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TINA DOOLEY-JONES

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INTERVIEW

Q: Hello, everybody. My name is Bill Hammink and I'm here to interview Tina Dooley-Jones. Tina was first deputy mission director, and then mission director in USAID [United States Agency for International Development], Afghanistan recently from 2019 to 2021. We'll hear more, of course, from Tina about that. This is part of ADST's Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan special project. Thank you very much, Tina, for joining us today. Could you please say a few words about your career in USAID and what led you to bid on and be interested in going to Afghanistan?

DOOLEY-JONES: Sure. I joined AID in '94, as a Housing and Urban Development officer. I spent almost twenty-five years with USAID. All of it on the African continent, and none of it in Washington. So I'm one of those rare people who is a true field person and has never served in Washington. Moving around Africa, I think I came to the point where I understood many of the big issues, not that I had all the solutions, but I think I had a good handle, and I'm the person who needs to be challenged constantly to thrive. When I was leaving, I knew that I was going to be leaving Kenya after five years. I started looking around for challenging posts. And I knew it was gonna be my last post and that I would be retiring afterward. I wanted something completely different, and a different set of challenges of what I've been dealing with for twenty-five years. I'd never been to a CPC [Critical Priority Country]. And I thought it was time. Earl Gast, the incoming mission director at the time, tried to get me to go to Afghanistan with him in 2010. Although we were both willing, I guess for a variety of reasons, it just didn't work out. So, I thought about a CPC for my last posting. My daughter had graduated from high school and was in college. My husband could move back to the States. All of that was kind of pushing me to take up an unaccompanied post someplace in a very challenging region. That's why I bid on Afghanistan, the deputy mission director position.

Q: Right, and that was in 2018 or so?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes. It would have been in late '17. Right. I was supposed to go out in September of 2018 and ended up having to delay until I got out there on the second of January 2019.

Q: And who was the USAID mission director at the time?

DOOLEY-JONES: It was Herbie Smith and then Peter Natiello. It was Peter's first CPC as well. We arrived within one week of each other. Jeff Cohen was the other mission director who was doing a second tour there. And he had been there for a year, almost exactly a year, a little over a year by the time we arrived.

Q: Jeff was actually head of the program office when I was out there in 2015, but that was his second time back there. That's a great, strong team. And what were some of the key policy issues that the mission and you were dealing with that first year? This was 2019.

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, I think the biggest thing that hit us and Peter and I as we arrive is the leadership team. You get a lot of briefings and we go through the portfolio. The mission had just gotten approval of a five-year strategy in November 2018, which is unusual for a CPC. We got a lot of briefings on that as well. And the strategy was a little strange because it literally was a normal development strategy for a CPC, which kind of was a little odd for Peter and me. But in any case, we were focused on that and what was possible in this environment.

Then in February, the whole idea of the posture adjustment hit the U.S. embassy, which was basically rightsizing, downsizing, for security reasons, for cost reasons, footprint, all those sorts of issues. And there was the decree that the embassy and all agencies at post need to go down, take the expat staff down by 50 percent. And we were dealing with all of that, what that would look like, what that would mean for us, unlike the embassy. It's different for USAID. They have reporting officers, they have that type of engagement, we have programs that we manage. It's not as if you can remove half of your program managers and have everything stay the same. We had to look at the programming, we had to look at the budgets, we had to look at where different projects were at different times in their lifespan, and, of course, the people. And having to do this without being very open at the time as to why we were doing this because it was kept under wraps for a few months. It slowly got out because we had to have conversations with different people going up and into the spring period. As to the status of either of their contracts, we had a number of USPSCs and TCNs [third country nationals]. If we needed to go down to the 50 percent, USAID fought it, because it didn't make sense.

There was also a budgetary component, not that it was asked of Washington, but somebody came up with the idea that we also had to give up the budget as well. And that would show good faith that we were actually doing a posture adjustment. And so the two budgetary entities, USAID and INL [Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs] went through a budget exercise as to what level of funding made sense. It was literally a number picked out of a hat in terms of what money we would give back from our pipeline or future funds, and that future funds would decline significantly over the next couple of years, the annual budget. So that was a huge policy issue. And I remember, Peter was on leave both at the start of this and at the end of this when we announced this to the Afghan government. And I ended up going with the ambassador. Ambassador Wells was out from Washington and explaining this to Ghani's leadership team, what this was, what was happening, and what would happen. And that started a different policy dialogue with Washington. Not really coordinated with the

military security aspect. But of course, it overshadows everything that you do, definitely democracy programming.

Ultimately, there was a lot of anxiety built amongst the staff, a lot of distraction from the staff. And it went on until I think July when USAID lawyers and others basically said, you need to submit a major restructuring of a mission like this, you need to submit congressional notifications. And there were four committees. So, there were four CNs [congressional notifications] submitted and immediately those committees slapped holds on this change. And I think up until—I assume it's off now—but up until last year, last August, when we left one of those holds was still on. AID lawyers determined that the State Department just blew through the holds. And they did reduce by 50 percent. We argued and we came up with our own number. They allowed us to come up with our own number. What made sense programmatically for the staff, which staff—FSNs [Foreign Service nationals] or Afghan colleagues were unaffected by this. And we came up with a number and it was 34-35 percent, or something like that. But it was 35 percent of the numbers on our staffing pattern, which of course, as you know you never fill every single position on a CPC. But we lost only a handful of people in their positions. And budgets did go down ultimately from the very, very high of half a billion, all the way down to about two hundred fifty million. That was the big issue in 2019.

At the same time, trying to engage on behalf of the embassy in the election that was going on, which ended up being contested and the inauguration took place there and assumed the winner in 2019. And we also knew that the talks between the Taliban and the special representative, the SR, were started and ongoing. And trying to suss out of that and plan for if there's a breakthrough, what does it mean for development programming? What does it mean for humanitarian programming? First, and then what does it mean for our development programming to get into these areas, particularly those areas if there is a breakthrough, and there's no talk of a joint government, but some agreement on the governance structure in certain provinces, what that would mean? We also knew that the military retrograde was coming at some point during 2019. We started planning, that was an element in that process as well.

Q: Wow! There's a lot going on.

DOOLEY-JONES: That's 2019.

Q: That's 2019. Was USAID very involved in the election? Did you provide electoral assistance and with other parts of the embassy?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes. We did all of the programming for the elections, the support to the technical aspects of it, the support to the election monitor training, the support to even the early legislation and the legislation, the regulatory and legislative changes that came after that election. It was interesting. It was shades of Kenya, and their same exact failed election and two winners announced in a big inauguration. And they went to a second polling in Kenya. What was interesting was when our implementing partners pulled on the international experts in these areas, they all showed up. I knew all of them. I feel like I'm back where I was a few years ago, five years ago, or four years ago in Kenya. Yes, we were the lead on the election program and support.

Q: I was in Afghanistan in 2014, the previous presidential election, same issue between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. And were there any like interagency? Did you have an interagency group that was led by the DCM [deputy chief of mission] or the ambassador? And were there any broader issues that you had to work through?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, there was. For the big issue. At that point, it was Ambassador Bass, DCM Karen Decker, and ACOM [assistant chief of mission] DeHart. There are three people in the front office and Chief of Mission Jim and Karen. Ambassador Bass led the interagency elections working group, which met once a week for updates for instruction for strategizing for linking that policy dialogue with the Ghani administration, and with others, civil society, media and others, with the programming that we were doing, and the intelligence gathering, information gathering that the political section was doing.

Q: Were you able to have any officers out monitoring elections even in Kabul?

DOOLEY-JONES: No, we didn't. Our Foreign Service nationals did some election monitoring for us where it was safe. But there was very little of that. We relied on third parties, some of the other embassies felt secure enough, safe enough to send teams out to different very specific areas. But yeah, as you probably know, in Afghanistan we've relied quite a bit for our monitoring, evaluation, and assessment on a third-party monitoring system, a three-tiered system that kind of triangulated information for us. And that was the same type of system that we use during the elections.

Q: Okay, and when you took over as mission director, when was that? And what were you facing then?

DOOLEY-JONES: So let me step back one year. That was in 2020. Also what happened between, let's say, the elections, and in my taking over in July, basically, of 2020 was the election kind of sorted itself out in early to mid-February. The February 29 agreement with the Taliban, U.S.-Taliban agreement happened in 2020, that meant ramping up the whole planning process for potentially a breakthrough. The Afghans, Taliban, and the Republic leadership, meeting together and working through some things and the planning of what type of programming would go first into areas and all that kind of stuff. We really ramped that up. And there was a specific section called PARS, the peace and reconciliation section at the embassy. It was its own section, separate from the political section and separate from all the other sections, and USAID had somebody seconded to that, one person, and sometimes two people. At that point, we had an OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] TDY [temporary duty] or long-term TDYer seconded to that section. There was a lot of planning with Resolute Support, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], intelligence, and all this other stuff of what could happen. So that was occurring in the spring along with everything else.

Then of course, in March Covid hit so what happened with Covid was worldwide and we ended up being like a big ship in a sea of Covid. Afghanistan, like many other countries of its like and its status, was totally unprepared for this. Within a few weeks, the two commercial carriers stopped flying. Luckily, the State Department put on charter flights. They were kind of different timings. But ultimately we had a flight every three weeks.

And we were asked to reduce our staff significantly, get them out of there and get them back to the States or if they are a TCN [third country national], back to their home country, where they would continue working for us. We actually went from seventy expats down to five at one point.

Q: Really seventy to five at the embassy in Kabul?

DOOLEY-JONES: Well, at USAID. I was one of the five. Peter had a Covid- related family issue that he needed to get home for. So, I stayed, and then when I could get out on my leave, he would come back in and it just worked. The timing worked for us. But that was a big deal. None of the FSNs were allowed on the compound for fear of spreading, for their safety, more than our safety, quite frankly. We didn't have any cases on the compound until a month later. Some very serious restrictions on travel and movement. You work from your apartment. It was just assumed we had to equip everybody's apartment with laptops and monitors and you name it. And we did the same for many FSNs. They had phones, they had laptops, they had everything. Eventually, we actually got them solar systems because the power was awful in Kabul. It even got worse, there were days without power. And they were ending up having to work from one am to six am to try to get internet bandwidth and everything else. We started a program, a pilot program that the embassy never really picked up on. But we supplied, I would say, oh, dozens of our FSN with solar systems, which allowed them to work through the Covid crisis there. That was tough.

But what ended up happening was, I think, if there's anything good that came out of Covid, it was, we had people spread across something like seventeen time zones. We even had somebody—because you could choose where you went on an evacuation like this, somebody went to Honolulu. And so literally, if there's a document that had to be processed, we'd start it in Afghanistan, or maybe even in Afghanistan and Pakistan, we had people in India, and then it would go across the Middle East, where we have people at their home, we had people in Africa who pick up that document, people in Washington. It was almost like because we're working at that point Fridays and Saturdays, it was almost like a twenty-four/seven production process. We woke up the next morning and picked up the document and moved it to the next whatever. And we did a lot of assessing, on workflow, on capability, on accessibility, and on communications, even just meeting protocol, because you don't want to waste time when you are meeting and regular meetings go on. And we put into place a lot of procedures to enable us to really not drop the ball, nothing fell through the cracks. Nothing, not a single thing. Even with five people in Kabul, the FSNs working at home, and people spread across the world.

Q: Wow. So you were able to continue the programs and program oversight.

DOOLEY-JONES: Program oversight. And of course, the contracting office. As you can imagine, like every contracting office around the world was dealing with how they can't work, but the people, contractors have to be paid. The only activities that kept going were our infrastructure activities. Because these were teams going out building pylons, electric pylons and streaming lines and substations. They were basically a bubble cell, right, moving around. So that continued, of course, continued in a war zone. And we're running these lines through Taliban-controlled areas. And our health program where we

ultimately provided vaccines, we provided oxygen ventilators through the White House program, we provided a lot of—maybe you're aware of it, USAID in the 2000s built the surveillance system for the Ministry of Health—it was the backbone of the health information gathering system in the country. And we developed the new system module for Covid specifically to be fed into.

And with all of that, we led on the Covid front with the Ministry of Health, and they were very thankful. Thankful for that, because otherwise, China was trying to ship vaccines in. And it was the right move for us to make, but it was also the right move to make politically, to show that we were standing with the Afghans. And the ambassador was always on the calls that I would have with the minister of health or his team, and just going through things. We got data daily because we had access to the system. They totally underreported deaths. We found that out through some of the security services' surveillance methods.

I took over in July, August as mission director in 2021 in that environment. And then fighting for staff to get back into the country because they changed over the Embassy leadership team but then right in February of 2020, Ambassador Ross Wilson took over as the ambassador. We had a different ACOM at that point but ultimately during the summer, we had both a different DCM, Ian McCleary and Scott Weinhold, the new ACOM. They were coming into a situation where they actually didn't know much about posture adjustment. It was kind of crazy. I was fighting hard for our staff's return.. And literally, I had to ask and then ask again and then plead, and then I literally threatened them with SIGAR [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction]. "You really want to bring back your reporting officers and leave my officers who are managing billion-dollar programs in the U.S.?" So that's how I got all my people back. I would say by September, October we had 80 percent of all of our people back, and by December everybody was back.

Q: This is really interesting. When you went from seventy to five, it was temporary, it was deemed to be temporary. Unlike if you were told to cut before that was kind of a permanent cut.

DOOLEY-JONES: Right. It was trying to get a handle on what we can put into place. The world didn't know how fast this thing traveled, right? And it could decimate the entire security population. And actually, when it did take off, it took off twice at the embassy, at one point, I think we had like fifty-seven cases on the compound. It was almost all within the contractor community and almost all within the security community. That was problematic. That is our security. It was the Gurkhas who provided perimeter security. We had to get them out to figure out what would work, what wouldn't work. RS was dealing with the same thing because they had to downsize. They were in retrograde anyways. But they had to downsize their staff and they were helping to figure out do you quarantine people like in Doha someplace for a couple of weeks before bringing them in, or you bring them in and then quarantine them? For us, on the compound in their own apartments, which is what we ended up doing. You arrived, spent at least a week, if not two weeks in your apartment alone, somebody brought you food, all that kind of thing. It was temporary. And then when they started realizing that yes, the charter flights are working, yes, our medical team, which was one doctor, several Foreign Service nurse

practitioners and Afghan doctors, was working well. They were amazing. Until the spike in cases happened. And we had two trauma centers set up on the compound.

I would be running or walking around the compound and seeing one of those gators with a little trailer with oxygen bottles going to these places. Because when the retrograde was happening, the only way to get in and out of the country was to either be flown to Begram or get out through Kabul. And ultimately in 2021, obviously, Begram closed, it was handed over. So, the chance of a quick and required evacuation, medical evacuation for anybody was really questionable. We just had to keep everybody safe and secure and informed. We had a Covid working group, every single head of every single agency was there. And we voted on things, decided things about what was going to happen, what wasn't going to happen, and just after that meeting, that met twice a week, on Tuesdays, I held a touch base call with the staff on the compound to know what was going on to let them know why decisions were being made to either lock something down or open something up. And what were the requirements to keep whatever it was opened up? The gyms were a big thing that we had to close and a cleaning protocol was put into place and amazing with the leadership that came out during this of our staff, taking on key aspects to keep some semblance of morale up. I mean, you're thousands of miles away from your family, you're a handful of people. I did a virtual happy hour on Thursday nights or Fridays just to try to keep people's spirits up, because it was tough in the U.S. and everywhere else. But it's really tough on a compound like that.

Q: You are not allowed to get together with even four or five people with masks on?

DOOLEY-JONES: Not in the early days. Ultimately, we are allowed to get together and we move to happy hour outside with masks, socially distanced. It just kept finding more and more people coming, kept finding a bigger, bigger venue for this, and then the winter hit. People were like, "No, we still want to go outside and see people and engage and talk." We weren't allowed early on. But after that, it opened up.

Q: And do you remember when vaccines arrived in the embassy for Americans there? And what impact did that have on what you could do?

DOOLEY-JONES: We were some of the first. My brother is a former physician, but at that point, he was at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] Medical School associated with the National Association of Medical Colleges. And I got my vaccines before even he got his or the medical professionals were getting theirs because the State Department asked for and got early on. Like I want to say when vaccines come out, like January 2020?

Q: January 21.

DOOLEY-JONES: I think I got mine on January 21.

Q: Okay, all right.

DOOLEY-JONES: And two—later, I had my second shot. We were prioritized amongst all of the embassies across the world. And we got them because we didn't have a lifeboat, right? To get out of the country, except every three weeks, right? We couldn't rely on the

local services. And we literally had a med unit, which is literally a med unit like any other place in the world. You're lucky if it has an EKG [electrocardiogram], a defibrillator, and a few other things but otherwise, it's pretty sparse.

Q: Wow. So if anyone had really gotten sick, as you found in the U.S., there would be very little way to help for a while.

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, we reached an agreement early on. Ambassador Wilson and the team did this with General Miller Resolute Support to evacuate any cases that were do-or-die cases, that he would make it happen.

Q: Right. I see. So real emergency evacuation could happen. Wow. Tough. So you had not only the transition, political security transition with Taliban discussions and the administration wanting to get out, you had Covid, and you had the I assume the committees in Congress who are still wanting the relatively important development program?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes. I mean, Congress definitely wanted us to continue. The other program that continued was our gender program. Afghanistan is the only mission in the world with its own gender office, which very proud of that in the work they were doing. And what was interesting with that is during Covid we tried to figure out what we could and couldn't do. The expat contractor staff left the country. And we had all of these spreadsheets about who was where and who was doing what and the contracting officer and partner liaison security officer was involved and tracking staff and movement and all this stuff.

What we developed under Covid was so useful during the evacuation and during the lead-up to the evacuation. During Covid, Peter and I were on the phone, we were doing virtual staff meetings, and we ended up doing a special one. And we challenged each one of the offices to figure out what were the biggest issues that Covid are going to strike your program with either primary like health, or tertiary impacts of Covid. And there wasn't much coming out. And it was an officer, head of the gender office, first time overseas, she was a civil servant, not even a gender officer. I think she was in the Management Bureau at USAID, but she had a good team with her. And she literally dug into it, she and her team dug into it. What are the big issues with Covid? Well, gender-based violence is massive and huge and widespread in Afghanistan. With the lockdowns that skyrocketed. The programming shifted to some type of mitigating effort to overcome this increase in gender-based violence. And how do you do that in a lockdown situation? How do you do that even when the lockdown is over? Providing services? How do you keep shelters open? This is where the interagency came in because INL was managing and supporting many of these shelters. So that really started different offices thinking, but I was so proud of this woman, for literally just breaking that ice.

The economic growth people who have been dealing with trade between Pakistan and India realized that humanitarian supplies, food supplies because the border was closed. Why was the border closed with Pakistan? Because nobody knew how Covid was transmitted. So, they came up with a protocol of how to safely and securely get a truck with a trailer on it into a secure area. It can be inspected, if it needs to be, and then over to

the other side of the border. People were trying to figure out what the impacts were and how to shift their programming. And, of course, the agency did all of these redirections. And the redirection of funding was a contractual thing. And we put forward several of them, which were approved. Many of them didn't help a lot. But there were a few that really hit the mark. And when I say that we did the same when we realized that the withdrawal was coming. We thought we had six months, we challenged the teams again, what can you do in six months? What resilience can you build in a system, in a community, in whatever amount of time?

Q: So with Covid when you said people started coming back in the fall of 2021, is it required that they were vaccinated?

DOOLEY-JONES: In 2020. Yeah. So here's the thing. It wasn't until sometime in 2021 late, they might have just gotten it through. It wasn't possible legally to know somebody's vaccine status. The ACOM, Scott Weinhold, was all of this, he was like the Covid czar at that point. He fought for it. He fought with Washington, he fought to try to get status known and vaccinations required. There was a negative test required for coming into and going out of the country on the charter flights. But I remember having conversations with mostly contractor staff and many officers at State, USAID who were concerned about the vaccine and never got it. But it was a civil liberties question whether or not you had to be vaccinated and that never got resolved. Status was not known and you could not ask what somebody's status was.

Q: Here, at least in Washington, you can even go to a movie theater, a play without showing your vaccination status, maybe because it's private, not government, but that's really interesting.

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, it became a very divisive issue on the compound as you can imagine, different cultures. And there was an issue with DOD [Department of Defense] as well. They had the same issue but in a war zone. Ultimately, that was resolved pretty quickly. It's a different type of war. But the different requirements. I think there was the argument they made that there were required vaccinations, that people had to have it to be in Afghanistan, I don't even know what they were. This should be one of them. But because it was a trial vaccine, it wasn't for many, many months, an approved vaccine. You couldn't force anybody to take it.

I spent a lot of time on that, touch base call, and other times trying to get staff to understand their point of view if they didn't want to take it, or they would tell me. And I wouldn't ask but they would tell me that no, I haven't taken it, why and trying to push them towards science. And it's kind of like security at this compound, wouldn't you like every single layer of security you can have around this compound? Why not? Ethically.

Q: Did that help or did that ring a bell?

DOOLEY-JONES: Some. I think it rang a bell as my voice was, amongst other voices, family members back home or other voices, my voice joined other voices to convince some people to be vaccinated.

Q: Yeah, it's so interesting. I hadn't thought of that, huge issues I'm sure you followed in the U.S. and became political right away, unfortunately, vaccination or even masks. I suspected the campaign was kind of a microcosm of sort of the same issue.

DOOLEY-JONES: We had the security guys who weren't wearing the real masks that were just wearing the gator, then that had to stop. I mean, before this shift in the leadership team, this was late 2019, and there was a contractor who became belligerent. We installed sinks in each one of the four cafeterias. You stood in line six feet apart, washed your hands six feet apart, went and got your food and took it home with you. Took it away. And a contractor, I guess, refused to wash his hands. And one of the cafeteria staff went up and said, you need to wash your hands, this man became belligerent. DCM Decker had that man on the next flight out. Seriously, sent home, contract terminated for not washing their hands. That's how serious people were, at least leadership was about trying to keep everybody safe, and they kept everybody safe until people started hiding. Not only the status is one thing, hiding illness, and still not doing six feet apart.

Still these parties were going on for Thanksgiving. Oh my gosh, Thanksgiving, one group got together and eleven of them ended up with Covid. You had your limit on the number of people you could have in your apartment at one point, your one-bedroom apartment can have one other person in the apartment literally; that type of thing. But you can't police that. And people were afraid to come forward because it's their job. Nobody knew how long this was going to last. So being sent home was a real threat, which kind of drove some people underground. And so if they were sick, it's like, "Oh, I'm fine," because people were working out of their apartments, right, and unless you see them on a screen and they appear sick. During a meeting, many people left their cameras off. You just don't know. And people didn't want to risk being sent out or further being quarantined and marginalized, which is how many of us felt after a while, after months and months of this.

Q: I know in the early days when you were quarantined for different security reasons, but did they basically make sure people got out every few months? Because it could be so hard to be stuck in a room? I mean, got out of Afghanistan off the compound, took R&R [rest and relaxation]?

DOOLEY-JONES: The flights, the charter flights that State put on were every three weeks, and with the reduced numbers on a compound that worked. And there was a short period of time, sometime in 2021, I think it was Turkish who started their flights for a few weeks, and then it ended again, and you never knew whether or not you could get a flight or not. The flight was going to be canceled, which many of them were, but the charter flight kept running every three weeks. Everybody planned as we all did. When you first arrived at post, you planned your R&Rs. People got out. We made sure that people got out. But the only place you could go is the U.S. because that's where the charter flight went. The problem was for TCNs. If they couldn't get to a hub where there were flights still flying into their country, many countries closed their borders, even to their own citizens. I remember our people from Rwanda or Botswana, they couldn't go home. I didn't think about this. It was tough. It's really tough on our TCNs, because they didn't have a place to go home unless they ended up having a visa to the U.S. and could

get into the U.S. Sometimes they would request to go stay with family or whoever in the U.S.

Q: Right. Well, so you were able to keep TCNs or third country nationals on the compound along with the five direct hires?

DOOLEY-JONES: Oh, they were part of the five.

Q: Oh, well, I see, they were part of the five.

DOOLEY-JONES: The seventy were direct hires and USTSC, and TCNs, those are expats. So seventy expats total. So making a decision, and literally staging, who was the most important part of the team? When the first five, it was more by default, and everybody, literally everybody took on ten jobs in that five. You had no other choice. I literally had the infrastructure officer who was kind of like the EXO [executive officer] at the same time. And then when we started gaining more back up to like fourteen or fifteen, which was our stated number that we could do, allowed number, who would come back and the first five, who would come back in the next five, such that we had fifteen. And then ultimately, as people started coming back, and of course they got into assignment cycles and does it make sense to bring them back only for a month? But does it make sense, because we really need them back, even if it's just for the month? So yeah, it got pretty complicated in terms of human resource management.

Q: Were you able to continue? I know people's tours ended while they were out. Were you able to recruit new people even though they couldn't come? They would be working from wherever?

DOOLEY-JONES: If you remember, the assignment cycle had already assigned people. The assignments happened before. It happened in 2019. So people were assigned. Some people were allowed to get their assignments canceled for whatever personal reasons at the time, but we had some new people come in. We had new people come in who chose to come back to Afghanistan. This isn't necessarily the reason but people go to Afghanistan for so many different reasons. It's a challenge. It's to their financial benefit, as well. And the problem with people being sent out is that financial benefits disappeared. Those who were sent out of the five beyond the five or the fifteen lost all the financial benefits of working in Afghanistan. So that was kind of tough. For new people coming in then you couldn't get your clock started, unless you were physically in Afghanistan, your three hundred sixty-five-day clock and that became a human resource, legal morass. Listen, we just, if people want to come here, we want them here. Make it happen. And that's why it was really important to get our numbers back up, whether it's the same people coming back, or new people being able to take a position in mission.

Q: Wow, and that was 2020. And then in 2020, let me first ask about, you talked about these planning cells, and the impact of Covid in different sectors and programs as well, as you said, you started doing some serious planning when the agreement with the Taliban was put in place and what might happen. Were those separate planning processes? Or did you kind of have to combine them? Was it scenario planning, not really knowing what different scenarios might happen?

DOOLEY-JONES: That was 2020. So yes, it was separate, Covid was separate from the Taliban, it was all about the retrograde because that's what the ultimate withdrawal, and the retrograde of Resolute Support the allied forces, right? And so that's what the agreement was all about. It was planning around where the rhetoric grade would start, and how and that's at the DOD, but we had people who would go to the planners, the military planners over at the meetings with them, when they could in person securely and have conversations about where would happen. And what would be the staging of that retrograde happening? And therefore, if there was a lack of violence and armed conflict what types of programs would you send in first beyond the humanitarian, if necessary? The humanitarians are already working there so that wasn't even an issue. And which ones? And how would you layer it?

That's why OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] became very, very critical to our planning, they are the transition specialists between conflict, initial kind of ground building, community, trust building, and governance, just the beginning kernels of governance, such that other types of programming, whether it's health, whether it's education is a totally different issue in Afghanistan—whether it's economic growth, whether it's agricultural production, whatever it is. They're helping us with that transition planning. OTI did a streamlined strategy for us and what they thought would be the best thing. We understood where the first five or so retrograde areas, districts, and provinces would be, and did some planning around that. And then we planned and then planned again, it was a huge amount of scenario planning. We were kind of ready. We didn't talk to the implementing partners about this point because it was still conjecture. Here's what Covid did: the retrograde happened, but it wasn't called retrograde. It was shifting people outside of country because of Covid. Right?

Q: Exactly.

DOOLEY-JONES: There were forty thousand people, very few of the vast majority of those are contractors who are getting out of the country. It wasn't called retrograde but it was because of Covid. So, it actually started earlier than the withdrawal started to happen, earlier than most people think such the numbers were by the end of 2020, beginning of 2021. The numbers were already down significantly. And then what else will happen in 2020, which is kind of a policy. This is an interesting kind of mashing of policy issues. Every four years or so five years, there's a pledging conference on Afghanistan. This happened in 2020. Our ambassador, who I did some things that he didn't like early on, and I understood that and changed my approach. And we became extremely like-minded close to the point where when both the DCM and the ACOM had to be away from post at the same time, I was acting DCM and ACOM, one of the first times ever for a USAID mission director. I was acting in that embassy in 2021, so he trusted me implicitly. I was in charge of everything having to do with the pledging conference from the mission perspective and from the embassy perspective.

I don't know if you remember, the talks were going on. Afghans were in Doha meeting with the Taliban, and they struck an agreement and part of the team flew back to Kabul. And Ghani said, "No, we're not doing that." Whatever it was, I actually know what it was, but I am not gonna go into that. And Washington asks, "No. What can we do? How can we force them?" Well, we withheld three hundred million dollars. That's what we

said we were going to do. And we did withhold three hundred million dollars, and it was a whole choreographed pledging process with different embassies, countries, providing their pledges, choreographed, such that we and a couple of other like-minded donors spoke at the end instead of the beginning, which is usually when we pledge. And there was a message, our ambassador, actually went over to the palace and said, "This is what's going to happen." And they kind of sniffed at it and said okay, so it happened. He didn't change Ghani's mind. We withheld three hundred million dollars. And our budgets have the money. They literally at that point, I think we have like a one point eight billion dollar pipeline, which was in our agreements with them. Three hundred million, they might not even use that for a decade. I don't know if they knew that. But they called our bluff. And it wasn't until the spring of 2021 when we knew that the retrograde was on after the Biden administration's decision to withdraw, that we needed to give this money back.

I assisted the ambassador with what would be the prerequisites for giving this money back. This was in November, December, into January, what does this look like, and I'm like, it's got to be simple. It's got to be understandable. We complicate so many different things that we can't even understand, let alone the government. So we came up with that. And then there was, we need to get this money to them and show support. So it's coming up with the soundbite that explains why we're doing it now. And the reason we came up with it was the American, the Afghan people were here standing with the Afghan people because the Ghani government still wasn't. Abdullah Abdullah, the Peace Ministry, all that nonsense between all of them, they still weren't doing what we wanted them to do, what they needed to do for the Afghan people. We couldn't be seen as supporting them particularly but supporting the Afghan people. So, we gave them three hundred million dollars. But these decisions were distractions from everything else you're trying to do. At that point, we needed to get programs up and running again. Through Covid agriculture programs, economic growth programs, and the other programs we're running in 2021. The distractions of the peace process in the development sphere, and the military sphere were a particular one where you had to keep all three aspects in mind.

And then, of course, there's the U.S. politics of the withdrawal. It was in early 2021, just before the Biden administration came in. We didn't know what was going to happen. So the embassy started planning for the potential security impacts of withdrawal, reducing secure documents, reducing equipment, reducing everything we could think of. What was interesting for us with our implementing partners, we had learned during the previous year during the spring offensive, the Taliban spring offensive in Lashkar Gah, Helmand. Our partners provide a lot of the intel in Lashkar Gah because they're caught in the middle of the fighting. And one of our programs, the Victims of War program was there, and they were being very vocal. Before they fled, they thought enough to destroy hard drives and burn documents, because of what was on those documents. Victims of war had been supported by the U.S. government, names, addresses, amounts, and everything else were in those documents and it would have been bad if the information ended up in the hands of the Taliban. So, we took their experience and expanded it and used it in 2021, when we knew that the withdrawal was going to happen, planning for the worst-case scenario as to where we needed our partners to be in terms of documents, in terms of equipment, in terms of people being in the wrong place, stuck in the wrong place. And of course, nobody knew that the Taliban would rage across the country as fast as they did.

Q: Before we get into 2021, and the withdrawal issues and processes, can I ask you and especially in areas of health and education when you arrived in Afghanistan, was most of the USAID assistance in those sectors through the World Bank-led Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund or ARTF?

DOOLEY-JONES: I would say for health, no. I think it was kind of equal. I don't know, probably, most of our health money was in our own programming. In education, I think it was mixed. There was an education program under the multi-donor trust fund. But we also had teacher training, curriculum development, textbook printing and distribution, and some other programs ourselves. The MDTF, we were the biggest contributor to that up until the end. We had democracy, governance, agriculture, and education money and a little bit of the health money went into that.

Q: One reason I asked is because this was just heating up when I left and that is, were there areas of the country that were controlled by the Taliban, and everyone agreed they were controlled, that the government really didn't have a hand in? Were there areas like that, where you were not allowed to have USAID-funded programs because the Taliban could possibly get credit for that?

DOOLEY-JONES: Absolutely. There were known districts where they were in charge. There was never any, obviously until the takeover, they weren't in charge of any of the provincial capitals. There were districts where it was known, and where we would not support programming, where our implementing partners knew very well what sanctions were and what they meant, and how not to breach them. And humanitarians had, they didn't have an OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control] license, but they had special ways of doing it based on their five principles of humanitarian independence and they held negotiations with the Taliban for unfettered access. Our other staff didn't have the option of implementing programs in these areas. So constantly reminding them to not be in those areas trying to do good work took a lot of effort. Because once USAID becomes known for that, our agency would not take that very well.

Q: And were there agreed upon areas where every, at least on the U.S. side, they agreed were Taliban controlled where we couldn't work, or USAID couldn't work?

DOOLEY-JONES: I never saw a list of districts. Most of the implementing partners knew that if the Taliban were about to come into an area, they bowed out, they got out because their staff were under threat. And it was 2020–2021 when we had some people go missing and some deaths. And that's the other thing that happened in 2019 was the attack on our partner, Counterpart International, the only U.S. embassy-connected entity to ever be attacked in that way. Peter was away on much-deserved leave, and I was acting mission director and spent six hours watching this event unfold in the Tactical Operations Center, feeding information to our security folks and trying to get in touch with the implementing partner headquarters in the U.S. Partners understand sanctions and even more so in the run-up to the withdrawal and the scenario planning that we're doing as to what they need to do and what they should not do. And if there's any expectation on the part of the U.S. government, the interagency, of our non-humanitarians doing something that's why we started asking for OFAC licenses a year before the takeover.

Q: Yeah. Interesting. And just moving into late 2020–2021, you mentioned the withdrawal. And when you mentioned that, are you talking about the military withdrawal or the civilian withdrawal? Related to that one question, was it always a policy, either explicit or implicit, or both that even with a military withdrawal, which of course, the Biden's administration USAID would still be there, and that partnership for development would continue and State would still be there? And on the political side, was that explicit? And at what point did the withdrawal affect USAID as well?

DOOLEY-JONES: I take you back to the February 29, 2020 agreement. It surprised everybody, including the Ghani administration, Ghani, and his administration. And I remember going to the palace with DCM Decker, to meet with Rula Ghani on a women's program to talk about programs she was never happy with. We were trying to get Mrs. Ghani on board or find some common ground with her. And I remember her basically saying, "Do we not have a bilateral security agreement with you?" Yes, you do. "Well, how do you sign an agreement that's on security with a known terrorist organization?" Oh, my goodness. Absolutely. True. Right. How do you do that? So that was the starting point. With the displeasure of the government about that agreement, and how that kind of played into 2021. And how that played into Biden's ultimate decision, I assume. Because the heart of the issue is messaging, right?

The ventilators that we provided in September of 2020, little things that we donated or provided or a new program that we signed or a new contract we issued, the ambassador would get on the TV to highlight U.S. support. It was a show of standing by the Afghan people, we are not leaving. We are here in the long term. We are planning five-year programs, we're putting money into the five-year programs and starting new ones, despite all of this withdrawal conversation. That is a military thing. The sound bite, the message was, there are the three Ds: development, defense, and diplomacy. This D, defense is stepping back as it should, and development and diplomacy are moving to the forefront. We had mega talkers to use whenever speaking in public. That was the commentary, that was the message—we are not leaving. But on the backside of that, as I said before, the Biden administration came into office and then it really ramped up in January, February, for months, constant scenario planning of worst-case scenario, and everybody's leaving, everybody's out.

Q: That was more related to potential security risks for the Americans to stay, not to any kind of issue with development or diplomacy, per se.

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes, it came down to the safety and security of the people who were there. The expats, the international community, and the Americans. That's what it came down to. And so that planning started, it didn't have anything to do with development programs. It was for a potential evacuation and you're part of an embassy, and you're an American, like anybody else, and you'll be pulled, like everybody else. We had political officers, who I remember—the country team became a totally different animal, always in a secure place, and several times a week, for months, leading up to at least my departure in July. I remember certain heads of section or their stand-ins saying, "Why aren't we leaving now? Why aren't we evacuating now? They are moving across the country in a very predictable way."

At that point, I hate to say it, but if they're moving that fast, development programming kind of falls away as the most important thing. Our Afghan staff members of our implementing partners, they become my concern. Right. And our Afghan staff in Kabul become my concern, and my expat staff still on that compound become my concern, not the programming. The programming kind of fell apart. But what I will say is, I mentioned how do we spend six months building resilience.

As the transition team and others came in for the Biden administration, I came across an old friend, Linda Etim who was previously the AA for Africa at USAID. She had a different title at that point. And it was like development humanitarian atrocities or something like that was in her title at the NSC. So I was reintroduced to her. And at that point, we were having, I would say, five meetings a week with the NSC [National Security Council]. It ramped up to probably twenty meetings a week. Different ones on different security developments, humanitarian policy, women's issues, staffing—it became a blur, because, of course, Washington doesn't realize that we're nine and a half hours different. So our meetings would be in the middle of the night, every single night of the week in February, March. We are just feeding the NSC information, and getting them up to speed on all of the issues. The OFAC license became critical if the NSC wanted us to continue this work, the policy of what implementing partners can and should not do needs to be clear so that we can tell them what to do, and clearly state the expectations on development.

During one of these calls, for some reason I was on my phone, I must have been in my apartment and the Internet wasn't working. On my phone, Linda asked me, "So what would you focus on right now?" And off the top of my head, I came up with food security, livelihoods, and therefore agriculture. Number one, essential services, health, and water sanitation. Number three, this was a far third I hate to say it, protection of marginalized communities, women, girls, and ethnic minorities. That's what I would focus on. And I finished, and I'm like, oh, my gosh, I should have said something else in my mind, in the silence. And I said, "Did I lose you on the phone?" "No, we're writing all that down." And Linda says, "We're gonna share this with Jake Sullivan and Jonathan Finer. Oh, but I'm like, Really? Yeah, kind of crazy. They became known as the framing objectives. And amazingly, these three things are basically framing our continued assistance right now in Afghanistan.

I shared these three framing objectives with our staff. We had no idea when Biden would decide on the withdrawal and when it would happen. So five and a half months before, remember it was supposed to be on September 11, was when the withdrawal was supposed to happen. Five and a half months before that. I actually told my staff, what can you do in the next six months? And I wanted to focus on our partners not doing the work for communities and institutions. They needed to focus on building the resilience of Afghans to do the work. That's what has to happen over the next six months. That's what you're doing immediately, developing programming, shifting programming. You come up with a plan and I will approve it. And you'll go and you'll see what resilience you can build.

Q: Did they?

DOOLEY-JONES: They did, they came up with certain things. Again, the gender programming took off, as you can imagine, they had some real successes and a couple of areas. Literally in four provinces province-wide, the Ulama, the political leaders, other religious leaders, and community leaders, they banned in four across four provinces, under the legal decree, banned underage marriage. And despite what the parents said, despite what the parents agreed to, which was like, whoa, okay, well, that's a resistance type of thing. Afghans were saying we have determined as a community that this is what we want in our life. Now. I doubt that it is still holding with the Taliban, but imagine the ability of a community to come to that point. To get everybody onboard with something, I don't care what it is in the future, right? It is a big resilience-building, outcome, right, it's a success. It was those types of activities and outcomes we were looking to do.

When I was in Washington in September 2021, I met with one of the deputies that I worked with, and he said, "Yes, so going, still using those framing objectives and still trying to make this work." And the thing about the framing objectives is I was engaging a lot with the head of leadership of BHA [Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance] Sarah Charles and others. And I said the reason is because as much as you can get done on those three things, before a withdrawal, and hopefully not a collapse, but a collapse, the more pressure it takes off of the humanitarians. You get health, water, and sewage, right? You get livelihoods and food security, at least a few steps ahead of the oncoming catastrophe. It will only help the humanitarians in the future. And that's why I proposed it. There are multiple reasons why I said it. And here's the kicker, like I said, everything is in the message. I actually even gave them the soundbite as to what we were doing, and in the next six months, gave the White House the soundbite. I forgot the language I used but for the Afghan people because of this, this, and this. This is where we focus. So, yeah, development programming took on a very different role and purpose than our normal—we can develop this or we can develop the systems and they'll ultimately get picked up by Afghans or not picked up by Afghans to go forward with it. Now, this is focused on what you can do now that they can pick up and run with when we're gone.

Q: So even like in early 2021, you were planning and thinking as if the development side would also be gone sooner rather than later?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes. We had to start with that premise. The scenario planning was a mess to begin with. Every single agency was doing its own scenario planning with different triggers, different scenarios, and different everything. And it was the embassy front office, Scott Weinhold, and the Ambassador who basically said, "Okay, we're gonna develop an embassy scenario plan and share it with everybody else." Basically, no more reliance on Washington to develop the plans. DOD had its own, CIA had its own plan, but it was just kind of crazy. It came down to developing one plan with not only and just remember, by this time, the withdrawal was over, we had already gotten down to less than twenty-five hundred troops by that point, right by summer, last summer. The withdrawal had actually happened, RS and the bases and everything else had closed. That scenario planning had a good scenario. Basically, there's a joint government that comes together and some things change and what can we do? Then there was this drags on for a while and there's the intense conflict scenario. And it's the way it's always been. The

government takes over an area, the Taliban takes it back six months later, ISIS-K [Islamic State] takes it for three months, and then it goes back.

The worst-case scenario was what actually happened, but it happened much quicker. They were thinking first, they were thinking that it would take eighteen months for that to happen. Then they thought it would take a year for it to happen. Well, the Taliban took over within like, three months or something like that once they really started their push through the country. The programming under each one of those scenarios required a lot of back and forth with USAID leadership in DC. To take them through our thinking about what was possible during each one of these scenarios, such as the worst-case scenario. The humanitarians are the ones who are left there. Everybody else is out.

There were three issues that I outlined to them for resolution of guidance. The three issues were under each one of these scenarios. What will sanctions allow with the shifting sands of Taliban control? You get an OFAC license for everything. Then there's a recipe for disaster. The safety and security of our implementing partners of those who even just want to stay. No, you can't just let them stay just because they want to stay. I mean, safety and security of working even in a Taliban area if it was allowed. And then there's the moral issue, which nobody ever figured out. But I assume they're figuring it out right now, which is, imagine an agricultural implementing partner goes out to an area to do some field training and as they're walking through the district center, they see a man being beaten because his beard isn't long enough, and he's not wearing the right clothes, and women are being beaten. They're now out in the field. And guess who is totally absent from the farmers? There are no women. But women make up over 80 percent of the agricultural workforce. What do they do? We need a policy for this. You don't leave it up to the implementing partner, you shouldn't leave it up to the mission. Is that a moral issue? Maybe, but it's also a policy issue, you have to make a decision because it's going to happen the right way if left without absolute clarity. I don't know if they've ever managed to figure it out or not.

The other thing was, the women activists who came out, many of them came out early, many of them came out during the evacuation, but many of them stayed and said, "I'm gonna fight, I'm gonna die," I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that. I actually was yelling at people. I was yelling at Karen Freeman. Because in that worst-case scenario, she goes, "How are we going to continue our gender empowerment support?" I'm like, "We're not, Karen, we have no boots on the ground. Literally development boots, right." We have no ability to fund or finance anything in that country. We need to stop promising things that we cannot deliver, which is what happened. We promised the world last summer. And we couldn't deliver on any of it. We still can't, maybe there are ways of doing it now. I don't know. And most of that's through diplomacy with the State Department. But not through programming. But stop promising the world. Even if we could support these women, are we just not literally buying the target on their backs? Another moral issue.

Q: Tough issues. I mean, these are still going on, I can tell you.

DOOLEY-JONES: Exactly. In my tough conversations about these scenarios with the agency counselor and the front office advisors, sometimes with Samantha Power. I put these issues on the table, this is what we've come up with. But you need to deal with

these big policy moral issues for us. Right? We don't have time to do this and it's not the mission's call on these big issues.

Q: I mean, just a question for you. In your mind, were these just USAID issues? Or were these broader U.S. government issues?

DOOLEY-JONES: They were specific to us in the way that we work and what our contribution is, right, as the development agency, to the U.S. government. They were critical of that, and what we could and could not do. And what we should and should not prompt, not that we shouldn't try. But let's be very circumspect about what we can deliver. Right? You put into place, the best you, with the best mind, or what you think you can do. And what you will do, because you get that in your mind, but don't promise the world because that's when USAID loses its place at the table. Fail once in Afghanistan at that point, you won't get that table, that seat back. No one's gonna listen to you anymore. But I also think that because of the work that I and others at USAID in Afghanistan had done to build that seat at the table and the ambassador to create the understanding of exactly what development could do for diplomacy, what development could provide to the U.S. government and to the administration. And it's more than a carrot. Right. It's more than that. I think it did have implications for the broader U.S. government engagement and it still does in Afghanistan.

Q: Absolutely. Basically, for the U.S., for politics, this is so interesting, because these are some of the same issues. If you talk to Jim Bever he was at the table, for example, when all the discussions were going out on the surge, and what we can do, and the COIN counterinsurgency and development following the troops, going in and this whole build, and when even when I was in Afghanistan, a lot of these questions, what can we promise and what can we actually do? And it was all the difference between the short-term goals of a lot of diplomatic and especially military, the quick response, quick impact type of stuff giveaway, seeds, and fertilizer, versus more longer-term goals of development, which is build capacity, build systems, marketing, whatever, and those we were facing fifteen years ago, and you were facing again, when you were there just a few years ago. It's very interesting.

DOOLEY-JONES: A couple of the lectures and talks that I gave recently are focused on the importance of our words, the way we communicate, and the messages that we send, that we don't even know that we're sending messages to the Taliban, messages to the Ghani government, messages meant for the American people that are picked up by the Taliban and interpreted rightly or wrongly, and how that influences actions. And so you're right, it is a timeframe issue, when we give that message, is it a short-term soundbite right meant for that purpose, or is a longer-term progression, positive progression, setting up that progression? You don't just say something and it happens, right? In development, it's a progression. And in a positive trend, right? And we're used to the setbacks, but we're used to the five steps forward, maybe one step back or one step to the side. That's how we do our work. We know how to do that work really well. But that's not how an ambassador understands it. That's not how a political officer understands it. And it's so important to understand that in a place like Afghanistan, where we talked about probably two dozen things that happened in my two and a half years. You have to be flexible, you can't use the word never, and provide firm promises. You

need to give your best, temper expectations for the short term knowing the long term is really the higher-level goal.

This is where I think the Taliban ran circles around us in their messaging. From day one, they had three messages. Get the infidels out. Establish an Islamic Emirate. And I forgot the third one was anyways, they had three things that didn't change from day one, in 1996. Never changed. Everybody said it. I wrote a paper recently. I did research on the four presidents since 2001. We have changed the script, and the message, convoluted it, confused it and wrapped it around itself. Biden actually changed his message significantly from when he came into office when he made the April decision and in August and September. And then he totally wrote history when he talked about the evacuation. I mean, well, there's some messaging, short-term purpose. Without a thought that if you were really serious about women and girls, about ethnic minorities, about the people that the U.S. government worked for us who literally left behind. Would you be saying those things? Would you be thinking with a developmental mind to build a strategy to be able to affect something in the country going forward? We would say something very different.

Q: We didn't want to get too political here, but frankly, I was quite surprised in his speech in July or August, when he said that the U.S. government never had a foreign policy objective of state building. Despite the billions Congress appropriated, another spent. In any case, can we add let me just put on part of this so we are going to end this session now, and we'll pick up again in the next interview. Thank you for a fascinating few hours. And Tina and I look forward to seeing you in the next interview. Thank you very much.

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Q: Hi, my name is Bill Hammink and I'm here to honor our second interview with Tina Dooley-Jones. Thank you very much, Tina, for joining us again. And we're just going to continue where we left off in the last interview and basically ask about when the new administration came in you were in Kabul as USAID mission director, and with a speech by President Biden in April, you saw the handwriting on the wall, so to speak, and what was in terms of within USAID, but also the interagency in terms of withdrawal of civilians to mirror the final withdrawal of the military?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, I think that's when the importance of the interagency came together, obviously. As I said before, it really started, actually, before the administration came into being on January 6, but really ramped up over the first few months of 2021. As we were compiling, and each agency and department was compiling both out in Kabul, at the embassy, but also in Washington information, and data and analysis, to feed into the NSC, to hopefully, all with the purpose of helping the White House make the decision on what to do with the troop withdrawal and the timing of the troop withdrawal, and the fact that the Taliban had lived up to any of the agreements from February 2020. At first, as I said before, we were doing all this separate planning, kind of what it meant. And each

one of us either had three scenarios or four or five scenarios, I think I forgot, which agency or department literally had like six or seven scenarios that they were planning on kind of a good-good, a good-mediocre, or bad-good. And then the absolute worst-case scenario, complete breakdown, violence, chaos. Even in the aftermath of a takeover, it continued. So then that's when we had increasing numbers of secure video calls with the NSC.

Ambassador Wilson and his very small team of us would be on these calls with him supporting him, and being asked to contribute if we had the answer to something. And the military had their own planning going on. In any of these, most of the vast majority, the calls I think there might have been two or three that I was on that the Resolute Support team or the successor to that, and I'm not sure what they called that command after General Miller left. But then it was like everybody was in on all the meetings, and then they realized that there was a little bit too much freedom of information going around across agencies that didn't have a need to know. They started to break it down. And there was a lot of conversation, a lot of chatter around the real issues that didn't have to happen on these calls. They really honed it down to a few different things. Security was one, which USAID, we didn't have a role in security except for me feeding information into the front office because the RSO [regional security officer] and others were dealing with that but our implementing partners still on the ground and trying to figure out when we should definitely pull the plug, how to convey this as, if something happened really quickly, how do we convey it that you need to get out what was the evacuation plan if there was like a quick trigger event that required a rapid email.

The other two were humanitarian. As I mentioned, Linda Etim was the head of that and engaged with a few others at the NSC and fed the information that came out of those up to the leadership at the NSC in the White House. And then, there were a couple of others. I say probably there was one other, I am not remembering exactly what it was called. But maybe it's embassy security versus intelligence gathering with the intelligence community. They separated out those conversations.

Where these things crossed was where you got some pretty lively meetings and conversations. I think I mentioned the problem with the humanitarians staying. As the retrograde was happening, the DOD pulled the rug out under the no-strike list system. And what ended up happening, the DOD was managing that system for our implementing partners, where they and the entire humanitarian country team which was run by UNAMA [United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan] headed by UNOCHA [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] would feed data, locations, even mobile locations that are supposed to be able to feed those into the system, and therefore our military, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] military knew where they were, don't strike them since they are there. And be aware that they're there. And I will get calls regularly about there's some activity that's going to be happening at this point, very soon, there's a liaison at the embassy, a DOD liaison, who I was pretty close to at that point, sharing information back and forth. And he would call or others would call in and just say that this is going to happen. Do you have partners in that area?

I'd have to remind, even humanitarian staff, office directors, and others, that you're not the only ones out there, you're not the only ones working in IDP [internally displaced people] camps. I have economic growth, and livelihood programs, working in those IDP camps. And I had to constantly remind them that in this country in this environment, it's not the humanitarians in one location and the rest of the development programs in another location. We are doing the work we're supposed to be doing right. Because where the need is, is in these IDP camps or in underserved areas of population areas. When the retrograde happened, the DOD just said we're closing down the no-strike list system. We were clear that you can't close this down. This is when we really need this. We understand that there's no combat role for Resolute Support at that point but the system enabled humanitarian assistance delivery and it was really important. This went all the way up, I mean, all the way up, and was the conversation and we're fighting and State Departments fighting on our behalf to make sure this continues, because it's managed partially in Afghanistan and remotely in the U.S.

Long story short, there were a couple of instances, they were supposed to hand it over to the Afghans. And they said they're fully operational with a team in place twenty-four-seven. And here's the phone number that humanitarians or other partners can call when they have a question or they want to update location information. People would call that number and find that the line is not even connected. Nobody answers it. And we had a couple of instances where it was a major issue. I mean, literally, it could have been life or death. And so that got thrown up to the NSC and we said, "Listen, this cannot continue." They agreed to help continue, at least I think it was for like, not knowing what was going to happen, into this year, I think, in terms of helping to manage the system. Obviously, I don't know if it's gone away. That's interesting. I'm not sure if it's gone away. It should still be there because our humanitarians and potentially others since we have these OFAC licenses for humanitarian plus activities more the livelihoods and the health, other implementing partners besides the humanitarians that are also there that they would still need this. But that's when the security and intelligence community and the development humanitarian would come together on issues like that, and have some really essential. We had tough conversations about what the different needs are of different parts of the interagency. For USAID, if humanitarians don't feel that they're safe they won't stay and deliver and yet the White House and the embassy think that they need to stay while acknowledging that their safety and security is like first and foremost. If safety is not enabled, humanitarians will pull out. And then where will you be—you won't be able to provide that humanitarian assistance when we said that we would provide humanitarian assistance within the global community, but also to the Afghan government and to Afghans in general.

It was this kind of push-pull on objective setting and priorities. And a lot of time was spent on this issue. Because it was so important. And it is because the humanitarians in particular, knew that they would be staying even after an evacuation and a complete withdrawal of military and potentially an evacuation, which is what happened to everybody else. These things continued in the planning, and they came to a point where everybody realized that all the agencies and departments had their own criteria and triggers for these scenario plans, and different numbers of staff and different drawdown plans of staff on the compound. That's when I think the ACOM, who was the lead on

logistical issues, and really managing this scenario, tried to pull it all together, said, "Listen, we're gonna pull this back to the embassy." Essentially, take it out of the hands of the Washington people who are distanced from it, because things in Afghanistan can change on an hourly basis. Small changes, big changes around that point in time. So that it could be done in a more rational way by the people sitting in the field and knowing what was going on. We were given the kind of details of five scenarios, each agency and department were given the same, and a few different things that were needed for the kind of logistics side for the embassy.

But for us, this became a conversation point between USAID Afghanistan and our leadership in Washington, the front office was heavily involved, as was our office of security. Samantha Power was involved, really defining the objectives in each one of these scenarios for the development community. Because we were leading this development community, remember this? We were the biggest donor. And I don't know if we were always the most vocal, but we were pretty vocal. I was pretty vocal with my donor counterparts. And we were asked, literally, USAID was always asked to speak first during invitation-only discussions and meetings with other heads of development agencies based in Kabul. Our opinion mattered, and our decision-making mattered. I spent a lot of time explaining what was going on, and where we were going to the point where I could, in terms of just sharing information that I could share.

Q: Sorry. So you're saying that you did a lot of coordination and working scenario planning with other donors as well as the interagency?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes, because donor meetings and conversations mirrored the conversations that the U.S. ambassadors were having with their chiefs of mission. But also because of what ended up happening, we started the scenario planning so early on, it took several months for even the World Bank, the multi-donor who managed the multi-donor trust fund to start doing some scenario planning. And as they started to do it, they had totally different visions of the scenarios. I tried to comment on their planning without sharing information that I shouldn't be sharing, I would literally say, "You know what, you have to have your security people talk to our security people because I can't talk to you about this, but you need to know what we know and keep it in a secure environment." Because I saw that a lot, particularly the multi-donor trust fund, the triggers and the types of scenarios that were being developed were not necessarily cohesive and rational.

Washington was also involved, USAID Washington is also involved with all these donor capitals. And they're getting the calls too, and they're getting the "Are you doing?" question. And what's particularly in terms of the work of UN [United Nations] and UNAMA. But just in general, also the big donors, the UK [United Kingdom], the Canadians, Germans, Italians. In terms of our own interagency at the embassy, that's when it really started to click where if I don't understand something, I usually go to the front office, I go to the ACOM or the DCM and ask. In this trigger is this what you mean, in terms of atmospherics, because that will determine how we define actions? For them, for most agencies, it's kind of an all-or-nothing kind of thing. For us, it's location specific, if the Taliban is not someplace and we can continue to provide agricultural livelihood assistance, how long should we be doing that? And what is that trigger? Or in

an area where the humanitarians are working, where it's Taliban controlled, but they're adhering to the no interference requirement and things are working, is that okay? And there's probably going to be more and more of those areas, right, as they go through the countryside and take over areas, hopefully, without violence and major conflict.

Then it becomes a timing thing because development work is done in stages, we know that there's a progression towards development starting with humanitarians. You have to build some stability in terms of governance or systems. And then you move on to the more. But take a location-specific issue. And the fact that it links into a bigger system, and then so many other connections form. For us, development professionals, this is hard to explain to the interagency. It's not like if we see the writing on the wall, we pull everybody out. Period. Everybody stops. And whether it's a policy stop because the Taliban is taking over and we have no, no real policy direction without an OFAC license as to where we're going, everything stops and everybody needs to come out. Because you just don't know. Or it could be due to conflict or it could be a no-access stop. And how long do you let whatever negotiations that are going on take? So the interagency conversation also became an explanation of why our scenarios look like this because these are the layers of decisions that we have to make as an agency, particularly in terms of our programming, our implementing partners, and the medium and long-term goals.

Q: Which was very different from many of the other agencies around the table. You had people on the ground as the year is 2021 and continued towards the summer and the Taliban took over different and more provinces, if you will, like you said, some, just without any fighting, did you then continually have to tell your IPs [implementing partners] to pull out and as they fell increasingly, fewer and fewer and fewer places?

DOOLEY-JONES: I think very early on, and particularly after Biden made his decision public of the September 11 date, all the expats implementing the programs pulled back to Kabul. And many of them had already left. I'm not sure how many were left out in the field, but they quickly came in because that was a signal that at least over some period of time, the Taliban would be emboldened to move. I think the question is much more relevant for the Afghan contractor staff implementing these programs, implementing partner staff as to when they cease operations. And it was the same issue with Covid. You're telling me that you're still working and implementing under those conditions or environments, it became a contracting issue. You're, you're still billing us for this, that, and the other but you can't be doing those things, the environment, the situation of Covid, whatever, it doesn't allow you to do those things. We had a long conversation, and probably INL had the same conversation as they had contractors, as well as public affairs. They had grantees. How long can you continue to do this? How long before we pause? And we went into a whole legal conversation with USAID DC, I'm sure the other agencies, departments that have very similar types of grantees, and other things went into this as to when can you pause? And what does that mean? When can you tell them to stop and cease operations, it's different between a cooperating partner and a contractor and a grantee.

Here's the tough part, I mean, even at this point, particularly later in the summer, we didn't have a lot of staff. I mean, we had expats in country, but they started to return by midsummer. I would say, definitely at the beginning of June, they started to—we would

rotate out on these R&Rs, every ten to eleven weeks for a three-week period because we have this charter flight. And none of the commercial flights were flying. The State Department gave us a charter flight every three weeks like clockwork, so you knew how you scheduled the R&R when you first got the post, your three R&R. But the embassy made a decision, and they stopped people from coming back. If you're not supporting the security aspect or intel, the agency [CIA] has their own planes and flies their people over the place. But if you're not supporting the security aspect of what we're doing here at the embassy, you need to stay in the U.S. for a little bit longer, until we figure this out. On the first flight back six or eight of our people got stuck in the States, and we ended up being pulled into Washington, just so they could continue to support us if they wanted to. They could stay at home if they can work remotely. And then I think the next flight, there was still another number of them not allowed on the flights. And remember, we had at that point, I want to say we had fewer people because people had rotated out permanently and nobody was being allowed to rotate in, right under regular rotation. So, it really reduced our numbers significantly.

In terms of the IPs and who could speak with clarity to the IPs, I didn't want to put that responsibility on our Afghan staff, even though they were the AORs/CORs in many cases, right? It could have been a really bad case of telephone, right? We determine what we think is right, and we clear it with our contracting office. We also have to inform Washington because they have conversations with the CEOs [chief executive officers] and presidents of these implementing partners. And how you relay that and how it actually works on the ground in the field, across the country is more on us in making sure it's explained clearly.

I had a partner who thought that they could continue working despite the situation and they were very proud of the fact that they had such good relationships with the Taliban in the south, and it kind of came out that they've been doing this for a little while. And I had to remind them what the sanctions are. How those sanctions roll over into the OFAC office and what you're potentially breaching in terms of those sanctions. You need to cease and desist immediately. And I'm not saying that they did step over that line, but they could have been easily very, very close to it. I said, at least the expats were out, and when to tell them to stop and cease.

It also became an issue of security for their Afghan staff. Everybody knows in the community that they work for the U.S. government. What is their security? In particular as the Taliban are moving across the country, they were going after pilots and their families, because that was the one area where they were hurt. And they had nobody, there was no ability to attack back with bombs dropped from the sky. So they were after pilots and their families. ISIS-K took advantage of this and also started identifying at least one of our humanitarian partners who was killed outside of Jalalabad. I think during this period of time, a little bit earlier, it was starting to be a little bit too chaotic for Afghan staff with implementing partners who continue to work and to become the continued to be identified with the U.S. government. Many of the implementing partners made the decisions themselves to pause if they could and but we didn't cancel any contracts, as I remember. But we paused. Like everything just paused after a while.

Q: Yep. And as you moved into the summer, how were you looking at your transfer out? I mean, where do you see so much going on and scaling back the size of your program and staff and everything? How did you deal with that?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, I mean, when you transfer from a post you work up to the very end. And I guess we were a little lucky in that Peter Duffy was named early on. And I asked for at least two if not three discussions with him. I had a list of things that I wanted to hand over to him because, in a place like Afghanistan, you don't have overlap. And we could have had an overlap, but not in this situation. I went out on the same charter flight he came in on. That was the overlap, but at the airport terminal two, we didn't even see each other. I think I saw him walk by, I'd never met him before I kind of waved to him across the building and across the fence. And that was hard because he was busy doing I'm not sure what and I think we only had one and a half conversations to hand over. But you work up until the end. I mean, I'm literally retiring too, I'm not going on to another post. It was a good thing that I was retiring. And going into the retirement courses as a month-long course, and then, job search and all that kind of stuff. I'm not looking for a new job. I could be totally focused, and in a way that everybody else on the country team who was left was focused. The security people were focused, and the ambassador and the front office were focused. And I think they appreciated my ability to focus.

I remember Ambassador Wilson who had worked with Peter before joining AID, he worked for an NGO [nongovernmental organization] in the same post where Ambassador Wilson and his wife worked. They knew him, but not really well at all. But he would always ask me, you're going to talk to him and get him up to speed on what's been happening and what, at least my role on the interagency on what became I think, two, three, four times a week, kind of country teams with the military involved in it. I just, at that point, it's not tunnel vision, but there are so many demands on you, from your staff, from the ambassador, from Washington questioning it. Questioning what you're doing and the decisions that you're making and trying to keep the donor community focused and in the same line, and just took up my life.

Q: So when you left, was it mid-July?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes, it was the fourteenth of July. I think there was a problem with the plane that they were supposed to take or something happened, and we were delayed by two days. It was the fourteenth of July when I left.

Q: And at that point, how many staff did you have left, USAID direct hire or TCN?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, the expats. I would say there might have been thirty on the compound. I mean, that's less than half. We added up because of the posture adjustment, we did come down. And we got approval for seventy. But I think, with the summer transfer season, people transferring out and people not being able to transfer in. It was no, I want to say no more than thirty particularly when they started holding people back in the States, not allowing them to come back after R&R.

Q: Had planning begun at that time within USAID to establish a kind of a cell, a mission over outside of Kabul?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes. It started more in the interagency, that conversation. It wasn't USAID, it was if we needed to leave, where can we establish a base? And we looked at Pakistan, and I was always against that, simply because it's Pakistan, and this is Afghanistan. I mean, I don't know how people—it's conversations with Julie Koenen, USAID's mission director there, saying, are you kidding me? Do you want USAID Afghanistan to set a base in Pakistan? That's not going to happen. And trying to convince Washington it's a bad idea. And once I mentioned it to the front office, and I'm like, yeah, that would be bad for us, too, because they were looking at it, too. They were looking at Doha, they were looking at Uzbekistan and Tajikistan looking at two different places, as an embassy to set up a location. And this came from the military term, over the horizon, to continue to work over the horizon. The military had already moved with the retrograde; they'd already moved a number of people to Dubai, and a few other locations to continue the over-the-horizon work for the retrograde, and that got ramped up more during this period of time last year. That's when the interagency started looking at what we can do from over the horizon and where it should be. And we were always like, it needs to be at least somewhat close to the same time zone. A lot of people were saying, just move it back to DC, back in Washington with the interagency. I'm like, that's nine and a half hours away. I mean, and not that people don't work twenty-four seven but if there's no need to work twenty-four seven and you just have an ops center, that's what the Ops Centers are for. They already do that. So try to have it as close as possible. And again, not knowing what scenario was going to actually occur. Why move it that far away? You plan for the worst, hope for the best, hoping that some level of diplomatic and development assistance would continue.

Q: Right. And before we move on to the evacuation time before you left, did most of the folks in USAID and even the interagency with province after province falling, did you kind of see the handwriting on the wall that okay, Kabul it's inevitable at one point six months, three months?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes. I don't think they call it a country team anymore, because that meeting usually only happens once a week. But these three, four, several times a week meetings we would have, and they just went on as long as they needed to go on. They started with an intel briefing from the RSO, went to the agency, and went to RS analysts. That's when we started having Admiral Vasely, the new commander after General Miller. He arrived with his staff. And so we'd have an intel briefing from their intel officer as well. That's how each one of these meetings started. And we could ask questions if we had any questions about that. But they made it clear that it's just rolling. I mean, there's no pushback on the Taliban's advance.

The Afghan ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] were laying down their arms and running away, or just here are my arms, I'm done. And the Taliban had offered, except for the pilots and a few others, amnesty to them and their families. Every single one of these meetings, again, three to four times a week, you heard this progression. And in the media, in the news. We knew exactly what districts were taken over. And the agency was just producing maps of just this takeover. It was interesting to compare those maps to their analysis and projections of how the Taliban would take over the country if they were going to take it over in terms of the movement of their fighters.

The media ended up keeping a tally of the provincial capitals. Once the provincial capitals started to fall after the first ones, which were kind of Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand, Nimruz, the ones in the south and some in the north. You kind of knew that there was nothing stopping it. People realized that there was nothing, no barrier to their continuation. And so I think people were—I remember one of the political officers, she was acting political pol chief. And she actually asked the question, why are we not evacuating right now?

Q: Everybody?

DOOLEY-JONES: Everybody, why are we not? Why are we sitting here seeing this happening? And have we not crossed the triggers? Because there were triggers that we had set during Covid, both for Covid and security. And then because we had security there even during Covid. Covid triggers, we had security groups. And we went through both sets of them every single time we had a meeting to decide whether or not we crossed the trigger. We have these triggers for security, have you not crossed many of these, which would cause us to go into the next scenario? And why are we not evacuating? So people in the interagency started to see it. And particularly we who are not security people. And trying to keep my PLSO, partner liaison security officer, in the loop. And I worked hard with him and his two people on his team for over a year to make him engage with the interagency as a strong contributor. And he built relationships with the security community, particularly the TIFC, the threat identification fusion cell at the embassy, which is like all the security folks and the DOD involved. Making him kind of an essential member of that team. What I might not hear in these other meetings where I need to validate, I could go to him in a secure location and say, what are you hearing? Are you hearing this? Then and that would also help inform kind of implementing partners, but even just for Washington, what was happening? Because they're not in these meetings, they're not getting these briefings. Having to take the information from these interagency discussions and briefings and make it concise and focused for a secure call with agency leadership. They'd sometimes go off on tangents and try to alter what the security people on the ground were telling us or wanting to help the embassy decide on a course of action. The PLSO became really important, helping me gauge what was being said, in the interagency.

But yeah, there became a point where we knew this wasn't ending, that they, the Taliban would come. And we also knew the conversations and negotiations that Khalilzad was having, with the political arm still in Doha, on the movement and the agreements, in terms of—as they started to come closer to Kabul the discussion was to not come into Kabul not to cross those gates for some period of time, to allow us to continue the evacuation a little bit more. The other thing that became critical was, and that's why this whole projection of how they're going to take over the country. One point, I remember, my agency reader, I had a reader, which was great. I can ask so many questions, and they would answer them. And there was an Anaconda takeover where they came in with two arms, like a mouth coming down around Kabul, and other projections. And the importance of that was the shortest overland route is east, right to Pakistan, through Jalalabad. The major road north and south, you'd have to go through this long pass and through that tunnel, the Salang Pass, a total bottleneck. And we'd already seen the major

ring road around the country, they're very strategic and taking over portions of that. And so you could see, and the interagency planning was if we needed to get out, with so many people, a land route is always an option. So what does that look like? If we can't get enough helicopters back and forth, flying helicopters back and forth to the airport is not advisable. As they started taking over, once they crossed the east-west route to Pakistan, that was a trigger. That was a definite trigger. And that's what started to happen, these major transit routes, exit routes started closing off.

Q: That makes sense. And then everybody had to fly out.

DOOLEY-JONES: Then everybody had to fly out or negotiate exit in another way. And I talked about that when we talked about the task force and in those negotiations for that exit. After August 30, nobody was flying out, and that airport was closed.

Q: Yeah. So when you went back to DC, or to the U.S. on July 14, were you able to take some leave?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yes. I took one week of leave. And then, I took a one-week or four-day financial planning course in retirement. And they are virtual, FSI's [Foreign Service Institute] last set of courses that were virtual because of Covid. I was here in New Hampshire. I did the first two weeks and almost got through the third week when I got an email from one of my deputy mission directors. And it was entitled "Help." I remember thinking, hey, how can I help, all I can do is watch this on TV because I'm out of it. And Peter is there and you don't step on toes. I didn't know what he was dealing with exactly. And I don't know what he's dealing with now. Right. I didn't even know where he was. Whether it was still in Afghanistan or Doha or back in the U.S. Anyways, they wanted to have a call with me to help support something. I didn't know what it was. That was Thursday afternoon, the email and the call was about four o'clock with agency leadership.

They knew that the ACTF, the Afghanistan Coordination Task Force, had been set up four days ahead of time by the State Department. USAID was not getting any information about it, about what it was doing, about what its mandate was, about how this relates to us and our people and our FSNs, or anything. They needed a senior person to sit on this task force. And I'm like, of course, I'll do this. I'm not one to sit around. I was like, what am I going to do in retirement? What am I gonna do for the next month before I actually retire? This is ridiculous. So I said sure.

At six am the next morning, I was in a car to Logan Airport. I had gotten the email on Thursday afternoon and by noon, twenty-four hours later, I was standing on the seventh floor of the State Department talking to former DCM Decker, one of the two people heading the executive part of the task force. And I think I was the right person ultimately because I've worked with all the leadership, Ambassador Bass, DCM Decker, and ACOM DeHart. I've worked with Ambassador Wilson, ACOM Weinhold, and Ian McCleary the DCM and they all trusted me implicitly. I mean, if I said something, they trusted that it was I'm not guessing, it's factual. It's what I believe. If I had to explain it, they would listen to what I would say because they trusted me. I got a little scared because USAID had sent over a junior officer to work on multiple sub-task forces

underneath the executive one. There was a logistics one, there was an Afghans at risk one, and I think there were like four different sub-task forces, each one led by an ambassador or former ambassador. Of course, you're up on the seventh floor, you're in the crisis management center, you're right next to there, across the hall from that center. A few of our people, you have to have clearance to get up even get up there, right? So they didn't have the clearance. They were too junior, people didn't know them.

I went or I was asked to go there, but I also went there to do a couple of different things that were critical for USAID. Provide the information that our agency should have. For the first three weeks, we would have a stand-up meeting at eight-thirty with the task force and another at four-thirty. After the eight-thirty, I would send notes to a small group of people, including the administrator, giving them the kind of morning update, the same thing I would do after the four-thirty. In between that, I would go over to USAID and we would do a secure call at around noon. Particularly with our command staff, SOCOM and CENTCOM, and some others who also were engaging with their DOD counterparts and had discussions about what was happening. It was an information exchange. USAID, we are a bunch of do-gooders and without information, people are trying to do good in any way they could. USAID folks wanted to step in and do it.

I would have, on a daily basis, at least two to three conversations with our staff to say you need to stop what you're doing. I can't share with you everything that's going on. Because any strategy or tactic that the powers that be at State Department or DOD have for helping people get out and stay safe, they might have one chance at trying it. Once it's tried and it's known, they can never use it again. And so trying to get our do-gooders enough information saying things are happening. People are obviously getting out, as you're seeing in the news. There is a plan. And that's what the administrator needed, was to understand that there was a plan. I could explain to her the plan behind closed doors, but I'm not gonna do it with literally dozens every single week of people I didn't even know who had spent one assignment in Afghanistan sometime over the past twenty years and wanted to do good, and they're pulling strings that I didn't even know USAID people had to try to do good, but I made it clear that they needed to stand down. This included USAID's front office.

Q: When you say doing good, do you mean trying to get friends and colleagues out of Afghanistan during the evacuation?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yep. On a special list, or on this or on that list, advising them where and when to go to try to get out. I had a few of these conversations with the administrator and her senior advisors because they have the strings to pull, they have the connections to pull. But in doing so they were undermining the efforts of those who can actually make things happen. And when I say make things happen, if you get somebody, hopefully across the border, you're lucky. You don't know what the negotiations are, that are taking place by SRAR with the Taliban on crossing that border. I know exactly where that negotiation is. You try what you're planning at the wrong time and you will undermine that negotiation. And I have these little come-to-Jesus conversations with our administrator and with her senior staff regularly saying you're gonna get somebody killed. I mean, that's what it comes down to, you will get somebody killed if you keep this up.

I got an email from, it was kind of a joint email, kind of weird, somebody very high up on the seventh floor and the deputy secretary highlighting this problem to me saying USAID needs to be a team player. We need to cease and desist. We need to trust that everybody's doing what they need to be doing. And my answer back was, I will redouble my efforts to make sure that that actually happens, that we were made a team player. And I shared that with our USAID front office, saying, "You will never know everything that's being planned and that's ongoing. There are things that are happening that I don't know." There are things that were left to the CARE team, which Karen Decker and ultimately Ambassador Bass took over, which was literally just after the official evacuation ended, just trying to get Afghans out of the country and even more Americans out who either chose too late to decide to want to leave or didn't want to leave with their Afghan family who didn't have status. It was a problem, because the whole visa, who's an American citizen. We weren't even focused on green card holders, like ever, during my five weeks on the task force, it was American citizens first. And ultimately, luckily, before the evacuation, it was our Afghan staff from the embassy as well. All Afghan staff from the embassy.

It was my sharing information, but also keeping USAID on the straight and narrow, and providing information to the task force on the needs of the humanitarian community, particularly focused on after the end of the evacuation. Because I remember, it was twenty-four seven and it's only me on that task force. I'm working seven days a week, eighteen hours a day at the State Department. I get very little sleep and the phone rings. Often. I don't know, six am in the morning, and it's Ambassador Bass, or it's James DeHart. I got many of these calls. And one of them was, "Listen, we know we're going to be leaving soon. We know there is some equipment that the UNOCHA and World Food Program [WFP] might need at the airport. And we can do an assessment of the airport before we leave. Can you connect us with them so that we know so the military can do this, and we can make sure that equipment is locked up and only a handful of people know where equipment is secured? Because there's going to be looting afterward." All this stuff and I'm like, "Okay, I'm gonna find the right person and get back to you today." I contacted the deputy SRSG who was dual-hatted, I knew him very, very well, I worked with him, and he trusted me. I got connected with the UNOCHA and WFP people. You need to understand what had happened, the tarmac was awful. And I was amazed that we even got any planes off at that time and that the UN would need to use the same airport to fly in relief.

Those types of things were number one, my relationship with the embassy front office, even the former team helped, but also my connection particularly to the humanitarians and a few others, particularly when we were trying to get certain people out of the country. From the Taliban's perspective, high-value targets might have been my contacts at the embassy, so feeding that into the interagency as well. There were significant points where USAID's position and contacts and knowledge came to bear on what the interagency was able to do.

Q: Excellent. I mean, you were clearly the right person at the right time, for that particular position or job. And at the time, how did you feel about the whole evacuation process? There's been a lot written back then plus, since then, including kind of for the

USAID FSNs, who wanted to get out, and obviously, the USAID direct hire and TCN were taken care of.

DOOLEY-JONES: All of our FSNs wanted to get out, knowing that they could only take their immediate families and children under the age of twenty-one. We had many who fought that for a long time. But that's the policy, it's regulation, it's the rule. And it's a tough rule to implement. USAID has seven current staff members who chose not to leave for that reason because they had physically disabled elderly children, parents, or brothers and sisters. The living situation is a multi-generational, multi-sibling, type of relationship and they just didn't feel like they could leave. And they stayed, they chose to stay. And everybody else got out with their immediate families. Many of them very sadly, from their point of view, got out without their entire families. But they got out. After the evacuation ended, people started realizing that the Taliban were going through the streets of Kabul, just to find people. They decided they wanted to get out. They fought again, for their family members, but even without their family members, with just immediate family members, they wanted to get out.

That's when I left the task force. I left, I was there for five weeks. And I left on September 24 from Washington. I trained somebody else to take over this role. And I think they did for a month or two. It was a mission director who was going out not to Afghanistan, but to another post in between things. They took over but by that point by September 24, our seven had not gotten out, but I think there were plans the CARE team knew about them. And how to try to either negotiate or get them across the border.

I think in terms of the evacuation itself, everybody can say it was chaos, it was absolute chaos. The pictures that I saw, the video I saw of that airport, and then in the military, as the cordon around the airport and the consular officers out there on the front line, literally checking documents and papers and trying to compare that to the list of the embassy has, in the airport of who should be let in today to get on these flights because the seats are available. That was chaos. That was chaos. But when you have hundreds of thousands of people trying to get out. I can't imagine anything else. I can't imagine being on that front line. And to the point where we were accepting of the Taliban's assistance in managing those concentric circles of security around the airport, which was amazing.

Q: Probably not one of your scenarios.

DOOLEY-JONES: Definitely not. Who would have thought, right?

Q: Yeah, exactly.

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah.

Q: Insights or reflections of that period?

DOOLEY-JONES: I think what I saw, on the task force itself, I mean, I would leave there every night thinking, what an incredibly effective team of people focused on the core priorities, and doing what needs to be done. If a decision needed to be made, they packaged it and got it up to the State front office, or when a policy wasn't existing, we identified that we were operating without policy, there was no policy around this issue.

And they would check with Legal quickly. And if we could do it, we did it. They did it. Not me. I mean, I'm sitting there, literally answering hundreds of emails from Afghans who got stuck in Afghanistan, who got my phone number or my email address, people in terror of the next hour, the Taliban knocking on the door. That was what I was dealing with. They would literally be dealing with moving a hundred thousand people out of that country and moving them through a system, or helping to get them out, or just incredibly dedicated, focused, and knowledgeable. If an ambassador, one of the task force leads, didn't know something, they said they didn't know, but they're gonna find it out in the next hour. I'm gonna learn what that is in the next hour. And then I'm gonna take action, and I'll let everyone know what that action is going to be. I mean, awe-inspiring. No chaos in Washington in that task force. We had calm, considerate, professional conversations. And because I guess, because we're so far away from it, we weren't in the chaos. We could sit back.

I remember August 26, when the thirteen service members lost their lives. I was in the morning, I was around nine-thirty in the morning, our time, and my office was right next to the DOD. And it's small, it's kind of a circular-shaped office on the interior offices along the perimeter suite. And people were running in the small suite. What is going on? And even with that, a second, two seconds, three seconds to process, we went back onto what do we need to do with this? How can we help? What do we need to put into place now that will be helpful to those in the embassy in Kabul? I mean, just the airport, everybody at the airport. Just lining things up. I mean, here's the thing, no scenarios planned. They're not working off of a game plan that we took a little left turn here, but still working off of one game plan scenario. None of that. These were core joint objectives that were known, and everybody just kept moving in that direction.

Q: Why do you think that, at least, on the Washington side the task force was so focused and so leadership? Do you think within that or just very senior people have been through it and kind of knew how to approach it?

DOOLEY-JONES: I think there were people who had been through it and knew how to approach it. I think senior leadership helped a lot. I think the fact that the seventh floor of the State Department didn't delve into what was happening. They didn't double, try to guess, second guess what they were doing. They didn't interfere. Except when they were asked to make a call on something, make a decision on something, I think it really helped to understand. It helped me to understand the military side, the DOD side, and how they use their assets, up until the evacuation, and then, after the evacuation and moving the seventy thousand people or hundred and twenty thousand people through the lily pads and ultimately to the U.S. That helped me a lot. Seeing their systems and how they're geared for it. We, USAID and State are not geared for this, they, the DOD are the voice of reason in the room and they understood the kind of logistics issues they could solve in a minute.

It's all the people issues that State was trying to deal with the inter-agency, USAID, and others were trying to work through and how the DOD folks wouldn't laugh at it. They weren't critical of it, they understood that that's part of our contribution to this effort. And they took it on. I mean, they're things that we laughed out about what they did too, that was an issue with one of the bases in the West, I forget where it was, where I think

they have like twelve thousand people refugees. It was in the middle of a missile test site location, and missiles had to fly over them. The base needed to maintain its test site certification. And this was right before I was leaving. And I said, what because yeah, we have to move a thousand people off of that line, where they would literally be building these tented camps with food facilities, laundry facilities, sleeping facilities, water, sanitation, everything, as people are being flown in, they're building these places. And now we're going to move to—people because they happen to put it in the flight line of a missile that has to be tested every three months or so. And you can laugh about it. And it's sad because people have been abused, these people have been through hell. There are certain things that when we could kind of laugh at ourselves when it wasn't life or death, it became quite a team effort and a team mentality. The inter-agency, just, yeah, it clicked.

Q: Great. And just you had two and a half years of involvement in Afghanistan, do you have insights or reflections? Just in general, I mean, looking back at twenty years of U.S. involvement and any thoughts or insights from your time there, related to the twenty years related to having to leave quickly in August of 2021?

DOOLEY-JONES: Yeah, I think I mean, there are so many reflections. I mean, did we go in with the right objectives developmentally, at least from my perspective in terms of the country's ability to become and maintain a democracy? Our kind of USAID strategy could have been, it was a strategy for anywhere in the world, any normal place in the world, and that strategy would have worked. I knew when I first got there, this is not the strategy for this place. We're not focused. We are not focused, and we've had too much money pouring into this place to make us focus, more money is a burden. It makes you make bad decisions. And that's what happened.

I think, even during a single administration, the politics around Afghanistan kept changing. I have a lecture that I've given a few times that focuses on how our policy changes, and the messaging that we put out as a government changes to the point where literally, Biden kind of in his last remarks in September, on Afghanistan, he literally changed the history of our involvement. How do you do that? I look back at the four presidencies and administrations from 2000–2001. And the same thing kept happening, what we say to the American people which was being heard by the Taliban, is being interpreted in two different ways. And probably the Taliban is interpreting correctly. And our objective just kept changing over and over again, and how that related at least for me, to development assistance, and what we should be focusing on.

To me, there are so many missed opportunities to reflect on. And maybe it's that annual turnover of staff and leadership. I think that's a big part of it. Nobody's reflecting, nobody's taking the big picture and reflecting on why we're doing what we're doing right now. And what the timeframe of that should be before you reflect again. It almost gets to the point where you're trying to do so many things, and just trying to see what sticks on the wall.

And I also think that we underestimated the power of the Taliban from the start. I'm not sure why we did. In terms of their messaging, they had three messages consistent since they first took over the country. In the '90s, foreigners gone, infidels gone, it's an Islamic Emirate, and a country kind of following the rules of Islam. They have been so focused

on those three, they have not changed. And Afghans can relate to that. Particularly when it's the same thing that the Taliban have said for over twenty years. We give you that we take away corruption and we take away conflict. We didn't understand that. The U.S. didn't understand it. All these things are going around in my head now. I mean, again, this is after the fact. This is Monday morning quarterbacking, but I think we've had so many missed opportunities. And to think that the same diplomacy that we have to use for decades, is always the right diplomacy. We don't use our words well enough or accurately enough or correctly enough for them to be understood in the right way.

Q: Do you think for at least USAID, do you think it's even possible to do nation building or state building everything that means in a conflict situation?

DOOLEY-JONES: To me, and I actually even thought about this in Iraq, people confuse nation building, meaning democratic institutions and democracy and everything else, with nation building what the services that a government provides security, infrastructure, water, sanitation, infrastructure for livelihoods, and food and all that kind of stuff. People kind of mesh those two, in a way that I have a problem with when people say nation building. For me, if I was going to go into a country after it's secure, I'm gonna focus on the governance aspect of this, and I don't care if it's a democracy, or a different type of Republic or authoritarian. I'm going to focus on the governance that makes this happen. Because that's what people need. People always say you can't eat democracy. But you need to eat and live and have water, and all this kind of stuff in this life. I always think that when we're going into a situation like this, even when there's some conflict, you build those systems. And I think the road building the electricity, the health systems, building that type of thing, I think that was essential at the start. I think because that country was so big and so underdeveloped, we should have still been focused on finishing that. And yet, we got down to trying to make Afghanistan in the likeness of us, versus helping Afghanistan figure out what it needs to be while helping it achieve stability by providing just normal life things to its population.

Q: Anything else related to kind of as you walked out the door in Kabul and got on that plane? Kind of a strange feeling, at least it was for me knowing I might not come back.

DOOLEY-JONES: I think it was particularly hard for me to leave after two and a half years, after Covid and posture adjustment, and then this whole 2021 takeover that was happening. And leaving the staff, my staff there, and leaving the interagency there. I was in Kenya, I was a deputy, and I became a mission director. I always find it really hard for myself to just go into a mission director position, because it's such a huge learning curve. Because it's not only understanding the country, it's understanding context, it's understanding the environment of the interagency, it's understanding how to engage with that particular interagency, in that particular embassy. And what you can contribute, and what your place is on that team. And leaving that I thought, I have such knowledge, I have such information that I can continue to share that Peter won't have. And he won't have it for a long time. And that's the thing, he won't have that for a long time. And that was I think the hardest thing for me.

I should have been exhausted. But I wasn't. I don't know why, I kind of thrived in the situation before leaving, and my staff highlighted that fact back to me saying you can't

leave. You shouldn't. Now's the wrong time for you to be leaving. We know that things are moving across the country and things are going to get worse. Can't you stay a little bit longer? Does it make sense to bring Peter in here now? And maybe this is a different decision that might have been made, I don't know. Ultimately, a month later was the right decision because I could go on the task force and Peter could come back here and then go to Doha. But I think that reflection of leaving with what I thought was a lot more that I can contribute to the effort, in terms of what I've learned, and the exceptional working relationships that I had developed, really worked hard with the front office and with the interagency, so people could not only depend on me but depend on USAID. The point was, I'm the face of USAID, but I want to have dozens that you can depend on that the embassy, the inter-agency could depend on. I was hoping that that would not end. And that would continue if they had been able to stay longer in Afghanistan.

Q: Well, thank you very much. Any final thoughts or words before we end the interview?

DOOLEY-JONES: No, this is a great opportunity, these oral histories of particularly a situation like this. So many different voices contributing to this will help people see the chronology of what happened and potentially will be so useful for somebody doing an analysis of this, the decision making, and the words of people like me over twenty-one years, and to pick out those nuggets of that was a turning point and this is what we have to consider if this ever happens again. I think oral history, particularly of Afghanistan, is going to be fascinating. I mean, it's been centuries since that country had any lack of violence, they say forty years, but it's been a lot. It's always been a conflict, always. But I actually do wonder whether we're gonna find ourselves back here in ten, twenty years again. And have we learned anything? That's what oral history is going to do and could be crucial to decision-makers in the future.

Q: Totally agree. Well, thank you very much. And I'm sure this won't be the last time and it'll be quite interesting for you and for all of us to take a look at all of the oral histories they're doing now, including colleagues from the State Department and elsewhere. Thank you very much.

End of interview