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PROGRAM Crossfire

STATION CNN-TV

DATE September 27, 1984 7:30 P.M. CITY Atlanta, Ga.

SUBJECT Robert Kupperman Interview/The Beirut Bombing

ANNOUNCER: From Washington, Crossfire. Tonight, whose mistake allowed the Beirut blast? The hosts for Crossfire: on the left, Tom Braden; on the right, Pat Buchanan. In the crossfire, Robert Kupperman, expert on terrorism.

PAT BUCHANAN: President Reagan yesterday suggested that, quote, the near-destruction of our intelligence capability, unquote, during the Carter years resulted in the lack of warning of the murderous truck-bombing of the U.S. Embassy Annex in Beirut last week. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democratic Senator from New York and Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, called the President's charge false and reckless, and threatened to introduce a motion to censure the President in the U.S. Senate if an apology is not forthcoming. And there the matter stands.

TOM BRADEN: Mr. Kupperman, as an expert on terrorism, can you tell me what you think about the President's statement that it was a failure, it was the gutting of the intelligence agencies by Stan Turner that caused this?

ROBERT KUPPERMAN: I think, like many things, it's partially true. And that is, I think Stansfield Turner emphasized the technological side of intelligence collection, as compared with the HUMIT, the spy side of the business.

BRADEN: Yeah, but now wait just a minute. President Reagan accused him of gutting the intelligence agencies.

KUPPERMAN: I think what he was referring to, if the President understood his own comment at all, was the human collection side. You don't collect on terrorists through

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technical means.

BRADEN: Look, Mr. Kupperman -- Pat, look, I simply have to say something about this. Now, I don't want to -- you know, I'm a human being and I know you're an expert on terrorism. But you obviously don't know much about the Central Intelligence Agency. I know those people. I know every one of those people who was dismissed. I can tell you what their names were, I can tell you where they live now. Now, those people were covert action types. Most of them had been in the OSS. They were getting along in years. They had done nothing. I hate to use the term, but some of them were deadwood. And not one of them, with one exception, out of about 700 people that Turner got rid of -- and they've all been replaced now -- about 700 people, only one of them was an intelligence expert. The others were covert action types, which wouldn't have made any difference in Lebanon. Now, I know that to be true.

KUPPERMAN: Then you've answered your own question, haven't you?

BRADEN: Well, I just wanted to straighten you out. I'm sorry but I had to straighten you out, because that charge is just totally false.

BUCHANAN: Well, you're talking about the firing from Jim Angleton's shop after Angleton left.

Did Stansfield Turner and Jimmy Carter gut or nearly destroy, to use the President's phraseology, the intelligence capability of the CIA?

KUPPERMAN: On the human side, the human collection side, which is what is needed for the terrorism field, we have done very poorly for quite some years. It certainly has been argued, the case had been argued for quite some time, maybe incorrectly...

BRADEN: We surely have done damn poorly, Mr. Kupperman, but the intelligence side was never touched by Stansfield Turner. The human intelligence side was not touched. The human covert action capacity was, yes, was...

BUCHANAN: Question: Was the human intelligence side nearly destroyed? Was the President right when he made that statement yesterday?

KUPPERMAN: What I understand, not having been in the intelligence community personally, but from those in the terrorism business at the CIA, that the field was decimated during the Turner years.

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BUCHANAN: The anti-terrorism unit at the CIA was, from your conversations with people in it, nearly decimated or destroyed during the Turner...

KUPPERMAN: Seriously injured, whatever particular adjective you want.

BUCHANAN: So the President's comment there about the agency is fair comment and criticism. Now, all right.

Well, let me move on, then. Look, what intelligence do we really need, though, in Beirut when a truck bomb destroys the embassy, a truck bomb blows up the Marines, to guard against a truck bomb coming at the embassy annex? Do you need any great intelligence to know that they might strike that way?

KUPPERMAN: You need two things. Clearly, if you can cut them off at the pass because you've learned ahead of time, that's all the better. In all cases, the host country is presumed to provide a lot of help. In Lebanon they can't do it. We have...

BRADEN: So we relied on the Lebanese guards. I don't know what the intelligence capability has to do with that.

KUPPERMAN: The point I'm trying to make to you is that the real failure here was security. The real failure, in many cases when we know that this is the sort of problem we're going to face...

BUCHANAN: Truck bomb.

KUPPERMAN: A truck bomb -- is we made no adequate precautions.

BRADEN: If the real problem was security, then the real problem wasn't the intelligence, wasn't some people being fired from the CIA back in the 1970s.

BUCHANAN: In other words, what the President said maybe true, but it may not be relevant at all.

KUPPERMAN: I guess what I'm saying is that even if it were entirely relevant, say three years ago, there comes a point where it becomes irrelevant. It is now our problem. It is now Reagan's problem.

BUCHANAN: All right. Then this calls for a political judgment. In speaking to those kids out there, maybe he spoke off the cuff, but did he try to pass the buck to Jimmy Carter unfairly?

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KUPPERMAN: I think yes.

BUCHANAN: You think he did.

KUPPERMAN: I 'don't think that whatever happened four years ago is a clean reflection of what is going on today.

BUCHANAN: All right. That clears that up. Let's get into this.

Who, Mr. Kupperman -- why cannot we find out the group or the office or the individual who, after these two massacres of Americans in Lebanon because of truck bombs, who has responsibility at the annex for preventing or stopping that kind of attack, so that we can say, "Look, Jones," or Smith, "you've been a good employee, you've done your job, but you're responsible and a horrendous failing has happened. And therefore, by order of the Commander-in-Chief, Ronald Reagan, you're gone"?

KUPPERMAN: Pat, you can pick anybody you want and you can find someone or some collection of people responsible for security and you can dump them. On the other hand, you've got to understand that the whole subject of terrorism varies from apathy, to being treated with apathy to paranoia to apathy to paranoia.

BRADEN: Well, let me ask you this. After this latest bombing -- that was the third in 17 months during the Reagan Administration -- we have Caspar Weinberger saying any terrorist could hire a helicopter, you have George Shultz saying embassies have to stay open, and you have the President talking about how what a long time it takes to fix up the kitchen.

Now, the man who was in charge of security in Beirut had advised against this move.

BUCHANAN: Whom did he advise and who made the move? I guess that's the question, if you're talking about specific, detailed responsibility.

KUPPERMAN: It's the Office of Security in the State Department.

BUCHANAN: In the State Department.

KUPPERMAN: Yes.

BUCHANAN: George Shultz, the Secretary of State, tough statement after the Marines were hit. He's talking with the Israelis: We're going to go into preventive measure against terrorists and we're going to take action beforehand, preemptive

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strikes. It was very tough. Now we've had these three massacres in Beirut by one group calling itself Islamic Jihad, if it exists. There has been no retaliation. There have been no preventive strikes.

I mean is the Reagan Administration -- are they bluffing over there, Mr. Kupperman?

KUPPERMAN: I think they're kidding themselves. I don't think that they know about who these people are. I don't think they have enough information about precise locations. And I think they cannot get used to the notion that they may have to be in the assassination business.

BUCHANAN: All right. That's exactly what I wanted to get to, the assassination business. Look, we do know, I think, that -- we might not know who the individuals are who did this, but we do know who has given them a measure of support -- and I guess that's with the Marines. It was the Iranians, or whatever it is, that moved the stuff in there. They're operating under an area controlled by Syria. And as long as a group of terrorists, a couple of them, as long as they have a state that's either looking the other way or encouraging them or giving them a benediction, is the state which supports terror not responsible for the terror that's carried out?

KUPPERMAN: There's no question that they are responsible. The question, I think, that we face is how far, understanding some degree of plausible deniability, how far we're willing to go and what risks we're taking, and how capable are we? Are we going to bungle it if we go in and find three or four of our people caught and hanged?

BUCHANAN: Go in and assassinate whom, do you think?

KUPPERMAN: The leader of the -- the operational leader or the planner in the intelligence agencies in Syria, for example, or Iran.

BRADEN: Let me interrupt you both to tell you something that I just found out because it was just handed to me. Jimmy Carter said today, this afternoon, late this afternoon, that Reagan's suggestions that the CIA budget cuts had led to the embassy bombing is, quote, personally insulting and too gross in its implications to ignore. He went on, "This series of tragedies has been brought about by the President's deeply flawed policy and inadequate security precautions in the face of proven danger." So, just to settle that one, what Carter thought.

BUCHANAN: What do you think of that statement?

KUPPERMAN: Look, we're clearly in an eara -- at a time,

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rather, of obvious political accusations. I don't think that Stansfield Turner's actions four years ago, or whatever, make any difference whatsoever now. We are faced with tremendous operational and intelligence questions, and we are faced with apathy, disorganization within the government in terms of how we're going to handle this problem.

BRADEN: Well, how would you handle it?

BUCHANAN: Why is there apathy?

BRADEN: Let me just ask -- you mentioned apathy. Supposing -- you're an adviser to the White House, you're an adviser on security to the State Department, you've advised the CIA, you've advised embassies. What would you tell them to do right now? Because I think you've pointed out exactly what the situation is.

KUPPERMAN: Let me tell you. Number one, in the case of security, in those areas where you're in obvious high risk, which obviously includes Beirut, you need big buffer areas, physically. You need explosives dogs -- that is, dogs that have been trained to sense explosives. If you can't come up with exotic defense systems, such as pop-up barriers or whatever, you can come in temporarily with a dump truck with sand just to block...

BRADEN: Well, wasn't it really an example of apathy that, lacking a steel door because they'd ordered it and it hadn't arrived, they didn't pull up trucks full of sand in the way they did right here at the White House?

KUPPERMAN: Well, it was an act of negligence. It's more than apathy.

BRADEN: All right, negligence is what we've decided right now, so far, on the question of who's responsible for the Beirut bombing. We're talking with an expert on terrorism, Robert Kupperman of Georgetown University.

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BUCHANAN: I want to go back, Bob Kupperman, to a point you made. You mentioned the word assassination. Let me give you some examples of what -- let's take Qaddafi. Qaddafi has sent people into Western Europe to murder dissidents. Presumably, he has sent them into the United States to do the same thing. There was talk of hit squads out to kill the President.

Now, if -- this is hypothetical. If we found out that Qaddafi is sending hit squads in to kill the President, certainly you've got a moral right to retaliate against him. Would you

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recommend either an attempt on his life, Qaddafi's life, or use of American planes, for example, to strike at Qaddafi in his tent one night, or what? What I'm getting at is the idea of state-sponsored terror. It makes no sense to run down the two or three Shiites who are willing to go to their death, and take them out and hang them, when a state is sponsoring and supporting it.

KUPPERMAN: Pat, there's no question in my mind that we've got to be very careful about covert operations. I don't think we do them well. If we bungle it, the public relations, the international effects would be really very substantial.

BUCHANAN: Well, that's secret. Suppose you do it in public.

KUPPERMAN: What I'm saying is I think it ought to be done overtly, if we decide to do it at all.

BUCHANAN: Overtly.

KUPPERMAN: Overtly.

BUCHANAN: All right. What would you recommend...

BRADEN: Assassinate Qaddafi openly? You couldn't...

BUCHANAN: You could do it overtly by an air strike.

KUPPERMAN: Air strikes or whatever.

BUCHANAN: Air strikes on Qaddafi.

What would you do now? Look, three times we've been hit by people, all of them, presumably, operating under control of the Syrians in occupied Lebanon. The Israeli didn't allow these people to operate. The Falange didn't, the Lebanese didn't. Presumably, it was the Syrians. Are not the Syrians responsible?

KUPPERMAN: In part, certainly yes. They clearly did the planning for the incident involving the Marines. They clearly were the only of the two nations involved with the technical capacity to supply both the explosives and -- you know, setting off a multi-ton bomb is not a trivial matter. It takes a bit of geometry and electronics.

BRADEN: So that you feel that the Syrians had to know that it was coming in and had to approve it. All right. Then why is our Secretary of State saying Syria has been helpful in the Middle East?

KUPPERMAN: I think that he's got a broader agenda, and I think that business of terrorism is occasionally...

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BRADEN: You wrote what seemed to me an extremely interesting article not long ago -- I've forgotten in what newspaper I read it -- that said, look, we're going to have -- this is coming home to the United States, or there's a very good chance that it will. Now, what kind of a life would we be leading here in this country if in every city we had to protect, I suppose, the [technical difficulties], we'd have to protect all our -- Washington would certainly be a different place.

KUPPERMAN: Tom, I believe that, largely, what I'd like to use is overt means, as overt means as we could, that we've got to make some countries and some terrorist groups that are harbored by those nations feel vulnerable. There have to be some public, rather unpleasant, even violent examples of what can happen to them.

BRADEN: Aren't we taking a chance -- and I think you mentioned it when you were talking with Israel's former Defense Minister Arens -- we take a chance if we make a mistake. Suppose that our diligent press corps finds out that those guys weren't responsible at all after we've just delivered a bomb on them.

KUPPERMAN: Tom, you know, we do the best job we can. We're going to have to make -- we're going to be in the business of making mistakes occasionally.

I'm sorry, Pat, hold on.

BUCHANAN: Sure.

KUPPERMAN: There's an important point here. We have got to understand that we not only can make mistakes and that terrorism may strike here, but we're a large great country with liberal values to uphold. And it seems to me that if we're going to do anything, we're going to have to do it abroad as overtly as we can, justify as best we can the intelligence and political reasons why we did it, and we're going to have to suffer the consequences in some cases.

BRADEN: We now have three car-bombings in 17 months, and we've had both Mr. Reagan and Mr. Shultz saying that we would take some vengeance about that, we would do something about this. And we've done nothing. What would you suggest we do now?

KUPPERMAN: If you wait long enough and you can't identify the people, you better wait for the next incident. You've got to be able to do it very quickly afterwards.

BUCHANAN: Bob Kupperman, look, let me list you groups, organizations and states which have supported or endorsed terror: the PLO, Syria, Libya, North Korea, South Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Cuba. Bulgaria and Romania have sent assassins into Western

Europe. Now, all of those, with the exception of Iran, which the Ayatollah operates his own shop, all of those are client states of the Soviet Union.

Now, what I would like to know is which of those states, if any -- let's take North Korea, for example, which blew up half the South Korean Cabinet last year in Rangoon, ax-murdered a couple of Americans a few years ago, captured the American Pueblo and shot down an American plane in international waters. It seems to me that North Korea and other states do this because (A) there's a great benefit to it and (B) there's no punishment whatsoever.

Now, what should we have done in the case of North Korea?

KUPPERMAN: The case of North Korea? We may very well have had to use, since it didn't affect us directly -- that is, the case in Burma, the South Koreans -- I think all we could do under those conditions was to encourage covert operations, or, behind the scenes, even an overt case, aid the South Korean government in doing the job. We can't do it for everybody else.

BUCHANAN: You mean a tit-for-tat thing. You mean if they kill our Cabinet minister, we kill one of theirs?

KUPPERMAN: Maybe.

BUCHANAN: But it seems to me a great power like the United States cannot behave like we're in some Italian city-state in the Fifteenth Century, stabbing them in the back when they stab us. We're a great nation.

KUPPERMAN: You're right. The point is, if we do anything of that nature, that's got to be extremely covert. We can't bungle it to the point that it comes out that we were involved.

On the other hand, if one of our embassies gets hit, as just did happen, and if we can reasonably justify that it was some particular group harbored by Iran, harbored by Syria, whatever, then I think we ought to go in with F-15s.

BUCHANAN: Hit, in other words, Iran.

BRADEN: Hit Iran or hit Syria.

BUCHANAN: Who would you hit in Iran?

KUPPERMAN: Cells, locations, training camps for the Revolutionary Guards, for example.

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BRADEN: And in Syria?

BUCHANAN: Do you think that would pay off?

KUPPERMAN: I think it's a little risky, but in the long run it's going to pay off for one reason. It'll look as though the home team can win occasionally.

BRADEN: Doesn't the Reagan Administration, which has touted itself as something very strong and stand up tall, doesn't it look a little weak, in view of the fact that we've now had three in 17 months?

KUPPERMAN: Tom, I personally think -- and since you know the intelligence business and have been in it, and I've not. I think that you would agree that you try to keep the business fairly quiet, and the last thing you need is a lot of machismo about it. It seems to me that...

BRADEN: All right. Well, I bet -- the problem is when this thing first happened, I bet Pat that President Reagan would retaliate, and he was a little doubtful. I thought he would. I thought something would happen in the next few days. Now, it may be that something is in the wind, something is in the works. I don't know.

KUPPERMAN: Tom, it could happen, you know. But the longer you wait, the less excusable, the less justifiable your raids become, particularly because we're a great nation.

The only thing is, let us suppose that we hit the wrong people, let us suppose that an Iranian cell operating here decides to get very active, let us say that they set off a large bomb somewhere.

BRADEN: Here.

KUPPERMAN: Here. Or they hit some key transformers and blacken the Northeast for a week or so.

BUCHANAN: That's an act of war.

BRADEN: Well, all right.

KUPPERMAN: It's easy to do.

BRADEN: It looks bad ahead.

Mr. Kupperman, Pat and I want to thank you for being our guest on Crossfire.

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BUCHANAN: Tom, I don't think Ronald Reagan's statement out there in Ohio was deliberate. I think it's just something he fired off the cuff. I don't think it's going to sell. It looks unpresidential. More important than whether or not the agency was gutted by Jimmy Carter is not the important thing. It looks like he's sloughing off the blame on somebody else. It's not the way Ronald Reagan is supposed to lead.

BRADEN: Yeah. Except the only problem, Pat, is he did exactly the same thing nearly a year ago when all those Marines were killed. President Reagan said, well, it was the fault of the previous Administrations and the way they handled the intelligence agencies. So I don't think it'll play the second time, any more than it did the first.

But somebody ought to be responsible. Somebody's head ought to roll. Somebody should be fired.

BUCHANAN: Somebody's head should roll. Somebody ought to be fired. But last time -- I'll give the President credit --he did stand up and say, "Look, the buck stops here. Ultimately, I'm responsible. It's me." He didn't do that this time.

BRADEN: Well, let him go to the American people and say so.