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AMBASSADOR RICHARD BOUCHER

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. It is October 26, 2022. I'm Robin Matthewman and today I am interviewing Ambassador Richard Boucher for our ADST Afghanistan Project.

Welcome, Richard. I hope I can call you that.

BOUCHER: Absolutely, yeah.

Q: Thank you. I thought we'd just start off and ask you to summarize your diplomatic career prior to getting involved in working on Afghanistan.

BOUCHER: I spent a lot of my time in China. I spent my early days in China. Taiwan, Chinese language school, the Department's China desk. Shanghai in the mid-1980s. That was kind of the first ten years of my career. I came back to the Operations Center, which opened up new possibilities. I happened to get a job in the European bureau—because we had conversations with allies about the rest of the world, and I knew the rest of the world, so they needed somebody who wasn't just in the European niche.

Then one thing led to another. I had mentioned to Chuck Redman, who was outgoing spokesman at the time, my interest in one of the jobs down in the press office and he somehow threw my name up as somebody who might be a deputy spokesman. When I went up to see the incoming spokesman for Secretary Baker, Margaret Tutwiler, we hit it off. I knew the world and she knew the press and our partnership worked out really well.

Suddenly I found myself going in a totally different direction, but that usually happens somewhere along the way in the Foreign Service. So, I was in and out of spokesman jobs for a while. I'd gone off as ambassador to Cyprus, consul general in Hong Kong, came back to be Senior Official for APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation] for a while.

I was in California on a business trip when I got a phone call from Secretary Albright's outgoing spokesman saying she needed somebody to do this job at once, would you like to? I said let me think about it. And I called my wife and she said, "Well, you said yes, didn't you?" I said, "No." "So, call them back and say yes." I said, "Okay." So, I called Jamie Rubin, her Spokesman, back and said, "Yes." They still wanted me in the hour that

had passed, and it turned out to be a great thing to work with Secretary Albright. Very exciting and dynamic moments.

In 2001, Secretary Powell came in, said, "What do you want to do?" and I said, "Well, you know, I'd like to go out as an ambassador somewhere but I'm okay staying for a while if you want me to." And he said, "Yeah, why don't you stay for a little while."

Q: What year is that now?

BOUCHER: What?

Q: What year?

BOUCHER: So, we're talking 2000 and let's see, 2000, right? Two thousand and one, early 2001, January of 2001. And so, he said, "Stay for a while," and five years later, I was still there until Secretary Rice moved me to South and Central Asia. I wasn't an expert in South and Central Asia. I certainly had been to these places with Secretary Powell, with Secretary Rice, and had talked about them from the podium, but of course, talking about things and actually doing something about them is quite a bit different. That's one thing you rapidly learn when you leave the podium. And so, I was familiar but not immersed in South and Central Asia when I took over the job for Secretary Rice.

Q: I wonder if you'd stop and before we leave your time as the spokesperson, you were pretty close to Secretary Powell. You went with him on most of his trips, I think.

BOUCHER: Yeah, all of them, I think all but one to Greenland.

Q: I think you were with him in South America when 9/11 occurred?

BOUCHER: Yes, I was.

Q: So, I wanted to ask you a little bit about, you know, as you—during those subsequent days, months and years, what are your key takeaways about how the United States responded to the fact that Afghanistan had harbored the al Qaeda planners?

BOUCHER: Yeah. Well, we were in Lima, Peru, when 9/11 happened, when the airplanes hit the towers. I don't remember if I've told the story or not, but we were in a meeting with President Toledo of Peru talking about textile quota for Peruvian long-staple cotton shirts. Craig Kelly, Powell's executive assistant, came in with a note that said: an airplane has hit one of the twin towers. We said: oh, that's strange. And then a moment later Craig came back with another note that said another airplane hit the other tower.

At that point, Secretary Powell said, "Oh, we've got to find out what's going on, we've got to get organized here." And so, we stopped the breakfast, we went up and watched TV. With the Organization of American States members, we were planning on voting a democracy resolution. Everybody knew we were going to have to leave, and so, they called the meeting into session for maybe ten minutes, voted the democracy charter. Powell had said, "Gas up the plane, we're going home." So, we voted and then went out right away to the plane. I think everybody at the meeting from all over the Americas

understood that somehow democracy and the solidarity of democracies was an integral part of whatever this was and whatever we were going to have to do about it.

On the airplane on the way home, it was one of the weirdest rides we ever had. It was probably eight hours in the air, largely cut off from news. All the usual communications channels were just full, we couldn't get into them. Secretary Powell was getting information, talking through the radio of the airplane with the tower at Andrews air force base, who then patched him to the State Department. He could talk to Deputy Secretary Armitage in the State Department building. That was the only way we were getting news.

One of the women onboard, one of my Press assistants, was very, very concerned. Her husband worked in that corner of the Pentagon that had been hit, and she was desperate to find out any news on him. Deputy Secretary Armitage was able to get it from the Pentagon that he had been out of the office at the moment that the airplane struck. So, we were able to pass that information on and reassure her. That reminds me of both the big picture concerns about the fate of the nation and the personal concerns for people who lived and worked in Washington. I give Rich Armitage and Secretary Powell a lot of credit for paying attention to both.

At one point, I went into Secretary Powell's office on the plane with a list of things that we had on our agenda and said: "We've got this list, boom, boom, boom, you know, here's what I think we ought to do about them." And he cut me off and said, "You don't understand. This changes everything. This changes absolutely everything." And he was right. It did change everything.

I think our initial response was somewhat in contrast with the response of ordinary Americans. You'd talk to other people in the United States—folks you knew or folks you bumped into at the grocery store—and the general reaction was: "Oh my god, we're so vulnerable." People didn't realize that other people could come and attack us at home. This hadn't happened since Pearl Harbor.

And yet, in the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA and elsewhere, our reaction was: "We can get these guys. We can do something about this." So, that became the motivating factor to enlist governments, including famously the government of Pakistan, and allies and military forces and sanctions and the myriad of actions it was going to take to get at these guys and other people like them who were interested in carrying out acts of terror against the United States. That became, I would say, more than cause, it became an obsession and a duty. I think some of the subsequent errors stemmed from this kind of attitude as it extended into the mantra of "we've got to go get them before they get us." That was the attitude that we had and it took us to excesses.

Q: The—yeah. I think that—I think that's fine.

We—there are some comments in the press, in the books and some of our oral histories that in the early period we felt that somehow, we had—that we hadn't actually caught the leaders of the attacks. We had fixated in Afghanistan the early years because there wasn't that much fighting and the Taliban sort of melted away, visibly at least. Is that how it felt to you in 2004, 2005?

BOUCHER: Initially, you know, we went in to support the Northern Alliance, you know, our allies from the anti-Soviet period. But also remember, Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, the Lion of Panjshir, had been assassinated two days before 9/11 by the Taliban. So, they had their own problems, their own gripes with the Taliban and we were coming in on the side of Afghans who were trying to get rid of the Taliban too.

That was very successful, fighters coming down by horseback—some special forces and CIA people and the Northern Alliance fighters, sweeping into Kabul, and then there was this "what do we do now" moment. The idea was to get Afghanistan up and running, to bring in a government, to bring in people who would be able to run the place, and help them organize through a process of international conferences and contacts that we had. Karzai was put forward as the president, given his tribal and international contacts, and he went in, he set up the government.

We visited him with Secretary Powell in January of 2002, so this wasn't much after he took over. And I just remember the stories around the table with all his cabinet members were how empty their offices were and how there was no money, no currency, no gold, no silver in the central bank vaults. There were no papers, there were no fax machines. They didn't have anything to run a government with. Many of these people were Afghan expats, they were fully capable, but they didn't have the wherewithal to set up the mechanisms of government. And so, we started to help with that, we started to help with AID [United States Agency for International Development] programs, get money into the bank accounts so that they could run a government and spend it on doing things in Afghanistan. Plus reconstituting an Afghan army and, almost as a secondary thought, a police force.

Q: Now, the Taliban had only been fully in charge for maybe six years, I think, or something like that, but there had been a civil war going on for twenty years at this point. And the government before that had been a monarchy, I guess, or a loose federation.

BOUCHER: A loose federation, monarchy, yeah.

Q: But was it—did we underestimate how hard it would be to get a government in place?

BOUCHER: I think so. I think we basically thought that, you know, once you get a president and a bunch of ministers they'll run the place, right? Well, A) that's not the way Afghanistan has ever been run, and B) not very practical in a country that doesn't have telephones. So, it was fairly quickly apparent that this was a much bigger task than we had originally thought. And do remember the Taliban had been running their own apparatus out of Kandahar on a large part of the country, but all the Afghans had come through these thirty years of fighting, but during the last ten years, there was absolute chaos and murder. The nineties were a horrible time in Afghanistan, warfare between factions and warlords: it was just awful.

The areas that the Taliban had occupied were, I would say, peaceful and orderly, but only after a fashion of draconian Islam. So, overall, it was a real mess. Getting Afghanistan back together and getting it running as a modern state was an infinitely greater task than

we originally conceived. As we got into it, we kept getting deeper and deeper into, you know, the kinds of training that would be involved, the equipment, getting the ministries up and running, getting the drug enforcement process up and running, all this other stuff. I think part of the difficulty was the magnitude of the task.

Then, the other thing was, we were really trying to teach them to be like us. We thought: Well, what do they need? Well, they need elections, they need justices, they need a kind of modern bureaucratic government, they need ministries and interagency meetings, just like we have in Washington because everybody knows our government runs so incredibly well. But that became the default position, then we got trainers and NGOs [non-governmental organizations], and we started deploying people like us to teach Afghan bureaucrats, essentially to be like us and run a system like ours. Really not taking full advantage of all the Afghans who had been overseas, all the Afghans who had been in refugee camps basically running their own operations, educated Afghan professors and managers. We were not deferring enough to the very capable Afghans about how things should be done. I think that was part of the tension in the beginning.

The other part of it was that there was just so much money all of a sudden that naturally, people's inclination to line their own pockets was very strong.

Q: When you became the assistant secretary of state, it was for South and Central Asia, right?

BOUCHER: Yeah.

Q: So, the Central Asian countries from the former Soviet Union had just been added to the bureau, I think, as you came in. So, I guess the idea was that part of the answer would be to have a regional approach, or it made some sense since the countries were, you know, you can't get away from geography. (laughs) So, is that how Secretary Rice looked at it or what did she, how did she frame the job to you?

BOUCHER: So, it was her idea and she asked me if I would be the assistant secretary of South and Central Asia. Her idea was that these people had been neglected as sort of 'an ass end of Europe.' They were there, and they had been visited. There were some deputy assistant secretaries who pay attention to them, but they really don't get the attention they deserve. We were still heavily involved in Afghanistan, we had airbases in Manas in Kyrgyzstan. We had railroad supplies that came down through Russia and through Central Asia.

And then there was the strategic position. These countries were no longer—well, they couldn't be just seen as the far end of Europe. They had been a region that was buffeted by Russia and China since time immemorial, and in the modern world they needed other options besides Russia and China.

You know, it's funny. When I took the job, my first trip was to Kazakhstan with Vice President Cheney, who was visiting. I remember, I showed up at this dinner and three times during the dinner President Nazarbayev points over and says, "That Boucher, he thinks I'm Asian, but I'm actually European." He says this three times in front of Cheney, and I'm thinking, Oh, boy, this is great. This is going to end my career. And at the end of

the dinner, Nazarbayev comes up to me, puts his arm around me and says, "Okay, now we can work together."

It was a continuing theme because a couple of years later, he announced the pathway to Europe for Kazakhstan, how they were going to work and integrate themselves more fully with European institutions, including, you know, what happens in a couple of years, he shows up at the OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] in Paris where I'm working. The Kazakhstanis saw part of their destiny as Europe, and Nazarbayev said to me at the time, "We know the path to Europe also leads towards the United States." And so, that was their destiny, their dream, their attitude towards modernization, their attitude towards institutions, and yet he also had significant ties with some of his friends in the region as well as with Russia and China.

So, it's an oddly placed set of countries, but Secretary Rice's thoughts were that a lot of the ties into Europe were going to evolve, we could certainly work on those between State Department regions. What we really need to do is to see if we can't open up the connectivity going south down towards Afghanistan, Pakistan, and eventually the Arabian Sea, that that's an outlet that's important to them too.

Q: And vis-à-vis Afghanistan, so what did she, I mean, did she have any goals for you or was it more along the lines of tell me what we need to do?

BOUCHER: A lot of it was figured out as we went along. She didn't really have to tell me what we could do, because the name of the game was stabilization, although I think our aspirations were much bigger than stabilization. That's another one of our fundamental problems. You know, stabilization is not building a set of institutions that run a modern nation. It's about running a set of institutions that are, shall we say, good enough, but we never thought good enough was good enough. We always thought this has to be perfection à la Washington-style.

So, stabilization was the name of the game and to do that you needed the cooperation and support of Pakistan and India, you needed routes in and out of Central Asia, and you needed institutions in Afghanistan that could maintain the peace. And that was our exit strategy: a government in Afghanistan that could maintain the peace and take care of its people. I don't think we thought that part of it through clearly or far enough. We thought that elections, judicial systems, ministries, and interagency meetings were enough. We didn't think enough about the countryside, the district level, and how the government related to people in the villages.

Q: We had created an assistance program that was an Office of Afghan Reconstruction that I think started in 2002, but it was part of your bureau. Was it folded into the SCA [South and Central Asia] bureau, or did that become—

BOUCHER: They were part of our bureau, but they were also related to the people that were doing the post-Soviet, you know, Eastern Europe, Central Asia stuff. So, there were several offices and money for a variety of things—

Q: Okay.

BOUCHER: —that used to go to—yeah, the money people came into our bureau, and it became part of my budget. I mean, that was part of my annual budget presentation to Secretary Rice. Here's how much we need and here's what we want to do in Afghanistan.

Q: So, Ambassador Neumann got there before you were confirmed, he came into office. So in 2005, he had been trying to get Washington's attention for some important issues. What was that all about?

BOUCHER: Well, that was about stability and connectivity, especially roads. We had this slogan that I think General Eikenberry came up with, and so General Eikenberry, Ambassador Neumann, and me, we were all lockstep on this. And the slogan was: "Where the roads end the insurgency begins." We needed roads, we needed connectivity, we needed to tie the country together. That was sort of one of themes of the bureau because connecting the Central Asians to South Asia to the sea was part of the plan as well, connecting their hydrocarbons to Europe was another part of the plan, and connecting Afghanistan to itself, connecting the government to the rest of the country was part of the plan. So, roads, roads, roads. So, I pitched to Secretary Rice, I think it was on a three-billion-dollar appropriation that year. I think we got two, maybe a little more, but a large part of that was to build roads. And we did that. We built a lot of roads.

I've told others this story before: a couple of years later there was some kind of attack down by Kandahar on the road that we built down to Helmand province, and Secretary Rice turned to me in the hallway and said, "Richard, it looks like Taliban have gotten pretty good at using these roads you built."

Q: Ouch, right? (laughs)

BOUCHER: I mumbled and said, "Yes, ma'am." You know, the problem with roads was everybody could get places, including the Taliban. It increased and improved their mobility too. It also improved their revenues because the police and the Taliban all put up these checkpoints along the road at various spots and the checkpoint, I mean, it was really a shakedown point, whether it was the police doing it or the Taliban doing it. And they would shakedown trucks and transport and taxis, and anybody, any especially commercial vehicles that were going down the road would get hit up for money. That helped fuel… it was one of the minor sources for the Taliban, I'm sure, but it made, it helped fuel the idea of equivalence that the police were doing the same thing the Taliban did, and this feeling that the police are not protecting me and my road and my transport, but they are just along the way making their money too. I think it became part of what undermined the credibility of the Afghan government, the behavior of policemen meant the government was just another problem for ordinary people. Once we finally trained up policemen and got them out there, they started engaging in the same kind of petty corruption that everybody else did. So, if you're a villager, a guy that wants to bring his onions into the marketplace, you don't really care if you're paying a toll or a fee to a policeman or a Taliban, you just want to get your onions through, but it doesn't give you any better feeling of respect for the government in Kabul.

Q: Right. So, the Taliban had a major military offensive in 2006, and so Ambassador Neumann and General Eikenberry had been warning that they needed more U.S. trainers

and more U.S. troops and more money to expand the Afghan Army, so what happened as that offensive started?

BOUCHER: Well, I think it was about that time that we started doing more for the police as well, so the idea that we had to not just have an army that could fight and take territory, but would someday be able to police it and maintain it.

Q: Were there debates in the NSC [National Security Council], were there debates in Washington about how to handle what looked like a resurgence of the Taliban?

BOUCHER: I'm trying to remember exactly what was said at the time. It seemed to me what happened was, we felt like we needed more allied troops in more places and especially in Helmand, because of both the drugs and the fighting down there and the Taliban advances. I think we largely saw it as the Taliban moving into places that had not been well fortified, that had not been, where there was little to no American or Afghan government troop presence, and so that was about the time the Brits signed up to go down to Helmand, and they sent their folks down to Helmand and started trying to go into various districts that had been taken over by the Taliban. The marines came in about that time too, maybe a little bit later, to sort of bolster that effort. But yeah, it was, I wouldn't say it was a moment when people thought we were losing. I think people would say it was the moment when we realized that any place that we were not heavily present in support of the Afghan government the Taliban was going to focus on and move in. And so, they came to Helmand, the Brits got in, pushed them out of some districts, not others, but then the Taliban started going into the western provinces as well.

Q: And so they call it, or we called it the south, I guess the south and the west. But the problem was that in addition to everything else, we were fighting a war in Iraq and there was a lot of money and a lot of U.S. military going there. Is that right?

BOUCHER: Yeah, that was one of the problems. I guess I'd say I never really saw it in terms of the money. It always seemed like there was enough money when you really needed it, and it always seemed like the military had enough money when they needed it.

But there is this problem of the short attention span in Washington that just a lot of people whose minds were trying to be in two places at once. First of all, you know, Iraq was such a total mistake from conception to execution to the aftermath, et cetera, and by 2005, 2006, Iraq was really going to hell. And so, I'd say at the highest level there were probably more meetings on Iraq than there were on Afghanistan. But there was a pretty regular pace of NSC meetings on Afghanistan in 2006, '07, '08 when I was doing this, a pretty regular series of meetings with the President and the Vice President in the Situation Room with all the senior members and leaders and the Ambassador from Kabul on the screen, and the commander from Kabul on the screen. So, we were pretty well knitted up, but when people left the room, a lot of the senior leaders would think, I have bigger problems in Iraq than I do in Afghanistan. So, I think there is kind of an attention span problem.

Then, frankly, the other problem, General Petraeus—and I do have high regard for him as a manager and a leader—but he came up with ideas and theories that I didn't really think

applied to Afghanistan. I was along on his first trip. He had invited me to join him on his first trip to Afghanistan and so, I went to Afghanistan, and he had what he called his PowerPoint rangers, —the guys that prepared all the briefings for him and prepared slides for him.

On that trip, I was constantly telling them and General Petraeus: "this is not Iraq, this is not Iraq." There were two fundamental differences I don't think they understood. One was that in Iraq there was a country with the capability to run itself when we went in. We had destroyed that. But a lot of those people were still around. In Iraq it would have been much easier to get the Iraqis back and run their own government. They couldn't do that as long as we were around but it could have been easier. Afghanistan was a country in chaos for ten years, where people had fled as refugees and the government had been totally annihilated. The second was the fighting in Iraq was about us and for better or for worse, people were fighting the Americans because they wanted to fight Americans. It was not about which Iraqi was going to run the country as it was in Afghanistan.

So, his counterinsurgency doctrine about American forces—you know: don't just fight, build schools, take care of villagers, talk to the locals, blah-blah-blah, blah-blah-blah—the counter-insurgency doctrine, the U.S. Army doctrine to attach themselves to the local population. He brought all that to Afghanistan with all his charts and the graphs and the tornado—the whirlwind of economic, political, and military effects. Some of the stuff on the slides was crazy.

But the idea that American forces had to be involved in assistance, reconstruction, outreach, meeting with village elders, et cetera, et cetera, really flipped the thing on its head. The fighting in Afghanistan was about the Afghan government and we weren't going to be able to leave until people respected the Afghan government. If people liked the American forces and didn't shoot at them that was good, but that was not an exit strategy. The exit strategy had to be an Afghan government that people respected. We were not going to be able to leave until the people that were in the countryside accepted the Afghan government and supported the Afghan government. And our whole effort should be to find ways to help the Afghan government to push itself out into the countryside and take care of these villagers. And we didn't focus on that; we focused on getting people to like the Americans.

Q: And you weren't able to push that through over your influence over AID and the other agencies because the military was out there doing a lot of this ad hoc?

BOUCHER: Primarily, it was the military and that vast amounts of money controlled by the Pentagon. I remember talking to one major at one of the forward operating bases. I asked him: "Do you meet with, do you go down into the villages to meet with the officials?" And he said, "Yeah, we do." And I said, "What about the district chief?" "Oh, yeah, we bring him along." Well, if 'we bring him along'; everybody knows who's got the checkbook and who's got the guns, and the fact that there's this Afghan guy sort of sitting in the corner or sitting next to him, that's not the main effort that we were showing. It shouldn't have been about people liking the Americans, accepting the Americans—it wasn't about our people. Well, it was if they would stop shooting at us, maybe, but not fighting to take over Afghanistan.

The crux of our effort should have been about the Afghan government being able to get out there and take care of people. And that was a hard thing to sell in Kabul as well, frankly, because in Kabul you talk about ways that the Afghan government could reach into the countryside better, and try to get money for district level officials to do projects. No, AID didn't like it because the accountability was just not there. You couldn't get the accountants out there, you couldn't get inspectors out there. I mean, we do projects for accountability, not for results, frankly. Most of the AID programs are there so that we can go to Congress and say we spent the money, and we know where it went, not so we can actually bring clean water to some villagers who never had it before. Anyway, that's another rant of mine.

So, in terms of getting out in the countryside, spending money way beyond Kabul, people didn't like to do that. AID liked to spend the money in Kabul, maybe on non-governmental organizations, including expensive American ones who would do some things in the villages and some things in the countryside, but it was about us and our largesse, and often about our people and partners in NGOs who ran programs. Nobody was willing to give large chunks of money to the Afghan government because oh, "It will get stolen, you know, and get pilfered." And yeah, it probably would.

As I said to the inspector general: the problem is you, me and Jesse Helms. It's you the inspectors, who think we can account for all this money. It's me because I don't have the guts to go up in front of Congress and say 30 or 40 percent is going to get stolen, but the rest of it we'll probably do something useful with. And it's Jesse Helms because at the end of the Soviet Union he wanted to cut all our AID programs and we negotiated with him a deal that we would spend the money on American contractors and American entities that would go out and carry out AID programs, and so we cut the AID bureaucracy itself way, way back. We had much smaller numbers, I think like a third or a quarter of the number of AID officers that we'd had in the 1980s. The people who knew how to do development assistance in the countryside had gotten cut. And so, the few AID staff that we had would be in Kabul doling out money to American NGOs, American contractors and subcontractors and sub-subcontractors.

The Afghan finance minister—Ahadi—said to me once, he said, "You know, 80 to 90 percent of your money disappears before it ever gets close to an Afghan village." It gets spent on contractors, subcontractors, overhead costs, inspectors, accountants, airfares because all AID really wants is an accounting. It gets spent on technical advisors, on their security men, on the business class airfares for people that fly out to check on projects, all that stuff. And by the time a villager gets close to the money or gets close to a pump or a hydro station, there's not that much left.

Q: Which is why we thought we couldn't afford infrastructure anymore, right?

BOUCHER: Yeah, we do training instead because training you can do centrally, you can do it out of the country, and you can count the results. You can say we've trained twenty-three people, or we've trained 340 people. So, we just kept training people. And frankly, Central Asians pointed this out to me too, they said, "You know, you train the same people the Swedes train, you train the same people the Brits train, you train the same people that the Norwegians train, the Dutch train. And you have the same crowd of

folks who go to these training programs all over the world, but we don't measure whether the people we train ever do anything to make lives different for people in the countryside."

The countryside is where it matters. In Afghanistan there has been a hundred years of tension between urban modernizers and rural traditionalists, and in many ways, we fell into that, and we were trying to extend the urban modernization campaign out into a very traditional countryside. And you can do that, eventually that has to happen, but it happens more often by economic forces than it does by training people who go out and teach villagers how to keep the books.

Q: Pakistan, it was always considered a key part of the puzzle because as we went in in 2001, 2002, much of the Taliban went to Pakistan and regrouped. And we initially, I think, President Bush was able to or well, the State Department was able to get Pakistan to help restrain that, but it didn't last very long, and I know that was a focus of your time there, working with Pakistan. Was it ever possible to—?

BOUCHER: Not really possible; Pakistan was always going to look after its own interests. There was that famous meeting that Deputy Secretary Armitage had the day after 9/11 with the Pakistanis where he basically gave them a list. I think it was the head of their ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence], the head of their security service who was in Washington, but Rich Armitage sat down with the Pakistanis the morning after 9/11 and said, "Look, I can't give you details, but we're going to need you to break with the Taliban, we need you to tell them to give up bin Laden, and if they don't, we're coming after him. At that point we're going to need access through Pakistan, through the ports and airports. We're going to need supplies, we're going to need your support in a whole lot of ways. And I just want you to know that and I want your agreement right now."

The stories in Pakistan were that he concluded his remarks by saying that if they didn't comply, we would bomb them back to the Stone Age. I'm not sure—he denies it, let me put it that way—but it might have been the tenor of some of the remarks that Armitage might make on an occasion like that. Let's leave it at that.

So, the Pakistanis initially, first of all, worked with us a lot on al Qaeda: Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and others. The Pakistani government and services were very helpful, cooperative. They had their own agenda with us against al Qaeda which was bringing violence to Pakistan and destabilizing the region.

The Taliban was more sort of ambiguous… you know, the Pakistanis didn't see them as an enemy. They saw them as Afghans who had a role in Afghanistan. They didn't want the Taliban to bring their violence and religious doctrine into Pakistan. By the time I came into the job in 2006 we had a lot of pretty important things going on with Pakistan, so I probably spent more time there than even in Afghanistan. I became the point person for Pakistan because nobody else really wanted to deal with them. There were a couple of big things at stake for us. One was the transition to democracy, so I spent a lot of time with President Musharraf as the demonstrations were going on, as the Justices of the Supreme Court were going after him, as turmoil was rising in the streets.

We were working with him on the transition to democracy and that included some very, at that time, very secret shuttle back and forth between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto about how they would handle the transition to democracy.

Q: Where was she living?

BOUCHER: Benazir and Musharraf had asked us to "guarantee" whatever understandings they made. Secretary Rice and I thought "guarantee" was too strong a word so we agreed that I could "witness" any understandings they concluded. So I kept talking to both Benazir and Musharraf every few weeks. They met a few times themselves and Musharraf sometimes sent his personal confidants to talk to her, but they also passed ideas through me.

She was mostly living in Dubai. I saw her in Washington, I saw her in New York, I saw her in London, and I saw her in Dubai. I think that was all. But every couple weeks, I'd see her, I'd fly into Islamabad and see Musharraf and we'd talk about Afghanistan and the Taliban, but also about democracy, talk about Benazir, talk about what political arrangements the two of them might make to ensure a smooth transition. He knew he had to make the transition. I'd say he understood Pakistan in that sense.

He knew the country needed to move from military rule to civilian democratic rule. A more difficult part was for him to make the transition from military ruler to civilian democratic ruler. He told me his uniform was like "a second skin." So, it was hard for him to imagine taking it off. The idea being discussed was that maybe he could become President, voted in by the legislature. But then, he wanted to add power as he wanted to have a non-ceremonial presidency, a protector-of-the-nation sort of presidency and that was not in the cards for her.

Benazir was a big thinker, a strategic thinker clearly focused on results. She'd been kicked out of office once by the military, she'd been kicked out another time by the president, and she wasn't about to have a military president who was going to kick her out again. So, the discussions were on rocky grounds from the start.

And then, I got sick, went to the hospital with pneumonia, and Secretary Rice ended up getting in the middle of it as their phone calls started coming in.

As far as Afghanistan goes, Pakistan had worked closely with us against al Qaeda. The bin Laden house in Peshawar… anyway, in the tribal areas… I'm not sure if I'd say it was an exception, but it was sort of outside of the cooperation that we did have that was very good against almost everything else involving al Qaeda.

When it came to the Taliban, I think, what they would do is tell the Taliban to cool it down and stop doing the nasty stuff against the Americans, but they weren't about to ask the Taliban to give up their position in Afghanistan. They saw the Taliban as a legitimate political force in Afghanistan. So, the more we started to focus on the Taliban as the enemy and the Taliban as terrorists and the less we had our attention focused solely on al Qaeda, the less and less cooperation we got from the Pakistanis. And there were all kinds of ironies in this.

Many of the people involved in Taliban terrorism against us, for example, the Haqqani Network, had been buddies of ours in the anti-Soviet period. They were terrific fighters against the Soviets in the eighties, the Haqqanis, and even—what's that movie, the congressman who goes out—*Charlie Wilson's War*, the book and the movie. That was about the Haqqanis, right, and the Haqqanis in the end turned into this nasty bunch of suicide bombers, right? We trained them and others. They were a nasty bunch all along, they just changed sides as far as we were concerned. So, you know, a lot of our friends from the eighties became opponents.

Some of them were with us in Kabul, some of them were opponents. There were guys like Hekmatyar, the head, really nasty warlord who kept throwing out feelers, saying, "We want to talk to you about coming in from the cold." And my reaction to that was always, "Tell it to Karzai, tell it to the Afghan government, to the constitutional authority in Afghanistan." And he wouldn't do that. He finally did, eventually. But, I think now that maybe we should have figured out a way with Karzai to talk to him together or something, but anyway, that eventually happened.

Then you had the anomaly that everyone knew that there were Taliban coming in and out of Pakistan. The borders were pretty porous. Trying to get a more carefully guarded border between Pakistan and Afghanistan immediately brought you back into the British colonial border, the Durand Line of 1895, which none of them accepted. So, how do you monitor a border area that has no accepted border in it? It's like the U.S.-Canada border where we can set up a post on one side and one on the other side and watch it together. We tried to talk to the Afghans and Pakistanis about jointly monitoring the border area, putting up a common fence without any special status, but they weren't interested. So, there were those problems.

The bigger irony or difficulty was that from about 2004, 2005 we, the U.S., —including Secretary Powell and then Secretary Rice as well as people like me—we were telling the Pakistanis: "You've got to stop playing around with these Taliban. You've got to stop playing around with these Taliban for two reasons. One, some day this is going to come back to bite you and two, if they win in Afghanistan it's gonna be trouble for you." And in the 2006–2009 period when I was working it, we started seeing more and more Taliban trained suicide bombers coming into Islamabad, coming into Karachi, coming into Pakistani government building and markets and places and conducing suicide bombings. The Pakistan Taliban were a home grown product of Pakistan.

Q: And why were they doing that?

BOUCHER: Because they felt that if what's good for Afghanistan is good for Pakistan too, and the Islamist government that we're fighting for in Afghanistan we should be fighting for the same thing in Pakistan. It was too secular. My God, there were women in the government, you know. There were all kinds of things.

So, the Taliban effort in Pakistan was focused in the tribal areas in Pakistan, towards any sort of government involvement in those areas along the border. Look at the structures the British had used to govern this place. One of the best books I ever got, the Pakistani national security advisor, Mahmud Durrani, gave me, is called, *Report on Waziristan and*

Its Tribes. It's a very small little volume of British government dispatches from the late eighteen hundreds about how they tried to subdue the Pashtun tribes on the border areas with their empire. It starts with the Brits fighting them. Then they tried to get each village leader to give them one of their sons so they could be put in British government schools and thereby held hostage if there was ever an uprising. And the leaders sent them one of their sons; it turned out it was the son of a relative or a slaver, somebody else in the village, but not a direct descendant. You know, there were things like that. They started putting some of them in jail for crimes. All these things didn't work, and they finally figured out the way to do it is put them on the payroll, give them a stipend and then if one village starts acting up, cut off the stipend for that month. Probably lessons we should have learned better as well. Anyway, the problems the British had were repeating themselves. The Pashtuns looked after themselves and no American, or Brit, or Pakistan was going to tell them what their interests were.

So, what I was telling the Pakistanis, what Secretary Powell was telling them, what I was telling them, and eventually Secretary Rice was telling was: if you support the Taliban, if you're not curbing the Taliban's activities in Afghanistan they are going to start coming into Pakistan and attack you too. And indeed, 2006–2009 period, when I was working this, there became more and more and more suicide bombings and Taliban—Pakistani Taliban attacks inside Pakistan.

We would constantly talk to the Pakistanis about exerting government control in tribal areas. Because the other thing about British government institutions from the colonial period was, they governed the tribal areas by stipend, by relations with the tribal leaders, but not direct control because you couldn't exert direct control. The Pakistanis had continued the same pattern. Periodically they would go in and try to exert some direct control in the tribal areas in Waziristan. What would happen is: they would go in with heavy armored columns, they'd get bogged down by sabotage: fighters, roads, bombs, et cetera. They would negotiate a withdrawal and then pull out with an agreement where the local tribal leaders said we're going to stop these attacks; we're going to stop the terrorist attacks. And then, three to six months later the stuff would start up again on the Pakistani side of the border, not just in Afghanistan. Then the Pakistani Army would go in with another column, they'd get bogged down… They just kept repeating the same thing. But they never had real government control over the borders. We had plenty of ideas for them: we'll help you put up a fence, we'll help you with better checkpoints, we'll help with drone strikes or electronic monitoring.

I remember going to Chaman, the border crossing in the south between Quetta and basically Helmand, southern Afghanistan—a dusty wasteland. There's like a two-inch layer of fine dust everywhere, everywhere you look, all over the place. And there are these wonderful spanking new border crossing machines that take fingerprints. And I'm thinking, This is not going to work. Basically, people were just walking back and forth as usual. They had no real control over their borders. They couldn't put up a fence that would last.

We had done cross-border attacks with drones against Taliban leaders, fighters, others that we saw taking refuge in Pakistan and the Pakistanis knew, everybody knew we were doing it, it was in the newspapers, but nobody could do anything about it. And the

Pakistanis knew it was not in their interest to try to stop us because to some extent those guys were a danger to Pakistan too. So, they would complain, but not expect us to do very much.

Q: And in Afghanistan too we were using drones and night raids and some other—and poppy eradication, so some of our techniques for war were resulting in civilian casualties. Was that a big—

BOUCHER: Well, there were a number of things wrong with those tactics: with night raids and drone attacks and stuff like that. I think the first is that you need to understand you can't end a popular insurgency movement by killing the leaders. That doesn't work. It never has worked.

One of the speeches I give is: how did the Vietnam generation end up stuck in Iraq and Afghanistan? We never ask ourselves those questions. We never learn from our history. We had the same attitude in Vietnam and many wars before that.

If you're going to stop an army, you have to stop an army, not just kill off some leaders. And essentially, the Taliban was a movement, not even an army. And you don't stop a movement by attacking its leadership, that just builds the fervor of the followers. So that was not going to work. As many pointed out, every person you kill with a night raid or a drone strike—probably all his brothers and cousins become fighters. You probably expand their fighting force by a factor of three or four every time you carry out one of those raids. So, when we had General McCraven come in as commander and he thought you could stop the insurgency with night raids. The special forces were really good at night raids, but nobody was saying, "Hey, this isn't doing anything to stop the fighting."

Q: You're creating more of an insurgency.

BOUCHER: Creating more of an insurgency. And then, some of the Afghans said it; Karzai used to say it, frankly, but we thought we knew better.

And then, we had the question of narcotics. So, we tried one thing after another to stop, to cut the narcotics production. There were at one-time sort of incentive payments to governors who reduced poppy production. Not to them personally, but 'here's money you can spend on AID projects in your province.' I think it was more like here's money we will spend on AID projects in your province, for which they got little credit with the population—which was another problem. That brings us back to the question: are we projecting ourselves or are we projecting the Afghan government?

But anyway, there was an incentive structure, so it cut down on poppy production. Well, the incentive made it better to have a big crop this year and a lower crop next year, then a big crop the next year, then lower crop the next year. Put some of it in storage so that you have a continuing income from the sale of refined opium, but since the Americans were measuring acres under cultivation and not the amount that you made from opium every year, it was an incentive to just jack up production some years and lower it the next.

Bill Wood, when he became ambassador, he'd come from Colombia, and Colombia with President Uribe and Plan Colombia, which was their plan, that included spraying. And

people in Kabul started calling him Chemical Bill because he said, "We've got to think about it here, we've got to think about it in Afghanistan, about spraying."

Frankly, I did talk to Karzai about it. Bill and I talked to Karzai about it and Karzai just said, "No." And our military said no too, frankly. Our military said, We're not going to get involved in this. Talk about turning the cousins and the population against us. No. These are not drug lords making drugs, these are peasants who are—it's their only source of livelihood, it's their only source of income.

Frankly, I started to think about this and talked to people who'd been successful in stopping the opium trade in other places. If you look at the countries that at one point were major producers of opium in the world, if you look at Turkey, if you look at Thailand, even Colombia or any of the other countries that at one point were major producers of drugs like opium and heroin in the world, the only way it stopped was development, economic development, governance and becoming part of the modern economy.

Legitimate trade, legitimate business replace illegitimate business every time but only where there are real opportunities for legitimate business and only over time. And until you had a growing middle-class economy, none of these places got rid of their opium production, no matter how much spraying there was, no matter how many government programs, no matter how many arrests there were. And that's the story from Colombia now, that's the story from Thailand, that's the story from Turkey. So, I was not really hopeful on that front.

We had to keep up the interdiction programs. I think we were somewhat more successful even in those days working with the Russians and the Pakistanis and others, interdicting shipments, working, trying to work with the Saudis and others on interdicting money flows. But I was never very hopeful that one could stop narcotics production except by replacing it with legitimate business and enterprise and agriculture –and that required stabilizing Afghanistan and extending governance.

Q: One more question about the Taliban. I think the story goes early on that Karzai wanted to bring them into the government at the beginning and it was a non-starter for us with 9/11 so close and also with the refusal to give up bin Laden. Do you think that was a mistake in retrospect?

BOUCHER: It was a mistake to maintain it for so long. Well, maybe even then, there were moments when the Taliban would have been willing to negotiate: late 2002, 2003, sometime in that timeframe, but of course, that was out of the question. But, certainly, from our side, giving up bin Laden would have been one of the prerequisites, one of the requirements.

I think we walk around with this idea that wars end on the deck of the battleship Iwo Jima, that they end at a peace conference in the Hall of Mirrors in Paris. Wars don't end that way, particularly insurgencies and messy wars like the ones in Vietnam and Afghanistan. And the fact is, wars end politically. Our military always studies Clausewitz, that war is a continuation of politics by other means. But that means that the

end of a war is political and not military, too. And so, you have to be prepared to negotiate. At any moment, you have to be prepared to negotiate. That doesn't mean you're going to cut a deal.

We might have had one secret meeting with the Taliban somewhere, hosted by a Saudi prince or something like that, and you may have to say, first and foremost, you've got to give up bin Laden, and they say no, and we say: well, screw you guys, I'm going home. But you've got to be willing to seek a political solution, and I think there were moments we could have done that earlier. But, we didn't.

Q: But later it sounds like during a series of these interviews the issue of whether or not the Afghan government was considered legitimate seems to go on for the whole twenty years that we were there, so that it was hard later to get the Taliban to agree to serious negotiations. That right or I've got it all wrong?

BOUCHER: Yeah, the Taliban never considered them legitimate, but we never considered the Taliban a legitimate government either. They were a bunch of insurgents, terrorists, whatever.

I used to say, we need that peace table we had in Paris for the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese, right, because we didn't consider the Vietnam Cong a legitimate fighting force, and the North Vietnamese didn't consider the South Vietnamese government anything more than a puppet regime of the United States. So, we had a negotiating table in Paris that was carefully organized by Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, right, and it had little felt strips down the table between the American delegation and the South Vietnamese delegation, and between the North Vietnamese delegation and the Viet Cong group. So, what we needed to do was get the table out again and we would have been able to have the Taliban and, I don't know who their patron would have been, but we would have been able to get people to the table who needed to be at the table.

In the end, it's not about the table and who thinks what of whom. You just need a place to have conversations, and most of the talks under circumstances like these were the result of quiet conversations of people that are semi-authorized to meet somewhere and say, we know you're suffering, we can end your suffering. We can leave if you can do this, this. Oh, no, we can't.

There are plenty of people who could have arranged such discussions but we weren't interested, we were too focused on the military task without understanding it was impossible. The Saudis could have arranged quiet talks. Frankly, Pakistan too, but we were not interested. We kept thinking that you could win this militarily. And part of that was because politically we were so distracted by Iraq, part of that was because those of us on the political side just didn't assert ourselves enough. The things I'm saying now would have been heresy at the time. I'm not sure I even thought all of them, but even thinking in that direction was heresy at the time. We thought we could win this militarily. We thought that was the only way out, to occupy the whole country and expand, let the Afghan government move out into the countryside and take over, and whether they had the ability to do that, whether we had the ability to clear the way was never part of our thinking. We were the United States of America—the can-do nation.

Q: Thank you. This has been a terrific conversation, especially with people like you have done their oral history some years ago. We have been asking our interviewees if there are any reflections they wanted to add on the whole, on the whole time or on what happened with the withdrawal and the evacuation at the end.

BOUCHER: I don't know how to put this. Sometimes we've got to stop being like us. We get carried away with our enthusiasm. We think we can do things that we can't do and what I said earlier on: good enough ought to be good enough in some cases. Going into Afghanistan, chasing the Taliban out of Kabul, chasing Osama up into the hills, maybe continuing to operate a certain capability to track down and find those guys, either from Afghanistan or Pakistan, somewhere in that area, and letting the Kabul government figure out how to negotiate arrangements with warlords and potentates throughout the country, giving them a certain amount of money so they had incentives to cooperate with the central government. You know, good enough would have been good enough in Afghanistan. We didn't need to turn the place into Washington on the Kabul River.

Q: The war on terrorism, it never ends.

BOUCHER: The war on terrorism never ends because we don't know what a terrorist is. Everybody who shot a gun or set off a bomb was a terrorist. We went around the world and there was a terrorist behind every tree, and we had no way of differentiating between people who were fighting because they had grievances against their government for almost legitimate reasons or people whose ethnic groups felt disadvantaged, people whose livelihoods have been taken away by modernization or something else that happened.

No way of differentiating those people from terrorists who were out to commit acts of violence solely for the purpose of frightening a population or intimidating a government. And terrorism for political reasons is not excusable, but you've got to deal with it differently. And the fact that everywhere in the world, everybody that held up a gun or carried a bomb or made a bomb was a terrorist led us on this worldwide crusade. I hate to say it's anathema to some of our Arab partners, but a worldwide effort where we just kept finding people that we label terrorists, and that justified a whole series of not just military actions but Guantanamo and other stuff. And that feeling of vulnerability and then the overreaction of having been attacked on 9/11. It may be understandable, but it didn't work out in the end.

We worked hard and honestly, but what we did in Afghanistan didn't work.

And that's, I guess, my final thought, my final reflection on all of this is that Sarah Palin, for all her faults, enriched the political discourse of the United States with a question: "how's that working out for you anyway?"

We don't ask that question, we didn't ask that question in Vietnam, we don't ask that question in Afghanistan, we don't ask that question in Iraq. When we go into Iraq and it's not working out in Afghanistan, we try the same things again in Iraq. And we keep trying again and again and again, same damn things, the things that didn't work in Vietnam we try them again and they don't work in Afghanistan. And then, we try them again and they

don't work in Iraq. And at some point, maybe it's through oral histories, maybe it's through more reflection on history, we've got to say that didn't work last time, let's try something else. And we certainly didn't do that in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Q: I want to thank you for your time. I guess one final question, of course, there's a lot of disappointment on how Afghanistan ended up like Vietnam, with people hanging off aircraft and et cetera, but there are people who worked very hard on Afghanistan who believed that we should have stayed but just not called it a war but focus on stabilization. What do you think?

BOUCHER: Well, first of all, we should have focused on stabilization in 2002. Stabilization and building a modern Afghan government are different things so we weren't clear about our goal and kept expanding our agenda. Getting a group of people into Kabul who could control the country and keep that from becoming a base for attacks again was a much smaller, quicker and easier thing to do given the circumstances than what we tried to do and failed to do over more than a decade, two decades of trying to build a modern government in Afghanistan. So, if we're going to do stabilization, we should have started in 2002 and finished my 2003, not suddenly thought about it in 2021.

Second of all, saying we could keep a stabilization force in Afghanistan after we withdraw almost all of our troops raises questions.

I've got to, in an aside here, say that I know that Ryan Crocker, who knows more about this than any of us, who spent more time there than any of us, I mean, my God, he hitchhiked through Afghanistan when he was a student in 1971, I think it was, but Ryan Crocker thinks we should have kept a stabilization force. So, anybody that listens to me and agrees with me ought to look at what he says and make up their own mind.

I think the problem with a stabilization force is what are they going to do and how long are they going to stay? And what are they going to do is, are they there to conduct night raids and drone strikes and create more terrorists? Are they there to help the Afghan army do things that we've been training them to do –like night raids and air strikes– for the last twenty years? What exactly is the function of a stabilization force? Maybe, if you look at the way things fell apart, maybe, and keeping the airbase open or running a logistical supply operation for the Afghan army might have made sense, but even that, then you've got to protect yourself, then you've got to protect your airbase, then you've got to protect your troops and you've got to have more troops, now you have this, now you've got to stop that –before you know it you're running operations all over the country trying to protect an Afghan army that is supposed to be there to protect you. You know, there's no end to it.

And the second question you've got to ask yourself is how long. And some have said, well, it's only two or three thousand guys, a generation or two is fine. We've had troops that long in Korea, we've had troops that long in Germany. Well, yeah, but again, you know, Korea and Germany are sort of vital parts of the American sphere of influence, the American alliances. Afghanistan is not going to be that and it's not contiguous with anything that we really care about. It's going to be an isolated place as long as world geography doesn't change.

So, ‘for what purpose?’ and ‘for how long?’ cannot be adequately enough defined in my view for us to leave twenty-five hundred or two thousand military men and women.

I would note that the Afghan army ran out of supplies in the end before they stopped fighting. So perhaps leaving them with supplies, equipment and training would have made some difference, not in the outcome but in the precipitous conclusion.

Q: Right. And as you pointed out, there was a time early in the Trump administration where at a certain troop level they were able to do that support for the Afghan military, but President Trump decided to withdraw most of those forces, so it was a very, very difficult option for President Biden when he came in.

BOUCHER: Well again, go back to the beginning, that instead of creating an Afghan army and government that were good enough and that they could maintain, we helped them create an army that needed fast resupply. They needed the same kind of helicopter-borne logistics as the American Army did because that’s what we knew how to do. We taught them how to do what we knew how to do.

Well, if they don’t have those bullets coming in by helicopter every two days or whatever it is, they run out of bullets. And what do they do when they run out of bullets? Well, they go over to the other side or lay down their arms. They’re not going to get shot holding empty guns. So, we helped create an Afghan army that couldn’t fight without us. That was a mistake that goes back way before the questions of the final moments.

The other thing I’d say about the chaos of the final moments is that pulling out is never pretty, but we compounded it in Afghanistan in so many ways. The State Department deserves a lot of blame for not setting up expeditious processing for special immigrant visas. And I saw somewhere there were still three hundred thousand people whose visas haven’t been processed by the State Department.

The fact is that asking everybody to fill out all the paperwork, get all the medical clearances, get all the documents from the police checks, get all this, get all that, and then line up for a day to get your interview and then get your stamps and go to the airport and show your documents and get onboard, that doesn’t work when the country’s falling apart. We could have long ago set up an expedited system, set up if things go bad; you’ve got this thing on your phone that you can show that you’re a qualified applicant for a visa. We just kept the old routine, slow, hand-to-hand, form-based processing going right up to the end and the backlog that we’d had for years continued right up to the end and continues to this day. So, we deserve a lot of blame for that.

End of interview