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SHANNON GREEN

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Thursday, August 7, 2025, I'm here with Shannon Green to do an interview with her, of her experiences at USAID, principally focused on her work in the democracy rights and governance area, but also cover perhaps some other aspects of her illustrious career at USAID and elsewhere. But let's start Shannon just with the quick origin story. Tell me where you're born, and if there was any childhood time that sort of predicted that you would end up working in development, democracy, and governance. Then we can get into the more substantive part of your career after age ten or whatever.

GREEN: Thanks Larry. I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, but grew up mostly in Georgia. I do have a formative experience that led me to this career, which are the images of Tiananmen Square. In 1989, if you'll recall, most of us watched the nightly news, or it was on in the background, and I just remember the images of the man standing in front of the tank being seared into my memory. And truly it was at that moment, I decided if someone can literally put their life on the line for democracy, surely there is something I can do to help. And so my path was pretty linear into this career. When I was at the University of Georgia, I learned about the State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, DRL, and I sought out an internship there. In early 2001, I came to Washington and was convinced, this is the work I need to do. This is the place I need to do it in. I went to American University to study. I learned about USAID at that time, and realized, yep, that's the organization that I need to be a part of, because of the reach and the presence all around the world, and because I really saw it as a force for good in the world. I wanted to be a part of that. And I think I was attracted to the mix of policy and programming. I sought out the Presidential Management Fellowship and made my way to USAID. And initially I wasn't in the democracy, rights, and governance space, because you must be opportunistic when you are a PMF. My initial job was in the Asia Near East Bureau and eventually I made my way to DRG.

Q: Just before you get to joining USAID, what did you study at the University of Georgia?

GREEN: When I was at the University of Georgia, I studied history and political science.

Q: Noble majors.

GREEN: There was no clear path at that time. There wasn't anybody in my family, there wasn't anybody around me at school, there wasn't anybody who told me, "This is a career that you can explore." I stumbled upon it again because I had this Tiananmen Square experience. I studied the history of China; I studied the history of the communist movement. I was learning about international relations, just kind of finding out how to make a career of this myself. And then when I came to DC for that initial internship at the State Department, I researched what schools had a concentration and international development, international peace, democracy. And found the program at American University in the School of International Service called International Peace and Conflict Resolution. There was a concentration on human rights, and a lot of professors had practical experience in international development and international relations, so that's what I did. I did my graduate studies here and focused on Africa, development, and human rights.

Q: You joined USAID in what year as a PMF?

GREEN: Summer of 2004

Q: And you said you're in the Asia and Near East Bureau focused on any particular country, or just-

GREEN: I was in the program office, which was great, because you get broad exposure to everything that the agency does, and how it works. And at that time, if you recall, the Iraq war was happening, we were in Afghanistan, and so from that perch in the ANE Bureau, I had a lot of opportunities to contribute to the reconstruction of both Afghanistan and Iraq. And it was at the time that USAID had developed its first fragile state strategy. The premise being that ultimately, you have to improve the efficacy and legitimacy of government in order to overcome instability and fragility. I got to do the first draft of a strategy trying to apply the fragile state strategy in Nepal, which was a formative experience and gave me lots of exposure to policy leaders in USAID.

Q: And how long were you in the Asia and Near East bureau?

GREEN: Let's see. When you're a PMF, you get to do rotations. I did a rotation to Nepal, spending the summer there, working on that fragile state strategy. I did a rotation to the Department of Defense on the Afghanistan and Pakistan desks, really trying to understand the triple Ds. At the time, it was all about the three-legged stool of defense, development, and diplomacy. I thought it was important to get that perspective. And so, I was at DOD for quite some time. After the end of my PMF-ship, in early 2008, the democracy and governance office had an opening for their Middle East coordinator. And if you'll recall, this whole time, I was trying to get into the democracy and governance work. This was my opportunity. I applied for that job, and got that job, and found my way into the democracy and governance work, with a focus on the Middle East. The Asia

coordinator and I backstopped one another, so I also got to dabble in some Asia stuff, particularly Afghanistan elections.

Q: Maybe let's just quickly go through the career arc, and then come back to some of the specific questions. You're in the DG office (which is what it was called then) and working on Asia and Near East work. Then what was next? I think it's probably when I came back to USAID.

GREEN: So, I am in the DG office as of 2008, focusing on the Middle East. Most of the countries I concentrated on were authoritarian or semi-authoritarian. And then at the beginning of 2011, the Arab Spring happened. There was a ton of activity and enthusiasm; we were really ramping up our programming and responses, as you'll recall. And then in 2013, I got picked up by the National Security Council to serve as a director in the Global Engagement Directorate. Global engagement was the part of the NSC that was trying to forge people-to-people connections around the world. I was responsible for the Young African Leaders Initiative, the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, and those kinds of things, working with Ben Rhodes. I launched the Stand with Civil Society Initiative while I was there because we were seeing the start of the global phenomenon of shrinking civic space. I stayed at the NSC until 2015 – the first two and a half years of the second Obama administration – then I left government. I went to CSIS to lead the Human Rights Initiative. I did that for a couple years, and then I went to an organization called Center for Civilians in Conflict, CIVIC, to be their senior director for programs. And then when Biden got elected, I came back into government. This was May of 2021. Initially, I rejoined USAID to lead the Anti-Corruption Task Force. And then I was working together with the DRG Center and the DAA that oversaw that Center to create the first democracy, rights, and governance Bureau, and was chosen to lead that Bureau as the first DRG assistant to the administrator for USAID. That takes us through 2025.

Q: Great history and lots of different things to talk about. You mentioned the Arab Spring, so maybe let's use that as a jumping off point in terms of reflections, both on how we approached, the Arab Spring, what reflections you have now, ten, fifteen years later on, what we did right, what we may have done wrong, in the context of the Arab Spring.

GREEN: In the context of the Arab Spring, I think we all recognized what a seminal moment it was. Right up to that point, especially in Egypt, there was a sense that these authoritarian regimes were so durable. So, it was an earth-shattering set of events and very exciting for those of us that cared about democracy, rights, and governance issues. The first thing is that we recognized what a big deal it was. I think I approached it with a mindset that it was all hands on deck, that we needed to do everything in our power to support the people and movements that made this happen.

Q: We're talking about the Arab Spring – what we did right, what we got wrong, your general reflections.

GREEN: When it first started, I think we did a really good job getting people in-country very quickly to assess the situation. Tunisia was the first country to experience the revolution, to see the dictator fall. And I think it was maybe within ten days, we had a team on the ground talking to some of the movement leaders, talking to civil society, talking to people who were emerging as spokespersons and political leaders about what kind of support they needed. I think that was amazing, especially for an agency that's not known to move fast, to be able to get that analytical support in place quickly. That then translated into support for things like elections and political party work and all the rest of it. In Egypt, we had much more infrastructure in place because we had a USAID mission there. We had a long history of working there. And we had a fifty million dollars Civil Society Program at the time. So, there was a strong foundation on which to build. We did a good job tapping into all that to get resources to civil society organizations that were trying to transform their society.

And I think that's also where we made some missteps. There was so much enthusiasm across the U.S government for what was going on and a desire to support it, but we weren't prepared, we didn't have clear lines of effort or lanes. That resulted in some interagency infighting because any time there are resources to be deployed, people want to have a seat at the table. There was confusion in the interagency about who should lead on which aspects of the transition, which I think bogged down our response. I also don't think we fully understood that, even though the leader had been toppled, the whole authoritarian infrastructure was still in place. That planted the seeds of what came later – when the Egyptian government pushed back aggressively on American support for democracy and human rights.

Q: Just to go back a little bit and talk about where we felt the tension between those in the democracy sector pushing an agenda and the sort of real politique of, hey, we have allies here, and it's different. And it was both, I think, a conversation within USAID, and then at times between those in the democracy areas, whether it's USAID or State and the regional bureaus and so I'm curious as to your reflections. You can use Egypt as an example or, more generally, your time in the Near and East Bureau as to how that tension, both before and after the Arab Spring, was addressed.

GREEN: Yes, it was always a tension. And support for DRG ebbed and flowed, depending on who was in leadership. In the Bush administration, when the Freedom Agenda was a priority, there was an imperative for people who were working on diplomacy and defense to care about human rights issues. Which meant there was a lot more leeway for us to do work on these issues. But when support for DRG waned, the bilateral relationship took precedence, and it got a lot harder and more contentious to do this work. Egypt was emblematic of this dynamic. When we were prioritizing the Freedom Agenda, the push from the State Department was to get more money to independent civil society and human rights groups. USAID knew we needed to do it smartly, strategically. So, we did a civil society assessment. We did a democracy and governance assessment, really trying to understand the entry points or levers for change. The tension at that time was between the folks that wanted to do more institutional democracy support, meaning, for the Prosecutor General's office or to the government,

and people who thought, you're just strengthening the repression capabilities of the authoritarian government. The tension at that time was between the institutional democracy people and the civil society and media democracy people, not between the policy and democracy people. But then we entered a stage that was quite different.

Q: But what about just internal to USAID, between the democracy people at USAID and then the field mission, which had its own institutional perspectives on maintaining relationships with local government?

GREEN: Yeah, that was tough.

Q: Yeah just maybe talk a little bit about that.

GREEN: There were so many phases of this, right? At the time, this was 2007/2008, the regional Bureau and USAID Egypt mission felt this huge pressure from Washington to do more and more on DRG, especially direct support to civil society. And the folks on the ground were getting a lot of heat and pushback from the government. The mission was in a tough spot, they were in between a rock and a hard place, because they were getting missives from the Egyptian government all the time, basically saying cease and desist this work that you're doing to support human rights institutions or civil society organizations. At the same time, they were being told by Washington that not only they needed to continue to do it, but they needed to do more of it.

We had to thread the needle. I was trying to help the democracy and governance office in Egypt navigate all of this by supporting them analytically. We had teams going out and trying to help them identify entry points that would make a real difference, that would give the government a little bit of what it needed to allow the more pointed democracy and governance stuff to continue. I was doing a ton of analytical work, a ton of support to the mission, a ton of interfacing in the interagency to try to balance these different interests. Honestly, it was about allowing us to continue doing that work because the government was threatening to shut down USAID, and the ambassador was very concerned about all this because she was trying to maintain good relationships with the government.

Q: I mean, I just want to throw one out to you, which has a broader context, but clearly came up in the days with Egypt. This came before the Arab Spring, and a conversation that I had with then the deputy head of the Near East Bureau at state, and she said to me, I think we should have a division of labor where we, the State Department, and they had their own program office in NEA, take responsibility for the civil society efforts towards Egypt because they're going to be harder to push back against us. And USAID, which is concerned about its other programs doesn't have to have the democracy sensitivity, and I took it back to folks at AID, and immediately they said, no, no, no, don't do this. I'm just curious if you remember if you were part of that. What's your reaction?

GREEN: Well, this is an age-old thing, with some folks thinking that because USAID has to maintain its presence in country and has to have good relationships with government

officials to do that, that it's hard for them, or even impossible, to do some of the more challenging DRG work. In my experience in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, the government really doesn't differentiate between a program that's State Department managed or something that's USAID managed. What they know is that resources are flowing into civil society organizations and human rights organizations, and they don't like it. I don't think they care about the bureaucratic nuances between money flowing through this Bureau or that Bureau. It was all USG support. I always thought it was a red herring. And it really did depend on the Embassy's and Mission's willingness to take those risks. There were situations where it was beneficial for the State Department to be making those grants, if only because the USAID mission couldn't or wouldn't, and then we were still able to get resources into the hands of organizations that were trying to transform their societies. And vice versa.

Q: And I think it's a great point about how we divide these things up and think these are important, and then when you're out there, you realize that they all see it as one. But I'm curious, because this also has come up in the context of the National Endowment for Democracy, and occasionally with USIP and I've argued the same that you're arguing now - the Egyptians or whomever, they don't really make a distinction between NED and the State Department or AID. I'm curious if, because obviously, some people have made a major point, that NED, we're not the U.S government, we're an independent nonprofit organization that gets 95 percent of our money through either USAID or direct from Congress but how did this debate obviously play out then and continue to play out throughout the last fifteen years.

GREEN: I honestly think the most important thing is, if you're giving resources to organizations that are doing this work in tough environments, then you need to be doing so in a way that's trust based and agile. Kudos for NED or anyone who can give resources to these organizations and do so in a way that doesn't tie them in knots, because they do need the flexibility and direct support. The flip side of that is they also need the U.S government's advocacy and support and backing, because inevitably, in some of these environments, they're going to be attacked. Their work is going to be delegitimized. It's going to get twisted. Maybe they're going to have their offices raided, as we saw in Egypt. Having the Embassy and also the USAID mission stand up for them was oftentimes the difference maker. If the Embassy isn't bought in because the money's flowing from somewhere else, and they're not willing to stand up for them, that puts those organizations at real risk. In these tougher environments, I took the position that having a diversified portfolio was better because if one thing gets shut down, you still have other avenues of support.

Q: If you do have the backing, then it sort of makes it seem like their argument is correct from the start, meaning, so then they're basically saying you're part of the embassy or-

GREEN: Exactly. The USG's willingness to engage on behalf of a democratic leader or organization can be the difference between life and death, or the difference between being kept in jail with no representation or not. Of course, it's not the same in every

environment, but I have seen our intervention make a real impact. With more and more environments looking like Egypt in that 2008 - 2010 timeframe, it matters.

Q: Jumping ahead, and I know we're not going to get to everything today, so I am going to want to do a second hour, but jumping ahead to the stand with civil society era that you were involved with, and again, mostly focusing on its impact on USAID. A couple of questions. At that time, we also started talking very explicitly about closed society, closing societies and again, I'm just curious from your different perches, how do you think the U.S government, USAID specifically should approach closed societies in terms of assistance, in terms of potentially putting people at risk, versus providing support. That's often critical in those contexts. How did you navigate that? What do you recall in terms of where we came out on those issues after long debates?

GREEN: Stand with Civil Society came about because we were starting to see the Arab Spring turn in the other direction; there was a massive crackdown and conflict in Syria; we were getting massive pushback in Russia; we were being threatened to be kicked out in Ecuador. It wasn't just USAID. When I got to the NSC, I was overseeing public diplomacy programs. We started having Gulf States say, "You know what? We don't want you to independently select who gets to come to the U.S for these educational and training opportunities. We want to be the ones to choose." The squeeze was being put on U.S government partners and grantees, and I thought we needed to do something about it. The tension was how much political capital to invest in pushing back against these restrictions on civil society and civic space versus other interests that the U.S government had. We were many, many years into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and we needed strong security partnerships for that. There is always the economic interest that comes into play. This was an era where there was a lot of tension between these different impulses and having to navigate them. What I was trying to do with the Stand with Civil Society agenda was, one, bring greater recognition and understanding about these closures and what it meant for our ability to partner with civil society groups overseas, and two, to find a better balance between these different interests. One of the things that was really important to us was when government officials from Treasury or from DOD or from the State Department were traveling to these places and were formulating policy that they took the time to consider the impacts on civil society and civic space. We wrote into the Presidential Memorandum that it was a requirement that government officials at the country level and those visiting take civil society's perspective into consideration.

In terms of USAID and the debates around working in closing and closed spaces, it's always been my opinion that civil society organizations know what's best for them. I think you should defer to their wisdom and their risk tolerance and make the assistance available. We should be clear about what the U.S government will and will not do if our partners find themselves attacked by a government, and then let them make the choice. I don't think that you should obscure the origin of the resources, because then you're not letting them make a clear risk assessment. That's not fair. I think it's important to be transparent about who is providing the resources, where the money is coming from. It's also important to be clear about what support will be available – legal support, advocacy, communications, emergency assistance, other kinds of support if they find themselves in

trouble and need to get out of the country or to a safe house. Be upfront and honest about that. And then, make the resources available if they want them. That's always been my approach.

Q: And how well do you think we, USAID did with those principles? I mean, were we transparent? Were we clear with our grantees? How much did we feel we had to hide some stuff, just to protect them. But we couldn't be as transparent as we would normally be.

GREEN: Yeah, I mean, there was a period of time where I don't think we did that as well. We had layers between us and the ultimate recipients of funds and extensive measures in place to protect the grantees, or what we thought was protecting the grantees, but it also obscured the origin of the resources. There was a massive internal debate about whether, as a development agency, we should be taking such extraordinary measures. And so over time, we got much better at being transparent and backing our resources with real advocacy and support. So much so that, when I came back to USAID in 2021, we stood up Powered by the People and other emergency assistance programs. I felt very comfortable with where we had landed. I feel like we were no longer supporting things that we couldn't be completely open about and we were still able to get money in the hands of human rights activists, civil society organizations, investigative journalists in some of the toughest places, without putting them at unnecessary risk. And by unnecessary risk, I mean, if an organization needs a waiver from having to use branding, then that's something that we could grant or if we needed to make sure that there wasn't public reporting that tied them to USAID, that was something that we could do, but they were clear about who was partnering with them and where they were getting the resources. And I felt pretty good about that balance.

Q: One of the interesting post-your-tenure developments is how this is now being replayed in a very different way, where the new administration and their advocates are basically making the argument again that USAID was seeking to undermine governments, and it's come up again in a very different and much more belligerent manner. And I was kind of surprised to listen to a couple of podcasts on the subject but will save that for another day. Let's go back to your view from the NSC. As you were watching USAID from the NSC in that period, 2013 to 2016, and specifically on democracy, governance issues, were there specific things that you said, hey, sitting here, I see things a lot differently than I did when I was sitting in USAID, and if you can identify some of those.

GREEN: This is a great question. First, I was always impressed by USAID's expertise. We were trying to do the Stand with Civil Society agenda and understand the trends and restrictions that were being put on civil society. And USAID had this amazing partnership with ICNL [International Center for Non-Profit Law], and they were bringing all kinds of data and analysis to play. That was very, very valuable. But the flip side of that was sometimes I felt like USAID was too academic in its approach. When you're at the NSC, you're trying to get stuff done. It's a very action-oriented place, and you're in a very proximate, immediate way, trying to advance the President's agenda. So, as valuable as

all that analysis and assessment was, it was also imperative to harness it for near-term action. I would say that was the first observation.

And then the second was USAID had such a powerful and important perspective on what was happening in these different countries but wasn't always effective weighing in on the core policy questions. For example, we would be discussing what to do about a crackdown on civil society; at the same time, we have an interest in protecting overflight rights to that country, and we have economic relationships with that country. And how do we respond to this crackdown in light of all of that? USAID would come to the table, and I was very adamant that they have a voice at that table. But when they showed up, oftentimes they weren't engaging with the central policy question and bringing their field knowledge and DRG expertise to bear. It was well, we have a cooperative agreement, or we have an IQC that does X, Y and Z that maybe could be tapped into. And it really felt like you're coming to the table, as if you're just an implementer of the policy. We want to hear your perspective on the central policy question.

Q: Is that a training issue for USAID, or is it something that in a sense, USAID has passed down generations, that if you go out of your lane, you're going to get in trouble in some ways.

GREEN: I think it was a training issue but also a confidence issue. USAID internalized this idea that we were a secondary policy player. When I came back into government as a political appointee, this was one of the main things that Samantha Power was trying to get through to folks – you have a voice, you have a perspective, you have a position. We have a seat at the table – use it. Her direction to us was always if you see a problem in the world, don't assume that someone else is going to do something about it. Initiate, do something, and eventually we'll figure out who to pass it off to. When I was in these leadership positions, what I would say to my team is to have the confidence that you have something important to say and that we have a perspective that might not otherwise be heard if you're not the one voicing it. We held trainings on engaging in policy conversations. But I think it was both training and encouraging people to speak up, to believe they belonged there, and then to back them up if there was pushback.

Q: I know you have to go. So, we'll pause here. I do want part two, because we didn't talk at all about what's really critical, which is the four years that you spent as the head of the anti-corruption push, and when you were at the head of the Bureau. We definitely want to go through that.

Q: Today is August 19, Tuesday, and I'm here with Shannon Green for part two of the oral history interview with her. And Shannon, we're going to jump right into the Biden administration and your work during that administration. But to start it off, just maybe share with us how you got involved with the Biden team and how that led to your being recruited to work in USAID's front office.

GREEN: My involvement with the Biden team goes back to my tenure on the National Security Council staff from 2013 to 2015 because a lot of the people serving there ended up populating his foreign policy team. At the time, so this is in 2020, I was working at CIVIC (Center for Civilians in Conflict). And one day, I got a call that the foreign policy team was going to build out a dedicated group of people looking at democracy and human rights. And they asked if I would join and co-chair that team on a voluntary basis. I spent four or five months writing papers and advising the campaign on positions that they could take on democracy and human rights issues, and really trying to lift up the issues that we thought could use some focus and attention if Biden were to get elected. It was probably my involvement on that advisory team that helped me get picked up.

Q: When were you formally recruited to start with the Biden administration?

GREEN: That was very early on, so January, February of 2021 and then I made it through the whole process, got my security clearance and was on board in early May of 2021. I guess within the first four or five months.

Q: You were in a, basically a new position there. Maybe describe both the position and how that position came about, what it was designed to reflect in terms of the new administration, the new administrator because it hadn't existed before.

GREEN: Great question. The initial position I was recruited for was to stand up a task force on anti-corruption within USAID, and the reason for that was as a senator, as Vice President, as a candidate, and then ultimately as President, corruption was something that Biden had diagnosed as a cancer within society. During the campaign, he pledged to devote more effort into combating corruption, both at home and abroad, and hold a Summit for Democracy. Anti-corruption was one of the core pillars. When Samantha Power came into USAID, she looked around and asked, "Who do we have working on this?" And there were very few people. I think she very quickly came to the realization that in order to deliver on the President's foreign policy priority, there needed to be a team. I came in with a pretty blank slate, a lot of running room. I set out to build a team, build out a budget, build out programming, figure out what our strategy should be and run with it. That's how I spent the first two and a half or so years at USAID in the administration.

Q: I want to dive a little deeper into that, but before I do that, I just want to, particularly in light of what's happened since and in just to go back to the period January or even November, whatever the election date was in 2020, through May. Just in terms of the transition from President Trump to President Biden, on the issues of democracy, governance, corruption, and the like. I mean, what was your sense coming in, in terms of continuities versus real shifts that the new administration intended to make?

GREEN: There were three things that really struck me. One was the issue of credibility. We came in with some reputational damage with our partners and allies, governmental and non-governmental, around the world. We realized that we had to rebuild that trust

and rebuild those relationships. That was order number one. And we recognized in order to do that, we had to be very clear eyed and honest about weaknesses in our own democracy. That was a central idea at the time. To have legitimacy leading on DRG overseas, we needed to admit our democracy is very much a work in progress and has suffered real damage, and we need to address it on the domestic front and internationally.

Q: Were there specific issues on the domestic front that you were focused on?

GREEN: Corruption was one of them. There were lots of concerns about corrupt people being able to warehouse their money in the U.S. That was one of the big issues we knew we needed to address. Another issue was around this, the way that human rights were being defined.

Q: I think it was natural rights, but yeah.

GREEN: Which felt like that was really walking back years, maybe even decades, of progress on making the human rights agenda universal and shifting the discourse from human rights as Western values to something that are truly inherent to people and universal. We had to rebuild support for the idea of the universality of human rights. And then the third thing, which is maybe a little bit more bureaucratic, is that we had to rebuild the capacity of the DRG cadre.

Q: Then again, as we were discussing, basically you're being put into a new position, a new team, to create a new team. Just maybe explain the bureaucratic nature of where this new position was located, how it did relate to the DRG center, how it related to other bureaus and offices within the agency at the time?

GREEN: Great question. You're going deep. It's always tricky whenever you try to introduce a new theme or a new structure within a bureaucracy. And I think USAID is no different in that regard. What we were trying to do was both give it the authority and status of being directly under the Administrator's view. It was important that it was attached to the front office and had that proximity to the administrator. Because, as you know, bureaucratically, the closer you are to the center of power, the more people are willing to listen and contribute time. We needed to get people to volunteer their time, because we didn't have permanent staff at first, so we were both trying to achieve the proximity to the administrator while realizing in a bureaucracy, in order to get stuff done, you also need communication support and admin support. And if you want to start moving money, you need a program office, and you need a whole infrastructure in place. Having been at USAID before, I was really trying to figure out how to combine those two things. What we ended up with was a dual structure of being formally housed within what was IPI at the time and reporting directly to the Administrator.

The relationship with DRG was very important because the senior anti-corruption advisor in DRG was the first staff member of the task force, and she was there pretty much the whole time. So, there was that connecting point. We didn't want to put the Task Force in DRG because we were trying to make it a cross-sectoral thing; we were trying to say

anti-corruption is imperative for development and democracy. And in talking to a lot of people, they suggested if we were in DRG, it will be perceived as “only” a democracy thing. There needed to be greater ability to reach into the other sectors. The hybrid arrangement gave us the best of both worlds.

For this to work, it was critical that we stayed in close relationship and collaboration with DRG because there were so many crossover opportunities, and because we did three summits together. One of the three pillars of the democracy summit was anti-corruption. It required that we walked in lockstep with DRG the whole time.

Q: Other than the one detail you mentioned, the senior advisor, how many other people were formerly on your team?

GREEN: I think at its height, like twenty-two, maybe twenty-four.

Q: A pretty large bureaucratic unit. And just again, to clarify, how many of these sorts of self-standing themes were part of the front office at this time. I mean, was anti-corruption one of one, two, or five?

GREEN: Well, there were other task forces. There was one on COVID and one on the Northern Triangle. Those were more temporary.

Q: Temporary probably lasted a year or two.

GREEN: Well, yeah, but they were stood up to be temporary. They were set up in response to an emergency. Basically, there's this thing that's happening in the world, it requires a real rapid surge in attention, staffing, etc. The idea of those was always that it was going to wind down. We knew from the very beginning that anti-corruption was not an emergency, per se. It's something that's been here from the beginning of time and will probably, unfortunately still be here until the end of time. We always built it with institutionalization as one of the goals. We had four goals, and institutionalization was one of them. We were very deliberate about building out permanent staff capacity in Washington and in USAID Missions. We did a lot of training, a lot of capacity building efforts, issuing guides, coming up with metrics. We got a budget line item so we had resources to work with. And we were always thinking about what the ultimate home of the anti-corruption work was going to be. It was a little bit different than some of those others that were attached to the front office because we were trying to build towards something permanent.

Q: But like those also eventually, the idea was that it would be absorbed somewhere.

GREEN: Correct. The idea was to be absorbed somewhere in a larger, more robust, more permanent form. And that was one of the things that we had mapped out for ourselves from the very beginning. We had to figure out what that institutionalization looked like so there was a permanent anti-corruption capacity at USAID.

Q: You mentioned institutionalization is one of the four goals. What were the other three?

GREEN: Oh, gosh, Larry. Something about shaping policy. We were very engaged in interagency strategy and policy processes. Because, as I said at the outset, this wasn't just a development priority, this was a national security priority. So, there was a lot of policy work, including shaping the first ever U.S. strategy on countering corruption. The second had to do with our programmatic activities – we stood up a whole suite of cutting-edge anti-corruption programs. The third was the cross-sectoral work, that is trying to embed anti-corruption into sectors. Through the anti-corruption policy, we worked with other Bureaus, particularly Humanitarian Assistance and Global Health, to build out their anti-corruption practices and commitments. For example, we did a whole guidebook on integrating anti-corruption into these other sectors to move that along. And then the fourth was institutionalization. It was something like that.

Q: I mean, you mentioned one of the big pieces of work was these democracy summits, which were two or three of those. And the other piece that you mentioned was the inter agency work, and so I'm just curious on that one, because that is, as you said from the outset, always a challenge. Were there specific areas where you felt particularly successful, and then those that you felt like there was just too much pushback to achieve what you'd really set out to do?

GREEN: Honestly, this was one of the best interagency efforts that I have been part of, and I've been a part of a lot of interagency efforts. I think it was because, unlike in other periods, there was real alignment from the President through the Vice President to the Cabinet levels of the departments and agencies that this was a priority. Secretary of State, Administrator of USAID, Secretary of the Treasury, and Attorney General, because DOJ was so important – all of them were on the same page. We didn't have to fight to get people to prioritize it, they were all doing as much as they could, I think, with the capacity that they had, and trying to build capacity to deliver on this agenda.

There are a couple of things that I thought went particularly well, and that was on the accountability front. There was a lot of combined effort and success trying to identify the perpetrators of the most gross corruption and find different ways of holding them accountable and even innovating to figure out how we can do that. I think that really came to bear when Russia fully invaded Ukraine because we were sanctioning and freezing assets and confiscating yachts. USAID was a small player on that part of the agenda, but DOJ, Treasury and State were all working very much in lockstep to hold perpetrators accountable. And then the other piece that I thought was good was on the real estate front. One of the things that we were trying to do through the Summit for Democracy process was mobilize international partners to address corruption at home and abroad. As part of that, we were trying to show that we were putting our money where our mouth was. So, we're standing up all these programs, right? We're assisting partners address corruption, and at home, we're trying to clean up our own system. One of the big successes was establishing rules so people who are engaged in real estate transactions have disclosed who was purchasing those parcels of land. It was definitely

one of the better examples of interagency coordination and collaboration, and I think that's why we were able to move pretty far, pretty fast.

Q: Was there any pushback that you encountered within USAID intra agency? So, you said you work with the health sector and economic growth, but were there times when you felt basically, they were just conflicting perspectives on these issues and the corruption piece didn't necessarily rise to the top of the USAID priority?

GREEN: Yeah, I'll give you two examples. One is interagency, and one is intra-agency. The interagency, as I said, functioned quite well together and was pushing pretty hard. We're using our sanctions authorities, we're funding investigative journalism, civil society advocacy, all kinds of things. And towards the end, there were some governments that started pushing back. Paraguay is a good example of that where the government started to pull back cooperation and threaten the civil society organizations we were funding. And that's when we started to get the more classic tensions between managing the relationship and advancing other interests in this country, while continuing to make progress on anti-corruption.

Within USAID, there wasn't like strident pushback. But as you know, everybody has their own priorities for good reason. When we were talking to the humanitarian assistance people or the global health people about what additional safeguards we could put in place to further mitigate the risk of corruption, they had to stay focused on their mission of saving lives. We had to figure out how to do this in a way that didn't slow down getting aid in the hands of people who desperately needed it. We found ways of working that out. And it was an ongoing conversation. We had to understand their perspective. They had to understand ours. You just have to keep at it and find ways of meeting them where they're at and then recognizing that this was an emerging priority.

Q: Is there anything specific that you want to just share about the time as the head of the task force before I take you through the transition to the bureau?

GREEN: I would just say, I think we really accomplished a lot and put anti-corruption at the center of a lot of our work on democracy and development. There was a real sea change. And you know how hard it is to get bureaucratic transformation. By the end, most people at USAID recognized that where corruption thrives, people are not content with their government, are not getting the services that they deserve, and are not being treated with dignity, we need to address it from a development perspective. We gained a lot of buy-in over the course of a few short years, and it is really sad to see all of that progress erased.

Q: You made the argument successfully, or you're recruited to make the argument successfully that you needed to be in the front office to have this task force so that it could have this type of impact across the agency. And then, after two years, two and a half years, a decision is made to establish a new bureau that will be known as the Democracy Bureau, and the task force gets folded into that. So maybe, again, to give all of us a sense of the history of both forming the new bureau, of folding the center into it, and how you,

addressed some of the concerns that you may have had about ensuring that corruption remains a front and center issue for everyone in the agency and is not just viewed as part of a democracy programming.

GREEN: As we discussed, one of our tasks was institutionalization. We started playing around with different paths to institutionalization. Could it live permanently in the front office? Does it live permanently with the DDI/IPI conglomerate? Does it go somewhere else, or do we combine forces with the DRG Center to create a Bureau? We found that last one to be the best option for two reasons. One, anti-corruption was always intimately connected to DRG, and DRG staff were the strongest proponents and allies. There was significant capacity and interconnectivity with work that was happening elsewhere in the DRG sector. Investigative journalism and mobilization of civil society were two main strategies for addressing corruption – that was in DRG. Governance – working with and strengthening the capacity of institutions for accountability and oversight – was in the governance part of the DRG Center. Thinking about the narrative work that needed to be done to change attitudes and behaviors from corruption – that was in DRG. There was a natural affinity, more so than with any other sector. So that was the first. The second is that it was mutually beneficial to go this route. The Anti-Corruption Task Force was looking for a home. DRG was looking for a way to sustain the boost it got during the Biden administration because of Samantha Power’s advocacy and support. By joining forces, we were able to make the case to be a full-fledged Bureau. We both got lifted up.

We did think about the perceptions of other sectors – are they going to relegate this to a quote, unquote, democracy issue that they didn't have to pay attention to? Ultimately, we decided that we had made enough progress that that wasn't the case. Secondly, we felt like by being a Bureau, we had more bureaucratic heft. We had more opportunities to make our case on equal footing with other functional bureaus and regional bureaus. Three, there was a policy advisory council that I sat on as the head of the task force, and now the Bureau had a seat on it, which meant that where there were tradeoffs or tensions between our work on DRG or anti-corruption and other development sectors, we could bring them to the Policy Advisory Council and work through them. Finally, we had made a lot of progress through the Summit for Democracy process, lifting up democracy, anti-corruption, and human rights and making them more relevant for national security and development, and they happen to hang together. It was an opportunity for all of us to not just institutionalize the integration of anti-corruption, but to use that as a way of institutionalizing some of the democracy and governance approaches that we had been trying to make a cross cutting.

Q: Just from a historical perspective. Democracy and governance, it started out as a center, gone to be an office. It had been discussed at various points in time of elevating it to be a bureau, but it never was a self-standing bureau. And so, this effort in the 2020s was really the first time that there was a standalone DRG bureau in USAID history. From that historical perspective, it was certainly a big deal. But I want to go back Shannon to something you said and actually just repeated, and just to compare, because certainly when I was doing DRG work, I would make the same argument that you made about anti-corruption, which is that democracy should be viewed as a cross cutting issue to that

wherever we were working, We should be sensitive to democracy, human rights considerations in our efforts, and that that should inform our programs and health and education, environment or whatever. And I'm just curious having had the experience of doing this as a task force, where that was certainly embedded in the institutional structure that existed. And then going back to now being part of a bureau, and just comparing the work on anti-corruption with the work on human rights, with the work on democracy, in terms of having it taken seriously by other bureaus, by other field missions. How much it mattered whether you were a task force sitting in the administrator's office, whether you were a self-designated Bureau, and just the difference between democracy and anti-corruption in that regard.

GREEN: It felt very, very familiar when we were making those arguments because we had long been advocating for democracy, human rights, and governance, and in particular, governance to be a lens through which other sectors saw their work. The differences were not that acute, to be honest. And our governance colleagues had made major strides in integration over the years. I think we lost people when they felt like we were telling them what to do or didn't understand their mission, as well as their constraints. The approach we took on the Task Force was to try to understand, first, what are you trying to accomplish? How is corruption detracting from your ability to accomplish that? And how do we work together to figure that out? Before we combined and became a Bureau, we were already exchanging lessons with the DRG Center about how we were approaching the other bureaus to make that case more effectively. So then, when we became a Bureau, we were able to make a more coherent, comprehensive argument. One of the main ways we were going to advance that was with the DRG policy that came out in 2024.

Q: Late in the administration.

GREEN: Pretty late in the administration. Part of the reason for that is because we took great pains to run a process that was inclusive of all the different stakeholders in Washington and in missions. We wanted the Policy to speak to their priorities, as well as the elevation of DRG. We wanted to create accountability for following through with the idea that all issues are democracy issues – which is the way that the Administrator framed it. We did that by committing to something called a democracy review process, which was a way to honestly take stock of how our various priorities in the countries in which we were working were potentially in tension or conflict with one another. We were finally unpacking how our presence in a country and the support we were giving could all be better leveraged to support our sectoral outcomes and DRG goals. We had started two of those by the end.

Q: And Shannon, who participated in this review. Is it internal?

GREEN: It was internal to the agency. It was very important that we did this in-house but the teams were drawing from the DRG Bureau, the regional Bureaus, the Policy Office, etc.

And then they would do two trips to the field to assess and tease out tensions between our various goals and really understand where we might be working at cross purposes with one another. Again, just USAID. They put it in the context of the whole relationship with that country and other foreign policy concerns, but we were only trying to speak to USAID in the first instance. And then make recommendations for what adjustments or refinements could be made to our strategies and portfolio in order to mitigate those risks or try to get greater coherence and try to resolve some of those contradictions.

Q: When you said, you did one or two, one or two countries, or one or two rounds of these?

GREEN: Well, we did two rounds in one country. We had started the second country. I think we were doing round one, and we had already named the third and fourth country. We had set out for ourselves in the policy to do one in each region in the first year of policy implementation, and then we would assess and see whether it achieved anything. Was it a meaningful process? Were we able to honestly surface some of these tensions? Were we able to find solutions or recommendations to resolve some of them, or at least mitigate those contradictions? If so, we planned to formalize the process.

Q: And you never got through that process because the transition took place?

GREEN: Yes.

Q: Just a bureaucratic question, which has always been on my mind since I was the one who wrote about this initially. You were designated the head of the Bureau, but you were not Senate confirmed. How did that in your own mind play in terms of DRG's role within the agency? Do you think it mattered, it didn't matter because who you are, everyone knew you no one really paid attention to whether it was Senate confirmed or not.

GREEN: I don't think it mattered. When we were putting different options forward for the structure, we did play around with the pros and cons of being a Senate confirmed Assistant Administrator versus a non-Senate confirmed Assistant to the Administrator. And there are pros and cons. But ultimately, in talking to peers, it seems like there really wasn't going to be that much impact in terms of our ability to influence, to make a difference, to be listened to, to have credibility. I don't think it really affected us negatively. As you said, maybe it was the fact that I'd been around for a while, or maybe people just really don't care about those things. I don't know.

Q: I mean, I've been on this argument a couple of times. When I started in the Clinton administration, PPC did not have a Senate-confirmed Assistant Administrator

GREEN: It was office, right?

Q: It was a bureau without a Senate confirmed person. And during the Clinton Administration, Brian Atwood decided to request another Senate confirmed position so that he could make the head of PPC a Senate confirmed person, which became Tom Fox.

And at the time, it was a big deal. When I came back in the Obama administration, I recommended PPL do an assistant to the administrator, because it would take too long to get another authorization and I just felt that, in this case, the head of PPL should be the advisor to the administrator. So that was the argument. But in truth, Raj Shah then just totally compromised my arguments when he decided that, hey, this is a great idea, and I'm going to create four or five more assistants to the administrator. PPL is now one of five or six and, and I think that's continued.

GREEN: The calculation was that we felt like we had so much momentum because again, the President, Vice President, Cabinet level officials, Administrator, were all rowing in the same direction, all prioritizing this issue. The prospect of having that position unfilled was untenable.

Q: I have a few just very specific inside baseball questions, just to get you on the record. A common critique of USAID is that we were too reliant on contractors and NGOs, mostly international organizations. And I'm just curious, as you reflect on your years at USAID, but including your time both on the task force and as an assistant administrator, what's your take on that now? I mean, is there an alternative, or were we just-is this just the reality of doing business in Washington?

GREEN: Hmm, okay, I want to preface this answer with I, unlike a lot of other people, didn't see this big division between contractors and grantees. People would approach me and try to convince me that one was better than the other for various reasons. Frankly, I saw them both as being partners, great partners, that had a lot of expertise and a lot of commitment to the issues that they were working on. I truly could not differentiate in terms of the devotion and desire to do good, and commitment to having an impact between the contractors and grantees. If I had the chance to do it all over again, one of the things that I would really like to see is moving away from a system that is so cumbersome that it requires us to rely on third parties because what I would really like to see is us finding partners that are doing amazing work. And that could be leaders, or that could be organizations whose missions align with what the U.S. government and USAID are trying to accomplish, and for us to just give them core support, that's my whole thing. If I had the chance to build a whole new system, I would really, really love to see a system that was based on mutual trust and just buying into the work that organizations are doing because we agree with their vision, we see that they're having impact, and we're supportive of their leaders. And if we're able to do that, I know this must sound like so pie in the sky, but like-

Q: Pie in the sky, or, I know sounds like MacKenzie Scott.

GREEN: Yeah, philanthropy has moved in that direction. When I was at CIVIC, I was the beneficiary of a relationship with a bilateral government donor that operated like that, and the relationship we had was so different. They were invested in us as an organization. They believed in us as an organization, and we had such an open and honest relationship with them for that reason. I would have done anything to deliver results because there was just that feeling of mutual trust and confidence. I've been on both sides of it. I don't

think that is how the whole system could work, but I would like to see us be able to move in that direction. Find people in organizations that are doing amazing work and bet on them as a way of building infrastructure, not just doing projects.

Q: I'm with you, but I do think we have to respond to both the critiques and the realities. Second question. Generically at USAID, but even within Democracy Bureau, we've gone from three or four focus areas to nine or ten. Does that spread USAID too thin? Or is it just the inevitable complications of operating in a sector that you have that type of expertise on all these different issues.

GREEN: Both and here's how I'm going to justify it. I'm a big fan of prioritizing. When I came into DRG, the policy process had been going for quite some time, and my initial take was that we were trying to do too much. If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. So, we really shrunk it down to four areas that we thought were at the cutting edge of DRG work that were responding to global challenges and where we needed to develop and kind of hone in on our expertise and tools. We were trying to concentrate on what the DRG Bureau was going to do because I think in Washington, the role that they can play is finding the new frontiers, developing capacity, developing resources, looking into new paradigms, testing out things. And I recognize that, like with so many missions around the world, what mix of programming they're going to need to do, and how that relates to the context that they're in, and what expertise that requires is a whole different thing. We were really trying to balance having some residual expertise in each of these different areas for missions to draw upon, and where we didn't have the expertise to have contracting mechanisms or rapid response mechanisms to deploy that TA, while focusing our staff on those four core priorities.

Q: The hallmark of what used to be USAID, of a decentralized agency with fifty sixty, field missions responsible to their specific environments makes it hard to then say, okay, here are the three or four things you must be doing in this sector.

GREEN: We were trying to develop a theory of how the Bureau would take up certain issues, create new expertise, build field capacity, and then kind of roll it out. We were thinking about a phased process, where we could know when we're in experimentation mode, when we're in build mode, when we're in institutionalization mode. We had to have the ability to constantly renew our capacity, and go through this process so that we could take on the new things and the new challenges, and then count on folks in the field over time to have enough expertise to pick up the things that have been around in the sector for a while. It was kind of a conveyor belt idea that we were working to develop – what is it that an operating unit in Washington should do, as opposed to what DRG officers in the field should do? What is our value add? And how do we make sure that we stay fresh, even while we're continuing to support the field and what they need?

Q: If you'll indulge me, one more question, which puts us into a sort of both reflection on your time, but also reaction to what's happened in the last six months. One of the issues that has come up from some of the critics of USAID particularly of the democracy sector, has to do with the question of interference in domestic affairs, of countries that were

working on in with development programs. And the democracy programs are usually viewed as the most egregious example of interfering, picking winners, looking for good guys to support. And I've been surprised at the level of this critique that's been offered by those who are opposed to USAID, and particularly the Democracy Program. And I'm just curious looking back, is there anything that you think we should have done differently in this regard? Is there any validity to the critique? And how do you think about it in terms of potentially moving forward?

GREEN: I think if you only look at it from the perspective of autocratic or anti-democratic governments, I can see how you would come to that conclusion because autocratic governments don't want you supporting democratic actors in their societies. Because they don't want any dissent, they don't want any opposition, they don't want any independent space or thought separate from them. They want to be able to control everything. That's the marker of autocracy. And USAID did do those things. We supported journalists, we supported civil society, we supported reformers within the system. I can see how that was very uncomfortable for a lot of those governments. However, if you look at it from the perspective of what people in those societies want, the picture shifts. If we accept that the government is not the only or most important actor, and we also care about what people in those societies are experiencing and what systems they want, and what they're asking for from the international community, and what they desire in terms of solidarity and support, I think you can come to the conclusion that we were invited into these places by domestic actors who very much wanted that partnership and wanted that support. I really push back on the idea that USAID was interfering, was unwelcome, or was trying to usurp the regimes in those countries because the fact of the matter is, there are people in those societies who want a different future, and they were reaching out to us and looking for our assistance and our partnership. They valued our assistance and our partnership.

I think that reframing is important – we don't have to accept authoritarian framing. At one point, when I was at USAID, we were having a policy conversation, and somebody kept going back to what an autocratic leader wanted, suggesting that person was the only voice that mattered. And I said, "wait a minute, this country is not just this unelected, unaccountable, autocratic leader and yes, we need to respect authority and whoever is the sovereign government of those countries, but we also need to respect the wishes of people who are living there and be responsive to what they want and what they need from us." That's my frame, right? We were never there because nobody wanted us there. We were there because there were significant segments of society that wanted us there and invited us to be there and valued our partnership. And that's what I always go back to, that's my north star in terms of the critique. If people are literally willing to put it all on the line for democracy, to have their rights protected, to be able to vote in an election that actually matters, or even just to have their voice heard, and they're taking huge risks, surely we can step up too. If we can stand with them and support them in any way, I think that that's worth doing.

End of interview