



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

**Interviewee: Knut Vollebæk**

Foreign Minister, 1997-2000

Ambassador to the U.S., 2001-2007

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**[Begin Transcription]**

LEONG: LaiYee Leong with the SMU Center for Presidential History. Today is April 12, 2018. I am with Ambassador Knut Vollebæk, and we're in Oslo, Norway. Ambassador, let's start with setting the stage. Could you describe what US-Norway relations were like prior to 2000 and 2001?



VOLLEBÆK: I would say we had very good relations, or I would even say excellent relations with the United States at that time. Before 2001, I was foreign minister myself, and Madeleine Albright was the Secretary of State, and we worked very closely together, also because of the chairmanship that Norway, and I personally, had in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. And as you [00:01:00] may recall, in 1999, we had the war in Kosovo, which meant that there was a very direct link and interaction between both Norway as a NATO country with the United States, but also to me personally as chairman of the OSCE<sup>1</sup>, so we had a very close relationship. And I would say that was the fact when I arrived in Washington in March 2001, just after President Bush had taken office.

LEONG: What about the tone of transatlantic relations in general between Europe and the US?

VOLLEBÆK: Well, if you talk about the beginning of the Bush administration, or maybe based on his electoral campaign, there was some concern that President Bush would, to some degree, turn away from Europe. When I was sent, then, to Washington in March 2001, there had been a message from that government that, [00:02:00] please remind President Bush about Norway, Norway's location next to Russia, and Europe's importance, because he had spoken quite a bit about that he would turn more westwards towards China and southwards towards Latin America. So there was a concern that Europe was maybe taken for granted, and there was also a discourse in Washington that Russia didn't matter. Russia was weak, poor. It was not a challenge, neither to Europe nor to the United States.

LEONG: Was there a struggle at that time to reorder the relationships among the powers, the different countries, given that it was a post-Cold War era?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, [00:03:00] to a certain degree I suppose so. At the same time, there was a kind of euphoric attitude still, maybe less than -- as you know, from '89 there was this euphoria that now war is over and we will all cooperate. That didn't

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<sup>1</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe



happen. And I think the Kosovo war and the situation in the Balkans demonstrated for all of us that there were differences between east and west still. But at the same time, I would say that there was engagement on both sides, and there was a feeling that we can benefit more from cooperation. And then with the perception that Russia, because of its fairly weak economy, the migratory moves out of Russia, and the lagging behind, [00:04:00] one would say, in the military capacity, in many ways, after the -- or in connection with the Yeltsin period. I think there was also a feeling that you could co-opt or cooperate more closely with Russia, and I suppose that might also be one of the reasons why President Bush talked about China, because China was more the giant, the alternative, the competitor, to the United States, than Russia, and Europe, for that matter, would be. But you had also, even though the European Union has never been a proper union, it was more a union at that time than what it is today, so it was more -- you could still, even though -- I can't remember it was Madeleine Albright or someone -- no, I think it was somebody else in your administration that said -- if you want to call -- it was Kissinger. "If I want to talk to Europe, who should I call?" And you had still that to a certain degree. But at the same time, there was more of a European [00:05:00] unity, I would say, than what you have today. So I think the multipolar world is much more difficult today. It's much more unruly today than what we had if you go back to 2000, 2001.

LEONG: The concerns that you expressed for Norway, in terms of being a little bit worried that the eye would be taken off Russia and Europe, was that shared by other Western European countries?

VOLLEBÆK: Yeah, I think there was a concern that Europe, to a certain degree, was marginalized, because it was taken for granted, maybe, and that one didn't need Europe. That, of course, changed quickly, because when you came to Afghanistan, whom should you look to, if not Europe? Europe was the only one that could actually help you. So I think it didn't take that long before the Bush



administration changed, or even President Bush himself probably changed his attitude and his [00:06:00] way of thinking, because it was Europe that he went to and called on in order to assist in Afghanistan, and as you may recall, also in 2003 when you had the Iraq war, in spite of the fact that some of us European countries did not go along with that war. It was still Europeans, to a large degree -- your main partners would be European countries. So he did not manage, if that is the word, to marginalize Europe in the way that he thought, but I think the world -- the scenario changed quite quickly, and Europe was there. Partly because of NATO, of course, that you had capabilities, that you had an organizational structure that could work together between the United States and Europe. So maybe the attitude in Washington changed, [00:07:00] and the affair in Europe also diminished.

LEONG: Sure. Now, of course, President Bush came out during his campaign also and talked about Kyoto and his view of the UN, and so on. What did you make of that at the time?

VOLLEBÆK: Well, I think in Europe there's a feeling that multilateralism has not been the strength of the United States ever, in any administration. I remember when we had the Kosovo war, and I was chairing the OSCE, and as you may know, Norway has been very adamant that foreign international operations in a warlike form, you need a UN mandate. And then Madeleine Albright said to me at one stage, "Look, Knut, you are the chairman of the OSCE. I am the secretary of state of the United States of America. I have the might, and [00:08:00] we have the right, so why don't we just go ahead?" And to explain to her to that, well, it doesn't work like that, we need a UN mandate, was difficult. So I think the whole - - I suppose that we have an understanding, or an acceptance, to a certain degree, that the UN, for instance, and multilateral diplomacy is not the first things that any American administration would look at in order to achieve its goals, when for Norway, we need a multilateral framework. We need to have somebody else



together with us in order to move forward in the right direction as we see it. But if you are so powerful, like the United States has been, of course -- as also I remember one word that Mrs. Albright used was, "It's so cumbersome." And of course, it is cumbersome to get the number of governments and states together. [00:09:00] But for us, that's the only way, while for the United States, it's not necessarily that. You have gone alone many, many times. And so it might have been, maybe, more vocal with the Bush administration, but at least personally, I was not very surprised.

LEONG: What about the EU at that time? It has been written that that was also a time when the EU was becoming increasingly assertive as a body. Would you agree?

VOLLEBÆK: To a certain degree, I think so, because it -- also as maybe an alternative to the United States because of the Bush administration. It's very interesting that there were two periods -- as you know, the public in Norway is very much against Norway's membership in the European Union, and I think that the latest polls show that 70 or 80 percent against membership. When we had the referendum, the last one in '94 -- the latest one, maybe I should say. [00:10:00] You never know. But then it was 49-51 or something like that, but now it's a staunch majority against. But in two periods lately, you've had a change in attitude. One was in '98, when the then prime minister Bondevik fell ill, and the oil prices were very low, the interest rate was very high in Norway compared to the EU. Then the support for the European Union went up. And the second time was actually in 2003 when you had the Iraq War. Because we've always felt very close to the United States -- this is our closest ally, and we talk about even, joking, that we could have become a state in the United States. But then also when the polls were made in 2003, there was an increase in support for membership in the European Union. And I think there was this feeling that maybe we are not that close after all. Maybe we are more [00:11:00] European than transatlantic in our attitude. And then, as you said,



there was a stronger EU. The EU was more of an alternative than maybe what it had been earlier, and also what it is seen as today.

LEONG: So when you went to Washington, DC, as ambassador, in the early days of 2001, what was your brief? What was your mission?

VOLLEBÆK: It was definitely to remind the United States that we are here, we are alive and kicking, but we need still your attention. We should be an interesting partner. We are a great oil producer. At that time, the United States were not really even. One of the things I did was to open a harbor for this liquefied gas that should come from [00:12:00] North Cape. I don't think it ever came, but it was a big issue because of the lack of energy resources in the United States. Now you have your -- that has changed dramatically lately. And then our neighborhood to Russia was important. To the north, the Arctic environmental issues. So it was very much to try to remind also the Bush administration of the historical close ties, the contributions we had made over the years, both bilaterally but also then multilaterally in cooperation with the United States, and to be able to strengthen and further improve those links and relations.

LEONG: Now, of course, Norway isn't just any other Nordic country. It [00:13:00] also prides itself as being something of a peace broker.

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, that's true. And I'm not certain that that was so important to the Bush administration. Of course, to the Clinton administration, it was an important part, and we had been -- I personally also had been working very closely with Secretary Albright, not least on many of these issues, being the Middle East, being Sri Lanka. We were even involved with the Philippines. And also we got involved in Haiti, which people laughed about back home, but that was one of the direct questions from Secretary Albright, and since we then thought that we did have some people that could contribute, we saw, of course, that this was something where we also could strengthen our relations to the United States. We could do something good, hopefully, for Haiti, but also [00:14:00] then do something good for Norway in



facilitating assistance that the United States was interested in. And you had some of the same, but my feeling, at least, was that the Bush administration was less interested in that part of Norway. When we became members of the security council in 2000 -- was it one, already, or two? -- so I had then a close cooperation with the state department on some of these issues. But again, then it was more the United States requesting Norway's support for issues that they were handling or raising in the security council. Colombia came up, started to a certain degree at that time, so there was some interest there. But otherwise, [00:15:00] I think that the peace processes as such were not so prevailing in the discussions between us.

LEONG: So if I may bring you, then, to the late summer and early fall of 2001, you had just moved to DC in the summer, is that correct?

VOLLEBÆK: March. First of March.

LEONG: Okay. So you had just been there for a few months, and then 9/11 happened. Could you maybe relate that experience? What was it like when 9/11 happened? What were the days leading up to it, perhaps, and then immediately after?

VOLLEBÆK: Even though I had moved on the first of March to DC, I had been on holiday, and so I came back from my summer holiday in Norway on the 10th of September, evening, afternoon, with my wife. And went to the office during the morning, and turned on the TV, and there was this news about one plane that had crashed into the Twin Towers in New York. So I remember I said it might be quite a serious accident, [00:16:00] so I remember I called over the -- we have a kind of compound in DC where the chancery is next door to the residence. So I called my wife and said, "You should turn on the TV, because there seems to have been a serious airplane accident in New York." And then as we were looking, then, of course, we saw the second plane, and we realized that this was not an ordinary accident. And then later on, you had the plane in the Pentagon, and you had Pennsylvania, and you had rumors about planes coming towards the State



Department. So it developed quite quickly. But I don't think we really grasped or understood, because we had a dinner planned for the evening of the 11th of September, and it took a little while before we understood that this dinner has to be cancelled because of the drama.

LEONG: Was it an official dinner?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, yes. And then of course, we would have done that for a number of reasons, I think, we couldn't have a dinner in that situation, but also for [00:17:00] practical reasons, because the guests couldn't arrive. And what was very spectacular and moving, and left us, I think, with a great impact, was the flood, the streams of people leaving downtown DC, walking up Massachusetts Avenue, where we lived, and because, as you know, the Metro was closed, all public transportation was down. Garages were closed, so people couldn't get to their cars. And so you had some of the clubs down the street from us, the union clubs, the waitress came out with water bottles and sandwiches to give to people to feed them on their way home, so to say. So that was -- you felt that you were in a country where you had a stream of refugees that wanted to get away from some horrendous situation. That was very, very moving. And then after that, it all became quiet. No planes, [00:18:00] no cars, no people. So we felt that we were left alone, almost. In a way, it was a very, very odd feeling, because of the -- after this drama, and all of a sudden, this silence that was not normal for a place like DC. And then, of course, very soon, the day after, came the manifestation of support, nationalism. We are strong, we will stand up against this. And I am not very good with pins, actually. Even as a politician, my short time, I didn't wear pins. But of course, I had to wear pins in Washington at that time. I had a Norwegian and American flag together. Because that was the first things people looked at when we had our meetings in the State Department and other official residences. They looked, does he have a pin or not? Because that was a sign of solidarity. [00:19:00] As you may recall, people were having huge flags on their cars. It was a very strong manifestation of,





we are standing together, we are fighting this, we are overcoming. And so every meeting, or every conference, or everything you said, you had to start with a sentence about solidarity with the people of the United States, and we're in this together, in order to -- So it was a very peculiar situation, in one way. Not surprising, but it was obvious that you were judged on how many words you used, and how strongly and emotionally you expressed your support for the United States in the situation in which it found itself.

LEONG: Where do you think this was coming from, in terms of -- are you talking about high-level officials, as well?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I suppose, well, [00:20:00] partly it's a psychological reaction. We, after the 22nd of July here in Norway, of course, we also looked for support, and help, and solidarity in a situation like this. And that is different, because it was a Norwegian citizen that did this terrible act, while in your case, it was then foreigners, to a certain degree. It came from the outside, which means that you expect even more, I suppose, your friends to be with you in a situation like that. But then, of course, you had to say that you had President Bush and high officials in that administration also -- not exacerbating, necessarily, but at least stressing this. So it was, I suppose, a signal to everyone that you either with us or against us, as the president also said at that time, and [00:21:00] that you had to prove that you were a loyal civil servant also, to a certain degree. And we then as ambassadors, diplomats, wanted to show that we were also good friends, which we were.

LEONG: Right. Was there any trouble communicating this strong feeling back home to Norway?

VOLLEBÆK: I don't think so. The reaction was, maybe, stronger, and then it took a different -- it presented itself in a different way than what it would have done in Norway, to a certain degree, because the language was much tougher, and it was more talk of revenge than we are used to. So that, one had to explain, and we tried



to do that with a cultural flavor. But that was not the most difficult part, I would say, of my tenure [00:22:00] in Washington.

LEONG: We'll get to the difficult part, I hope, in a little bit. But in the meantime, in terms of what you saw going on in the US government, in terms of your communications with US officials, what was your sense of how much they understood the events of 9/11, what it meant, who they ought to go after. What was your sense of American understanding of that event?

VOLLEBÆK: Well, it became as you know very black and white, so it became -- there was a feeling that you had to look for some enemies that were easily identified so that you had a target, so to say. Some of us, then -- it became very clear also that this, [00:23:00] to some of us, and I guess also to the Bush administration, of course, that this was not Muslims, per se, that were the problem here. I remember there is a mosque down the street from the Norwegian embassy, and I think that mosque never had so many diplomats around them than they had those days after 9/11, because all the ambassadors wanted them to come down and talk to the imam, and pay their respect, and say that we know that this is not your fault. And in order to make sure that it wasn't political moves against people that we considered innocent, and that could then exacerbate the cultural and religious rift within the society, which would have been a concern, well, to most of us at that time. [00:24:00] But, of course, when these things happen there is a fear in the public, which I think is normal. Sometimes, then, politicians can reduce that fear by using what I would call the right words and maybe also explain that this is not -- it's serious, but it's not more than what it is, and we have measures that we can take to counter it. But in this case, at least for a time, this was -- as I see it either way, that was not done. It was more used for, I felt, political purposes, that this became -- now you see we need the Republicans. We are strong. We are able to counter this, so there was kind of a -- it became rhetoric that also influenced or inflected the domestic political situation. But then, again, [00:25:00] you had the Democrats



that had to show that they were as good as the Republicans. So, for instance, I think some of the laws that were changed at that time to become more strict against terror, I believe personally some of them were kind of unfortunate. And I remember in some of my reports I said that we have to make sure that we change our laws before we are in the situation of terror and panic, because when we are in the situation of panic and terror we do things that we otherwise wouldn't have done, which is not necessarily rational. So we could be rational in the way that we behave. So I'm not certain that they adhered to my advice, but, anyway, I saw that quite clearly, that also many of the Democrats went much further than I would have done [00:26:00] partly because of genuine fear, I suppose, or interest but also, then, in order to match the Republican rhetoric and attitude.

LEONG: Did the Norwegian government back home -- and I realize that you had an election on September 10<sup>th</sup>, so there was some transition going on back here. In any case, did the Norwegian government back home instruct you to convey anything in particular to the --

VOLLEBÆK: Absolutely. Well, they didn't need to instruct me on that. That was fairly easy, but, no, of course there was a strong, strong message of solidarity and that I was requested to convey and to show and to communicate always. So this was something that we took very seriously, both out of a genuine support and feelings and then, of course, also for political reasons. So it was both.

LEONG: Was there anything more concrete than that, any concrete expression of support?

VOLLEBÆK: Well, I think we -- I don't recall exactly, but I believe [00:27:00] that we said that if there is anything we can help you with we would do that, as you normally do. But I can't remember that there was any kind of request for assistance. What we did, what you had to do, one had to try to do something, then, symbolically sometimes. So remember when Prime Minister Bondevik came to Washington later. We were looking for -- on this first visit as prime minister and after this,



after 9/11, we were looking for what we could do. And then, we had decided to make a little project at a school in Washington, which was in one of the areas that were socially marginalized, you would say, poorer areas. And Mr. Bondevik was and still is a great soccer fan, [00:28:00] so we helped to finance and gave some money to a soccer team. And then, Mr. Bondevik, before he started his official visit, went to the school and played soccer with the boys and girls at the school to kind of show the solidarity and things like that, which of course was not a big economic sacrifice for us, but it was then -- that was not a question at that time, but it was more symbolic, what can we do to show that we are with you and care about you.

LEONG: Right. Now, NATO very quickly invoked Article 5. Although my understanding was that Norway actually -- the representative for Norway at NATO at that time was actually out of the room when the vote was taken.

VOLLEBÆK: That might be the case. That I don't recall, but since you have interviewed a lot of people I suppose that is correct. But there was no [00:29:00] -- I can't recall any negative attitude towards Article 5. The only rumors I heard were that the United States had been more reluctant with Article 5 than anybody else, that this was more of a Canadian initiative, I was told at that time, and that the Americans thought, again, maybe that this would be cumbersome because you have to coordinate things with NATO. But, again, my understanding or at least the message we got from Oslo was that this was -- what I used in my speeches was that this invocation of Article 5 was, again, an act of solidarity, a sign of solidarity. We are all in this together. So at least just after the little bewilderment, maybe, at the beginning it was used to show solidarity.

LEONG: Do you remember having to explain -- because Defense Minister [00:30:00] Godal, at that time, I think, actually had said, "Yes, Article 5 has been invoked, but we're not actually at war yet," to maybe reassure the Norwegian public. And I think Foreign Minister Jagland at that time also had said some statement to that



same effect, and there was a bit of a backlash. I think it was reported on CNN. It was reported on BBC. Do you remember having to explain that?

VOLLEBÆK: No, I don't, but maybe I had. When you remind me, but -- no, I don't really recall that, but it might have been the case.

LEONG: Okay. So it must not have been particularly traumatic, then, if you don't remember.

VOLLEBÆK: No, probably not, or it may have been so traumatic that I have tried to forget it.

LEONG: Did it surprise you that the United States -- it was, after all, the first time that Article 5 was invoked, and that was the whole point of Article 5, precisely for a situation of this nature. Yet the United States decided to put together a [00:31:00] coalition of its own. Did that surprise you?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, it surprised me, and it worried me, but I felt that this was the beginning, to a certain degree, of a new definition of what is an alliance. I remember at one stage, I suppose that was -- I can't remember exactly if that was even after the Iraq War or during the Iraq War, but at one stage I remember I saw President Bush on the TV talking about that he had been called by some allies, and he mentioned Nigeria and India or something like that. It was probably not Iraq then if it was Nigeria and India, so it might have been at some other stage. And then, I thought to myself, "Your allies?" So I think many of us felt that because of this rhetoric of "Either you're with us or against us," those two are with you [00:32:00] more or less unconditionally. That's my allies. And if you raise questions about things, then you're not my ally any longer. So I think we felt, some of us, that the NATO alliance was not as important as we thought it had been and wanted it to be.

LEONG: So did that change your strategy for approaching the administration?

VOLLEBÆK: Not necessarily, but I think there was more of a bilateralization, which, of course, also became even more clear during the Iraq War, because then you had



these different circles of embassies and ambassadors according to your stand on the Iraq War. So it became important, I think, to [00:33:00] work more bilaterally, to show what we could do and find the areas where we then could -- what should I say -- present ourselves as interesting partners for the United States since we could not operate in a group, necessarily, to the same extent that we had done before and also that there were areas, then, where we did disagree and didn't look eye to eye and that we had to find other places. I think Afghanistan helped us a lot. We got a lot of credit for our participation in Afghanistan, to such a degree that I had to calm down the American administration at one point, and that also helped us when we later came to the skirmishes, if you may call it that, with respect to Iraq. [00:34:00]

LEONG: Let's talk more about the war in Afghanistan. So Norway, of course, was right there, supporting the United States in invading Afghanistan from the start. Was it a difficult decision in any way?

VOLLEBÆK: I believe that that wasn't that difficult. You, even then, had, if I recall correctly, the Socialist Leftist Party going along with that, so that wasn't such a difficult decision because you had -- there was an understanding that there was a UN mandate for this. But, of course, what should we do and how to do it was not an easy one, and there was not -- which is being criticized now -- there was not a clear -- what should I say -- perception or presentation that this is a war. We are participating in an international operation [00:35:00] under the leadership of NATO and the United States but under a UN mandate. So it was kind of -- I think now, for instance, many of the soldiers that participated feel that they were not given the acceptance or the recognition they felt they should have been given because the politicians tried to diminish to a certain degree their activities and their actions. And, of course, when we now know what they were involved in, it was, of course, a serious war, a military conflict, a danger to their lives, which then, to a certain degree, people tried to cover up. So there was some discussion in



newspapers and in parliament but not a serious [00:36:00] opposition to it, as far as I can recall.

LEONG: How did the meeting between Mr. Bondevik and President Bush go in October?

VOLLEBÆK: That went very well as far as I recall, and also Bush and Bondevik had a good rapport, which helped us during the whole period, in his prime ministership. And it might -- some people say that their kind of religious attitude helped. It could be, but I think also the way that Mr. Bondevik was very principled and he didn't abuse his confidentiality and his relationship with the president was very helpful. [00:37:00] At that time, the first time when it comes to Afghanistan, of course, the fact that we were willing to help, we had fewer conditions, for instance, than the Germans. The Germans were often presented as the difficult ones because they had so many caveats around their activities that some people in the Bush Administration told me that, "We would rather be without them because it's so complicated to work with all these caveats." And we had less caveats, so that made it interesting and useful, I think, and helpful for the president. And we did contribute and quite significantly, particularly with the Air Force, and that was one of my problems when we had a very so-called successful bombing at one stage. And [00:38:00] I was called down to the State Department, and they said, "We want to send out a press release thanking Norway," and I said, "Please don't." And they looked at me and said, "Why? This is fantastic. We are so grateful, and we want to tell you, the people of Norway, everyone." And I said, "You don't understand us. It's the first time since the Second World War that we have been involved in something like that, and this is difficult for the government because it's -- yeah, this will then show that we are actually in a hot war, not only a kind of conflict, a peace operation." So they didn't send out that press release, but that showed -- well, it showed that we did something that the Americans were very appreciative of, but it also showed the difference in attitude. But in spite of that,



as I said, the way Prime Minister Bondevik handled things [00:39:00] when it came to Iraq where we didn't see eye to eye -- as you may recall, the Germans had a great problem because the chancellor, as President Bush saw it, had abused the conversation, the way they talked, and used the chancellor's negative attitude toward his involvement in Iraq for domestic political purposes. And it was obvious that President Bush felt almost stabbed in the back by that. Prime Minister Bondevik never did that, and he kept a very principled line, the lack of UN mandate. So, of course, the administration didn't like it, and I can talk more about the way they behaved in that respect. But there was a lot of pressure, a lot of threats, a lot of them. So it was a tough time, but at the same [00:40:00] time, then, kind of an acceptance of that, "Okay. We don't like it, but we accept it."

LEONG: But still focusing on Afghanistan before we move on to Iraq, which, of course, is a big topic, was there a sense that -- let me rephrase that. Why was Mr. Bondevik and the cabinet so careful to refer to involvement in Afghanistan as a "conflict" rather than as "war"?

VOLLEBÆK: Yeah, you have to ask Mr. Bondevik about that, and maybe you have done that. He did that all the time. That was when I was in government with him. When we had the Kosovo conflict, he was very careful, and this of course has something to do with the legal consequences of saying that you are at war. If you are at war with somebody, then there are a [00:41:00] number of things that should happen accordingly when it comes to trade, when it comes to international links, relations of different kinds. And he used -- and I suppose they still do -- the legal department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to kind of define things, and I remember I saw some of these notes, documents, papers that were produced there. And I said at some point that, "You can't really use those because this is too legal. People don't understand. If you're shooting, you're shooting. It's a war to ordinary people." But you can maybe phrase it in a -- have some -- what should I say -- explanation as to what kind of war you're talking about. But at that time he was





not willing to do that, and I think he felt that that was too dramatic, and maybe [00:42:00] he didn't like the consequences that could have on him and on Norway. So he became very kind of legalistic -- as I read him, anyway, and understood him -- in his approach and the way that he presented these conflicts and felt that he had the support of the lawyers, the jurists of the legal department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to do that.

LEONG: For all his care in his words, public opinion in Norway went south very fast.

VOLLEBÆK: Yes.

LEONG: Why was that?

VOLLEBÆK: Because, I suppose, they didn't believe it. They felt, as I tried to say, that -- for people, you don't -- maybe they felt it was a kind of cheating, that it was -- what should I say, a [00:43:00] kind of -- that the politicians were not open and honest in this. And that, of course -- so in that respect the attitude changed over time when it came also to Afghanistan, and now, of course, there is a lot of regrets of what we participated in and what we did, even though we are still there somehow. So there is still an interesting, maybe, dichotomy. At that time and also now, we have had NGOs working in Afghanistan, and they were more careful, critical, even though one was very much against the Taliban and the way they treated women and the lack of education for girls and all of that [00:44:00] and the consequences it had on society. But still, they were critical of the Taliban, so they were critical of the Taliban but still at the same time that they were more careful with more military involvement, and I guess they -- and also, then, the fact that you combine to a certain degree the humanitarian assistance and military activities, which they felt were dangerous for their operations as a humanitarian organization. So that kind of shifted after, maybe, the first acceptance that this is a UN mission and we are in an alliance, and then you had a change in attitude after that.



LEONG: For many Americans, Afghanistan used to be seen as the good war, whereas Iraq came to be the bad war.

VOLLEBÆK: Yeah.

LEONG: So sometimes it's surprising for Americans to realize how quickly public opinion in Europe shifted [00:45:00] even with the so-called "good war." What was it?

VOLLEBÆK: Maybe a lack of success, then, and also a lack of understanding that this was a war. The Americans have much more experience with wars that we don't have. I remember when I was a student in the United States in the early '70s, and I wrote on a piece of paper "after the war," and then my professor put in a remark and said, "Which war?" because in Norway if you write "after the war" it's after the Second World War. But, of course, you had had a number of wars after the Second World War. So I think for Europeans they thought this would be a short-term military operation, and then, after that, building up the country with development aid and humanitarian assistance and all of that. So when that changed, it wasn't like that. This was a war in which we are still today. Then, of course, [00:46:00] the attitude changed.

LEONG: Did you get a sense that when the United States went into Afghanistan it was something that was quite well thought out, or did it seem very knee-jerk?

VOLLEBÆK: Well, I don't think we had a sense that it was well thought out but maybe less badly thought out than the Iraq War. I think some of us asked about the exit strategy quite early, but at the same time, partly because of 9/11 and partly because of the background in which we had seen Afghanistan, there was more of an acceptance and maybe fewer questions, whether this was well prepared, than what we had later, then, for instance with Iraq because of the experience we had in Afghanistan. So I think it's wrong to blame only the Americans for not p[00:47:00] reparing and thinking of an exit strategy because very few of us did that, actually, in the proper way because there was this kind of urge, "We have to do something.



This is important. We have to get involved, and we have to stop this,” particularly because of the international threat, but also it was this kind of humanitarian cover or thought that this would also help the local people and the local community.

LEONG: Your defense minister at that time, Kristin Krohn Devold, very famously developed a very good relationship with Secretary Rumsfeld. Did it start around that time, when Afghanistan --

VOLLEBÆK: I would think so. I don’t know what she says herself, but that was my understanding, and that it was Norway’s active participation, strong support, willingness to be available. So I think we were useful, and that, I think, definitely helped Norway [00:48:00] and created a good rapport between the two of them and also, to a certain degree, facilitated my access as ambassador.

LEONG: Did you as ambassador help to brief her in how to approach Rumsfeld?

VOLLEBÆK: Very little, I would say. I think she used -- of course, I wrote reports, and I hope she read them. And we spoke on the phone, but partly she had at that time civil servants who were well known in the United States. We had had a very close intelligence cooperation with the United States for a number of years, and I suppose they have people who can brief her better than I ever could on certain things. And then, I felt -- maybe I felt sometimes that I could have used the embassy more [00:49:00] than what I did, maybe even more if we talk about the Iraq situation. But I suppose she felt that she had people around her that could advise her.

LEONG: President Bush very quickly, of course, adopted the term “Global War on Terror” that came to encompass many things. What was your reaction when you came across that term?

VOLLEBÆK: These kinds of slogans worry me in general, because they encompass a lot, but they don’t say very much about how to do it. And when you talk about a global war on terror, I mean, what is terror, and what is global, and what is war? But at the same time, it catches [00:50:00] in such a way that you create



expectations of being tough, being hard, being resolute, and that, I think, often then -- politicians are then caught in kind of a cobweb where they have to -- they don't get out of this without losing their face or losing their reputation among certain groups that they cater to. So it became -- I don't think it's very helpful because it becomes -- it's more of the slogan than it actually gives you a direction and useful tools for what you're doing.

LEONG: I came across something that said that when Jagland was still in the cabinet -- so this was during the transition period -- he had actually made a statement saying, "Oh, we should be careful to prosecute terrorists as criminals and be careful about taking military action, treating it as a military [00:51:00] operation." Was that something that the Bondevik government adhered to as well, that opinion?

VOLLEBÆK: Probably, I would think, if you asked them -- I don't know -- they would probably say that. But at the same time I think that was not anything that I heard very much stressed in any communication from Oslo, I think partly because the minister of defense and minister of foreign affairs would not probably use those words in the same way as Mr. Jagland did. And then, of course, the atmosphere changed, so you wouldn't like to repeat that too often, I would think.

LEONG: Okay. Okay. So let's now move to Iraq, because, of course, that's a big topic. The White House began to build a case for military action in Iraq as early as 2002. You remember, of course, the big speech about the Axis of Evil. How did the diplomatic community in Washington, DC, of which you were a member [00:52:00] -- how did it react to that?

VOLLEBÆK: We believed this was preparation for war, and it annoyed me tremendously that Oslo didn't believe it. I claim -- maybe I have to verify that, but I claim that I sent numerous reports saying that this is a buildup to something, "They can't stop it." And the foreign minister at that time thought, "No, they're not so stupid. They are wiser. They will not do this." He went public several times saying that we



should not be concerned with the war. And I remember saying to my staff and my colleagues that, "He shouldn't do that. It's obvious, what we are seeing, that this will result in something quite dramatic." So I'm not a prophet in any way, and I'm not very clever, but I think most of the diplomats in Washington would agree that we saw this coming somehow and [00:53:00] tried to warn our respective capitals about it. But it was difficult. I don't know what they did in other capitals -- that I didn't know -- but at least in Oslo it was -- I think it was a lack of willingness, because it would ruin so much if you accepted it. What should you do in preparing? What were the consequences? And at that time, then, with the more difficult attitude towards Afghanistan that had developed over time, I don't think one wanted to accept it and hoped for the best.

LEONG: Why was it difficult to accept?

VOLLEBÆK: Well, because what were the consequences? I think, then, we had to -- what kind of challenges would we meet in relationship to the United States? We were onboard when it came to Afghanistan, but Iraq was much more difficult. There [00:54:00] was no UN mandate. It was obvious there wouldn't be a UN mandate. This political situation, also because of Iraq -- and then people had taken a different attitude than the Labour Party and Norway had used in its propaganda over time and also, later, before the elections, then, in -- what was it -- 2005 when Stoltenberg came to power, they, of course, used this -- at that time, they used that they would not do anything in Iraq whatsoever, so this became very much a domestic political issue. And then, I think it was very difficult to -- they did not want to believe it because then it was too complicated. [00:55:00]

LEONG: So when did the United States approach you or approach anyone in the Norwegian government for the first time with something quite concrete, with an ask?

VOLLEBÆK: As far as I recall, to the embassy it was after the war had started. We were not privy to any kind of -- at least not in Washington. They may have done



something in Oslo that I am not aware of with the minister of defense or the minister of foreign affairs, but we were not -- when the bombing started, this was at least a surprise to me. So I knew it would be coming, but the date I didn't know. So I must admit that I don't recall many approaches before, actually, the war started. But then, of course, afterwards we were [00:56:00] under heavy pressure to participate and move in and support, which -- and that was a time, then, when Mr. Bondevik was quite clear also in a phone conversation with the president that we can't because of the lack of a UN mandate, which they didn't like. And I was under a lot of pressure, then, to do different things, but still we were not marginalized in the same way as, for instance, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, France were. But we were not -- as diplomats, we talked about three circles in Washington at that time. You had a very close one with, at that time, the Netherlands, Denmark, Britain, some of the very close allies, and then you had the Belgians and the French and the Germans and Luxembourg in the very out, and then you [00:57:00] had some of us in between. And I think the fact that we were in between was partly, then, because of Afghanistan -- that saved us to a certain degree -- the fact that Mr. Bondevik did not abuse his disagreement with the president for domestic political reasons, and also Defense Minister Krohn Devold's relationship with Secretary Rumsfeld. No doubt about that, also, that that was helpful, so we were under pressure, but we were not kind of marginalized in the same way. And I remember the Belgian ambassador once came to me and said, "Knut, what are you doing? What's your relationship with the State Department?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well, I've been called down to the State Department, and I've been scolded." And I said, "Well, the same with me," but they did that every day, more or [00:58:00] less. And then, he said, "But when I was leaving, they looked at me and said, 'Why can't you at least behave like the Norwegians?' so tell me what are you doing." And I said, "I can't really tell you much," but I suppose it was the way that it was used domestically and the



arguments that we used that resonated more in the State Department and in the administration than some of the other countries did. But it was a very difficult situation because there were expectations that we could not meet and, of course, that -- they didn't like that very much.

LEONG: I think you have referred to that period as a very dark period.

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, it was, because you felt that -- Norway being very close to the United States, I felt that we had built up very strong, good relationships, and [00:59:00] we had a broad -- our cooperation was quite broad. We had many links to the US, and in that period everything concentrated on Iraq. It was your reaction, your participation, your lack of participation, your involvement in Iraq that was the only thing that people could talk about. And you were measured or judged on that. So it was, I think, a difficult period, and also because, in all fairness, there were certain disagreements in the Norwegian government. And my concern was that at that time the American Ambassador Ong was here, and I saw some of the reporting that he did, which worried me because we also saw that some of the countries that in [01:00:00] the first phase went quite a long way to support the United States but then at the later stage, because of reactions in parliament, for instance, had to retreat and change their attitude -- which of course, then, created a much worse situation for these countries than if you hadn't gone that far at the beginning, because then, of course, the American administration felt cheated and betrayed and couldn't count on people. So my concern was that the American embassy here should report things that I knew would not be politically correct, and it would not be possible -- it could be opinions by some ministers, but they wouldn't have the full support of the government, and they would definitely not have the full support of the parliament. So at some stage I was invited down to the State Department to read through the [01:01:00] American ambassador's reporting to give my judgment, and they smiled and said, "We don't normally call in foreign ambassadors to censor and check on our diplomatic representations reporting, but



we think that could be useful,” which I also took as a very good sign because it showed that -- well, I took it as a sign that they personally had confidence in me, personally, which I of course appreciated, but also that there was, in spite of the differences we had, a desire, a wish to keep good relations and not misjudge Norway’s position in this. So I think that was very helpful for both sides, and I could also, then, report back home on the perception of the American embassy in Oslo in order for the government to make sure that if there were things that should be rectified or corrected they could do that [01:02:00] if need be.

LEONG: That’s quite remarkable. But why did the US State officials even think about -- why would they even suspect that there was a need to better contextualize those reports?

VOLLEBÆK: I don’t know, but maybe it was the general contact with the embassy. We had very close contact with officials in the State Department. I had personal friends, from my time as foreign minister, in the State Department, and I also had developed quite strong and good relations with other officials there. We worked on a number of issues together. So maybe they found it useful and thought that that could be helpful, and maybe they through other sources knew that there were differences in the Norwegian government, I suppose. There is a lot of American intelligence going on in Oslo, [01:03:00] so they could very well know that, and somebody might have told them that, “Maybe you should look at what you get and see if that is at least perceived -- there could be different opinions to what is being presented.”

LEONG: Now, Ambassador Ong caused some controversy, not least because he had made a public speech at some point essentially threatening Norway, saying, “If you don’t join in the war in Iraq there will be consequences, serious consequences.” As a diplomat yourself on the other side, can you put that in context for us? Is that quite shocking, or is that just par for the course?





VOLLEBÆK: I think it's shocking or -- not shocking -- surprising, which is a more diplomatic term, that the ambassador in a country that is supposed to be one of your friends does that. [01:04:00] At the same time, I think one has to put this also in the context that this was a dramatic situation. The United States was looking for friends, support, allies, assistance, and I suppose he, then, thought that, "Well, I'll be helpful. I'm the ambassador. I am paid to do my best." But what was interesting there also was that was one of the times that I also was called down to the State Department and told that this last paragraph was something that the ambassador had added on his own, and it did not come from the State Department. The problem, again, was that at that time there was so much -- what should I say -- lack of confidence or doubt that I had a difficult time actually explaining this to and convincing Oslo that this was true. But I'm [01:05:00] convinced that it is true because they wouldn't have told me otherwise. And the way I was told, it was obvious, because they were as or maybe even more shocked and upset than I was, because they knew what the speech looked like. And all of a sudden this came out, so this was against its instruction. So that was also interesting, and for me it gave me, then, the confidence that I can trust these people. They may not tell me the truth, but what they tell me is the truth. But, again, then I think I was considered a little bit naïve and a little bit too American when I tried to explain to Oslo that, "This is not the State Department's view. It's not the view of the administration. The ambassador has not been instructed to say this," because we [01:06:00] had to go several rounds, and people were a little skeptical of what I was reporting.

LEONG: Do you think that could have been a reflection, also, of the tension between the State Department and the Defense Department, because wasn't Ambassador Ong a close friend of Rumsfeld's?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, maybe. Maybe. No, it could be, but I think also it was a reflection of Ambassador Ong's view, personal view. Maybe he had some instruction from the



Pentagon that I am not aware of, but talking to Ambassador Ong, whom I felt I knew quite well -- and I liked him in many ways, and I think he was a nice man, but, of course, he had very strong views on certain political issues. So I think maybe it was more that he wanted to be helpful to his administration.

LEONG: In your time as ambassador, did you feel like you were getting crossed signals? Of course, you've dealt mostly with the US State Department, but did you [01:07:00] feel that you were getting crossed signals from the State Department and sometimes from Defense just because of the famous conflict between the two departments?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, I did, definitely, but I, as you said, I also dealt mainly with the State Department. But I had friends then that were so open and had so much confidence in me that they told me about the problems they had with the Pentagon, so I was very well aware of many of those conflicts. And I, of course, visited the Pentagon quite regularly and also, then, experienced the differences, because I could have heard something in the State Department, and then I heard something differently in the Pentagon. And also, then, having discussions, for instance, when we were talking about Iraq and the strategy and where, of course, it became very obvious that there was -- well, not only there was [01:08:00] a lack of an exit strategy, but there was -- to me it felt like there was no strategy whatsoever, or there was a strategy, but it was not related to the actual conditions on the ground. And people were not interested in that, and I remember, I think, I came home some afternoon after I had been to the Pentagon, and I was really worried and shocked and afraid of what could be the result of this, because I felt that I was talking to people that didn't care about reality. They had a goal. They had a mission, and that's where we are heading. But then, I knew from my friends in the State Department that they had the same concern that I had, and my hope was then that there would be somebody controlling this at a different level than I could.



LEONG: Now, despite having friends in the State Department, you mentioned earlier that you were regularly called up to be scolded, to use your word.

VOLLEBÆK: Yes. Yes.

LEONG: What does that actually mean?

VOLLEBÆK: [01:09:00] It means that you were told that the State Department is not happy with you, that you don't deliver, that --

LEONG: What did they want?

VOLLEBÆK: They wanted us to do what they told us to do, and this is might, this is a great power, and, of course, they expect people to behave and say, "Aye, aye, sir." So when we didn't do that, they were disappointed but also, then, dismayed and annoyed and irritated. And it became then -- because they were, of course -- one thing was that if you should go along with these activities and action in a broader term, then, at a later stage you might have specific requests for maybe smaller components or participation in certain operations and things like that. And when we also said no to [01:10:00] these things, of course, "What is this? Why can't you do something for us?" so we were not off the hook when we at the outset said no to a broader participation because of the UN mandate, because later on there were a number of other requests that came, which we also then said no to. But then, as you may know, we had some so-called advisors at the headquarter level or in the Capitol at a certain point, which then was something that the Norwegian government accepted and that the Americans, of course, appreciated. And that became, maybe, the problem when Mr. Stoltenberg came to power because he, in the election, campaigned and said that he would withdraw those. This was part of his election [01:11:00] message, and then he also said that he had said that to President Bush in the first conversation, which he probably didn't do.

LEONG: Speaking of phone calls, the phone call that Mr. Bondevik had with President Bush about saying to the president, "No, we will not be going into Iraq with you," was that a phone call that you helped him prepare for?



VOLLEBÆK: Not necessarily, as I recall. Probably I did something, but through the -- of course, we were helpful in setting it up and things like that, but you have a much - - and, yes, he used a sheet of paper where we had these more -- what should I say - - basic positions with the UN mandate and principles, so he probably used that. But you have a much better system with [01:12:00] phone calls than we have because you have a whole apparatus, and people are listening in and taking notes, so there is no doubt what has been said. I suppose that with Mr. Bondevik's phone call at that time, I think, that's true that he had somebody listening in that took notes. But that was, for instance, the problem with Stoltenberg later on, that he didn't have anybody listening in. And it was probably not prepared either because it was more of a call that he received in order to say congratulations. But I don't recall specifically writing a note for the phone call, but I, of course, recall that we were in contact on a daily basis, explaining what's going on to the United States and what can you expect to be asked.

LEONG: Right. And I imagine you were relieved, as was everybody else, when Mr. Bush said, "We're friends."

VOLLEBÆK: Absolutely. Absolutely. No, it was very significant, and it was [01:13:00] -- I've said publicly and I think that Mr. Bondevik, his role was extremely important in kind of -- what should I say -- determining Norway's relationship with the United States at that point in time, because it could have gone wrong, as I see it. Some other members of the government at the time might disagree with me, but I felt from the reporting I heard or received from home that there were differences in the government and that we could have had different messages being sent to the US that we would not have been able to fulfill. And that would have been so detrimental to our relationship. Now, to repeat myself, we were disliked [01:14:00] but respected, and that is much easier than if you lose the respect of somebody.

LEONG: I think what you're suggesting here is, because of the dynamics of the coalition government, that --



VOLLEBÆK: Yes, absolutely. As you know, there were different parties.

LEONG: -- yeah, the defense and --

VOLLEBÆK: Yeah, and my understanding was that the minister of foreign affairs and the minister of defense at that time would have been more accommodating than the prime minister was.

LEONG: Now, despite not supporting the invasion of Iraq, Norway participated in the stabilization efforts that followed later. Why one and not the other? And I think Norway was the only one that perhaps did that.

VOLLEBÆK: That could be, again, because of, well, maybe some internal dynamics in the government, that the prime minister then felt that they had to give something to the biggest party. His party was not the major party, so [01:15:00] that could very well be, without me being privy to that kind of conversation. But also, then we had made very clear that we opposed an invasion and the lack of -- that you could not participate because of the lack of the UN mandate. But when it came down, as I said, we had a number of requests all along and were kind of under constant pressure. So I guess at some point one felt that now we shouldn't annoy the United States anymore if there are other things we can do in order to accommodate some of their requests without then jeopardizing or violating our main principles. But some of the members in government might be able to enlighten you more on that.

LEONG: Did it begin to concern the Norwegian government, and how did you present it to the [01:16:00] US government, as it came to light that there were certain issues associated with torture, human rights violations, of course, Guantanamo? How did you communicate on those issues?

VOLLEBÆK: Of course, it was a great concern. I must admit that I don't know how specific I was in all these communications. I am not -- I couldn't, wouldn't recall, but we did raise the situation in Iraq, Abu Ghraib. Guantanamo was raised both by the embassy but also in conversations with members of the government because



this was, of course, very much a public issue back home in Norway. And then, you always have questions after meetings, [01:17:00] “Did you raise such and such an issue?” So it was absolutely raised, and it was raised as a concern, but I don’t think there was a lot of pushing from the Norwegian side, as far as I recall. It was more - - “concern,” I suppose, is the right word.

LEONG: Did you get the sense that other European countries, that their representatives were pushing harder on those?

VOLLEBÆK: No, not really, not that --

LEONG: So not even France or Germany?

VOLLEBÆK: That could have been, but not to the extent that this was kind of known in the diplomatic community, not that I know.

LEONG: Now, to the extent that Germany and France and Belgium or Luxembourg were in the outer circle that you mentioned earlier, how was that manifested?

VOLLEBÆK: Oh, it was manifested in all kinds of small things, ridiculous things in many ways, but the briefings. There were different sets of briefings according to how friendly you were. So we were [01:18:00] called in and then, the inner circle had their own briefings where they supposedly got much more information than the rest of us had. And then, this middle circle, we were called in with some funny countries, we thought. I wouldn’t name them because no country is funny, but this kind of alliance, so that was a fairly huge group, with countries in other parts of the world. And then, you had the outer circle that also had -- I think they had some briefings and were included in some more general briefings, but sometimes they were not briefed at all. And sometimes, I remember, I was asked by both the German and French ambassadors, at least the German ambassador a couple of times, to brief him on what I had been told in the State Department. Of course, as an ambassador from a small country like Norway to be able to [01:19:00] inform the German ambassador is a little bit odd, but that was the case because he was not included in some of the briefings that I was included in.



LEONG: So how did those ambassadors react? What did they do?

VOLLEBÆK: Of course, they did not like it. At the same time, if you look at Germany and France, even though the United States is a big power they have to relate to Germany and France. You can't kind of exclude those. You can exclude Norway, definitely, and Luxembourg, but how do you react? You may be sad. You may be upset, but you have to accept it. But then, you try to find ways and means to get a hold of this information. If you have friends that are closer to the administration than you, yourself, are, you asked for briefings. Then -- what should I say -- the [01:20:00] diplomatic conversations became even more important than what they normally are because it was a way to get a hold of information, a little bit like you might have had in the Kremlin in the good old days or the bad old days or --

LEONG: Right. You had to read the tea leaves.

VOLLEBÆK: That's right.

LEONG: So when did this dark time pass for you?

VOLLEBÆK: Well, I left in 2007, in August of 2007, after six and a half years, and, of course, it changed at the end. But since we had a new election, I had three governments, so to say, that I represented. Of course, it eased out with the end of Mr. Bondevik's government. I think it became -- things became smoother, so to say, at the end, also, because of some more participation than necessary in Iraq. But then, with the elections and the new [01:21:00] government, which also included the Socialist Leftist Party, of course, I had a new wave of suspicion and skepticism. And the problem was -- and it became difficult because of this infamous phone conversation between Prime Minister Elect Stoltenberg and President Bush where then, at least, the Bush Administration felt that the prime minister didn't tell the truth after the conversation, that he had said something that the president had not heard him say. And that created quite a bit of a problem because this was written down in notes in the National Security Office. And every time -- or at least I felt that every time I wanted to connect the political



leadership in Oslo [01:22:00] with Bush, the president, or with a higher official in the administration, this piece of paper was picked up and put on the table to remind them that there shouldn't be any contact. So this, actually, haunted us as long as I was there, and, as you may know, it also continued after that. So this became a problem, I felt, and maybe to a certain degree a greater problem in the relations than we had had before because this was -- I felt that President Bush, to him politics is, or at least was, something personal, and he wasn't -- what should I say -- of course he was a professional politician, but he wasn't a politician that could look at politics as something impersonal that was something there. One thing is the political issues, [01:23:00] and something else is myself and me and my personal relationship. So I felt that when he -- the good relationship with Mr. Bondevik was that he felt that they -- he trusted him. They could work together. "Yes, we disagree, but we are still friends," and things like that. In this case, then, he felt betrayed. He felt cheated on, and that he didn't forget easily. So that created a very different atmosphere, I felt, in the relationship between the United States and Norway and which, I think, followed us. And it also created, because of the Socialist Leftist Party that came in -- and, of course, they came in then on the NATO platform, and I tried to sell that to the best of my ability. And I was told then by my friends in the administration that, "Well, didn't Norway join NATO [01:24:00] 60 years ago?"

LEONG: Dr. Rice said that to you.

VOLLEBÆK: Yes. "So what's the news?" And I said, "Yes, well, you're right," so there was -- this was very problematic. And also, then, the negative attitude toward Israel that you found particularly in the Socialist Leftist Party and the then-finance minister going out and talking about boycott. And then, not only the Bush Administration but also members of Congress scolded me. I was really told off by representatives. But at the end, after I had been really told how bad I was, they said at the end, "Well, it's not you personally but your country." So this created,





actually, [01:25:00] a broader skepticism against Norway than what we had had in the previous years, I felt.

LEONG: What actual repercussions were there, though? Even though the tone changed, were there real repercussions?

VOLLEBÆK: I don't think we, looking back, can say that there were repercussions as such, I think, but of course this has also to do with psychology. It has to do with visits. It has to do with perception back home. And the fact that the prime minister is not received for years by the president or in the administration, high-level in the administration, creates an image that is also problematic. I don't know. If you look at the trade relations, I'm not certain that that changed much, and, of course, we had very close defense cooperation all the time. I think that went along without [01:26:00] much problem, so it was more the sentiment in Washington and the perception that we also had of not being considered as friends or perceived as friends that I think -- so we didn't have as close cooperation, and we couldn't exchange views on so many matters. I think they would withhold issues from us, and they would not look upon us as partners in the same way, as they did before.

LEONG: Do you get a sense that, both because of that and also with the focus on the Global War on Terror, which was, of course, very much focused on the Middle East, that the eye did, in fact, get taken off Russia, that Norway's importance perhaps wasn't quite as central to the United States as it ought to have been?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes. I guess so, but, again, I think much of the [01:27:00] military cooperation continued because they are different channels. But -- what should I say -- public-wise, I think the perception was that Norway was more alone and not so closely tied together with Washington as it used to be. But, if there had been a conflict, if that would have had consequences for Norway, that I don't believe, actually, because I think we in certain areas were still considered useful.



LEONG: Was there a difference in tone, because as you are aware, of course, much has been written about how the first Bush Administration was quite different from the second Bush Administration because of the change over from Rumsfeld to Gates and Powell to Rice and so on? Did you detect a difference in your position?

VOLLEBÆK: Probably, but not significant, as I recall it. [01:28:00] But maybe, again, since I was there during -- there was some kind of continuity, so you get used to something, and then you feel there is maybe more of a continuity than a dramatic change. Yes, there was a change in tone because of the difference in personalities but not like, I would say, this had a significant effect on -- I don't think the change in the Bush Administration was the thing that changed the relationship with Norway. I think it was more the changes in Norway that created that change.

LEONG: For people who study transatlantic relations, they would look at 2003 as a low point, immense tensions and then gradual improvement and then back to a sort of restabilization, so that by the second term most people would say they're back to, more or less, the [01:29:00] footing before 2003. Is that something you would agree with?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes, I would agree with that except, as I said, that because of the elections in Norway we had our own bilateral problems in explaining the new government's attitude and the new government's positions, and then these kind of personal problems, if you may call it that, between President Bush and Mr. Stoltenberg that actually created a certain tension that we didn't have before.

LEONG: Sure. Sure. Now, I understand -- and this is a little bit surprising, perhaps, for all the intelligent people who work in the US government -- that there was maybe not a full understanding of what the Labour Party represents in this country, that it's very mainstream, that even with the coalition with the SV that it was much more mainstream than one might imagine. Are you surprised by that?

VOLLEBÆK: Yes and no. I mean, yes, to a certain degree, I am because the Labour Party has been kind of the bearing party [01:30:00] in Norway for a long, long time, and it



has been -- that was the party when we joined NATO, and it has been very fundamentally pro-transatlantic, pro-Europe, pro-everything. But at the same time, I think there was a fear or a feeling that because of the Labour Party presenting itself as an alternative to Mr. Bondevik's government and in a coalition with the Socialist Leftist Party, it moved towards the left. So I think there was -- at least, I was told, and this was the presentation I had -- there was a fear that these old principles that the Labour Party had stood for, they were giving them up in order to get power and in order to accommodate more than leftist attitude. And I think some people in Europe and in your administration, then, thought that it was [01:31:00] their task to stem that, to stop it, and that they could maybe do that by also being tough on Norway so that Norway couldn't glide further away from what would be mainstream politics, because we were very often asked about statements made by individual politicians and ministers. And also, again, this question of Israel and the position of Israel in all of this became a big, big issue. And, of course, then also into the Democratic Party, you had a Congressman like Mr. Lantos, Tom Lantos, who was a strong friend of Norway and had been through the peace processes, through the Arctic situation, global warming, all of that. And he was really furious and told me that he had lost any [01:32:00] confidence in Norway and that it was impossible to believe that Norway could behave in such a way. So that was very sad, and it took some time, actually, to -- and I don't know if we ever repaired it entirely before he passed away. So we had close friends that actually reacted very strongly to the new government's attitude on certain issues.

LEONG: Well, I've asked you all the questions I have except for one, just to round it up. This, obviously, was a challenging time for you as an ambassador. Was there a high point?

VOLLEBÆK: There were many high points. I wouldn't have been it without -- even though it's a challenging time and tough time, that's also part of -- that gives you energy, and you feel that you're useful, maybe, and that you can do something. I'm



very much a transatlanticist myself, so to be able in spite of the differences to keep [01:33:00] relations going and maybe even having good relations and contribute to that, I think, is something that I appreciate and I am happy that I could be part of. The highlight might have been in 2005 when we celebrated and commemorated the independence of Norway, 100 years, for a number of reasons, because it energized the Norwegian American community all over the United States. And, as you know, there are about five, six million people that consider themselves Norwegian Americans, and this was something where they got together. We had that year two visits by the king and queen, a luncheon in the White House with the president, so you could strengthen relations, bilateral, personal, and present Norway, and also that we worked, then, with the Swedish embassy to talk about the amicable divorce. [01:34:00] We had a kind of road show, the Swedish ambassador and myself, so it was a way that we could actually both present Norway. We could strengthen the bilateral relations and show how important they are and how long a way back they go. During the Second World War, the Crown Princess Märtha lived in the United States and was very much a link between the US and Norway and created fantastic relations, so we could use that, and then to show that you have two European countries that, in spite of differences, we can work together and we had a peaceful solution to a conflict. So it created a very good atmosphere, I think, where we were visible and could move the relations, use this opportunity to move the relations with the [01:35:00] United States further.

LEONG: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

VOLLEBÆK: You're welcome.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]