

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
AFSA Dissent Series

AMBASSADOR JONATHAN ADDLETON

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
Initial interview date: April 1, 2024
Copyright 2026 ADST*

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Monday, April 1, 2024. This interview with Ambassador Jonathan is part of the ADST/AFSA Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Modern Foreign Service highlighting the winners of the AFSA Awards for For Constructive Dissent. Ambassador Addleton won the Christian A. Herter Award for constructive dissent at the senior level of the Foreign Service. Jonathan, your constructive relates to your tour of duty in Afghanistan. Take a moment to explain the situation and how you decided to express a constructive dissent.

ADDLETON: I am a career Foreign Service officer. I volunteered for a year-long assignment in Afghanistan in 2012, having by that time served in the Foreign Service for 28 years including assignments in South and Central Asia. I also spent much of my childhood in Pakistan and had visited Afghanistan on a number of occasions. So I felt that I had an affinity for the country. Just prior to serving in Afghanistan I had spent three years as the US Ambassador to Mongolia. At some level, I viewed Afghanistan as one of the big issues of the day, one to which I could also contribute. I also took seriously my job title as a Foreign Service Officer — service is what we are supposed to be about and Afghanistan would involve service of the most challenging kind.

Perhaps I didn't realize how tough it was going to be, that southern Afghanistan was viewed as the most "kinetic" part of the country. More specifically, I would serve as the Senior Civilian Representative for Regional Command South (RC South), as it was sometimes called. If Afghanistan had been a "normal" or "regular" country, it might have been like an assignment as CG (Consul General) in the southern part of the country. Other former Ambassadors encumbered some of these regional positions in places like Herat, Bamiyan and Jalalabad. And so my assignment would be in Kandahar — I would serve for one year as the Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) for southern Afghanistan.

Q: And this is, again, in 2013?

ADDLETON: I was assigned to serve in Kandahar for one year, from August 2012 until August 2013.

Q: Can you recap the major aspects of your activities? In other words, what were the projects or programs that you oversaw?

ADDLETON: Just prior to my arrival in Kandahar in August 2013 the Administration announced that there would be a drawdown in the US presence in Afghanistan. That announcement dominated many of the conversations that I had with Afghans throughout my assignment. Basically, I was charged with explaining to Afghan counterparts that “we are leaving but we are still with; we are departing but we still support you, though in a different kind of way”.

This drawdown had a big impact, not only in terms of our military presence but also in terms of our civilian presence which included civilians under Chief of Mission authority assigned to several Provincial Reconstruction Teams and District Support Teams scattered across southern Afghanistan. So that became another aspect of my time in Afghanistan, to manage that withdrawal.

I don’t remember the numbers after all the years. However, I think when I arrived there were something like 140 people under Chief of Mission authority located in a number locations across southern Afghanistan. Of course, “Chief of Mission Authority” meant under the Ambassador’s authority. I reported to the Ambassador and was therefore responsible for these 140 individuals representing a variety of civilian departments and agencies including State, USAID, USDA and others. It would be a steep drawdown in terms of both people and locations. By the end of that year, there would be a handful of us based at a single location — Kandahar Air Field.

While heading the civilian US government presence in southern Afghanistan, part of my responsibility also involved liaising with the military. In my case, that meant liaising with General “Abe” Abrams, the Third Infantry Division commander in southern Afghanistan. I had regular contact with him, meeting with him and his colleagues on a daily basis.

I should also mention that while I spent most of my career as a Foreign Service Officer assigned to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), this was not a USAID assignment, rather it was a State Department assignment. Our team included a senior USAID officer who looked after USAID activities, mainly in health and education. He reported both to me (as Senior Civilian Representative in southern Afghanistan) and to the USAID Mission Director in Kabul. In that sense, oversight of development activities was included as part of my work responsibility as well.

All that said, I viewed the diplomatic aspect of my assignment as in many ways the most important one. In fact, I had far more mobility than people might realize. Throughout the years I talked to dozens of tribal leaders as well as various other Afghans including government officials, religious leaders, politicians, businessmen, NGO leaders and others. Some of this outreach was focused on the economic and social issues but it also had a political dimension as well.

At the same time, this was a multinational effort involving representatives from several other countries. For example, one of my counterparts was the Australian Senior Civilian Representative assigned to Uruzgan, one of the four provinces in Regional Command South (RC-South) that fell within my area of responsibility. So this assignment involved an international dimension as well.

Put another way, my responsibilities included a diplomatic presence and engagement; outreach to Afghans; oversight of our program assistance; liaison with the military; and preparation for a major drawdown of the civilians under Chief of Mission

authority working in southern Afghanistan. Obviously, all this work was in some way related to diplomacy. However, to a certain extent it also involved development issues as well as security concerns. Often foreign policy is described as involving a combination of diplomacy, development and defense — we engaged in all three areas during my time in southern Afghanistan. Arguably, public outreach including public affairs was an important part of our mandate as well.

Q: The drawdown you mention, did it include all major agencies – State, USAID, military, etc.? I ask because once one agency starts drawing, others are affected as well.

ADDLETON: That's a good point — the drawdown involved the full spectrum of the US presence across Afghanistan including southern Afghanistan; it wasn't simply the State and USAID presence that was drawing to a close; the military was drawing down, reducing numbers and closing military bases. Indeed, the military had a term for their drawdown: "retrograde," the point being that as they departed they turned over the bases that they had previously occupied to the Afghan military. Basically they were leaving; however, an effort was made to ensure that this departure was taking place in a measured, responsible way.

Q: In your talks with tribal leaders, local leaders, and so on, in explaining to them that we were drawing down, what was the general reaction?

ADDLETON: Disappointment was definitely a big part of it. I've said it before but it is worth mentioning again here as well: the drawdown meant that we were leaving and turning over our security responsibilities to the Afghan military. And one sort of plaintive comment in response to this reality, made by a tribal leader if I remember correctly, was basically this: "Just leave one soldier behind and we will be okay".

Of course, this wasn't meant literally in the sense of "Just leave one soldier, that single soldier will protect us"; rather, it was more along the lines of "As long as your country has a stake in this, as long as you keep some of your people here, then we can keep this thing going; but if you pull out completely, it is all over for us as well."

At least, that is the way that I interpreted it: If we had maintained a smaller presence in Afghanistan, we might have kept things going, at least for a longer period of time. I'm not sure about this and realize that the matter could be debated. However, I keep returning to that statement "If you leave just one soldier behind, we will be okay". And, again, I took this to mean that "If you remain interested in this country, if you have something in this, then we are with you; but if you are truly and completely gone, it really is completely over".

Q: I understand. Now, while this is going on, the event that you are going to dissent about took place. Set the scene for that. In other words, the attempted assassination of Malala of Swat. People will be able to go to the internet and learn more about it. But from your point of view, what was the initial reaction in Afghanistan, what did you see?

ADDLETON: There were two levels to my dissent. One was at the micro level, which related to the specific case of Malala. And the other was at the macro level with respect to how our work related to public diplomacy and, in this case, what does it

take to respond quickly, to publish something quickly, and to be responsive to the important events of the day?

Malala of Swat was of course the subject of international headlines, she had already gained publicity via her blog for the BBC at a time when the Pakistan Taliban had fought battles in Swat and for a time ruled Swat; if I remember correctly, she was fourteen or fifteen at the time and the Taliban had prevented her and other females her age from attending school in Swat. So through her blog in which she commented on what was happening she was already beginning to emerge as a well-known figure.

And then of course there was an attempt on the part of the Taliban to assassinate her. Basically, a couple of members of the Taliban boarded a school bus in Swat and asked, "Which one is Malala"? That is why her subsequent book was titled *I am Malala*. Basically the terrorist who boarded the bus said "We will kill everybody on this bus if you don't tell us which one of you is Malala". And she replied, simply saying "*I am Malala*".

She was then shot, three times if I am not mistaken including at least once in the head. Miraculously, she survived. This occurred in October 2012 and was the context which eventually prompted my dissent cable. Certainly, it was a miracle that she survived. Not everyone was happy about it. Having spent many years in Pakistan, I was well aware that some resented the fact that she survived and the publicity that resulted because of it. In fact, some in the Pakistan print and social media speculated that the entire event was a "set up" by the US and its intelligence agencies to make the Taliban look bad.

I knew from the start how the event was being reported in Pakistan. I also knew something about her father. And I knew something about another Malala, Malala of Maiwand after whom Malala of Swat had been named. In fact, Maiwand is situated in southern Afghanistan not far from Kandahar and I had flown over it by helicopter on a number of occasions; Maiwand was the site of a famous battle between the British and the Afghans in 1880 that people in the area still talk about.

According to the oral tradition that developed in Afghanistan afterwards, Malala was one of the Afghan women who took part in the battle, serving as a nurse and providing water to the Afghan troops. A couple of her brothers were involved in the fighting as well. Very symbolically, when the battle was going badly for the Afghans she stripped the covering off her head and waved it to rally the Afghan troops. Although she was killed in the fighting, she was credited with turning what looked like certain defeat into victory for the Afghans. If I remember, she was either engaged at the time or perhaps recently married. Later she became the subject of folktales among the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and subsequently the Pashtuns living in Pakistan as well.

Reading the media reports related to Malala of Swat, I learned that she was from Mingora, a town in the Swat Valley that I had visited at least a couple of times while growing up in Pakistan. In addition, I read in some of the articles that her father had made a public link between his daughter (Malala of Swat) and her better-known counterpart (Malala of Maiwand). Basically her father was quoted as having said, "I named my daughter after Malala of Maiwand because I wanted my daughter to be courageous and now she has fulfilled my dreams." For me, it was a touching story, providing an obvious way to link the courage of the twenty-first century Malala of

Mingora in Swat with the equally touching nineteenth century heroine Malala of Maiwand who was also a Pashtun and had lived more than a century earlier.

For me, having flown regularly over Maiwand, the entire episode really struck a chord. Shortly afterward and relatively quickly I wrote an article that I titled *The Two Malalas*, highlighting the recurring pattern throughout Afghan history of a young woman taking on the forces around her and trying to make a difference. It was symbolic but it was also very real.

At a more cautionary level, someone suggested to me that it might be a mistake to remind others about Malala of Maiwand, given that she was a symbol of resistance to outside forces, in this case British forces during the nineteenth century. That said, for me the courage of the two Malalas trumped everything else. I was also touched by the fact that Malala of Swat's father had stated in newspaper reports that "I named my daughter after Malala of Maiwand, hoping that she would be equally courageous."

Again, for me it was a story that wrote itself. And I wrote it very quickly. We had a Pashtun translator—he loved the article. Essentially it was a story meant to evoke female courage among the Pushtuns, in one case on the battlefield, in the other case with respect to female education. I thought both stories were compelling and welcomed the opportunity to link them in this perhaps unusual way.

The linkage was also being made at a time when Afghanistan and Pakistan were in an uneasy relationship. To my mind, this was an opportunity to draw the two countries together, projecting a shared sense of humanity among both countries that would benefit each of them. And, of course, there was the Pashtun dimension. To my mind it was a compelling story that would be broadly appreciated. I thought the Public Affairs Office at our Embassy in Kabul would welcome it, just as our Pashtun translator in Kandahar had welcomed it. And so I wrote the story and dutifully sent it off to Kabul for clearance before attempting to place it in the local media.

I am not sure where the draft went after I sent it to Kabul. However, I surmised (and perhaps I am wrong about this) that the Public Affairs Office in Kabul sent it to Washington for clearance and then Washington sent it to the US Embassy in Islamabad for clearance, given that Malala of Swat as well as Pakistan were also mentioned.

In any case, regardless of what happened and regardless of how the clearance process worked, this is where it gets very complicated very quickly. And, even as the clearance process was unfolding, the conspiracy mill in Pakistan is going into overdrive, including among other narratives the story that the entire episode involving Malala of Swat and her attempted assassination by the Pakistan Taliban was a set-up while also asserting that as a blog writer for BBC championing female education in Swat she had been a CIA spy. So at the same time that I was writing the article in Kandahar a backlash was underway in Pakistan, perceiving even a mention of Malala of Swat as somehow being against Pakistan. Later, when Malala of Swat was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, the backlash against her became even more pronounced.

Pakistan is a country of more than 220 million people and a lot happens within its borders including rumor mills. Against this backdrop, there was a strand of public opinion that despised Malala, even as others championed her. Rightly or wrongly, my interpretation at the time was that the official US public affairs effort too readily

acquiesced to one strand of the narrative related to Malala of Swat while ignoring possible other ones. For sure, the Public Affairs chain went from Kandahar to Kabul and very possibly it involved Washington and Islamabad as well. In any event, what I perceived as a simple and straightforward article was “spiked” with a scathing comment by some ill informed Public Affairs Officer somewhere involving four damning words: “*Please no more Malala*”!

Remember, this is a State Department Public Affairs person stating “Please no more Malala” — a heroine to many who a couple of years later would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. And, in fact, only a couple of weeks after my article should have been published in the Pashtun press in southern Afghanistan, the “two Malalas” were the subject of another op-ed piece, this one appearing in English in the *New York Times*. As in my draft, the article was based on the obvious parallels between the example of Malala of Maiwand and the courage of Malala of Swat.

Not to become too personal here, but my thought at the time was that those of us living and working in southern Afghanistan were on the “frontlines”, risking our lives each and every day in our efforts to connect with the local population — and yet somebody in Public Affairs in Kabul or perhaps Islamabad or Washington all too quickly and all too readily spiked this article, despite the fact that they were far removed from our reality, not realizing that they had arguably rejected a rare but timely outreach mechanism that was almost literally staring us in the face. It is perhaps also worth mentioning here that one of my goals in taking on this assignment was to humanize relationships in an extraordinarily difficult and at times violent working environment — a goal that this article would seemingly contribute towards.

And, despite these difficulties, we had arguably achieved some measure of success in undertaking this kind of outreach. For example, not too long before I had received a letter from an elderly lady in Kansas, who said that she was with her husband at a development project in Kandahar back in the 1950s. Her daughter, age twelve, had died from polio during the time that they had been stationed in Kandahar. At this point, she simply wanted to know: was her daughter’s grave still there? Remarkably, working with our Afghan counterparts, we did in fact determine that the small cemetery where her daughter was buried was still in place.

This too was a touching human interest story. And, as with the two Malalas, I wrote an op-ed about it that was translated to Pashto and appeared in the Pashto press. It basically stated that our human connections with Kandahar were enduring and had a long history. Polio was also part of the story, given that the young American daughter buried in Kandahar had passed away prior to the discovery of the Salk vaccine. And, as it happens, by this time polio had been eradicated in most of the world, with the exception of certain parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria. In this case, I could also refer to continued efforts made by our assistance program to eradicate polio. And, just as with the Malala story, this human interest story almost wrote itself as well.

I don’t speak Pashto. However, the article was translated to Pashto and appeared in the local Pashto media. I don’t want to exaggerate the impact — but it was at least one way to connect with the people who we were working with. For my part, I also felt that Malala’s story — coming soon after that the story about the young American girl who had died of polio in Kandahar —was similarly touching, providing an important

way to humanize and put a human face on our own outreach efforts. While viewing it as a good local story, meant for local audiences, I also thought it was unlikely that others beyond southern Afghanistan would be interested or comment on it. From my perspective, this was a purely local public affairs effort, not one that should draw critical attention from Kabul, Islamabad or anywhere else.

In sum, I thought the “spiking” of the story of the two Malalas was ill advised and possibly yet another example of never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity in Afghanistan. This was also the genesis of my decision to send a dissent cable, venting my concerns.

Q: Sure.

ADDLETON: I shared my concerns with a number of other people, resulting in several comments on the part of others. One of the comments used the phrase that “too often we over-think situations” — a comment that in this case I very much agreed with. Looking back, I truly believe a Desk Officer somewhere “overthought” what should have been a positive public affairs moment, viewing it from a one-dimensional perspective that in this case seemed more concerned that this purely local effort might somehow inadvertently complicate relations elsewhere, in this case Pakistan, employing the damning phrase “Please no more Malala” to express their point of view.

Another comment that I received was along similar lines, in this case suggesting that “sometimes we are so concerned about doing the wrong thing, that we end up not doing anything at all.” Again this comment also resonated with me, suggesting as it did a kind of timidity in the face of Islamist conspiracy narratives that were already beginning to gain traction in Pakistan and elsewhere, in this case dismissing Malala as a “CIA plant” or “American stooge” — from my perspective an outrageous response, “buying” into a particular narrative rather than confronting it while also lacking in both courage and conviction on the part of certain elements of the USG.

Reflecting many years later, I realize that one of the points of my article was to affirm Malala and the courageous decision that she had made to champion female education in Swat, a courage that almost caused her to lose her life. And the seeming response to this from somewhere in the State Department, memorialized in a communication that was later shown to me was: “Please no more Malala”.

Undoubtedly, Malala was beginning to be well-known internationally and in a certain way becoming a *cause célèbre* [famous case]. And not everyone in Pakistan and beyond were comfortable with this, turning it instead into a new narrative that declared “Oh, she has become a tool of the US”, somehow leading to concerns within the USG that if an article referring to Malala was published in southern Afghanistan it might feed rumors along the lines of “Oh, there goes Malala, being used again.”

Q: Just a quick question, there are two places for reaction, one is within Afghanistan, the other one you’re talking about—Pakistan. I wasn’t sure what the concern was in Pakistan for publishing the article other than just Pakistan’s own basic unease with the education of women?

ADDLETON: I don’t really understand that either. However, to my mind this is where the comment that we sometimes tend to “overthink” or that “we are so afraid of doing

the wrong thing that we end up not doing anything at all” comes into play. Given the tenor of the times, to some extent I also ascribe it to a certain kind of timidity on the part of US officials when it comes to challenging the Islamist narrative. I mean, did we really have to dismiss someone like Malala with the derisive statement “Please no more Malala,” spiking a positive story about her rather than taking the opportunity to publish it for local audiences in southern Afghanistan that might actually have appreciated it?

Q: Now, you mentioned that your own Pashtun staff loved the article, or did you agree you should publish, where—was anybody else at post or in your immediate area of work, did you find any support there?

ADDLETON: It must have been obvious at the time that I was disappointed. I did share both the article and my subsequent dissent cable with others. At the time, I thought a story about the two Malalas focusing on female courage would be appreciated and welcomed. I even thought that others such as the VOA (Voice of America) Pashtun service might be intrigued enough to present it to a larger audience.

Of course, that didn’t happen; my article never saw the light of day— though, as mentioned, the *New York Times* did publish an op-ed not long afterwards with its own “take” on the two Malalas, one that was broadly similar to my own. As it happens, my article was published in the *Foreign Service Journal* a couple of years later, after Malala had won the Nobel Prize for Peace. If nothing else, a Foreign Service audience was able to see for themselves exactly how innocuous this article actually was.

After the draft article was “spiked”, I shared it with several other colleagues. I also shared it with Ambassador Cunningham, mentioning to him that I intended to send a dissent cable expressing my concern that it had been turned down, resulting in a missed public affairs opportunity in Kandahar, a place where public affairs opportunities only rarely presented themselves.

I might have misread his reaction. However, my sense was that he supported it. Perhaps he felt that in his much larger world he was being micromanaged from a distance as well. I mean, he didn’t explicitly indicate that he supported it. But at the same time he didn’t suggest that this was too trivial an issue to bother with. From my perspective, the message that I received from him was more along the lines of “I understand your view and I am okay with it”.

In any case, I didn’t receive any objections or cautionary comments from the Ambassador or anybody else and I went ahead and sent it to Washington, following the usual procedures related to such cables. Sometimes dissent cables are signed by a number of other officers. However, in my case this was a “solo” effort, sent out only under my name.

From my perspective, the cable reflected two main themes. First, there was the personal disappointment that an op-ed that should have seen the light of day in Pashto was “spiked” and not allowed to go any further. And, second, there was the public affairs aspect of it, including the unwieldy and frankly ridiculous clearance process involved in publishing almost anything as a State Department officer.

As it happens, I had already faced the truly horrendous State Department clearance process earlier including with respect to a book I had written that was published by

Hong Kong University press (*Mongolia and the United States: A Diplomatic History*), in this case involving no less than 32 separate clearances. Looking back, this still seems to me more or less unbelievable. As for the modest draft article on the two Malalas, it too seemed to me to border on the horrible, that it would require clearances not only in Kabul but also in Islamabad and possibly in Washington. So my thought at the time was, really, does it have to be this way?

As I mentioned, I don't speak Pushtu. However, I do think the story, were it to appear in the Pashtun press, would be well received; or at least that is what my translator had indicated to me. It seemed to me to be a "good thing" for the story of the two Malalas to be part of the conversation in southern Afghanistan, demonstrating as it did female courage as well as support for female education; the fact that it presented in a positive light the story of the two Malalas for Pashtun audiences in both Pakistan and Afghanistan also seemed like a "good thing" to me.

Q: Now, let's go ahead and move on to the mechanics of sending in your dissent. So you sent in both the article itself, and then a description of why you think it should have been published, or it should still be published. Describe that process a little.

ADDLETON: So one thing that I have left out of these reflections — something that is actually quite important — is that Secretary of State Kerry either visited Kabul or spoke from Washington to all the Foreign Service Officers then serving in Afghanistan including those of us in Kandahar. As with our colleagues elsewhere, we too listened in on the video call. And in his remarks, Secretary of State Kerry emphasized two important items. First, he talked about the importance of candor in letting people know how one felt about particular issues. And, second, he talked about the importance of outreach related to all aspects of our work in Afghanistan. .

Given that I was struggling with how to address both issues, my first thought was — that's great, the Secretary of State is saying that we should be candid and that we should emphasize the importance of outreach; and here is an example close at hand that illustrates both points in a compelling way.

As I remember it, Kerry's talk to the assembled Foreign Service staff occurred not long after my efforts to place the story of the two Malalas was turned down. I was considering a dissent cable in any case but hadn't actually drafted it. However, his talk and especially his references to "valuing candor" confirmed to my mind that I should go ahead with it. And, looking back on the US experience in Afghanistan, I would affirm more than ever that candor is important and perhaps all of us were not as candid as we should have been as this the ten-year story of the US in Afghanistan unfolded.

In any case, he had talked about both candor and outreach. For me, this was a clear example of an attempt at outreach being unnecessarily squashed. That little nudge from the Secretary helped a lot.

I was also aware of a recent book titled *The Blood Telegram*, providing the story of the then-US Consulate in Dhaka which had watched with concern as the events leading up to the birth of Bangladesh unfolded. While not perceiving that what I witnessed in southern Afghanistan was in any way comparable, I did admire the way in which those few Foreign Service Officers in what was then a seemingly isolated

Consulate in Dhaka had responded — and that at a time when the dissent channel had not yet been formally instituted within the Department of State.

In any case, I was aware of the dissent channel and the purposes for which it had been established. And then, when the Secretary of State addressed Foreign Service Officers in Afghanistan and said, “It’s important that you be candid and it is important that you be committed to outreach,” my thought at the time was, “What the heck? I should at least let somebody back in Washington know that we tried” (laughs).

So that was the origins of my dissent cable. And so literally, within a couple of days of those remarks to an assembled group of Foreign Service Officers which I was part of, listening in from Kandahar, I wrote the cable. I guess in some ways it was a way for me to vent my frustration during a difficult assignment. At the same time, I did think it was appropriate, especially after hearing what Secretary Kerry had said.

Before sending it, I shared a draft with a handful of others and also mentioned it to the Ambassador, simply stating that “I intend to send this.” I gave people three or four days to respond and no one urged me not to do it. Perhaps I wanted to make sure that I wasn’t doing something ill-advised, rash or “in the heat of the moment”. In the end, I do feel that I did the right thing. If I remember correctly, Ambassador Cunningham’s comment to me was along the lines of “Do what you think you should do”, or words to that effect. I don’t think I blindsided any of my colleagues.

Q: The fact that the Ambassador was willing is certainly an important expression of support. When you submit it, a dissent usually goes to the policy planning staff first. When did you begin to hear back from Washington?

ADDLETON: I was aware of the fact that it is mandatory for Washington to respond to dissent cables. After all these years, I don’t recall the time frame. At one level when you are living in Kandahar, time passes quickly as each day melds into the next one. On other hand, certain days seem like they might have lasted 1,000 years! It was a combination of both. In any case, I did hear back from Washington in a fairly timely fashion. Of course, by this time it was too late to publish the article, it had already been overtaken by events — though perhaps I did harbor the illusion that the response would be along the lines of “Oh, go ahead and publish it after all!” (laughs). Of course, that wasn’t the kind of reply that I received.

As it happens, it must have been a year or so later that Malala was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, the youngest person to ever receive it. As mentioned, some in Pakistan resented this, savaging her for playing into international stereotypes about Pakistan. That said, for others it remained as a timeless story about a brave young lady who championed female education, someone that any country should be proud of.

In the end, I did receive a response from Policy Planning, as required by dissent cable policy. Perhaps if I had been assigned to Policy Planning I might have written something similar. But what I recall is that the reply to me reflected a strong sense that “There were certain sensitivities involved” — a statement that I assumed was largely related to certain sensitivities regarding Malala in Pakistan, not Afghanistan.

At the same time, the reply also suggested that the review process might have been more sensitive to local on the ground realities in places like Kandahar — a statement

that I took to mean there were at least some at State who concurred or were at least sympathetic with the suggestion that officers serving on the ground should be given more latitude in undertaking local outreach efforts.

For my part, I realize that there will always be a certain amount of tension in this area: people in the field will always want more flexibility and freedom while people at headquarters will always want to limit it. And of course at some level the issue goes far beyond this one example related to public outreach.

More specifically, our Political and Economic Officers in places like Kandahar always felt that the clearance process in Kabul almost always took too long and was often too intrusive. At some level, I do think there was a sort of undercurrent of support for me because more than a few colleagues felt that their own clearance processes were all too often quite problematic. Perhaps there was a sense that though my concerns centered on the “spiking” of the Malala story, the subtext also spoke directly to problems associated with clearance processes writ large.

In any case, some of my colleagues — and it is easy to say this when you’re at the end of the line in terms of the clearance chain — felt that we were highlighting concerns related to a wide range of issues including corruption in southern Afghanistan in our more regular reporting that, by the time the message was finally transmitted to Washington, had been “massaged” (laughs). Again, some of that “massaging” might have been warranted, depending on where one happens to be sitting in any given bureaucratic system at the time; of course, the Embassy in Kabul also had its obligations including in terms of both the substance and quality of the economic and political reporting going back to Washington. All that said, I do think that the fate of the Malala story was in some ways indicative of a problem with clearance processes more broadly.

For me, it boils down partly to “How much do you trust your people in the field”? The truth is, more than a few of us living and working in southern Afghanistan felt that we were putting our lives on the line for little nuggets of information that we wanted other people to read and know about! And, when some of what he thought was important was sort of “massaged” out of the message by the time it reached those that needed to know about it, we had our concerns.

I won’t name names here—but we had a couple of outstanding young Political/Economic officers in Kandahar. And, completely separate from the issue related to the op-ed that I had written that was “spiked”, they felt that their reporting either took too long to clear or that certain elements were somehow “lost in translation” by the time their reports were finally transmitted to Washington.

Q: It was a difficult situation given the personal security concerns every day. And at the same time, not getting the satisfaction of getting your analysis that you’ve taken so much trouble to carefully frame.

ADDLETON: Exactly.

Q: But then the next step is for the dissent to move from the policy planning officer to the Secretary's staff. Did you believe that any of the replies was directly from the Secretary's office?

ADDLETON: As I recall the response from both was the same. I conflated them, actually.

Q: Okay.

ADDLETON: Now that you've asked the question, I'm wondering if that was the case. I don't have the dissent cable in front of me—but I'm pretty sure that I referenced the Secretary's comments in which he stated that he encouraged his Foreign Service Officers to display candor and engage in outreach. As I mentioned earlier, I had more or less decided that what happened to the op-ed on the two Malalas was by now "water under the bridge". However, when his talk highlighted the importance of both candor and outreach, I decided to send a dissent cable after all.

Q: Sure. You received a sort of general reply from Washington, but in your networks and your contacts, did you get any other sort of back channel reply, like, 'Oh, so and saw this, and they were very concerned, and you should know that that's what killed it' or something like that, again, without naming names.

ADDLETON: Ten years later, I might fault my memory; but one part of the story that stays with me after all these years is that comment, "Please no more Malala." Now that you asked the question, this comment must surely have come from someone who knew a lot more about the clearance process than I did. Perhaps they were sympathetic to my position and simply wanted to provide me with a "heads up" about the nature of the conversations taking place, implying that some people within the Department were simply "tired" of Malala.

I don't know. I mean, we all say things we might later regret. But that withering statement, "Please no more Malala," to me those four words capture the mindset that set me off! I mean, why "Please no more Malala?" I mean, have you already become sick and tired of her comments on female education? Are you also sick and tired of fending off what might be considered a segment of public opinion in Pakistan and elsewhere that is claiming that she is a CIA plant, and we're sick of having to respond to that?

And again, what does it mean when someone says "Please no more Malala?" Can you really get enough of someone who almost paid the ultimate sacrifice for her one big cause in life, which is female education? So you might argue that there should be as much Malala as possible (laughs). I don't know for sure — but apropos your comments about, 'Did you get any sort of backchannel kinds of stuff?', I guess I would put this particular quote that I carry with me to this day in that category — which is to say, if that quote hadn't been included in the communication to me, I never would have become so worked up about it!

As I recall, the "Please no more Malala" quote and the apparent link between that quote and someone at our Embassy in Islamabad came informally through a private communication, not through an official channel. So that is a good point. Ten years later, I am now living and working in Pakistan, in this case in education. I really want Pakistan to succeed. Education — including female education — remains an important concern. But it still bothers me that an op-ed meant to be published in the Pashtun press in Kandahar was seemingly routed through Islamabad for clearance — and that this clearance process had a damaging and even chilling effect on our outreach efforts in southern Afghanistan.

Q: Sure. Now, did you talk to Malala about it? Or did she eventually hear about your effort?

ADDLETON: It is interesting that you ask that question, given that I attended an event in Lahore in the last couple of years in which she was present as a featured speaker. She is now married, she earned a degree at Oxford, and she is significantly involved with the Malala Foundation, funded in part by her earnings from the Nobel Prize for Peace. We met only briefly and I did not mention to her my reflection on the two Malalas, based on my experience in Kandahar. This was of course more than ten years after my time in Afghanistan. As it happens, I am currently involved in education in Pakistan as Rector/President of Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) in Lahore. And the event to which she was invited took place at a neighboring institution, the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS).

I made a point of attending her presentation at LUMS because I was truly interested in meeting her in person and I wondered what she would have to say. As far as I know, she was not aware of this story which I subsequently had written up in the *Foreign Service Journal*. I was tempted to ask her about it, recalling among other things just how many people around the world were moved and inspired by her actions.

On the other hand, I would also have to acknowledge that not everyone at State was thrilled by her actions. As an aside, her family is very well informed. In fact, her father comes from an established progressive tradition among the Pashtuns, one that values female education; it is a tradition that goes back to at least the 1940s.

This is perhaps part of the Malala story that not many people know about. In any case, her father was committed to female education and has always supported it. The fact that he named his daughter Malala “in the hopes that she would be courageous, like Malala of Maiwand”, it wasn’t just coincidence, rather it reflected his own long-standing views.

Coming out of this left wing tradition, coming out of this “out of the box” sort of thinking among Pashtuns as reflected in the statements by Malala’s father, makes you more aware of the complexity of Pakistan, of the fact that there are more than a few stereotypes related to the country that need to be broken. As with Malala, Malala’s father also upends stereotypes about the role of both men and women in Pushtun society.

Q: You’ve moved through the channels of dissent cable very properly, but then how does it become known to be considered for the Christian A. Herter prize by AFSA [American Foreign Service Association]? How did they learn about it and then decide that you’re worthy of an award?

ADDLETON: Well on this one, I’m probably a little embarrassed to say what happened. What I do remember is that someone, maybe it was an AFSA representative, told me that they were having trouble getting nominations for Dissent Awards involving senior members of the Foreign Service. In fact, I think AFSA had gone at least a couple of years without receiving any such nominations at all. Basically, it seemed that AFSA was opening the window for self-nominations, perhaps on the basis of dissent cables published over the past several years.

In any case, I received a communication from AFSA — whether this was done formally or informally, I'm not sure — that basically said, “We are having trouble getting nominations for the Christian A. Herter award, accompanied by a comment to the effect that “If you've been involved in a dissent cable and want to put your name forward, then go ahead.”

I replied to this request, confirming that during the year that I spent in Kandahar I had transmitted a dissent cable; I further added that if AFSA wanted to consider this dissent cable as worthy of a dissent award, I would be happy to put it forward — which is what I eventually did.

Q: And then this leads to a question, do you have a sense for why senior officers like you did not—they're certainly plenty of senior officers who would have a reason to dissent from some policy—was their concern among senior officers that it would somehow negatively affect them?

ADDLETON: I am not sure that this is the case. Perhaps more likely potential candidates for dissent awards at a more senior level might think, “Well, I am a senior officer and I have had ample opportunities to voice my own concerns as part of the ongoing policy debate and inter-agency process on any given issue; beyond that, if I lose any particular policy debate, then I lose the debate, that's simply how bureaucratic organizations work. But it's not like I don't have the opportunity for others to listen to me or I don't have the opportunity to at least argue my case”.

That said, Kandahar feels like the “end of the line,” even for so-called senior officers. It is different from being in Washington or even in a large Embassy somewhere, both settings in which one regularly engages in policy discussions and perhaps is even able to contribute to policy making in one way or another. Put another way, serving in an isolated place like Kandahar lends itself more readily to making the decision to send a dissent cable, especially if there is a sense that “headquarters” is somehow remote, far away and not listening to what you have to say!

At the end of the day, the usual tendency is to perhaps metaphorically salute and then say, ‘Yes, I've had my chance — no need to go any further and voice my dissent in what might otherwise be perceived as a case of ‘sour grapes’’. Indeed, that same officer might have voiced their views in the senior interagency or other forums, perhaps even forcefully. The reality is that in any given policy debate, senior officers might “win” on some occasions and “lose” in other ones.

At some level, the experience in Kandahar was a very different one. Very possibly, my frustration was fed partly by the sense that was more along the lines of “Really, I am supposed to be serving as a senior officer in Kandahar — and I am somehow not even trusted enough to write and publish a small and innocuous op-ed in the local media”? Perhaps my dissent cable reflected this kind of frustration, born out of an unusual situation. Both in fairness and in retrospect, this could have been part of the dynamic that was at play here as well.

Q: Then the last question about the mechanics, you send the cable in a confidential channel, but eventually the cable has to be available for AFSA or for someone to read, or am I misreading the exact way the award is given?

ADDLETON: I'm not sure; you may know better than me—is there an annual report that catalogs the dissent cables received? In any case, someone from AFSA did write to me appealing for nominations from among the senior ranks, noting that it had been at least a couple of years since the dissent award for senior members of the Foreign Service had been given out.

My own dissent cable was not classified; if I am not mistaken it was tagged SBU [Sensitive But Unclassified], perhaps reflecting the reality that a dissent of almost any kind might by its very nature be considered sensitive. As you mention, such cables are sent through a confidential channel.

A trend analysis of dissent cables sent by junior, mid-level and senior officers would certainly be interesting. Again, it would be interesting to know trends over time including numbers, subjects and who exactly is taking the time to write these cables.

How many were done and at which level? It could well be that it is at the junior level where a dissent cable is mostly likely to be written — or perhaps such cables are more likely to be submitted by mid-level officers? For the reasons that I've mentioned, perhaps there is much less incentive for a member of the Senior Foreign Service to memorialize their dissent via a cable, if only because Senior Foreign Service have ample opportunities to present their views in a variety of other forums, even if those views don't ultimately prevail.

Q: Okay. Sure. Now, you provide—okay, so you received the award in 2013?

ADDLETON: It can't have been in 2013 — that would be too soon after the events in question; it must have been at least a couple of years later.

Q: Okay.

ADDLETON: I was basically in Afghanistan from August 2012 to August 2013. The AFSA Award would have been later, perhaps in 2014 at the earliest..

Q: Yeah. And your article in the AFSA journal appeared in 2014. So that—

ADDLETON: I am not sure but maybe someone in AFSA saw that article and wrote to me about it. Even that is sooner than I recall.

Q: Now, one last thing in the process of the whole dissent and the award, when the awards are given, typically, the State Department has a high official, sometimes even the secretary, attend, which gives it a bit of official sanction. Do you recall who was at the ceremony?

ADDLETON: I say this circumspectly, because I could be wrong. But I want to say that it was Bill Burns who was serving as Deputy Secretary at the time who attended the AFSA Dissent Awards ceremony that year. You could confirm that with his own tenure but it would seem to be logical, affirming once again his respect for the Foreign Service and his appreciation for dissent.

As it happens, Ambassador Burns was my Ambassador in Jordan. He was also the one that swore me in as U.S Ambassador to Mongolia. And I've told this story before, but just to say it again, he was supportive when USAID put my name forward as a

potential US Ambassador. As you know, it is relatively rare for USAID officers to serve as Ambassadors.

When I was being considered for an ambassadorship, one of my State colleagues said, “You’ve got to be political about this, you have to reach out to people in the Foreign Service that might be able to help advance your case.” For my part, I have never thought of myself as a political person. However, my colleague added that “You have to forget those scruples, you have to engage in some measure of self-promotion.”

Bill Burns by this time was Deputy Secretary; among other things, this meant that he also served as head of the “D” committee [a decision-making body led by the deputy secretary]. I sent him an e-mail and simply said, “I want you to know that USAID just put my name forward”. I then listed my assignments since serving together in Jordan, adding that I would be happy to answer any questions that he might have.

He responded to that tentative e-mail on my part by basically saying, “Dear Jonathan, you will make a wonderful Ambassador!” (Laughs) So that’s my USAID story, which is a great story when you think about it.

I guess memories fade as we grow older. However, unless I am mistaken, Bill Burns attended the AFSA Dissent Awards ceremony that year. I was also able to attend, traveling from Central Asia to receive my Award, participating along with the other Awardees from that year. In any case, I have huge respect for Ambassador Burns, both in his role as Deputy Secretary and with respect to the responsibilities he subsequently took on.

Q: The last question I have is, looking back again, essentially ten years later, would you go about it in a different way? Or what recommendations would you make about the process,

ADDLETON: Yes, given the time and place and given my subsequent reflections I do think it was the right thing to do. That said, I have also wondered if it might be considered too trivial of an issue to merit a dissent cable; or perhaps I was too self-centered or was handling disappointment in a too personalized way. Having once aspired to be a journalist, I also wondered if I was perhaps overly sensitive to what I thought was a good story being “spiked”. Put another way, *Was this too small of a thing?* And yet, even in retrospect, I don’t think that it was. Probably more than anything it was the line “Please no more Malala” that prompted me to send a dissent cable!

That dismissive line simply seemed like too much for me. As you can tell, it still sort of grates, even after all these years (laughs). That approach seems wrong and should be questioned; there should be pushback when something like this happens, especially when working in a place like Kandahar which was difficult enough without having to contend with this kind of background noise.

Of course, no one ever knows the complete story. At the same time, you have to trust those around you. Someone close to us is a Combat Controller, recently becoming a member of a Tier One Special Operations Unit, having been selected after an incredibly intense process involving a high dropout rate.

Among other things, his training involved hostage rescue exercises which he describes as follows: “You go into a room. You have responsibility for a quadrant of

that room. Your colleague has responsibility for the quadrant next to you and then the colleague next to him has responsibility for his own quadrant. You only see your part of the room and your colleagues have responsibility for only seeing their part of it. You have to make decisions quickly. And you have to have complete confidence in those next to you, you have to trust that they are taking care of their quadrant, just as you are taking care of yours”.

I know the clearance process is important — but 32 separate clearances for anything is perhaps excessive, 32 separate clearances is simply too much. To use that Special Operations metaphor, when you go into a room and there are people at your side, you have to trust them, you can’t always be micro-managing them. Again, I felt the phrase “Please no more Malala” was the kind of sarcastic and withering comment that betrayed an appalling lack of trust.

Referring to training exercises involving a simulated hostage rescue using live ammunition, this Combat Controller related that there was an accidental discharge of a weapon. Immediately, the lights went on in the room and the question was asked: “Who did it”? And the person who accidentally discharged his weapon did in fact acknowledge it. And that was it, there was no forgiveness for an accidental discharge — that was too egregious of a mistake to make.

People have to earn trust. In Special Operations you have to have complete confidence in the person next to you, without second-guessing them. Race, gender and background doesn’t matter in that context, rather you are part of a brotherhood that surpasses all of them. By my lights, an overly complex clearance process at some level becomes a “gotcha” process, one that conveys a lack of trust in those around you. In most cases, there should not be a need for dozens of clearances and there should not be a need for mandatory clearances from thousands of miles away from those clueless about your situation — if that is the case our bureaucratic processes have become far too stifling.

Perhaps I am mixing too many metaphors, in this case military metaphors. But that is the kind of year it was in Kandahar. Even from the vantage point of ten years, I think it was right to draw attention to the issue, even if it didn’t have much impact. Perhaps it did make some of my colleagues feel better; we were in this together, after all; perhaps it at least mattered for those of us living and working in Kandahar. My apologies if this doesn’t resonate or seem realistic — however, you can see that for me these broader issues are also involved.

Q: Yeah, absolutely. That takes us to the end of my formal questions. Do you have any more parting thoughts?

ADDLETON: I think that’s pretty much it. As I mentioned, I may end up reviewing the written transcript and deleting some of this stuff. Or at least reaching out and paraphrasing, shortening, or summarizing it. Mostly our interview has had a narrow focus, highlighting the micro issue of the rejection of a short manuscript that should have been published but wasn’t. Now, several years removed from what happened, I also more clearly see a broader context, one for which this single incident was possibly simply a symptom of something more deeply off track.

Following my time in Kandahar I published a couple of *Foreign Service Journal* articles touching on what happened. In addition, I wrote a book titled *The Dust of*

Kandahar: A Diplomat among Warriors in Afghanistan (Naval Institute Press). I've also thought a lot about the whys and wherefores of what I experienced in southern Afghanistan. I don't think what I did there had a significant impact. But again, there's the question of what impact "means" at a variety of different levels. As I mentioned, there are the micro aspects of what happened with respect to my time in Kandahar as well as this specific story about the two Malalas. And then there is the macro story which is more related to the broader issues involved. Perhaps there was a positive aspect to this after all, one in which the micro picture becomes a metaphor for a broader failing on the part of all of us to truly understand what was happening around us. At the end of the day, an accumulation of micro failings at a micro level very probably leads to failure at a much bigger macro level as well.

Q: Alright. Then we'll end the interview here with thanks from ADST and AFSA for participating in this 100th Anniversary project on constructive dissent.

End of interview