



ABC Conversations with Richard Fidler
John Howard Interview Transcript

VOICEOVER (over music): Conversations with Richard Fidler on ABC Local Radio.

(Excerpts from American TV broadcasts, September 11, 2001):

MALE VOICE (excerpt from advertisement): To consolidate your credit card or other debts, just log on...

NEWS PRESENTER 1: Yeah, this just in. You are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there. That is the World Trade Center. And we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed...

NEWS PRESENTER 2: And again, unconfirmed reports that a plane has crashed into one of the towers there...

MALE VOICE 2: And it appears to have crashed into, I don't know which tower it is.

MALE VOICE 3: And I looked up and all of a sudden it smashed right dead into the centre of the World Trade Center.

NEWS PRESENTER 3: So the questions have to be asked: was this purely an accident or could this have been an intentional act?

(End of excerpts)

RICHARD FIDLER: Hello and welcome to Conversations.

When those first sketchy reports came through that a jet had hit the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York it seemed just possible that it might be some kind of accident.

Then the second plane smashed into the other tower and we knew it was some kind of an attack.

Then a third plane - this time at the Pentagon near Washington. Then another in a field possibly on its way to the Capitol building or the White House.

And in Washington on that day while these bolts were being hurled from the sky was the prime minister of Australia, John Howard.

John Howard became a witness to history and he saw it from within the epicentre of American power. The shock and grief of that day affected him profoundly.

He'd come to the United States to meet the new president and to commemorate the anniversary of the ANZUS Treaty, the mutual defence pact that was born out of a cold war.

When John Howard left a traumatised America on board Air Force Two he decided to invoke ANZUS for the first time in circumstances its creators never imagined.

John Howard, welcome to Conversations.

JOHN HOWARD: Good to be with you Richard.

RICHARD FIDLER: The ANZUS anniversary was the ceremonial framework for your visit to the United States.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah, the formal justification.

RICHARD FIDLER: What was the real business for that visit in your mind?

JOHN HOWARD: The other piece of quite important business was an address to a joint sitting of Congress. That had to be cancelled because of what happened on the 11th of September.

But it was also principally an opportunity for me to meet the new president. And I was obviously keen to meet him.

And we spent a lot of time together the day before on the 10th of September. We spent about four hours together. There was a ceremony at the naval dockyard in Washington to commemorate ANZUS. He handed over the bell from the USS Canberra as a gesture of friendship.

We then went to the White House, had our formal discussions, talked about as I recall just about everything except terrorism. That was sort of the last day of the old order so to speak.

RICHARD FIDLER: You were also hoping to get a free trade agreement with the United States up and running too.

JOHN HOWARD: Oh yes well at that stage, you know, that was something on our agenda. It wasn't the main thing.

The main thing was to make certain that the alliance was just as close and if possible even closer under the new presidency because you had a Republican president and a Liberal prime minister.

Not that those political things mean all that much in international affairs, as I found with Tony Blair. On international affairs we tended to agree on most issues.

But it was an element. And the free trade agreement was an issue - not the main issue but it was one of the things on my shopping list if you want to put it that way.

RICHARD FIDLER: I think you've said in the past that people have exaggerated your love affair with the United States. And you actually say you see America as a good in parts country. Just tell me a bit about what your thinking was about the United States.

JOHN HOWARD: Well look I am pro-American in the sense that I see America as a powerful force for good, as an exemplar of the free enterprise system which I admire very much.

But I do not want Australia to become too Americanised.

RICHARD FIDLER: Why not? In what way?

JOHN HOWARD: Well because I like who we are now. We have the same cultural background as the United States and Great Britain and many other countries. But we are distinctive.

And it always on a low level it always irks me when people use American idiom and American language forms rather than Australian. I just wonder why on Earth we have to do that.

And there are things about America I do admire. There are things I don't admire.

I mean for example I have always felt that one of the things that Australia has got right is the balance in our welfare system. It's not as harsh as the American one but it's not as paternalistic.

RICHARD FIDLER: How about America's gun culture?

JOHN HOWARD: Oh I don't like that at all. And I had an interesting reminder of the difference on that.

After I'd ceased to be prime minister I went to George HW Bush's presidential library in College Station in Texas. And it was a nice gathering of two or 300 people there whose politics were almost identical to mine.

I gave a little speech and the former president welcomed me. And I was asked what were the things I was really proud of what I'd done in Australia. And I started listing.

And the third thing I listed was gun control and there was an audible wooh from the audience.

(Laughter)

And that didn't go down well with a Texas audience and they all ribbed me about it afterwards. You know, you won't get anywhere with that here.

And I said, well, I think you know your views on this are -

I just find it unbelievable that whenever there's a massacre in America there's always talk about whether the person should have been receiving psychiatric treatment beforehand. There was never any suggestion that you would actually try and limit the availability of guns.

But I think it's terrible.

RICHARD FIDLER: You're a child of the Second World War and your middle name is Winston of course. You grew up in a family that looked to I suppose Churchill and the British for example.

JOHN HOWARD: Oh yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: But do you remember your attitudes towards America as a kid, within your house growing up?

JOHN HOWARD: Well within my house my parents were conservative Australians on foreign policy. They were pro-British. But they were also pro-American. But they thought our best friends were the British and then the Americans.

RICHARD FIDLER: But Americans seemed more alien to us in the Second World War than they do today perhaps didn't they?

JOHN HOWARD: Oh well of course they were late entrants, as they had been in the eyes of many Australians in World War One. And in that generation of Australians, many of them whenever you started talking to them about history and those things, eventually they'd say, oh of course the Americans were slow to enter.

I mean that wasn't a view I had. But I mean I was a kid so I didn't have any view.

But World War Two profoundly changed Australian attitudes towards America. The broad take-out of World War Two with people of that generation was that America saved us.

RICHARD FIDLER: I think it's fair to say you never really quite clicked with Bill Clinton when he was president.

JOHN HOWARD: That is largely wrong. I wasn't as close to him as I became to George Bush. But too much has been made of a couple of incidents such as him being, keeping me 20 minutes. He was notoriously unpunctual.

But I actually had quite a good relationship with him.

And he was very helpful in the end on East Timor. He said, I can't give you any troops. But because I expressed quite a lot of disappointment he ended up being very helpful on logistics, intelligence. And they put an enormous amount of diplomatic pressure on the Indonesians, including a visit to Jakarta by the defence secretary.

So we ended up being close but not as close as I became to Bush.

RICHARD FIDLER: Nonetheless my understanding is that the feeling within the new Bush administration was that you know, this guy's an old friend, he's a great friend, he's a conservative like we are. We've been neglecting this friend a little bit for a while and it's time we put on a bit of a show of support, which is why you got that turnout at that barbeque.

JOHN HOWARD: Oh yes I think all of that is right, what you've just said.

You know Bush was very keen to make sure that this visit was successful. And I think all of those things that you mentioned are right.

RICHARD FIDLER: So the barbeque was attended by vice president Cheney, Colin Powell, secretary of state, secretary of defence Donald Rumsfeld, two Supreme Court judges.

It sounds like an informal occasion nonetheless.

JOHN HOWARD: Oh it was a very informal occasion. I made a very brief speech of welcome but there was no, there were no memorable grabs in that apart from sort of enjoy yourself and enjoy some Australian hospitality.

But the social highlight in one respect was ducking in to see Lleyton Hewitt clean up was it Pete Sampras?

RICHARD FIDLER: I think it might have been, yeah. So you had one eye on the guests, one eye on Lleyton Hewitt?

JOHN HOWARD: (Laughs) Yeah. Well I, you know I only absented myself for a couple of minutes. But it was a pretty spectacular win.

RICHARD FIDLER: Today's conversation is with former prime minister of Australia John Howard on his recollections of the events of September 11, 2001, a decade ago when he was an eyewitness to history in Washington.

Monday the September the 10th began with a ceremony at the naval dockyard in Washington to honour the ANZUS Treaty.

(Excerpt from ceremony):

(Military band playing Advance Australia Fair)

GEORGE W BUSH: Australia is a generous land, mindful of the struggles of poor nations, always helping when and where it can. Your government and your good people are an example of democracy, individual liberty and the virtues of free trade amongst all nations.

(End of excerpt)

CATHERINE McGRATH, REPORTER (archival excerpt from AM, ABC Radio, 11/09/01): John Howard was awarded a ceremonial welcome, a 19 gun salute and a special present from the United States. President Bush handed over the ship's bell from the now decommissioned USS Canberra.

RICHARD FIDLER: How did you get on with president Bush?

JOHN HOWARD: We clicked at the beginning. And he's an informal man. Being a Texan he tends to relate more readily to Australia. I think Texans and Californians relate more immediately to Australians than perhaps north-easterners.

One of the mistakes Australians make about Americans is to assume that all of them are as informal as most of us are. That's not true. Americans particularly in the north-east are far more formal than many Australians allow. And sometimes Australian over familiarity can grate.

We just seemed to get on quite well. And he said, come up, I'll give you a lift to the White House. And we just continued our discussion.

And then when we got to the White House we had a full-scale formal meeting of sitting around in the Oval Office. And the secretary of state was there and the vice president and Condoleezza Rice and the national security advisor and you know the equivalent people on my side and his staff etc.

We didn't talk about intelligence issues or terrorism or Al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden because they weren't really on the radar at that time.

I was struck by the fact that he was on top of his brief. He wasn't all the time sort of looking at a bit of paper and looking around to any of this advisors.

In fact I found in all my meetings with him, contrary to a lot of the criticism that is made of the bloke, unfairly in my opinion, that he was always on top of his subject.

But he was a no-nonsense conversationalist. He didn't have intellectual pretensions. He didn't sort of air his knowledge on something that wasn't relevant to the discussion, which I quite liked because you do sometimes run into people at every level and every walk of life who really take the opportunity in a conversation to let you know just how much they know about everything.

(Laughter)

And he wasn't like that.

RICHARD FIDLER: That night you said you had dinner with Rupert Murdoch.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: Afterwards he refused to explicitly endorse you. Were you disappointed by that?

JOHN HOWARD: No, no. He gave a classic response. He was saying, he was asked by one of the journalists, "Are your papers going to back the Coalition, Mr Murdoch?"

And he said, "You'd have to ask the editors about that." Which you know, what else would he say?

It was quite a good dinner.

RICHARD FIDLER: Did he ask you for anything he shouldn't have at that dinner?

JOHN HOWARD: No he didn't, no it was just an amiable dinner.

One of the good things I've always found about talking to Rupert Murdoch is that his views on issues are never predictable. He's always interesting in that sense, that you'll often get a left-field attitude or opinion from him. And that makes him both, I've found, an interesting and relevant person to talk to.

RICHARD FIDLER: Early on the morning of September 11, 2001 you went out for your usual early morning walk and you took a call from Peter Costello. That was about Ansett wasn't it? That was going to be the story of the day wasn't it?

JOHN HOWARD: Well Ansett was crumbling. And it was a huge issue. And there was pressure from the unions and others for us to bail them out. And both Peter and I and I should say also John Anderson the transport minister were absolutely determined that we were not going to bail out Ansett.

RICHARD FIDLER: So you were getting ready to make a press conference about that.

JOHN HOWARD: I was.

RICHARD FIDLER: Eight forty-six am the first plane hit the north tower of the World Trade Center. How were you told?

JOHN HOWARD: Well how I was told was Tony O'Leary my press secretary had come around, around about quarter to nine or something to talk about what I might be asked by those ever vigilant journalists.

And just as the conversation was ending almost as an aside Tony said to me, "Oh by the way a plane has hit a tower of the World Trade Center.

NEWS PRESENTER (excerpts from American TV broadcast, September 11, 2001): ... an incident that's happened just a short time ago. You're looking at the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan where just a few minutes ago we're told that a plane crashed into the upper floors of one of the twin towers. You can see fire and flames or smoke billowing from...

JOHN HOWARD: In my mind's eye I visualised a small plane, a light aircraft.

RICHARD FIDLER: We all did I think when we first heard, yeah.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah hitting it. And I thought well that's a terrible accident. But that was really it. I didn't think more about it than that.

And then a few minutes later, I mean it might have been 10, it might have been seven, I don't know. But a few minutes had gone by. He came back and he said, "Another plane has hit the other tower of the World Trade Center." And we both then knew.

(Excerpts from American TV broadcasts, September 11, 2001):

(Sounds of people screaming)

WOMAN: Something else just hit. A very large plane.

WOMAN 2: It's the other tower, coming from the south...

(End of excerpts)

JOHN HOWARD: This was no accident.

WOMAN (excerpt from American TV broadcast, September 11, 2001): I watched the plane fly into the World Trade Center.

JOHN HOWARD: And he darted inside - I think he'd spoken to me in the corridor - and turned on the television and of course you saw these terrible images. By then it was wall to wall coverage.

(Excerpts from American TV broadcasts, September 11, 2001):

NEWS PRESENTER 1: Oh my God!

NEWS PRESENTER 2: That looks like a second plane.

NEWS PRESENTER 3: ...still inside the World Trade Center...

MALE VOICE 1: ...see a plane go in, that's just exploded...

NEWS PRESENTER 4: We just saw another plane coming in from the side...

MALE VOICE 2: I can't see from my vantage point...

(End of excerpts)

RICHARD FIDLER: You were scheduled to appear at a media conference.

JOHN HOWARD: I was.

RICHARD FIDLER: To talk about Ansett and instead this is what you said on that first press conference.

JOHN HOWARD (archival, at press conference on 11/09/01): My personal thoughts and prayers are very much with those left bereaved by these despicable attacks upon the American people and the American nation.

RICHARD FIDLER: I suppose to try and recapture the mindset of that moment, it's more about what we didn't know than what we did know at that time.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah. It was obvious that it was an attack. It wasn't an accident. And it was a, because of the nature of the building and what it represented both physically and I guess psychologically it was an attack on America. And I used words that were consistent with that.

RICHARD FIDLER: Did you sense its symbolic power straight away?

JOHN HOWARD: Oh yeah. I mean I'd been to the World Trade Center years earlier. And it was clearly an attack on what America represented as well as the American people.

RICHARD FIDLER: While you were speaking at that press conference in your Washington hotel a third plane was crashing into the Pentagon nearby. Did you hear anything?

JOHN HOWARD: I didn't hear anything. But after the news conference was over I was told about it. And the security people of mine had these things in their ears. And they said they'd picked up the explosion on their radio frequency.

RICHARD FIDLER: Could you see it when the curtains were pulled back? Because the curtains were closed weren't they and then they were pulled back.

JOHN HOWARD: The curtains were closed during the news conference for the television lights. And then after the news conference was over we pulled back the curtains and we could see the smoke rising from the Pentagon.

(Excerpts from American TV broadcasts, September 11, 2001):

NEWS PRESENTER 1: These are live pictures now of the Pentagon. You can see this thick black smoke.

NEWS PRESENTER 2: ... huge plume of smoke which continues to rise from the west side of the Pentagon. It's impossible for me to say from this side of the building whether the building itself is on fire, up in flames...

(End of excerpts)

RICHARD FIDLER: That must have been a moment, in all honesty a moment of terror for everyone in that room.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah I mean it was, it was a stunning moment. But one of the things I do vividly recall is that everybody that was around me always remained remarkably calm.

My first thought after seeing it was, what about Tim and Janette?

RICHARD FIDLER: Now talk about them. Your wife and your son Tim were in Washington on that day.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah well my wife had come over with me and Tim at that time was on a working holiday in London, incidentally working for Lehman Brothers. And he'd come over to sit in on the address I was to give to Congress and say hello. We hadn't seen him. He'd gone to London in April of that year and we hadn't seen him since. So he was going to catch up. And he bunked in with us in our suite at the Willard.

That morning he and Janette had gone out with, in a car with the secret service to have a look around Washington. And they were in fact heading for the Jefferson Memorial, not very far from the Pentagon.

RICHARD FIDLER: So just putting myself in your shoes then - one plane's hit one tower. Another plane's hit another tower. A third plane is now hitting the outskirts of Washington, the Pentagon. And maybe at this point there was the report of a fourth plane that eventually crashed in a field.

JOHN HOWARD: Hadn't heard of that.

RICHARD FIDLER: Hadn't heard of that at that point. But you know an attack could come anywhere.

JOHN HOWARD: Oh well exactly, yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: And where's my wife and son?

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah well that was the first human reaction as a father, a husband and father of course. Then I was quickly told by the secret service, don't worry, they're fine.

RICHARD FIDLER: Yeah but you don't know that until they're right in front of you.

JOHN HOWARD: Well that's right. But when they found out what had happened I think Tim actually said to the security bloke in the car with him, he saw the smoke and he said, "Has that got anything to do with what's happened?" Because they'd heard what had happened in New York.

And they said, yeah the Pentagon's been hit as well. So they then were taken off to a safe house. In fact Tim tells me that the driver of the car turned around and he saw a policeman and he screamed to a halt. And he said to the policeman, "I've got the missus of Australia with me. Where's the nearest safe house?"

And they were taken to a safe house which was in fact a fire station. And they stayed there for I guess half an hour or an hour. And then they joined me in the basement of the Australian embassy in Washington.

RICHARD FIDLER: I interviewed a former member of the Bush White House staff who recalled an extraordinary scene within the White House where he looked out his door and he saw Vice President Cheney almost physically being lifted and carried by a contingent of secret servicemen out of the building.

What happened to your detail? Did they pick you up and carry you out?

JOHN HOWARD: No, no they didn't go that, they're, you know the Americans always do these things in sort of double measure. (Laughs) That's part of their make-up. No matter what the incident is, it's just Americans to a T.

What did happen is I went back to my room at the hotel after the news conference and after being satisfied about Janette and Tim.

I was just talking to my senior staff and they said, the security people want you out of here. And Keith Edwards who was the secret service American, head of my security, came in and said, "Prime minister, out of here. I haven't lost anybody yet and I don't want to start today. You can't stay here."

"Can I pack my bags please?"

And he said, "No, somebody else can do that."

So I just went downstairs and hopped into a car. And with sirens blaring and all that sort of stuff we were facilitated - as the Americans call it...

RICHARD FIDLER: Right, expeditiously...

JOHN HOWARD: Expeditiously, dramatically and noisily across Washington to the basement of the Australian embassy.

RICHARD FIDLER: Former prime minister of Australia John Howard is my guest in conversation today. I'm asking John Howard to recall the days around September 11, 2001 when he was in Washington and was an eyewitness to those historic events.

Do you remember seeing what was happening on the street? Was there panic on the streets at that point or just...

JOHN HOWARD: No there wasn't really. There was a lot of noise.

I mean when you're being facilitated like that, there's so much noise from the sirens. I don't recall seeing panic on the streets. I didn't see that at any stage except of course on television, close to where the attacks had occurred.

RICHARD FIDLER: Then you were taken to a bunker and...

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah we called it the bunker but it's a secure basement area.

RICHARD FIDLER: In case of nuclear attack essentially isn't it?

JOHN HOWARD: Something like that.

RICHARD FIDLER: Artefact of the Cold War possibly.

JOHN HOWARD: Possibly, I'm not quite sure.

RICHARD FIDLER: What's it like that space?

JOHN HOWARD: It was quite commodious. It was, you know it was a large area and then there were a few rooms off to the side where you could have a meeting.

The first thing I did when I got there was to ring John Anderson who was acting prime minister and just to find out what was happening in Australia because one of the early reactions of all of us was this could be the beginning of a series of attacks around the world. They've started in America. London or Paris or Tokyo could be the next and maybe even Sydney...

RICHARD FIDLER: Canberra...

JOHN HOWARD: Canberra, exactly. I mean they're the sort of thoughts that go through your mind. And at that stage they didn't know how many other planes had been hijacked. There was still as it emerged concern about this fourth plane that most intelligence suggested was heading for the Capitol, perhaps for the White House. But because of the bravery of people on board that didn't happen and the plane ended up crashing in Pennsylvania.

But that was the mindset of people at the time and very understandable. So I spoke to John. And John said, well we've had this and that meeting and we've got an exclusion zone around the American embassy and we've put one around the Israeli embassy. And we've taken certain other precautions. And we're having a full meeting of the National Security Committee or whatever tomorrow morning.

And I mean all of the things that were necessary to be done had been done in Australia. And I then immediately starting thinking about, I made mention to John, well I've got to find a way of getting home. So I knew there was going to be a problem getting out of America.

RICHARD FIDLER: Tom Schieffer, the US ambassador to Australia came in. How did he look when he walked in?

JOHN HOWARD: Well he, I mean he came in and he'd only been ambassador for a few months but I'd got to know him reasonably well. He'd come over with me as is the normal protocol.

I mean he looked shaken. And I walked over to him and I quite literally put my arms around him. And I said, "Tom I'm so terribly sorry for what's happened to your country. You don't deserve this." And he was quite moved by that reaction.

It was just one of those spontaneous things you do. And I hoped in that way to transmit to him as the representative of America in Australia just how I felt.

RICHARD FIDLER: I think we were all trying, as we were watching events unfold, no matter where we were in the world, we were all trying to fight off a sense of disbelief...

JOHN HOWARD: Oh yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: ...which tends to make you want to just sit there and not react. And of course you don't have that luxury as prime minister.

JOHN HOWARD: No, no. I...

RICHARD FIDLER: So were you fighting against disbelief to try and get a sense of the shape of things?

JOHN HOWARD: No look I understand. I mean by this time I'd, you know, I knew it had happened. And I don't pretend that I'd you know, magically assimilated what it all meant. I hadn't. Like everybody else I was struggling with coming to terms with the reality of it.

But I knew it had happened I knew that it was something that was going to have a profound impact on the Americans in particular but also Australia as a country that's very close to America.

Naturally you think, geez, what an horrific loss of life. And at that stage we were thinking in terms of almost tens of thousands because it's a huge building. And the fact that in the end the death toll was 3,000, horrible though that was, compared with what it might have been if a lot of people hadn't have got out it was much smaller.

So it was a gigantic cumulative tragedy of all those losses and what it represented was massive as well.

RICHARD FIDLER: You sat down and wrote a letter to President Bush.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah I did yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: Just to express solidarity and grief.

JOHN HOWARD: Just yeah solidarity and grief and identification and wanted to do all we could to help.

RICHARD FIDLER: You then appeared for a second press conference.

(Archival excerpt, 11/09/01):

REPORTER: It was an emotional prime minister who having monitored developments called a second press conference and speaking for all Australians read from a letter he had sent to president Bush.

JOHN HOWARD: Dear Mr President, the Australian government and people share the sense of horror experienced by your nation at today's catastrophic events and the appalling loss of life. We will stand by them. We will help them. We will support actions they take to properly retaliate in relation to these acts of bastardry.

(End of excerpt)

RICHARD FIDLER: Do you think the presence of your family in Washington that day sharpened your own feelings in that moment?

JOHN HOWARD: Probably did. It always does. It's human nature when something unexpected and very dangerous happens, it's human nature to automatically think of those you love most and those closest to you. There's nothing selfish about that. It's purely human and everybody reacts in the same fashion.

It probably did have an effect. Although I don't think in longer term our reaction as a nation would have been any different if I'd been there on my own. Maybe the language I used subconsciously may have been different.

But there's not much doubt that whether I'd had family with me or not or whether I had family or not, not much doubt that at some point Australia would have stood by the Americans in retaliating against this attack.

RICHARD FIDLER: Do you remember where you spent that evening of September 11?

JOHN HOWARD: Yes. So that evening we spent at the residence of the Australian ambassador Michael Thawley. We went up there in the late afternoon and had a very sombre

barbeque, just a small number of people, our staff and my family. And Janette and Tim and I spent the night there.

And Michael and I began to talk at great length because Michael had been my foreign affairs advisor. It was probably that evening when we started to talk about who was responsible that we first came to the provisional view that it was probably Al Qaeda operating out of Afghanistan.

And that of course became received wisdom very quickly in the television coverage and the very extensive newspaper coverage the following day.

RICHARD FIDLER: Previous to that there'd been two attacks on embassies in Africa, the USS Cole. So they'd, I remember thinking at the time they seemed to be the likely...

JOHN HOWARD: Well they were the prime candidates, yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: Former prime minister John Howard is my guest in conversation. Today John Howard recalls the events of September 11 from his point of view which was right in the centre of American power in Washington.

VOICEOVER (over music): You're listening to Conversations with Richard Fidler on ABC Local Radio and the worldwide web.

RICHARD FIDLER: Former prime minister John Howard is my guest in conversation today, recalling the events of September 11, 2001 when he was in Washington on a visit to meet president Bush.

September the 12th, the following day, you were due to address...

JOHN HOWARD: I was yes.

RICHARD FIDLER: ...the joint session of the Congress but of course that had to be cancelled because the Congress was in continuous emergency session.

Was it your idea to go anyway?

JOHN HOWARD: My idea when, I knew immediately after the attacks, I started thinking ahead well...

RICHARD FIDLER: Not the time to spruik a free trade agreement is it? No, no.

JOHN HOWARD: (Laughs) ...the address to a joint sitting is off. I mean they had higher priorities, much and all as they make like me. But I said to Michael, "Look, I still want to go and be there as a demonstration of friendship."

So we got in touch with the speaker's office, put to them that obviously the speech was off, I understood that fully, but I'd like to go. And he agreed and so we went off to this specially convened sitting which passed resolutions condemning the attack.

RICHARD FIDLER: You were greeted there by the speaker and the minority leader. And how did they welcome you? Were they distract...

JOHN HOWARD: It was in the office. It was in the speaker's office. And they just welcomed me in a very cordial way. Americans are very cordial people.

And they greeted me. And we just chatted. And I said you know, we just talked. And they were all in a state of disbelief.

Because the night before I think there'd been that amazing scene of all the members of Congress standing on the steps of the Capitol singing God Bless America.

CONGRESS MEMBERS (singing, archival): ... and guide her through the night with the light from above. From the mountains, to the prairies to the oceans white with foam God bless America, my own sweet home...

JOHN HOWARD: It was an extraordinary demonstration of unity to...

RICHARD FIDLER: And vulnerability too.

JOHN HOWARD: And vulnerability, yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: To me that's one of the most extraordinary moments in the whole couple of days, seeing the United States Congress who you think of as being this proud body representing the most powerful nation that's ever been on the face of the Earth, standing there singing that song in these quite small voices in a way. You got a sense of their own vulnerability and grief.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah the fragility of all of us in the wake of events that were unexpected and we can't control or feel we can't control, oh yeah that's true. It was quite an amazing scene.

We went into the gallery and Janette and I and Michael Thawley and his wife Debbie were the only people there. Then the speaker called them to order and said originally there had been planned to be an address from me but naturally that couldn't go ahead. But the prime minister is here. And he acknowledged my presence.

JOHN DENNIS HASTERT (archival, in Congress, 12/09/01): The chair wishes to acknowledge however the presence of the prime minister here today and extends on behalf of

the House his appreciation for the solidarity of the Australian people and the presence of the prime minister today...

RICHARD FIDLER: And they gave me a standing ovation.

(Sound of Congress members clapping)

JOHN HOWARD: It was a very moving experience. And I felt very grateful that I'd been able to personally be there and by that presence say, we're very sorry for what has happened, you are our dear friend and we'll do what we can, reasonably can to help you.

RICHARD FIDLER: It seemed like they went from a moment where they assumed the world was their friend to a moment where, do we have any friends. And then...

JOHN HOWARD: Well one of these things you should always remember about the Americans is that they are remarkably vulnerable sometimes when it comes to self belief. They often overdo this feeling that nobody likes them. And they therefore reach out to people who have appeared to be consistent friends over the years.

And that is part of the reason why the American alliance is so strong is they know that there's only really been one country that has stood beside them in every major conflict in which they've been involved since World War One and that's Australia.

RICHARD FIDLER: Do you think Australians have ever fully grasped the effect of that day on America's leaders?

JOHN HOWARD: No I don't. And that's understandable because they weren't there.

RICHARD FIDLER: But you were.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah and I mean certainly the fact that I was there deepened my understanding of how they felt.

RICHARD FIDLER: Afterwards you described it as an attack on all of us. How were you able to come to that conclusion so quickly?

JOHN HOWARD: Well because it was in my view completely unprovoked and it could therefore only be a symbolic attack on a way of life as well as an actual physical attack on two buildings.

RICHARD FIDLER: Again the symbolism was very powerful.

JOHN HOWARD: Well the symbolism was overwhelming. It really was because here was the building representing the economic might of the free world, free enterprise system, the

Pentagon representing the military might. And clearly that fourth plane was intended for either the Capitol building or the White House, probably the Capitol, representing the political centre of power.

And bearing in mind that America was with all her flaws, and there's plenty of them, the most powerful liberal democratic country in the world, it was an attack on our way of life.

RICHARD FIDLER: It was described I think by many journalists at the time as the you know, 21st century Pearl Harbour. In many ways it was worse than that.

JOHN HOWARD: Oh it was worse than Pearl Harbour. The actual loss of life was greater than Pearl Harbour. And because it hit New York and Washington, Americans felt that they had been attacked in a way they didn't feel that they had been attacked Pearl Harbour.

RICHARD FIDLER: This was an attack on civilians too wasn't it?

JOHN HOWARD: It was an attack on civilians. And there'd been no sort of warm-up.

I mean you know from the history of the outbreak of war against Japan there'd been rising tension. And it seemed only a matter of time before conflict did break out. Pearl Harbour was unexpected as to the specific but it wasn't completely unexpected as to the generality of a deteriorating relationship. Whereas this was completely out of the blue.

RICHARD FIDLER: You were obviously keen to get back as soon as you could to take care of what needed to be taken care of in Australia. How did you get out of Washington?

JOHN HOWARD: I got out of Washington courtesy of the Americans. They supplied Air Force Two. I couldn't get any commercial flights because they'd all been cancelled. Thawley had begun speaking to the State Department. He spoke to Richard Armitage. And I subsequently spoke to Richard Armitage that afternoon.

And they had arranged for Air Force Two to fly me from Andrews Air Force Base near Washington to Hawaii and then I'd pick up a Qantas flight in Hawaii and come back to Australia.

RICHARD FIDLER: I've got some audio here of you speaking just before you left for Andrews Air Force Base to fly out of Washington.

JOHN HOWARD (archival, 12/09/01): It is a terrible moment in American history. It has implications for other nations. Nobody should imagine that they're immune from this. Australia is not immune from this kind of possibility.

And anybody who suggests that Australia is somehow or other different and that precautions taken by other nations don't need to be taken by Australia and Australians are deluding themselves.

In many respects yesterday marked the end of an era of a degree of innocence following the end of the Cold War and a decade in which it seemed as though things which posed a continuous threat were put behind us.

But regrettably we now face the possibility of a period in which the threat of terrorism will be with us in the way that the threat of nuclear war was around for so long before the end of the Cold War. I think it is as bad as that.

RICHARD FIDLER: Sadly events in Bali were to bear out the truth to some degree of what you said there. But that wasn't apparent at the time.

JOHN HOWARD: No.

RICHARD FIDLER: It seemed to be a bit of a leap to take at that moment, that attack on America specifically would be an attack, we wouldn't just come to America's aid because we had shared sympathies but because you felt it was an attack on a whole way of life.

JOHN HOWARD: Yes I did. I felt that immediately.

RICHARD FIDLER: But you couldn't have known that could you?

JOHN HOWARD: No. Well in a way you never do know it in the sense of being able to prove that the subjective reason for that attack was a hatred of a way of life. (Laughs) I mean you can only ever assert that on objective grounds as you can't look into the minds of the terrorists.

But I think the last 10 years has demonstrated that that assessment was correct. And I had a sense then that it was going to go on for a long time.

One of the things that this did was to radically alter our conception of warfare. The image still of most people about warfare was an army rolling across a border. You think of that.

But this changed it. For the first time we were going to confront a situation where people were prepared to give up their lives in pursuit of an ideological, perverted objective, to be suicide, participants in a suicide attack. It was a different concept of warfare altogether.

And I sensed then that it was going to be with us for a long time and it was going to be very much a replacement of the fear we had of nuclear attack.

You know, different. I don't want to overdo that analogy because a nuclear attack carried out on a major population would wreak terribly devastation. But the great worry was then and still is that if terrorists ever got their hands on nuclear weapons they could wreak terrible damage.

RICHARD FIDLER: You decided on the flight back to invoke the ANZUS...

JOHN HOWARD: I did.

RICHARD FIDLER: ...Treaty for the first time. Was that a response driven by shared values with the United States or a kind of cool, pragmatic assessment of Australia's national interest?

JOHN HOWARD: Well in a way those two things blend in together. It just seemed to be the right thing to do. We had this treaty.

There was a certain element of symbolism in doing it just after we'd celebrated the 50th anniversary. It would send a very powerful symbolic reassurance to the Americans that we were close to them and we felt for them.

We didn't have to do it. But we could do it and it seemed the appropriate way of doing it.

And I knew that it would get support from the Australian community. And I sensed at that news conference when I went quite a distance in committing Australia to support the Americans in any retaliation, I sensed then that the Australian people would support doing that and the opposition would and as it did.

I mean to his credit Kim Beazley as opposition leader was very supportive of what the government later did. And he demonstrated very good credentials as an alliance partner of the United States.

RICHARD FIDLER: Did it ever strike you as, I don't know if there was a moment to contemplate the irony of things. But you'd gone there to commemorate the 50th anniversary of ANZUS and that was created out of the Cold War at a time when we were - I don't know was it the Menzies government or the Chifley government...

JOHN HOWARD: It was the Menzies government. It was 1951.

RICHARD FIDLER: ...yeah was trying to nail down American support in case Australia was subject to some kind of Asian Communist invasion.

JOHN HOWARD: I mean what you say there is absolutely right. I don't know that the irony did strike me at the time. Now that you put it that way maybe it should have. But what you say is absolutely right.

ANZUS came out of the Cold War period. It was a time when we genuinely believed that Communism was an enormous threat. It was only two years after the Communists had taken over in China.

It was also the time incidentally when legislation was put through the federal parliament by the Menzies government to ban the Communist Party, declare it an illegal organisation. And it was overturned by the High Court of Australia I think by a verdict of six to one.

(Laughter)

So that's another irony if you like. (Laughter) Just a reminder that...

RICHARD FIDLER: A contrary High Court. (Laughing)

JOHN HOWARD: Well it is a reminder that the idea of a court striking down government legislation is not new.

RICHARD FIDLER: Nothing new in that at all, no.

JOHN HOWARD: No.

RICHARD FIDLER: It was one of those things that allowed Australia also to not have to consign a huge chunk of its GDP to defence spending. We could sort of say, well we can always rely on, well often rely on America. You know it worked to our economic advantage in many ways.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah it's not incidentally though to be fair to Australia, it's not we weren't doing our bit. It was signed at a time when Australian forces were in Korea.

And of course later we were to commit Australian forces to the British campaign in the then Malaya against the Communist insurgency. And later on we committed Australian forces to confrontation involving Sukarno-led Indonesia.

So we weren't bludging on our alliance partners. But certainly it contributed to bringing us together and it cemented the association between the militaries of the two countries.

RICHARD FIDLER: Nonetheless there was a defence treaty that was created in the world of the early Cold War. And it was signed off by the Australian government in the hope that America would come to our defence in case of an Asian invasion.

JOHN HOWARD: Look, you know look the whole idea from the Australian end about that was that it gave us additional security from an external attack. You're absolutely right. And the point you make, isn't it ironic that the first time it was invoked the boot was on the other foot, that the powerful United States was being attacked and we were coming to her aid.

RICHARD FIDLER: And also America was being under attack by a non state actor to use that phrase.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah a non state actor, yes.

RICHARD FIDLER: It was an attack on the north-east of the United States.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah exactly. I mean it was, when the lately Percy Spender signed that I don't think he had in mind the first time it was going to be invoked was to help America in response to a terrorist attack in New York and Washington.

RICHARD FIDLER: What does that say about how our alliance with America has evolved over time given that it seems to be much more than a legal document?

JOHN HOWARD: What it says is that the treaty itself was sufficiently imaginative to allow for a lot of changed circumstances but still retain relevance.

And it also just demonstrates that the alliance is more than just a formal treaty although a formal treaty and all these other things are part of it.

RICHARD FIDLER: To use a line from The Castle, "it's about the vibe" rather than the document itself.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah it is about the vibe.

RICHARD FIDLER: John Howard is my guest in conversation today, recalling the events of September 11, 2001 and the consequences of those attacks.

On the weekend that followed that president Bush announced a war on terror that he said does not end with Al Qaeda.

GEORGE W BUSH (archival, excerpt from speech to joint session of Congress, 20/09/01): We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. (Applause)

Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated. (Applause)

RICHARD FIDLER: That's a bit like John F Kennedy's vow that America would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend" - a really huge, gigantic, open-ended commitment going on for just about forever.

Were you a little concerned when you heard that rather than president Bush setting a specific goal here?

JOHN HOWARD: No I understood that that was the type of language that an American president would use at that time.

America was still in a state of shock and her total preoccupation was to stop another attack. I mean the Americans believed for months, indeed for several years after September 2001 that it was only a matter of time before there was another attack on the American mainland. They really did.

I think we all make a mistake if we pass that over. And it helps explain the context of a lot of the other decisions they took.

RICHARD FIDLER: Still it's interesting that he was, he quickly used the phrase "a war on terror". But you at the time were quite reluctant to use the word "war".

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah well I'm perhaps by nature a more cautious person on certain issues. And Americans and Australians use language differently. I made that point earlier.

I try and speak in a way that can communicate a view to my fellow countrymen and women. I just know what language seems appropriate or hope I know (laughs) which seems appropriate in addressing Australians. And once again you don't automatically adopt the language of another country, close though you may be to them.

RICHARD FIDLER: There's a view that Osama bin Laden was hoping to, by those attacks to lure the United States into foreign entanglements that would polarise opinion in the Muslim world. You'd have to be for him or against him. He was looking for a dance partner and he found one in President Bush.

JOHN HOWARD: I've heard that theory yeah.

RICHARD FIDLER: What do you think of that?

JOHN HOWARD: Look it's, I'm sure that some people around bin Laden, perhaps even he had that view. But whether it was a view that others held I don't know. But it's a theory I've heard advanced.

The other theory of course is that he really hoped that this would strike fear and panic into the hearts of the Americans and they would begin to behave in an erratic fashion and all sorts of valuable consequences would follow that as far as his brand of extreme Islam were concerned.

I mean once again I can only look at the objective evidence. And the objective evidence was that the purpose of this was to intimidate and the frighten and to bully and to divide. And it did have the opposite effect.

And if you fast forward to now the balance sheet of the last 10 years is that the objectives he might have had in 2001 are further away from being realised than is now apparent. I mean I think...

RICHARD FIDLER: But they were never realistic. They were never realistic were they?

JOHN HOWARD: But fanatics are never realistic. That's why we dislike fanatics in this country. It was one of the reasons. We don't like fanatical behaviour full stop.

RICHARD FIDLER: But I just wonder about treating Al Qaeda like it was Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany which were genuine existential - Imperial Japan - genuine existential threats who did have a, which did have a prospect of success.

But Osama bin Laden's, Al Qaeda's plan to establish an international caliphate which we'd all be happy to live under - that was never going to happen.

JOHN HOWARD: No but you have to understand that the leader of a democratic country that's been attacked and lost 3,000 or more of its citizens in the most unprovoked way has to do something to respond. That's the nature of things.

I don't remember many voices at the time with much support anywhere in the world saying oh look, let's do nothing about this. I mean really there was overwhelming support for what Bush did to take out, try and take out Al Qaeda and take out bin Laden. And it's taken a long time to take out bin Laden but it finally happened.

It's fair to say 10 years on that Al Qaeda's reach is not as great as they would have hoped it would be. And it's met greater resistance in the Muslim world.

Look at Indonesia. I mean Indonesia is the third largest democracy in the world. And the Indonesian government has joined arms with Australia in fighting terrorism in that country. Without the help of the Indonesian security forces and police we would never have caught the Bali Bombers who killed 88 Australians in 2002.

So the idea that this would have resulted in a united Muslim movement against the West, that's not been realised and we've got to remember that. We shouldn't be too pessimistic about the progress that has been made over the last 10 years.

RICHARD FIDLER: Now we live in kind of a new phase of the world now it seems. It kind of seems much the political debate in the world has now come from the latest catastrophe which is the global financial crisis caused in 2008.

Al Qaeda has largely been smashed to bits. Osama bin Laden is dead. We seem to be in a new phase. But the Taliban lives on.

JOHN HOWARD: Oh the Taliban does live on. And that still constitutes a big danger, particularly looking at the fragility of the next door neighbour Pakistan which is a nuclear armed state.

Pakistan now is probably more unstable than it was 10 years ago. I worry about that country because it does have nuclear weapons. It's never been able to embrace democracy or anything approaching it very effectively. The influence of Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda affiliates and fellow travellers is very great in Pakistan.

And one of the reasons why we have to be very careful of what we leave behind in Afghanistan when we finally leave as all foreign forces ultimately will - not putting any time on it, it's unwise to do so - is the impact of that on Pakistan.

RICHARD FIDLER: I know you're not big on counterfactual history and the like...

JOHN HOWARD: No go for, try me.

RICHARD FIDLER: Let me try you on this one.

JOHN HOWARD: Mmm.

RICHARD FIDLER: I think not long after, some years into the war in Iraq, Al Gore made a speech where he said if he'd been president he would have prosecuted that war in Afghanistan relentlessly, have left no stone unturned until they'd found and killed Osama bin Laden and never would have got himself entangled on concocted evidence in Iraq.

JOHN HOWARD: Well the evidence was never concocted. The evidence was factually inaccurate.

RICHARD FIDLER: It came from Curveball who was concocting it. Curveball was the source and that was made up. That was, we know that now.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah, yeah. But I just felt in fairness to the American security agencies, they did believe it. They told me. I mean I've, when you're told by the head of the CIA and the head of MI6 that they actually believed the conclusions and the intelligence and everything else I saw indicated to me that although there were factual errors and there were no stockpiles of weapons found, the capacity to make them was clearly found, the idea that the whole thing was just made up by the CIA or...

RICHARD FIDLER: Well they wilfully ignored evidence that told them there were no weapons of mass destruction.

JOHN HOWARD: Well, well I mean that's not, if you read, if we get into the weeds of this, if you read the National Intelligence Estimate of November 2002 which was a collation of the views of all the American intelligence agencies, they reached judgements. They said on the basis of what we've seen this is our judgement.

Now okay you can say that in the process of reaching that judgement that they made mistakes. I'm not saying you're saying that but others may say that.

But this whole idea that the thing was invented and it was a lie is not right. There were factual errors. The conclusions were not supported by what was ultimately found. That's true. I accept that. That's self evident.

But this idea that right from the very beginning the whole thing was a lie is wrong.

RICHARD FIDLER: And when Osama bin Laden was found crouching in a room somewhere in Pakistan surrounded by the (laughs) the residences of the Pakistani military elite and was finally caught and killed, what did you think when you heard that news?

JOHN HOWARD: Well I was pleased. I actually rang the former president just to talk about it. I don't, you know I don't ring him regularly but we, I just felt it was something that given what he'd been through on the issue and happened on, the attack had happened on his watch.

And he was very pleased and he was complimentary about president Obama. He said it was a gutsy call to send the SEALs in because sometimes you can have wrong information. He was naturally very pleased it had happened.

We all thought the right result had been achieved. We weren't particularly troubled by propositions that he should have been seized and sent to The Hague.

RICHARD FIDLER: That day, September 11, 2001, that was experienced for you as a family event to some degree, your wife and son were present.

JOHN HOWARD: Yeah it was. That's true.

RICHARD FIDLER: Do you still talk about it as a family?

JOHN HOWARD: Occasionally. When I was writing my book we talked about it. I went over the events of that day with Janette and Tim who were both with me. My other two children were back in Australia.

But yeah we do go over it and we do talk about. And you know, when there's a reason. We don't talk about it all the time. And you don't. I mean your life goes on and other things have obviously happened. But in writing the book I went over it with them.

And it was an extraordinary day. I'll never forget the calmness of people. People did not panic. That was very impressive.

RICHARD FIDLER: John Howard, thank you so much for being my guest and for going through that extraordinary couple of days in world history for which you were an absolute eyewitness and participant. Thank you so much.

JOHN HOWARD: Thank you.

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