

KEN BACON
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CHARLES FERGUSON: Could you begin by telling us your name?

KEN BACON: Sure. I'm Ken Bacon.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Can you tell us what you did in the Clinton administration, and then what you are doing now?

KEN BACON: Yeah. I was the, uh, Pentagon spokesman during the Clinton administration; the assistant secretary of Defense for public affairs was my actual title. And I served in that capacity from 1994 to January 2001. And uh, since then, I've been the president of Refugees International, an advocacy group in Washington.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. So I'd like to ask you first about your experience in the Clinton administration, and then about more recent events.

KEN BACON: Um hm.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Everybody seems to have thought that Saddam in fact possessed weapons of mass destruction. What did you think, what did your colleagues in DOD think, during the 1990s?

KEN BACON: Well certainly, in the, um, when I got to the Pentagon in 1994, uh, everything I read, and everybody I talked to, led me to believe that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. Um, the reports we got from Iraq, uh, verified that. And um, in uh, 1996, I had the uncomfortable job of changing the, uh, administration's view on Gulf War illness. Gulf War illness, as you know, is a galaxy of, uh, of, uh, diseases that Gulf War veterans s-, uh, suffer from. And it, uh, ranges from, uh, insomnia to, uh, um, uh, night sweats to impotence, uh, to, uh, uh, various, uh, soft-tissue problems; a whole range of problems that have been linked to exposures, uh, to certain, um, elements during the Gulf War. What those elements are, um, we're still not entirely sure. But until 1996, the, uh, the administration was very firm in saying that, um, there was no evidence that soldiers had been exposed to, uh, chemical or biological weapons, or chemical and biological substances, um.

And uh, in 1996, we received, uh, new in-, I, actually I think it was 1995, excuse me; we received some new information, um, that, uh, caused us to revise that statement. And we realized that as many as 50,000 soldiers may have been exposed to, uh, nerve gas.

So we, um, went through a very awkward period of explaining this. Why did we insist, why did the U.S. government insist, from 1991 on, that there'd been no exposure, and then suddenly changed its mind?

And the reason we changed the mind, our mind, was that we, uh, blew up a, right, right after the war, it was within two or three days after the end of the war; we blew up a huge weapons dump called [Camisea]. And after that happened, we, um, uh, some, uh, UN, uh, investigators went in — weapons inspectors — and they were able to, uh, check fragments of the, uh, of the shells. And they found that there was, uh, uh, uh, s-, uh, traces of sarin nerve gas on the shells.

So we knew that as of 1991, he had had, um, a fairly significant supply of, uh, sarin nerve gas. And um, the government was able to go back, and reconstruct that, uh, weapons site from pictures; um, eh, uh, various overhead images that had been taken, o-, over the years. And then, uh, apply the images they had there to other weapons sites, and extrapolate, um, the number of shells that contained, uh, sheri-, sar-, sarin nerve gas.

So, um, we were pretty sure that he, that, we knew that he had had these in 1991; we knew that he'd used chemical weapons against the, uh, Kurds in [Halabja] in, uh, 1988. Um that's been well, well documented, by the VDC and others. And um, so we assumed that he maintained these, uh, maintained these supplies.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Was there any evidence, other than assumption, that he had maintained...

KEN BACON: Well, um, fa-, I think that, uh...there were certainly, um, uh, plans found, um, for manufacturing this stuff. We knew that he had a, uh, scientific infrastructure to, uh, manufacture chemical and biological weapons. Um, there were reports that were printed in the press, um, throughout the 1990s, and, and public comments made by, um, military officials in the UK and elsewhere about,

um, programs he had to develop, uh, uh, planes for disseminating, uh, biological weapons; the British referred to them, uh, as the drones of death. Um, they, uh, the British also referred to Saddam's anthrax air force. So there was a constant stream of information coming out of intelligence agencies, eh, um, leading one to believe that there were weapons of mass destruction; that he was continuing to work on them.

KEN BACON: Um, remember, during this entire time, from 1998, he was in a fight with UN's weapons ins-, uh, inspectors. And so the, uh, the logical conclusion was that the reason he didn't want, uh, UN's weapons inspectors in Iraq was because he had things he was afraid they were going to find.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Which makes perfect sense. But ss we now know, he in fact didn't possess any WMD after about 1994. So was there anything that you saw, or that others saw, that provided more affirmative evidence, other than Saddam's evasiveness, and the knowledge that he previously had had these weapons?

KEN BACON: Well, if you're asking me if I, if I personally recall seeing information suggesting that he had, uh, destroyed his weapons of mass destruction, the answer is no. I personally did not see any evidence suggesting that he was destroying his weapons of mass destruction.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

KEN BACON: If the question is, were people, um, did people suspect that these weapons might be degrading, over time; leaking, um, etcetera; yes, they expected that. But of course, we had no evidence that that was happening.

Um, of course, one of the strange things about this was that we weren't discovering, um, we weren't discovering new, newly manufactured caches of weapons of mass destruction. Um, at the time, this, uh, if people thought about that, uh, their answer was, well, the guy's evasive; he's tricky; um, he's trying to hoodwink the weapons inspectors. Look at all the trouble he's giving 'em. He's giving 'em this trouble. And you know, the trouble, um, was certain sites they couldn't visit; um, they had to give notice before they went to places. So he had ample time to, uh, to move things around, if that's what he wanted to do.

So the expectation was that he had these things, and he was just, it was a shell game: he was moving them faster than the inspectors could get there.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm. So the nature, you would say, the nature of the belief that he continued to possess WMD was essentially related to knowing that he was behaving in a dishonest way, and therefore inferring that there must be some reason for him behaving in this dishonest way.

KEN BACON: Well, uh, I think, if you were in the government at the time, uh, you knew s-, several things. You knew that he had, he had possessed weapons of mass destruction, and that he'd used them. Um, you knew that he was, um, very good at maintaining power, and doing anything that was necessary to maintain power. So that wouldn't lead a reasonable person to believe that he would be destroying these weapons of mass destruction; it would lead quite to the opposite conclusion; that he would be holding on to them.

Um, there was always a lot of speculation that he might, um, sell these weapons of mass destruction to some people, but there was another school of thought in, within the government, among, not even within the government, but within the type of people who followed Iraq; uh, that he would never sell them, because these were the basis of his power, and that he wouldn't want to run the risk that any of these would fall into enemy hands, or the hands of insurgents [within] his own country, so that he would, uh, control them, keep them, uh, tightly guarded at all times.

Um, and so there, people didn't seem to think that the destruction or elimination of these weapons fit Saddam's psychological profile.

And then, of course, um, we did have inspectors, uh, in the country; uh, the UN did. And [it's] no secret that the United States and, uh, for awhile, France, uh, but also the UK, um, spent a lot of time, um, and a lot of, uh, money, monitoring what was happening, um, in Iraq. And I'm not aware that we ever picked up any information to suggest that he was either destroying these weapons actively, or just letting them deteriorate to the point where they would be buried or thrown away.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Looking back, do you think that there was reason to think that he didn't have any WMD? Or, looking back, do you think, on balance, there still was good reason to think that he had WMD?

KEN BACON: Well, I think, given the world we lived in in 1994, 1996, 1998, even 2000; there was no reason to suspect that he was getting rid of them, based on anything that I knew.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

KEN BACON: Now, I hope there were people in the government who knew more than I did about this. But, um, uh, I don't think there was any reason to expect that he was getting rid of these weapons.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. Analogous set of questions about the sanctions and the impact of the sanctions. The sanctions, the Oil for Food program, and the impact of both. What did DOD, and what did you think and see then about the effect that the sanctions were having on Iraq; on the Iraqi economy, on Iraqi society, on Iraqi public health, on Saddam's military capacity, on the Iraqi infrastructure? You know, all those questions.

KEN BACON: Well, it's a complicated question. In terms of his military infrastructure, and the, uh, basic economic infrastructure of the country, um, we thought the sanctions were working; that they were having, uh, quite, uh, a dramatic impact. And uh, that they were, in fact, preventing him from improving his airplanes. We knew that his airplanes couldn't, uh, um, fly very many hours a month, because he had a hard time maintaining them. He couldn't really, he couldn't replace spare parts; um, uh, seals, etcetera, that had, uh, had worn down. Uh, we knew that that applied to other types of weaponry as well. We knew that it applied to parts of his, uh, economic infrastructure, such as electrical system, uh, uh, and, and other big, uh, capital, uh, projects.

We also knew it applied to the oil industry.

Um, we were also aware of reports that it was, uh, affecting the people of Iraq. Um, and we knew, however, that there was enough food going into Iraq to feed everybody in Iraq. Um, so the question was, how was this food being allocated? And um, uh, we also knew that the food pro-, the Oil

for Food program allowed medicines, certain medicines, to come in. The question there was, were they purchasing the right medicines? How were the medicines being allocated?

There were also, um, numerous reports that the program was being manipulated by Saddam. And the manipulation, at least in these reports, took several forms.

Um, one was that, um, that he was, uh, using the, uh, uh, the program in some way, uh, uh, and smuggling, that we also knew was going on. We knew that there was a fair amount of oil being smuggled out of the country, um, outside of the Oil for Food program; that this was generating revenues that we felt were being used by Saddam to, uh, for his own protective forces; um, to build new palaces; uh, and probably to buy, uh, to buy, uh, weapons in the black market.

Um, we also, um, uh, there were also reports that the program was being manipulated in certain ways to, uh, reward favorites of, uh, that Saddam had.

So, um no; there was a fairly close monitoring of the smuggling, and there were even estimates within the government of how much money he was generating from the smuggling.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And what about the effect of the sanctions on Iraqi public health? You probably know that there have been various assertions...

KEN BACON: Oh yeah. I, I, I know that, and I know that, um, I know that Saddam held public funerals all the time, uh, uh, carrying coffins around on taxis, and things like that. Uh, I have to assume that the sanctions did have a deleterious impact on the people. Um, sanctions are a very blunt instrument, and they are almost always manipulated, um, in a way that hurts the poorest people in the society, and uh, and don't hurt, sometimes even benefit, the wealthiest, most powerful people in society. This is the history of sanctions. Um, nobody would have, would employ sanctions if they had better ways to put pressure on a country. But frequently, it's the only, uh, non-, uh, uh, non-truculent, or non-warlike resource we have to put pressure on a country.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Was there a discussion in the Clinton administration and within DOD about the possibility that deposing Saddam by force would be the humane thing to do?

KEN BACON: I never heard that discussed.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And the Bush administration gets ready to invade Iraq. And you're president of Refugees International. What did you think, and what happened, and what was the nature of your involvement, and...

KEN BACON: Well, um, I was involved with a number of, uh, other NGOs in trying to make sure that the administration faced up to the potential humanitarian disaster that could come from a military, um, invasion of Iraq. And that disaster really focused on a couple of, uh, of, uh, gruesome events that fortunately did not occur.

Uh, the first was, because we all believed, at the time, that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, that if anybody had weapons of mass destruction, the time to use them would be to fend off an enemy force. Um, invading your homeland. So we assumed that there would be a use of chemical, uh, and/or biological weapons, and that the casualties from that would be horrific. And that no one was really prepared to deal with those casualties. The last time that chemical, uh, weapons had been used, um, consistently was World War I, and they were used, uh, against military forces, force-on-force used, not on civilians. So there had been the [Halapsia] incident, in Iraq, where chemical weapons had been used, and we had all seen pictures of the people with the blisters. Uh, we know that, that, that the population had been severely affected in terms of birth defects, and, um, other crippling impacts of, of this, uh, of these weapons on the people who lived.

Um, so we were very concerned, as, as the humanitarian community, that our government, um, needed to have a plan for dealing with this; that otherwise, hundreds of thousands of people might die, um, a-, a-, in ways that we couldn't prevent.

We were also concerned about a dramatic flow of refugees, the idea being that if we invaded, uh, weapons of mass destruction were used; um, the first, the first thing people would do would flee the country; they wouldn't stick around; they'd go into all the surrounding countries.

So, um, those were our main concerns; that the government have a coherent plan for dealing with these two possibilities. Of course, our projections were totally wrong. Neither of these things happened.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And what did you think about how well prepared the government was to deal with them in the event that they had happened?

KEN BACON: We didn't have a clue. Um, the government didn't really talk to us about this. It didn't really talk to the UN about, uh, um, what their plans were, or their concerns. Um, we do know that, um, that shortly before, well, we, I know from hav-, from reading books afterwards that they were in fact concerned about the use of weapons of mass destruction, and they were, uh, in fact concerned about refugee flows. In fact, they've said that they were prepared, uh, to deal with those. What they weren't prepared to deal with was the type of lawlessness that ensued shortly after the, uh, after the, uh, takeover of Iraq, so-called takeover.

So, um, we had no real engagement with the administration, at, at, at a high level; at, at any level, um, that, uh, of people who could tell us what their plans were.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

KEN BACON: This was not just Refugees International. It, it applied to CARE; Save the Children; the International Rescue Committee; the entire humanitarian community.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. And why do you think that was?

KEN BACON: Well, I think that, um, there were several reasons; some of 'em, in retrospect, might even make sense. Um, the first reason was that for a long while, um, the administration, um, maintained that the president hadn't decided to invade Iraq. Therefore it was premature to talk about the impact of a war that might not be fought.

Um, this didn't make a lot of sense at the time, because, um, uh, even while they were considering a war, it was reasonable that they would consider the, uh, implications of the war, and the impact of the war, and the cleanup costs of the war afterwards. But they made this from the, uh, uh, they made this assertion, saying that they didn't want to, uh, um, operate on the assumption that the president had made a decision he hadn't made.

Uh, looking back on it, um, after having read Woodward's *Plan of Attack* and other books, it's pretty clear that they president and his top advisers had made the decision, um, long before they

announced it publicly, um, and that they spent a long time, uh, preparing for this war, and presumably, at some level, preparing for the humanitarian implications of the war.

I think there was another reason, which is a very common reason among, uh, eh, bureaucracies and, and within defense establishments, that I could understand because of my previous job. Uh, which is, they didn't want to say anything that might have given a hint as to how they thought this was going to be unfo-, uh, how it would unfold. They didn't want to say anything that showed their hand in any way about what they planned to do.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

KEN BACON: And what their planning was.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. From what you saw when you were in DOD yourself, is the Defense Department capable of handling the occupation of a large country?

KEN BACON: Well...certainly could handle it better than it handled this one. After all, it has considerable experience running occupations, in Japan and Germany. It was some time ago, but there are extensive histories of how we did it. And uh, human nature hasn't changed that much. Um, I think there[^s a] fundamental difference between, uh, those, the two differences, I would say, between what happened after World War II and in Iraq was one, we spared no resource, um, uh, in the postwar reconstruction. Uh, we not only had the Marshall Plan, but we had literally millions of soldiers, um, occupying those countries, and they were completely dominated by, uh, by U.S. or Allied administrators. Um, that's the first point.

Um, the s-, the, uh, the second point is that we had completely destroyed those companies, countries, and therefore completely dominated them, to a much greater extent than we had destroyed, um, uh, Iraq, and uh, and to a much greater extent than we dominated Iraq, as it turned out.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And what did you think — you were in DOD during Kosovo, and the aftermath of Kosovo. And you certainly, I assume, saw a lot about how the Balkans were handled during conflict, post-conflict. What do you think about the Defense Department's institutional competence for running reconstruction efforts?

KEN BACON: Well, um...I think the Defense Department, the, the U.S. military is an enormously, uh, capable, adaptive institution when it's well led, and given the resources it needs to do a job. Is not to say that it'll do things right. It'll not, it's not to say it will do them quickly or cheaply. Um, but it can do almost anything it's directed to do, if it's given the time and the resources and the leaders to make that happen.

I think in this case, um, w-, there clearly was not enough public discussion of the day after; um, what would happen the day we knew we controlled Baghdad and Iraq, or thought we did. And there was, it turned out, not enough, uh, government, internal government discussion, private discussion, of this, at least productive discussion. Um, now, George Packer's book is pretty clear that a lot of planning did go on, in the State Department; but somehow didn't make it across the Potomac River to the Pentagon, or they chose not to pay much attention to it.

Would that have made a huge difference? Probably would have made a difference. Um, would it mean that things would be going swimmingly well in Iraq today? I'm not so sure. But um, they might not be as bad as they are today.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. When it became clear that the Bush administration was going to do this — was going to go to war to depose Saddam Hussein — did you talk to any of your former DOD colleagues about whether this made sense, about their views about it, about whether they'd been consulted; those kinds of questions?

KEN BACON: I talked to some retired, uh, military officials, who had, uh, real doubts as to whether this was going to be done successfully. Um, it would be difficult to get from an active-duty, uh, person, uh, a clear expression of, uh, of doubt. Um, you saw what happened to General Shinseki, when he was asked a question, uh, at a hearing, uh, about how many troops he needed, and he said, uh, about 200,000, for some long period of time. And uh, he was, um, reprimanded for that.

So it's not true that he was fired. His term, he had a four-year term, and it was going to expire. And uh, chiefs of staff of services generally aren't reappointed for second terms. So, um, he was at the end of his career.

But I, I, uh, there were certainly doubts among retired military officials, including some who had been at the very s-, very highest ranks of the military, and had considerable experience in and knowledge of the Middle East.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And did you talk with [UI] civilians about this...

KEN BACON: Not that many.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

KEN BACON: I mean, I, uh, uh, I talked about a-, I talked with anybody I could when I was trying to get them to pay attention to the possible humanitarian implications of an invasion.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

KEN BACON: But I didn't spend a lot of time, uh, at night, sitting around, uh, wondering what was gonna happen.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm. Okay. During the Clinton administration, you said that you weren't aware of any discussion of the possibility of invading to depose Saddam. Was there discussion of what to do, other than just continuing the status quo? Or people just assume, this is gonna go on for another 20, 30 years if it has to?

KEN BACON: Well, I don't think people assumed that. I, I think people genui-, genui-, gen-, genuinely believed that containment was working: that it was messy; it was costly to us; um, it clearly was costly to the, uh, average Mohammed in, in, uh, Iraq, um, uh, I-, in that it, uh, was crippling to their business and commercial life. Uh, but we felt that, uh, Saddam was pretty much boxed in. Uh, and it seemed reasonable to assume that, um, either, uh, uh, that he would stay boxed in no matter what. And that eventually, there would be either a, an effort to depose him, or he would, uh, he would die. I don't think anybody speculated that it would take 30 years, but you might have, if you'd been a, uh, if you'd been an actuary, I suppose you would have had to speculate that he might live another 20 or 30 years.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Fidel Castro, you know; 78.

KEN BACON: Right. Exactly.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Uh...

KEN BACON: He didn't lead a stressful life, exactly, but, um, I suppose there were elements of excitement to it.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. So basically, you didn't think that far ahead. You just thought, for the moment, this is the right thing to do. We'll leave it at that until something...

KEN BACON: Well, I wasn't a policymaker. Uh, my job was to explain what other people were thinking and doing.

CHARLES FERGUSON: You collectively, I'm sorry.

KEN BACON: And um...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah.

KEN BACON: ...uh, to the extent I, I, uh, thought about this at all, um, I thought that, uh, as I said, containment was messy, but it was basically working. It, it had, it had defanged him as a military threat. There was no possibility that he was going to invade a surrounding country. And um, there was also no evidence that he was supporting, uh, international or multinational terrorism. So he was sort of a self-contained, somewhat, uh, menacing, somewhat pathetic, uh, dictator. Uh, eh, eh, eh, in a country with a, a military force that was, uh, uh, degrading at some unknown rate.