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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

AMBASSADOR JAMES DOBBINS

*Interviewed by: Dr. J. Eva Meharry
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INTERVIEW

[Note: James Dobbins passed away before completing his edits.]

Q: Thank you for taking the time, Ambassador Dobbins. You served as acting ambassador of the United States to Afghanistan during the transitional period, and then special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan from 2013–2014. We have your account of the former role on [record for ADST](#). Do you want to just give a brief overview of your role as special representative? What was the situation in Afghanistan at that time? What were the main policy issues and challenges that you were dealing with at the time?

DOBBINS: I'd say that the chief subject in most meetings during this period, which was a year and a half roughly, was leaving Afghanistan. The administration was debating the commitment, and the White House was pressing for some kind of disengagement, and I was trying to retort that. Now there was an intense period where it looked like we could get into negotiations. Shortly after I joined the administration, the Taliban looked like it was about to meet our demands, they talked to Karzai as well as us. We had a brief period during which things looked like they were going toward overt public negotiations. Negotiations would be private, but they wouldn't be public. We would have been having them, which lasted about two or three months. Then we went back to the situation that prevailed before, where we weren't talking directly to the Taliban, but indirectly.

Q: That jumps ahead to a question I wanted to ask about reflections on your time during the transitional period. One of the comments that have come up during some of these interviews is that the Taliban should have been brought to the political fold right after the defeat when they were at their weakest. You mentioned in your oral history with ADST that the Bonn conference included anti-Taliban elements. So in light of that, what do you think of this idea? Should there have been space for the Taliban early on in the transitional period?

DOBBINS: Well, early on but not entirely at Bonn, they were still fighting, and if the Taliban had been invited, no one else would have come. The Taliban certainly hadn't organized themselves, and we needed an answer immediately. I was getting to arrange, for a government of Afghans, we didn't want an occupation. We didn't want to govern

Afghanistan and when I took over that task, the deadline was a week away or two weeks away.

When we got to Bonn and started talking, we needed an answer within a week. Because the Taliban were going to be tripping out, and who was going to govern Kabul? So it wasn't something you could postpone for two months, or three months, while you rounded up a group that included the Taliban. So that was the situation.

Now, what we didn't do, and we didn't recognize, was that Pakistan had abandoned the Taliban government and cooperated with us in overthrowing them, but they hadn't abandoned the Taliban. There was a difference; they still saw utility in keeping the Taliban alive as an insurgency. We didn't realize that until five or six years later, and we didn't do that because we were fixated on getting our guys out. The Pakistanis were cooperating and getting our guys out. So that was enough for us, and we lost track of the Taliban for that period. The Taliban, in January or even December of 2001, was ready to negotiate.

Mullah Omar offered to surrender, and now that's a murky area, but it seems that the offer was made and rejected by President Karzai. Karzai said he didn't think the Americans would go along with it. It's sometimes indicated that Rumsfeld knew about the offer, and I'm discouraged by it, but I can't find a record of that.

So I mean, that's an area that still needs to be probed, is what exactly happened. Was that an opportunity, what Omar did do? He said he'd surrender if he was promised immunity. Was he going to be arrested, demanded to share power or just immunity? A number of other senior Taliban figures, civilians, not military, for the most part, surrendered and got thrown into prison or Guantanamo when they were ready to participate in the new dispensation. So it took us ten years to recognize that the Taliban or element of Afghan society that couldn't be ignored, couldn't be eliminated and had to be dealt with. So that's the answer to your question, I think.

Q: Yes, it is, and I hadn't heard that about Mullah Omar. So that's a line of inquiry I'll pursue as we continue these interviews because that's a fascinating detail, thank you.

DOBBINS: Yeah. I never asked Karzai that, we've heard that now.

It was ten years later that I knew about that. I didn't know that Mullah Omar had surrendered at any time. When I was there in 2001 or 2002, no one told me that, and I'm pretty sure nobody told anybody in the State Department. If Colin Powell had known, I would have known.

Q: Right.

DOBBINS: It wasn't shared with anybody outside, and if DOD [Department of Defense] knew, I don't think they told the White House either.

Karzai had a military detachment with him and Jason Amerine is someone you might want to talk to. The head of Karzai's escort. Jason Amerine, I think he was a captain in

the Special Forces at the time, and he's been around. I've met him once, but he was in charge of the Special Forces with Karzai when that incident occurred.

Q: As we have your full oral history already and you just told us a little bit about your time as special representative, do you have any other reflections? Are there any particular successes, challenges, or lessons learned you want to highlight and reflect on regarding what's happened in Afghanistan?

DOBBINS: From both periods or the first period?

Q: Yes, both periods.

DOBBINS: I've written about several mistakes in the early period, one of them was the failure to recognize that Pakistan was going to continue to back the Taliban. Okay, that was a failure that lasted about five years. The second failure was a failure to understand that the Taliban had been defeated and driven out of Afghanistan, but not destroyed, and as I said, part of Afghan society that couldn't be ignored. Which we did for ten years, being taught a rejoinder method, as someone to talk to. So those are two mistakes. The third mistake, which I go into some detail about in my books, is the failure to provide any form of security for Afghanistan. For the interim period between when the government was formed, and when they had their own institutions for security, which was a period of about five years. So we had a government, which had no police, no military, no army, tribal militias, and that was it?

The administration, Karzai and Rahimi, the UN representative, advised us that they wanted to expand ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] beyond Kabul. Five thousand, mostly European troops, were under the British providing security. They weren't doing much because there wasn't any threat to security. So they were essentially a reassuring factor for non-Northern Alliance political thinkers that it was safe to go home. The Northern Alliance, which was shocking like Kabul before beginning in December, wasn't going to use its soft power to manipulate or pressure nonpareil Taliban politicians who came back to Kabul. That was the real fear, and it served that purpose; it made Kabul a safe zone for foreigners.

They wanted to expand that to the other major cities. Rumsfeld asked me, when he came to Kabul in December for a brief visit, what that would take. I said, "Well, if you take the five thousand international forces to stabilize Kabul, maybe twenty-five thousand for the other cities like Herat and Jalalabad." Four or five other major metropolitan areas would suffice and at that point, it certainly would have sufficed. Wouldn't it have been nice had those numbers prolonged? Perhaps, it was fairly nice for a year or two. He indicated that wasn't the answer we were looking for. He opposed it when it was discussed by the interagency group, the Principles Committee, and Powell gave way to that argument.

Q: Another interesting point that I noted you advocated for with Washington, was that the Iranians were helpful in the Bonn conference. You thought they might be helpful going forward, working with Afghanistan. I was just wondering how you reflect on that experience now. Do you think that was a missed opportunity for Washington to engage with the Iranians in Afghanistan?

DOBBINS: I think it was a missed opportunity for Washington to engage on a far broader field than just Afghanistan. They were promoting engagement across the board and they wanted to discuss everything, the nuclear program, Israel, everything. It was all laid out and they persisted long after the axis of evil speech and other things. They persisted until 2004, and in 2004 they sent a diplomatic note to Washington offering negotiations across the board. Indicating that they will take negotiations seriously. So yes, it was a missed opportunity for us in Afghanistan, that was easy for them because it was a traditional adversary. Then, after we invaded Iraq, we talked about the second of their regional competitors. So they were grateful, but they were also afraid they were next on the list, which was an accurate depiction of where the administration was going. It was looking at Afghanistan as a perch from which the course of diplomacy, a course in the sense backed by military force, could be applied. It wasn't just that they were anxious to help, but they had fears as well. They persisted in this, really, until the end of the Ghani government.

Q: Turning now to the withdrawal in 2021. You said, based on your recent [Foreign Affairs article](#), that President Biden's choices were limited, it seems that loss was inevitable. Based on your experience in Afghanistan, how do you think the Biden administration handled the withdrawal? Could they have done things differently? Or what would you have recommended?

DOBBINS: Well, I recommended that they not withdraw. I was a member of the Iraq Study Group that managed us under General Dunford, and we were recommended that they stay, in a limited number with a limited mandate. So I disagreed with that decision, which was the same position I had when I was in the government. I was trying to persuade them to stay, and I failed. I left in, I think, May of 2014, and Obama announced a month after I left that he was going to bring the last combat troops home before it's determined. So he said, "It would be out by 2016." Now he didn't specify what he would leave, and he didn't say the last American soldier would be gone. He implied that the war would be over as far as the United States was concerned.

So, now that decision, I thought it was followed two weeks later by the attack from Syria by the Islamic State. They rolled to the gates of Baghdad and almost overthrew the government, and that satisfied me that Obama wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. So he wasn't going to leave because we see potential; what did happen when we left under his responsibility? So, in the end, that argument prevailed under Obama. Then, four years later, that lesson had been attenuated. Particularly since it was promptly not Obama that wanted to leave, so we repeated it.

Q: Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share about how the U.S. should engage with Afghanistan going forward, both on the diplomatic front and perhaps the development front?

DOBBINS: Yeah, well, I was a principal author of a paper for RAND.

The options were to engage, isolate or oppose. So either we engage them, we ignore them, or we actively try to overthrow them. Instead of those three options, engagement was the only one that had any chance of serving up purposes, which was the only way we were going to help the Afghan people and the only way we were going to attenuate or

model the margins, improve that Taliban behavior. That was the only way we're going to get any cooperation on counterterrorism. I think that's right, and I think the administration is divided on that. Not in the hierarchy, not in the sense that different agencies have different views. Different levels of the agencies have different views. I think the White House wants to keep Afghanistan out of the press, and for understandable reasons. Good news, from Afghanistan for the administration, because of the controversy over its leaving, and the early consequences.

So he certainly could have avoided it by not leaving, there was no inexorable pressure to leave. The American public was happy to leave, but they weren't particularly unhappy. He was saying it wasn't anywhere on the to-do list, it wasn't an issue in the election in March, and it wasn't Vietnam. It was brilliant and every agency, every National Security Agency, had an element in government and told Biden he should stay. We know the military, we know the Defense Department did, and the State Department probably did as well. The intelligence community told, but what would happen? Maybe not on such an accelerated scale, but that it would collapse. So I don't think that was inevitable, I think the consequences of leaving still outweigh the consequences of staying.

Q: Are there any final reflections you'd like to make about your time in Afghanistan or generally?

DOBBINS: Well, I think there are issues I've written about also on a larger scale, most post-war reconstruction paradigm, nation building. The record was disappointing in most cases, and I was associated with Somalia and Haiti, Afghanistan, my case, but not entirely. That gives me hope that it'll succeed in Ukraine; it is somewhat similar. As I reflect on it, the U.S. nation-building was something good before it became something bad. Something the U.S. took pride in South Korea, Japan, Germany, and Western Europe in general. I tried to apply that model to each other's cases. The difference in reflection is that the post-cold war models were mostly civil wars for weak and divided states. We became responsible for them as they exited our project in the civil war. Ukraine is not too weak, it's not divided, and it's not emerging from a civil war. So I think the paradigm that began with the Marshall Plan is still applicable, but it's applicable in case of interstate conflict, more easily than in civil wars because you don't face any internal opposition. In the civil war case, there will always be some element who will not share your objectives, wherever they are. So if you want Iraq to make a democracy, you're not going to get any Sunni support. Sunnis have run the country for a thousand years; they don't want to give it up. They are going to have to if the U.S. proceeds in its shady lane, right? It's the same thing in Iraq and Afghanistan; he tried to exclude the most powerful patronage network in the country. In both countries, we said to the Taliban, You're never coming back. We said the same thing in Iraq to the Sunni Saddam, You're never coming back, and that exaggerated our ability to manipulate society.

Q: Thank you so much for these reflections. I know you've written so much on this material, so I don't want to ask you about topics you've already extensively discussed. I will link the things that we've talked about to your many publications in the transcript, so you don't have to regurgitate all, but thank you so much. I appreciate your thoughts on this topic.

DOBBINS: I've written across different times. I remember I wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* called ["Who Lost Iraq?"](#). I blamed everybody at the State Department, and it was published just when the surge was succeeding. I started the article when it looked like it was helpless, and then we turned it around. That's when the article came out, which was unfortunate, but I was fortunate that my predictions were naught.

End of interview