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WILLIAM FREJ

Interviewed by: Bill Hammink
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INTERVIEW

Q: My name is Bill Hammink and I'm here interviewing William Frej, as part of the ADST Afghanistan Project, looking at twenty years of our history there. It's a real privilege to be interviewing you today, Bill. Bill was our USAID [United States Agency for International Development] mission director in Kabul during this time period.

Bill, welcome, and thank you for agreeing to do this interview. It would be great if we could start by telling us a little bit about when and how you joined USAID and how it came to be that you were asked or volunteered, whatever it was, to go to Afghanistan and when that was.

FREJ: USAID, I joined in 1987 and I initially joined the agency as a RHUDO staff, regional housing and urban development officer, and was assigned to Indonesia. The primary RHUDO office at the time in Asia was in Bangkok. They wanted it because of scale and the need to establish more of a presence in Indonesia. I went out in '87 and ended up spending seven and a half years in Indonesia for that first tour. We developed a relatively substantial housing guarantee loan program. I think it was around 150-125 million dollars and infrastructure was a primary area.

I was with RHUDO for four years and then I became the director of the Office of Economic Growth in Jakarta at the embassy. RHUDO was under economic growth at the time, so that was an easy transition for me. One of our primary economic development objectives in Indonesia at the time was infrastructure, so the package fit extremely well.

After Jakarta, I went to Warsaw right after the transition [1984–85] and headed up the RHUDO regional office for Central Europe, based out of Warsaw, for two years. Then I was asked to become mission director and stayed on in Poland for another three and a half years. We had five and a half years in Warsaw, which was another extraordinarily great experience. The Polish-American Enterprise Fund was certainly the leader of all the enterprise funds in Central and Eastern Europe. AID was clearly a catalyst for that activity and we had a very robust housing program also, a housing guarantee program in the region.

After Warsaw, I went back to Washington where I had an SMT [Senior Management Team] position leading the Office of Market Transition in the Europe and Eurasia Bureau. Linda Morris was the DAA [deputy assistant administrator] at that time. After a year in that position, I was asked to join the National Security Council [NSC] as director for

development issues, George W. Bush was president, and Condoleezza Rice was our national security advisor at the time.

When I was at the NSC it was a trying time to say the least. It was the build-up to the Iraq War and then the implementation of the Iraq War. My mandate at the NSC was trying to stay with development and we worked very closely with the president on the PEPFAR program, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, as well as designing the beginning of the implementation of the Millennium Challenge Program. It was busy on all fronts at the White House.

I continue to say to this day, President Bush's legacy will certainly be Iraq, but I think his greatest legacy, and I think history will play this out, is his leadership in a number of development issues around the world. The First World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, PEPFAR, Millennium Challenge history will see what happens to his legacy in the long run.

After working at the NSC, in 2003 I was asked to go back to Jakarta as mission director. The first year and a half was a manageable position. We had an incredible agenda from natural resources development to economic development. Then the 2004 earthquake and tsunami hit off the west coast of northern Sumatra. I was the point person in Indonesia for our assistance program there and I worked extremely closely with the ambassador, Lynn Pascoe, a great person who was very dedicated.

We literally, almost for two years, flew up to Banda Aceh on a weekly basis to implement what was about a six-hundred-million-dollar U.S. assistance package for Indonesia. Two hundred forty thousand Indonesians died in that tsunami. I guess the good news was the Acehnese finally sat down with the government of Indonesia and negotiated a peace plan, which I think has held pretty well over the last fifteen years. It was difficult politically before the tsunami. After the tsunami, it became even more challenging.

The U.S. government's major commitment to that whole effort was building a two-hundred-fifty-kilometer road between Banda Aceh and Maratua along the Sumatra coastline, which was completely destroyed by the tsunami.

I left Indonesia in 2007 and went to Almaty, Kazakhstan, where I headed up the Central Asian Mission and spent a lot of time traveling through five Central Asian republics. At that time, too, I was also the U.S. government officer in charge of our Almaty embassy facilities and programs, because the primary embassy had moved then to Astana, a brutal place to live but with nice architecture. I was really wearing two hats: the embassy officer in charge as well as the mission director for Central Asia. Again, I had a great working relationship with the State Department. A number of USAID and State people ended up in Afghanistan at the same time that I went.

After Kazakhstan, Jim Bever at the time was acting assistant administrator. I was asked if I wanted to take over the mission in Kabul, Afghanistan, and I clearly did. But that was the time when a number of the challenges began, primarily due to Richard Holbrooke.

I think Ambassador Holbrooke had a long-standing perspective on USAID throughout his career and it certainly carried forward into Afghanistan. He wanted someone from the

State Department or from the military to take over the AID mission. Quite honestly, we were going back and forth for six months before the final decision was made that I was going out. It was a challenging time. Holbrooke had a major role and say as a special representative, but clearly a man with a different focus and a different policy perspective on how assistance should be delivered to the Afghans.

I was in Kabul for a little more than a year and a half. At the time, I didn't want to retire. I was able to work with the agency to get an appointment as a diplomat in residence at the Santa Fe Institute. We actually did some major work there on development with them. Their whole focus is complexity issues, looking at how complexity could better inform our foreign policy initiatives. I organized major conferences and wrote papers on development issues, especially related to Afghanistan. It was a great transition out of USAID for me at that time.

Q: After this discussion with Holbrooke and others, when did you actually arrive in Kabul as mission director?

FREJ: I actually went out at his request two different times to write a couple of policy papers on strategy and approach. It was at the same time that the former ambassador who, again, had a different perspective on how the whole U.S. approach should be managed in Afghanistan. He ended up leaving his position. Mike was the mission director then. I took over for him. It was in the spring of 2009 when I became mission director. I was there until the summer of 2010. It was during the Obama surge when we had a hundred twenty thousand U.S. troops there and Stan McChrystal was the head of ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] at the time.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you arrived?

FREJ: Karl Eikenberry. The new approach then included Eikenberry as ambassador.

Q: Whatever you're comfortable talking about.

FREJ: Eikenberry came at the same time as I arrived. In fact, Eikenberry came to my swearing-in ceremony at the USAID headquarters. His history—he was the former three-star brigadier general in charge of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. He transitioned from that position into an ambassador. I think in retrospect, I would not say that that was a great idea. But apart from Eikenberry, Holbrooke brought in four deputy ambassadors: Frank Ricciardone, Tony Wayne, who was the point person responsible for U.S. assistance, then two other ambassadors responsible for management and communications. Ricciardone, Wayne, and Eikenberry were the three key people.

Q: When you went out in 20-something at TDY [temporary duty] and you arrived there as mission director, what were some of the key top issues that were impacting USAID that you had to do?

FREJ: Education for girls. We had a big education program that was just gearing up, which I completely supported. I think the statistics, before I got there, showed that 30 to 32 percent of the people in primary schools were girls. Through AID's major interventions, we got that up above 50 percent, which was remarkable, especially in light

of the history today and what has happened with the Taliban regime. Education was really important. Afghanistan was just going through the process of reestablishing democracy.

We put a lot of money into democracy programs, voting, voting registration, training programs for legislatures, and the Parliament. And the one major program that was really supported strongly by Holbrooke was agricultural development. What do we do with the poppies? Are there going to be alternative crops? Do we use aerial bombardment as they did in Colombia to eliminate poppies? It was a huge issue.

Holbrooke was keen on getting the advice of an advisor who helped implement USAID's green revolution in the late '50s and early '60s. We at USAID clearly were at odds about the best approaches in the agricultural sector.

Q: Were you aware that Holbrooke brought in USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] folks and gave them a bunch of money?

FREJ: Yes, USDA was a big player, which we paid for by the way. USDA advised us and a number of the PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams] around the country. It was clearly an important issue. I think, quite honestly, the former ambassador was the ambassador before Afghanistan, in Colombia. They had a very successful drug eradication program. I think he was intent on doing something similar to what they did in Colombia, which actually worked.

Holbrooke and Eikenberry were very formidable individuals. It was a real challenge implementing the USAID mandate as clear development experts viewed in the context of that political environment that we were dealing with, with the State Department. Tony Wayne and I subsequently reconciled our differences in a positive way.

It was really difficult. First of all, having State Department officials responsible for much of what we had been working on for fifty years in the agency. Then that difficult relationship certainly we had with Holbrooke. Difficult was probably an understatement. I feel comfortable with the word difficult.

Q: I interviewed Jim Bever as well when he was in DC. In agriculture, I was there from '13 to '15. We did a number of studies looking at impact. One of the things we looked at is in agriculture there was a huge issue between short-term objectives and long-term objectives, with USAID trying to put in place long-term objectives like markets, market development seeds.

FREJ: How long does it take to grow a pomegranate? Seven years.

Q: Then Holbrooke, in my understanding, stopped some of these long-term programs and just wanted to do seeds and fertilizer, and other short-term impact types of programs. Quick response, quick impact, especially following the troops in some of these areas.

FREJ: Absolutely. He was about short-term objectives. To give him some credit, politically at that juncture with the state of the war, the number of troops we had in place, Obama, the new president, Hilary Clinton, the new secretary of state. I think Holbrooke

probably viewed short-term interventions as something that was doable and could show results in the short term. It didn't work, by the way. I don't know how it was when you went there, but I can tell you for the two years that we struggled with these issues it was a problem. I think longer term, if we would have stuck with a longer-term objective, who knows what the situation would be today in Afghanistan.

Q: I agree. What was your involvement with the surge? Did you, as mission director, have a say in how many people came out, where they went, and what they did?

FREJ: The surge, from my perspective, was primarily and almost entirely U.S. military. At USAID, we were fully staffed. I don't remember how many staff, but I think five hundred plus at the time. The one area that Holbrooke was intent on surging was getting eight senior people in Bagram and I think—John Mellor, a senior agricultural economist, came out at that point in time, and getting more USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] staff in PRTs to help implement that, a program he was certainly pursuing.

I don't recollect a large surge on USAID's part in coming out. We were still heavily dependent on contractors. Contractors were out in the field. I had some AID staff that quite honestly never left the AID side of the compound and that was an issue. But we were very staffed up, I thought, sufficiently staffed up.

Q: Bill, did you say that when you arrived there were almost five hundred USAID folks?

FREJ: Yes. I can't specifically recollect the number. Maybe that included the key contractors we were working with and clearly FSN staff. It was a very robust staff.

Q: How was your budget at the time?

FREJ: A billion dollars, both years, around a billion. It's a lot of money and it's not easy to expend that much, especially in light of the constraints you have dealing with government officials of Afghanistan and folks working in the field. Corruption was certainly an issue. I think SIGAR's [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction] recent report pointed that out too. Whether or not it's accurate, I don't know. There were certainly corrupt Afghan officials. There's no question about it.

Q: When you were there, was that when the election took place? Was it 2008, Karzai?

FREJ: Karzai had been elected. Wasn't it 2009? I can't remember, '08 or '09. Karzai was there and he ran again, and he won. He put a lot of effort into that election. He was onboard again for another four or five years.

Q: How was your relationship with the embassy ambassador? You had to work with Ambassador Wayne. How did you deal with some of these policy issues? Did you go to the ambassador and talk it through? Were there regular country team meetings? I'm wondering about the process.

FREJ: There were regular daily country team meetings. I was certainly a significant player at the table, sitting right next to Michael Flynn. Does the name ring a bell? The former national security advisor for Trump.

Q: He was there?

FREJ: Yes. He was McChrystal's cybersecurity right-hand guy. And Kirby, who is now the NSC spokesperson, was there at the same time. McChrystal was head of ISAF. We met daily, country team. We met at least three times a week at ISAF, a meeting that McChrystal chaired. Then it continued after Petraeus got there when McChrystal left, who I thought was a remarkable individual, a strategist, a keen policymaker, and a great leader of troops in Afghanistan. It's too bad that he had to leave under the situation.

Back to your question. I had a very difficult relationship with Eikenberry and a difficult relationship with the ambassador. He did not respect AID. I'm sure he did not respect me or my leadership. His history with AID goes back a number of years because he interacted with AID staff all over that country when he was a three-star, and I think had clear ideas and biases about the role of AID in that country. I think he gave Tony Wayne the mandate to take over and do what you can, that exact program entirely.

Tony and I, we had our ups and our downs. I wouldn't call it a contentious relationship because I did respect Tony very much and I think he, too, was under a very difficult situation with Eikenberry, although he agreed to stay on as Eikenberry's deputy ambassador after his first year.

The State Department, Ricciardone, deputy ambassador, a lot of respect for USAID, very supportive. Everyone on the ground at that embassy from State, we had a very close working relationship. I have nothing but the highest regard for my State colleagues who were there at the time.

Going back to that management hierarchy of Holbrooke and Eikenberry, that was a difficult environment to work with them.

Q: Did you feel you got support from USAID Washington?

FREJ: I think USAID administrator Raj Shah was part of the problem, personally. He would never push back Holbrooke, ever. When we needed support on the ground, in the field, it never came. My regard for him as an administrator was clearly tested during my time in Afghanistan.

Q: What were some of the other development issues that you were working on that you felt you made some progress on while you were there?

FREJ: Health, a really important issue. We put substantial resources into the health program. Before both of us were out there, a big part of the health program was building hospitals and schools. That turned out to be, I think, a real disaster. It was a good way of crushing the spread across that country, which it did, with shoddy construction.

We spent a lot of time and energy and money on local indigenous health clinics at the local level in Afghanistan, training medical staff, expanding coverage almost across the country, including in the Wakhan Corridor area of Northern Afghanistan. That was a really important program and a very successful program.

We worked on a number of economic development initiatives, some successful, and some not, business incubators. That was wrapped around the agricultural program. When I was there, we put in more than five hundred million dollars into the Ag [agriculture] program. It was huge and a lot of that was trying to develop business incubators. Difficult.

Education, a big focus of our program. Kajaki Dam was still an issue. I hope it was resolved by the time you got there. Another, not only time-consuming but money-consuming project. I don't know the outcome of that.

Q: I do. When I was there I spent a lot of time and effort on that project because the third generator had been delivered with a lot of bloodshed from the Brits especially and the marines. They were installing that and we had to evacuate a few times because the Taliban took over that area. But at the end of the day, and this happened about a year or two after I left, Herbie Smith was there. USAID actually finished that project and electricity was flowing into Kandahar and elsewhere. Basically, the Taliban let us finish because they could have taken it over at any time.

FREJ: I'm glad to hear that.

Q: That's the good news. After I left, there was additional investment going in to expand the dam, add another generator and heighten the dam so they had more water pressure and increased electrical output there. Obviously, it has a fifty-year history or more. I think USAID's predecessors started that in the '50s.

When I was there, we found this booklet that was published by USAID Afghanistan, in 1976, which laid out all the projects at the time. Fascinating, it included Kajaki Dam as one of them. Back then, it was a big part of the portfolio.

FREJ: That certainly impacted all of our work. I'm glad Herbie Smith became the mission director, he's the guy who could do it.

Q: That's right. When you were there, could you get out much?

FREJ: I did. I visited all but four provinces.

Q: How did you do that? Were you with DOD [Department of Defense], Security?

FREJ: Sometimes with Security. We had a very active, I wouldn't call it an air force, but we had two or three fixed wings and two or three helicopters that were still being managed by USAID, at the time. We made a point. In fact, this is one area I respect Eikenberry for is really pushing us to get out and seek projects and meet Afghans. Herbie and I were the team with the staff. We traveled I would say almost every single week, mainly on USAID aircraft.

Q: Fantastic.

FREJ: Did you still have that?

Q: No. They had taken that away during Raj Shah's time. I think the embassy took it over at one point and ran it.

FREJ: Can I give you a vignette about that?

Q: When you went out, how was your relationship with RSO and DOD?

FREJ: Excellent. I had a five-person security detail assigned to me, twenty-four hours a day. Maybe you had the same thing.

Q: I did.

FREJ: Great guys, two former Special Ops, two State, security, and a medic. They were with us constantly almost 99 percent of the trips that we took out with them. We had a very good relationship and we had a great relationship with the RSO in the embassy. I have nothing but the highest regard for these gentlemen. They were extraordinary and I'm still in contact with two of them.

Q: How was your relationship with the government? Did you meet with Karzai or was it ministers?

FREJ: Mainly ministers. I think we tried to have bi-monthly meetings with the president and his key staff. I met Zakhilwal, the Minister of Finance when I was there. I'm trying to think of names. I can't recall a lot of them. Spent a lot of time meeting at the ministerial level with the health minister, education minister, home affairs, and the president.

Myself and a number of staff, we had very good relationships with the government. We met with the government often. The government came with us many times to visit projects in the provinces. I would say that was a very positive part of our program.

Q: How did you see the issue related to centralization or decentralization and the Constitution focusing on power centralized in Kabul? Did that come up when you were there?

FREJ: It came up in relation to elections at the local level. Through contractors, we did a lot of work strengthening not only local government voting procedures at the local level, but also the leadership that was running for office, and I think that helped. Karzai probably was not keen on a major decentralization effort, which probably impacted his future in the country.

I think decentralization was absolutely critical to the future of Afghanistan. I know home affairs and the sectoral ministers all felt strongly about that too. Because they really saw if that country is going to have a future, decision-making at the local level has to be decentralized and it has to be an activity that is really supported by the center.

Q: When you were there, was the government, whether or not Karzai, but at least Zakhilwal, supportive of economic policy reform that was needed?

FREJ: The Central Bank governor was the primary advocate. He came to the United States and came back to Afghanistan because he believed in the country then. I thought he was a remarkable individual. Zakhilwal, lots of questions. I think where he's living now in a multi-million dollar home is probably something that came directly out of his

role in Afghanistan. He's smart. The Central Bank president, when I was there, was the key player. I had a great deal of respect for him.

Q: Do you remember his name?

FREJ: No, I don't.

Q: Were you there when Kabul Bank had billions stolen?

FREJ: No.

Q: That happened after you left.

FREJ: Yes. Was Zakhilwal there when you were there?

Q: Yes he was.

FREJ: Was he still minister?

Q: He was. He left soon after I arrived. The national election, the presidential election was in 2014. That's when Ashraf Ghani was elected and there was a controversy and Abdullah Abdullah became the so-called CEO. I think that's when Zakhilwal left and there was a new minister of finance. He was there and then under Ghani became the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan. He managed that relationship.

FREJ: That's interesting. A lot of money flowed through the minister of finance. He pushed back on them a lot. Everything was on the up and up and funds were spent appropriately. I think the ministry took that as maybe an overreach watchdog approach that we had, but I think it was absolutely critical and I would certainly stand behind that to this day. Zakhilwal reflected that in his relationship with AID. Then it was good and then not so good. We focused primarily on the Central Bank.

Q: When you were there, did you have to work on trying to move 50 percent of USAID resources through government-to-government or on-budget programming?

FREJ: Yes. It just started.

Q: How did you approach that? Tied for second place on transparency international for corruption.

FREJ: He wanted to make sure that that happened. How it was managed, again, we played the watchdog role significantly and all the resources that were flowing out the door, and tried to ensure that they were being spent appropriately. Sometimes they were, sometimes they weren't. When you have as much as we did at that time, it was difficult.

Q: Absolutely. Herbie, I heard at that time that he tried to manage the staff going to the PRTs.

FREJ: He was.

Q: Did you have a say in where people went?

FREJ: Yes, we did. That was certainly one of the positive aspects of the management structure that they did maintain a lot of responsibility and decision-making in terms of that staff. Herbie worked for me in Indonesia also. He was certainly a key player. I was happy to hear that he ended up being mission director out there too, because he was the right person for something like that. We can spend a whole day talking about PRTs.

Q: Were all thirty-four established?

FREJ: Yes, they were established. Herbie and I certainly visited many of the PRTs. Every time we went to a province there was a PRT there. We made a point of going there. In most of these situations, U.S. military staff met the plane and escorted us, and introduced us to counterparts and Afghans working on their programs in the field. PRTs worked with a different approach than what USAID had.

Q: Did USAID have people in each PRT?

FREJ: Yes. I think almost every PRT, even the ones that were not U.S. supported.

Q: Were they integrated into the missions like project design and project monitoring programs?

FREJ: Yes. The big problem with PRT was the military had a handful of cash, literally, and they could deal with the local projects at that local level. There wasn't a lot of strategizing at the PRT level in terms of project need, project design, and project implementation. It certainly was, when I was there, a facility that was led very strongly by the military with their own directions.

I have to say, I don't think they did a bad job, quite honestly, a completely different approach than AID had. AID staff, at the PRT level, were from my perspective actively involved in project implementation. A lot of it was bridge building, small-scale roads, and paving. They were there and working effectively with the military ties, but the military was in charge.

Q: You had mentioned Petraeus arrived. My understanding, he brought with him the Iraq COIN approach, counterinsurgency. Did you have to help implement that?

FREJ: Yes. Not only Petraeus but Stan McChrystal, that was what he stood for. He was probably the primary designer of COIN. He implemented that in Iraq and certainly in Afghanistan. I found there was more local-level interaction with military colleagues implementing the COIN approach under McChrystal than there was under Petraeus. I was only there for a few months after he came, and left.

McChrystal was a key proponent and I would characterize him as the primary designer of COIN. I think it worked to a certain extent, but that whole counterinsurgency approach at the local level is difficult when you're fighting a war. Perhaps a year or two later, with things more stable than they were in 2009 and '10, it would have had more of an effect. It was a big part of the military approach.

Q: How would you characterize USAID's role under COIN?

FREJ: Going out with military counterparts at the PRT level, engaging Afghans, implementing our corresponding decentralization programs, our health programs, our education programs, this was all part of COIN. Engaging Afghans at the local level and ensuring that they were to the extent possible a part of that local-level decision-making process. I think we played a major role in that, for sure.

Q: Looking back, that's when we had a lot of destabilization programs that OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] helped follow the troops.

FREJ: Follow the troops, join the troops, and work with the troops. OTI did have a big stabilization program then. We worked with them through Herbie's office.

Q: Do you think those were successful while you were there, subsequently, what you've read about it?

FREJ: No, because I'm looking at today, at what's happening in that country today or a year ago. I think if we would have had more of an impact and really built local leadership and if the Afghan military also would have stepped up and had built their own internal leadership we wouldn't be in the situation we are in right now. It actually makes me sick. Every day I think about that country. I love Afghanistan. I love the people. To me, it's just a sad state of affairs where they are today, especially with women and girls.

Q: I agree. It's heartbreaking to see.

FREJ: Yes, it's heartbreaking.

Q: I'm actually on the Board of Trustees of the American University of Afghanistan. AUAF still has five to six hundred students in Afghanistan, and more women, studying online. They're not allowed to go to universities, but they can continue their studies online. There's an important niche there.

FREJ: That's terrific. That's encouraging.

Q: Thinking back, what are your insights and reflections based on your experience working in and on Afghanistan?

FREJ: As I just said, I love the country and I love the people. I think the U.S. had an open door to provide assistance that was managed and mandated by Afghans. And at the same time, I always say it was maybe my best job in AID and maybe my worst job in AID. The worst side of that equation is the political context that we were working within.

It's hard to bifurcate politics from development assistance in a war zone, in a situation like Afghanistan with billions of dollars on the development side and the military side pouring into that country.

Looking at what happened a year ago and the last ten years in that country, I think somewhere we missed something along the line. I'm not sure what it was, but I still go back to the Holbrooke era. I think the special rep role is important and it's certainly been an important role from a State Department perspective. In fact, I know a couple of former

reps, one of them retired to Santa Fe that had a completely different approach, maybe one when you were there.

It was so political and Eikenberry as a career military person coming into that role. With all due respect, the guy is a great leader, but he never served a day as an ambassador with the State Department, or interacted with them, certainly, but it's a big job to be an ambassador in a country like Afghanistan where the president surges up twenty thousand troops. There's a new actor coming on board and it's very difficult.

I look at the development side of the coin and I look at the political side of the coin, and I think somehow along the way we missed the boat. It was that 2009–2010 period that was quite traumatic. I think wrong decisions were made, personnel-wise. I'm still not convinced, although I can go back and say I have respect for Tony Wayne and his predecessors, but I'm still not convinced that was the right approach. Didn't Bambi Arellano go out in that role at a certain point in time?

Q: She did.

FREJ: I think that was positive. The State Department re Holbrooke, that was the model that they wanted to continue. In great part that was one of the reasons I wanted to go out there. And it all changed. I just wish it would have had a more positive outcome, but it didn't.

Q: Any other insights in terms of working on reform issues or policy issues, huge staff for the largest mission in the world?

FREJ: In terms of implementation of our programs, it's hard to do if you don't leave the compound. You can't tell somebody to put on a bulletproof vest and go out to the local neighborhood in Kabul. That whole approach and the types of people that end up working in a conflict zone would need to be questioned in the future and I would certainly put that on a policy question to consider.

If you're going to work in a war zone, I think there are certain risks that go along with it and you have to be willing to take those. A lot of people, you probably can't tell them to do that, but that was certainly an issue.

Working with counterparts is absolutely critical and I think finding and developing the right kind of counterparts is very important. I think we had some success with that, but some failures also.

Managing money and resources that we did, is that a role for the State Department to really subsume or should that role have been maintained more by USAID with the support from all the way up to the USAID administrator? Those were issues that I certainly had to contend with.

I think if Holbrooke would have been secretary of state, I don't think USAID would have been implementing programs in Afghanistan. There would have been an entirely different model. That type of relationship, it's not only internal to us, but outsiders, counterparts, Afghans, they can perceive that. That's a big issue.

Q: That's a great point. To ask about more recent events, did you have any involvement, did you play any role in the evacuation from Afghanistan in August 2021?

FREJ: No, no direct role in the official evacuation. Both my wife and I were heavily involved in attempting to get former USAID and U.S. embassy staff, and contractors out of the country. It was a very frustrating time, especially with the lack of responsiveness from the State Department as well as our contractors.

One example, a big education contractor who worked for USAID, he worked for them for eleven years and was very active. He was under the gun because he couldn't get a visa to get out, a third country visa. I was getting texts and emails from him in the middle of the night, for weeks and weeks, and calling folks that I knew at State, getting back to the consulting firm. For whatever reason they just couldn't do a damn thing. It was very depressing. I have no idea, after telling him, finally, there's nothing I can do, about what happened. Quite honestly, I don't want to know.

My wife was working with one of the staff persons that she supervised in the embassy in Cultural Affairs and he got out and is in correspondence with us now from somewhere in Virginia, so that was positive.

I had three or four former OTI Afghan staff, same situation. For whatever reason, if that direct link between USAID and Afghan foreign national, is made, a lot of the folks that are out there doing the real work, they're still sitting in Afghanistan. It's a sad situation. I still can't believe it happened the way it did.

Q: Did you correspond with USAID and State, the people who were trying to help with the list for evacuations and subsequently?

FREJ: I think Jim, someone from USAID Washington sent out the emails, the contact persons. We followed up. Over the course of two or three months, maybe longer, it was very frustrating.

Q: Any kind of broader insights in that whole process, having served there?

FREJ: I don't know if our intelligence failed us or not. I certainly would have had a plan in place much sooner than we did. I would have ensured that the broader Afghan community that worked for State and worked for USAID and USDA, and every other agency that was there, that the visa program would have been more inclusive than it was.

You can see the writing on the wall the last couple of years, what was going on in that country. We just got the embassy staff out of Sudan in a day with very little planning. Why wasn't there a major plan in place to evacuate not only American personnel but from my perspective, as important, our Afghan colleagues? Yes, a hundred twenty thousand people were evacuated and that was a success, but there are a lot more people still there. I think on the military side, there could have been more planning.

I still cannot believe that the Afghan Army threw down its arms and the Taliban marched in, in a week. It boggles my mind. I'm just a bystander these days.

Q: You were in Afghanistan as USAID mission director during an extremely important time with the military and civilian surge, and during the time of Holbrooke, who was the first special rep. Any concluding reflections and lessons learned, both the time you were there, but also looking back on the twenty-year U.S. involvement?

FREJ: The first thing I'd say is, the two years I was there, I think USAID should have had a different seat at the table. Working closely with the State Department is absolutely critical, especially in that political environment. But I think we were relegated to a secondary role. It not only affected the morale of all of the staff at AID, but I think it was sensed by the Afghans. We've been in Afghanistan for years. They know USAID and they know what we can do and what we can manage. It was turned upside down.

I have the highest respect for Ricciardone and Tony Wayne, and the State Department folks that were working in Tony's office. But to this day, I felt that we weren't highly regarded. We weren't respected. And when that respect is not shown by the ambassador or the special representative at that time it creates a real morass for us to work in.

I think we did our best. I was there at a very tough time, the most, I think, difficult time of the last twenty years of the U.S. tenure in that country. Could we have done better? I think so. I think if we had a much more collaborative relationship with State, it would have had a more positive effect than the relationship that we had. We had a very close relationship with the military. We respected them. They respected us. They saw what we can do at the decentralized provincial level and that was very positive.

Development through a PRT is certainly different than working at a national level through ministries, through counterparts that have a lot of clout and a lot of power, Afghans I'm talking about, to implement programs correctly.

For me, it really goes back to the politics at the time and the leadership involved in managing what was clearly a very difficult program. Personally, when I heard Bambi was going out as whatever the title was that Tony Wayne had at the time, I think that was a great step in the right direction.

One last point regarding AID, I think the administrator should have been more proactive in the program. When I was at the NSC, Andrew Natsios was the administrator. One of my objectives and one of Andrew's objectives was that the USAID administrator needs to have a seat at the table at the NSC. When there are important meetings on development issues like Afghanistan, the administrator should be there, not only somebody like Doug Lew, whose role was also very important. The AID administrator needed to be on the NSC.

I think today the new administrator, Samantha Power, I think she probably is a member of the National Security team at the NSC. I had this discussion with Raj Shah a number of times. And I'll tell you, we were hurting out there a number of times, in Kabul, and needed some support and some major clout from our senior management. We had it through the AID level, but from my perspective, we never got it from Raj Shah, and I fault him for that.

Q: Any other final reflections?

FREJ: I said before I've always felt probably my best job at USAID and my worst job. Going back to the best job aspects, I've had a relatively long and stellar career: career minister, four mission director positions, National Security Council director, diplomat-in-residence position. And throughout this entire tenure, I have always had a great working relationship with every ambassador and every State Department official I've ever worked with.

Coming into Kabul, even before Kabul, in the hoops I had to go through to get this job, meeting Holbrooke in India, flying in there for a ten-minute meeting, and on and on, taking his bullying that occurred in Washington, DC, as well as in Kabul, it was a shocker for me, I have to say. If I felt that way, I always wonder how the people that I'm managing felt and I've always wondered what was the perception seen by our most important Afghan counterparts and colleagues. It was quite a time.

But when I look back, again, the best part was what we did in a difficult environment and managing a helluva load of money relatively effectively at the time, within this political climate that was very difficult. Looking back at my career, including Afghanistan, I can look back and say my collaboration with State ambassadors has always been important to me and has always shown through in the work that I've done.

Q: I had two ambassadors that were very supportive. That makes a huge difference. I can only say that I was extremely lucky because I had two great ambassadors who were very supportive, Jim Cunningham.

FREJ: I know Cunningham. It was at that point in time, new president, new secretary of state, the surge in Afghanistan, civilian and military, new special representative. It was one point in time, and we hopefully won't experience that again.

Q: People are asking a lot about lessons learned for USAID and State in Afghanistan, and what we can learn if we ever have to get involved in other kinetic situations that may be coming in Iraq or Syria. I think there are a lot of lessons learned. That's what we're trying to get out of these discussions when we do have a roundtable.

Sudan is next. That was one of the countries where I was mission director, leading up to the independence of South Sudan. It's heartbreaking to see what's going on there now.

End of interview