



Transatlantic Diplomacy after 9/11: The U.S. and Norway
Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Kristin Halvorsen

Minister of Finance, 2005-2009

Minister of Education, 2009-2013

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Date of Interview:

July 10, 2018

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Citation:

Interview with Kristin Halvorsen, interviewed by LaiYee Leong, 10 July 2018. "Transatlantic Diplomacy after 9/11: The U.S. and Norway" Collective Memory Project, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University.

[Begin Transcription]

LEONG: I'm LaiYee Leong with the Center for Presidential History. Today is July 10, 2018. I'm in Oslo, and I'm with Ms. Kristin Halvorsen, former leader of the



Sosialistisk Venstre.¹ Thank you so much for your time. Before we start out, perhaps it would be useful for you to explain to us what SV stands for.

HALVORSEN: Yes. Thank you for inviting me to say something about the Bush presidency, and I'm Kristin Halvorsen. I've been a member of the Norwegian parliament since 1989, and I was the leader of SV from 1997 until 2013. SV was founded in [00:01:00] 1975. It was based on the Socialist People's Party, who was founded back in the beginning of the '60s, because of -- members of the Labor Party were against Norwegian membership in NATO. But in 1975, this new party, the Socialist Left Party of Norway, gathered people from the student movements, from the women's movements, from the peace movements, from the environmental movements. It was the party of the new left. So yeah. You don't have anything compared to that in the US, but in Scandinavian countries, we have sister parties [00:02:00] in Scandinavian countries. SV was against -- or tried to establish a third way between the two superpowers during the Cold War. So we would not like to be allied with the US, nor with the Soviet Union; we would like to be in dialogue with both parties, and that was one of the basis of the SV. But we were often in the forefront in introducing new reforms. For instance, kindergartens for all kids, parental leave, environmental topics, and they were often picked up by the other parties afterwards and then implemented. But not by SV, because we had never been in government before. [00:03:00] We were part of the coalition in 2005.

LEONG: So starting with the Bush presidency at its beginnings, 2000, 2001, what was your impression? You were already leader of SV at the time. What were your impressions of Mr. Bush as a candidate and then as a president. Before 9/11, so tell me the beginnings.

HALVORSEN: Yes, yes. I tried to look back, and I can't see that I have a very clear impression of Bush. Of course I knew he was his father's son, and that it was a

¹ The Socialist Left Party, a democratic socialist political party in Norway.



kind of a family business. I knew he was a religious person and that it was a mixture of politics and religion that is not very familiar to Norwegian politicians. But I didn't [00:04:00] actually have a very clear picture of what kind of policy he was going to implement. We knew a bit more, maybe, about Al Gore, and felt closer to his kind of policy and tradition. But Norway is a small country; we need to have good relations with the US. So I don't think I had a very clear picture of what we could expect from the Bush administration.

LEONG: Did you have any expectations in terms of the post-Cold War policy? Because at that time, the Cold War had ended, there was still some talk about, well, what would the post-Cold War geopolitics look like? Do you remember having thought about -- so, for instance, where SV might stand now that the two superpowers -- now that balance wasn't there anymore?

HALVORSEN: Yeah, [00:05:00] we were very optimistic after the Cold War, and we thought that this was a great opportunity to reach out to the Eastern European countries and try to connect them to the more Western democracies and to have a good relationship with Russia, our close neighbor. And of course the US as a superpower was now -- no one beside. No one over and no one beside. So the power of the US was even stronger than before. And that had to be dealt with with care. So that was, I think our expectations, our hopes, after the Cold War ended. Because a lot of conflicts [00:06:00] in the world had to relate either to the US or to the Soviet Union. For instance, we were involved in a lot of different solidarity work -- for instance, the anti-apartheid work -- and of course that was kind of a conflict and a situation which also was influenced by the Cold War. So we gave opportunities to many countries to find their own way, not having to be dependent on the Soviet Union or the US.

LEONG: Was there any concern, especially given that Norway is a small country, that the US as the only superpower would be acting in a more aggressive or demanding way?



HALVORSEN: Yes, of course, but I think that [00:07:00] we were concerned, but the situation changed very much after the Bush administration, or Bush was elected president. And of course after the 9/11 and the response to the 9/11.

LEONG: So let's talk about 9/11, then. Do you have any recollections of the day itself -- where you were, what you were doing, and what your first thoughts were?

HALVORSEN: Absolutely, absolutely, because this was the day after the election for parliament in Norway, and Stoltenmen [sic] government has lost its power. And I was in the parliament, in my office in the parliament, preparing for a debate in television, NRK, the same evening, together with all the party leaders. We were going to summarize the election and the results and discuss what now. And SV was actually the winner of that [00:08:00] election. We had the best results ever. So I was happy, preparing. And next door was Jan Petersen's office, the leader of the Conservative Party. And he was also preparing. He was also a winner of that election. And then someone knocked at my door and said, "You have to turn on the television; this is really scary and frightening." And I did, and I was of course terrified. At first, we didn't understand what was actually going on, but then we saw that there was a catastrophe. And I had friends staying at Manhattan at the time, so I tried to call them and find out what was going on. And we felt terrified. It was [00:09:00] shocking, and we also felt attacked. We have this kind of love and hate relationship to the US. Also in my party, very many people really love American culture or music, feel very close, even if we are criticizing the politics from the US. But it was very shocking. So I remember, of course, the debate, NRK, was canceled, and Jan Petersen and me, we were just walking around in the corridors shocked, trying to find out what was happening.

LEONG: Did SV put out a statement? Did you put out a statement?

HALVORSEN: I don't think we did. I think that we felt that the government is [00:10:00] talking on behalf of all Norwegians, so that this was not something that



we should cope with as a party because it was like the nation, Norway was and the government was talking on behalf of all of us.

LEONG: Did you have any expectation at the time as to what the US, how the US might respond to that event?

HALVORSEN: Not the first day. Of course we recognized that the US had the right to protect themselves, but what was it to protect the US in those days? It was very hard to know or understand the situation. So I think the first few days, we were just trying to find out what was happening and [00:11:00] what would be the US answer, what would be, for instance, the role of NATO, and would Norway be asked to contribute to some kind of actions? And of course we were looking into the security of Norway. What kind of threat could this event be to Norway? What would be next.

LEONG: Right, right. Now, NATO invoked Article 5 quite quickly. Was that something that SV supported?

HALVORSEN: Yes. I can't remember that we questioned that, Article 5 or the US right to protect, but we were very clear that it should be [00:12:00] a UN mandate for the actions that the US would take, and clear that they shouldn't go alone, US shouldn't go alone, they should be part of the international or the UN handling of this. And we were against the bombing, when it started a month after.

LEONG: This is the bombing of Afghanistan.

HALVORSEN: Yes, the bombing of Afghanistan, because we feared that this could lead to more terror. We argued that you need to have a long time horizon on every kind of response or how you are going to fight against terror. And in fact, bin Laden and [00:13:00] mujahideen, they were recruited and supported by the US when they were combatting the Soviets in Afghanistan. So we feared that we could do something now that in 10 years' or 20 years' time could create even bigger problems, and that there was an imbalance between the war against Afghanistan,



the war against terror in Afghanistan, and the need to take out bin Laden and weaken Taliban.

LEONG: So why do you think the US did what it did? Why do you think the US did not have that type of calculation?

HALVORSEN: Well, I believe that they needed to show their strength and [00:14:00] give a strong answer to the terrible attack, and that is very understandable. That is very understandable, but what is it to be strong in that kind of a situation? That was an important question. And I think that after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and after the end of the Cold War, we forgot everything about Afghanistan. We knew the situation in the country very poorly. I think that the attack against Afghanistan and Taliban, they didn't have the necessary knowledge about the religion, the politics, the situation in the country, how to deal with that. And if you start that kind of answering this terror attack without [00:15:00] actually understanding the country, then you could do more harm than you are aware of. So that was our argument. And then during the autumn -- winter was very close -- and the situation for people in Afghanistan was very serious, and we argued for a stop in the bombing to get aid in, and then we also argued that it would be more to the benefit of fighting terror to increase aid and to improve the situation for people in Afghanistan to prevent recruiting terrorists [00:16:00] instead of the warfare against different areas in Afghanistan.

LEONG: Now, Mr. Bondevik's government expressed very strong support for the invasion of Afghanistan. What did you make of that? How did your party respond to that?

HALVORSEN: We were the only party in opposition to the response of Bondevik. We insisted that if there was going to be military actions, it should be led by the UN and not by the US, and we questioned, is it really possible to "end terror" [gestures quotation marks] by bombing Afghanistan? Yeah. Our main argument



was that we are not [00:17:00] aware of the effects of these actions in the long term. And we were more right than I knew at the time.

LEONG: Was there any concern that because Norway was involved in this invasion, that Norway would also become a target?

HALVORSEN: Yes, and that was also part of the discussion. Not the main argument when I look back on the debates in the parliament, but that was also part of it, and that we could be more vulnerable. But our main concern was that US picked their allies, NATO wasn't involved as NATO at that time, and that it should be UN-led sanctions or actions against Afghanistan.

LEONG: [00:18:00] Why do you think the US decided to go with a coalition of its own making rather than with NATO or the UN?

HALVORSEN: I think they had a very strong feeling that they should be in the lead. The attack was on the US; it was their right to be in the lead of this kind of action.

LEONG: Did that give you an impression of the type of thinking that were driving individuals in the Bush administration, sort of how they went about approaching foreign policy or security policy?

HALVORSEN: Well, I think in the beginning, we thought about this as a reaction to 9/11, and maybe not a new [00:19:00] policy. It was more like it was an extreme situation. It was more connected to 9/11 than -- but of course this changed the whole foreign policy. It was war against terror; it was not war against the nations. The terrorists could be in very many countries. But we saw that picture more clearly after some months, I think.

LEONG: Could you outline that for me? How did the picture become clearer? What happened that made you realize that, oh, this was something quite new?

HALVORSEN: Oh, of course this was when the Bush Doctrine was presented. [00:20:00] It was much clearer, because then it was written on paper and you could very easily see the unilateralism, the preventative war thinking, was changing. But I think that we saw the way that they -- the strategic discussions about how to deal



with Afghanistan. It was not like that they would like some kind of advice or involvement. They would like to be in charge, or the Bush administration felt the right to be in charge of this answering, even if many countries could be threatened by terrorists. [00:21:00]

LEONG: What did you make of it? When you realized that there was this new doctrine, what went through your mind?

HALVORSEN: That was very frightening, I think, because the preventative war, the unilateralism, the thought that this one superpower in the world actually could do as they liked without waiting for -- or of course they. And it was frightening, and when Bush attacked Iraq, they didn't wait for a UN [00:22:00] mandate. And we know now that they actually knew better. They knew that Saddam Hussein didn't have weapons of mass destruction, they knew the evidence was very weak, and it was to change the regime. And that was against international law. So that was actually frightening, I think. And the solidarity that very many people felt after 9/11 and the power that US had at that time and the support that the US had at that time, Bush actually lost all that, or much of that, after the attack on Iraq. [00:23:00]

LEONG: What about some of his senior officials, people like Rumsfeld or Cheney? Did you have any impressions? Do you remember what you thought of them at that time based on what they were saying?

HALVORSEN: I thought of them as aggressive. I thought of them as if they thought that war and military actions were easy reactions, that they actually could solve very complicated conflicts. And the Bondevik government, I think Bondevik, when it comes to the situation in Iraq, he did not support [00:24:00] Bush going alone against Iraq, and that was the government's policy. But Jan Petersen and Kristin Krohn Devold, they [inaudible] different. It was very hard to -- and especially Kristin Krohn Devold. She was actually Rumsfeld's best friend, and we felt very uncomfortable with -- the position and the statement was correct, but



they were not actually standing up against Bush. That was our impression at the time.

LEONG: Yes, in fact, it was widely reported, in the *New York Times*, for instance, that Kristin Krohn Devold was very close to Rumsfeld and offered resources from Norway to support --

HALVORSEN: Yeah.

LEONG: So when that was going on, how did SV react?

HALVORSEN: That was [00:25:00] shocking. It was shocking, and she was very strongly criticized, in public and in parliament. We felt like she was making Norway small, like, just pleasing, trying to please the Bush administration and Rumsfeld all the time. And it was dangerous, and it was against Norwegian interests.

LEONG: Now, others have argued that in fact it supported Norwegian interests because, Norway being small, it had to remain relevant, and that this was one way that Norway could make itself useful to an important ally, to a key ally. How do you respond to that type of perspective?

HALVORSEN: I totally disagree, because I think as a small country, we are more dependent on [00:26:00] international law than big, powerful countries, and that it is in our own interest that we should have a UN-led international order, and it's not a way to make ourselves relevant. And Ambassador Ong, that was very controversial in Norway. That was not to the benefit of the US the way he reacted when the Bondevik government was not supporting the attack against Iraq. He said that that would weaken and have effect on them, would harm the relationship between Norway and the US, and I think we felt that he treated Norway as a US colony [00:27:00] and that he didn't respect our government and that we were an independent nation. It was a big majority in Norway against the attack in Iraq, and he was actually very efficient campaigning [laughs] for these reactions against the war in Iraq.



LEONG: Right. What do you think of the phrase “global war on terror”? Do you think that’s a misstatement, mischaracterization?

HALVORSEN: Yeah, it’s very hard to understand that this kind of warfare [00:28:00] against Iraq, against Afghanistan, should be the most efficient way of fighting terror, because the reactions in very many countries could be the opposite, could lead to recruiting even more terrorists. And that you have this picture of the enemy that divided people and made Muslims more isolated or strange, like strangers in many countries. It was very hard to understand that that would be an efficient – And I’m sorry. And I’m sorry. When we look back, we were more right than I thought at the time, actually. [00:29:00]

LEONG: Now, France, Belgium, and Germany were the loudest in the opposition to the Iraq war. Did you agree with what they were saying, or did you agree in terms of the conclusion but maybe not agree in terms of the arguments they were making? Do you remember?

HALVORSEN: I don’t actually remember every argument, but we felt embarrassed that Norway’s voice, the voice of the Norwegian government, wasn’t as strong as the French and the German voice, because this was a dangerous situation, it’s done a lot of harm, and it was frightening for what’s next and how will this affect the situation and the security for all of us.

LEONG: Besides what you have just mentioned [00:30:00] -- you talked about security for Norway and also of course how it could engender further terrorism -- was there any particular fear about how it might affect the geopolitics of the Middle East or any other repercussions?

HALVORSEN: Yeah, it felt unsecure for all kind of reasons, actually, and the situation in the Middle East was serious and dangerous from before, and of course this was making it even worse to find good solutions in the Middle East and for the Palestinian people. It was really frightening days.



LEONG: Did you also think that it would have [00:31:00] implications for multilateralism, for multilateral organizations?

HALVORSEN: Yes, of course, because they were just ignored, and I think it was -- [laughs] I'm not sure how to put it, but it was big steps back. We had a great opportunity after the Cold War to establish a more multilateral UN-led international order, and the way the Bush administration answered on the 9/11 and especially the war against Iraq, it [00:32:00] ruined that, actually, at the time.

LEONG: Secretary Rumsfeld very famously referred to an "old Europe" and a "new Europe."

HALVORSEN: Yeah, right.

LEONG: What was your reaction when you heard that?

HALVORSEN: It was very unfamiliar, or I'm not sure that is the right way to express it, but it was, it was strange. It was nothing like the way we would like to think about Europe.

[Break in recording]

LEONG: Okay. Do you remember what your thoughts were at that time with the Bush administration's unilateralist approach, not only with the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, but also more generally. So for instance, the Kyoto treaty, that must have been something that mattered to SV.

HALVORSEN: Absolutely, absolutely. I think in addition to the [00:33:00] situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, the lack of climate policy from the Bush administration was a great disappointment to SV, and also to the Norwegian government, I believe. So we were very disappointed that the US wouldn't see the threat from global warming and wouldn't take action and wouldn't have ambitions to be leaders in this field. And of course also surprised that there are people who deny that global warming is based on human activity or a result of human activity. So that was a big disappointment. And that was maybe [00:34:00] the biggest change from Bush to Obama, when it comes to international politics, that they really use



their opportunity to set the agenda and to build coalitions, and that prepared for a very good Paris Agreement.

LEONG: Now, I have heard a lot about how in Norwegian politics, consensus is very important, so even for parties like SV, small parties, there is often effort to build consensus in parliament.

HALVORSEN: Yes, right.

LEONG: Do you feel that in the first Bush term, so when the Bondevik government was in power, do you feel that there was sufficient effort to include SV's views in terms of policy related to the US? [00:35:00]

HALVORSEN: No. I think in that period, we were in opposition, but most of the other parties were -- maybe you could say that the progressive party was always the closest friends of the US, and that the Bondevik government and the Labor Party tried to balance a bit, but we were alone in opposition in those years. And that's not a strange situation when it comes to security, these kind of security issues, because of our history from being against Norwegian membership in NATO and also in other [00:36:00] situations. But then when we were part of the government, in 2005, then the foreign policy was a very challenging part of the negotiations in the new government. Before the election, we had agreed with the Labor Party and the Center Party that Norway should continue membership in the NATO and continue the membership of the agreement, but should not apply for EU membership. So this was kind of a platform before the election and before we started to negotiate after the election. But of course we saw the way that Norway should participate in Afghanistan [00:37:00] and Iraq would be challenging topics in the negotiations with the Labor Party and the Center Party. And we did agree that we should withdraw from the Operation Enduring Freedom but support ISAF, and that we should withdraw the military personnel that we had in Iraq, and that all kind of military participation outside of the NATO area should be based on the clear mandate from the UN. That was part of the platform from the Stoltenberg 2



government and very important to us. But of course it didn't solve the problems, all the discussions that we had that we need to have during [00:38:00] the eight years in the government. Because at that time, we saw that it was not easy to "solve" [gestures quotation marks] the situation in Afghanistan. I actually visited Afghanistan and the Norwegian military base in Kabul before the election in 2005, and we did support the Norwegian participation in ISAF when we were in opposition. But that was also because we were very eager that we should have control of the way that Norwegian troops were used or that the Norwegian military personnel were used, and we wouldn't have that if that was under US control in Operation Enduring Freedom. [00:39:00] And at that time, of course also the discussion had started connected to violation of human rights when it comes to prisoners, and also that the US were using cluster bombs in Afghanistan. So it was very many different topics connected to that. But then, of course, the situation in Afghanistan developed, and the US were more involved in Iraq, and they wanted to broaden the area that ISAF was in charge of. And that made the character of the ISAF forces different, because then ISAF also had to go south, and that was the areas where the Operation Enduring Freedom actually had [00:40:00] a more aggressive way of warfare than was the situation in the north where we were from before. So then we were asked to contribute to the actions in the south of Afghanistan, and that was a big crisis internally in the Norwegian government, because we were very much against that, and the Labor Party and the Center Party was very concerned that this would weaken the Norwegian position in the NATO and affect our relationships with the US. So we had to establish a separate group within the government, with state secretaries from the three different parties, because [00:41:00] this discussion took a lot of time, and they tried to come up with different solutions that could balance the Norwegian contribution to the situation in Afghanistan. Barth Edie was a key person, of course, in that. And we managed to find solutions that we could live with, all the parties. So that meant



that we contributed with special forces in Kabul and stayed on in Maymana but didn't participate in the south.

LEONG: Did that cause any negative reaction from US officials that you were aware of?

HALVORSEN: Not that I am aware of, because to be frank, I think that Gahr Støre and Stoltenberg, [00:42:00] they always tried to convince the US and the rest of the NATO that our, SV's, influence in the government when it comes to foreign politics was very small, even if there was a lot of noise. But in fact we did influence, and I think that if we were not part of the government at that time, that more Norwegians would have died in Afghanistan and that we would actually have been part in more aggressive warfare in Afghanistan. But it was a very high level of conflicts internally in the government and also internally in SV, always kind of discussions, and we also discussed sometimes during these years if we should [00:43:00] -- oh, I'm sorry, I don't know the English word for that. I can come back to that. But I think that it also influenced on the public debate, because when we were in opposition and not part of the government, the discussion about Norwegian participation in Afghanistan and Iraq was part of the public debate. After we were members of the government, Afghanistan was not in the center of the discussion anymore. It was the situation in the government, the conflicts in the government, and the conflicts in SV about these questions that were dominating. So actually, so that was a disadvantage by our membership [00:44:00] in the government, because I think that a lot of Norwegians would really like to be more informed and more part of the discussion, and we couldn't have this kind of discussion in the same way when we were in government and the opposition in the parliament, they were never actually asking, "Is this the right policy in Afghanistan? What is actually going on? How is the situation developing?" They were always asking, "Where is the conflict in the government?" So yeah, that was...



LEONG: Was it difficult? I mean, was it difficult for you to resolve these differences within the government?

HALVORSEN: Yes, it was maybe the most difficult topic that we dealt with during these years.

LEONG: Wow. [00:45:00] Can you outline? I mean, how did you resolve? What was it --

HALVORSEN: Well, I think the main difficulties was that we weren't actually -- well, the situation in Afghanistan in 2005, that was four years after the first attacks against Taliban and against bin Laden had started. And you couldn't say that the results was great, and it was a success. And then after another eight years, or during these eight years, it was very difficult to see that this strategy was the right strategy and that the balance between the military [00:46:00] actions and all the billions spent on the military actions compared to the humanitarian aids, that that was right and if we've chosen another strategy with more building on developmental of Afghanistan, that that could be a better strategy. So it was actually quite hard to believe in the strategy. And we were responsible for sending Norwegian young boys and personnel to Afghanistan. We lost 10 Norwegians in Afghanistan, and I felt that as a terrible responsibility when it was hard to see that it was possible to succeed.

LEONG: Now, earlier, before the interview started, we were talking about WikiLeaks, and [00:47:00] the WikiLeaks later showed that during this period, some of the US diplomats here referred to SV as, to quote, "mildly irresponsible." Were you surprised when you heard all those revelations?

HALVORSEN: Yes, I was surprised. They were quite polite when we met them. But I was surprised that they didn't actually understand more about Norwegian mentality and politics than the reports back home. You know, the way they formulated their reports back home. But we agreed, also, because we did have influence on the Norwegian contribution in Afghanistan and Iraq, and during our



years in government, of course we... So this was good for SV's reputation, and [00:48:00] it was good for [inaudible] as the members of government.

LEONG: So US diplomats never individually approached you or your colleagues in SV to maybe try to change your minds or persuade you otherwise?

HALVORSEN: No, no, no. I wouldn't say so.

LEONG: What are your impressions of Ambassador Whitney, Benson Whitney?

HALVORSEN: Well, I had actually a lot to do with him, because I was minister of finance, and we have these ethical guidelines for the Oil Fund, and we have this ethical Council on Ethic [sic], and they gave advice to the minister of finance to withdraw Walmart from the Oil Fund, from the investments. [00:49:00] And in those cases, Walmart -- all companies, but also Walmart -- had the possibility to reply before the decision is made, and they didn't use that opportunity to reply or to answer to the questions from the Council on Ethics. So I think it was in June 2006, we excluded Walmart from the Oil Fund, and he was very upset. Actually, I don't think that he was fully aware of how the ethical guidelines for the Oil Fund was functioning, and he was making a lot of noise that I don't think was to the benefit of Walmart, [00:50:00] because he thought or he claimed that it was more often that American companies was excluded from the Oil Fund than other companies and that this was something that I decided. But of course, because of the U.S. domination in the world economy, of course the Oil Fund is more involved with American companies than other companies, so there was a lot of discussion connected to that, especially connected to that.

LEONG: So what were your impressions of him as ambassador? Did he do what he was supposed to do?

HALVORSEN: He was an activist; he wasn't an ambassador. No. [laughter] No, it's strange, because Norwegian diplomats are very balanced, [00:51:00] always, but the way that you appoint ambassadors in the US, it's more all kind of people or people close to the president. And that is a bit unfamiliar to our culture when it comes to



ambassadors. Now, he was an activist. He was really fighting for US interests in a very direct way.

LEONG: Did that turn off people, you think, because it was so different?

HALVORSEN: It was kind of refreshing also. But because US politics and Norwegian politics is very different, the culture is very different. I'm sure that in US, they would look at me like I was an extremist. In Norway, I'm of course [00:52:00] a leftist, but not a frightening person. And if you don't understand that kind of mentality or the Scandinavian way of dealing with politics -- when I was a politician for 24 years, I was always friends with people from other parties. It was not like we were enemies; it's more like the way of discussion. So I'm not sure that he fully understood or was aware of the mentality and the Norwegian politics in the Scandinavian countries. So I'm not sure that his way of acting was in favor of the US because it was maybe too direct trying to -- or have strong opinions about [00:53:00] the Norwegian politics. It wasn't felt polite.

LEONG: He also made some critical comments about Mr. Gahr Støre.

HALVORSEN: Yes.

LEONG: He also described him as a loose cannon and being overly activist. What did you think of that?

HALVORSEN: That was not understandable at all. It was very strange.

LEONG: Now, of course Mr. Gahr Støre did take a very active role in seeking to promote dialogue.

HALVORSEN: Yes, absolutely.

LEONG: So with Hamas, for instance, that the US regards as a terrorist organization. Was that something that you supported?

HALVORSEN: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely, and I think Gahr Støre is right, and I think that maybe when we look back, we should be in dialogue with the enemy. [00:54:00] Also Taliban, when they were at their weakest point, and that was before anyone started to discuss that we should have some kind of contact with



them. So I think that if that is a lesson learned from the situation in Afghanistan and in Iraq, it is that we should actually also talk to people that we are -- our enemies. So I think that Gahr Støre is absolutely right and that we should have talked to Hamas and to Taliban before.

LEONG: Going back to Afghanistan, you had said earlier how you felt responsible for the Norwegian lives lost, and of course the Godal Report, the Godal commission a couple years back, suggested that Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan [00:55:00] really hasn't paid off, necessarily -- in terms of aid, not very successful; in terms of creating a civil society, not very successful -- that probably the only major goal achieved was that Norway convinced the US it was a staunch NATO ally. Do you agree with that report?

HALVORSEN: Mm, yes. I think it's an interesting report. I read it much more carefully now, preparing for this interview, than before. It's kind of depressing, really, because it's a lot of resources. It's not that Norwegian personnel didn't make a difference, but not in the big picture. Of course we contributed in a positive way. But I do agree with the conclusions in the report, that [00:56:00] the main goal that was achieved was to show US and the NATO allies that we were a part of their coalition. But of course as a small country, you can't expect that we are going to make a big difference. But I think the main difference that we could make and that also Jonas Gahr Støre emphasized and initiated later was to try to establish this kind of dialogue, because that is a role that Norway has had in many conflicts, because we are not members of the EU, we are a small nation, we don't have any agendas. So that is something that we could define as a clearer role for the Norwegian foreign policy.

LEONG: A few people that I have spoken to have mentioned that in the [00:57:00] second Bush term, so when the Stoltenberg 2 government was in place, that relations between Norway and the US became more distant, for all the reasons that



we have discussed. Do you think that that was to the detriment of Norway's position?

HALVORSEN: No, I don't think so. I think that we had, or that the Norwegian government had a good relationship to the US, a professional relationship to the US. Of course it was disagreements, and that was important, but I don't think that it made any harm to the Norwegian position or to our... [00:58:00] I'm not sure that the US respects a country that is always agreeing and always polite and always maybe too polite. I think that you gain more respect if you are clear and speak your mind.

LEONG: One observation that has been made is that Mr. Stoltenberg never got invited to the White House, and in fact, when I spoke to Mr. Gahr Støre earlier, it was something that he said for him was a low point. Is that something that was important for you as well, from your perspective?

HALVORSEN: I don't think that we paid much attention to that in SV, but I'm sure that he did. So I do understand that he was [00:59:00] concerned about that, but that's the way it had to be.

LEONG: Now, Mr. Gahr Støre is also known, besides his efforts towards dialogue, he was also known for reemphasizing the high north, security in the high north. Was that something that SV agreed with?

HALVORSEN: Absolutely, absolutely. That was also something that we discussed when we were negotiating the platform for the government, that we should pay more attention to the situation in the high north. This is a very important strategic area for Norway, and we are responsible for seven times as much area in the sea than on land, and that means that we should have much more attention [01:00:00] towards our own interests in the north. So that was highly appreciated, that he was very dedicated to lift the awareness of the situation in the north.

LEONG: Did that cause any tensions with the US? Because again, in WikiLeaks, I think, I forget whether it was the ambassador or someone else, mentioned that he



thought that Stoltenberg was too close to Putin, or becoming too close to Putin.

Do you remember hearing any criticisms about that?

HALVORSEN: I can't remember. It was surprising. [laughs] It is surprising if the ambassador reported back about that, because I don't think that Jens Stoltenberg was ever close to Putin.

LEONG: [01:01:00] So how did transatlantic relations change when President Obama took office?

HALVORSEN: I think that he was -- well, he was much more inviting to the European countries. I think maybe the main difference, as I see it now, was connected to climate policy. It was highly appreciated by us that they had these kind of ambitions when it comes to climate issues and global warming. I think that [01:02:00] actually made a big difference, I think, and also the way that they were dealing with China and more oriented to be part of the international politics instead of this unilateral track that was then-Bush Doctrine.

LEONG: How about in terms of Afghanistan and Iraq?

HALVORSEN: Well, of course they couldn't be very big difference in the US foreign policy when it comes to Afghanistan and Iraq, but I felt that they were more open for dealing with these conflicts together with the [01:03:00] rest of the NATO countries and the UN than Bush. But the pattern was, of course, decided back by Bush, so there is no way back from that.

LEONG: Right. So just to round things off, how would you assess the Bush presidency, from your perspective?

HALVORSEN: Hm, yes. I think that he wasted the enormous solidarity and sympathy that came from all of us to the US after the 9/11 by his unilateralism and preventative war, and that the US power in the world could have been much stronger if he had decided [01:04:00] to answer to the terror attacks on 9/11 in a more -- or with involving more, involving UN more and the rest of the world more.



LEONG: Is there anything else you might want to add that maybe we didn't cover for some reason or another?

HALVORSEN: I can't think of anything just now.

LEONG: Okay. All right. Well, in that case, thank you.

HALVORSEN: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]