



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

Interviewee: Morten Wetland

Ambassador to Germany, 1998-2003
State Secretary, Prime Minister's Office, 2005-2008
Ambassador to the United Nations, 2008-2012

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[Begin Transcription]

LEONG: I'm LaiYee Leong, with the SMU Center for Presidential History, and I'm
with Ambassador Morten Wetland, former Norway's Ambassador to Germany.

WETLAND: Right.



LEONG: Today is the 17th of April, 2018, and we're in Oslo, Norway. Ambassador, could you describe the state of transatlantic relations when you were working with Dr. Brundtland, in the late '80s, early '90s?

WETLAND: Yeah. I started working with Prime Minister Brundtland in '86, when she became prime minister, and I stayed with her for about 10 years. This is the period leading up to, including, the [00:01:00] fall of the Berlin Wall and the splitting up of Eastern Europe, including the early phase of former East Bloc countries, ambitions to join the EU and NATO. I remember being with Prime Minister Brundtland in the Oval Office while Ronald Reagan was president, and also returning with George Bush, the father, the first, 41st. Then came Clinton and Gore, a new generation of American politicians, a little like a Kennedyesque transition again, from sort of the older style, New England nobility. I know they were also from Texas, the Bush family. We knew Al Gore since he had -- from the, well, sometimes [00:02:00] in the second half of the '80s -- come forward on an environmental platform, also running unsuccessfully for the nomination, I think in '88, was it? He, as a person, Al Gore, established contact with Prime Minister Brundtland, for example, when he was still a senator and she gave the commencement address at Harvard in '92. So, we felt that we knew these people, that they were thinking more or less like we did. Of course, Americans don't think like Europeans and by all means, George Bush 41 had been a wonderful person for us. He has a very pleasant demeanor, he was experienced in foreign affairs. He took a keen interest in the people that he met, he couldn't hide that, and we met him several times. [00:03:00] My understanding at the time, my feeling was that things were in fact as good as they could get in a situation where nobody is really in charge of what is happening next, with the fall of the Berlin Wall. And President Bush claiming, "We won the Cold War." So it was a little jingoist. And nobody knew, really, where things were heading, but we all felt that the threat that we always perceived during the Cold War receded. People started talking about a



peace dividend, that we didn't need so much for arms anymore and could spend that on other needs of our societies, leading, for example, to a reduction of the American military footprint in Europe. I remember [00:04:00] Prime Minister Brundtland saying to George Bush, father, that if it was up to her, there was no rush to pull the Americans out of Europe, because you never knew for sure, what would happen next, and we could never rule out, sort of a resurrection of some other repressive or even aggressive leadership in Moscow or the former east. Yeltsin was, in a sense, a little loose cannon. We had known Gorbachev. So there were all these uncertainties, but basically a feeling that you didn't need, sort of much translation or cultural filter in the way that you talked across the Atlantic. At the same time, we had, in Germany, Helmut Kohl, he didn't speak English, or at least he pretended that he didn't [00:05:00] speak English, but we all felt that we could trust Kohl. He was sort of a middle German conservative, but trustworthy. There was President Mitterrand in France and we, as Norwegians, also knew him, since he had been a participant in the European network of leaders, driven, more or less, by Willy Brandt, when he was still alive, and taken over by other leaders, who kept the conversation going. So, it was a good time. Prime Minister Brundtland stepped down from being prime minister in '96, and we still have a couple of more years to go with Bill Clinton and Al Gore. But the sense at the time was, I think, [00:06:00] things were okay across the Atlantic; we had sensible leaders. They would be sometimes forced to do things that they wouldn't like to do, for domestic policy reasons, that happens all the time, but on balance, they wouldn't do anything reckless.

LEONG: Was there a sense that the EU was, under the leadership of Germany and France, were becoming perhaps more assertive? Were they trying to recalibrate the balance of power at that time? And I'm talking about the 1990s.

WETLAND: There was much talk about that, and if you look back, I seem to recall that there were all kinds of initiatives for a more self-assertive European role, most of



the time driven by the French. I personally didn't belong to those who took that seriously. I used to say jokingly to the Americans, that the next time [00:07:00] you invade France, could you please keep it? Since, when you pack up your bags and go home, they just run their country down the drain and can live with 15 percent unemployment and stuff, and now they pretend that they are a force and they're not. And the Germans, given their history, will never, ever, sort of step into the shoes of the Americans in any serious military sense of power projection. So there was much talk. I come from the Foreign Service. I joined there as a young diplomat, when I was 25, and my colleague diplomats, if I can call them that, they were more prone to believing that the European Union would actually assume such a role. I believe what we're seeing now today, we're speaking a couple days after the air strikes on Syria, due to [00:08:00] their use of chemical weapons, and of course the Germans. I was watching German television yesterday. They were discussing whether or not they could defend that in a principle basis. Asking why they didn't participate, they had to say upfront, well, we couldn't cross the Danube, much less the Mediterranean, with the capacities that we have in our military. So the Germans never geared up to take over and to be a force to be reckoned with. So I don't think -- it didn't happen then. Professional diplomats believed that, it was in the foreign policy hype and conversation at the time, and as we see today it never came to anything significant.

LEONG: What about the Americans at that time, did they believe it? Were they preparing themselves for a more assertive Europe?

WETLAND: [00:09:00] Well, we had the Balkans, the conflict there, during a time, and it took a good while, before the American administration committed resources to the wars on the Balkans. Of course, I can fully understand that the Americans saw that as a European problem, and you had the Austrians and the French and so on, who have kind of a history in the Balkans. Norway is among those countries who had never any history in the Balkans, so personally, didn't get so engaged with



that, wasn't close enough to the issue. This was an example of -- It was a little change and challenging for the Americans, because they also had the Rwanda massacre. The good thing about the Americans is that you will have [00:10:00] a lot of elite foreign policy specialists who will argue in favor of intervention in order to save human lives, irrespective of the passport of that people or population. I don't think any other nation has that in their DNA, in a sense, to even consider doing this for purely humanitarian reasons, to save lives, but the Americans have that; not always in the majority, but sufficiently many to keep the discussion alive. Does that in a way?

LEONG: Yeah. So when George Bush, George W. Bush, became president, you probably recall that he had a slightly different take on foreign policy, at least during his campaign. What were the expectations in Europe, for his foreign policy?

WETLAND: Well, in hindsight, now we know what happened, [00:11:00] but during the campaign, we didn't know what was going to happen. George Bush 41 had initiated the Iraq invasion in '91, which it took some time to sort of adjust to the fact that you had that kind of a conflict, and that the Americans were in the market for soliciting support for intervention in a country that most Europeans couldn't find it on the map, and definitely, we're not prepared to fight for it, but the Americans were at the time. So, Bush and James Baker decided to pull out when they felt that they had exhausted the mandate in the UN resolutions at the time. There were, if I recall correctly, several conservatives who believed that they had stopped too early, that they should have taken out Saddam [00:12:00] in Baghdad and really actually taken over the country. Now, Baker and Bush were both wise enough to understand that that would backfire sooner or later, as it proved to happen during George W. So I don't know what we believed actually happened, but the trigger, in fact, in my mind there, was the fact that he lost the popular vote to Gore -- although it followed what I said earlier, that we here of



course were rooting for Gore, because we knew him as a person and also because he came across as a sensible person. I remember I went to the first or second presidential debate at the Kennedy Center in Boston. I was sitting in row 26 and I thought Al Gore won this by a landslide. Then I went back to my hotel room and saw it on television and discovered that upfront, pictures of the two candidates said this is not so clearly a victory for Gore, and it [00:13:00] turned out it was not. Then what happens is he picks these hawkish neocons, who have been sort of in hibernation during the reign in Washington, of Newt Gingrich and the likes. They seemed to have a second shot at Iraq; should we not finish what we left halfway done 10 years earlier? There was talk about Iraq having chemical weapons and the like. A friend of mine was there, a weapons inspector, in Iraq, for the UN. I was in Berlin and he stopped over in Berlin and talked me into the situation on the ground. This was a couple of months before Colin Powell went before the Security Council. My understanding from him was that they had inspected all of [00:14:00] Iraq, almost. They had found a lot of tired, unpaid, and thirsty guardsmen, planes that hadn't been flown, because of failing maintenance, for a good while, rats in abundance, and that's it, and not a trace of any chemical weapons. So we have 9/11 and the sense that America is under attack, and a president that has lost the popular vote. So my feel, when I saw Colin Powell in the Security Council, live, in my office in Berlin, was that this is an absolute low in the career of Colin Powell, to be sent to Security Council, to present these lies to the national community. Then, I had the distinct feeling that all this is driven by an urge to do better in the midterm elections [00:15:00] half a year later, and to get the popular mandate that you didn't really get, following the recounts in Florida and so on, in 2000. That was my feeling, that they're using foreign affairs to mute and pacify the opposition and the Democrats, and to get a mandate from the American people, and they're asking their allies to be part of that performance.



LEONG: I'm going to get back to that in just a few minutes, but first of all, you were ambassador in Berlin from '98 to 2003.

WETLAND: Correct.

LEONG: So, what were the -- so you have described what your thoughts at that time were, in terms of George W. Bush becoming president. What was the talk in Berlin at that time, about George W. Bush becoming president?

WETLAND: George W. Bush never ran on the profile of being an intellectual. [00:16:00] He ran on being a guy that people wouldn't mind having a beer with. So, the latter appeals to Germans. You cannot win an election in Germany unless you sit down and have a beer with the people visibly. So people were in two minds about this guy. One thing that the Americans did well when they occupied, defeated and occupied, Germany after the Second World War, was to demilitarize it, not just in terms of taking out the hardware, but also the mental software. The Germans became detrained from thinking actively in military terms. So, anyone who travels around, trying to drum up sort of sentiments based on [00:17:00] "follow me, we are crusading for some kind of liberty," will have a hard time getting the Germans onboard. I think early on, there was a feeling that well, sometimes you have a president who we would have liked to see someone different, but American institutions are so strong and we've lived with, learned to live with the Americans for a couple of hundred years and we can survive four years of this stuff.

LEONG: Now he had also -- President Bush as a candidate -- had also made some disparaging comments about the UN, about Kyoto of course. Was that something that rattled the Germans in any way?

WETLAND: Oh yes, but [00:18:00] the Germans are so much in two minds that they dislike it, but they also accept much of what the Americans say. They see the Americans as of course, the world's leading power and so on, and actually the Germans don't care that much about Kyoto. The elitists care about the UN and there are probably, percentage-wise, more Germans than Americans who care



about these issues, but not that many. Also, I believe that there wasn't so much active opposition as a sort of "boys will be boys" sentiment about it. Hope they don't do anything that they want to do, [00:19:00] because we have a country to run and we don't need any sort of aggressive action. We're not under threat.

LEONG: That brings us to 9/11. Could you relate the day, 9/11, what is your recollection of the day?

WETLAND: Well, I remember I was in a car in Berlin when I got a call that a plane had crashed into one of the Twin Towers. Of course at the time, we didn't know exactly how and why.

LEONG: You were in Berlin.

WETLAND: Yes. I was in a car and we turned the car around and rolled back to the office, not to the function where I was heading. I was in my office for another six hours, watching CNN live, together with some friends and colleagues there, and also was seeing live, the [00:20:00] crash of the second plane, into the second tower. We had also, news of -- I think -- Sometimes, it might be that I'm mixed up with what I was told later, than what I actually knew and thought at the time, but there was absolutely no doubt that this was a terrorist action, and if anyone doubted that after the first crash, you can't seriously doubt that after the second crash. At that moment, you have to think what next, what next, which is the next target? I'm in a European capital, we're running an embassy, I have a staff. So the first thing I thought of was actually the embassy staff. So I told everyone there, I took care of that in a sense, long before I started thinking about [00:21:00] sort of what are the ramifications for transatlantic relations, or Germany, in a macro perspective.

LEONG: Sure, sure. So you sent them home?

WETLAND: No, I didn't say that, but I said everybody is free to go home and stay home, because I can't ask you to do something that you're afraid of doing; we're not that important, we can postpone things. And that was it.



LEONG: What was the chatter among the diplomatic community when this was happening?

WETLAND: Well, all kinds of speculation. The diplomatic community is a rather sort of very mixed community. Some of them come from countries who don't care so much about what Europeans and Americans care about. I remember we had a Dutch colleague, a Dutch ambassador, who [00:22:00] just had come from serving five, six years in Baghdad, so he was one, we picked his brain early on and suddenly, he became a much more important source of information than we thought he was when he came, because we didn't think that we would have to think about terrorism and all the -- does it have to do with this, that, or the other thing. So we tried to find people who had background knowledge that would help us to interpret what was going on. Then came the initial phase of the retaliation against the hideouts in Afghanistan and nobody objected to that, as far as I can recall. I'm saying this, part of my job, was to observe what the Germans are saying and doing, and to keep Oslo informed about [00:23:00] what the German government and the German people and German parliament, and German parties, and so on, how they would respond. Up here in Norway, the government and the foreign office are pretty much alone, unless they can be told about what is happening, how are other people reacting.

LEONG: Absolutely. So what did you tell them?

WETLAND: Well, they are rather unemotional. When you look at all the atrocities that have happened either on German soil, or as a result of German actions throughout the decades, this is not maybe the biggest thing on earth. Holocaust and stuff is exponentially more important and serious. There were 3,000 people being killed in 9/11. If you look at the statistics since then, [00:24:00] the number of people dying because of terrorism every year, is in the range of 10 to 30 or something, not counting, at the time, Sri Lanka, which you could well see that these are terrorist actions, during times of the conflict there. But if you did not count Sri Lanka,



deaths because of terrorist actions have been rather low in western countries over the years. Things that have happened are spectacular and they sort of create and instill fear in people, but the Germans are in a sense, not the ones who would say that we have to retaliate or strike back or something, that's not for me, a typical German pattern or reaction.

LEONG: Did the Germans have any particular position on Article 5 being invoked?

Were they at the forefront [00:25:00] of that or were they followers?

WETLAND: No, they were not out there. I don't recall really, but I think that Article 5 at the time, was an expression of solidarity more than an expression of an intent to roll out the military. I may be mistaken, or my recollection may fail me, but I don't remember, what are the typical TV debates, like the talking heads, and they do that a lot in Germany, about Article 5, and it seems to be widely accepted that this was such a case. Since that in itself did not automatically mean that you had to get engaged in a military operation, which the Germans, given their history and the way they run it, by [00:26:00] means of using the Constitutional Court to approve everything.

LEONG: When President Bush began to use language like you're either with us or you're against us, how did that go down with the German government, as well as the German people?

WETLAND: I think everybody felt that it was vulgar, untrue, and the way we talked about it in Berlin, whether we haven't changed but the Americans have changed. We are not altering our behavior, but this way of talking is so out of line with common decency among people, that we can't take the guy seriously but we have to live with him. We had to limit somehow, the damage that they can [00:27:00] and will inflict, if the operationalize the notion that you're either with us or against us. I remember also, the American ambassador here in Norway, later in the period, came here in 2005, he used to say that even on occasion. We got so fed up



with him that when he left, the foreign minister didn't even give him the regular courtesy farewell luncheon.

LEONG: You're talking about the American ambassador?

WETLAND: Here in Norway, here.

LEONG: Ambassador Ong?

WETLAND: No. The one after that.

LEONG: Whitney.

WETLAND: Whitney, yeah.

LEONG: So, what was Germany's response to the actual invasion of Afghanistan?

WETLAND: [00:28:00] Well, of course this was -- It was Gerhard Schröder wasn't it?

LEONG: This was October of 2001.

WETLAND: Yeah, so the chancellor was Gerhard Schröder of the Social Democratic Party, who had been close to both Tony Blair and to Bill Clinton. They had been meeting in sort of a circle which they called progressive leaders or something. Gerhard Schröder was a pragmatist, so he managed to establish a majority in Parliament for that, because you need such a vote in Parliament, and managed twice in my term, in my service. He used all his political capital to build a majority in Parliament, based on [00:29:00] only his own parliamentary support group, and not a sort of across the aisle, joint decision, because he would not be seen, for domestic political reasons, to have to be relying on the opposition to establish a mandate to eventually engage in Afghanistan. I believe that there was a majority in Parliament in Germany, a solid majority, that we have to go with the Americans. It's also like Norway, people can't spell Afghanistan, but we understand that being a country like Norway, somehow you have to have a national system of paying taxes. It can be [00:30:00] done in the form of, for example, development assistance, or to taking, shouldering your responsibility in this, that or the other context, and sometimes it means participating also, in action in areas where you don't really have interests on your own, which justify military action, and



Afghanistan was definitely one such for both, for the Germans and for us. No serious national interests were threatened and you really had to work to obtain, and deserve, and sustain popular support for becoming engaged. So I think the pattern or reaction was rather similar in Germany as I see here in Norway. We managed to have a rather solid and high support during that decade in particular, but also the Germans. Not quite as high as in [00:31:00] Norway, for the reasons I mentioned earlier, that has been effectively been demilitarized, but the chancellor himself, sort of put -- he was almost saying the same thing to the German people: Either you're with me or against me, you have to go with me on this. So I would say it went fairly well but it also went well because German activity, military operations, are a little symbolic, it's tokenism. Obviously, the Germans in Afghanistan some years later, 2008 or something, and the Norwegians were complaining that the Germans, they cannot take a jeep ride around the block unless it has been approved [00:32:00] by the superior command in Potsdam, by Berlin. So they would not risk anything and were hopeless to work with. If they were to provide helicopter transport for Norwegian soldiers, the Norwegian soldiers would have to leave their arms somewhere else and not take them, bring them into the helicopter under German control. So the Germans could, in a sense, speak with two tongues. Yes, we have people on the ground there in uniforms and it looks like a military operation, but they're not really doing dirty work, not taking risks.

LEONG: What was the reaction when President Bush, in early 2002, began to talk about the "axis of evil?" Was there a sense of more to come?

WETLAND: Axis of evil depends a [00:33:00] little on who you talk to, but Ronald Reagan had used that phrase hadn't he? Where I personally walked and talked as an ambassador is not among people on the market, sort of the market or anything.

LEONG: But among officials.



WETLAND: Among officials, yes. It was seen as a childish, immature expression, like this speechwriter dug into his archives and found that Ronald Reagan phrase and he recirculated it. And Bush himself, in his immediate surroundings, didn't have the sense of taste that it wasn't maybe the best choice of words, because you look as if you went down to the basement [00:34:00] and found the jacket of Ronald Reagan and you try it on for size, which just happened to be a couple numbers too big for George W. Bush.

LEONG: Maybe you can help Americans understand this better. Why was it so repugnant, or seem to be so vulgar, from the European perspective, apart from it being recycled?

WETLAND: Because the world is never as simple as that, and it's not a helpful instrument in the calibration of foreign policy measures and countermeasures, because one option is just to let them rot, pull out and let them try to run their lives another hundred years or so and see how that goes. We got into it because of some vengeance [00:35:00] attitude on the one side, of the American sort of hawkish right, and George W.'s inclination, tried to rectify the fact that he lost the popular vote in 2000. These things come together, and he needs to have the upper hand and to intimidate the opposition Democrats in the U.S., and he uses us as pet pawns in the chess game, to establish such opposition for domestic political reasons.

LEONG: Were you surprised that the United States decided to build a so-called "coalition of the willing," rather than actually go through NATO?

WETLAND: No. I thought that was a good move. It was an opt-in more than opt out, [00:36:00] but it was an opt-in situation, which could be expanded with time and would give the Americans absolute control. I don't know enough about the status of the NATO command system at the time but of course, probably the Americans would have been of the opinion this is too cumbersome, we can't run the war by



committee, we have to do it our way. People can join in; we need their flags more than their hardware, to make this look as if it's more than us.

LEONG: Do you remember thinking that was simply practical, or do you remember thinking that that was maybe hot-handed? How did German officials, for instance, respond to that?

WETLAND: I don't remember too well, [00:37:00] all the different German reactions.

The Germans felt that they were, in a sense, forced to stand up. They had been behind, had supported the Article 5 decision. They could obviously do something and they did something, but they didn't have their heart in it and they did it only because they felt they had to, sort of paying for political and military protection since 1945.

LEONG: Did Secretary Powell's appearance at the United Nations, which you mentioned earlier, did that affect his standing in Europe?

WETLAND: [00:38:00] Germans in particular, but also Central Europeans, more than Norwegians, would hesitate to say anything which was not sort of laudatory or positive about Colin Powell, I think. So, I tested it out because I felt -- and this happens -- I actually felt, during his statement in the Security Council, that this was an all time low for the U.S., in the history as I knew it, to present this to countries like us, Norway and Germany, and decent people who want to have good relations with the U.S. So I felt personally, that we'd been lied to. I remember the Norwegian Foreign Office, I talked to them of course. At the time, we had a foreign minister from the Conservative Party, [00:39:00] who was surrounded by people I thought at the time, did not have the spine to say something which the foreign minister didn't approve of. The foreign minister was very pro-U.S., but not an intellectual giant, and I asked him then, I asked him also later, "Didn't you know that it was all a big hoax, what they claimed to present on these slides in the Security Council?" And they denied it to this day. They actually believed that everything that Colin Powell said was true. Now, everybody knows that it wasn't,



even Colin Powell. So, it was a low for many in Europe, they took the -- ate, bait and tackle of that show.

LEONG: Why were you so certain that it had no basis, that speech, [00:40:00] compared to say, the people back here?

WETLAND: Well, first of all it was just a hunch by the time he got to slide five or six, to say that this is sort of -- here we have a barrack, and we cannot rule out that there are chemical weapons in that barrack, a little like that. There was no compelling or convincing evidence, and by solid evidence, I mean facts that cannot be refuted in the spur of the moment. They were just pure allegations that a barrack, since it was a barrack, and you could take any house there and say you cannot rule out there are chemical weapons in that house, but you might end up in a sanitorium if you say so. His allegations were not sort of substantiated, and I felt that if you had solid evidence, and you have the whole world watching you live from the Security Council, you better roll out all you have, and [00:41:00] if this is all that you have, you haven't got anything, was my view.

LEONG: How did the German leadership respond to that, do you remember?

WETLAND: I thought they were divided, but they were much too polite and careful not to cause necessary disturbances in the transatlantic relations, to say what I say, and I actually believe there weren't too many at the time, who actually thought that the Americans had the sort of courage to use such a respected person as Colin Powell, to bring that kind of material to the world. I think most Germans actually thought well, it looks like it isn't but since they say so, since they go to the Security Council, since it's Colin Powell that said it, maybe there's something there, I cannot rule it out. There was much of that in it, I think.

LEONG: Were you still [00:42:00] ambassador in Germany when the scandal over Abu Ghraib broke out?

WETLAND: I can't recall so well.



LEONG: I guess what I'm trying to get at is if you recall what the reaction of the German leadership might have been, or even the diplomatic community might have been, as news began to filter out about torture, or certainly about Guantanamo.

WETLAND: The Germans, I think the Germans basically will need another couple of hundred years before they criticize other nations for cruel or inhuman treatment of people. They have occasionally done that, but at the time, there were of course voices, but there was also sort [00:43:00] of a tendency to give them the benefit of the doubt, even if of course you will have all countries with that size, with such splendid institutions for intellectual training, people who will have opinions ranging across the spectrum. It wasn't an uproar. This goes into sort of a pattern, which I think I've said many times during our conversation, that the Germans would take great care not to be too openly critical of anything that comes from the U.S., and they would maybe talk about it when they were not observed, but not so openly.

LEONG: What about other members of the diplomatic community? Do you remember what the chatter might have been? [00:44:00]

WETLAND: There was a sense of what I said also a little earlier, that we haven't changed, they have changed. This could not have happened, in the '90s, for example. In the '90s, basically everybody thought that we were -- everything was getting better, and by the end of that decade and the beginning of 2000, this was not the case anymore. So people were a little cynical in their observations and we never knew how long this would last, because it was driven by an idiosyncratic attitude among several sort of hawkish, right-wing Republicans who, in a sense, also terrorized the [00:45:00] U.S. and the rest of the world with security measures that were of course generating business if you're selling security services, but which also limited people's freedom also in the U.S., and there was a feeling, really



feeling that the U.S. had changed, was changing -- away from sort of the western project of liberty, freedom and individual, and so on.

LEONG: How did the U.S. ambassador to Germany at that time, Daniel Coats, how did he represent the United States, how did he advanced United States policy, how did he explain it?

WETLAND: I don't know if I can explain that, because Dan Coats, in his public appearances, was a rather low-key person. His predecessor, his name was John [00:46:00] Kornblum, was an old State Department official, and made it to the rank of ambassador to Germany. He served many years in Germany, spoke fluent German, knew everybody, knew everything, and knew why the Germans were the way they were. Well, I had the feeling that Coats was sent to Germany because Coats might be a future secretary of state or something, and needed some maybe, international exposure, driven by Republican logic. He was a sort of sympathetic person. He would not give inflammatory speeches. I guess, I cannot know, but I assume that he had private, can I say private, of course official, but closed conversations, with high German officials, including the chancellor and everybody else. But he didn't take that out in the open, and why he should share. He didn't need to share that with me for example, or a [00:47:00] diplomatic corps, or even the press. I thought he was maybe I wondered for a while, because there was such a difference between him and his outgoing predecessor, but in hindsight, I think it turned out good for the U.S., to have him as ambassador at the time, because he didn't come across as sort of vulgar, hawkish, as a person.

LEONG: I had the privilege of a conversation with Ambassador Knut Vollebæk last week, and he was of course the Norway Ambassador to the U.S., and one of the things he said was Germany, over time, and France, came to be seen as sort of adversaries to the Bush administration, and they were kept out of the inner circle, so they were in the outer circle. He [00:48:00] used the idiom of outer circle and



then he said Norway was sort of in the middle circle, and then you had the very tight inner circle.

WETLAND: Yeah, and in there, he included Denmark.

LEONG: That's right.

WETLAND: Right.

LEONG: He said that he was actually asked, by the German ambassador to the U.S., for more information, because he was privy to some briefings that the German ambassador to the U.S. was not. Did you get a sense of any German officials approaching you and saying what do you know, what does Norway know that perhaps we don't?

WETLAND: No, no, no. I never experienced that. No. I may not always have been in the circuit of information between the Norwegian ambassador in Washington and Oslo. Of course, what was cabled came to me in copy most of the time, but I wasn't following Washington on [00:49:00] a day-to-day basis like that, no. Later, as from 2005, when I joined the prime minister's office, we had all these Nordic meetings, and the situation, the international situation was by and large really unchanged. What I saw and was rather shocked to see firsthand, and get to know the Danish prime minister and his immediate advisors. They were lecturing me that Denmark had made the policy decision that they would support anything the U.S. would do, and I said can you repeat that, because it sounded like you said you would support everything the U.S. will do, and they said yes, that's what we'll do. So the Danish prime minister, who went on to become the Secretary General of NATO --

LEONG: Right. This would be Mr. Rasmussen.

WETLAND: He spent weekends at Camp David. [00:50:00] Our guy, Stoltenberg, who is now SG of NATO, never got close to it, and was almost never accepted, because he had introduced his tenure as the prime minister by saying we will not join you



here and we will not go along with you here and there, which I supported fully at the time. So we were definitely not in the inner circle.

LEONG: But that was later on, that was 2005 and afterwards.

WETLAND: Yeah, but we were not alone. I think maybe in the early phases, we had the defense minister, who was a darling of Donald Rumsfeld.

LEONG: Right. How was that seen in Europe?

WETLAND: Well, [00:51:00] I remember meeting her at the Munich conference, I think that must have been 2003. I don't know how the Europeans reacted to her, but she sort of, when you come out of the plane and see Rumsfeld, and you run up to him as if it were your boyfriend who you haven't seen for a month. So, that approach didn't appeal to me. I knew this person and I think she went all too far in currying favor in Washington, by getting more involved than she needed to at the time. Later, I mean, I've been part of decisions that had tremendous infighting, to keep special forces and F-16s and so on, in Afghanistan, and I felt at the [00:52:00] time, that it was sort of the right approach, but I think our foreign policy leadership at the time was a bit immature and they were held back by, at the time, the Norwegian prime minister from this small Christian Democratic Party, who was personally, his party, also more critical about what the U.S. were doing at the time than the government coalition partner, the conservatives, who had the foreign and defense ministers.

LEONG: Did it surprise you that Prime Minister Bondevik decided that Norway would not be part of the invasion of Iraq?

WETLAND: No, no. When I say I knew him a little, it's like because Norway is a country where you can know just about everybody. So when you are Norway's ambassador to Germany and you've been the prime minister for 10 years, you know everybody. [00:53:00] As I knew him, I was not surprised, but I thought it took a great deal of guts sometimes, to stand up against, or by mellowing or toning down the sort of initial reaction of the Conservative Party here. On the other hand, Bondevik had,



in his sort of toolbox, he had the fact that he was, if any, a religious person, and so was George W. Bush, and several of his cabinet members. So, when the Norwegian prime minister arranged a prayer breakfast here, in what is the Norwegian equivalent of Blair House, I was appalled, because I thought they shouldn't, you know? It's us and Iran who had priests at the head of the government, and [00:54:00] that it was unbecoming, and to introduce such a sort of very special American institution as a prayer breakfast, in a Norwegian public building. But it helped the bilateral relations at the time. One, he was more critical and was holding back the foreign and defense ministers, on concrete steps and possible participation and the request for this, that or the other thing. On the other hand, he was seen as a soul brother by George W.

LEONG: Was there a sense that with the quarrel, if one might say so, between the United States, and against France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg maybe, that NATO was fracturing in some ways? Was there any real threat to NATO unity? [00:55:00]

WETLAND: No, I don't think so. I think all NATO countries felt that we have to find a way which keeps NATO intact. We may have our differences. We will try to, not to have more differences than we have to have, but at the end of the day, we will do things here which we'd do for the sole reason that NATO membership and the benefit that we derive from it in peacetime, and in the future, are bigger than the immediate sort of burden that we have to carry for a while, in the sense -- For the purpose of NATO solidarity, we have to do things that we never would have done, had it not been for the requirement of solidarity among members.

LEONG: Did it surprise you though, as a Norwegian, to for instance, [00:56:00] hear at that time, the French Foreign Minister, Villepin, speaking so stridently against the United States, because of Iraq? Did it surprise you?

WETLAND: Yeah. Yeah, I remember him, but he was a type, and it would not have worked if a German foreign minister had done that, but in my personal view,



France has never been taken that serious internationally, as if the UK or the Germans would have said the same thing as Villepin.

LEONG: Could you elaborate? Why would they not be taken so seriously?

WETLAND: Well, France loses all wars, while Germany has lost a couple of wars too, but they almost won. France [00:57:00] is sort of an operetta country militarily. They would like to be sort of a standalone global force in a sense, and they have significant interests around the world, in places where Germany doesn't have anything, like take the Pacific for example. The French have naval bases there, Germany doesn't have that, but still, they are not perceived as, yes, they can use big words, but they can never get anything done based on their own military capability. This is my very personal. I haven't seen it that clearly in print, but it's sort of what I believe is close to, if I have to say it, a couple sentences, I would put it that way.

LEONG: Sure. Now, there was also a sense that Schröder sort of fell out with the Bush administration, because he was perceived to be [00:58:00] using anti-U.S. sentiments for his own domestic political benefit. Would you agree with that?

WETLAND: I agree that he did that, yes. He was a shrewd operator and in Germany, you always have elections, due to the federal structure, and the fact that they don't have federal statewide elections on the same date. The reason why they don't have that is that it will effectively prevent a new Hitler from coming to power of course, so they cut it up. But it means that you're always campaigning and yes, sure they did occasionally do that. I must remind you that George W., in my view, did it for domestic political reasons and so on, and this will of course irritate partners at times.

LEONG: So moving on then. You left your ambassador position in 2003 [00:59:00] and then, when the second Stoltenberg government came into power, you then became state secretary in the prime minister's office. So at that time then, what



were your thoughts or the government's thoughts on recalibrating relations with the U.S.?

WETLAND: We knew that Stoltenberg had had a telephone conversation with George W., when he took office, which was not sort of -- [laughs] well, if we could have done it again, we would have done it differently, I think. He said things about what he wouldn't support, which he didn't need to say in just a congratulatory, protocol congratulation talk on the phone. Later, we knew full well, we had a coalition with the socialist left party, which is compared to the German left, [01:00:00] came to be a political party because of a position of NATO membership in the first place. And we knew that we have to, in order to be seen as a party that can run a government, we have to work to sustain, maintain and uphold support in Norway for participation in Afghanistan. The Norwegian, sort of whether or not to send this kind or that kind of capacity, special forces or not, or F-16s or not, was decided every six months, and it was negotiated among the three coalition parties in the government: Labour, which I represented, the socialist left, and sort of center party, which doesn't really take such an interest in foreign affairs, which is more [01:01:00] agrarian based, people who own the big lands, the non-urban population of the country, of the people. So that was done, we kept that, measured that, if we were successful and we had, if you can say that in accurate figures, more than 60 percent support for continuing our participation and presence, more or less as it was in 2005, for another two or three years or so. It wasn't always easy to do that. We understood that we were not in favor in Washington. There wasn't any sort of love lost between Washington and Norway at the time, but I think the Americans saw, and even if they didn't [01:02:00] appreciate it, they had to sort of technically approve of the way that this government dealt with -- which had Cabinet members who would rather pull out of Afghanistan tomorrow, and they still managed to keep it up. And that was a meticulous, sort of domestic handicraft in a sense, to do this on a day-to-day basis



-- which I believe also is one of many reasons why Stoltenberg today is a trusted Secretary General of NATO, that they have come to know him over the years.

LEONG: What was the relationship of officials like yourself with the U.S. ambassador at that time?

WETLAND: Well, [01:03:00] we didn't think very highly of, honestly speaking, of the U.S. ambassador at the time. We thought that he was using language and repeating "either you're with us or you're against us" language at speeches that wasn't necessary, and drumming up "we are at war" rhetoric, which didn't go down well over here. We did our share in Afghanistan and there wasn't any reason for this guy to use his manuscripts from two, three years ago, over again, on every occasion. I remember I experienced several U.S. ambassadors, I've had very good to splendid relations with most of them. My relationship to this one was, we are well-behaved people, [01:04:00] but we didn't respect the guy. We thought he didn't understand where he was on the surface of the planet.

LEONG: If it was so costly politically, for Mr. Stoltenberg, and with the parties, the willing coalition, why did you maintain, continue, participation in Afghanistan?

WETLAND: Well, it started out as a solidarity measure alone. It grew to be sort of in a sense, it had to be justified in a way which influenced the purpose of the efforts, so that in order to maintain the military component, we also developed a civilian development assistance component, and the value of the one was equal to the value of the other, [01:05:00] so it was a 50-50 split in costs of the Norwegian Afghanistan engagement. Half of it was military, half of it was civilian, and we made a point out of sort of telling the story back here in Norway, that we actually sort of helped -- that girls were going to school in Afghanistan now, they were not going to school under the Taliban. We engaged in building schools and health measures, and a lot of other things, so that's part of the reason why we managed to uphold a high level of support, for our overall activities in Afghanistan was a mix of measures, and how we managed to balance the military and the civilian measures,



tried to help Afghanistan on its feet again. Well, it worked as long as it worked, [01:06:00] but I'm not stupid enough to believe that this, in any way, will contribute to what was it George W. said about Iraq, which is prosperous, stable and democratic. We laughed until we couldn't walk when we heard that, to honestly believe that Iraq has the potential to become prosperous, stable, and democratic, in the same way as Afghanistan. You won't find anyone here who believed this will happen any time soon, but it had to be said, that this was the engagement. Now, some of those who were having political responsibility at the time, seemed to believe what they said, and so we were very disappointed to see all the billions that we have spent on civilian efforts in Afghanistan, hasn't left much of a foot print on that. Well, of course, it has led to a high number of Afghani women [01:07:00] in particular, getting an education that they otherwise wouldn't have got, but it doesn't show up in statistics every so often. Of course there have been positive payoffs, but not to the extent that many hoped when they were initiated.

LEONG: The commission on Afghanistan in Norway here, that was led by a former minister, Godal.

WETLAND: Yes.

LEONG: Was very critical, has been very critical. Do you think that its conclusions are fair?

WETLAND: No, I don't think so. I think it's very unfair, because it wouldn't have been possible to do, extrapolate, using what you now know on the situation, that happened 10 years ago and stuff. I think we couldn't know at the time, that it would have a lesser effect than [01:08:00] one was hoping at the time they were initiated. So I think it's pretty unfair to say that, that both our military and our civilian efforts came to be established as an effort of solidarity, and we would not have been able, politically, to carry only the burden of the military component if we had not sort of shored up support for the left part of Norwegian politics by also



introducing civilian aid measures for the population of Afghanistan. And then we can discuss, yes, we should have done everything a little bit different and as you know, 20/20 hindsight, it's easy to say that we shouldn't have tried this in that region and so on, and that is the story of foreign aid. Most of it did not succeed the way it was envisioned when it was initiated, [01:09:00] but some of it has had good effect, some of it has had less effect, and if it had been the way that Bjørn Tore Godal, he himself talks about this, I think it's very unfair on his contemporaries. He knows that they did everything in their power to accommodate a lot of different needs in Norway, in NATO, in Europe, and in Afghanistan.

LEONG: Do you think that if it had not been for that unfortunate dispute over the phone call, at the beginning of Mr. Stoltenberg's term, that things could have been different?

WETLAND: I don't know really, because some time later, I was told that the cooling of the atmosphere between Washington and New York had to do with an American close to the decision making process regarding Norway in the White [01:10:00] House, on National Security Council, who thought that the Norwegian government were too anti-Israeli. That wasn't clear to me during these years, that this was an underlying driving force, that it was this one or handful of persons in the National Security Council, who had misgivings about Norwegian policy in the Middle East. I was told that years later, as an explanation, because we thought they were overreacting under the circumstances.

LEONG: Would this be Mr. Richard Perle?

WETLAND: No, it wasn't. It was not one of the big names, but it was a name that -- brief. I could find out, I could call someone, but not one of the names that are in the headlines.

LEONG: Sure, sure. Just one last question, [01:11:00] because I know we're running out of time. Speaking of the anti-Israeli issue, now, the leader of SV at that time,



who was the finance minister, did make some statements that also became bothersome.

WETLAND: Right. Yeah.

LEONG: How did the government react to that? How did your part of the government react to that?

WETLAND: [laughs] This was that party, the Socialist Left Party, had never been in government before. So they had a learning curve, that you can be in government and in opposition at the same time -- because they had always been in opposition, and their ways of responding to outside stimuli was by taking typical opposition view. The finance minister of the Norwegian government said that she favored a consumer boycott of Israeli goods, like don't buy [01:12:00] Israeli oranges and stuff, and she said that she wouldn't do that. That's a typical "campus," sort of, "student protestors in the '70s" type of attitude to have, and not one that sort of should be stated by a Norwegian minister of finance. [laughs] And so in a morning meeting at the prime minister's office, I said to the prime minister, "I've served eight years in Germany, and it sounds like the old Nazi slogan, don't buy from Jews, and you can't have a minister of finance who says such a thing." Then, the press secretary happened to be stupid enough to say that to a journalist and we had it all over the daily newspapers, that I had said this in the meeting, so there was a roar [01:13:00] about that for a couple days, but she never said it again.

LEONG: Did that significantly damage relations with the U.S.?

WETLAND: No. No, I don't think it had any effect, because she also experienced, with time, that it wasn't necessary for her, as a party leader of that party, to openly challenge the U.S. on every occasion. They managed to live fairly well, with a more subdued attitude.

LEONG: Is there any major area that I have perhaps not covered, that we have not covered, that perhaps we should have?

WETLAND: Not that I can think of, no.

LEONG: Okay, well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

WETLAND: Well, thank you again, thank you.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]