

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

HILDA “BAMBI” ARELLANO

*Interviewed by: Bill Hammink
Initial Interview Date: October 27, 2022
Copyright 2025 ADST*

INTERVIEW

Q: Hello. This is Bill Hammink. I’m here to interview Hilda Arellano, who also goes by the name of Bambi. And this is part of the Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan program by ADST [Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training].

It’s a pleasure, Bambi, to be here, to be able to talk to you and interview you on this, especially on Afghanistan. So, just to start, could you give us your name and when you joined the Foreign Service and your service in and around Afghanistan. Thank you.

ARELLANO: Thanks, Bill, and it’s great to be here with you, trying to think back on that experience and how it may be relevant or not to what is now going on.

As Bill said, I’m a former USAID [United States Agency for International Development] Foreign Service officer. I joined the Agency for International Development in 1987. Prior to joining, I had been living and working overseas in rural development for fifteen years already. My primary focus was the roles of women in rural communities. I originally went overseas as a UN [United Nations] volunteer in the early ’70s, so when I came into USAID in 1987, I already had a fair amount of experience with other international development agencies. I had been residing in Bolivia that entire time.

I served in Afghanistan from July 2012, to the end of July 2013. The country, as other oral histories will attest to, had been through a great deal since 9/11. I arrived when the military surge was already underway and when a very large coordinating mechanism among donors already existed. I took the position at the U.S. embassy of the coordinating director for development and economic affairs, or CDDEA. It was one of five ambassadorial-level positions at that time, which I believed just showed how complicated and multi-faceted the international presence in Afghanistan had become.

Q: Great. Could you say a few words, before we get into your job and role in Afghanistan, especially the interagency work, which is so important, could you say a few words about your time in Iraq, which I assume gave you a lot of relevant experience for you to hit the ground running in Afghanistan. Or is that assumption incorrect?

ARELLANO: I think your assumption is correct, but it’s only partially correct. Yes, I was in Afghanistan with the same ambassador with whom I worked in Iraq. I had worked in

Iraq with Ambassador Ryan Crocker. We had worked together during the military/civilian surge in Iraq and under many similar policy issues the U.S. government was confronting in Afghanistan. He had been there for a year when I arrived and there were things about the Iraq experience during 2006–2007 which prepared me for the internal U.S. government interagency workings that existed in Afghanistan. But I should stress that the more I read about Afghanistan, the more I realized that the experiences I had had even before I joined the U.S. government in countries that were very, very poor, very rural, tribal, and ethically complex were going to be relevant as much as the Iraq experience had been. These were very, very different countries. In extremely different stages of development.

Q: So, Bambi, you mentioned you went to Afghanistan in this ambassador-level position, one of five in the front office. And can you tell us a little bit about how you were recruited and what your thinking was, because you would be working in State Department, which would be a bit of a change?

ARELLANO: Yes. Well, in 2011 when I was asked to think about taking that position, I had only returned to Washington the year before. I had been working overseas for forty years when I came back to the Counselor position at USAID. During my USAID career, because of staffing and funding shortages, many of us were asked to remain overseas in what were designated as critical positions. USAID had had hiring freezes for a lengthy period and overseas vacancies were common. So, when I was recruited for the position in Afghanistan, I had no intention of going back overseas again. But things happen and so I did go into that position. Ambassador Crocker made a compelling argument for the need to fill this slot and my immediate boss, Rajiv Shah, agreed. Ambassador Crocker. We had a good conversation about it and what it would entail, and it seemed to me that what they really were needing was somebody who had had complex interagency experience and intensive work with other donors. Both were key to this role.

Q: Right. So, could you explain a little bit about the specific job? You mentioned it was the coordinating director for development and economic affairs.

ARELLANO: When I arrived in Kabul a total of nine agencies, including the Department of Defense, were involved in development or economic affairs-related work. It was a complex coordination endeavor, as you can imagine. In addition, under the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] structure, NATO “areas” were divided: the Germans, Italians, British, Spanish, the French, all had specific geographic responsibility, as did Australia, New Zealand, Japan, among others. In addition, the Indians, Chinese, Russians, et cetera also provided assistance. While the U.S. was the largest bilateral donor and Afghanistan by then had out-paced Iraq as the largest U.S. assistance program. The World Bank had a major multilateral finance role, and its largest mission in the world at that time was Afghanistan. In sum, there was an urgent need for the U.S. to present a coordinated, unified view to all of the stakeholders mentioned of what we wanted to achieve, both on the economic side as well as the security and the political side. By then, the economic issues had become particularly fraught. Over the years since 2001 issues related to corruption, narcotics production, illegal trafficking in many areas, concentration of wealth, capital flight, weak or non-existent institutions, had all emerged to undermine political and security stability. They all kind of coincided. Thus the

imperative that different U.S. agencies coordinate internally before going to the government or stakeholders or regional and local governments with its programs or goals.

Q: And was most of your work then within the U.S. government, within the embassy and amongst the agencies you oversaw, or was it outside with donors and other—

ARELLANO: It was a combination. You started very early in the morning. I probably spent maybe 35 percent of my time on internal coordination every day, and then I was out at meetings either with other donors or country representatives, or dinners, luncheons you know, another 30 percent. The remaining 30-35 percent I traveled, both within and around Kabul, and to all provinces. The only way I could do a reasonable job coordinating inside the U.S. country team was knowing what was going on outside the embassy. This had to be a priority.

Q: Yeah. Can you tell us what were some policy issues that you faced when you were there that you had to deal with?

ARELLANO: It was the waning months of the Karzai administration and the national elections were coming up. What I had to deal with and what I was most concerned about did not always coincide, but isn't it always that way? Taking up a lot of time and energy was the Kabul Bank scandal that had come to the fore in the years right before I arrived. It had blown up both in Afghanistan and in Washington. From the interagency's perspective for the United States, the Department of Treasury had a very strong position, as did the U.S. military. Major vetting issues dealing with who we could work with, how we funded, where funds had been misused, were all on the table. We had standard talking points for meetings we attended about U.S. conditionality regarding very high-profile Afghans who were viewed as corrupt. A blacklist of sorts started to emerge. USAID was under tremendous pressure because of the variety and diversity of its programs and the need to "check the box" that no corrupt Afghan organizations or individuals were benefitting. Along with the vetting on financial corruption, you also had security vetting because of the reach of the Haqqani network and terror financing mechanisms. This meant that many local partners were regarded as suspect. In sum, you had those kinds of interagency issues related to both financial and economic security and corruption. In terms of issues that were especially fraught for the interagency, these were probably at the top of the list. It was especially difficult to execute a unified position and then take that position to the other NATO members who may have been less willing to take a very hard stance on corruption or program conditionality. Yes, many of the NATO members were not as willing as we were to deliver the tough message which often left us alone or with one donor who agreed with us. The international donor community, of course, had mixed views [the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the UN agencies, NATO bilateral donors], and even getting to the point where we could present a unified, coherent U.S. position before them, let alone before the Afghans, was always tough.

Q: And were you involved in any of the international meetings, like in Tokyo at the time?

ARELLANO: Yes. The Tokyo meeting took place about two weeks after I arrived in Kabul. I had the advantage that Ken Yamashita, who was the USAID director, was into his second year when I was there. He was incredibly helpful. [Ken later came into my

role when I departed and remained in Kabul for a third year.] There was a team at the embassy under Ambassador Crocker that had experience, and a group on economic affairs with experience. This was vital. I went into the Tokyo Conference fairly well prepared. The U.S. had already shared its position with the donors, and there had been good coordination with Minister of Finance Omar Zakhilwal and his team. Out of this came weekly follow-on meetings in Kabul to track progress. I found attendance at all these sessions very helpful because I was able to figure out where the U.S. position differed from other donors and when I needed separate meetings to raise issues or clarify differences. These side meetings became increasingly frequent during my tenure.

Q: And how would you characterize your relationship with senior Afghanistan government officials and then as compared to the U.S. relationship?

ARELLANO: I think this is something your career teaches you the hard way. Working in leadership positions for USAID I learned early on that local governments always wanted from us what they could not get easily from the embassy as a whole. It was as if they assumed that all decisions made by one U.S. entity could be re-litigated with the others. This was especially time consuming in high profile countries such as Afghanistan when there were national security issues front and center. For example, I had been USAID mission director in Cairo right up to the Arab Spring, your relationship with that government was only as good as your coordination within the embassy. USAID could not go it alone in such a high-pressure situation. One's ability to coordinate with the high-level government officials, particularly in a place like Afghanistan where you had such a fraught history of instability and institutional meltdown, needed to be in the context of a unified approach. I often wondered why we never needed to have as complex a structure of Ambassadors at the embassy in Iraq. I think it was because, in spite of the fall of Saddam, there were government institutions that remained and leadership within ministries that had career experience. As a result, getting to the bottom of a problem and collecting the background information needed was a more streamlined process. In Afghanistan sorting through the misinformation and understanding the competing interests was more complex and obscure. Thus, the ambassadorial responsibilities below Ambassador Crocker were allocated by sectors and then brought together at joint meetings. It was a bit more of a military model, if you will. My primary relationships with the government were in the economic and development spheres. The country's political/leadership development was extremely weak and often tenuous which meant there was no one to delegate to in many ministries. The ambassador could not individually track this hierarchy and needed assistance from others. But Afghans would often only open the door to someone with a senior title. Many poorer countries are this way, as we know. There was a need to divide up the responsibility of those who could communicate our positions, but then ensure that all agencies—civilian and military—said the same thing. As a result, we often went to meetings jointly to make sure we set expectations clearly and there was no doubt about our position.

As I look back now, I realize all this was simply an indication of how much work the Afghans had to put in to develop a political structure that would be more accountable and less self-interested, et cetera. Because of their tremendously hierarchical tribal structure,

progress across tribes and provinces and interest groups was often ephemeral. So much was working against any fundamental changes or improvements.

As for relationships, I had very good relationships with a core group of key ministers I needed to relate to in my role. Again, I saw the Ministers of Finance, Industry, Mines, Central Bank, among others on a very regular basis. I often felt like I struggled with the same issues they were struggling with. Their mid-level staff was also in touch with us and we relied on them for critical updates, be it on internal pressures of insecurity. While I never met individually with Karzai, I did go to several meetings with the Ambassador when the topic was in my area. I did meet regularly with his advisors.

I should highlight the other issue we were dealing with which colored pretty much all our relationships with the Afghans: the 2013 acceleration of the military drawdown. I am not sure I was as surprised or disconcerted when I saw the same thing happening in Afghanistan as happened in 2007 in Iraq. The surge had originally been on a five year plus timeline, or so it said on the chart on the wall of my office. This chart had troop numbers, budgets, et cetera. It had been part of a complex planning process across many meetings and with numerous countries. Then suddenly, you had the elections in France and Spain, as well as “Afghanistan fatigue” setting in in a number of places, including the U.S. Suddenly, you had NATO troops from other countries withdrawing rather precipitously. And so, this five-year slide down a hill, which was like an inclined plane at a forty-five-degree angle, became a cascading waterfall. And as a result of that, the government of Afghanistan went into this very accelerated transition at the provincial level, relinquishing NATO control of areas to the Afghan military, whether they were prepared or not to assume this role. As a result I met frequently with the coordinator for transition, Ashraf Ghani. One thing that became clear later on was that this process enabled Ghani’s first foray into grassroots politics, and probably his eventual use of these transition discussions as an anchor for his subsequent presidential campaign.

I represented the embassy front office at several of these transition ceremonies. I went to Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, preparatory meetings in Herat, Bamiyan, and Mazar-i Sharif, meeting with governors, mayors, community leaders, among others. And Bill, you and I know from experience at those kinds of meetings in countries that have a similar level of poverty and underdevelopment to Afghanistan. You come away with this very uneasy feeling: things are being driven politically from outside of Afghanistan by people’s tiring of the war, tiring of the taxpayer dollars, tiring of all the bad news, this was a country that just really was not ready to assume the complex economic and security roles we were laying out for them. Many of the people present knew this very well and would express their misgivings to us inside conversations. Among the first provinces to transition, for example, was Nangarhar on the border with Pakistan. [I recall a conversation there with several leaders where they referenced what happened to the British in 1842 at the Khyber Pass. Their concern was palpable.]

In sum, the rapidly accelerated transition, the very fragile, unsustainable institutions and the corruption issue were the three things that I think back on the most now. There were innumerable other policy issues related to inequity, dire poverty, poor services, women’s struggles, but these three set the stage at another level for what could really be achieved. While improvements were happening, we knew very well that only decades of sustained

effort would get them out of that lowest tier of underdevelopment. This was the tough lesson learned in so many places over the decades. Not all were warzones but the lessons apply. From a foreign policy perspective, the complexity of the security issues and the size of budgets may have masked this tough reality.

Q: There was an interesting, if you will, civilian surge at the same time as the military surge or maybe just after, in order—I guess the thinking was that civilians needed to be out there to do the development, to kind of follow through with the counterinsurgency, or COIN, and then that civilian surge also transition was so quick in that they pulled people out almost as quickly as they had put them in. And so, how did that play and your thinking on that, kind of the whole transition process?

ARELLANO: When I talk about the rapid decline in troop presence, this was in tandem with civilian assistance operations for security reasons. A lesson learned from Iraq was that you were not going to have civilians out there, especially in the more difficult areas where the risk was greatest, if you could not have the troops there to protect them. So, when the French withdrew from Kapisa Province, they didn't just withdraw their troops, they withdrew everybody. They were responsible for the PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team]. When the Italians eventually withdrew from Herat and the Germans first downsized in Mazar-i Sharif then withdrew entirely, it was a similar process. The Afghan troops could not provide a similar level of protection.

Q: Yeah, all at once.

ARELLANO: You could not separate one from the other in this kind of an environment. And so, as I say, that sudden military cascade affected all aspects of our presence. While I was still there a fair number of activities were reduced or pulled back to Kabul because there was no other place to pull back to.

Q: Just looking, for example, at process, how did you as interagency coordinator on the economic side especially, what was the process to make sure that Ambassador Crocker was aware of whatever you needed him to be aware of and there was that coordination not just between agencies that you oversaw, but between kind of the five ambassadors?

ARELLANO: It is common knowledge that this involves a lot of meetings, often an exhausting number when conditions on the ground were in such a state of flux. I found that we had to introduce a level of discipline where discussions were targeted and managed efficiently. By the time I arrived in Kabul this lesson had been learned and the systems were in place. I had been in Iraq previously where the country team was so massive it barely fit into a ballroom. It seemed that every USG agency had a presence at the embassy in Baghdad. Afghanistan was somewhat similar but now shaped differently. There was a very early morning meeting chaired by the ambassador of his senior team, including the U.S. military. This meeting was every day without exception. y. And it was like a check-in. In Iraq, as mission director I had always gone every day to In Iraq the first meeting we attended was the early morning BUA or Battle Update Assessment. I think it started at six am. You'd go over, get your doughnut and very big cup of coffee and get a sense of what was going on militarily. As USAID director in Iraq my focus had to be where we had projects and people. This was especially true during the Surge. In

Afghanistan it was similar, but we would get this information through the military leaders present at the embassy meetings chaired by Ambassador Crocker when I first got there, Ambassador Cunningham when Ambassador Crocker departed. And that was where you really got a sense of what the priorities were for the day for them and you factored these into your own planning and thought process.

And after that, I would go immediately to a meeting in my office with all U.S. agencies engaged in economic or development efforts, be they projects or policy reform. This was where you got the lay of the land and tried to match what you had just heard at the ambassador's meeting with what each agency was attempting to achieve. We had to encourage each agency to stay abreast of what was going on using both unclassified and classified sources. As the troops withdrew and as the elections approached, things were getting complicated nationwide. I would share what I could with them about what had come up in the early morning meeting, and ask for information related to any key meetings or travel plans. Matching travel risks to security was so important. We had a superb Regional Security Office Team, and while it can never be a foolproof system in a place like Afghanistan, daily contact with them did help us do reality checks and make sure travel inside Kabul and country-wide was based on the information they had available.

In sum, on any given day, including weekends, I would have two, three, sometimes four meetings into the night with different agencies that had issues that were going to determine what we did the next day or didn't do. If I needed to go with my colleagues to meetings with ministers or other officials, adjusting my profile depending on the nature of the issues. The Afghan government did not do a lot by phone and had no video chatting then! For security reasons [and force of habit] they wanted you to come see them. This was not a problem, but we did need to notify the RSO ahead of time to ensure there were no threats on route and determine that the travel risk was worth taking. That was pretty much it.

Q: And how and why were decisions made? What was the leadership process? Obviously in a situation like that, not all decisions came up to Ambassador Crocker. How did you see the leadership part of that?

ARELLANO: I had a scheduled weekly meeting with the ambassador, first Crocker and then Cunningham. I also met very frequently with the deputy ambassador, Tina Kaidanow, on a regular basis. I felt like I had "drop-by" authorization from them, if an issue or question was serious enough. When an issue bridged the portfolios of different members of the front office team, we would be brought together to inform each other. This was especially true of very sensitive, high-profile issues. The embassy offices for econ, political, public affairs, and U.S. agencies were always available. There was an unspoken rule that we all would be willing to meet as needed. This was not typical for other embassies but we were all living on the same compound, with no families present, so what we did was work. We did a lot of walking into the offices of our colleagues unannounced! Among the three ambassadors responsible for the different sectors [myself for econ, another for political affairs, another for military cooperation] we tried to resolve as many issues at our level as possible. When we could not, or believed the topic should be raised to the ambassador and his deputy, we would do it jointly either immediately or

at our next meeting with them. I spent a lot of time with the military. They were across the street at the NATO headquarters which meant walking through the tunnel to their compound sometimes several times a day. Most of our meetings were on policy issues where different agencies had differing views, either on substance or tone. This was especially true when coordinating with the NATO command. For example, we needed to talk through issues of corruption where we proposed taking a hard line, or vetting of Afghans issues where they wanted to take a hard line because of security concerns, or issues related to other international partners or other nations. Security also was a major concern on the civilian side and defining risk for us often meant explaining the specific constraints we felt as unarmed civilians. It was very important that the NATO leadership in Kabul hear from us about issues. I had worked with General Allen in Iraq and General Dunford previously as well, so it was relatively easy to know when they needed to hear from us or we needed to consult with them on a contentious issue.

Q: How would you say decisions were made by the leadership around which PRTs to close first or how quickly to pull the diplomats and the Agency for Development people out of wherever they were, out of Kabul and stuff? Or even on corruption, just how tough it is on the Karzai government, on the Kabul Bank issue, et cetera. You don't have to get into specifics, but just in terms of how decisions were made.

ARELLANO: These were precisely with kinds of decisions to move up the leadership chain, including in Washington, DC. When I would come back to DC on a break from Afghanistan, I spent a lot of time at Treasury and then the National Security Council because of their position related to financial sector corruption, particularly on Kabul Bank. As I mentioned, there were differing views within NATO and within the donor community on how hardline we should be on Kabul Bank. This was absorbing a lot of time and energy because it impacted everything. There were times I felt like we were putting a finger into a centuries-old wound of the way the Afghan economy is organized and managed. It touched everyone and everything in their "halls of power." Our taking a very hard line on Kabul Bank and on the two primary offenders in this case unleashed daily requests for meetings and "reconsideration of our position." The interagency eventually maintained its tough stance, often much tougher than other NATO allies, because our financial investment in Afghanistan was much greater, and because the war effort was coming under increasing criticism. A similar situation occurred with security vetting of Afghans we could work with or support. Suspensions abounded at the interagency level about some of our closest contacts and everyone had an opinion on their trustworthiness. Many Afghans prided themselves by coming to the embassy or to the U.S. to undermine their compatriots so it complicated the process of working with organizations or individuals. The country just functions that way, it is what it is, I guess! To this day, in many cases I am not sure where the truth lies on many of those contacts I spent a lot of time with.

By the time I left Afghanistan the second Obama administration was in place [2013]. There had been the transition down from the surge and the country was moving toward the mid-term election of 2014. The post-Karzai era was about to begin but he was intent on remaining a major player. The five-year plan I was handed before going to Kabul in 2012 was clearly OBE. Looking back, I realize that the U.S. was reluctant to be in the

position we found ourselves in Iraq—pretty much going it alone—after some of our major partners were no longer fully committed. The risks for staff were heightened with fewer troops in country, and the NATO coalition was quickly dissipating. A process of withdrawal from key regions was accelerated and reduction in staff in those regions where we all remained. We had major discussions, for example, of how to continue a key project like the Kajaki Dam with the British reduction in force. Security presence and risk became the key factor for continued program management. The U.S. was not in a position to provide human and financial resources to backfill for all those withdrawals. In addition, because of corruption issues and mismanagement, as well as the low expenditure rates on some projects, there was a growing feeling that you didn't need as many people doing the job as we originally thought as was contemplated in the five year surge plan. In sum, by the time I left there were very painful staff planning sessions to determine how many U.S. staff would/could remain in country.

Q: When I arrived in July of 2013 there were around four hundred and fifty USAID direct hires across the country.

ARELLANO: Wow.

Q: A third of those in Kabul and two-thirds across PRTs and—

ARELLANO: And that's one agency.

Q: That's one agency.

ARELLANO: Okay. In Iraq, we never went over eighty-five or ninety country-wide.

Q: Oh, I see.

ARELLANO: In Iraq we fought tooth and nail to keep the number at a reasonable level, citing security exposure or the fact that the tours were so short, as you just said, Why bring people in for a year? In Iraq, perhaps because it was much earlier, we were allowed to establish a completely different structure, not so much based on absolute numbers trying to match the military uptick, but looking at risk and relevant staff experience. I think because Afghanistan was relatively less violent, it was assumed that it was a more viable environment for development. Nevertheless, Iraq is a country with a strong middle class, and what had been functioning government institutions. While many things had been destroyed, there were still building blocks. For example, you still had paved roads and function services, even though these were targeted by the insurgency, there was still much that functioned. What I witnessed at the end of my tour in Afghanistan saddened me. Many of those departing—Afghans non-Afghans—were very committed to development and to addressing its daunting challenges. They had fought hard to sustain the positive momentum and were very passionate. Suddenly they were having to leave because we simply had brought in more people than we could protect or sustain. really felt very passionately about it and suddenly, they were having to leave just because you had brought in so many people. This reduction process had just started as I was leaving.

Q: Yeah. Within a year that number of four hundred and fifty was down to around two hundred. And so, like you said—planning for it—

You know, there's been some, quite a few lessons learned papers since, you know, over the years because of the twenty-plus years in Afghanistan, and one of the lessons that people have come out with is there's been kind of a disparity between the short-term, often short-term kind of defense and diplomatic kind of objectives and interests, and especially if it had something to do with the military and their goals, military goals in certain districts, and then, some of the more longer-term objectives and goals of the development folks who look at institutional development and capacity building and all of that. You know, as you coordinated all of these various agencies under you, kind of how did you deal with that, that there was this somewhat of a disconnect between objectives?

ARELLANO: I don't think that wasn't the only disconnect.

Q: Okay.

ARELLANO: (laughs) There were a number of disconnects. That probably was one of the primary ones. I do believe that by the time I arrived in Afghanistan there was more support and understanding by the military of the fact that the ability of any donor country to achieve and sustain results was going to require Afghan institutions capable of doing what donors had been supporting. It became apparent, as troop numbers dropped precipitously and the Afghan military took over key roles, you had a Ministry of Defense that was less capable of some basic functions. With computer systems this rapidly became apparent. NATO military had been assigned to many of these key roles, and suddenly they were not present. For a number of years there had been person-to-person technical assistance by the military from many countries, not just our country. I understand this was especially true in areas such as financial management, purchases, contracting, internal controls, et cetera.

Today what most stands out in my mind is something we discussed on day one where we joined USAID: a country is going to succeed both at the central government level and at the grassroots, to the extent that they want this more than we do. We know from having spent many years in countries like Afghanistan that if the leadership, the elites, the leaders at the grassroots don't really want these changes or improvements, and do not seriously commit to the sacrifices they may entail, these things will simply not take root. Because our short-term mentality in Afghanistan was primarily security driven, with the initial reason for going in post September 11 on finding bin Laden and eliminating al Qaeda's haven, there was a disconnect with anything that related to longer-term goals for Afghanistan. In a country with Afghanistan's history, anything beyond those initial goals would clearly take decades if not longer. There was a lot of talk of nation building and modernization but I am still not sure we fully understood how complicated a process we had undertaken.

The other issue related to the short-term/long-term is I'm not sure we coordinated our methodologies well. This had everything to do with the credibility trust in the changes we were supporting. For example, you needed every governor and every local leader to agree in principle and in fact when we talked about women having access to better services and participation—not just an elite group in Kabul, an elite in Kabul, many of whom were not even residing most of the time in Afghanistan. Some of our primary contacts on key policy issues spent large blocks of time outside the country. They'd fly in, they'd fly out,

but they weren't really living there. Those who were permanently in country really needed to believe in the message you were trying to communicate since this was the only way we were going to have a level of commitment to the goals we sought, be they short-term or long-term. Also, there was a difference in the very nature of what donor countries were willing to provide. Some preferred to focus more on relief and physical commodities, while others on institutional processes. Others preferred to subsidize loans [since it was easier and cleaner for them], while others preferred to donate cash to multilateral funds for them to manage with the Afghan government. There was no real agreement on how we coordinated our types of assistance to ensure sustainability after we departed or our assistance levels dropped. Talking about this does not necessarily endear you with the receiving country that wants to maintain the high levels of assistance forever. Thus, these issues get swept under the rug when they should be planned for, especially when it was clear that sustaining the intensity of effort in Afghanistan was becoming less and less popular in the donor countries.

Q: Thank you. Excellent response there.

So, let me just continue where we had stopped before for a break and ask about kind of your insights and reflections as you look back now at your year there, and what are the key takeaways that you would say, at least during your time there. And we'll talk later about what happened a year ago and your thoughts on that. But when you were getting ready to leave, what was your sense then, what were some of the key insights and takeaways?

ARELLANO: Yes, insights and takeaways. As a rule, I have found I usually have two, sometimes three types of what can be called takeaways. One type is one's personal views of the U.S. government's role and how that has been structured and communicated. The other is one's reflections on the host country itself independent of visitors like us. And then the third is reflections on your family and what your service in a place like that has meant for them, and similarly for the families of those who worked with you.

Starting with the second, which is the most important, I must say that if one simply looks at the statistics for Afghanistan, the country appears to have made progress in important areas. Between 2001 and 2013 and the years that followed, progress made in key sectors such as education, health, incomes and service delivery was quite impressive, if you consider their starting point. However, I must say that given where they were at that point in their history in 2013, I was not terribly optimistic. Given what we know of the tenuous trajectory of very fragile states it was clear that decades were still required to reach sustainable gains. I was in regular contact with women whose mothers were my contemporaries and remembered what they had said about women's opportunities in Afghanistan in the '50s, '60s, and '70s. These women would say they were shocked by how much worse their lives were than their mothers, many of them unable to attend school or university or to work outside the home until the Taliban had fallen. They stressed how they feared all the recent progress would never be irreversible and they lived each day in fear of this. I reflected on my own life, that of my mother and my own daughter and how we assumed that each generation would have broader opportunities. And so it has been, overall. As an example, the three of us were all athletes, but only my daughter's generation, after Title IX, could really play sports through high school and

college. The change was massive. In contrast, even in 2013 when I spoke with young Afghan women on the national soccer team, they lived in daily fear that they would be unable to practice or be forced to leave the country to do so. And this was eight years before the Taliban returned to power.

The ambassador and the deputy ambassador frequently organized meetings at their homes for Afghan women leaders. I met women who in 2001 had no education at all, and in the space of less than ten years completed elementary, middle, and high school, then completed their university education with the intention of completing a graduate degree. This was the situation of many successful businesswomen. You can't help but be optimistic—and feel humbled—when you see this level of willpower. I was very heavily involved with the American University of Afghanistan. They were opening the new campus on the other side of the street, which was inaugurated when I was there. And you'd meet with these women, and you'd say to yourself, this country has such a bright future because this drive to change will sustain the current momentum.

Traveling to the provinces, I met successful women among them the governor of Bamiyan province who later became Minister of Health. Others I met, in Mazar-i Sharif, for example, were incredibly active in the small business community, with the full help and support of their husbands. This support was especially critical in those locations where local officials were conservative and resistant to women's participation.

It was clear that this type of support and opportunities would need to be sustained for many years to come. Not just at the central government level but down to the grassroots, there was a level of fragility that put so much of the progress at risk. People we spoke with knew this. The more rapid drawdown by NATO brought this fear to the forefront of the Afghans' thinking. The topic of setbacks became part of every conversation. In private we would discuss what the U.S. experience had been in countries where USAID worked for decades starting in the 1950s, South Korea, Turkey, Chile, among many others. We knew how long it had taken to work with these places [that started at a much more advanced level of development] to a point of true modernization and sustained growth. Bill, where you have worked over the years, I am sure you knew it would take many decades to get to this point. It was so hard to imagine how progress was going to be sustained in Afghanistan without a more sustained commitment and with the rapid increase in insecurity.

As the troops withdrew, one of the most devastating incidents we experienced was the death of a foreign service officer with the Public Affairs Office at the embassy. She and a security officer were killed in a flagrant attack that occurred on the streets in Zabul province. They had been on a visit to deliver books for school children. Because of the nature of the attack and the work they were engaged in, this sent shock waves across not only the U.S. embassy, but the donor community in general. This occurred shortly before I left Afghanistan and it appeared to be a message, there was no question. It coincided with the acceleration of the drawdown. In sum, we were seeing things happen that from a future perspective for both the U.S. government and Afghanistan didn't make you terribly optimistic.

You asked the question about what it meant for an organization like USAID to cut its U.S. staff in half in a year, and the signal that was sending. By 2013, every budget approval process was a tough fight in Washington. Again, you were approaching the 2014 midterm elections that were looking more and more contentious, and also President Obama's second term was underway with much weaker support in Congress. It was not going to be smooth sailing. It was less and less clear to us how many activities could actually be executed successfully because of the growing insecurity and violence country-wide. On top of all this, as we were withdrawing our troops, U.S. attention to other parts of the world, including Crimea and Ukraine, and further into East Asia and the Pacific. After the death of Osama bin Laden, a lot of people referenced the original intent in Afghanistan, and how far our "reach" in that country had strayed from that one objective after September 11. Many started to question how the U.S. became so heavily involved in nation building in such a fragile country that was going to require a lengthy, costly commitment. At the embassy we hosted Congressional Delegations with newly elected senators and representatives who would start the conversation with these questions. It was clear that this was going to become an important political issue. Suddenly we were having to defend the U.S. position since September 11, something none of our predecessors had had to do.

I think this covers your questions about Afghanistan reflections, as well as your question about the U.S. position.

From a personal, staffing, and family standpoint, I mentioned the death of the public affairs officer, the security officers, and others who lost their lives while I was in country. I had been through this in Iraq, as well. There we had lost local staff—four locally hired Foreign Service Nationals as they are called, among them the man who washed and maintained our cars, an accountant, and others who were simply coming through checkpoints on their way to work. Much of this was driven by the violence between the Shia and Sunni Muslim communities which seemed to be unending. For Iraqis, working for the U.S. government was a very dangerous thing to do at that time. But you were losing, you lost staff you saw every day, all day. And I think from a personal standpoint I didn't think so much about myself because we were, at a certain level, very well protected. Iraq was very dangerous during the time I was there so security precautions for foreigners were extreme and necessary. I never felt the same threat level in Afghanistan, and realized that many of the outside activities I took on in Kabul and elsewhere simply could not have happened in Iraq because of the insecurity. For example, in Iraq we had several instances of U.S. and other foreign contractor technical personnel being kidnapped. During the time I was in Afghanistan this had not yet started. By the time I departed, however, with the troop reductions, it was clear the place was going to get a lot more dangerous. As in Iraq, they would wait us out like. We were constantly reminded by the Afghans "the enemy has the long view." Ultimately, as in Iraq, it was the local citizens, not us, that assumed the greatest risk.

Q: Thank you. Maybe with that we can fast forward to 2021, and just before that, obviously, some of the things leading up to the evacuation and the Taliban taking over. And what was your involvement in—I mean, I know you continued to be involved with things in Afghanistan, including this informal group of former ambassadors and the like,

but what was your involvement as it got to the pullout of summer of 2021? And then, with the Taliban takeover and the big evacuation?

ARELLANO: Once you leave there, no matter what position you take on, your involvement and your influence is not going to be what it was. That quickly becomes crystal clear. In my case, I returned to a job at the Foreign Service Institute and then moved to a position at Princeton University after retirement. The way I was engaged on Afghanistan was marginal at best, compared to how directly I had been while serving there. As Foreign Service Officers, we see this every time we depart a country where we serve. And in some ways, that's a good thing. Conditions in places like Afghanistan or Iraq change so dramatically that it should be the currently-serving officers that carry the ball. While I did do a number of open panel discussions and seminars on both Iraq and Afghanistan, these were primarily to think through the foreign policy implications for the future and talk about possible lessons learned. What I did more of, upon request, was mentoring of officers who would be going to both countries, either to assume leadership roles or to directly execute programs in these tough environments. I always found there were no easy answers to their questions, and looking back I realize this is exactly as it should be.

Much of our role in policy-making was pre-established in Washington. We provided information that gave policy goals a reality check, and often adjustments were made when it looked like U.S. policy expectations were off the mark and unachievable. But the major role for policy design resided in the NSC [National Security Council] and the White House. When I returned stateside and went to the Foreign Service Institute [FSI] there was a major security review in place with the goal of upgrading [post Benghazi] the way civilians were protected in war zones. It had taken a tragedy like Benghazi for this to become a political issue, and thus everyone was scrambling. I was deeply involved in thinking through next steps for field personnel, and the primary outcome of all this was a major upgrade for places like Afghanistan and Iraq, among others. Eventually more in-depth training pre-departure was obligatory. I understand that this is now a requirement for all FSOs [Foreign Service officers], and is even available for local staff. When I retired and went to Princeton it was very difficult to have any direct involvement. I intentionally did not put my name on the roster for consulting assignments with USAID or State Department. I did undertake, upon request, Mission Management Assessments in different regions. Always in the back of my mind was how FSOs who had assumed leadership positions were viewed as knowing how much attention must be paid to day-to-day management of agencies. I believe we were asked to take on this type of analysis because staff in DC often did not have the relevant experience and fully understand how poor management undermines achievements in any given country. My other involvement was with a series of panel discussions along with senior colleagues with whom I had worked, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. These took place at DC think tanks and at universities and a result of the widespread desire to come up with lessons learned for policy development across U.S. agencies in the future.

One side note: I had worked with Ambassador Khalilzad in Iraq, before Ambassador Crocker came in. As the negotiations with the Taliban were set up by the Trump administration, and it became clear there would be minimal involvement by the

Government of Afghanistan, many saw that [I was among them] as a red flag. Every major negotiation or conference on the civilian or military side from 2001 to 2017–18 had actively involved the government. Suddenly they were cut out of any role. The fact that the U.S. was negotiating with the Taliban independently sent all the wrong signals and undermined the values we had been insisting on for decades. Clearly the Taliban were allowed to be deluded into thinking they were more powerful than they actually were, or perhaps we deluded ourselves into thinking that we had more power to determine positive outcomes than we actually would have.

We already knew that Afghan leaders want to talk with those they perceive as on top. Clearly the Taliban thought that by talking directly with the White House, they represented Afghanistan and were securing ironclad commitments. In their worldview, the elected government was no longer in charge. as a government. Bill, you and I know from tough experiences that, as a foreign power, you don't create a parallel working environment.

Prior to going to Afghanistan, I had served in Egypt. This was in the lead-up to the Arab Spring. Our support for elections and civil society was very controversial with the Mubarak government. We had two presidential visits [Bush, Obama] supporting our commitment for democracy and its institutions. Both Presidents delivered strong messages. Our funding came through an agreement with the Egyptian government so these messages were not entirely well-received. But they came from our government to their government directly. We did not do a work around. In the case of the Taliban negotiations, I just think it was so simplistic to think that you could hold talks sequentially and then eventually invite the elected government into those discussions. How could we assume that any outcome would be achieved that would really serve the majority of the people in that country. That was my reflection.

Q: So, you're saying as, when those negotiations started, and especially when they concluded in some kind of agreement that it was almost inevitable that the Afghan government would fall eventually?

ARELLANO: In the mind of the Taliban, the Ghani government's position had become untenable. This message was not lost on the population and this was what the Taliban aimed for. Since leaving power in 2001 this was the goal they sought since it would underpin their return. This was what the Taliban wanted and because the U.S. clearly wanted to leave, they knew they could achieve it. I assume that Ambassador Khalilzad was given the parameters for starting these negotiations, but starting from the wrong place, the exclusions of the government, doomed them from the outset. The government in Kabul was very vocal in its opposition from the beginning. Whether there ever could have been a unified Afghan position was not likely, but establishing such a dysfunctional structure for the talks was even worse. It was the worst of all worlds.

Q: What do you feel were the key issues with the evacuation? I mean, there's the political side and kind of the fall and the Taliban takeover, but then after the fifteenth the U.S. mounted one of the biggest evacuations in our history, and what do you think, I mean, given your experience in Afghanistan, what do you think some of the key issues were with that?

ARELLANO: There had been evacuation plans in place for a long time.

Q: Even when you were there.

ARELLANO: Yes. I assume that as the negotiations went forward, these plans were updated given the urgency of the different possible scenarios. This is a question for somebody else, Bill. I'm not an expert on what precautions were taken as the uncertainty and insecurity grew.

Q: Right, okay.

ARELLANO: As you know, each embassy has an emergency action committee [EAC] which plans for the different situations in each country. We would meet frequently at each post, and the leadership was with the embassy front office and Management section. How this organization at post linked up to what was going on inside State Department and the Department of Defense.

I will give you an example. When I was mission director in Ecuador, 1998 to 2001 right up to 9/11, there had been a serious security threat to U.S. Embassies detected in South America. I remember it was right around Christmas-time. The threat level was being raised each day. Eventually the embassy in Quito shut down until they could really verify what was going on. The USAID mission operated out of my house. This was, as I say, Christmas 2000. The instructions for us were carefully laid out. There were lists of all employees and specific classifications of risk levels. I always remember that staff would come to my house to review and sign documents to keep our programs running. And these precautions were not only for terrorist threats. When we had a volcanic eruption, which we did frequently when both in Quito and in Guatemala, these emergency plans existed.

In sum, others will know how this process kicked in with the return of the Taliban, and how the quick deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan impacted emergency planning when there are so many people involved.

Q: Yeah. Fair enough.

And did you get involved back here or did people call you asking for help to—

ARELLANO: Yeah.

Q: —for references, and all that?

ARELLANO: Right, especially both work references and for visa references. I spent a lot of time on the phone. Having said that, because of my cross-agency role, I was not as active as, for example, an agency head who had local staff reporting directly to them. My referrals were more for Afghan colleagues with whom I had worked, or those who had worked for other donors and met me at meetings in different locations. Often these individuals had located me through someone else and were seeking advice or funding for themselves or other colleagues trying to settle abroad. Many of these networks became self-sustaining. Fortunately, but for unfortunate reasons, there were already large Afghan

communities in many parts of the United States, including Northern and Southern California, Minnesota, the DC area, Richmond, VA, et cetera. These dated from previous large-scale immigration over the decades, people who had a shared experience.

Q: Yep, that's true. Forty years of civil war.

ARELLANO: Right.

Q: Yeah.

Any other kind of reflections from that time, around August, September? I'm sure there were some personal feelings of what we were doing there, what we achieved.

ARELLANO: I go back to the conversation we had earlier about how, at the level of underdevelopment in Afghanistan in 2002–2003, what was achieved in the following years was in many ways remarkable, but also completely fragile and reversible. This was a relatively short period of time. Granted the funding was abundant, but few countries at this level of underdevelopment sustained any progress [for example in Africa, Asia or Latin American] without many decades of sustained funding and policy commitment. Forty to fifty years seems like a realistic timeframe for some of what Afghanistan achieved with such abundant donor resources in ten to fifteen years on issues like life expectancy, education for girls and boys, infant and maternal mortality, et cetera. I often thought back on when I arrived in Bolivia in 1971 [a similar country to Afghanistan: mountainous, landlocked, extreme poverty, low social indicators, years of civil unrest]. Life expectancy averaged forty-eight years. Today, fifty years later, life expectancy in Bolivia—still one of the poorest in the region—has improved by approximately twenty years. Today some countries are competing with the U.S. in terms of life expectancy, but this has taken decades to achieve. What Afghanistan achieved in less than fifteen years, Bolivia achieved in forty years. Bolivia achieved this with decades of generous donor funding, not at the levels of Afghanistan, but much more sustained and longer-term, so actually in dollar terms the resource levels may have been equivalent. The tragedy of Afghanistan was this process was rapid but as we are now seeing, not sustainable.

What comes to mind is how this type of a rapid, draconian withdrawal and takeover by a non-modernizing government, impacts relatively short-term achievements, many of which could have been groundbreaking. While they seemed to have broken all the rules in terms of human development achievements in education, health, even economic and financial access, they needed at least two to three more decades with less but sustained funding with a government that supported that type of modernization. Otherwise, the tenuous progress was totally reversible. I realize that there is no data, other than anecdotal, on the current situation, but clearly things are going in the wrong direction in every area. There has been a lot of Monday-morning quarterbacking on what went wrong and why so much money did not make any difference, but I must insist that we never said that Afghanistan's development process would be immediate or achieved quickly. There were just too many circumstances, with which the U.S. has ample experience, working against this.

Q: Thank you very much.

Q: Hi. This is Bill Hammink and I'm here interviewing Bambi Arellano for our second interview, and this is actually the third recording that we're doing. And it is now September 29, and thank you very much, Bambi, for joining us. And we will continue kind of where we left off before. I'd like to just ask, since you were one of the five ambassadors responsible for coordinating everything like economics, you sat in, and you probably met often with the military. Tell us about coordinating with the military, both front office, but especially yourself as one of the five ambassadors in the economics bureau.

ARELLANO: How to do this most effectively remains one of the ongoing discussions within USAID and at the interagency level. Most countries where USAID has a presence have a direct link to national security goals, and also to some sort of U.S. military presence, be it the usual defense attaché presence, or actual troop deployments. For foreign service officers Afghanistan was no different, just on steroids! I mentioned that my tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan coincided with the military surge [which was also accompanied by a civilian surge. The U.S. had over a hundred thousand troops in both countries while I was there. In Afghanistan there were also the NATO troops. All this to say, the military presence set the tone for what we did. There was no way around it.]

What comes to mind the most are both the day-to-day interaction, and then also the constant decision-making and problem solving that occur because of this complex environment. As agency leaders or coordinators, there is no question that adjusting the civilian perspective to the military's expectations, and the military perspective to civilian expectations becomes a primary role. At so many levels.

The 2013 and beyond precipitous drawdown by many NATO countries, including the U.S., is a case study in how while civilian agencies may try to coordinate and manage programs well, ultimately the military presence sets the rules of the game in this type of environment. As soon as our military went into drawdown mode, all civilian agencies had to follow suit. The impact touched all levels of engagement in all parts of the country.

The changes were immediate The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] because of issues related to vaccinations, had wanted to set up an office at the embassy but with the drawdown this request was refused. It was a tough discussion because they did not understand why vaccinations were not a top priority. HHS [Health and Human Services] downsized to almost nothing, and the Department of Agriculture pulled its people out of country. The Department of Treasury had an interim attaché in country but then proposed to operate entirely out of Washington.

Bill, you mentioned in our last interview the fact that AID during this period or during your time went from four hundred and fifty down to two hundred. So, what AID was doing, everybody was doing. And the embassy was not just picking on USAID; it was a right sizing or a downsizing for everybody, based entirely on how many people could be adequately secured in an environment with many fewer troops. And this was years before the final pull-out. The rapidly changing nature of the military presence set the tone for everything.

As the proposed drawdown became a reality, in many meetings, including those early in the morning with the Ambassador, we would listen to status updates from the military. These changes had to be coordinated among civilian agencies in all provinces, and ultimately with all organizations involved in economic programs or grassroots development. We would have to communicate alterations of ministries and to local officials, to the extent the changes had an impact on their responsibilities. Overall, that was the context for coordination with the military. The unveiling of the modified U.S. defense strategy had an impact on how far our programs could venture out beyond Kabul and into unsecured areas going forward. Our discussions with the military involved the timing and pacing of their withdrawals and which provinces could remain a priority and which would no longer be as viable for civilian activities. The NATO commander and his staff became critical daily contacts for us. We would hear their latest decisions and then try to clarify what they would mean in each of our areas of operation, both within Kabul and country-wide. It was important for the military on the ground to understand how their drawdowns meant we would have to alter our program outreach.

Managing this tough process was something that I learned the hard way in Iraq, but it did eventually serve me well in Afghanistan. We needed to “speak truth to power” in a transparent and timely manner. When I disagreed with something that was being said in terms of what activities would continue to be viable, I had to provide an immediate reality check either to military colleagues or Afghan officials. It was especially important to keep the provincial governors in the loop since so many of the U.S. assistance programs operated outside Kabul and were affected by the drawdown of troops. Amazingly the governors were the first to understand the connection, and I would receive calls from them about what would happen to programs once they knew the troops were departing or being reduced in their provinces. The questions were tough but our answers needed to be realistic and specific.

The weekly Wednesday interagency meetings on reconstruction support were an example of how the coordination unfolded. It was a very large group—co-chaired by the head of NATO’s reconstruction team and myself, with every agency involved in assistance at the table. A very large table! Very often the military would come in with lots of PowerPoint presentations which I often thought seemed to be a way of avoiding in-depth discussion. It was important to manage this meeting to ensure there was time to ask questions—often this involved interrupting the flow of many slides. I had to encourage civilian agencies to speak up and ask tough questions. As the drawdown took shape this became even more important. Getting specifics on information like “Where is this going to happen? In what communities? Have you notified the governor?” —became our responsibility to insist upon. Taking the PowerPoints at face value, one could assume that everything could be done, no matter how many troops you had, no matter what the conditions on the ground. But civilian contractors were becoming very concerned about what could be achieved. Perhaps the poster child for that was the Kajaki Dam Project in Helmand Province. Others who know much more about this will be interviewed so I will just say that security concerns had played and would continue to play a major role in what was possible without risk of human life. This was a very dangerous area. This type of critical infrastructure project and social projects such as women’s and girls’ education were directly related to the hearts and minds of the population. They were very high profile

and polarizing among the Afghans. Without troop protection, clearly the risks were going to increase. Construction projects were a military priority, so they wanted many projects to continue even as the risk grew. Women's and girls' education were a priority for civilian agencies, so both areas required major coordination on who would provide the security to continue operations.

In addition to these discussions and debates, there was a fair amount of joint travel with the military. As a team we would travel to the provinces to be informed by the PRT representatives and their local partners. This was indispensable to get a reading on how to carry issues to our meetings in Kabul and update information on what we could commit to for the future. Communications to the Afghans and guidance to our staff was a daily undertaking as the viability of field operations shifted. So, that was it in a nutshell!

I will always recall one example of how this all worked. I had traveled to Paktika, a province that while on the border with Pakistan, had traditionally been viewed as a place where field projects worked. The communities are extremely remote, but the population was very supportive of development activities. In the meeting with the PRT our team was astounded by how restrictive the province was becoming. We were told once pre-emptive announcements started to filter in on the upcoming drawdown by the U.S. and the Europeans, there had been an uptick in violence. But that trip was really an eye opener. We had imagined this would occur in places like Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan or Zabul and Kundar, but I was surprised at how quickly things were becoming more difficult.

Q: Just one follow-up question on that. You mentioned speaking truth to power, which is important, but did that work? I mean, would two- and three- and even four-star generals listen to what you had to say and consider it?

ARELLANO: You know, it wasn't always easy nor was it always effective. A lot depended on the personalities and the experience of the individuals we were dealing with. Also, there are always going to be people you get along with better than others. But it had to be done, and it was important to report on what we had said about a given problem "up the chain" so if we were quoted or misquoted, our superiors were clear on what I said. I had seen in Baghdad, where I witnessed some superb examples of how civilians work with the military. The head of the political section at the embassy there [she eventually became ambassador to Egypt so I worked with her again] was outstanding in her ability to mobilize us all—military and civilians—to work together. She did it on an informal basis in her office on Fridays and on an ongoing basis through daily meetings to make sure we had the same information on the state of Iraqi politics. This was no mean task, as you can imagine! I learned so much about the way relationship building should happen when we have common goals but very different areas of responsibility. She was a true expert!

In Iraq we had some extraordinary military colleagues in the field: my gosh, in Anbar, in Mosul, in Babil, in Baghdad, and nationwide. They all went on to play very important roles at the national level after their tours, and I worked with some of them again as part of the NATO structure in Afghanistan. It was a group of people who you learned so much and when we reconnected in Afghanistan it did give me a head-start for coordination in that very different environment. In sum, there was real respect for each other and

understanding that the best decision making would be done if information and ideas were exchanged. But also we knew the challenges were so daunting that success was never guaranteed. I think that humbling reality united us all. However for the civilian side it will always be more complicated. Our military is so much larger than we are, their funding so much greater, and their image so overshadowing. Working where they are high profile, and, frankly, because of their clear command-and-control structure, the civilian side often finds itself playing catch up because military institutions tend to get a “pass” where we tend to be told we need to justify every move.

Again, our working structures are very different. There was just a lot more dialogue, late night and early morning conversations with the NSC, when they were still at work and we had stayed awake. Setting civilian agency policy in the context of what is fundamentally warzone policy is not simple. One constantly asks: Did I really achieve something other than being at the table and bringing up what I thought was relevant information? Our decision-making role was not well-defined so to the extent you could convince them to modify what seemed to be a wrong decision based on unrealistic deliverables, I guess that was the role I had. I didn’t keep a log of how many times this was achieved. I felt very ambivalent at times. What I did come out with is a tremendous respect for the military I dealt directly with at all levels, be they the nineteen-year-old marine sharpshooters from West Virginia or the Generals in charge. Most of my USAID colleagues who were with me in both Afghanistan and Iraq would say the same thing. Working with them was not perfect nor easy, but you learned a tremendous amount and hopefully did a better job because of it. Or at least I hope so.

Q: Yep. Thank you.

You were not USAID when you were in Kabul, you were State, you were one of the five ambassadors, you were privy to a lot of discussions about different agencies, maybe even including USAID, and how was USAID viewed by other agencies and by the most senior people in the embassy?

ARELLANO: This is the perennial question. Any of us who are assigned to a new country as USAID know there is always a past legacy of how our work is viewed by others. That legacy has been created not just by other agencies’ experience with us but also the local partners’ experience. When I got to Afghanistan I again felt like when I was walking around with my predecessors accompanying me, or so it seemed!

Afghanistan was toward the end of my career and I believe interagency coordination had become much more of a daily practice by then. But at the beginning of my career, in the waning years of the Cold War and into the 1990s, I felt real tensions between some ambassadors and USAID leadership at post. Where these relationships worked well, they worked beautifully, but where they did not the tension was palpable. Much of this was because in underdeveloped countries USAID tended to have large budgets, often the largest at post, to work with the host country. Often we had more local staff and our mission directors were viewed as important personalities by the host country leaders. As other agencies entered the development arena, mission directors had to work very hard to keep USAID programs front and center. Once the Berlin Wall fell, many other agencies came to the table on economic development, education and even health policy. Justice,

democracy, and human rights also became a much more shared space for USG programming. I was in Latin America and Eastern Europe in those years and the work in administration of justice, for example, involved much more coordination with the Department of Justice and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], as well as DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration]. Not to mention the day-to-day coordination with the embassy political section. You know better than I do, Bill, because you served in Russia, but it seems to me that by the late 1990s USAID's issues had pretty much become everybody's issues which meant that most agencies had an opinion of what it was like to work with USAID!

By the time I got to Afghanistan in 2012 this was a given. But you still had this thing where when you first met people what they would talk with you about was issues or problems they'd had with USAID in the past. It was ironic. It seemed almost like a ritual or rite of passage upon arrival. You'd say, Hi, hello, my name is so-and-so. I come from blah-blah-blah-blah and I'm here to do this, and they'd say, Oh, yeah. I worked with USAID in, and they'd rattle it off. So, you dealt with that type of thing and had to get beyond it.

I must say, however, that the difference between the 1990s and today is noteworthy. There will always be exceptions, but by the time I got to Iraq everybody wanted us working with them, or at a minimum know how we were contributing. Sometimes our intense on-the-ground coordination with the military created tensions on the civilian side, even to the level of the ambassador. This was logical and needed to be remedied immediately. We did have ambassadors who had had issues with USAID officers and were not happy about the way things were aligned.

When I arrived in Afghanistan, six years after serving in Iraq, I found that coordination for planning the surge had been well executed. You had strong officers in each region, and while there might be an issue, it was not at the level where coordination broke down. Again, my role was not within USAID, but I found the USAID director, as well as other agency leadership very accessible and focused on resolving problems as they arose. Not letting things drag out. There was a sense that we were all in this together so anyone's problem became everyone's problem.

An important part of this improvement overseas was based on the fact that in Washington people were spending much more time on interagency coordination. Early in my career it was common knowledge that it was easier to coordinate in the field than in DC. Officers assigned back to Washington were amazed at how little work had been done in this sphere. As a result, you had a situation where overseas posts thought the interagency position was clear until they heard that Washington had not yet agreed on what it was going to do. For USAID this was especially true on the use of assistance budgets. In sum I think it wasn't just what people thought of us, but how we simply got smoother in achieving common goals up and down the decision-making chain over the years. I think it's taken decades to get there and probably will continue to take decades more as budgets are more shared across agencies.

Q: Yeah. And somewhat related to that, I mean, did you find that sometimes you had to mediate interagency rivalries, let's say like USDA [Department of Agriculture] and USAID working in the agriculture area?

ARELLANO: Not in Afghanistan. The Department of Agriculture was much smaller than USAID by the time I arrived and coordination between Agriculture and AID was strong. By the time I left Agriculture was drawing down. On other issues, in health, between USAID's health team and the Department of Health and Human Services [HHS] it tended to also be good. The issue was making sure we presented a united front to the very professional team at the Ministry of Health. The minister had been governor of Bamiyan province and worked well with both. But what she wanted was a unified U.S. position on issues like vaccinations, women's health, child services, feeding programs, et cetera. She wanted to know who would lead on each issue: what can HHS do? What can USAID do? What does Agriculture do? So, it was very important for us to have multiple officers meet with her and to have this scripted. I mentioned previously, with the Treasury and the embassy economic section in particular, policies on anti-corruption and vetting of Afghans had been clarified across agencies. Also, the military and Department of Justice had to be involved. USAID's role in the financial sector and the economy was primarily building institutions and access. Microfinance and cellphone access to capital were becoming wider spread. USAID felt especially affected by stiff anti-corruption measures and the blacklisting of Afghan leaders, many of whom they had had contact with. While USAID worried about shifting centralized services to more poor grassroots beneficiaries, Treasury and Defense and Justice were more worried about getting the bad guys and not letting any of the U.S. or NATO assets benefit known or possible criminals. Often it was hard to determine just who is who, and if a given program should be negatively affected.

The issue was not one of interagency rivalry as much as trying to figure out what was the nexus and what was the best decision. The meetings of the NATO allies who provided assistance, and the multinational donors [UN, World Bank, et cetera] were very large and complicated. There would be countries representatives from China and Russia, and others that really did not give meaningful assistance but wanted to hear what we talked about. Going into these it was so important to have a clear, concise position on high voltage issues such as corruption, and terror financing, and even specific individuals who had been found to be involved in both. We were asked whether we would be conditioning our assistance, or even stopping assistance to a given sector. And we had to have a response. Sometimes this was not possible because agency decisions were close-hold, and we had different levels of decisions for different sectors or different levels of beneficiaries. Again, I think the term rivalry, based on what I witnessed in Afghanistan, is too strong a term. It was people trying to do their job, but just having very different assignments.

Q: Yep, different objectives.

ARELLANO: Mm-hm.

Q: And you said before that you had worked with your ambassador, Ryan Crocker, in Iraq previously and then, I think he left and then James Cunningham was ambassador while you were there as well.

ARELLANO: Yes, you also worked with Ambassador Cunningham.

Q: Yes, I worked under Cunningham as well.

ARELLANO: Mm-hm.

Q: And you know, how did you know, for example, what the ambassador was really interested in, both in terms of what goes up, information, or no surprises types of interests that the ambassador had? How was that, especially in Kabul because it was big and you had five ambassadors, which is unprecedented?

ARELLANO: Yes. Ironically the structure in Kabul which divided responsibilities in the front office between five of us [ambassador, deputy ambassador, three “functional-level” ambassadors], it was easier to determine when to raise issues because we could consult among each other. I would often consult with Deputy Ambassador Tina Kaidanow on the relative urgency or relevance of information that came to my attention. There was so much going on that if I did not raise it to the Ambassador, she could, or another colleague could, if they were going to see him first. Nothing was viewed as proprietary for any one of us. Tina would consult with Ambassador Cunningham, and usually had full knowledge of the situation. The key was to use the front office team to get clarity as quickly as possible. For example, a lot of requests were coming in to me directly from the military, but not necessarily from a level of the military that the ambassador or the deputy ambassador was dealing with. Tina was very proactive and would have me over for her meetings with the regional commanders if I had a concern so I could consult directly when they came into Kabul. It was incredibly helpful to hear the reaction of those who would be closest to a program or an issue. On the other hand, very often the commanders would come in and complain about an individual they considered within my purview. It usually was a personnel issue, but could also be behavioral. To the extent it involved another agency I would have to listen and then speak with the agency head, eventually getting back to Tina or the commander with an update. In a similar fashion, if a given agency was having problems with the military, I would have to involve Tina or Ambassador Cunningham to make sure the loop was closed if they heard something. This fell under the “rule of no surprises.” In a situation like we were living in at the time, we needed to try to control the little that was in our span of control! So much of that was timely management of day-to-day communication.

In Iraq I had gotten used to working with two very strong DCMs [deputy chief of missions], one under Ambassador Khalilzad who had deep experience on foreign assistance to Iraq, another under Ambassador Crocker who had been the ambassador in Bangladesh whom he asked to transfer to Baghdad to work with him as his DCM. She was extremely experienced as both a diplomat and a manager. Like him, she remained in Baghdad for two years. These strong leadership teams, similar to what I later found in Kabul, made all the difference. Had this not been the case I know my jobs would have been much more difficult. On the other hand, hopefully these structures lightened the load at the top and made the ambassador’s job a bit more manageable. The rule of thumb, the judgment call if you will, was if we could resolve an issue at our level, just do it. It would have been untenable for every issue to await the Ambassador’s attention.

Q: Yep. Thank you. And just wondering, you know, U.S. government and USAID, State and others were in Afghanistan twenty years, 2001 to '21, and what are your reflections and lessons learned on the overall U.S. involvement? And then I have a follow-on question related to how you see how things are now a year after the Taliban took over. But just during the time period when the U.S. was in Afghanistan, what are your reflections?

ARELLANO: I mentioned this earlier, probably a couple of times, but the fact we were there, living in the same place we worked, without our families, twenty-four hours a day, there was lots of time to think about whether we were doing any good and who was benefiting in the medium to long-term. That would be constantly running through my mind. These are not easy situations for you personally, nor is it an easy situation for your family, nor for the families of anybody who's there. Ironically, by the time I got to Afghanistan, military tours were actually down to eight months, so civilians were staying a full four months longer and a much higher percentage of the civilians, overall, extended their tours. This was much truer for Afghanistan than Iraq, probably because Iraq was much more insecure.

I cannot speak for what it became after the drawdown, Bill. You know more about this than I do. There were restrictions in Afghanistan, but nothing like Iraq where every morning you would wake up to, at least the period I was there, to bombings inside Baghdad. Our compound was on the river so the noise traveled. The markets were relatively close by and those bombings set the tone for the day. In Afghanistan there much less; it existed, but on a much smaller scale. This level of violence took place in more remote locations and news would arrive gradually from the provinces and secondary cities. All this to say, in both countries one was always conscious that our presence was very fragile. There was always the risk that both our presence and our achievement were very temporary.

This was a hard thing for me because my prior experience [with both USAID and other donors] had been in underdeveloped countries where you could witness a level of improvement and change over time. We had seen the living standards of communities progress and evolve. Often taking decades but it would happen. I imagine that the people who reopened the embassy and re-started assistance programs in 2001 had in the back of their minds that the danger of reversal would exist as long as the threat of violence was so present. Finding a country that had regressed centuries in such a relatively short time meant it could happen again. One wants to look at the bright side of the achievements because so much effort on the part of so many people went into this progress. I cited those statistics earlier. I left in late 2013 and there was additional progress in the years that followed, though more slowly than previously. That was the situation the day before the evacuation of Kabul. The situation in 2001, two decades before, was extremely different.

We know that much of this incipient progress is being erased day by day now. For me this is a tough lesson in how ambitious your goal setting should be for any fragile state. There must be a guiding rule that we cannot be blinded by our political reality or ambition that forces us to set timeframes that are totally unrealistic. Don't say this country's going to be changed in five years, don't say you're going to have a flawless military built in four or

five years, or a flawless anything built in four or five years when your starting point is that low. Afghanistan is now and was always, even prior to the final drawdown, at that very bottom tier of the developing nations. I do not believe it has ever gotten out of the lowest ten since the index of underdevelopment existed. We should not have forgotten this, no matter how many resources were made available.

Q: So, even twenty years, in terms of development is just very little in terms of what's needed.

ARELLANO: It's a drop in the bucket in terms of time. I understand that the amount of money may not have looked like a drop in the bucket, and as a result we felt compelled to set overly ambitious targets. But frankly, on most days I thought if we had 10 percent of that assistance budget for a country like Afghanistan, over time we likely could achieve similar levels of improvement, given that the operating environment was so tough. And so, did we need these massive amounts of money? There are real downsides to too much of a good thing.

Q: I agree. I had the same issues when I was there. And you know, a lot of times the U.S. government throws money at problems like—in other countries as well. If it's humanitarian assistance very specific, okay, you can maybe spend a lot of money, food and keep people alive, but in terms of development assistance, I mean, in Afghanistan the budgets were billions and billions of dollars. And do you think that was reasonable for the U.S. as kind of a lesson learned here in Afghanistan, the U.S. really needs to look at what should be the response. It's not always just money, it's kind of thinking, like you said, long-term relationships and the like. How do you think that was manifested in Afghanistan, all that money created corruption or the destruction—?

ARELLANO: There's been a lot written about this and even more discussed. And people always go to that point, it was just too much too soon. I think a lot of it was driven by who we talked to and who we trusted, or wanted to trust. I think this is kind of a red flag for assistance to other conflict zones like Ukraine. While that country is at a totally different level of development [paved roads, large economy, educated middle class, existing institutions], are we talking to the right people, what are the amounts of money, who's going to manage the money, what controls are in place. I assume a lot of that thinking on assistance to Ukraine is going on ahead of time, which is a good thing.

We noticed two issues working with the Afghan leadership. Very often we were talking with people who had been out of the country for a substantial period and had worked with organizations that knew how to “play the system.” They learned how to ask the international community for abundant resources, trying to pressure us to put more money forward. Combining this with the political reality of the United States, which every two years you're looking at a potential flip in the Congress and every four years a potential flip in the White House, it is a recipe for disaster in terms of long-term budget or strategic planning. The elites we spent the most time with live partly in Kabul, but mostly with their families in Doha, Abu Dhabi, Dubai or Canada or the United States or Washington, DC. Most of the time you were talking with them in English while the majority of Afghan local leaders and citizens were living an entirely different reality. That, combined with the U.S. budget and political cycle made it very difficult to put together the building

blocks of a workable four or five year plan that could lead to a more sustainable society and economy.

My rule of thumb for trusting the Afghan partners I related to was when they would say and do things that made sense to me based on past experience. That was the starting point. It was when they cared about what I considered to be “the right things” for their country. Nevertheless, these conversations usually took place in the context of the budget pressures we were under when money was not moving fast enough, or there had been issues with vetting of Afghans working on a given project. Add to this the incredible pressures our military was under to produce improvements in security in specific locations, and you know, Bill, how much pressure we all were under. The military budget was so overwhelmingly large, and the country’s dependency on these funds so total, There was always a backdrop of urgency and threat when it appeared that funds might be withdrawn or reduced.

I think back today on how—with the drawdown in 2013—the conversation suddenly shifted almost entirely to what could be secured, and what could not. Of course for me this dealt mostly with what projects and contractors could remain because conditions permitted it, and which ones would have to reduce in scope or disappear entirely. We no longer talked as much about the quality or content of the work being done, but where the work could realistically continue. For the U.S. staff this was a major mental shift since many of them were professionals with a specific technical or management type of expertise. My daily meetings with agency heads became a discussion of logistics and how to update projection into the rethought masterplans the embassy was putting together. Meanwhile, for the military the Ministry of Defense just was not ready to assume full responsibility for security operations. They neither had the staff nor the ability to manage resources. The literacy and numeracy rates within the military were ridiculously low, a reflection of the country itself. From the standpoint of institutional development much more time was needed. And what we no longer had was time. The wakeup call for so many serving in Kabul was the realization that, in the final analysis, everything depended upon the military planners and their decision then and going forward.

Q: That’s right, yes.

ARELLANO: I remember setting up meetings between USAID people working in the Ministry of Finance and Minister Zakhilwal at the time. He and his staff were so worried about the way the defense budget was being managed by the Ministry of Defense, especially as NATO staff were no longer inside that ministry. Was it that there was too much money? Was the withdrawal too precipitous? Had there been too much of a focus on doing the job for them instead of teaching them the skills to do the job? Probably all of the above, given the pressures to spend funds that would not be around forever.

Q: One thing that I saw I really struggled with and that is that the poverty rate from 2001 to, I was there in 2013, ’14, ’15, had not gone down. It was still at 36, 38 percent of Afghans who were below the World Bank poverty level. And I mean, I’m sure you also looked at that, and what was your take on that and why, despite the billions on health, education, jobs and you know, business, that just didn’t do anything, agriculture?

ARELLANO: Yes. As we know, a lot of it is probably in the way you measure poverty, but I think the issue for Afghanistan goes way beyond that. I know this debate will continue. I first went to South America as a college student in the 1960s and then eventually went back there in 1971 as a UN volunteer. There was this whole discussion even then on the role of urbanization in reducing poverty, and how much poverty could be reduced in remote rural areas without developing urban market centers. A city like Sao Paulo in 1965 when I was there had two million people, I think at the time. Brazil was then extremely poor and had one of the largest USAID programs in the world. Well, today Sao Paulo has twenty-two million, and the urban-rural balance has been reversed from what it was then.

At the academic level there still is this discussion of how much development can be achieved in a place like Afghanistan without populations shifting to more urban centers. Mexico is another case in point. While the world today overall is much less poor than it was sixty years ago, Afghanistan has simply not kept pace. Extreme poverty has been reduced to a limited set of countries which tend to be more rural and isolated and landlocked. Afghanistan is one of those countries. It is in the company of countries in Central and Sub Saharan Africa, Haiti, Somalia. Places that combine historic strife with severe lack of economic opportunities. I would not want to attribute Afghanistan's inability to make it over this hurdle to any one economic, political, social or security factor, but clearly working simultaneously on solutions for a sustained period may hold the key to a better future.

As you know, the communities you visited in Afghanistan were among the poorest we had seen in our careers, especially in those places where the Taliban was a constant threat. There was a hopelessness that had set in over the decades. Access to services, access to roads, access to commercial enterprises that could have brought people out of extreme poverty by improving incomes, needed to be accompanied by diminishing the threat of violence. It was all part of the same package.

Q: Yeah. Well, thank you very much. Any kind of final reflections that will go into the oral history for U.S. diplomacy in Afghanistan? You played an important role while you were there and even now in different groups, so any final reflections?

ARELLANO: As I followed Afghanistan after leaving, it seemed that every year was a different situation. When I would speak on panels or at courses I would be asked very different questions, depending on what the current challenges were. Lessons learned from my time there may be of little utility to the team that is now running the Afghanistan program, based outside the country. One thing I like about the oral history process is that it makes you more thoughtful and hopefully more humble because you think about what has happened since you've been on the ground there, and what remains of what you thought you had achieved. Or, in my case, less what you achieved than what you were a part of that changed dramatically either positively or negatively after you departed. I still try to stay abreast of what is happening in Afghanistan and care deeply about the impact on people I knew and met, and those who remain there today. The amount of time I served there was very brief, and one realizes how relatively insignificant that time is in the longer continuum when things can change for the better, or in this case, for the worse.

Our reflections are not easy on us, nor should they be. How else would we learn what we should or could have done differently at that time?

Q: Well, thank you very much. This has been really enlightening for me, I've enjoyed it, and hopefully for you too.

End of interview