

Interview of Lord King of Bridgwater

With Dr Kate Utting and Dr Michael Kandiah

11 July 2012, Palace of Westminster

Dr Kate Utting: Could you comment on the role of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during the early phases of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait?

Lord King of Bridgwater: There was no question, following on from that there was a wide feeling the Gulf – it is just fresh in my mind, actually, having seen about some of the meetings with rulers and others – of the very strong feeling that her role and the leadership which she had shown was critical in the speed of the response.

Someone said that Saddam Hussein ought to have known, but I think that that is idiotic. How would he possibly have known where she was going to be on 2 and 3 August 1991, and where the President of the United States was going to be? There is no doubt that, from the point of view of Saddam Hussein, when you look at the normal speed of international co-operation on an issue like this – telegrams, advice, ambassadors and various other things in terms of the speed of response – their being together that morning in Aspen the next day was critical.

Dr Utting: Do you think then, if she had not been –

Lord King: She did not come back, actually, till the next Monday. She went to Washington, of course, and was very closely involved with Bush. Messages were flying backwards and forwards, and we were having meetings here, but she did not actually come back till the Monday. I think the first meeting of a Cabinet Committee or a meeting of Ministers was on the Tuesday. I have a feeling it was probably about the 7th or the 8th. Would you be able to check that?

Dr Utting: Yes. The initial deployment –

Lord King: She went to a cabinet meeting in Washington, and was very closely involved at that time.

Dr Utting: Do you think then, if the circumstances had not been that she was in the United States anyway, that it would not have been so much an Anglo-American co-ordinated effort from the get-go?

Lord King: There is nothing like face-to-face. Knowing both personalities, there was certainly no doubt where George Bush stood, but Margaret Thatcher's speed of reaction in that situation and her absolute instant recognition, given the history of this country – memories of appeasement – that here was another dictator marching through, meant that there was absolutely no question of what had to happen.

Funnily enough, with the messages, it was a great shock to the system. It was a big shock to the Arab system, because the feeling before when these stories were around about the movement of Republican Guard divisions – looking as though they were moving down and approaching the Kuwait border and all that – and whether something was going to happen or not, was very strongly, 'No. As Arabs, we do not invade each other's countries'. That was the very strong Arab feeling at the time, and it relied not just on Arab culture and code of behaviour, but actually on personal assurances, of course, from Saddam Hussein to King Fahd and, if I remember rightly, to Mubarak¹ as well. It had been fed in through the intelligence net.

Dr Utting: Are you saying –

Lord King: That was before I had intelligence briefs on my desk. We were coming to the end of a parliamentary term. Holiday time was coming up. The Commons – guess what? – had gone on holiday again.

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: I asked questions about this, and said, "Look, what about this? Is this sinister"? I got all the assurances that everybody else had got that what he was going to do –

Dr Utting: It was just 'sabre rattling'?

Lord King: That he was going to frighten them and, at the worst, if he did anything, he was only just going to come across and go for those oilfields – that that is what the row was about and that his punishment would be to go for the oilfields and perhaps one or other of those islands as well.

Dr Utting: The disputed islands.

Lord King: "He won't go any further": that was the sort of thing.

Dr Utting: So, not Kuwait City?

Lord King: That was the sort of phase two view. Of course, that was all –

Dr Utting: Completely wrong.

Dr Michael Kandiah: What was your assessment at the time?

Lord King: Well, I asked the questions at the time: "What's going on? What is happening"? I received these replies: "Yes, we understand entirely why you have raised the question". Privately, people were a bit smug, I think, because we happened to know what he had said to King Fahd and all that, through our intelligence net through our ambassador, or whatever it was, so it was: "Relax and go on holiday".

Dr Utting: Lawrence Freedman suggested in his book that, after *Options for Change*, civil servants in Whitehall were worried that there might be some type of war – a conflict such as this – that might be used by the military to undermine the conclusions that you had come to in *Options for Change*, a bit like a John Nott moment in the Falklands War. Was that at all the case at the time, or is that just reading too much into it?

Lord King: No. Somebody might raise that with you and say, "We warned them". The point about *Options for Change* was that there was such a clear strategic change. In other words, the level of forces and the basing of those forces had been to cope with the threat from a Soviet Union and a Warsaw Pact neither of which still existed, if you remember?

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: That was the overwhelming challenge. We had East Germany, the Iron Curtain, Berlin and all that stuff. That was the case for the level of forces, so you could not argue.

There was an interesting point about the public presentation of *Options for Change* when I had a press conference afterwards. We changed from something like 320,000 in uniform to a quarter of a million. I think it was a BBC report that said, not "This is a desperately dangerous and risky cut", but "What on earth do you want all these people for"? That was what the Cold War was all about.

Dr Utting: A deterrence force.

Lord King: It had all gone, so: "Why on earth do you want to keep all these people"? That is when I produced one of my rare *bon mots*. He said, "What threat are you expecting"? and I said, "The threat of the unexpected". That was not bad, because it was seven days before Saddam Hussein went in.

Dr Utting: It certainly was.

Lord King: It was a fairly obvious remark, but it was exactly what happened.

After all, after it all happened, we were still able to put 45,000 people into Kuwait – or into Saudi and adjoining territories – and all that. No, I must quibble with what Lawrie [Freedman] said about that.

Lord King: I am sure that there was all sorts of stuff, with people supporting the continuation of the Staffordshire Regiment and saying that not to was an outrageously risky move.

Dr Utting: Would you say then that some of the options that you were looking at were even greater reductions than that?

Lord King: No, we put them on hold, of course. We had done it.

Dr Utting: Yes. You had announced it.

Lord King: And then we had to put the whole thing on hold while we sorted it all out.

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: What of course we discovered – for which, by the way, thank you very much; I found it fascinating to read – was that what we thought we had anyway, we did not have. To send our armoured brigade, then reinforced up to the division commanded by Rupert Smith, we had to take virtually every serviceable tank out of Germany. What it revealed – a bit like Saddam Hussein – was the amount of our kit that did not actually work that we thought we had.

Did somebody produce in the seminar the sit-rep of the scale of the Iraqi forces?

Dr Utting: No.

Lord King: He had 1 million men in uniform. I am trying to remember what the scale of the Republican Guard was. They were the ones; the rest did not really add up to a lot.

Dr Utting: They were conscripts.

Lord King: I am trying to remember the strength of the Republican Guard. It might have been 300,000 or something like that. He had blow-up tanks and things like that. Did you know that? He had inflatable rubber things to look like tanks.

Dr Utting: Deception.

Lord King: And a lot of his kit did not work either.

Dr Utting: Lord Hamilton seemed to suggest in his evidence to our witness seminar that Alan Clark² had been up to his own defence review type business.

Lord King: Oh, yes.

Dr Utting: Were you aware of that?

Lord King: Alan, of course, was a great military historian. Have you ever read any of his books?

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: *The Fall of Crete*, or particularly *Barbarossa*.

Dr Utting: *The Donkeys*.³

Lord King: Alan did have ideas of what he should do. I cannot quite remember how he sort of deviated.

Dr Utting: Looking at how the build up of the forces took place in what the Americans call the DESERT SHIELD phase, it looked like it was going to be largely an air and maritime response for Britain, and the decision then to deploy the brigade and then the division came later – nearly a month later. Was that because we did not think there would be a need for ground troops, or did we think that the deterrence effect of maritime and air would do it enough, in combination with sanctions?

Lord King: If you remember – an awful lot happened over about a two-week period – the first, initial problem was actually to get any invitation to come. Dick Cheney went very quickly and saw Fahd, and then did get agreement to come, but there was all this sort of stuff: he is the custodian of the two holy mosques – what are we doing with Christian soldiers crashing around in Saudi Arabia? And the sensitivities of women serving, and all that stuff. There was quite an initial hesitation. The view was absolutely clear: we could not go unless we were invited.

Dr Utting: Right.

Lord King: The first people to get the invitation were the Americans, because Cheney went very quickly. Then, pretty quickly, we were in there as well, and the invitations came.

Then it quite quickly moved from the initial slight reluctance to quite a bit of nervousness – actually fear, in a way: “Just a minute. Kuwait was awful, but what happens if he doesn’t stop at Kuwait?”

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: That went right down through Saudi; it went to Bahrain; it went to Qatar; it went to the UAE, too. I do not think Oman quite got caught up with it. Then these people started to say, "Well, actually we would like quite a bit". They were worried.

They were worried about two things. One was invasion – full-scale Republican Guard armoured divisions just marching right on down, capturing them and cornering all that.

I never realised, but there was some story about Saddam Hussein – have you picked that up? – having had some research done which claimed that he was descended from the Prophet.⁴

Dr Utting: Yes, that is right.

Lord King: And that he was therefore –

Dr Utting: A guardian.

Lord King: And entitled to take the leadership and control of all that area. Actually, strategically and in terms of power play, he would have been right. If he had cornered all that oil stuff, and without the prospect of kicking him out, people would have had to think very hard about the economics – America less so now than then. But why were they so supportive of Saudi Arabia? Because it is critical to the American economy.

Dr Utting: Yes. So was it a big surprise when the Iraqi Air Force then found sanctuary in Iran?

Lord King: Yes, that was extraordinary.

Dr Utting: Very strange.

Lord King: That was such an odd business. I am not sure that I ever quite heard the end of that. Do you remember when it was? Was it in the air campaign, or was it before the air campaign started?

Dr Utting: I think it was before.

Lord King: That was such an odd business. I am not sure that I ever quite heard the end of that. The air campaign was so devastating. You have got it in this evidence here. The scale of that air campaign was unbelievable. There was no way the Iraqi Army was going to cope with that or, I mean, that the Iraqi Air Force was going to cope with that.

Dr Utting: Yes. It was from 15 August onwards. They resumed diplomatic relations for the first time since their war.

Lord King: Who? Iran?

Dr Utting: Iran and Iraq.

Lord King: Yes, but they did not leave then, did they?

Dr Utting: No.

Lord King: I did not think that it was related.

Anyway, from then on we were getting these requests. I am now in week one, or really into week two. Then they suddenly thought, "Just a minute. We need a bit more help, and we want a bit more protection". They were worried, if not about invasion, then about special forces attacking them – assassination, terrorists, a bit of decapitation of Gulf leaders. Those were the sort of fears they had.

Dr Utting: Scenarios.

Lord King: So they were then pretty keen to get our support.

Dr Utting: At the end of August, you went out, didn't you?

Lord King: As you said, the first thing we could get there and get there fast were the aircraft. We already had the Armilla Patrol, with ships around and stuff in the Indian Ocean, which could be shipped in, and we got them in pretty quickly. Then, pretty quickly after that: "Well, what about some troops"? The first troops, of course, were really – I cannot remember if it was an RAF regiment or whatever – for airfield protection for the planes that we had out there.

Dr Utting: Yes. Our naval witnesses in the seminar seem to be a bit critical of the decision not to deploy an aircraft carrier. What was that all about then? Did you feel it was not necessary because of the capabilities that the United States had?

Lord King: Yes. I do not know how far the *Clemenceau* ever got. Have you picked up about the *Clemenceau*?

Dr Utting: No.

Lord King: The *Clemenceau* was the French aircraft carrier, which they decided to send, but they only put helicopters on it. They put on Puma helicopters. The initial instruction was that it was not to go beyond the Straits of Hormuz, which was rather outside the helicopter range, really.

Dr Utting: Yes. So what was the point?

Lord King: Yes.

Dr Kandiah: It was very far away.

Lord King: Yes. Anyway, that was that. That was how they started.

What would the carrier have done? We had all the aircraft – land-based – that we needed. We had all those all the way up from Oman, UAE, Muharraq, Dhahran and I think – I cannot remember – Tabuk and the other Saudi one. I think we had some planes there. We had all the air bases that we needed. You only need a carrier if you have not got airfields, but we had bags of airfields.

There was a slight feeling – it is rather unkind – that a lot of people thought they were missing out on the action, and that they would like to be involved. I do not think it – the *Ark Royal*, if I remember rightly – got beyond the eastern Mediterranean. Then the issue was whether it was within the campaign medal country.

Dr Utting: Always very important.

Lord King: Anyway, it was actually quite late on.

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: The carrier thing was not earlier, of course.

Dr Utting: No, it was not.

Lord King: That came up sort of quite well on.

Dr Utting: Yes, in September. In the initial phases, when you were thinking about the war – that it possibly could, if economic sanctions and these kinds of compellence deployments did not work –

Lord King: There were suggestions coming from one or two rather impetuous – or one or two slightly excitable – Arab friends that we should go straight in: “Saddam won’t listen to anything except force. We should go straight in and smash him up”. I can remember a phrase: “It is wrong to underestimate your enemy, but you should not overestimate him either”, and that his armed forces had not been that good in their performance against Iran. I do not know that people entirely held that view – I am not sure – but that view was that we should go straight in.

We were never in that country. From the Prime Minister downwards, we wanted DESERT SHIELD, sanctions, common sense: total, maximum diplomatic pressure; Russia and China

onboard; whatever UN resolution was going – and Iran onboard as well, and better relations with Rafsanjani – and get out. That was our position. The idea that we went straight in, saying, “Bloody good. We’re longing to go to war” –

Dr Utting: It was used as a pretext.

Lord King: That was not true at all.

I was looking at that today. The Prime Minister was absolutely clear that this was what we wanted. We were not –

Dr Utting: This is not regime change.

Lord King: No.

Dr Utting: Not at all.

Lord King: It was just to get out.

Dr Utting: But even if you are not in the business of regime change, the anticipated amount of casualties, the possible use of chemical weapons – how high was that in your thinking?

Lord King: Absolutely. Of course, Saddam’s record over the use of chemical weapons, against his own people, was very much in people’s minds. The first request we got – actually almost before, “Can you send some planes and can you send some troops?” – was: “Can you send us chemical protection kits”?

Dr Utting: Right.

Lord King: I am talking about Arab countries now. And we did.

Dr Utting: Michael, perhaps you would like to ask about the domestic stuff, while I find that?

Dr Kandiah: One of the things that I think is lacking from the seminar we did was the domestic element. You were in London, most of the time, and of course you are a politician.

Lord King: No, I am a statesman. An old man like me is allowed to say that. No, you are quite right.

Dr Kandiah: Could you tell us something about to what extent the domestic played any part in any of the –

Lord King: One thing I think I appreciated from the start, but I certainly appreciated it pretty quickly thereafter, was that a key role was ensuring that we got maximum public support for what we were doing, because of the feeding frenzy of the press or of the media.

I have just noticed that within about 10 days, or maybe a bit more than that, I was getting furious letters from editors – Max Hastings, [Nicholas] Lloyd, a man called David Montgomery who had *Today* – asking why their people had not been in the press pool that had gone out right at the very beginning, when I think we sent out the first planes or practically before that.⁵ There was this thing about the media's desperate wish to be involved.

Of course, one of the problems there was that there was quite an education process for one or two of the countries we were going to, not least Saudi Arabia, about the idea of allowing British journalists to crash around and about what they would get up to. There was the problem of trying to get visas for them, getting them out there and trying to run a pool and all that business.

There was terrific interest and terrific desire for news, and we were having a succession of press conferences. That was a challenge, and Peter de la Billière flexed us a bit in his stuff, because he could not understand why I was always chasing him and saying, "What is going on? I need to know". We were having press conferences, perhaps with Stormin' Norman [Schwarzkopf] and with Peter de la Billière, in Riyadh at – whatever – 7 am UK time, then one in the MOD perhaps at – I do not know – 11 o'clock UK time, and then one in Washington or wherever.

Dr Utting: To get all of the constituencies in.

Lord King: London journalists were not satisfied if we said, "Well, why don't you just listen to what was said in Riyadh"? They wanted to ask their own questions and wanted to have their own information.

I did spend a lot of time trying to ensure we gave good, effective press conferences, with clear information and delivered by people who could do it. I brought in a number of people. I remember one chap in particular, who very sadly died young – John Thomson. He was a commodore; no – what am I talking about? – an air commodore, I think. He would have gone on to be Chief of the Air Staff, but he died young.⁶ He was extremely good. What I liked was to have guys in uniform – I might chair it, but I wanted guys in uniform – standing up: for example, if you were deploying aircraft, a guy who has flown them standing up and saying what these aircraft do.

One of the pleasures or good recollections I have of it – this draws some comparison with one or two of the events we have had since – is that, actually, the further it went on, the bigger the national support for what we were doing. You can look at the parliamentary votes in here. There was quite a bit of hostility. A few people in the Labour Party were not madly enthusiastic.

Dr Utting: Did they want sanctions only?

Lord King: Yes. Actually, we did get a bigger and bigger vote in Parliament. You can see it reflected in the figures.

Dr Utting: That is for sure.

Lord King: I saw that as my duty to the guys who were out there. I never had any trouble, and when I managed to go out to see them, which I did quite a bit in the early stages, I would say, "Look, I can tell you one thing straight away: the whole country is right behind you". That was very important, and that was an important part of my job.

Kandiah: Was Labour's position a tactical one—that, in fact, they supported you in Parliament, but they said that sanctions –

Lord King: No. There were quite a lot of pacifists in the Labour ranks – people who were just anti-war – and they had been in the "Ban the Bomb" movement through to anti-war marching and all that. I am not saying the leadership, but there were a lot of such people on the backbenches in the Labour Party. I cannot remember where Tony Benn was at that time, but there were a lot of people asking questions and saying that there must be a peaceful solution, as done by the United Nations –

Dr Utting: Going back then to November and the change of leadership of your party, as well as John Major becoming Prime Minister, did that have any significant impact on our preparations? How was that – a change of leader – viewed from a defence point of view?

Lord King: Well, it needed a bit of fast footwork from me, because I had just been out there. We were obviously building up to the risk that we were going to have to go to war, and there were worries. Some of the initial projections of possible percentage casualties were –

Dr Utting: Huge?

Lord King: They were obviously quite difficult. The problem was: how long were they going to be stuck out there for? Not much seemed to be happening on the diplomatic front. They were stuck out in the desert in pretty unattractive living conditions and with problems. I used to go out – I cannot remember how many times I went – to keep in touch and give them encouragement, and make them aware of all the support there was for them. I said, "The whole country is behind you. We are determined to see it work, and you will receive all the support and help that you need". We were shipping everything out. They knew that they were getting all the best kit. We took all the best tanks out of Germany, and any amount of spare engines and so on.

There is a thing that I think comes up there. I am not sure how it was quoted – I think Charles Powell quoted it actually – but it was not quite right. I had in the defence industry people, and I said, “This is the biggest showcase. You’ve been selling your kit or trying to sell your kit to these various countries. This is the time – this is it in action – and it had better work! It is critical to our national interest; it is also pretty important to you commercially that it goes well, because you’re going to get a lot of publicity if it doesn’t”.

One of the other things was that they sent out a huge number of their chaps. I am not talking about BAE/al-Yamamah people; Vickers had people out there, because of Vickers Challenger tanks and all of that, reinforcing –

Dr Utting: Doing the maintenance, advising –

Lord King: And we had any amount of people who were ‘civilians’ – engineers or whatever they were – right in support of their own kit, perhaps even riding on it to make sure it worked. They saw the scale of that support. I said to them, “Don’t be in any doubts about it. You know our Prime Minister and you know about the Falklands and all that – the *Canberra*, and then the *QEII* – and I can tell you that she is right behind you, and we are right behind you”, and all that.

Then I come back, two weeks later –

Dr Utting: And blow me – a coup!

Lord King: And I say, “I just want you to know that the Prime Minister” –

Dr Utting: The new one.

Lord King: “The new Prime Minister is right behind you”, and he was. He was fine, and he was very good. John was very responsible, and obviously he respected the fact that Douglas Hurd and I had been –

Dr Utting: The continuity ...

Lord King: We had been fighting, with all that, and on we went. He was new to it. He did not have any military background. He did not have any background at all in any of that.

Dr Utting: No. He had been Foreign Secretary for only three months.

Lord King: Three months as Foreign Secretary. Anyway, there was all that.

It was not ideal. It would have been much better, and I tried to see if we could not find some way in which, if the party believed that change was really needed – that the Prime Minister,

Margaret Thatcher, had had a wonderful innings, but that it was time for a change – I could get a few people to suggest, “Well, perhaps not just now: in the middle of a war, or just building up to a war”?

Dr Utting: Terrible timing.

Lord King: I may say that I have just talked about our troops, but of course I went round all the rulers to tell them as well. Fortunately, I know about dealing with Arab people. They are always very polite, but we have different cultures. What I found was that the first time I used to meet them, they were very polite and very correct. The second time, they were just that bit warmer – recognised the face, and all that. Then, about the fourth or fifth time, you had a really good relationship.

That was actually important, because John’s problem, in the middle of all this, was: “Who is this new chap? Is he going to ...?”, because they knew Margaret and they knew her reputation. They all attributed to her the credit for getting this defence thing going as quickly as it was. With all respect to George Bush, they felt that she was the one who had really got it going, although there is no question, I am sure, but that he would have got there perfectly well as well. She did enjoy the credit for the thing happening as it did, so that made it all the more difficult when she suddenly went, because they do not actually have to understand or are not entirely familiar with that system of government.

Dr Utting: Yes. They believed that she really was in charge.

Lord King: No, I meant that something is not going to happen to them; it is even more of a shock when they find that a ruler has suddenly disappeared, without a revolution. Anyway, I went out again and crashed all round –

Dr Utting: To reassure.

Lord King: And I just said, “It is as it is”. Peter de la Billière and I went around. He was extremely good, and had built up very good relationships.

Dr Utting: With the military leaders and commanders?

Lord King: And with the rulers, absolutely. He was good, because he spoke a bit of Arabic, and he had done his time.

Dr Utting: Certainly, with his background.

Lord King: He was known as a brave soldier, and that did him no harm.

Dr Utting: When you were sitting in the committee in Downing Street and the IRA mortared Downing Street, was that something that did not really bother everybody – it was just business as usual – or was that really a distraction from all of this?

Lord King: The actual fact about the mortar was that we were very lucky, of course. Two of them did not go off, if I remember rightly.

Dr Utting: Just the one.

Lord King: Just the detonator. One went off. If I remember rightly, the one that went off was outside the garden walls, and I think two fell in the garden, did they? We just got the pop of the detonator and the explosion –

Dr Utting: It was just the windows that went.

Dr Kandiah: It could have been a lot worse.

Lord King: Yes, yes.

Dr Utting: Yes, and then where would we have been?

Lord King: I think people were pretty shocked by that.

Dr Utting: Did you expect any follow-up attacks?

Lord King: I think, maybe, they were a bit more shocked than me. I had had four years of Northern Ireland: there were one or two bangs in my time.

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: All it did was shatter the windows, but they all had the plastic inside them, so they were all crazed; and we adjourned to COBRA⁷, if I remember rightly. I think John Major said that – after the first one, people had got down and were starting to get up – I said, “Keep down”. I do not know if that is true, but he said that. It would have been quite good advice to give, because then there were two more pops.

Dr Utting: Turning to the ground war – we are coming to the end; I know you have things to do – it was a catastrophic success, wasn't it?

Lord King: The ground campaign?

Dr Utting: Yes.

Lord King: Yes.

Dr Utting: Had that been anticipated?

Lord King: No, not at all.

Dr Utting: How long did you think it was going to last?

Lord King: No, because of the overwhelming success of the air campaign and the degree of it; at the start, nobody envisaged an air campaign of that length. It was the first real use, as you know, of much more sophisticated targeting and accuracy of weapons.

I cannot say it was unprecedented, because no two wars are ever the same, but it was a much longer air campaign than I think we had originally envisaged at the start. It was overwhelmingly impressive: half the Iraqis were waiting to surrender the moment before anyone got killed – it was shattering – and not surprisingly, because there was no air cover. It was total air supremacy. The most significant casualties, as you know, were when we tried to go in very low and do the airfield suppression with the JP233s, when we lost a few planes and people.

Then there was the speed of the land campaign. We could not be at all sure – the centre of the minefields, flaming ditches, the setting of the whole place on fire and all of that – what was going to happen, how successful the left hook would be and all of that.

Of course, one of the consequences was that we actually had not presumed sufficiently in advance that we were going to win as quickly as that, and thought about what the terms for that first ceasefire should be. There was, as we know too well, far too much back-of-the-envelope stuff by Norman Schwarzkopf on his way up to that, and then, of course, about permission to continue to fly helicopters and all that.

Dr Utting: Yes, against their own people.

Lord King: When you look at the time that was spent on the rules of engagement, for instance, for the Armilla Patrol or for the naval blockade in support of the sanctions, there was a very careful working out of what all the terms should be and how we handled the thing.

Then we came to the end of the war. Of course, it also stopped quickly. I remember the meeting we had in No 10 – Douglas [Hurd]⁸, I think, was in Washington at that time, but we had a meeting in No 10 – on day four, or whatever it was. We said, “Well, it has gone fantastically well”, and there were the stories of Mutla Ridge and Iraqi troops all streaming away, and trying to get out and going.

We came out, and it was agreed that we needed to talk very quickly to our American colleagues on: "What do we do now, and when are we going to stop the actual land campaign"? It was fixed and we came out: John was going to speak to George Bush, I was going to speak to Dick Cheney, and David Craig⁹ was going to speak to Colin Powell. We rang through and got exactly the same answer: "I'm afraid they're all in the White House". That was when it was said: "A 100 hours war, Mr President". "It's a turkey shoot," said Colin Powell, "so let's stop".

That was the only time. The co-operation and communication was terrific all the way from the first meeting in Aspen and right through, as was the fitting in of the troops, the arrangements about how they would work and our relationship. I remember many happy hours with Norman Schwarzkopf and, of course, with Peter de la Billière, Paddy Hine and the people who were involved. The only time it just never happened was –

Dr Utting: At the end.

Lord King: They said, "Let's stop".

Dr Utting: Really?

Lord King: We were told, "We've decided to stop", and that was it.

There were all the arguments thereafter. My own view is – 24 hours too soon. We could have caught those two Republican Guard divisions, the hook was coming round the noose, and what would that have meant subsequently when the Shia –

Dr Utting: For an uprising ...

Lord King: And George said, "It's now over to the Iraqi people", which they then thought was the signal –

Dr Utting: For an uprising.

Lord King: And that they would probably get American support and all that. On that went, and that is history and public knowledge.

One was that it stopped too soon. Then it was: "There's got to be a ceasefire, and what are the terms going to be"? That was the bit where there had also been inadequate – really hardly any – preparation, because it all happened so quickly.

Dr Kandiah: It was really the collapse of the last bit of war that was the problem, in a sense?

Lord King: Yes. If you look at other wars, there comes a later phase in the war when you are starting to think what the terms will be for the peace.

Dr Utting: Post-hostilities planning.

Lord King: But if the war lasts only four days, you are still wondering whether you are going to win.

Dr Utting: The rug is pulled out.

Lord King: You may be tempting fate, in some ways, to say, "Well, we know we're going to win, and we're going to win jolly quickly, so let's agree the victory terms now". You concentrate on making sure you win.

Dr Utting: Some of the critics of the way it ended suggest that what should have happened was that Saddam Hussein should have been meeting people such as General Schwarzkopf –

Lord King: And had some humiliation. That is all part of it, exactly right.

Dr Utting: And that that would have made a difference, because we did not destroy his war-making capability, did we? In that sense, our war aims were not met.

Lord King: Norman Schwarzkopf was a great war-fighting general, but he was suddenly thrust into this position of responsibility. He had Prince Khalid with him, and I do remember those television interviews.

Dr Utting: Indeed. We were absolutely glued to the TV.

Lord King: I mean the television interviews outside the tent, when Prince Khalid was there, with Norman Schwarzkopf giving him a few helpful suggestions about what might be interesting things to say.

It happened so quickly. As I say, you cannot write a manual on this saying, "Always ensure that you've got the victory terms agreed before you actually start the campaign". Maybe you do? Maybe that should go into the little school handbook.

Dr Utting: Do you think that part of the problem that was then created with the Kurdish uprising and then the Shia uprising was: "Oops, what do we do now"? John Major's great success was getting the safe havens policy and then the no-fly zone. Could this have been planned for or predicted? What operational plans were there for that?

Lord King: No, no. The thing is that a lot of people were wise after the event about why we did not agree to go to Baghdad and why we did not march on and depose Saddam, but all

our authority – all our commitment to our people who were fighting and everything else – was that we were going there to end an act of aggression and to restore the legitimate sovereignty of Kuwait.

Dr Utting: Absolutely.

Lord King: We were not there for regime change in Iraq. We were there to put Iraq back in its box, and get it out of the country it should not have been in. This business about – well, you know: if we had gone on to Baghdad, it would have been a very different matter, as we know and as it proved to be. There would have been a lot more casualties. And what would we have said to the people who said, “I didn’t think that that’s what we were doing”.

Up until that rush of blood, which was his invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein had been seen as a protector of those Arab countries, and appreciated by us and by America as a bulwark against Iran.

Dr Utting: As a counterweight to Iran.

Lord King: As you know, part of the Saddam complaint – why he invaded Kuwait – was that he thought their activities in the downstream were undermining, and causing this fall in, the oil price.

Dr Utting: Directly affecting his economy.

Lord King: Iraq was bust, after all the money they had spent, and a lot of that money had been spent defending these rich Arab countries who owed him something. He thought that the money they claimed he owed them, they should write off. Iraqi lives and blood had been spent defending these countries, and they should jolly well pay up. You can see from the grid.

It is quite interesting that, as you know, at the beginning of all this, there was some lack of sympathy, among some of the other Arab countries, towards Kuwait. They thought that Kuwait had a few questions to answer. Is that right?

Dr Utting: Yes. You could read it as being acts of provocation.

Lord King: Yes.

Dr Utting: That is great. Can I ask one final question? This experience and great success meant that we were – perhaps, we could say – punching above our weight again in world affairs, militarily and diplomatically. Did it mean that you went back and looked at *Options for Change* again? Were there lessons learned that re-evaluated your assumptions?

Lord King: The lessons we learned, I think, out of the thing were this, for example. When we did the *Options for Change* exercise, very rightly one of the things that really attracted all the attention at the time was the infantry regiments.

I said this the other day. You can change squadrons in the Air Force or you can do things to the Royal Logistic Corps, and people do not really focus on it; start doing things with regiments and that is in all the headlines.

Interestingly enough, I went to listen to Philip Hammond make his statement on restructuring the Army. Afterwards, I walked round the back of the Speaker's Chair and I bumped into Philip. I just happened to have this in my hand, and I said, "Have a look at this". What was it? *Hansard* for 1991: Secretary of State for Defence (Tom King): Statement – Restructuring the Army.

Dr Utting: Yes. *Plus ça change*.

Lord King: It was even the same title – not even a change in the title. There we are; it is quite funny.

On what came out of Options, I think we had 53 battalions, or regiments, if I take the infantry, but when you added up their strength – a lot of them were significantly under-strength – we had actually only about 38.

Dr Utting: That were usable?

Lord King: No, in numbers.

Dr Utting: Really?

Lord King: In terms of strength.

Dr Utting: Okay.

Lord King: In this argument at the moment, he has got the same thing. On the arguments about whether or not you keep the Scottish regiments, a lot of his argument was: are they recruited or up to strength?

The other thing, for instance, that came out of it – I do not think this was properly appreciated – was that when we said how many armoured regiments we had, how many Challenger tanks and all that, how many of them were actually serviceable and what condition were they in?

It is certainly true – if you get hold of Peter Inge, he would tell you – the appalling outrage when I went over there to see the arrangements that were being made and all the efforts that

were being made to equip our 7th Armoured Brigade, I think it was. If the Russians had decided to invade Germany at that time, we would hardly have had a tank in the place.

Dr Utting: Oh dear. That would have been it ...

Lord King: We were meant to have them, but they were sitting there on blocks, or something, with no engine. You may have heard that.

Dr Utting: Yes. I think that that is one of the points Archie Hamilton made, wasn't it?

Lord King: Certainly, and he would know.

Dr Utting: Yes, he was quite vociferous on that.

Lord King: Yes. A lot of what we learned from the Gulf War was about: "What actually have we got"? And when we say that we are changing this or making these important changes – that we are going to change these regiments – and ask how much this is going to alter our capabilities, although it looked good on paper, how much of that was as valid as it looked written down on the sheet?

Does that make sense to you?

Dr Utting: Brilliant. Yes. Thank you very much.

Dr Kandiah: Thank you very much.

Dr Utting: Excellent. Thank you very much for your time.

Lord King: I charge by the hour, you know that?

[Laughter]

Notes

¹ President Hosni Mubarak, President of Egypt 1981-2011.

² Alan Clark (1928-1999), Conservative politician and author. Member of Parliament Plymouth Sutton 1974-1992; Kensington and Chelsea 1997-1999. Minister of State for Trade January 1986- July 1989; Minister for Defence Procurement, July 1989-April 1992. Famed for his notoriously forthright and indiscreet diaries.

³ Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Hutchinson, 1961); *The Fall of Crete* (London: Anthony Blond, 1962); *Barbarossa*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1995).

⁴ See Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2012), p.264.

⁵ Max Hastings, editor of the *Daily Telegraph*; Nicholas Lloyd, editor of the *Daily Express*; David Montgomery, editor of *Today*.

⁶ Air Chief Marshal Sir John Thomson, 7 June 1941 – 10 July 1994. Assistant Chief of the Air Staff 1989-91; AOC-in-C RAF Support Command 1991-92; AOC-in-C RAF Strike Command 1992-94; Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces North-Western Europe, July 1994. Sir John died a few days after assuming the NATO appointment.

⁷ The Cabinet Office Briefing Room

⁸ The Foreign Secretary.

⁹ Air Chief Marshal Sir David Craig (now MRAF Lord Craig of Radley), Chief of the Defence Staff.

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