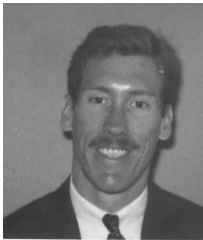


IPPR Interview No. 4, September 2001

## Joseph P Cassidy, Political Officer at the US Embassy Windhoek, on the Implications of the September 11 Attacks in the US

Robin Sherbourne



**“This is an opportunity to accomplish great good in the world.”**

**IPPR:** Why did the events of 11 September happen?

**Cassidy:** The immediate cause is that this Al Qaeda group, a loose alliance of terrorist organisations led by Osama bin Laden, took advantage of the openness of the American system to target and kill civilians. The ultimate cause is of course more complicated. Osama bin Laden and the people who share his views have a Millennialist view of religion. They hope to bring about some final apocalyptic battle and they believe by doing so they will cleanse the world of its sins. Only Osama bin Laden and those who perpetrated the attack know for sure why they did what they did, but we believe they are trying to provoke this great battle in the world.

**IPPR:** What is the nature of this great battle?

**Cassidy:** I think he would say it involves defending Islam but I wouldn't want to let him get away with that. In fact, Bin Laden's Millennialist world view is remarkably similar to Millennialist traditions in Christianity and Judaism. His view is to bring about this final conflict and attract God's intervention in the world and thereby bring about some kind of utopia.

**IPPR:** Does it involve the Moslem world putting an army together to fight the West or ridding the Middle East of any Western presence? How thought through is his strategy, does he have a grand plan?

**Cassidy:** Bin Laden would probably tell you this was very well thought out. The only thing I would point out to contradict that is what a big mistake it was to knock down the World Trade Centre and kill 8,000 people. Ultimately his great ambition is to provoke the US and other like-minded countries into fighting this great battle. His tactics, however, are proving to be a serious mistake. He has done something now so egregious that he has managed to unite the great bulk of the world and the world's governments against him.

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**“Bin Laden has done something so egregious that he has managed to unite the great bulk of the world against him”**

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**IPPR:** How sure is the US Government that it was Osama bin Laden?

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**Cassidy:** At this point the investigation is still continuing. It was not until two weeks after the attack that the US Government formally identified Osama bin Laden as the prime suspect – that was in President Bush’s speech to Congress. Before that we had examined lots of different leads. We got lucky and caught another group of hijackers armed with the same box cutters who had attended the same flight school in Florida. This is the biggest investigation in the history of the world involving thousands of FBI agents. At this point the evidence strongly points to bin Laden. Secretary Powell has made clear that the US knows it has a responsibility to present evidence publicly and that we will do so in order that the people of the world will be able to decide for themselves whether that evidence will hold. I believe that they will find it convincing.

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**“...the US knows it has a responsibility to present evidence publicly and we will do so...”**

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**IPPR:** The fact that the hijackers went to US flight schools suggests this plan was years in the making.

**Cassidy:** Yes, this was clearly a multi-year operation. There are many facets to it. One of the most recent press accounts was that the US is investigating hazardous material transportation companies because some of the hijackers themselves had sought licences to

transport hazardous materials throughout the US as well as purchase crop dusting planes. So clearly all this happened over a period of years.

**IPPR:** Is that not just scare-mongering? Surely if these people had wanted to they could have dropped some sort of chemical bomb over New York. This technology is relatively straight-forward and cheap. Why did they choose to crash airliners into the World Trade Centre rather than kill hundreds of thousands of people with chemical weapons?

**Cassidy:** At this point I don’t know their specific motivation. I think we all appreciate that having two commercial jet liners slam into the World Trade Centre makes great press. In an attack using weapons of mass destruction, CNN would not be allowed to get anywhere near the site, for example. The type of press coverage that we’ve seen has been much greater than what would follow the use of weapons of mass destruction. The method of this terrorist group has been to do things which have high publicity value. It’s brilliant in its evil way.

**IPPR:** A lot of people would say that the Americans had it coming to them. The US, US foreign policy, the US military, the CIA and US sponsored organisations have been responsible for equal atrocities in many parts of the world for 50 years or more.

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**“The people killed in the Trade Centre had no role in making US Government foreign policy.”**

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**Cassidy:** I hear that a lot unfortunately. A number of responses come to mind when I hear things like that. The first is legalistic. A core principle of the US and Namibian legal systems as well as many others in the world is a common law prohibition against collective guilt, that is to say we are responsible only for our own actions and not for those of others who commit crimes. The people who defend this act have a very expanded idea of collective guilt – that people in the US can somehow morally be targeted simply because of their proximity to people who make certain decisions. The civilians who were killed in the World Trade Centre represent some 67 countries and hundreds of those were either Moslem Americans or Moslem nationals of other countries. Those people have no role in making US Government foreign policy. For democratic nations of the world this prohibition against collective guilt is a core principle and I would hate to let the terrorists get away with abusing this principle.



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**IPPR:** What are the other arguments?

**Cassidy:** The other is simply human. There is a town on Long Island right now where many of New York's fire-fighters live. Right now there are hundreds of widows. It's pretty cold comfort to them for people to justify the attack by looking at geopolitical issues. I don't want to allow the terrorists to win this philosophical debate. People who believe in human rights and the dignity of humans shouldn't allow explanations like that.

**IPPR:** So you wouldn't even try to defend US geopolitical actions like the carpet bombing of Vietnam which killed we don't know how many hundreds of thousands of people, or the support for the Contras in Nicaragua, or for the Israelis and their invasion of Lebanon?

**Cassidy:** Actually I'd love to debate that, either now or at another time. But let me give you an analogy. There are many people in Namibia and elsewhere who believe President Nujoma's decision to send troops to the DRC was wrong. Many people feel it was morally wrong to prop up an undemocratic leader like Laurent Kabila. But could we in any way morally justify a decision to bomb the Sanlam Centre because of a Namibian foreign policy decision? The answer would be of course no.

**IPPR:** You've talking about civilians there. But the US bombed German cities throughout World War II inflicting massive civilian casualties.

**Cassidy:** But it's a little different. I went to UNAM the other day and talked to law students. One of the things I got them to think about was the list they would come up with of humanity's greatest achievements. The things that come up all the time are the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids. What I argued was the most important achievement of Man throughout our entire history is the series of human rights conventions that were widely adopted in the twentieth century. And one of those is the Geneva Convention. One of its specific provisions is that no matter how dire a military situation is no combatant can justify an attack on specifically civilian targets. So, while there were civilian casualties in the World War II bombing campaigns, those places were military targets. The World Trade Centre cannot be construed as a military target.

**IPPR:** ...and the dropping of atomic bombs on two Japanese cities killing hundreds of thousands of people?

**Cassidy:** President Truman had to make a decision. An invasion of Japan was imminent which would have cost at least hundreds of thousands of lives. We had just seen an incredibly bloody struggle on a series of islands in the Pacific. The Truman Administration made a decision that was the lesser of the two evils: drop two atomic bombs killing 50 or 60,000 people or go ahead with an invasion which would kill perhaps millions of people and destroy Japan's infrastructure. It's not enough to despise the World Trade Centre terrorists because they killed a bunch of people and knocked down two big buildings. All of us should despise them because they put us in a situation where conflict is inevitable and civilians will almost certainly be affected. But the alternative – doing nothing to combat terrorism – would be worse.

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**“As US policymakers we're going to have to rethink a lot of the lessons of the last 100 years”**

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**IPPR:** What impact have these events had in the US?

**Cassidy:** The first pretty obvious reaction is that US Government officials have been preoccupied with this one event. The normal activities of the US Government in peace



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time have now been subsumed into a greater goal which is trying to protect Americans and others from this threat. Ultimately the world really has changed. Certainly as US policy-makers we're going to have to rethink a lot of the lessons of the last 100 years. Since the end of the Cold War US foreign policy has been based on two things: the spread of democracy and the spread of economic opportunity. Those things won't change, they're core ideals of US foreign policy today. There will now be a third aim and that will be combating terrorist organisations that can cause widespread harm.

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**“There will now be a third aim of US foreign policy as well as spreading democracy and economic opportunity and that will be combating terrorism.”**

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**IPPR:** Will there not be changes in US foreign policy, especially in the Middle East? Will the US not lean harder on Israel than it has done? Or will it have the opposite reaction and give Sharon free reign?

**Cassidy:** The US Government has been involved at the highest levels trying to get a peace settlement in Palestine

for the last ten years. Everyone understands that continued conflict in the Middle East is not only a terrible thing but it also feeds an atmosphere where people are more likely to conduct acts of terror.

**IPPR:** Do you think this would have happened if we had had a peace settlement several years ago or would it have made it more likely?

**Cassidy:** The US Government will do everything it can to continue to engage in the Middle East peace process. But it's important to point out that the World Trade Centre has been attacked twice, the first time in 1993. The September 11 attack took place at what many people see as a low point in the relations between the Israelis and Palestinians but the first time was at the high point in relations in the wake of the Oslo Accords. Whatever bin Laden and people like him say, this isn't about Palestine. His goals are far more ambitious. As you know bin Laden is often criticised in the Islamic World for not caring about Palestine. It is for him a very secondary concern. So bringing peace to the Middle East wouldn't change the mind of people like bin Laden.

**IPPR:** The Middle East is not heavily populated with democratic states. Why is that so and is the US acting as a force for modernisation and democratisation or is it holding them back?

**Cassidy:** A good place to start is our annual human rights report which is a State Department Document prepared for our Congress.

We do those reports on every country in the world. The reports on many countries, including allies of the US, are very critical. It would be instructive to read the report on Israel which is incredibly critical. This document would tell you what kind of problems we see for democratisation in the Middle East. We don't pull any punches. Similarly, in our relations with these countries democratisation is a constant theme of what we do. In the wake of the Gulf War for example, the US Government talked with the new Kuwaiti Government about instituting a more representative system of government. There is now a council which, while not perfectly democratic, does indicate some movement. There are still a lot of countries in that part of the world that are dictatorships and they must change. Democratisation is important not only because it is morally the right thing to do but because it works, it contributes to conflict resolution and development.

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**“Bringing peace to the Middle East wouldn't change the mind of people like bin Laden”**

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**IPPR:** Are you not contributing to this West versus East standoff by spreading liberal democracy?



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**Cassidy:** Would people make the same arguments about us spreading democracy in Africa or Latin America? Of course not. All of us, and that goes for most of the people living in the Middle East, know that democracy is the right thing to do. It doesn't mean that all democracies have to share the same culture or must all look exactly alike. But there are very few people in the world now who actually defend autocracy against democracy and that applies equally to the Middle East.

**IPPR:** And yet democracy has made so little headway there?

**Cassidy:** This is frustrating. I think historians in the future will see this part of human history as a great flowering of democracy and they'll look back at the 50 years since the Second World War and say that was an incredible age of progress. Now we're in the middle of that process, so it is not quite so apparent. It's frustrating to have even one country in the world that's not democratic but the democratization process is inexorable.

**IPPR:** So how will the US response – this “war against terrorism” - now be shaped by this aim of democratisation? How is going into Afghanistan and shooting the hell out of people going to help the cause of democracy?

**Cassidy:** Let me tell you what I hope because of course I don't know exactly what is going to happen over the next months and years. At this point the number of countries that has pledged direct support is huge. So the international coalition against terrorism is real even if we don't know the exact details at the moment.

**IPPR:** Are these voluntary pledges? Hasn't the US basically given countries an ultimatum: either with us or against us?

**Cassidy:** No quite the contrary. A good example is the statements from regional groupings. The Organisation of American states issued a statement last week prior to any formal U.S. diplomatic initiative saying under the OAS Charter such an attack would trigger the self-defence mechanism. We saw the same thing with the Article 5 decision by NATO. The Organisation of African Unity has issued incredibly well-received statements not only offering condolences but talking very specifically of the need to bring the perpetrators to justice. I don't think we've yet seen the real flowering of the US diplomatic effort. Even in advance of that the coalition is forming because states see that it is in their interest to defend themselves against such terrorist groups. There will definitely be phases to this but for the time being the coalition has very tightly defined goals. We can all agree that groups like Al Qaeda pose such a grave threat that we must take action. Most of the activity taken so far is diplomatic and financial rather than military.

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**IPPR:** How many groups are we talking about?

**Cassidy:** It depends on your definition. The State Department regularly reports to Congress to identify groups according to strict criteria as terrorist organisations. That could be a basis

for what will become a worldwide list of groups that all of us agree pose a great threat. So ultimately, although this effort is starting out with one particular group in mind I hope as we go forward the goals of this coalition will broaden. There are lots of things that almost all of us agree on and that we could usefully do together. In spite of the tragedy of the events in the US, I'm optimistic that there really is an opportunity for the people in the world to get together and attack the world's problems of which terrorism is only one.



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**IPPR:** So the US is going to play a longer cleverer game to rid the world of terrorism?

**Cassidy:** The President has made clear that because of the threat these groups pose, they cannot be allowed to continue to exist. The alternative is to accept that every once in a while, terrorist groups will destroy a city somewhere around the world. The US will certainly be engaged in this effort for years maybe decades to come. Perhaps, we won't even know when ultimately we have won.

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**IPPR:** And what will the US attitude be towards governments, which do terrible things to their own populations joining the coalition?

**Cassidy:** I think we're going to have to handle that case by case. Certainly in the fight against terrorism there will be governments with whom the US hasn't had good relations but

whose interests lie in joining the fight. That said, the other two elements of US foreign policy don't go away simply because terrorism is so important to us. We will continue to pressure governments to become more democratic and institute free market reforms.

**IPPR:** What implications does all this have for Namibia?

**Cassidy:** We've seen a whole range of positive statements by high level government officials. President Nujoma was very quick to issue a letter of condolence to President Bush and these have been very well received. Foreign Minister Gurirab wrote in our condolence book "today we are all Americans". Namibia is a developing democracy. It has no history of supporting terrorism. I think that US and Namibian interests are if anything even more closely aligned now than they were before September 11. So I expect that our cooperation will increase. I also expect that the Government of Namibia will energetically embrace this international coalition against terrorism.

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**"I think that US and Namibian interests are if anything even more closely aligned now than they were before September 11."**

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**IPPR:** So the response so far has measured up and the US won't be pressurising us to commit resources towards the fight against world terrorism?

**Cassidy:** Well I wouldn't go so far as to say we will not ask the Namibian Government to commit resources. The US Government will be talking to the Namibian Government about the specific things it can do to combat terrorism. For example, Charge Borden met with the Minister of Finance yesterday and one of the things that they talked about was the financial implications of the war on terrorism. I expect that in that area US-Namibian cooperation will be very close. But that said, the international coalition is not going to demand identical things from all countries. It will have lots of different components and different countries will donate different things.

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**IPPR:** So if Namibia as a non-aligned country decides not to show total solidarity what will be the consequences?

**Cassidy:** Total solidarity is not what we expect from anyone. I've been a diplomat for 11 years and I'm not sure what total solidarity with the US would look like.

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**IPPR:** I thought that's what your President was looking for?

**Cassidy:** Certainly an important distinction will be made between those countries that are committed to the fight against terrorism and those who are not. So from that point, the US does view countries' willingness to engage in this fight as an important indicator of their relations with the US.

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**“Certainly an important distinction will be made between those countries that are committed to the fight against terrorism and those who are not.”**

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**IPPR:** And if they choose not to do so?

**Cassidy:** It's hard for me to believe that more than a couple of countries in the world would choose not to be associated in some way with this effort. Again, there won't be a demand by the US for specific action by other countries. This international coalition will be just that. It will be a coalition of like-minded

people and we will have to work together to determine what responsibilities this will have and what each member can most effectively contribute. So in that sense there won't be US demands at all. But of course the US has foreign relations and those relations are dictated by ideals that we share. I'm sure that within the coalition there will be differences of opinion on many subjects but the things that unite us will be much stronger than the things that divide us.

**IPPR:** Has the fact that it is a coalition served to moderate US action in the immediate aftermath?

**Cassidy:** I'm not sure that the US has taken any actions that people wish to moderate...

**IPPR:** But maybe there would have if there hadn't been this coalition...

**Cassidy:** I'm not sure that's true. From the very start Secretary Powell made absolutely clear that if this fight against terrorism was seen to be only a US effort then it would fail. We have realised from the outset that because it crosses all sorts of boundaries, terrorism cannot be combated by just one country. That is understood at the highest levels of the US Government. People don't need to worry about a bullying US forcing people to either join this coalition or not. There will be a process by which all governments realise that their interests are aligned.

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**“Secretary Powell made absolutely clear that if this fight against terrorism was seen to be only a US effort then it would fail.”**

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**IPPR:** Certainly until September 11 many observers got the impression that the Bush administration wasn't very keen on engaging with the rest of the world – on the environment, on racism to name just two issues – on issues that other countries found incredibly important. Has this changed?

**Cassidy:** We can talk about global warming. The US is a leader in environmental technology in the world without a doubt...

**IPPR:** I don't want to talk in detail about these issues but the fact is the US withdrew from negotiations deciding that it didn't need the rest of the world...

**Cassidy:** Well those were very serious policy disagreements. I would not want to minimize those very real disagreements. So, I take your point. That said, terrorism is different. Aside from a couple of governments in the world, there is no one defending what happened on 11 September.

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You may see me as hopelessly naive but I truly see this as an opportunity to form a coalition which will be a tool to solve lots of other problems.

**IPPR:** You think it could serve as a force to counter the tendency towards isolationism in the US?

**Cassidy:** Sure and I think it will also counter trends toward confrontation in international relations.

**IPPR:** So rather than withdraw, the US is more likely to engage with the rest of the world?

**Cassidy:** I think the process of engagement is inexorable. However big and powerful, there is no doubt that our interests lie with the rest of the world. We are a huge trading nation and that alone forces us to take into account the policies and feelings of governments and peoples around the world. There is nothing that will derail this process of globalisation. It's a beneficial process but it's not something the US would wish to impose even if we could, which we can't.

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**“I think the process of engagement [between the US and the rest of the world] is inexorable. However big and powerful, there is no doubt that our interests lie with the rest of the world.”**

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**IPPR:** What about US Namibian relations more generally. My impression is that there is generally a lot of anti-US sentiment in Namibia. We can talk about books of condolences but what do people feel in their hearts?

**Cassidy:** I think it's complicated. It's very difficult to talk about Namibian public opinion just as it is to talk about US public opinion...

**IPPR:** That doesn't stop us talking about it, does it...?

**Cassidy:** I think because of historical events we all know about there is a sense of some suspicion of the motives of the US Government and US foreign policy. It's pretty clear. I've been in Namibia for three years and I recognise that those suspicions are there. I think that they're generally decreasing and I think we can expect them to further diminish as time passes. There is also a broader feeling around the world that there is no longer a safe balance of power that protects small countries and that US hegemony presents a threat.

**IPPR:** So there's no sense in which the US presents a threat?

**Cassidy:** From this US diplomat's perspective, I think there is a threat. That threat is to dictators and corrupt leaders. There is definitely a threat out there because the US will use its power to further the things we find morally compelling. I understand people's concerns about US power but the only reassurance I can give is to give real world examples. Namibia was on the Security Council for two years and voted on a number of issues contrary to the US, even on issues about which the US cared deeply. Namibia has 1.8 million people and the US has 280 million, we have a huge military and Namibia has a small military and yet the US couldn't somehow cajole Namibia to vote with us. I think that shows the real limits of US power in the world right now. The US is far more constrained than past superpowers. Namibia and other small democratic countries can disagree with us without being victimized and that's a good thing.

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**“...the US will use its power to further the things we find morally compelling.”**

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**IPPR:** Why do so few people here fail to appreciate that?



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**Cassidy:** Most people develop their opinion about the US based on a few sources of information. Let me give you an analogy. Americans new to Africa may come and say “Africans think like this” or “Africa is like that” and I always know that they don’t know what they’re talking about because no one can make such blanket statements about such a huge complex area. The same applies to the US when people say “the Americans are like this” or “Americans think this.” The best thing for people who fear America to do is to walk down a street in New York City and they would find a much more complex picture.

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**“I think this is an opportunity for the world to come together and solve the very great problems that face us.”**

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**IPPR:** Will anything good come out of this tragic episode?

**Cassidy:** I think this is an opportunity for the world to come together and solve the very great problems that face us. Just helping to combat terrorism will confer benefits on Namibia and other countries. But this is also an opportunity to accomplish great good in the world. The UN is based on some

of our finest aspirations but during the Cold War was not a very effective tool for accomplishing good. Now we have an opportunity to reinvent the world and I hope we take it up.

**IPPR:** Thank you for this interview.

This is the transcript from an electronically recorded interview between Joseph P Cassidy, Political Officer at the US Embassy Windhoek, and the IPPR conducted on Thursday 27 September 2001. While every attempt has been made to reproduce the interview word for word, it has been shortened in parts and minor language changes have been made.