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AMBASSADOR ROBERT FINN

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. It is December 7, 2022. I'm Robin Matthewman and as part of our Afghanistan project today I am interviewing Ambassador Robert Finn. Welcome and thank you so much for agreeing to participate today. Can you start off by describing your background and Foreign Service career prior to 9/11?

FINN: Yes, I can, and the answer is actually pertinent to one of your questions. I am from New York and my undergraduate degrees were in literature and history. I wanted to study Chinese literature initially. I took three years of Chinese, but then—this was in the 1960s—I applied to join the Peace Corps and was accepted, and they sent me to Turkey. And so, I was there from '67 to '69, and after two years there, I said, "Well, I know Turkish a lot better than I know Chinese, so I'll study Turkish literature," and I did. When I came back, I went to NYU [New York University] for three years and then I had a gap year because NYU had changed its program. I went to Princeton, did another master's and I finished my PhD at Princeton.

In the meantime, I had taken the Foreign Service test. At the last minute—my wife and I were actually both going to go to the American University in Beirut to teach, but were awaiting the contracts. They had been delayed in the mail. And on the very last day—it's all fate, you know—the phone rang, and the Foreign Service had a position for me. I went to Istanbul as my first job [from 1978 to 1980], which was fine for me because I'd done my PhD on Turkish literature of the late 1900s, so Istanbul was the very place where all these things I had dealt with in my studies took place.

But it was not a peaceful posting. I was talking with my wife earlier, and I said to her, "Well, actually, Kabul was probably the most peaceful assignment that I had." I arrived in Istanbul having watched *Midnight Express,* if you remember that movie, and three weeks later I was visiting the prison where all those prisoners were. And I had to literally physically fight my way in with a gendarme on each shoulder to get into the prison, and then when I was leaving, I had to fight my way out again. So, that was one introduction. And also, the period that we were there was when there was virtually a civil war in Turkey. As soon as it got dark, the shooting started, and you couldn't go out. And everyone said, Oh, when twenty people a day are killed, the military will intervene, and that's in fact, what did happen, in September of 1980.

But by then, we had gone back a few months earlier to the U.S. where my son was born. I was working in the Ops Center at State, but I didn't work there very long. Excuse me, it gets a little confused, as my postings kept switching. I was working on Africa, and then I went to work on the Gulf War Task Force in the summer of 1991, because the war started and they wanted me. And then from there, when the Kurds in Iraq fled into Turkey, Ambassador Abramowitz asked me to come and set up an embassy office in southeastern Turkey, in Diyarbakir. I had worked on the Kurds several years before in 1988, when they first fled to Turkey. So, I worked there, stayed for a few months until the autumn and I came back in the fall of 1991. I was in Washington for a few months working on Africa again, and then the Soviet Union fell apart and because I knew Turkish and also Azeri, having studied Azeri literature, they asked me to go and open the embassy in Baku in early 1992. So I did. And there we had lots more shooting again. Dark came, everybody was shooting everybody else in the street. We had a coup while I was there, and two attempted ones. There was a revolution. It was so much fun. (laughs)

Q: Were you a political officer by this time?

FINN: Yes, I was. I started out as a consular officer. Back in those days, the State Department said, Oh, we'll make everybody a consular officer initially and then we'll automatically switch you. Well, it didn't turn out to be automatic. But anyhow, I got switched finally. So, yes, I was a political officer by cone. My position in Azerbaijan was to serve as DCM [deputy chief of mission] and I was actually chargé for over a year while I was there. Because I spoke their language—this was the beginning of independent Azerbaijan— I made them have their government meetings in Azeri because I could speak Azeri, but I couldn't speak Russian. And that was very funny because they were used to speaking Azeri at home, of course, but all their education was in Russian, so they would say all the things in Russian in the meetings, and I would just say, "Yes, yes, yes," you know, and not get everything via translation. And then, they would turn to one another and give their analysis, which I understood perfectly. (both laugh)

I was in Azerbaijan from 1992 to 1995, and from there I went to Croatia to be the DCM. And again, that was the last fighting of the Yugoslav civil war, and lots of murders and all kinds of unpleasantness occurred to the poor people there. Great destruction. Mines alongside the roads everywhere. So, I was there from 1995 until 1998. I then got promoted and I also was chosen to be the ambassador to Tajikistan. And again, I may have been chosen because of my many languages—I learned Urdu in Pakistan, I knew Persian, and I knew Turkish and on and on and on. So, I was ambassador in Tajikistan, but because of security concerns, they wouldn't let me live in Dushanbe all the time. I had to live in Almaty in Kazakhstan and go back and forth. This was part of a deal. The security people just wanted to shut down this mission, but wise people in the State Department said no.

They made an agreement where we would be based in Almaty and go to Dushanbe on an itinerant basis, whatever that meant. So, I think the security people took that to mean almost never and I took it to mean almost always. So, we were rotating back and forth on Tajik Airlines, which I don't recommend. And Dushanbe was just coming out of its civil war. Again, evening came, the shooting started. There were three ways out of the city that were blocked by warlords, the Islamicists, and one particular warlord who went by the

name of Hitler. And then, the other road, the eleven-thousand-foot Arzob Pass, one of the most dangerous in Central Asia, was closed by snow and ice for ten months of the year. So, that was Dushanbe.

From there I came back to Washington, and I was assigned to go to Istanbul as consul general the following year. Since I already had the language, I had a gap year, so I went back to Princeton, and I was teaching about Central Asia and politics and also Turkish literature. And then, when Afghanistan happened, they called me up. And actually, it was very funny. I was sitting in my office on a winter's morning and my son, who was a senior there that year, came by. The phone rang, and they said it's the assistant secretary of state for south and Central Asian affairs, Christina Rocca. And my son said, "What does she want, Dad?" And I said, "I don't know. Maybe she's going to offer me Afghanistan." And she did. I'd never met her before. So, I went to Afghanistan and arrived there in March of 2003.

But of course, there, we had thousands of soldiers and big men with guns to protect me, so it was mostly very peaceful. There were some makeshift rockets fired at the embassy occasionally in late evenings and one shootout incident, but it was relatively very peaceful. So, that's the story of how I ended up as ambassador to Afghanistan in 2002.

Q: And do you think they called you because you had been working in the region, and you spoke many of the relevant languages?

FINN: Because I'd been in the region. I'd been in Dushanbe for three years, I had been in Lahore, Pakistan for two years in the mid-'80s, and I traveled through Central Asia to and from Dushanbe, I knew the languages. I can speak Turkish, I can speak many of the different Turkic languages, understand them, so I was just very much at home in that part of the world.

Q: And you were ambassador in Tajikistan while the Taliban was in control of Afghanistan next door?

FINN: I was, yes. And actually, when I left there in the summer of 2001, I thought that it was going to be over, because the Taliban had taken almost all of the country. The UN [United Nations] was setting up refugee camps in Tajikistan for the people from the Northern Alliance who were hemmed in up against the northern border with Tajikistan, and everyone figured that when the fall came that would be the end. But then, of course, September 11 happened, and everything completely changed.

Q: So, when you were ambassador in Tajikistan, did you have any contact with the Northern Alliance or other Afghans?

FINN: I did not. They had an office in Dushanbe, and I inquired about it at the State Department, but they wanted to keep that separate. So, I did not engage. There were no official contacts of any kind. I can't even think of personal contacts. I mean, I would see them driving around, that kind of thing, but there were no contacts, no, I didn't have any.

But you know, the State Department did not have any contacts.

Q: Okay. So, by 2002, we had invaded Afghanistan. There were a whole lot of generals as you said. In Washington, before you went to Afghanistan, did they give you some kind of brief on what they expected you to do?

FINN: In a way. They made me go through the process in Washington and I went around to the various offices. Everyone in Washington was completely absorbed with Afghanistan at that time. And my marching orders were basically to be there in Kabul to help the organization, to be on the ground. I thought of myself as the ringmaster of the circus. It was a very unusual situation. I can't offhand think of another parallel. At the beginning, the White House and all the heads of agencies in Washington were meeting daily on Afghanistan. The State Department was, in fact, a little bit off to one side. So, everything was going directly back and forth between the embassy and Washington. It was mostly all being decided in Washington. And the lead was taken by the military and the principals in DC. I was instructed that—unlike in other situations where the ambassador is typically in charge of U.S. troops—in this country I was told that I was not.

But in this case, the military were not physically in Kabul when I was there. They were up at Bagram, which is upwards of an hour's drive away. And when I met with them, I went there, I was briefed by them, but I was informed of what they were doing. I was not part of their decision-making process.

You asked about other countries' presence. It was a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] mission, and it was under a UN mandate, and when I got to Bagram, I saw that there were troops from tens of nations, perhaps over fifty nations there, and it was an integrated process. The work was being done by everyone together. I was not participating in the missions as to who did what and when, but I could see that they were working in an integrated structure.

We did have a separate force in Kabul that was an international force, ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], when I was there. It was set up in 2001 under UN authority, and then command was transferred to NATO in 2003. When I was there in Kabul, it was headed first by a British general and later by a Turkish general, and it was still unclear as to what they were going to be. There was some impetus for them to go out and act as a peacekeeping force in the countryside and that did not happen. I don't think our government was that enthusiastic about it and others weren't either, so it remained basically as a kind of policing force in Kabul to kind of keep managing basic order. And what it did varied according to who was in charge of it. But it was there, and it was located just down the street from our embassy. And we had good relations with them.

Q: You arrived there in March 2002, on St. Patrick's Day. Was that right?

FINN: Yes.

Q: So, we had just had Ryan Crocker fill in for a couple of months before you?

FINN: Right. He left only a few days before I arrived.

Q: And then you were basically recreating an embassy that had been closed for many years.

FINN: Yeah. It was very rough and tumble. We had the embassy building. It had been closed, but maintained by local employees, caretakers, for years. For many years, people went up from Peshawar and paid them, and so, it was only in the last few days that the Taliban broke in and did kind of a quick and dirty run-through. They smashed the doors, and they trashed the place, but basically it was all still there. I mean, all these things from ten and fifteen years ago, decrepit foodstuffs and other things. So, when I arrived, there were, I would say, two hundred or two hundred plus marines who were there, guarding the building, and these were battle-ready marines. And there were, I would say upwards of a hundred State and other people there. They kept emerging. Everyone was living in the same building. So, all the rooms were lined with cots. I had my own room because I was the ambassador, and I was one of the few who did. And meals were taken communally. There was a separate building on the compound. I don't know what it was before, some kind of a basement storage bunker or something, and the local employees cooked meals on the staircase there. The few ladies assigned to Kabul were also living there. The food was actually quite good. It was all very ad hoc. Later they set up a proper cafeteria and brought in supplies from abroad.

So, we were living in this environment. I would have my morning meeting and there would be people sleeping around the perimeter of the room and all these things going on at once But it worked well. And that went on for a number of months. They started building the magnificent embassy—which we no longer own following the Taliban takeover last year—while I was there. The construction had just started as I was leaving. And as in all these things, you know, things incrementally improved, so after a few months, it might have been June or something, we got construction trailers that were used as housing for people. We could have had them earlier, but I insisted that they had to have protective shielding on the roof for people. So people moved into them. But they were sharing a trailer that was twenty feet by six or eight feet long, two people in each one. I had a triple trailer because I was the ambassador. (laughs) And it was nice. And actually, I did a funny thing. They built this stockade fence around where my trailer was and I said, "Okay, we are now living in a Virginia suburb in a trailer park," so I said we had to have plastic flamingos. (both laugh) So, I got some plastic flamingos and put them out, and then everyone got them. We had all these plastic flamingos and they made up, actually, tee shirts with the flamingos on them and the bunker, and they captioned them "Embassy Kabul, World's Most Exclusive Gated Community." (both laugh)

Q: And at this point a government was starting to form in Afghanistan? Karzai had been chosen in December to be the president for six months, right?

FINN: Right, interim with a plan for an election, which took place.

Q: And so, what happened then as you got there in March?

FINN: Well, there was, as you said, a new government. They were setting it up. A lot of the people who were in the new Afghan government had been living abroad. One was a doctor in Switzerland, another was a professor, various occupations, and they came back.

And there were also some people who had stayed, some who were part of the resistance to the communists. The government bureaucrats from the previous regime were still there.

So this was the situation with which I was not unfamiliar because when I got to Azerbaijan it was similar. The Soviet Union ended. In fact, when I arrived in Baku, the last Soviet president was still there. They set up ministries, and they had very few diplomats because most of the Azeri diplomats opted to stay with the Russian Foreign Ministry. So, you had people who didn't know what they were doing functionally. Some people had been in the Civil Service who were working there kind of knew, but they didn't know how to do it as professional diplomats. So, in Azerbaijan, we were very helpful to them. It was a new thing. Communism is over, they were independent, so we were able to work very freely with them and give them brotherly advice. We weren't telling them what to do and making any kind of policy decisions but saying, okay, this is how it works, this is what you could do, here's how you write this kind of document, because everything had basically been done in Moscow And so, a lot of the same thing was going on in Afghanistan, but of course, on a much larger scale, and you still had fighting going on in the east, and all these soldiers up in Bagram who were now the main power. So, it was not the same, but there were skills that I had, that I could put to use there and help them with this.

One of the things was a surprise to me, realizing that for a whole generation, the people in the Afghan government had worked under communist governments, they'd been taught to think in that kind of a command economy, and take orders in that way and have value judgments in that way. And that's something that I only learned from having lived for seven years in the former Soviet Union, where I saw that people weren't free to use their own minds because they had been taught not to. Orthodoxy means the correct path, and it means that you listen to the person above you. I learned about that in Azerbaijan. We had very, very talented and intelligent local employees, but they would do something and when they encountered some kind of impediment, they would just stop and wait for you to come and tell them what to do because that way they didn't get in trouble. The same thing was true in Tajikistan, and I saw the same thing in Afghanistan. Afghans are very entrepreneurial and independent-minded, but still in those structures, they were used to having someone tell them exactly what to do. So, o, that's something that had to be relaxed over time. In Kazakhstan, the government realized that, and they started sending thousands of young people to the west to go to school until they realized the negative effects that that would have on what they wanted to do with their country. And so, all these things are a tradeoff. But anyhow, there are many things like that.

One of the problems, which I understand was later mitigated to some extent, was that because of the division of government ministries after the Bonn meetings, when you walked into a government building and you were familiar with the ethnicity of Afghanistan, as I was, you didn't have to ask what ethnic group the minister belonged to because one look at the people at the door would tell you whether they were from Kandahar or they were from the Panjshir or they were from some other group.

Physically they looked different, they might dress differently, and speak their own languages. It wasn't 100 percent, of course, but the tenure of the buildings was quite clear

from the people who were occupying the corridors. And people knew that, and I think later they tried to get around that and have the ministries be more representative. One of the things I did try very hard to do while I was there to get them to set up some kind of Civil Service academy to train bureaucrats. It is a very important thing, and certainly it makes the government work. And my plan was to try to get the Pakistanis and the Indians to work together in setting up a Civil Service academy because both, for all their many failings, have bureaucrats that work and run their countries, and they're also very familiar in many ways with Afghans and Afghans with them. They speak a lot of the same languages. So, it's something that could have worked, but it never happened because there was resistance in the government of Afghanistan. It wasn't from the Americans who didn't know what I was talking about, because we solved that problem in our government many years ago. There were people in Afghanistan who did not see this as being to their benefit further down the road.

Q: So, at that point in time the security forces were all headed by the Tajiks, right, which were a small part of the population?

FINN: Yes. At first, it was headed by Marshall Fahim when I was there, who's an ethnic Tajik. He's from the north. He was a commander, minister of defense and vice president. Most of his own forces were Tajik, you're correct in that. And that turned out to be a problem when they formed the Afghan army later on. It was a problem of communication because the officers were all Tajik, many of the soldiers were Pashtun, they couldn't talk to one another; there were hostilities. Everybody was illiterate. So, that was definitely a problem. And it wasn't until several years later when our military or whoever was running the army at that point, probably a joint force because the French were certainly involved, started realizing that they had to teach these people to read and write. First of all, so they could read their manuals and secondly, so you have a kind of joint language for communication of command. So, that was another area. But yes, the Tajiks were running the show in Kabul militarily when I was there, even though Ghani is Pashtun, Karzai is too, Abdullah is both Tajik and Pushtun, you know, it's mixed.

There were problems between Fahim and General Dostum, an Uzbek warlord from the north. In addition, other regional leaders were vying for power and control, sometimes fighting with each other and always maneuvering for their own benefit.

FINN: The embassy tried to maintain good relations overall. You know what you have to do. I mean, you're a diplomat, you say, well, we're the United States, we try to talk to everybody. You know, we don't have to like them.

Q: And then, was there a run up to a loya jirga that summer. Were you involved?

FINN: Yes, there was a loya jirga, and they had the election for the president, and that took place, and they started on the program for the first national election. Lots of things started to happen. One thing that is almost never mentioned was that Ashraf Ghani, who has later received a lot of bad publicity, managed to change the currency at that critical time. And this is a very, very important thing. They knew that. There were four different currencies circulating in the country just as in the initial period of the United States. You know, every colony was issuing its own money and the banks were issuing their own

money. And we had to resolve it in the early part of our history in the United States, and they had to resolve it too. And they managed to do that. Within a few months they managed to collect all of this money and turn it into Afghanis, the current currency, and the Japanese said, 'We could never have done this, it would have taken us years to do this. But Japan was so organized and complex we could simply never have done that.' So, that was really a big success story. They set up a national currency, so you didn't have to deal with money changers everywhere you went, among other things.

Q: Ghani, if I recall correctly, was the first finance minister?

FINN: Yes.

Q: And he had come back to Afghanistan from working in the World Bank and other international institutions?

FINN: In the World Bank. I actually already knew because when we were in Pakistan in the mid-1980s, he was there doing research in Lahore, so I had met him and we had entertained him a few times with other people. He's someone that I knew from long ago, and that's always a help because I knew how his mind worked to a certain extent. I saw him in a different position, but I knew certain personality traits about him that would be helpful in dealing with him. Just plus the fact that we were both in kind of novel situations, so it's nice to have someone that you already know.

Q: And Karzai had been chosen by the loya jirga to continue for another two years until there were elections, is that right?

FINN: Yes. He was chosen by the Bonn conference and then he got elected to stay until there were final elections. And there was a lot of pushing and pulling when that happened, but he managed to do it. He had come from India. He again was someone who was not very experienced in the arts of government and also I think he frustrated a lot of the interlocutors in the west because he was an oriental kind of person. He would just agree with everyone constantly and decisions didn't get made. It just went on and on and on until finally you think, when everyone's just too worn out, they say, Well, okay. The jirgas are like that, they're just talking sessions. You sit, you talk, you talk, you talk, and you talk until finally, you get to some kind of common resolution. Well, this is not the way we do things.

Q: In the United States. So, we were frustrated.

FINN: Yes, I think it frustrated a lot of people because they'd say, This guy isn't serious. It's just a different kind of seriousness, but that's how it goes. And when you have all of these people, all of whom are armed, by the way, and you have dangerous characters—Dostum's not the only one with a bad history—you have to bring them around. And the idea is to bring them around by talking to them, by smooth talking to them.

Q: Were you there long enough to see the elections eventually?

FINN: I was already gone when the election took place. Although the preparations were beginning before I left in 2003, and the national presidential election took in 2004.

Q: The government that formed in those early years under Karzai sounds a little different to us because he was appointing governors and such, right? There weren't elected officials at the provincial level, if I understood correctly. But what did you think about the process that went on during those two years? Were the U.S. and the allies too heavy-handed in insisting on a western style democracy, or did you think things went the only way they could, or what was your impression?

FINN: There were a lot of problems that got worse over time. I can talk for a long time about all of them.

One thing was that the government they set up reminded me of both the Turkish and the French governments, which were predicated on having a strong government in the capital and a strong, well-trained bureaucracy to carry out the government's orders. But as I've already pointed out, they didn't develop a bureaucracy; they didn't have those people. So, what happened, you still must have people to run things, so Karzai did what any tribal leader would. In that sense, he was a tribal leader. He called on the guys he knew out there. And they came back into power again and that was one of the complaints against the government by the people was that he brought back the same old faces. They were the reason the Taliban got to come to power in the first time.

We never resolved that. And it's also a question, I'm sure there were people in Washington who were aware of the differences in thinking about government and how you do things, but it's one thing to know it academically, it's another thing to have to live with it. I mean, one small example, which is not just germane here, because again, I learned it in the former Soviet Union. We think one man, one vote, and they think one family, one vote. And I had many discussions with people in Tajikistan and in Azerbaijan because when an election took place, they would take all the passbooks, all the ID cards of the family, and say go down and vote for us. We'd say, "No, no, you know, that's not it." And they would say, "What do you mean, you'd vote against your family? What's wrong with you?" And we just can't get our minds around that. It's just very, very hard.

So, one of the wonderful things about that first election, I remember seeing and reading reports of all these marches, and the ladies all voting, the ladies standing in line and saying, "We may never get to vote again, but we're voting today." So, it started out well, but many things went wrong. People didn't want to admit that they hadn't won. Sound familiar? And there was corruption. And you're dealing with a population that's mostly illiterate, which makes it harder. How do you fill out ballots? So many problems were involved in the process. You can't turn a country from living in a feudal way to living in a modern way with a few elections, although it's a start.

Q: There was a special envoy from President Bush, Zal Khalilzad, who was also Afghan-born. Was he heavily involved in this process of the government deciding what it was going to be?

FINN: Yes, very much. He was there a lot of the time. He wasn't there all the time. And he was very close to Karzai. He would spend endless hours talking to him, and I went to a great many of those meetings. There was a problem there in that we didn't use a translator, so it was in English, and it was in Pushtun, and it was in Dari, and it was in English at the same time as well, of course, often in the same sentence, so it was kind of mixed up. So, I never got everything. I mean, it wasn't that people were trying to keep me out, it's just that they would get lost in what they were saying. And my Persian is not five-five. But anyhow, he was there. He always showed me his reporting messages to Washington before they went. I didn't have strong disagreements with him about policy, although two people will never agree 100 percent on anything. But of course, much of the time he was talking to the White House and I was talking to the State Department. So, that was that. And he is who he is. So, yeah, I would have been happier if I hadn't had a special envoy, but I did have a special envoy. And part of my assignment was to have a special envoy, so I did, and you just have to deal with what you get.

Q: One of the books that I read about the period said that at one point Karzai proposed to have the Taliban be part of a unity government.

FINN: Yes. That was a discussion that went on from the very onset. He was always open to that. He always referred to them as his brothers. He was always open to having them join the government. He always said that it never worked out for one reason or another. One of the things that he and I talked about, and I was the one who brought it up, was having a national day of reconciliation. This is something that is in Afghan culture, when everyone—in fact, it is the women, the wives and the mothers—goes and asks for forgiveness and grants forgiveness. This is a historic thing and of course, it's always been violated down the road, if you know the history of Afghanistan. But anyhow, that was something we talked about, and he always said, "Yes, we will do that, but the time is not right yet for that." So, he was always open to that.

In Afghanistan, every family is divided on every side. I mean, you have to have someone in every camp to make sure somebody survives. Therefore, people were always switching back and forth. The Afghans are famous for doing that, for switching sides in the middle of the battle. So, this is not inconceivable at all in Afghan terms. But of course, when we look at it, we look at it from our own sensibilities, and we have a more rigid approach to this. I'm not saying what they have is good; I'm just saying that's the way they are, and you can expect this. People in Afghanistan look and see what their opportunities are, what their potential is, and they're motivated according to that, not according to specific plans or projects or politics that we may have.

Q: So, it sounds as if around that period of 2002 to 2004 some people felt we had won, that it was peaceful, that we felt the Taliban was on the run or gone or that we had evaded a continuing war.

FINN: Yes. I was part of that group. At the time I left, I thought, Okay, well, the major fighting is over. The Taliban are still around. They're up in the mountains and they're going to be bandits and they're going to come down and make trouble. And this is something that's gone on in this country for centuries, and it will continue, but the major fighting is done, and now is the time to build the state of Afghanistan in the way that the

Afghan people want. And that's why I'm making all these criticisms about the government, because that's the part I didn't see being done. I didn't see the new face. It was just that they were repurposing things for their own necessities and leaving unaddressed the same problems that had enabled the Taliban to take over in the first place. Not that the Taliban were any blessing. It's just that people thought they would be better in the context. And even now, in 2022, with the Taliban in charge, if you read the news, people are saying well, at least we don't have airplanes bombing us every night. So, people are living in their own reality there.

But yes, that was the feeling. I thought, Okay, things went surprisingly well, but now they have to start doing other things. And if you don't do the other things, it will fall apart again. Instead of doing the other things, we, and they, made old school kinds of decisions that turned the people off, the problems with corruption and mendacity and people's personal rights being violated, all of these things. And so, the Afghan people didn't come out en masse to support them, and many came to resent them in the countryside. And—but anyone who knows Afghanistan well, after we made this agreement with the Taliban, anybody who knew Afghanistan well would say, Well, the Taliban is just going to take over now because there's nothing to stop them, and there's no force to stop them, and the Afghan army is going to dissolve because that's what happened before. Because there's no reason not to dissolve because who's going to have their back? Sadly.

I mean, I also understand our position, that we wanted to get out of there, it went on for far too long with too much money spent. And I would add, on the side, that we spent the money mostly in military policing, whereas if we had spent more of the money, if we had done more for building up the people—and I'm not counting the assistance, assistance that was given to the police, which is where a large part of it went—if we had done more, maybe we would have had a different result. We did manage to have a different result with health, with teaching, with education, freedom of the press, with women's rights in urban areas, with a lot of things.

Q: While you were there, were there things that you were asking from Washington that they weren't able to do because they had started to focus on Iraq?

FINN: That was a yes and no, okay. You've been in the government, you know you never get what you ask for when you need it, it always comes later. By the time I got there, I think they had originally set three hundred million dollars aside for Afghanistan. By the time I got there, they had increased it to five hundred million dollars and it already wasn't enough. So, we went in, and we asked for, I think it was a billion dollars or even more. Of course, that had to go through the process in Congress and everything, so by the time that money came I was gone, and my successor, Ambassador Khalilzad, used to joke, "I'm spending Ambassador Finn's money." (laughs) But that's what happens. So, you're always behind the eight ball, and that is just typical of how governments, in particular our government, work. Instead of planning for multiple years we're always planning for one year. The military, if you get to speak to them, will tell you about that. They're always fighting a year one war at a time, instead of fighting a ten-year war or a five-year war.

This created problems, especially because it gave more ammo to the Taliban. They said, "Well, they're not going to stay. You know, they're only here for a year. Look at their

budget. They published their budget, we could see that there's no money for next year, we just have to wait." And they said it all the time. And in Pakistan, they said the same things when we were talking to them. They always said, "You Americans. You know, you come, and you say things and you do all these things and then you go, and you leave us with a mess." And so, they're saying, "Well, here we go again. Bye, bye America."

Q: If money had been faster, where do you think you would have advocated spending it?

FINN: That's a very good question. The problem is not only the money, it's a problem of the capability to spend it. And that's one of the things that happened. Money did come, and they gave it to people who weren't necessarily capable of spending it. They didn't have the capacity, they didn't have the budget people, they didn't have that bureaucracy that could figure out how to do it. So, we did build that one road. I was very happy about that. I pushed for that when I was in Washington. Before I went out, I raised that and they said, "Hell, no, we don't do roads." And the reason I said it was important was, "This is an illiterate nation. What do you do to make an impact? You build something they can all look at and see." One of the criticisms of our decades of helping Pakistan is that we haven't left a single thing with our name on it. So, in Pakistan, there's no American dam or American highway. There's nothing, so people forget. Because they're illiterate, or they don't have the records. The same thing is true there. So, anyhow, what happened was—believe me, I was not the hero of the highway. That was President Karzai who kept on insisting to them that we need it because in the 1950s, when we were in Afghanistan in full force, we built that highway, and that was a symbol of Afghanistan's becoming modern. So, Karzai said, "Do it again, remind us." The highway ring road was meant to be the main force in uniting the country.

Q: This was called the Ring Road, but there was a particular stretch between Kabul and Kandahar that was very important?

FINN: Yes, the first part. That's right.

And we coordinated with the Japanese on that. That was really hard for them because once we decided, we wanted to do it yesterday. And the Japanese were saying, "Well, you know, we've had to meet for fourteen months before—" Anyway, and then, of course, there was the dissolution there in that region because they reverted to being ruled by gunmen because we didn't have the other side of the equation.

Back to your question. So, one thing they could have done, I'm just thinking as I'm speaking, there were very large oil and mining reserves up in the north that were not developed properly. In the Soviet period they were getting about two hundred million dollars a year of income out of those reserves in the north, and we never managed to bring them back to life again, even though people wanted to. But it was a question of our government priorities. It took them about five years to come up with a complete survey of these deposits, whereas the Russians had known all about them and of course, took all the maps with them when they left. But surely there were people around who knew what was there who could have helped us. And energy supplies and energy functioning were the major problems of Afghanistan still. So, there's an area where we could have put money to good use.

Q: They did build a dam later, I think.

FINN: Yes, it's not that they did nothing, it's that it could have been better. The Chinese knew that. The Chinese went into command mode and started digging up copper and other things because they saw the possibilities. But that stopped because, of course, a lot of them got killed, which is a real deterrent.

Q: Were the Iranians present or involved? I know they were helpful in the planning for the new government.

FINN: They were helpful in the planning for the new government. They were cooperating with international people in the question of drugs because most of the drugs go through Iran. They were not that menacing to us there and at that time. I didn't see some of the evil things they were doing in other places. They were, of course, targets of the Taliban too because of the Sunni-Shia difference, so there was a point where the Taliban sent people into Herat and killed everyone in the Iranian consulate and did other things. And they're still, even now, they're killing Hazaras, I think, because they're Shia, I mean, among other reasons. So, that goes on. The Iranians, first of all, have large numbers of Afghan refugees whom they would be happy to get rid of. There was some cooperation initially within the lines of what we could do and what we were willing to do. But we were not able to do more because of our own policy and because of the larger picture.

Q: The PRTs, [Provincial Reconstruction Teams], the idea for the PRTs, I think, was based on the Vietnam CORDs [Office of Civil Operations and Rural Support] and I think the PRT program started around this time. Is that right?

FINN: It started around that time. I don't think I visited one. I remember driving by one on a visit to some other thing. It was a good idea, but the problem is that its primary goal was security—to establish security in areas—and what that meant was that the development people in AID [United States Agency for International Development] or the Department of State who were there were often unable to go and do their jobs because the people in the PRTs had other priorities, military security priorities, that didn't allow them to do that. Plus, the situation wasn't secure enough for these people to go out and do these things.

But that leads to another thing. We had thousands and thousands of soldiers there, but it wasn't until about 2010, I think, that we had more than a thousand people from the civilian side of our government there, State people and AID people. What you do is limited by how many people you have and by the security situation. You can't say it's this and it's that; it's always a whole array of things.

Q: So, what did you do to organize the embassy, because it was basically a brand-new entity?

FINN: We had very good people. We had many people coming for visits. I think almost every assistant secretary in the State Department was there for a while, often for weeks or months at a time, doing things. We had very talented people who came and worked—everybody wanted to come to Embassy Kabul and work. So, I had the very best, very, very bright people working very hard night and day. They did what they do.

They organized things, they were setting things up, and they were helping the government. As more money came in, they were able to do more projects. So, I have no criticisms of them for the work they did. They were working morning, noon, and night, sleeping on cots. It was not easy. And many of them have gone to very good positions because they proved their mettle under these very difficult conditions. Lynne Tracey, our new ambassador in Moscow, was someone who worked with me as a junior officer. And there were many, many, many examples of that.

Q: So, what do you feel was the most important thing you did while you were there?

FINN: Just to keep things flowing and keep things going. As I said, as the ringmaster of the circus, just to make sure the wheels were spinning around. And they mostly spun on their own because we had very good people. I always try to keep light control. People are there because they know what they're doing. My job is to just watch them and ensure they do it. My job isn't to do it myself. I've had this problem with other people who worked for me, with deputies who think their job is to do the other's jobs. I said, "No, your job is to make sure they do their job." And so, that's what I tried to do. And I also tried to create a lighter atmosphere. That's why I insisted on the protection for them. Not that it would absolutely protect them, but it would make them feel better about it, that's all. At that time, the security situation was much milder, so there were times when they could go out, and I told people, I said, "Look, when things are okay, I'm going to tell you I want you all out of the embassy, I don't want you sitting around here." But when it isn't, we'll lock you all up and I don't want to hear any complaints about it." So, they knew that. And, of course, we were keeping Washington apprised of what was going on and providing input for the future and policy.

Q: People were out and about. Did you have any American Foreign Service officer deaths on your watch?

FINN: No. There was one killed later, a year or two later. I didn't have any deaths. I can't recall any injuries. We did have a shootout. We had deaths, but they weren't Americans. And I spotted this potential the first day I got there. We drove up to the embassy, our old embassy compound, and there was a military group sitting across the street. And I said, "Who's that?" And they said, "Oh, that's the Afghan military, Marshall Fahim's men." And I said, "We have to get them out of there." And it didn't happen. And I spoke to the Afghans about it because I knew eventually something would happen, and sure enough, a few months later, I was having a meeting with some Indian diplomats, and I heard shooting and the soldiers were running back and forth with their guns. And I finally said, "Gentlemen, I think we should move inside." And we went into the safe room. What happened was these guys on the other side, they were always drunk and on drugs, and they started going back and forth with the Americans and pointing their guns at them. And then, finally, there was a shootout and three or four of them got killed. But at the time, we didn't know what it was. There was no communication back and forth. And I went into the meeting the next morning and everyone was very tense, and I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, what happened yesterday was truly horrible and it should never have happened. It should not happen again." Afterwards, the Afghan removed their troops from that placement.

But as I said, it was times when things were milder. I could go out. Once or twice I even had this sort of fake real life. I would go with my guards to the shopping street, Chicken Street, it was called, and I would even buy a couple of boxes of juice there and feel like I was a real person (laughs) and go back into the embassy again. And once a pub opened and they invited the British ambassador and me to the pub, and they said we could drink for free. I said, "Okay," and we went, and we had a couple of drinks. And we were leaving about 9:30, 10pm, and I said to him, "That was really wonderful, and we will never do it again." (laughs)

Q: So, did you get involved in trying to tell the Pakistani ambassador to stop letting Taliban slip over the border, or were there any kinds of work you were doing to try to help limit Taliban infiltration?

FINN: Very little. I mean, this was done mostly between our embassy in Islamabad and the Pakistani government. When I met with them, it was something that would be brought up, and of course, they would just deny that there was any such thing going on. And having served in Pakistan I knew all about that. So, it was mostly pro forma. But yes, we raised the issue, and certainly in the initial phase, these were things that were being done through Washington. Which is why when I was in Tajikistan, we heard from people about Pakistani soldiers being in Tajikistan and in Afghanistan and fighting between them and the Tajiks, but Washington did not want me getting involved in that, and I understood that. You can't have everybody doing these issues at the same time, which would just create confusion. They had a policy that they were following and that was the way it was being done.

I did do a lot coordinating. We set up the "Lead Nations program," which didn't work out necessarily all that well. It was under the auspices of the UN. And the plan was that each nation would take on the responsibility for a different part of helping the government of Afghanistan to set up. So, the Brits were supposed to do drug control and we and the French were working on the army, and the Germans were doing the police, and the Italians were doing law, and things like this. Everybody had different parts to play. And as I unkindly say, everyone failed in their own way (laughs) because we're all different. So, the Germans were training and they decided they would—not necessarily totally, well, anyhow, they decided they would train four hundred police officers. That takes about four years in their system. But we needed about forty thousand policemen yesterday, okay? So, finally, we had to step in on that. And it was that way with all of the issues, and I'm sure the other nations had the same complaints about what we were doing.

But part of the problem there is a UN problem in that the UN special representative did not have the authority to tell people what to do. You know, it was the UN, so they could only politely suggest what to do. That wasn't going to work. When I was in Croatia, we had a UN mandate for Eastern Slavonia, which is a part of Croatia that was a Serbian majority demographic that had joined Serbia and then was fought over—came back again after horrible devastation and lots of atrocities. Anyhow, they set up a special UN mandate under an [obj]American general with a French name, Jacques Klein. He was a dictator of this little place. He had his own radio station and his own little army of American police officers, and he ran Eastern Slavonia. Whatever he said went. And that

worked. One thing he said that we all obeyed was to never step off the pavement, as the roadsides were laden with mines.

Now, of course, there you're dealing with a different demographic, you're dealing with Europeans in the middle of Europe who have a different formation and attitude towards authority and all of these things. But in that case, he was able to set up working systems for Eastern Slavonia to be reintegrated into Croatia. Not without problems, of course. But at least there was something that could happen, whereas in the Afghan context you didn't have that means of compelling action on people. And of course, since you have all these different countries, they were doing things in different ways because different countries do things in different ways.

And actually, as I say this, I think, for example, of the PRTs; in the French PRT they could drink, but in the American PRT they couldn't drink. Not surprisingly.

Q: So, good afternoon. It's December 8, 2022, and we are continuing our Afghanistan interview with Ambassador Robert Finn.

Robert, thank you so much for going over your time in Afghanistan. If you don't mind, I think we might just go back to the discussion of what was happening with the building of the Afghan military and who was in charge and what you thought of them, and then anything else from yesterday that you think you'd like to add onto.

FINN: Okay, yes. Building the Afghan military was a difficult process. General Eikenberry, who was, of course, later Ambassador Eikenberry, at that point was head of the military in the embassy. He was the lead military attaché. And he was the one who was, during the negotiations with Marshal Fahim, in charge of the military forces then to bring this about. And it was very, very difficult. It took him months, I would say nearly a year, to get Marshal Fahim to agree to set up a national army, which we did, and the French had the lead in that, we did it in cooperation with them. But it was a very, very difficult process because Marshal Fahim had his troops in Kabul and did not want foreigners around. And I was telling you yesterday about the military group that was across from the embassy that finally wound up in a shootout. Those were his troops. And when I said I had spoken a number of times about moving them, he was the person I spoke to. And they finally did remove them after that incident happened. But he was a difficult person to deal with, as so many were.

He was a very gruff military kind of person; maybe you've seen pictures of him. He looks like a very tough guy, which he was. Usually characterized as being stiff and uncomfortable in public. But the thing that surprised me and explained his popular success was when we finally went for the opening of the military that first passed through, the army, I saw him speak publicly for the first time, I realized that in that context he is a wonderful orator in Persian, very poetic and lyrical, quoting poetry and making all kinds of allusions to history and things. Things that are important to Afghans, who know their oral history very well. Just really captivating. And so, I said, "Okay, now I understand why he got to be the leader of so many people." You know, there are certain leaders who are like that. To look at them you would not think very much of him, but when he was at the podium he became transfigured, and I said, "Okay, now I understand

why." So, that's an important thing. And again, that's the kind of thing that probably wouldn't come through with the translation, you know? Listening in Persian perfectly explained it. My Persian isn't perfect, but it's good enough to understand what's going on. So, that's what I wanted to go over again about Marshal Fahim and the military.

And in the beginning, I was at this first pass through, and the very reluctant warlords of Afghanistan were directed to send people and the troops that came to this first pass through were truly pathetic. They were old, they were lame, they didn't know what they were doing. It was clear they had sent the people that they thought were expendable. They weren't sending their first line of troops to join this process. That changed later on. As the training went on, they began to see the benefits of that. But the military was always a problem. They had very high rates of desertion, of people not returning after the first pay went out. A similar percentage, I forget exactly, but I would say certainly 20 to 30 percent of the people never came back. So, that was always a problem.

Then the problem that we referred to previously, which is that this was a Tajik-led force, but the majority of the population of the country is Pushtun. So, these people were coming who were not locals. And this is a tension that always exists in Afghanistan between the Persian speaking Tajiks of the north and the Pushtun speaking people, mainly in the south. The Pushtuns also lived in Pakistan. I'm not sure if there are more in Pakistan or more in Afghanistan. Anyhow, well divided and on both sides of the border. And as a sidebar, what many people said to me, including President Karzai, was, When we go over there, meaning to western Pakistan, we're not going into a foreign country. When they come in, meaning the Pakistanis, they're in a foreign country. So, the border, a factor of the 'Great Game' of the nineteenth century, divided the Pushtun people in half, and that's always a problem with troops going back and forth because they simply don't recognize that as a border. It's not a border for them. It can be legally a border, but they don't really see it that way. And in fact, I don't believe Afghanistan has technically ever recognized that border as an international border.

And there are other ethnic groups as well, the Uzbeks, Turkic speakers, Hazaras, Shias of alleged Central Asian origin, other Persian Shia, Baluch tribesmen, and numerous others. Integrating them into a unitary state and army is an ongoing difficult endeavor.

Q: Was there hostility toward the government in Pakistan because of that? Or was it that the Afghan government understood there are many places where family ties and tribal ties cut across a border? What did it mean for the Afghan government as it was developing this relationship with Pakistan?

FINN: Well, what it meant was that the Taliban could get across the border into Pakistan, and there they were safe home. And the Pakistani government—and there were so many vectors going back and forth—was at the same time fighting the Taliban. And then there were all kinds of recorded things about other parts of the Pakistan government or even the same parts helping the Taliban. So, it was a very, very complicated and volatile situation and remains that today. Pakistan does not want a strong Afghanistan. On the other hand, it doesn't want an Afghanistan that's going to cause trouble for it because it's in chaos. And there was a time when the Taliban were moving into Pakistan with dreams of going across Pakistan and lining up with the people in Kashmir. So that's a whole

other aspect of this. It's a very, very complicated situation. And as I said, it's been that way for a very long time. In fact, in the nineteenth century, Afghanistan stretched down into what is now the western part of Pakistan. Peshawar in Pakistan was the summer capital of Afghanistan. So, to them this is still "our country" in many ways.

Q: The British were there with you. And I've read that the 'Great Game' period and the British involvement is very alive for Afghans and that there was a lot of resentment of the British dating back to the nineteenth century. Did you see anything like that?

FINN: Yes. I mean, that's part of their history. They defeated the British several times very dramatically and very completely, and they know all about that. So, when we, the U.S., came to Afghanistan, it was always mentioned along the way, that well the British came and they went, and the Russians came and they went, and now you're here. What's going to happen? (laughs)

Q: We were just one more empire?

FINN: Yes, to many people. It doesn't surprise the Afghans.

Q: So, in the period that you were there, the U.S. was trying to build the military and the police force. Did you see a lot of problems evolving because they weren't yet developed? Was there a lot of crime developing?

FINN: Crime was kind of a separate issue. I wasn't directly involved in the training of the military, although I went to the training base on the outskirts of Kabul a number of times. But I was not in any day-to-day involvement in that. That was separate. And the same thing was true with the police training. Crime was an endemic problem, given the lack of governance. It was one reason the Taliban appealed to some people, who did feel the government was protracting them from crime. I mean, in the greater picture of what was going on in Afghanistan, yes, there was lots of crime, and the failure to control it, along with the perception that government officials were involved in it, helped the Taliban. The principal problem was the war that was going on, military factors. When I was first there, as I mentioned, there were long periods when things were fairly calm, and people could go around in Afghanistan. And of course, the advances for women. Women were appearing on the streets not covered up.

Early on I had a meeting with the minister of communications, and he told me that he was not in communication with any of his offices in the provinces. He had no communication. [That was on Luly 6, 2002, the day the vice chairman of the Afghan interim administration Abdul Kadir was assassinated not far from where we were meeting.] And by the time I left Afghanistan, virtually everybody in the country had a cellphone with which they communicated. That worked two ways because the Taliban were also using them for their communications and to spread their propaganda. But that communication helped in many ways to build a safer society because you could call someone and say, there are bad guys on the road, don't take that road. So, yes, crime was always a problem and continues to be a problem. But it was one of many, many issues.

Q: So one theme that seems to run through a lot of the interviews I did covering the twenty year period is that Karzai and then Ghani didn't feel they had a lot of legitimacy

and that they used to say to the U.S. ambassadors that you—by doing X and Y—are making me look like a puppet and not like a real ruler. Did you have that sense at all in those early years?

FINN: I did to a certain extent. Ghani, I worked with Ghani as minister, and as I mentioned, I knew him earlier. Since the relations were bifurcated, the main U.S. relation with the government was a military relationship and they were up at Bagram, about forty-five minutes from Kabul. Later they moved down into Kabul, but there wasn't the kind of day-to-day communication that you might expect between the government of Afghanistan and the military forces at Bagram and the embassy.

I was in the government, in the palace, several times a week, almost every day for hours and hours. But what was going on was military and that was not something that was worked out on a day-to-day basis in Kabul. The commander at Bagram would come down, say once a week, and brief Karzai, but as I said yesterday it was a briefing, it wasn't a participatory conference. He told them what they were doing, not asking for what he should do. So, it was a different kind of situation. And I must say that didn't surprise me because I had been in Croatia as the DCM during the last fighting with Serbia and NATO came in and the NATO forces were there, again as I mentioned, and they weren't great in day-to-day communication with the government in Zagreb at that time either, because they were there for military purposes, they were not there for civilian governmental purposes. When it came to administration the United Nations set up in Croatia, as they said, this special mandate for Eastern Slavonia where Jacques Klein, an American reserve general, was nominated to run this little military administration under the aegis of the United Nations. But again, this was not done except informationally with the government of Zagreb.

So, I wasn't so surprised that this was happening in Afghanistan. But of course, Karzai felt that he was left out of the picture, and I felt that he was left out of the picture very often. Visitors would come and make it their business to visit various warlords in cities outside Kabul, which sent signals to the Afghans about our assessments.

Q: On the military side.

I know early on, we didn't have so many advisors and so much development money yet. Were we paying government salaries in a way that may have been seen as undercutting the government?

FINN: That was over time, yes. Money was being given to people sometimes openly, sometimes not. And as I said yesterday, the money kept increasing. But part of the problem is, how do you manage the money, who is accounting for the money, where does it go, how does it go, what do people do with it? These are all very, very difficult questions to ask in this kind of volatile atmosphere where all of a sudden no one was in charge. Where are the record books, what happened, where did the monies go that were previously provided, who was in charge of what? It was just very, very difficult to work out. And while we were there, they were in the process of setting up these systems. Obviously, there could have done a much better job in terms of responsibility, on all

sides. But partly, it was because there was so much money coming in and that too was not done in a specifically organized way. It was also because of endemic corruption.

Again, this is something that I had seen before when I was in Turkey, but without the endemic corruption. In Operation Provide Comfort, when the Kurds from Iraq came into Turkey and we were helping them. I arrived, I told you, to set up an embassy office also for a hundred NGOs [non-governmental organizations] there and there was no organization, nobody was in charge. I mean, there's all these good people wanting to do good things. A lot of them later showed up in Afghanistan. But there was no order. So, being me, I just got everybody in a room and said, "Okay, sit down and listen." And there was someone from the Red Crescent and the UN, and they said, "We can't do this." I said, "Just sit there. I'll talk." And so, I made a very simple ad hoc organization, just made up lists, who's going to do water, who's going to do electricity, who's going to do food. And this kept it organized for a couple of weeks. Then the military was there, so things got more regular. But you need that. You need someone in the beginning. And as I said yesterday, the United Nations was there under Lakhdar Brahimi and—his predecessor, Francesc Vendrell, who unfortunately we just lost a few days ago, and they were doing the best they could, but the UN mandate doesn't give people the right to make people do things, and that's— a problem, and of course, he did not have the budgetary control of all the elements of the Lead Nation Program. He was involved in many, many UN operations over the years, but he had to work within the conditions that existed in a very unique situation.

Q: A couple of histories of the war say that the roots of the problems [basically building the security forces] were at the beginning, in these first few years, and that by the time the Taliban regrouped and started its offensive in 2006—it was almost too late to reclaim the situation. Do you have any comments on that?

FINN: I would have to know what they meant by that. That's too general. There were problems in setting up the government, with our friends sometimes, with organization and with corruption. These are all long standing problems that came with Afghanistan from before. I think one problem is that we didn't plan for the long term. There was never a long-term plan. Washington kept saying we're not doing nation building. And before I went to Afghanistan, I said to myself, Okay, what do we have to do to get out of here, to leave this country? And I thought, In order for us to be able to do that the Afghans have to be able to feed themselves, defend themselves, and govern themselves. And I cannot say that we did that. We did parts of it and tried to do all of it, but it was very imperfect. And the fault is by no means all on our side at all.

Q: I know it's a big problem, a big issue because it usually takes generations to build a new society like that.

FINN: Yes. And as I said, as I looked at the government that was set up, I said, Okay, this reminds me of Turkey, reminds me of France, but those are countries that had long histories. France went from feudalism to a modern government over several hundred years. And but, I've got to say, Afghanistan was still back at the beginning part with warlords, with feudal lords. And why are feudal lords there? Because they provide a service. They keep people alive who otherwise wouldn't be kept alive, who are willing to

put up with all kinds of bad things because they staked into tomorrow. And in both France and Turkey they were able to set up an administrator apparatus to train government bureaucrats. For this, of course, obviously you need to have enforcement mechanisms because people are always taking bribes everywhere. That's part of the human personality. So, you have to do what we did in this country in the 1890s and set up a Civil Service administration, codify the jobs, codify the salaries, and set up inspectors to make sure everybody toes the line. Before that, we had a corrupt government in the system. I'm not talking about today. And so, we managed that. But that's the kind of thing you have to do and that was not done. So, what they did was they reached out to the people who were there ahead of time and so, they crept back in and did what they always did. I'm not saying that this could easily have been done, and as you said, it takes an enormous amount of time, and it also takes commitment and willpower on the part of people. But if you are sitting in the capital and the people out in the countryside who are the problem are also your relatives, then you have problems. Everybody has a history going back several hundred years in Afghanistan, and they remember their history.

Part of the difficulty then had in building up the military and security forces stemmed from the fractured nature of Afghan history.

Q: So, I'm intrigued that you don't compare them to Tajikistan that much. Did Tajikistan pull it together over the years in this way?

FINN: Well, that's a very good point. Tajikistan was part of the Soviet Union. The Russians under the Czar and then the Soviets came into Central Asia and were very, very tough and killed a lot of people and made the society into a Soviet society, but even that was only to a degree. After the Soviet Union ended, gradually those same groups started to come back again. I remember shortly before I left Tajikistan, the head of the national bank invited me to his village for lunch and told me how the communists had taken over the village and the next village from his uncle and now they have them back again. And the same thing is true in Uzbekistan. Certainly, Islam went underground. But when I was traveling through Uzbekistan, in every village I saw this building with something like an apse on the side, and I said, "What is that?" and I said, "I bet that's a mosque," because there were similar things in Turkey, in minority areas, not marked but all of a sudden, this little semi-circular protrusion on one side. And of course, the religious leaders all emerged back again during the Soviet period. They had just gone underground, and it was a harvest festival but oh, yeah, it happened to be the end of Ramadan too. People are very conservative, particularly when it comes to religion.

Q: So, after this tour you retired, is that correct?

FINN: Yes, yes, I did. I came back and I was at Princeton, I was teaching. I'd been there before, as I mentioned. I was at Princeton teaching international relations and Turkish literature, and they did offer me a position in Washington, but Princeton also offered me a job and I decided to stay there. I had been there on a detail, before Afghanistan, and then returned, under government leave, for a year and then, I had to choose, and I chose to retire and remain at Princeton.

Q: Okay. So, over the years, you followed what's been going on in this part of the world from afar. Do you have any reflections that you wanted to add to our record?

FINN: Well, I've said a lot already, of course. We didn't have an overall plan, a long-term plan, and that is a systemic problem with our government. And I always think of going back to the beginning of our country where we think of God as the great architect and mechanic who will fix things and He created the universe, and it works but sometimes it goes a little awry and you have to go in and fix it and then it's okay again. And I see that underlying a lot of the way Americans think about things, we'll just fix it and then it will be okay.

On a more pragmatic level, our electoral system impacts on our foreign policy both in creation and in implementation. Other nations do not have the rigid open electoral calendar that we do. This means that our priorities and actions are influenced by both the time constraints and the political situation in the United States. It also means that other parties, whether governments, social forces or belligerents are able to factor our political atmosphere and election schedule into their own planning.

And that's not always enough, unfortunately, when you do. It worked in Europe after World War II because we were dealing with people whose habits and categories of processes were very similar to ours. It worked also in Japan after World War II, where we were dealing with a very organized society that could be really adapt itself to a different world, and it has. But it's not so easy to do when you're dealing with a tribal society like Afghanistan that has never had that order and that resolution and those kinds of commitments to a future and development. I think we didn't understand that. I think we tried. I know that the students at West Point were made to study Afghanistan and other people where there was a great deal of effort to do it. But it is very hard to play catch up on that. The information is not there. And because of the nature of how we process—with people only going for a year or so, and that was true in the embassy as well as with the military—by the time people get up to speed, such as it is, a few months go by, and then they have a few months of productivity, and then they're starting to look at the next place that they're going to go to. So that's a problem.

Q: Did you feel that as the years went on, because the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan lasted a long time—much longer than anybody in the Bush Administration had initially expected—did you come to the point where you thought it was time to leave?

FINN: Well, yes, and you can say that perhaps we should have left much earlier. We should have done things in a different way. But actually, when I got there, I said to myself, It's going to take twenty years before we can get out of here. I did not expect that we would leave the way we did. But I just saw what the problems were, and I said, I think in twenty years maybe we'll be able to go.

Q: Prescient. And what do you see for Afghanistan now under Taliban rule? Do you think it will become stable?

FINN: No, I don't think it's stable. I don't think anything has basically changed. I think we're in a current dynamic situation. The Taliban, we all see what they're doing. They're

doing exactly what they did the last time, thus creating the problems that they created last time. Why were these warlords who were not nice people able to take over the country? Because people were fed up with the Taliban and what they were doing. We just had a public execution yesterday for the first time, so here we go again. And the warlords that are around, there was a meeting in Ankara a few weeks ago with various members, warlords and other people from the previous government, talking about realigning, so I think we're in for a repetition of this. I'm not saying that we will be part of it. We probably won't be part of it because of the history, but I see it recurring again and again because none of the basic problems in the area have changed.

Pakistan has its own problems. Pakistan is always afraid of India. They want Afghanistan to be there as kind of a neutral entity at their back. India would like to be able to push up Afghanistan to put Pakistan in the middle. There are still problems with ethnic groups in Pakistan. Baluchistan is restive because they never wanted to be part of Pakistan in the first place. The Northwest Frontier, the same thing. They were forced to vote with Pakistan because of where they were, geographically. So, the problems of the larger area are still there and they're going to contribute to the problems of Afghanistan.

End of interview