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AMBASSADOR MARC GROSSMAN

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good morning. This is December 12, 2022. I am Robin Matthewman and today I have the pleasure of interviewing Ambassador Marc Grossman for ADST's Afghanistan project. So, welcome, Marc.

GROSSMAN: Thank you.

Q: I wonder if we could just start off by summarizing your experience with Afghanistan since 2001, or before if relevant.

GROSSMAN: My experience with Afghanistan goes back to my first post in the Foreign Service. I served in Pakistan as a junior officer from 1977 to 1979. I had a chance to visit Afghanistan several times then. It's hard to imagine now, but we used to drive from Islamabad to Kabul. We would swap houses with junior officers there. We wanted to go up and get out of the heat and to do some things in Afghanistan; our colleagues in Afghanistan wanted to come to Islamabad and see what was going on in the capital there. So, I was in Afghanistan a number of times. In terms of connecting, reconnecting, I was the under secretary of state for political affairs in 2001 after 9/11. There was an enormous effort, as you know, to both prepare for and then act in Afghanistan militarily. And after that, I kept following events there until I retired in 2005. I was later recalled to the government 2011 and 2012 to be the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan [SRAP] after Ambassador Dick Holbrooke died.

Q: So, initially, after the 9/11 attack your work as under secretary for political affairs involved helping to form our response to the attack and a little bit of setting up the structure of the embassy and the new Afghan government. And later, you reconnected with Ryan Crocker when he became ambassador as you became special representative in 2011–2012. This was the time of the diplomatic surge, also called the diplomatic campaign, and it was a massive effort to try to secure Afghanistan for the future with a lot of money and a lot of regional support.

GROSSMAN: Yes.

Q: And these two periods, which occurred in the first decade of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, are covered well in your original ADST oral history. So, today, I wanted to

give you an opportunity to provide your reflections on the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan during the whole period. I know that is a big question. (laughs)

GROSSMAN: Thank you. When I look back to September 11, 2001, I don't have any regrets about the effort to move militarily into Afghanistan at that time to destroy the Taliban and show that that attack on the United States of America—which was organized in Afghanistan and planned in Afghanistan—would not go unanswered. We would respond. I think the idea of responding then was extremely important.

If you think about the diplomacy that was required all through Central Asia, with Russia, and with many other places to try to support that military effort, I think diplomacy really showed its value to the nation. My own reflection is that the effort in Afghanistan was an important one. The military effort I think, by and large, succeeded in its initial objectives. The Bonn Conference that took place—I hope you've talked to Jim Dobbins and you'll talk to Ryan Crocker—setting up a structure in Afghanistan was an important event, again with diplomacy in the lead. My view is that having done that, we should have continued our presence for a year or two after that to make sure that that stuck. And then, I think we would have been wise to step back and let the Afghans and the region take the lead and run with it.

When I look back, I think that there was a shift in attention in Washington from Afghanistan to Iraq. Iraq took up an enormous, enormous, enormous amount of time and energy. I think Colin Powell said at the time that it sucked the energy out of everything else. And so the bureaucracy then took over the main direction and execution of policy in Afghanistan and said, Well, if we're here, well, let's make some changes. Let's see if we can't do right by the Afghan government and let's do right by Afghan people. And I understand that. Many of the things that got accomplished—as I have talked about in my oral history—are things that are really important and to be proud of: what happened in Afghanistan to improve the lives of Afghan women and girls, for education, for entrepreneurs, businesses, for freedom, for the press, all these kinds of things, are very important things. But I think the nation-building effort started to take on a life of its own as senior people—the most senior people in Washington—were paying most of their attention to Iraq.

By the time I returned to the question of Afghanistan 2011–2012, as I said in things that I've published, one of the most important pieces of understanding that effort, the diplomatic campaign in Afghanistan in 2011–2012, was the fundamental understanding that there never going to be a military solution to the problems in Afghanistan. And so, while you're absolutely right to talk about the diplomatic surge and the efforts and all of the money that was spent, a lot of it was predicated on the idea that if the U.S. could get a conversation going with the Taliban and then get the Afghans involved in that—as you'll recall the whole idea was to get Afghans talking to other Afghans about the future of Afghanistan—then we might be able to find a way to let Afghans proceed with their future and lessen U.S. involvement at that time. And as you know, from studying this time, I was very involved in this effort. I tried to create strong regional support for Afghanistan. We tried to follow the public instructions we got from Secretary Clinton's Asia Society speech in February 2011. We worked hard with the Afghans to strengthen their own governance, society, and economy. And, very importantly, we also tried to have

a conversation with the Taliban. And the idea was to try to bring all these things together so that the Afghans could make decisions about their own future. We recognized that there was no military solution, and we wanted our objective was to lessen our presence in Afghanistan over time.

I left the SRAP job at the end of 2012. If you think forward now to 2021, I thought President Biden was right to withdraw from Afghanistan. You can't continue to do these things without public support. There was no public support left for the effort in Afghanistan. I might have left a thousand or fifteen troops there to play "whack a mole" with terrorists over time, but that's not what the president decided to do. And, of course, you ended up in August of 2021 with the withdrawal.

As I reflect on that time, first, I give an enormous amount of credit to our people in Afghanistan, both civilian and military. They moved 125,000 people out of Afghanistan in a few weeks. Yes, the pictures were terrible. There was a lot of chaos. It could have obviously been done better in many ways but give credit for what people accomplished in the awful circumstances in which they operated. When I was ambassador to Turkey, I had the task of quickly moving seven thousand people out of northern Iraq who were under attack by Saddam Hussein, and I know how very difficult it was. Seven thousand people. In comparison, getting a hundred and twenty-five thousand people from Afghanistan is an astonishing accomplishment. So, the diplomats who did that, the military people who did that, we should stop for a minute and give credit even as we recognize that it was a terrible mess, and especially tragic for the people we left behind that had supported us.

I think world leaders and countries around the world understood why we put an end to this effort in Afghanistan. But the way was damaging to both U.S. credibility and to the idea that we can do hard things right.

The final thing, if you'd allow me one pitch, Ambassador Marcie Ries and I have just released four "Blueprints" on how to change some of the ways the State Department does business, and one of our Blueprints, principally written by Ambassador Pat Kennedy, is a detailed plan for a diplomatic reserve corps [DRC]. Perhaps had there been a diplomatic reserve corps, the effort to depart Afghanistan might have been done in a more systematic way and might have been more operationally successful. If the DRC we have proposed would have been fully in existence, President Biden and Secretary Blinken would have been able to call on a group of organized, trained, thousand-person professionals ready to deploy to Kabul. They would, I believe, have been of great support to the embassy and the military units that were already there. Again, all credit to those who did this hard work, but ad hoc is not the right answer for the future.

Q: Thank you. One of the keys to all this was the Taliban. It seems like they were pretty consistent that they were never going to recognize the Afghan government. But there was a lot of effort to try. There is also some indication that President Hamid Karzai actually tried to bring them into the tent early in the process when the U.S. wasn't really ready for that. You thought about this a lot in the time you were the special representative. Can you talk a little bit about the Taliban in this context?

GROSSMAN: The job I was given in 2011 was to see if we could open up a dialogue with the Taliban. Dick Holbrooke had started that. The Germans had identified somebody who we might be able to talk to. And so I started a conversation with the Taliban in Doha. The Qataris were excellent hosts for this effort and tried their very best to bring the two sides together. This job I took on was not to try to define the future of Afghanistan. It was to try to get the two sides, the Afghan government and the Taliban, to talk to one another. We had set up a series of confidence-building measures, which we hoped at the end of the sequence would be that the two sides would talk to one another. For example, to get there, we would do some exchanging of prisoners, including U.S. Army Sergeant Bergdahl; the Taliban might have been able to open a very specifically limited office in Qatar. There were a series of steps, and we hoped the last one would be the beginning of a conversation between the two sides.

It didn't work out for any number of reasons. One of them was that the Taliban saw that we were withdrawing U.S. troops. When I started the conversation with them, we had a hundred thousand young men and women there in uniform, but President Obama had laid out a plan to reduce that to sixty-some thousand, to forty, to thirty. I'm guessing that, in Taliban conversations among themselves, they said, Why give anything away? The path is clear; the Americans are going to withdraw. And so, in terms of leverage, that wasn't really very helpful to me, but we did our best. I also concluded that, for internal Taliban politics, what they wanted was to get their people in Guantanamo back. They weren't, as you say, at all interested in talking to President Karzai. And so, this turned out to be a conversation about, could we manage some kind of prisoner exchange, which we hoped would lead to something more, but it did not.

There were a lot of things that happened along the way. You'll recall that in September of 2011 the Afghan head of their peace negotiator was assassinated by the Taliban while we were all at the UN General Assembly trying to work this with President Karzai and others. In December of 2011, when I was on my way back to Qatar with the slight hope that maybe we could accomplish something, President Karzai decided that he had changed his mind and wasn't in favor of what I was doing anymore. He hadn't really prepared his own society for this. And so, there were a lot of bumps along the way. In the end, we failed. And so, this was left to others to try to finish.

My biggest regret in all of it is not just that we were unable to get Afghans to talk to other Afghans about the future of Afghanistan; it is that I could not get Sergeant Bergdahl home. That issue went to my successor, Jim Dobbins.

Q: On the diplomatic surge, a lot of economic and social development happened over those twenty years, including in the years during and after your time as SRAP. There was a lot of money flowing, so it was hard to manage, but at the end of twenty years, it looked like a lot of change and development had happened, particularly in Kabul. So, in retrospect, would you have done anything differently in terms of trying to slow it down or making it more sustainable?

GROSSMAN: Two points. One is that, again, let's give credit to what was accomplished. I think the statistics are real. The number of girls in school, women in business, the number of newspapers that were there, and the freedom of the press that they had. There

were a lot of challenges too on the corruption side, but give credit for the successful effort that people made.

Q: It is important that we focus on the women and girls because the Taliban was so restrictive, but some of the interviewees I've spoken with focused on the fact that there really wasn't an education system at all. The boys and men were also illiterate, and that was a real problem for everything, right?

GROSSMAN: Among the key things which could have been different, and something I tried to do with very limited success, was to reduce the parallel governance systems we had created. When I got to Afghanistan as special representative, I began to meet people, especially the people who were doing courageous work out front in Afghanistan. One of the things that President Karzai said to me—and I agreed with him—was that there were two systems working in Afghanistan, an Afghan system and an American or an international system, but mostly an American system. And when you would meet people who were serving courageously in some of the PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams], they would say things like, "I met today with my mayor, and I met today with my governor." And I would say, "Listen, please. They're not your governors and they're not your mayors because they're Afghans. And we're proud to support them, but they're not ours. This parallel system has got to shrink away so that when President Karzai turns on the TV at night or Afghans turn on the TV at night, they see Afghans who are in charge and Afghans who are doing the work. So, could we please stop this 'my governor, my mayor?' It's our privilege to support the Afghans but they are fighting for their way of life and their freedom." Karzai was right about this. We've got to make this an Afghan effort and stop making it our effort.

Q: So, on Karzai, one of the things during that period that was very difficult for him were certain U.S. military actions, like the drone attacks that would go off course or the night raids. He would tell U.S. officials he was not able to protect people from some of these unintended casualties and he felt he was looking like a puppet. So, I'm sure you had conversations with him, and I know there was an agreement that your office worked on to try to control some of the excesses. Could you talk about that a little bit?

GROSSMAN: First point is, I was a supporter of the night raids. The night raids were an important effort to try to deal with terrorists and extremism in Afghanistan. People may disagree with that, but I was not opposed to them. I certainly was in favor of making them as carefully done as possible in ways that were not causing extraneous harm, not just excess casualties, but the whole cultural way this was done. But the night raids were an important part of our effort there.

But you are right that especially some of the mistakes, the drone attacks or the attacks by U.S. aircraft on people who were out to try to gather firewood because they thought were terrorists, and some of the cultural things, like urinating on Korans, all that kind of stuff, really were very harmful. And what happened was not just that they had the physical challenges but that it took so much time and effort away from any other conversations with Karzai.

I often would go to see President Karzai with General Allen, for example, and we would have a whole list of things to talk about, but that morning one of these tragedies had taken place. So the whole meeting was spent on the tragedy. And rightly, I understood. President Karzai was demanding that we do this in a different way. And so, it wasn't just the human toll and the tragedy of these things; it was the fact that it overtook the entire agenda and overtook every meeting and many, many of the conversations with President Karzai and his senior leaders. And again, I can understand why.

Q: And so, there was an agreement negotiated, I think, on limiting the drone attacks or having a system in place for some checks and balances on U.S. military actions to limit the civilian casualties. Was that negotiated during your time?

GROSSMAN: I think that was in Pakistan.

Q: And one of your deputies in SRAP was working with Ambassador Crocker and the Afghan government on a couple of agreements. One of the agreements was the strategic relationship between Afghanistan and the United States. Can you talk a little bit about that and what the purpose was?

GROSSMAN: What we were trying to do, and Ryan Crocker, Beth Jones, and Doug Lute will be much better on this than I am, but what we were trying to do was start to make this relationship more systematic and move into some sustainable future. We wanted to make it more Afghan-driven and try to give the Afghans some confidence that we would be there to support them but not to do all the work. And so, I thought it was a big accomplishment to get the strategic partnership agreement done. And all credit to Beth and to Ryan and to Doug and to so many other people. President Obama's statement at Kabul Airport about the five lines of U.S. effort is the best definition at that stage of what we were trying to accomplish. The strategic partnership agreement was a key, key, key foundation of that.

Q: Do you have any views on how things went after you left the special representative job? You mentioned President Biden and President Obama, but we sort of skipped over President Trump's period. Some people have commented that although at the beginning of his administration, they did undertake a focused effort to have the Afghans take over the war effort with a small but critical level of U.S. military support. But early success was undercut by the continued U.S. withdrawal. The Taliban stopped attacking U.S. troops during that period but the continued withdrawal allowed them to make more gains against the Afghan military and government. So, some people have pointed to that as being something that poisoned the atmosphere for when President Biden came in.

GROSSMAN: Having sat in that seat, I know how hard this is, so it's not for me to judge. I think that what Ambassador Dobbins and Beth and Laurel Miller and Dan Feldman and everybody else afterward tried to do was the best they could. This kind of diplomacy is hard.

Ambassador Khalilzad had this job for President Trump. I imagine it was especially difficult because he was trying to do something different than any of us had done before. He then had an American view of what a peace process would be like, an American view

of what the end state would be like. Remember, I felt my job was to bring the two sides together and let them figure out what it was that the future would be like. Zal was right to try a different approach. At the end it was important that we had a view of what it was we were trying to accomplish. But I can imagine for him this was really a challenge because President Trump was committed to reducing our forces there. I think the president was sorry that he got talked into not withdrawing troops right at the beginning. But it was clear he did not support the military mission and the Taliban knew that. So Zal did not have much leverage.

Again, I wasn't part of any conversation or decision, but it was public knowledge that even as vice president, President Biden was not much of a supporter of this mission from the beginning, right?

Q: Right.

GROSSMAN: And so, when people say—and people are free to have whatever opinion they wish—but when you say that what President Trump made it harder for President Biden, I'm not sure that's true. President Biden carried out President Trump's policy. I think President Biden pursued the policy he thought was right, which in this case was essentially the same as President Trump's. The American people no longer supported this war. It was time to leave. Again, the issue became how to withdraw. The president set September for the date and then moved it back to August. The military commits to "fast is safest," and it all gets complicated at the end. But the idea that as president of the United States, President Biden would want to end our effort in Afghanistan doesn't seem very surprising to me.

End of interview