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PATRICK FINE

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INTERVIEW

Q: Hello, my name is Bill Hammink, and I'm interviewing Patrick Fine, former USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] mission director from Afghanistan. And this is part of the ADST oral histories of U.S. diplomacy in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Patrick, thank you very much for joining us today. As we start, if you could say a few words about when you joined AID, give a little background, and what led up to your involvement in Afghanistan, and when you went out there as mission director?

FINE: Sure. Thanks. And before I say something about myself, I think it's a great initiative to capture people's recollections and their point of view about their service in Afghanistan. And I think it would be especially valuable to see if there is some kind of synopsis that could be done from the USAID mission directors. Both to see how their perspectives evolved over time, because certainly the mission there evolved over time and to see the commonalities and the differences in points of view. I think that that could provide interesting insight, both for USAID and for U.S. diplomacy, more generally.

So in terms of my service with USAID, I joined USAID in 1987 through the IDI [International Development Intern] program, which was the entry-level program for joining USAID at the time. I came in as an education officer. The way that the program worked is you are to spend a year in Washington rotating through offices, so you could understand the USAID bureaucracy and structure and make some contacts and establish relationships with people in different parts of the agency and then you were posted overseas. In my case, I did a couple of rotations, importantly to the Contracts Office, that served me well forever after and in the Education Office, which was my backstop, but then I was sent to post early because of an emergency opening in Swaziland. The mission was at a critical point trying to develop a new program. And so they needed somebody and I was the only free hand on deck, even though I was brand new. I wasn't brand new to Swaziland. I had been a Peace Corps volunteer there. So they allowed me to go there early, about six months into my tenure with USAID and then I stayed there for my first posting.

That assignment got me into the Africa Bureau and at that time the Africa Bureau was a hotbed of education activity. This was a time of growth in education portfolios in Africa. So I went from there to Uganda, which was in the midst of starting the largest education

program I think that USAID had ever had in Africa. I went from there to South Africa, where the U.S. government had made education the centerpiece of its assistance strategy after the fall of Apartheid. And from there I went to Senegal, as the deputy director, which got me into management. And when the call for volunteers to serve in Afghanistan came out—in 2002, I think—I volunteered.

I wasn't called to serve in that first round when Craig Buck went out. But then as I'm sure the oral history will show, Craig fell sick and he was replaced by Jim Bever. The chemistry between Jim and the ambassador wasn't great. So USAID was asked to replace Jim and then sent out another request for expressions of interest. I expressed interest again. Both Jim Kunder, who was the assistant administrator for Asia, and Andrew Natsios interviewed me. Oh, wait, no, it wasn't Jim. Jim was the DAA but the AA was who was the AA? Do you remember?

Q: For Asia? Yeah.

FINE: She became an ambassador. She went on to become an ambassador. She was a political appointee. Oh, gosh, she's a force of nature. Anyway, she interviewed me, Jim interviewed me, and Andrew interviewed me. And then they sent me out in February of 2004 to Kabul to essentially interview with Ambassador Khalilzad—because USAID wanted somebody that he would accept—and so I went out for the month of February—actually, for about five weeks—to sort of interview with him. And then he agreed that I would be okay.

Q: Wow.

FINE: After I finished that preliminary TDY [temporary duty] in Afghanistan in Kabul, I went back to Washington and I did prep there from March—like mid-March to June—and then went out to Afghanistan for a tour in June. And at that time, the tours were one year long. So I was there from June until the following July of 2005.

Q: So it's not often that USAID basically sends prospective mission directors out to kind of have a discussion with the ambassador. How did that go? And did you feel on the line there?

FINE: Oh yeah, I was completely on the line. Because it was at the time the ambassador had a very negative and antagonistic view towards USAID. And that was not completely undeserved because USAID viewed him as a threat to its normal operating model. One, he had political muscle and influence, so he could get his way because he could go right to the president or to the secretary of defense, who was a close friend of his. So within the inner agency he had real power. He knew more about the country than any other living American because he was born in Afghanistan, had grown up there until he was an exchange student in the U.S. in high school. He was interesting because he was a true dual national in the sense that culturally he was American in his outlook—modern, secular, he had gone to high school in the U.S.—but he was also Afghan because he had grown up in Afghanistan. And that provided him with tremendous social capital, another kind of power. He had relationships within the U.S. government and private sector and academia. He also had relationships at all levels of Afghan society, down to the tribal and

clan chiefs and leaders. And so he always had more information than anybody else in the room, both from the point of view of what was happening on the American policy side and then what was happening in Afghan society. He was uniquely qualified or positioned to synthesize them because he spoke all the languages. He spoke Pasto; he spoke Dari; he spoke English; I think he did speak Uzbek. So he was fully able to gather information and synthesize it, and then bring both an Afghan cultural and historical perspective and a U.S. cultural-historical perspective.

So it was incredibly valuable and I think USAID didn't recognize that. They saw him as somebody who had been—he was the head of strategic planning at the Pentagon—they saw him as a DOD [Department of Defense] person, who didn't understand how U.S. foreign assistance worked and was going to push USAID into doing unwise things, things that were risky—like the American University of Afghanistan. At the time USAID didn't do higher education and considered it a harebrained idea. And he had lots of initiatives that from the USAID point of view looked harebrained or ill conceived such as starting private businesses, investing in startups, around different kinds of infrastructure development, which were not things that USAID was very comfortable with. And so that set up this fraught relationship that I walked into, so that first month that I was there, I was, yes, I was walking on eggshells, and it took me a couple of weeks to even get a meeting with him.

So I went out there to be interviewed but then he didn't see me. And then I was trying to get on his calendar and he just let me stew for a while. And then I got really sick with the flu, so not seriously ill, but the kind of flu that saps your energy and makes you feel like crap. And I had to be on so I had to just work through a period of about a week of being seriously down with the flu but writing papers and being alert in order to try to make a good impression. And ultimately, I think the thing that did make a good impression on him were three things. I think they were important for me during my tenure. And I think they were important for USAID showing the value that it could offer in terms of the kind of expertise that that we could bring, and the *savoir faire*, the ability to get things done that USAID uniquely has within the U.S. government. And those three things were, one, I listened to him and I didn't take doctrinaire USAID positions. I listened to the arguments that he was making for why a university was important, building courthouses was important, or funding startups was important. And a number of his initiatives struck me in that extraordinary context as making sense. And so I didn't fight them, not because I was afraid of him, but because after objectively looking at it, I could see that they were at least worth exploring and shouldn't be dismissed as just not fitting into what USAID traditionally does because this was not a traditional environment. So, I didn't bring that mindset into the mission. I think he recognized that.

Q: Yeah. Well, what were the second and third points?

FINE: The second thing is I wasn't intimidated by him. And everybody else except General Barno, was. But I mean, the military guys, the State Department folks, they were all super intimidated by him. And I think there was a turning point during that first month, and it was one of my first country team meetings—we had a country team meeting every morning—and there would be fifty people in the room, because all the military guys would be there. So you'd have maybe the fifteen department agency heads

on the civilian side, and then you'd have thirty-five or forty military guys. And the ambassador would lead the meeting. At one of my first meetings, he started to purposely insult USAID. And I don't know this, but I kind of suspect in retrospect, it was almost like a test and it was bullying behavior. And he was saying, "We could have done this, but USAID got in the way," or I don't remember what the specific taunts were but they were taunts that were thrown out in the course of the meeting to make USAID look bad. And he did it like three times. And each time in the meeting, I challenged it. And I said, "That's not true." I remember the first time he made this comment, I didn't raise my hand. I just blurted out, "That's not true." And there was like an audible gasp in the room. And Khalilzad turned and he stared at me. It wasn't an angry stare. It was a curious stare. And then he said something like, "Well what did happen?" And I defended us. And there were a couple of other times in that same meeting where I forcefully defended USAID's position because it was defensible. And I think that in some way that gained some respect, because after that he met with me. And over time, we established a good working relationship. An indication of that good working relationship was his response to USAID developing a strategy. When I arrived there in the summer USAID didn't have a strategy. We were just reactive.

So, one of the things that I launched—and I am sure that Washington and the interagency were encouraging it—was developing a country strategy. I went to him, and told him we're going to be doing this, and he had been the head of strategy for the Pentagon, right? So he's a strategy guy. And he didn't have much reaction. I explained—like in country team meetings—that this would be an activity USAID would be pursuing, and trying to get buy-in from other members of the interagency. And then we had a launch meeting in August or maybe early September. And it was our program officer, Rick Scott, who was in charge of the exercise. So, he was running the meeting and we got Ambassador Khalilzad to attend, along with other agency heads. And at that meeting, he said, "This is just a waste of time, you guys don't know anything about strategy. I'm not gonna waste my time on this," and left. And so that was an example of the kind of relationship challenge that we were facing.

Now, we finished that strategy before the end of the year and we had a strategy document. And in that period of like three months, his attitude had changed from you guys don't know what you're doing and you don't have anything to offer—just do what I say, to writing a very positive foreword introducing the strategy. And that positive relationship with the ambassador, I think, was the key to USAID during that first period of our assistance.

I separate the U.S. effort in Afghanistan into three phases. There was the early phase of setting up a relationship with the government and allies, working on democracy and governance, with the first election moving from the provisional government to an elected government—and focusing on extending the reach of the central government through the provision of a variety of social and economic services. And part of that was the PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Teams]. In my mind that phase goes from around 2003, because 2001–2002 was still pretty much like a beachhead period. Then from 2003 when Jim Kunder first went out to maybe like 2007 or so was phase one, because I think there was still hope through around 2007 about an overall development strategy and about the

legitimacy of the government and the ability to show that by integrating into the international community, Afghanistan would be better off than becoming a pariah state led by the Taliban.

Then in my mind somewhere around 2007–2008—I'm not exactly sure where that line is probably around 2008, I guess, in retrospect, the Obama years—how conflict became much more widespread in the country, the number of incidents was high. It was basically no longer a permissible environment to operate in most parts of the country. Much of the initiative in that first phase of DDR [Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating] to neutralize, the warlords had been abandoned to try to recruit the warlords into the battle. In that first phase—and certainly when I was there—one of the objectives was to maintain a very small military footprint. When I was there, the strength of ICAF [Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework] was around seventeen to nineteen thousand, and that light footprint was viewed as an asset, as something valuable. So it didn't look like an occupying army and it was using counterinsurgency approaches.

In the second phase, conflict gets much worse, many of the early initiatives have run out of steam and/or been abandoned. And now, you start to really have an engagement strategy which is completely militarized with a hundred and fifty thousand troops, and when you have that many people in a geography, it just changes the nature of everything. It changes the economic conditions, because you've got so much money flowing in; changes the social conditions, because you've got tens of thousands of young testosterone-fueled guys in the theater. It changes political relationships.

And by 2012 corruption has become endemic. You know, you have H.R. McMaster in 2011, I think, who tried to address corruption unsuccessfully. By that time—and I continued to travel to Afghanistan now in my role with an NGO [nongovernmental organization] that had programs there—and I would talk to my old counterparts, some who still were in government, others who were not. And around 2008 or so they started telling me, "It's not like when you were here." When you were here the Americans were welcomed as a friendly force, but now it feels like you're occupying us. And a lot of parallels were drawn in that period after 2008 to the Russian occupation. And so my sense, of course, I'm not there very often in those days, but my sense is that from around 2008 it starts to go downhill. Then you have the increase in U.S., or in ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] forces, so trying a military strategy that doesn't work at all. And by that time, it had really devolved into an irredeemable situation where the international community was not seen as allies or friends, they were seen as occupiers. And a lot of the actions that they took reinforced that view. And so you then are on this slide towards some bad outcomes.

And I know, it's much more complicated, and we could spend a lot of time talking about the role of Pakistan, or the role of U.S. and international politics, or what allowed the Taliban to grow in strength militarily and the different factors that contributed to that. But you've got the first phase that I was in, a pretty permissive environment when I traveled all over the country. And I traveled all over the country in a car, and a vehicle with one shooter, without convoys, without a lot of protection—some protection, but not much. I never wore body armor. I, in fact, made a point of not wearing body armor, because I wanted people to see me as the civilian, who was there with a civilian mission , not part

of the military. And then just over time, gradually, and then more quickly it accelerated into a situation where I think in effect, we were occupiers. We were occupiers with good intentions. But, that didn't change the fact that in the eyes of the majority of Afghan people, including President Karzai, towards the end of his term, and including many of the key people we worked with, on the Afghan side, our key Afghan counterparts, I think they viewed us as occupiers.

Q: Let me if I could drill down a second, what were some of the main policy issues that you faced when you got there as mission director? And besides the ambassador, well, let's start with that. And then my second question, besides the ambassador, how did you work with the interagency with other agency heads?

FINE: Yeah, so policy issues. One was fiscal policy, so equipping the Afghan government to raise taxes and to be able to self-finance itself through taxes and through getting economic activity started, that would then generate revenue at both the community and the national level. Maybe the biggest policy issue was what was referred to at the time as "extending the reach of the central government." Because it was recognized that the central government had very little reach into the hinterlands of the country. And so I think the core strategy of the U.S. and the international community at the time was to try to establish the central government as a legitimate authority. That involved DDR, so demilitarizing the warlords and militias because you have these different centers of military coercive power. And the main part of DDR was to get the warlords to decommission their crew manned weapons, so tanks, fighter jets, armored vehicles, cannon and artillery pieces—because they had them—to get those collected and warehoused and out of the hands of the main warlords. But that was a subset of extending the reach of the central government. Then fiscal policy, on the civilian side, was a big policy issue. And that had to do with strengthening the ability to collect customs, at the time—I can't remember the figures—but you had more money being collected illegally in Herat along the Iranian border in a month than the Afghan government was collecting in a year, and you had the same thing happening at the Tajik and Uzbek borders. So, it was to try to establish the structures of government and get functioning structures of government.

There was a lot of policy, energy, and attention given to narcotics, to countering the opium trade or the opium economy. When I was there, I do not believe the opium economy was a major financier of the Taliban. Yet, it was just starting to recover because the Taliban had ceased all opium production in their final years in power because they considered it un-Islamic. It was starting to recover and there was a lot of anxiety and I think sort of ill-conceived strategy on the U.S. part, trying to take models from Latin America and apply them to Afghanistan that didn't really fit. But that was another main policy issue.

Then there were the economic and development issues around creating the conditions for private enterprise and for agriculture to function and generate livelihoods for communities. So that was another major area. And that involved many programs, from agricultural programs, to road building programs, to support for small business.

Then there was a strong push around, I mean a huge push, towards democracy and during my period that culminated in the November 2004 election of the Karzai government. So democracy and free and fair elections—I think it really was a free and fair election. And that was a high point, I think, for our effort, for our engagement. And it was an example of great interagency cooperation. Because in the run up to the election, the Taliban—which wasn't super strong, but they were still active—had said they would kill anybody who had an ink mark on their finger showing they had voted. And they promised they were going to disrupt the election and that they weren't going to let it take place. But in fact, it did take place. I think there were only thirteen or fourteen people that were killed on election day. There were very few, again, there were just a handful of Taliban strikes on polling places. And that was the result of really incredible planning and coordination between the military led by General Barno, the Afghan government, and then the U.S. civilian side of things.

It's probably, in itself, a really good case study of what effective interagency collaboration, both within the U.S. government and with your partner looks like, and what goes into it. Because it was an immense undertaking. The planning on where to deploy troops, for example, where to station helicopters, the logistics around the—I think fourteen thousand polling places—well, logistics around all of that were done very, very well, and they got a really good outcome. I think like 70 percent of the eligible voters voted. So clearly, there was a demand there by the Afghan people to choose their leaders. It was, I think, in the context, remarkably free and fair, and the Taliban was unable to stop it. So that was both a policy and kind of execution success during that period that I was there.

So you had policies around economics, social policies, like getting schools and clinics going so that they were within reach of all Afghans. You had building out the infrastructure that enabled those programs to operate; you had legitimizing the role of the central government and having public institutions that could deliver services. It also was the most severe winter on record. And so that created a tremendous humanitarian challenge in December and January. In part because following the 2001 toppling of the Taliban, and then the establishment of the provisional government with support from the U.S. and the international community, and then moving towards the election of a legitimate, now a fully legitimate, no longer provisional government, you had an influx of Afghans from Pakistan and Iran. I think three and a half million people came in, just in the period from January 2004 to June or July of 2004. So millions of Afghans were voting with their feet, by coming back into the country, because conditions were stabilized. It wasn't completely peaceful, but it was stabilized. You had civil society, now functioning again, you had services starting to be offered again. You know, it was an optimistic time. But those refugees, many, I mean, tens of thousands of them, were in dire straits. And then you have this brutal winter.

So, one of the things that took time and attention from the Afghan government and its international partners—and especially USAID—was humanitarian relief operations to open up passes, because they had like fifteen feet of snow covering them; to ensure that that there was fuel so that the electricity and the heat could continue to operate; to distribute charcoal to the refugees so people had fuel for their homes, to distribute warm

clothing and food. And again, I contrast that with what's happening now. They're saying they're having the worst winner in twenty years. Well, they're referring back to that winner of 2004–2005. So apparently this year is the next worst one. And I think about the monumental efforts that went into providing humanitarian relief, especially to remote communities that were snowed in, using helicopters to airlift supplies in and heavy equipment to open up passes, and setting up special refugee centers in different parts of the country that provided food and fuel and clothing. And I don't think that's happening now. And I wonder about that contrast between a concerted effort to help people cope with the winter and then a government that just basically says, you're on your own. In fact, it is actually throwing up barriers to block efforts to help people cope with it.

Q: Let me ask in terms of working with other agency heads and you talked about your relationship with the ambassador, how was the interagency under Ambassador Khalilzad, but working with other agency heads there?

FINE: It was the strongest example of interagency collaboration I've seen in the U.S. government. I think it was a special time. Both because of the conditions and the historical context, and because of the individuals that came together. So there was a happy confluence, a fortunate confluence of Khalilzad who really is an extraordinary leader, who really cared about the country, but at the same time is an American patriot, so he didn't have divided loyalties but he did have this genuine, sincere commitment to Afghanistan, because of his background. Although he was never conflicted in where his real loyalties lie. And the thing about Khalilzad is he's a genius. And I don't mean that in a frivolous way. I mean, I think he's a real genius. He takes in massive amounts of information. And he does not sleep much.

So at night he has a lot of time to read and plan. So, when we would go into meetings, before the country team meeting at eight o'clock, there was a startup meeting at seven o'clock where he would review with the DCM [deputy chief of mission], with General Barno or the head of the military, and with me—and occasionally a couple of other people he'd invite in—what the day looked like. And he had his staff put together this big briefing notebook for him every day, which he had read and memorized. And so, he would start—and none of the rest of us had that briefing book—that seven o'clock meeting and he would know more about every topic than anybody else in the room could know. So you have a very strong leader in Khalilzad who's got this unique, historical, cultural ability to understand and influence events.

You have General Barno, who's the head of U.S. forces and the head of ICAF, this is pre-NATO. And Barno also is a lieutenant general, the youngest in the army's history, a remarkable collaborator. My first day in country, I got off the plane at the airport and went directly to a meeting that Barno had called at the airport because there was a conference room there. So I don't even go to the embassy, I get off the airplane, and I'm told there's an NGO meeting that you need to attend. It's here at the airport where Barno has convened all of the NGOs, to talk about how to collaborate with the military. And he was very forthright, very open about the current natural conflicts of NGOs not wanting to be associated with the military, not wanting to be seen as an arm of the military, and his approach was to acknowledge that those were real. And then to ask the NGO community, how can we mitigate it? He understood we can't eliminate those tensions completely, but

what can we do to mitigate them? Because we really do need to work together to the extent that we can.

So, you have this extraordinary leader in General Barno, you've got an extraordinary ambassador who's running the show, and then you've got agency heads who have a collaborative mindset. And so, I mean, I feel really fortunate to have been part of that team and to have seen what really effective interagency collaboration looks like, to know what it looks like in practice—even though there were plenty of cases where things went off the rails, or where one agency would do something that was not in the playbook, or that contravened our general policy position—but there was enough trust amongst the leadership that those daily problems or irritations or boneheaded moves a staff person made, they could be discussed and they could be addressed, without rancor. So it was really a team working together. An example of that was USAID was very small at that time. When I arrived, we had thirty-five staff.

Q: Wow! Total?

FINE: Including drivers, I mean, total thirty-five. And when I left, we were up to like, one hundred twenty. So we were growing during that period, the CAFÉ compound was not yet open, it was being built. So we had one big room in the old embassy, which was still beat up and pockmarked, shell marked. We had one big room on the second floor, and then off of that was like a closet type space that was the mission director's office. But everybody, all thirty-five people worked in that one room. And you always knew what everybody else was doing, because you could just hear everyone else because you're all in one room, sharing desks. And it's difficult on one hand, but there's a strong sense of camaraderie that it creates on the other.

So, we had this very small staff, I was trying to grow it, I was recruiting people, and I was getting people in every week. And as I say, by the middle of 2005, when I left, we were up to about a hundred and twenty people. And the vast majority of the increase were professional staff. But one of the things that I did at one point, because we had so many demands on us, and I don't mean the contracting stuff to move money, it was the demands to be present in policy discussions. So to problem solve on this multitude of issues around those different policy lines of action I described. And Khalilzad, because he was a planner and a strategist, he had put in place a very metrics-driven approach to measuring our success and our progress. And we had weekly—well, there were daily calls with the interagency in Washington—and then there were weekly calls with the deputies group, and then there were monthly calls—or maybe it was monthly with deputies, weekly with the interagency. That's what it was: weekly with the interagency; monthly with the deputies; and then, like once a month with the cabinet, that the president would sometimes chair. And so there was a tremendous pressure to show progress. And since the military is the elephant in the room, you have to produce these informative and compelling PowerPoint presentations to synthesize the information you're trying to present and then brief it efficiently and effectively just as the military does. For every line of action, there were a set of metrics. On a weekly basis, the embassy had its own meeting, where it would go over the progress towards achieving those metrics, and then that would become the stuff that was used in these meetings I just referenced. And so we just didn't have the manpower to produce everything. So, at that

time I became aware that General Barno had on his personal staff, his headquarters staff, two hundred and thirty people.

Q: Wow.

FINE: So I went to him, and I said, "You know, you've got two hundred and thirty people." And, honestly, many of them didn't have much to do. I mean, they weren't fully utilized. And I said, "Can you give me some lieutenant colonels or majors or captains, who would report to me? Can you second them to USAID, and I will be their rating officer?" I said, "I want to be clear. I don't want moles in my operation. And I understand, yes, they're still in the military, but for this I will be their commanding officer. And I will do their officer rating." What are those called, rating reports? And Barno, Barno was a great person to work with.

So, he gave me thirteen officers—one of them I had as the deputy of the infrastructure office. I promoted him to be head of the infrastructure office because he was much better than the USAID person. Then I had a lieutenant colonel, as the head of planning in the program office. And then he had a couple of captains or lieutenants under him. We had a couple in logistics. And that worked really well. And I am proud to say that I got two of those guys promoted.

Q: Oh, wow. From working at USAID, that's—

FINE: Yeah. To the point that some officer who I had never met before—didn't know at all—contacted me and asked, "Hey, we hear that you might have positions. Can we come work at USAID? Because you know, we're up in Bagram, and we're not really doing anything. And do you have something we could do?" And at that point, I went to Barno and said, "Look I don't want to get these requests, because I don't know how to deal with them."

Q: Did you? I mean, you were there at the time, as you said, when the U.S. went into Iraq, was it hard for you to recruit USAID officers because there was a pull towards Iraq? Or was that Afghanistan seen as a good place to work and still a U.S. priority?

FINE: Yeah, I think the competition with Iraq had not really set in yet. It was still hard to recruit officers, not because of competition with Iraq, but the whole CPC [Country of Particular Concern] mindset didn't exist at that time. And so the recruitment factors were that people had families, they didn't want to leave their families, and then some people didn't want to go to a conflict zone. And you just didn't have the same mindset that developed later on, where serving in a CPC was seen as just a part of your career. One of the things that I did was a position paper, I guess to Andrew Natsios, but maybe to HR, arguing that we needed to make these two year tours. There was just so much churn. And just as officers were getting up to speed, they were leaving. We can see the negative impact on the military side because they only had eight month tours. And that if USAID, that if we were serious as a nation about our mission, we needed to make the tours a minimum of two years and then encourage people to stay longer, because one year tours was not a workable model.

One of my reflections about our overall national effort in Afghanistan, is I believe the U.S. made a serious mistake in moving Khalilzad and letting his team break up. You did have this effective team. You know, people who worked well together, it was producing results, and worked well with the Afghans. It was an optimistic time that the team members from the head of the DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration], the head of the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], the Department of Agriculture, were there in a big way. We worked well together and for the most part we liked, or we at least respected each other. It was a well functioning team.

And instead of the U.S. government saying, "Hey, you guys, we don't care what you want to do, you have to stay there, because it's working." And recognizing this is an extraordinary time and an extraordinary situation for our national interests. Which is what you do during times of war, we didn't. We still had this mindset of well it's a one year tour, and now I'm off to El Salvador or wherever you're next off to. And then you have people like you who stayed for a long time and like Ken, who stayed for a long time, Robin who stayed for a long time. But these were individuals who made the commitment. You didn't have the U.S. government fundamentally change its outlook, to say, this is such an important priority for our national interests and the circumstances are so extraordinary, that personal preference is going to get a very low rating in terms of who we field and how long they stay there. So you know, the government—the Pentagon and the State Department—in 2005, when it's Barno, Khalilzad, Fine, we all left within a month of each other. And we were the three leaders of that team and of the interagency team in country. Somebody like the president, or the secretary of state, should have just said, "No, you guys can't go. You can quit government service if you want. But you can't leave and stay in government service because this mission takes priority." And that thinking just didn't exist.

Q: What happened to your proposal to Natsios or USAID-Washington to go to work?

FINE: I think that it contributed to the evolution of thinking. I mean, I think it was well received that there was recognition that the points that I was making were valid points. And I think that that was part of what led to the whole CPC policy. It wasn't the only thing but as policies developed, that was one of the building blocks.

Q: Right. Tough. It's interesting, I got there in 2013 and there was another presidential election in 2014. And just hearing your thoughts on the phases, phase one and phase two, I would say phase three started in 2014. The transition on the security side, where the U.S. side, ISAF, basically took a posture of no direct fighting but did train, advise, and assist the political transition of Karzai leaving, and there being a new president, in this case Ashraf Ghani, although there were issues as you know.

FINE: The disputed election, yeah.

Q: Correct. And then the economic transition with like you said, with all those troops leaving, closing down thirty-some different PRTs and all the money they spent. Huge transition, that '14 to '21 trying to get this government to a point where it could be legitimate.

FINE: Right. And by that time, I think, the international community's ability to do that had expired. Time had run out. And then you said you wanted to touch on the evacuation in 2021.

Q: Well, where were you?

FINE: I was at FHI 360 [Family Health International]. We had programs in Afghanistan, we had over a hundred staff in Afghanistan. And by January/February of 2021, I had personally concluded that the Taliban were going to win. It was a matter of time, how long it would take them to seize control. And so at FHI 360, I started in March—I can't remember what the triggering events were, but there were some triggering events—I started instructing my colleagues running those programs that we need to have in place plans for the safeguarding of our Afghan staff. We need to determine who would leave the country. Because some, when the Taliban come in, they're not going to want or be able to leave the country because of their parents or family situation. But there are some who may want to leave the country. So we should make sure that we start now to ensure that they have passports, that they have visas to India, or to Uzbekistan, to neighboring countries if they need to be evacuated. And figure out who would stay, who would want to stay, who would want to leave. This was before the humanitarian parole and SIV [Special Immigrant Visas] visa mania, that occurred in August.

Q: Your guys needed to apply for SIV, right?

FINE: Yeah, earlier in the year that was not an option, unless you had worked for the U.S. for a certain number of years. So that wasn't really prominent on the table. But we changed policies in the organization. I created a new policy that if we had to terminate programs and pull out precipitously, we would provide six months' lump sum payment to all of our local staff. I just tried to get my team thinking ahead at the start of the year, because it was pretty clear to me what was going to come. It was not clear to me that it would come as quickly as it did, like a lot of people I was thinking back to Najibullah and the fall of his regime to the Taliban in '92 and how he held them off for a couple of years. And so I was thinking of that as a parallel, but I did take specific steps so that FHI could be in a position—to the extent possible and legal—to safeguard our employees and to do what we could to support them and take care of them when the fall came.

Then when it did happen, I was flabbergasted at the USG's poor performance. I mean, really what I consider as unconscionable incompetence on the part of the U.S. military to allow that situation at Kabul airport. As a USAID director, I was very often on the receiving end of being told how the civilians were incompetent and we didn't stand up to the U.S. military, they were the standard of excellence in terms of operational performance. And to watch what happened there, and basic things like crowd control, like putting up perimeters—things that militaries do, they establish perimeters, they control crowds. And at first I was just astounded by it, and wondering, how could the guys in charge on the ground have let this situation unfold in this way without putting up the necessary controls, just for crowd control, sealing off a perimeter around the airport, if that's where you're gonna make your last stand. Then as more information came out about the level of communication and cooperation with the Taliban, it became even more mind boggling to me. And upsetting that we didn't hear about a bunch of generals losing

their jobs and having their careers ruined, because they let that happen. And their failure resulted in many people dying and thousands of lives being ruined.

During the period of the evacuation itself, we were trying to make sure that our FHI 360 staff who wanted out of the country could get out of the country, to make sure that those who were staying were safe. So we did a lot to figure out how to transfer money, either through Hawala or through other sources. Fortunately, in the couple of weeks before the final downfall—or maybe a month before the final downfall—I had our Asia office transfer a bunch of money into Afghanistan. So we had money parked there and we were able to make payments to staff. And some of those peremptory actions did in fact help. And then probably like you, and other former USAID directors, I was involved in making declarations and doing affidavits and signing—I signed over a hundred documents—for people applying for SIVs attesting that they had worked for—well for FHI, probably three hundred, because it wasn't just our current employees, it was former employees as well. And so there was a period of a few weeks where I was spending a great deal of time helping our teams process requests for humanitarian parole and SIV visas.

Q: Were you also working to help your guys to be on the list to get on the planes before they stopped?

FINE: Not our FHI people, but some of our former USAID FSNs [Foreign Service nationals], who needed a reference, I provided references. And I was nagging Nitin, like everybody else.

Q: Right. Those were tough times.

FINE: Again, I think that it was a catastrophic failure of our military, because the State Department was not in the lead—that was the military's responsibility to secure the city or a portion of the city and to keep that kind of chaos from occurring. And having people running out on the airway and jumping onto the wheels of planes, that could happen in a space controlled by the U.S. military is just inconceivable to me.

Q: We're not military experts, we're development types. But did you ever wonder why the military gave up Bagram earlier in the summer, when that was as securable place?

FINE: Yeah, I wondered. Maybe that was one of the precipitating actions, because there were a number of things that happened in the final few months, and that was one of the big ones. Maybe that's when I said, "Hey, get money in the country, because it's not going to be long now." But you could, if you had a sense of the country, you could see where things were going.

Q: Yeah. What are your—you talked a little bit—but insights and reflections about the evacuation? I mean, besides doing a terrible job of holding the airport, but other things that the U.S. could have done differently?

FINE: So, here, I don't know if it's an insight, it's an observation that if somebody like me—I have some connection to the country, I've worked there and I remained in touch with the country over a twenty-year period through USAID work and then NGO work and so I had traveled out there maybe four times between 2005 when I left and 2021. So I

had some sense of the country, and some sense of the dynamics at play. But I wasn't on the ground, I didn't have access to confidential reports, to any intel. And if somebody like me, sitting in North Carolina, can be reading the news and talking to people in the country and say, "Hey, this is going to fall apart quick." That we're talking weeks or months, we're not talking years. Then why is it that our government, who is there, who is in positions of responsibility, didn't have clear contingency plans? And you have, I think, the president saying, "Well, this isn't gonna be like Saigon." So it's on people's mind what a catastrophic evacuation looks like. So, how is it that we didn't have contingency plans that gamed out what it would look like if there was a collapse? And then what the withdrawal plan was, both in terms of our own citizens and in terms of our allies—people who we had a commitment to get out of the country—and it just didn't seem like those plans existed.

And so the military falls down on the job, then you have State trying to frantically put stuff together, like humanitarian parole arrangements, or SIV, I think it's clear what the lesson is, which is that in that kind of situation where the signs are very clear where the country is headed, and where our engagement is headed, that we need to be doing what I was doing at FHI 360. Who is it that we have a safeguarding responsibility to? Let's identify those people, so we know exactly who they are. Let's find out, what are their plans? And what kinds of support would they need? And what kind of arrangements do we need to make in terms of finances, logistics, and other actions, so that if we have to pull the trigger on an emergency plan, we have the pieces in place to do that to the extent that we can? And that doesn't seem to have happened and I don't understand why not you?

Q: You know, I think it'd be extremely useful to have some of us get together. You started this by suggesting a synopsis. This has been very useful in terms of your thoughts on the evacuation. That time, as CEO of a very large development NGO with lots of staff and projects in Afghanistan, you did a lot of upfront work and thinking prior to August 2021. Are there any other kind of broad reflections regarding that time period for this interview?

FINE: Yeah, my primary observation is that it is difficult to understand why the U.S. government, in particular, and the international community in general didn't have a clear set of contingency plans for how they would safeguard their own staff and safeguard others that they had a duty of care to, in case of a collapse. And in the run up to August, there were some clear indicators that signaled that the continued presence of the international community was in real jeopardy. And I would have expected that by June or so that the U.S. government and other international actors would have been putting in place contingency plans and taking preliminary actions to be prepared for a possible withdrawal and to be prepared to safeguard everybody they felt they had a duty of care to. It's clear, if you then look at what transpired in August, not only in Afghanistan at the airport—or in Kabul at the airport—but in Washington within the State Department, that those plans weren't in place, or if they were in place they weren't used. And so you had State Department scrambling to try to identify, who is it that we have a duty of care to? They didn't have a comprehensive list, and that cost people's lives at the airport.

We had one case of a person who was on the list for evacuation and got through the Taliban checkpoints—we had confirmed that they were on the list, we had told the employee, "You're on the list," so, if you can, get to the airport—she went there with her baby and got through the Taliban checkpoints, got to the marine perimeter, and she wasn't on their list, because there were two separate lists. The State Department and the military and DOD had not reconciled their lists. That was on one of the days they were letting people into the airport, she got all the way to the perimeter which was a harrowing journey, and then got turned away and had to go back through the checkpoints. And then, wrote me this devastating letter about how betrayed she felt, and how we had let her down—we the U.S. She'd been loyal to us and we had let her down in this truly life threatening situation. So the fact that we were as a nation, or that our operation in country—the military operation, the diplomatic operation—was so unprepared for what, to many of us who are observers, could see was coming. In my mind it is unforgivable and should be a stark lesson for the future.

Q: Right. Let me ask a quick question, also, some insights and reflections about both your time in Afghanistan, but more importantly, the twenty years of especially providing billions of dollars of development, support development, humanitarian assistance—and how much of that do you think any impact will continue even now under the Taliban? You mentioned several of the insights and reflections from your time in Afghanistan, but just looking back over the twenty years, why do you think the U.S. could have or should have done differently? And where do you think we made an effect?

FINE: I think we should have and could have paid more attention to Afghan history. The Soviets poured billions of dollars into Afghan development. And I'm sure you remember those giant grain silos that were in Kabul that were no longer functional, and they built a ring road themselves, and they elevated women's rights, and they invested in health and education. Many of the things that the Soviets did—we never acknowledged how similar the goals of their development programs were to the goals of our development programs: girls education, integrating women as full human beings into society, or women's rights, education, health care, and infrastructure. And I wondered why we didn't, no let me put it this way. It struck me that because we viewed them as our adversaries and because we had been instrumental in the demise of their own adventure in Afghanistan, that we were unwilling to look at their experience and see what we could learn from it. And I think that that's a big mistake, it was like an ideologically driven blind spot. And then if you go further back in Afghan history, and there are other very pertinent lessons around foreign intervention in the country, that in some cases we might acknowledge in coffee table talk, but that we didn't—as far as I know—really incorporate into our policy decision. So I think that's one thing that is worth noting.

Q: Okay, anything else?

FINE: I'm sure there is, but maybe I've given you enough for now.

Q: This has been great, Patrick. I really appreciate it. And okay, well, thank you very much. And again, this has been very enlightening.

FINE: Okay, great.

Q: Well, thank you.

FINE: All right. Thank you.

End of interview