, and it was done after a promise not to do it and without consultation that they had changed their minds. It was plainly pressure abroad and it caused a friction between Bill Clinton and me that lasted a little while. When I saw him and showed him in private what the IRA [Irish Republican Army] were doing, and showed him some of the security files he hadn't seen, he was pretty horrified.

Riley: This is with respect to Adams's involvement with the IRA?

Major: Well, with respect to what the IRA were doing, and Adams's involvement in that was pretty undoubted.

Warburton: What the money was paying for.

Major: Well, partly what the money was paying for, but also what they were doing to individuals in terms of torture. He was pretty shocked. And 95 percent or 99 percent of the time, he couldn't have been more helpful. So it was just that one issue. It's memorable because it broke the trend of placid relations.

Riley: Your book is a wonderful read, the autobiography.

Major: I'm happy you say so.

Riley: It was great fun.

Major: You got through all of it, well done. [*laughter*]

Riley: Well, I haven't, but the pieces of it I haven't finished I fully intend to occupy my time with on the plane back, after I've had this conversation with you. You have a particular strength in your character sketches of individual politicians, many of whom I would not know as an American. I would like to get your more general reflections in this regard, about George Bush as a President and as a political figure.

You open the book by talking about the different characteristics that weigh in people who are in public life. There are some people who are policy advocates; there are some who like the praise; there are some people who love public speaking. You, yourself, began literally on boxes in the park, right? That's not George Bush.

Major: No. The core of George Bush is really quite simple. He's a rational thinker with an inbuilt instinct for public service. It's in the family. You see it in the next generation, too. I don't think you've seen the last of the Bushes; you certainly haven't. If you see the grandchildren

coming along, there are some who will be pretty hard to keep out of public life, because it's been bred in them. And I think it was pretty much bred in George.

He was never a partisan politician. He was a Republican, and it's quite difficult to think he'd have been a Democrat, but he was pretty close to the middle of the aisle. Stretching across it was never a difficult proposition for him, ideologically. He had friends on both sides of the aisle; he still does. He likes people and has a gift for empathy. If you had never met him and he walked in this room now, within a few minutes you would think**:** *Hey, this guy is my friend. I know him; I like him; I share his views*. So he had a natural gift for diplomacy wrapped around by real political power, which is what the Presidency offers. It is a very powerful and rare concoction, and he had that. Envelop it in lots of background experience and a capacity for bringing people together, and you have a great facilitator. And he was a great facilitator.

I never saw much ideology in him; there's a bit. He's much more religious than people realize. He's very committed in that respect. It is a private religion, not a religion he forces upon other people, but there won't be a Sunday he won't be at church; there won't be a meal at which he doesn't say grace. Family is even more fundamental to him than politics, and if he hadn't been a politician, he'd have probably served in the public sphere in some other way. The two core things are a belief in service and a capacity to examine the facts and reach a rational conclusion, unbiased by ideological preference. Those would probably be the notes I would make before I drew a character sketch.

Riley: In your own account of your service—

Major: Actually, let me ask Arabella [Warburton] about it. She knows him pretty much as well as I do.

Riley: Please, speak.

Warburton: Well, I don't—That's a very generous thing to say, but—I just think he's one of the most deep-down, decent people I've ever met in politics.

Major: Not a big field, do you think? [*laughter*]

Warburton: It's a very rough game. But I think he is one of the most thoroughly decent human beings I've ever known.

Major: I should mention, in case you wonder, Arabella was in Downing Street with me most of the time I was there, as an advisor.

Strong: There's an American author doing a book on Bush now that's going to have the title, *The Last Gentleman*.

Major: That's absolutely apt.

Warburton: Yes, absolutely.

Major: I can't help thinking *The First Gentleman* would be better. Who knows?

Strong: Again, part of the observation is that for a politician, there was an unusual amount of reticence to claim credit.

Major: Yes, he wasn't very good at it. We shared that. Neither of us was really good at claiming any credit, though we usually managed to attract the blame.

Strong: All right.

Major: The system organized that, but yes, that's exactly right. He's not good at claiming credit; he's diffident about it. And I'm absolutely sure you've spoken to Scowcroft and Baker on that. You must have.

Riley: Yes.

Strong: That trait turns out to have both positive and negative consequences.

Major: Yes, it does. It has negative consequences in the short term. It had positive consequences in the way in which the affection for him is so evident now, and will be in the future.

Strong: I want to come back to one of your earlier observations, because it's an interesting one, and see if there's more to be said about it. Had he won another term, you said there would have been a real opportunity for progress in the Middle East. That would have been possible partly because of the continuity you mentioned and the able team he had assembled. What else should we connect with that possibility?

Major: [Yitzhak] Rabin. You had Rabin coming on the horizon. And you had a time when Israeli opinion hadn't split in the way it subsequently—Middle opinion in Israel is gone because of events. That makes it much more difficult.

Middle opinion hadn't gone then and there was Rabin, who could have carried Israel into concessions that none of his successors have been able to do. With a mixture of carrot and stick, George Bush and Jim Baker would have got infinitely closer to a Middle East settlement than anybody else has subsequently done, even though Bill Clinton tried very hard.

Riley: Contrasting Bush with your own experience, a good part of your book is written about what you were doing domestically in the UK, and there seemed to be a deep interest on your own part in things that were going on domestically in your country. There's a perception that President Bush was not somebody who, for all of his stature in the world, was terrifically interested in domestic policy. Do you have any observations about that?

Major: Well, his strength was plainly foreign policy, that is absolutely true, but you can't be as human as George Bush is without being concerned about domestic policy. Of course, there's no point in asking me about American domestic policy, because my interaction with George Bush would not have been about domestic policy.

Riley: Sure.

Major: So I would be of no more use to you than any one of 10,000 commentators from afar. The one thing I have learned that you can do as an expolitician when you haven't actually seen something directly, is you can say, "I haven't the faintest idea," and shut up. And so, I'm going to do exactly that. I'll comment on the things where I had interaction with him, what I saw, but on things where I wasn't directly involved, I don't have to have an opinion anymore.

Riley: Very good. Then I'll pose a question about Europe. I'm curious about the perception of what the American role ought to be, if any, on these deeper questions about European integration.

Major: The Americans don't understand Europe; they've never understood Europe.

Riley: We don't and that's what—Please.

Major: I'm sorry if you think I'm being rude. I should say I am one-quarter American, or pretty nearly one-quarter. [*laughter*] My father had dual citizenship and was brought up in America.

Riley: Pittsburgh.

Major: That's correct, yes. No one I have spoken to in America really understands the thought processes of the Europeans. Today they're rather contemptuous of the Europeans, but they don't understand their thought processes.

All they are trying to do in America is to answer the Kissinger question, "Who do I phone?" So they're in favor of European unity because they have someone to phone, but it's actually very different from that; it's much more complex. We could spend hours discussing it. If you were to ask specific questions, I'll answer them, but wind me up on the American relationship with Europe and we may be here for several days. Wind me up on the subject of the interrelationship between nation states in Europe and we'll be here for weeks. So if there's anything specific, do ask.

Riley: Not really, other than it always struck me—I lived in Austria for about three years and developed some sense about the European perspective on this question, but it was never clear to me what the official American policy was on European integration. At a theoretical level, it was always, "Yes, by all means," but particularly if you got to hard cases on things like a European difference—

Major: I can give you a clue. Firstly, the Americans wanted integration because it was easier to deal with a single bloc rather than a series of nation states, most of which are quite tiny. In any size, you only have Britain, Germany, France, and Italy—and Spain I suppose—but the rest are tiddlers really, in terms of American might. So having unity was an extremely good thing.

America was very keen on Britain being much more fully involved in Europe than we ever have been, and the reason was they had a different relationship with Britain, and saw Britain as a close ally who would be able to sway European opinion. So they were very much in favor of Britain taking a full role in Europe. They never really considered the British history and Continental European history as almost, in many ways, polar opposites. We talk of Mars and Venus in

politics, but the distinction between political Mars and political Venus is nothing compared to the thought processes of the Anglo-Saxons and the thought processes of Continental Europeans.

We think differently. Our thought patterns and instincts are completely different. I am relatively pro-European, but the concept of Britain joining a single currency and of the British Parliament sharing too much of its economic or any other policy with the European is absolutely for the birds. We've had a Parliament for 700 years. We're not going to hand over Parliament's opinions to unelected commissioners in Europe, who effectively then suggest policies to occasional meetings of heads of government, to rubber-stamp and impose on our country. It just isn't going to happen [*slaps table*]. Any more than it would happen if America were in alliance with somebody.

And that point, those intricacies, never quite got through. It was a very broad, *Oh, Europe's all rather difficult and funny.* [laughter] *Let's have them together and we can deal with them, and you Brits can exercise some good, solid American and Anglo-Saxon sense on the Europeans*. If only.

Riley: I know. I'm afraid that our time has beyond expired.

We're extremely grateful. The only thing that I don't know is you said there were some things we might talk about that you would want to hold on to, which leads me to believe there may be something a bit more delicate that I didn't get to. Is there anything?

Major: I can't remember. I'll have to look through the text and if there is, I'll let you know.

Riley: Add it then. You've been very generous with your time.

Major: A pleasure.

Riley: Thank you so much.