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WILLIAM HAMMINK

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INTERVIEW

Q: My name's Jim Bever, retired Senior Foreign Service officer and with USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and I'm honored to be talking today with Bill Hammink, a fellow retired Senior Foreign Service officer with USAID about Bill's experience in Afghanistan, where he served as mission director and then as subsequent experience in headquarters of USAID in Washington as the head of the—as the assistant to the administrator for Afghanistan and Pakistan, in what was known as OAPA, the Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs, reporting directly to the administrator of AID.

So, Bill, thank you for participating in this and for your service in Afghanistan. I thought we should start by asking if you could share with us your own professional background, summarized, and your educational background and your—how long you were in the Foreign Service and how long you were in the Senior Foreign Service, and what rank you attained, personal rank before you departed, before you retired. We'll start with that.

HAMMINK: Okay. Thanks, Jim. It's good to be here today and thank you for doing this interview for ADST. As Jim said, my name is William Hammink. I had the opportunity to work with USAID for thirty-six years. I retired in 2017. I joined in 1981. We spent twenty-some years in Africa and our children were born in what was then called Swaziland. After Madagascar, we went to Russia for a few years, working on democracy programs, and then to the West Bank and Gaza for four years where I was the deputy mission director, then had the opportunity to serve as mission director in both Ethiopia and Sudan. Then, in 2011 I was asked to go to India as mission director and that was when, obviously, the U.S. had a significant presence in Afghanistan. And when I got to India there was a strong push to try to expand the trilateral programs between the US, India and Afghanistan. So, I had the opportunity, I didn't go to Kabul, but I did go to Central Asia to work with USAID programs there and also with folks in Afghanistan to try to increase and improve especially private sector linkages and relationships between India and Afghanistan. We also carried out trilateral programs related to agriculture and ag training. So, that was my first time working to support U.S. government development programs in Afghanistan.

Just as a quick aside, I did take a year off college back in 1975 and spent a few months in Afghanistan, traveling all over the country. Back then it was safe, although adventurous, to be in these old buses and in the back of trucks, traveling around. So, I did have a good idea of what Afghanistan was about, especially its history and culture.

While I was in India, the USAID administrator, Raj Shah, and head of—the assistant administrator for OAPA [Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs] at the time called me and asked if I'd be interested in going to either Afghanistan or Pakistan, and I said Afghanistan. So, I took a trip to Kabul, talked to people, and went to Afghanistan in summer of 2013, and was there for two years and three months or so as USAID mission director, as Jim mentioned. I retired in 2017 as a career minister in the Senior Foreign Service, like Jim and like many others in USAID and State. I welcomed the opportunity at the high level to support the U.S. government through USAID. I had a really interesting, difficult, incredibly challenging, but also rewarding time in Afghanistan. If you want to, I can jump into some of the things that we were involved in.

Q: Please, yes. Let's go for it.

HAMMINK: When I arrived in Kabul in July 2013, the U.S. was facing some major transitional issues in Afghanistan. Major significant transitions were underway and continued well into 2014. As everyone knows, there was a huge surge of troops in the first administration of the Obama administration. This military surge was accompanied by a civilian surge, including a significant USAID surge in personnel across the country. When I got there in 2013, it was really the top of the surge and we had probably, nobody knew exactly for sure, but probably around four hundred and fifty USAID direct hire Foreign Service officers. Most of them were Foreign Service-Limited officers who were out in the field in various PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams] and other bases with our military the State Department colleagues. So, it was a moment of transition. And if you read the literature, you'll see three major transitions. One was political with the end of the second Karzai five-year term as president; there were elections coming up in 2014 for president, as well as parliament and other elections. So, one was a major political transition. The other was a security transition. The DOD [Department of Defense] had signed an agreement basically that they would transition over the fighting, the actual kind of fighting on the ground to Afghanistan, to Afghan security forces, and the U.S. military, while undergoing a major decrease in troops, basically were responsible to train and assist the Afghan security forces. And then, the third transition was an economic transition. And that really resulted partly from the pullout in that the U.S. was heavily engaged in the PRTs or Provincial Reconstruction Teams and a lot of money flowed to these provinces that ended once the PRTs closed. And you know, eighty to a hundred bases that were in the process of being closed down, that was a lot of money also going into these areas. And so, there was a major economic transition with going from a hundred and some thousand troops down to, I think it was five to ten, eventually at the time while I was still there in Afghanistan.

So, USAID, as part of the U.S. government programs in Afghanistan through these major transitions. And at USAID, we developed a three-year transitional strategy with a vision of being there for ten years at least, and what that might look like over the horizon. The World Bank did a number of economic analyses with these major transitions, especially the economic transition. They did some economic modeling, you know, looking at what things might look like in ten years. And as you know, the international community was providing some two-thirds of the overall budget to the government of Afghanistan for basic costs, health, education, salaries, of course, on the security side. So, that was something that was being looked at including how USAID could transition its own programming towards more longer-term partnership arrangements with the Afghanistan government and private sector.

There were policy issues, obviously, and some of the challenges involved working through short-term security and diplomatic objectives versus more longer-term development objectives that USAID normally pursues, when it has country programs in support of longer-term goals like institutional development. In Afghanistan, USAID had been supporting the new government institutions, institutions of justice, institutions in the media. There was that, and then you had the need for significant improvement of the infrastructure and all that takes time. And then at the same time you had shorter-term goals and objectives, especially a bit previous to my being there, related to following the troops, related to the counterinsurgency, the "COIN" approach and objectives that DOD pursued and USAID followed in a lot of these areas.

Just quickly on the elections, USAID was heavily engaged in electoral support, both for the conduct of the elections and the technical aspects of the elections through our typical partners, such as IFES [International Foundation for Electoral Systems], NDI [National Democratic Institute] and IRI [International Republican Institute].

Elections were held in 2014. A lot of the preparation work supporting the election started in 2013, led by the ambassador and working with the Afghan president, but also supporting at the technical level the electoral commission that was set up to run the nuts and bolts of the elections. And then, there was a lot of donor coordination work because many countries wanted to support the elections. And then, of course, the UN [United Nations] had a major role as well. So, that was 2013 leading into 2014. As you read in the history books now, the 2014 election ended up where there were significant allegations of fraud and neither side was willing to concede—this was both President Ashraf Ghani plus Abdullah Abdullah, who were the lead runners in the 2014 election. Neither of them would accept the outcome of the election, so the Secretary of State at the time, John Kerry, came out, worked directly with Dr. Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani and obviously many others. And one fine day, the ambassador called me and our team and said, "We need a hundred international election observers here within days to basically watch the vote counting," because that was the deal they made, that there would be a count of all the votes. They would bring in all the ballots from the various provinces across the country and count them afresh in front of national and international observers. And so, we worked with our implementing partners and were able to find and bring in, like,

within days, fifty or so international staff, and then within weeks, we had a full hundred. And other donors from other countries did the same thing.

Q: Same ambassador the whole time you were there, or you had two ambassadors?

HAMMINK: James Cunningham was the ambassador when I arrived in July 2013, having moved from being deputy ambassador before when Ken Yamashita was the mission director. Ambassador Cunningham had been ambassador to Israel before. Then, when Ambassador Cunningham left, Mike McKinley took over as ambassador. He again had been deputy ambassador, and he took over as ambassador soon after the elections in 2014.

So, USAID was heavily engaged in the elections, both on the technical level but then, supporting the counting and supporting this deal that had been made by the Secretary between President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who became then what was called the CEO or chief executive officer, kind of like a vice president almost. Anyway, it was a shared government.

Q: How did that work? What would that work?

HAMMINK: So, it didn't work well. And there's been a lot written on it and as you know, the election in 2019, that was, I think it was put off until 2020. That also resulted in disagreement between Dr. Abdullah and Dr. Ghani, and they had to, I believe, come out with a similar kind of shared government agreement to move forward on that. It didn't work well for a few reasons. One is it was unclear who would be the one making decisions on appointments, ministers, deputy ministers. They had an informal agreement between the two of them, between Dr. Abdullah and Dr. Ghani, but it didn't always work well and it slowed down key appointments and key decisions.

Q: You were talking about Ashraf Ghani again as the head of state basically and Abdullah Abdullah again as sort of a subordinate prime minister or VP kind of function again and later in the 2020 period. But when you were there, it had its operational problems as to who actually had authority to make decisions.

HAMMINK: Yeah. And that impacted on how quickly the government was able to move on, especially policy and program reforms that had been promised. The good news is, you know, my first year there, when Karzai was still president, I never met him once, although, Jim, I know you met him often when you were out there as mission director. And I never was invited to the palace, for example. But when Ghani was elected, I was at the palace at least once a month, and met President Ghani many times.

Q: Good.

HAMMINK: And I often met with his key advisors. He obviously comes from—came from the development side as a former World Bank expert and wrote a book on failed states. He took the lead on many significant reforms. You know, I think there was the agreement for this joint government in August or September of 2014, and then by December there was a major donors meeting in London, and even by then President Ghani's team had put together, with some donor and World Bank assistance, a major reform program, a document that laid out their vision for reform, which we felt at USAID that it was very well done and laid out some of the key reforms needed, whether macro or micro, or whether sectoral, education, health, infrastructure, the like, fiscal. So, but that was a good start, and we were hopeful at the time.

Q: And how was this related to the pledges that were made public around that time to support Afghanistan for another ten years, like what you mentioned?

HAMMINK: Absolutely related.

Q: Was this reform package meant to help bolster and lay out what the government would do as part of that ten years' worth of financial and obviously political or diplomatic support or was it two on separate paths?

HAMMINK: The security commitments and economic/social commitments were definitely joined very closely but were on different tracks. Basically, the pledges that came out at London, significantly influenced by the promised reform program, and it allowed governments, you know, key donor governments as well as the World Bank and the IMF [International Monetary Fund] to continue what was originally pledged in Tokyo and to continue with the very high levels of support for Afghanistan. And if I remember right, I think it came out to about two billion dollars a year total, of which the U.S., I believe, was about a third of that. And that's not military. That's just on the development side of the pledges. And so, there was a lot of broad support for the new government and some optimism. And then, for example, when the new ministers came in and there was a new cabinet, including a lot of reformers, President Ghani asked them to give him their hundred-day plans. In other words, get busy, think big. Think what you want to achieve in a hundred days and give me some indicators, which most of them did. And so, it was kind of an exciting time because it was hopeful. It looked like the new government was actually going to move forward on a lot of these reforms that were absolutely necessary, whether it be in the banking area, fiscal accountability, ministry of finance, or even education and health reforms to move ahead on some of these development structural issues.

Q: Interesting thing, I just caught you saying your first time around on the hundred days.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: The first time you mentioned it, you actually said a hundred years.

HAMMINK: Oh, did I? Sorry.

Q: Yeah. And the reality is, that may be closer to what was needed. But anyway, keep going. Sorry.

HAMMINK: Yeah. You know, I think one thing, Jim, and you probably saw this too, is for USAID, expectations were very high. Congress had appropriated a lot of money for development programs there. When I arrived in 2013, the budget just for USAID was 1.8 billion dollars. And then, in 2014 the USAID budget went down to eight hundred million dollars, but that was still, I believe, one of the largest in the world if you didn't count PEPFAR [United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] at the time. So, a lot of money was coming in and huge expectations. USAID had a pipeline of almost five billion dollars, a major responsibility and also opportunity to make a difference.

We were still working in a warzone, and there was fighting going on, as you know, and those challenges, both of kind of achieving results in kinetic areas, in areas where there was fighting going on and even in areas that were not controlled by the Taliban, but where the Taliban had influence. And so, there were significant challenges of working in areas of conflict and post-conflict. In some of the country, we saw intermittent conflict, but in a lot of the country it was just very dangerous to move around and do business. OTI, the Office of Transition Initiatives, was there, still working on stabilization type programs, which helped in those areas where our troops and then, subsequently, Afghan troops, went in to clear, with the expectation that USAID would follow the troops and carry out short-term local community development programs through these stabilization programs. Some research was done and several evaluations carried out on these stabilization programs, and found to be not real effective. And it's not surprising because it's really hard to do any kind of development in these very kinetic areas, and especially something that lasts and especially types of interventions that are community level that people, you know, will continue to support and there's some kind of sustainability related to those.

Q: So, can we just stay on that point for a moment? This is maybe one of these places where policy goals intersect on the ground with reality operationally. Was this kind of a policy to try to work at the local level everywhere we possibly could in the country, including especially in the conflicted areas, which may be green on green, military on military, may have been viewed by our military as post-conflict, they absolutely were not. If you happened to be on the ground, our implementors and our own staff were likely to, you know, be at severe lethal risk of being targeted or caught in crossfires because the conflict was anything but post. I mean, was there a feedback loop between the operational experience by AID at the ground level in these kinds of conflict zones, getting back to the policy and affecting the policy? Or can you just talk about your thoughts on this one a little bit?

HAMMINK: It's a great question and it is complicated. You have to look at what was going on well before I arrived to get at that. My predecessor, Ken Yamashita, and his

predecessor worked to support the major U.S. counterinsurgency effort [an approach called "COIN"] with the huge military and civilian surges in these kinetic areas through the USAID stabilization and other programs. Our troops were leading the way and then, after 2013, not taking the lead but supporting Afghan security forces. You know, trying to do our part of the COIN approach, while managing an incredibly large civilian surge and sending hundreds of development officers to military bases around the country and working to ensure they are part of the USAID programming and reporting systems—incredibly challenging. USAID alone had some four hundred and fifty direct hire officers around the country, and then, there were hundreds of other civilian State Department, USDA [United States Department of Agriculture], and DOJ [Department of Justice] out there in the field, and you asked about that loop, and you know, the USAID development folks who were out in the field in Forward Operating Bases and PRTs and elsewhere, they would be able to go back, and we would hear back from them in terms of what was happening, what kinds of things were achievable. But I think, as you know, expectations were high. Because of urgent demands on the ground for action, USAID was not able to do its normal due diligence and analytical work upfront to tell us, you know, what are the risks, what are the risks for achieving what we want to achieve, and what are the security risks. And what's the feasibility of achieving results? And then the issue between short-term and long-term objectives. Let me give you one quick example in the agriculture area.

They wanted us to have a quick impact in certain rural areas where the Taliban had left, and start, for example, giving away seeds and fertilizer, instead of longer-term market development programs and helping farmers develop the capacity to actually expand their production and profitability. And so, those were not consistent. When we carried out evaluations of these seeds and fertilizer give away programs, we found that partly the Taliban were benefiting from these seeds because somehow, they were getting access to the seeds. But those types of evaluations took a while to get information back to the policymakers and by that time, at least when I arrived there, Jim, we were in a full de-surge mode. The military de-surge and closing of bases forced USAID to also de-surge and pull USAID civilians out because the USAID folks were getting all of their support from the military at the bases.

Q: From U.S. military?

HAMMINK: Right, the U.S. military.

Q: And other parts of the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] force, right?

HAMMINK: Correct.

Q: So, just a question on that in terms of experience or lessons learned.

HAMMINK: Yeah?

Q: What are your thoughts about how successful the international military objectives were achieved at the provincial or local levels? You said in eight to a hundred places around the country, in terms of building up the capabilities on—and helping to support the motivation of the Afghan security forces, whether they were military or maybe police in some cases. Was that successful by our military or was that—the implication of what you said is that when the U.S. and NATO forces started, you know, pulling out and the Afghan forces were supposed to go in, the decisions seemed, policy decision you were describing seemed to indicate and—just conclusion that it wasn't safe for Americans to be there after all that effort by our militaries to build up the Afghan military or security forces' capability to protect civilians, you know, mostly Afghans, but including our development people.

HAMMINK: I'm not a military expert or security expert, so I won't comment on that per se, but Jim, I'll comment on what I saw on the ground when I was there, plus what I read in subsequent studies and assessments that have been done, and that is that they found that kind of broad stabilization programs, which what I call follow the troops type of environment, success varied, but for the most part these assessments found very limited lasting impact on the development side with these kind of stabilization programs, whether it was drilling wells or rebuilding irrigation systems or putting in schools, there was very limited endearing impact.

Q: I mean, in your experience and judgment because in the end, all politics is local, right, especially in Afghanistan, what were your thoughts on why? Why did this not stick?

HAMMINK: Well, what I read and what I saw when I was on the ground is that in some places, the Taliban came back and they actually destroyed stuff that our projects had built because they didn't want the local population to benefit from the foreigners. One other reason was that the local population just didn't continue the small-scale infrastructure, even though, maybe it was done too fast or maybe we didn't do the requisite types of institutional and community development approaches that we can do in other countries where we had more time, when we put in wells or when we build schools and the like. Or there was no connection to government. For example, we may have rehabilitated a school or a clinic, but there was no teacher then because they hadn't coordinated with the local education authorities. So, there was no kind of required or subsequent type of support from local government, which normally there has to be, whether teachers or nurses to work in these schools and clinics. And then, access became very difficult, especially in those areas where the Taliban came back after a little while. So, all those reasons made it very difficult. That being said, we did see progress in areas where the government firmly controlled the areas and you had government-appointed local administrators and you had communities that worked with local government. And in those areas, you did see progress.

Q: So, okay, we'll come back to that. And what I'm looking for is the heart of what we did right and are proud of and should do again and what came unraveled and why and what we need to be cautious about in the future.

HAMMINK: Yeah.

Q: Okay, so any other point you want to make? I've got a few leading questions for you.

HAMMINK: Yes. I think that USAID needs to be realistic about what we can achieve through these short-term stabilization programs in conflict areas. From my point of view, part of it is we have to be very judicial in terms of where we actually try to do this type of stabilization work, follow the troops and especially in areas that may be quiet today, but will be kinetic tomorrow. We need to understand that there are huge risks involved in that we're going to not have the kind of level of impact we would expect to see in areas where you don't have this kind of ongoing fighting and kind of battle for hearts and minds that we found in many places in Afghanistan. So, you have some successes, but then you'll have maybe more failures than you would in other types of situations where you don't have that kind of ongoing conflict. So, you just must be mindful you're not going to get the kind of bang for your buck and accept that upfront.

Q: Yeah. Were you all crucified by the, you know, U.S. government oversight entities, whether it was the USAID's inspector general, the special inspector general for Afghanistan, or it was the government accountability office or congressional oversight committees or the U.S. media, everybody's opinion? How did you, as mission director, how did you and your staff handle that kind of criticism and findings while you were also trying to implement in large areas in conflict settings, and yet, you had 450 or so total direct hire staff, which was, I think, unprecedented since the Vietnam era, when, of course, we had ten times that many, but usually 450 direct hires is ten or twenty times as many direct hires as we have in any of our normal missions, even our largest mission, like Egypt. How did you—if we can just take a moment on the assessment, evaluation and you know, findings and lessons learned, were your staff able to actually absorb what they were hearing, or was it that they were in such extremist conditions of implementation that there was little ability to benefit from those kinds of external third-party assessments?

HAMMINK: You asked some really excellent questions there. First of all, the context, let me frame it quickly. When I arrived, there were about four hundred and fifty USAID direct hires. I was told, anyway, that they were stationed in about eighty bases around the country. We had about two hundred staff in Kabul, on the embassy compound, but, the rest, several hundred were spread across some eighty places. Within one year, Jim, we were down to about two hundred total. So, we had been forced to have two hundred and fifty or so go back to the U.S. and leave because they just couldn't stay because the U.S. military was drawing down and closing bases and there was no support or security available for USAID civilians. And out of the remaining two hundred, almost all of them were in Kabul. We had some FSNs [Foreign Service nationals] and some staff in the consulates in Mazar, and in Bagram, of course, and in Herat. By the time I left, in September of 2015, so just two years later, we were down to a hundred USAID staff, actually just less than a hundred, and all in Kabul. This constituted a relatively quick drawdown which took time and energy away from implementing programs.

Q: When did you leave, when in 2015?

HAMMINK: September. So, we had shrunk that much and we still had a huge budget, we still had a multibillion dollar pipeline and a hundred plus programs to run. We had to quickly develop a robust remote monitoring program. Ken Yamashita, my predecessor, started this, and we worked on it when I was there. This was a huge priority, monitoring and assessment systems that we could do, knowing that the USAID direct hires and FSNs and others would not be able to get out to the field. We developed and put in place this five-tiered monitoring system that, you know, was, I thought pretty successful and subsequent mission directors and teams out in USAID Afghanistan continued to significantly improve it over time. Part of the system included third party monitors, part of it was using our institutional partner reports, part of it was to get the information from other parts of the U.S. government when we could. Anyway, we integrated that within our overall project monitoring system and also in audits and the like. One key context, we were all in Kabul, with fewer than a hundred staff, trying to manage this. We moved more funds through, for example, the World Bank, the ARTF or Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. We did more government-to-government programs where we could track any expenditure against agreed upon reforms that the government carried out. The Afghan government then used those funds within their budget system tracked by the World Bank for education and health and other development sectors. So, we tried to set that up, absolutely.

USAID had been given so much money to support overall USG foreign policy goals in Afghanistan and in a country with high corruption, few systems and on-going conflict over so many years. One thing I realized after a few months in Afghanistan is that SIGAR, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, could go and basically turn over any rocks, look at almost any USAID program, and find something that wasn't exactly right or not perfect. I mean, we knew where all of our money was going, but it wasn't always resulting in the highest level of achievements that we would find in other countries where you didn't have all these issues.

Q: One of the things Afghanistan has a lot of—

HAMMINK: As you know, there was huge corruption, right. Another thing I haven't talked about that I think in 2010 or '11, the U.S., and this was at the highest level, the president and the secretary promised to President Karzai that we, the U.S. government, meaning mainly USAID, would move towards funding 50 percent of our budget through government systems, what we call government to government. And so, can you imagine that with a 1.8 billion dollar budget to try to do nine hundred million dollars through government systems in a government that was ranked second from last on the transparency international corruption index. And so, the kinds of oversight, the kinds of controls we had to put in place to meet USAID's rules and the GAO [General Accounting Office] rules and then, SIGAR coming in and looking everywhere, which was their role, but in a way trying to find what wasn't working the best instead of trying to also support what was. In any case, that was very challenging and eventually we found ways, such as

the multi-donor World Bank-run ARTF which counted as government to government, so that was one way we could meet that high-level policy promise toward 50 percent on budget. But you know, that just showed part of yet another kind of problem or issue we had to deal with.

Q: So, while we're on it, why don't we talk a little about corruption? How you observed or heard about or were concerned about corruption. Was it always there? Was it getting worse? Was it accelerating? Or was it growing commensurate with the international AID program? Or was it related to the U.S. military spending inside the country and hiring people or building their own facilities? How much of it may have been related to the growth of the opium poppy trade? When people ask, say, Wait a minute, we invested in the finance ministry and the Central Bank and accountability systems and we invested in the court systems and the police. I mean, it wasn't AID doing most of that, it was State Department. How did this corruption, was it part of the enemy within, basically, in Afghanistan? Could we or should we have been able to control that, or they be able to control that? And how did that undermine, if it did, the final outcome in Afghanistan?

HAMMINK: Yes. Definitely, corruption in Afghanistan was a huge issue. And just like in other countries where we work, it was probably, I don't have numbers for this, but it was probably exacerbated in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. One is, as I mentioned, Afghanistan, when the U.S. went back there in 2002, had no real institutions of governance. They had to set up a new financial system from scratch that the World Bank helped them set up. It was kind of world class, but the problem was it required a world class level of trained and honest people to run it. You know, no matter how good a system is. And so, that took a long time. You had extremely high levels of people who couldn't read, and even in the military, the U.S. military had to set up literacy programs for Afghan security recruits. The systems that they did put in place were brand new. In terms of the judicial systems, you need to go after corrupt people. They had been compromised as well at different levels in terms of paying off judges. And so, part of the issue was the nascent nature of the accounting and other institutions that even our country relies on to minimize corruption.

Then Afghanistan was such a poor country to begin with, and it still was. Then, you had the incredibly high levels of aid, many billions of dollars being pumped in there, not only through USAID and World Bank and other big donors, but also, of course, our own military through procurement, military procurement and the like. And then, you had, since it was best practices and something in other countries that are kind of more normal, you had the push towards government to government, using government systems that basically were nascent, as I said. And so, you had all these issues that only exacerbated the level and opportunity for corruption to happen. When President Ghani came in, he set up and then expanded an anti-corruption commission that he chaired that actually included Dr. Abdullah, as well as a number of ministers and finance people, audit people, their dept of justice, and others to review all contracts—because that was a major source of corruption, the whole contracting system and trying to keep the contracting officers and those who made decisions honest. That went on for years. I don't know how successful they were, but I tell you, it sure looked good when you read the reports. Even

SIGAR was invited to the table and they were at the anti-corruption commission as observers and they said that it looked good.

Subsequently, assessments found that there was still corruption. You know, it's really hard. I can tell you that we had a lot of whistleblowers, we had a lot of hotlines out there, and both the audit folks and the inspector general, but also USAID and all of our programs, projects and implementing partners were required to have regular audits and inspections. Any time an allegation came in, we immediately shared it with our IG, the USAID inspector general. Unfortunately, they had a very small staff that followed up on corruption or you know, invested in what they called their investigations team, as compared to the audit team. But they tried to follow up. Every single allegation was sent to them, we helped them as much as we could with information, and they followed up with some and they actually got some bad guys. Our IG worked with the Afghan prosecutors to charge those found to be corrupt as examples also to show that it just doesn't pay with the U.S. government, or at least with USAID. Although, frankly, it was difficult for everyone, as I mentioned, because by 2014 even the auditors and the investigators were not able to get out very easily, just like our own project managers were not. But we did do everything we could to follow up on every single allegation.

Q: So, would one of your observations be that in—to the extent there are future heavy engagements by USAID in these kinds of programs and implementation portfolios that there should be a larger inspector general physical in-country presence, including their investigation teams, or do we need to do business differently, mindful that the IG may never get that kind of support? I mean, any takeaway lesson or a-ha that's at the operational and accountability level for the American people's money?

HAMMINK: You know, USAID had some approaches where we could have more confidence. The NGO [nongovernmental organization] community had people out there tracking where the money was going, but also how procurements were done and the like. And I think even our implementing partners were doing a pretty yeoman job. You know, I think the problem is that, as I mentioned, a lot of these institutions were nascent, US and Afghan officials were going up against internal corruption, even if Ghani said he was against it and showed that through some follow up and, you know, setting up these systems to track things so that corruption, to prevent corruption as well as to go after people who were caught judicially. But again, all that was fairly nascent, and just starting, if you will. And so, I guess one lesson learned, Jim, from my point of view, again, and this may not be everybody's, and that is USAID needs to do its due diligence and find areas of support for our development objectives in ways that minimized the risks, whether it be through the World Bank's ARTF system, but then we trust the World Bank's audit and tracking systems, so you know, we have to have confidence in that or whether more through NGOs. My own opinion is I think the U.S. too often tries to solve major problems by throwing money at it. And in this case, I think that was a mistake in Afghanistan. I think there was too much money. When I got there, I said to myself, there's no way that you can actually use 1.8 billion dollars a year in this kind of conflict and post-conflict situation in a nascent country, a very poor country, in a way that we're going to achieve the level of results that we expect to see in other countries and have the

level of success. And so, as we would often say in Afghanistan, it's never maximum, it's always sub-maximal because of the context and the situation. So, I think we had too much money, Jim, and it was impossible, well, it was extremely difficult to program that in a way that when you both got the level of results that we would want to see, especially in other countries.

Q: So, question on that. Could we or should we, lesson learned, have insisted on staying out in the countryside when U.S. military and NATO partners pulled out of the PRTs, maybe not all the way out to the forward operating bases, but I mean, I ask that because when I was there, originally, Americans could travel in unarmored civilian, you know, taxis and whatever all over the country. It seemed like it wasn't until—t sounds bizarre, and maybe it's purely coincidental, but until our military started showing up in some of these cities and towns that all of a sudden, our civilians also started getting targeted. And now, that was a certain freeze frame time at points in time, so my observation might have been, you know, incorrect that way. But our—you mentioned that we tried for a while having our Foreign Service nationals, some of them, located in some of the towns or cities as our brains and our eyes and ears there and interacting, I guess, with our implementing partners in one way or another, and maybe it was their hometown or home city. So, you know, they really knew their way—FSNs knew their way around, and yet eventually they were pulled back to Kabul, is what it sounds like. I mean, when you look at—was there evidence that they were such—at such severe personal risk that it justified pulling them back, or was that simply a precautionary move that maybe was overcautious?

HAMMINK: It's a great question and it gets back to USAID being under the RSO [Regional Security officer] and the ambassador, including security requirements of the State Department. In Afghanistan, it was even much more than that because outside of Kabul our security was guaranteed by DOD, by U.S. and NATO troops. Up in Mazar, it was led by the Germans, and we had people there. And in Herat it was the Italians. But it was U.S. and NATO troops. Once the decision at the White House and NSC [National Security Council] level was made to start withdrawing and closing bases, DOD started pulling out U.S. troops, and inevitably State Department and USAID people and DOJ and whoever else was there, were required to pullback because there was no one else to provide security for their safety. And RSO did not have the capacity, at the embassy, yes, but out there it was solely DOD, so once DOD pulled back, we were forced to pull our people back. Where we fought and fought, Jim, and we had great support from USAID Washington on this, once the decision was made for State Department to pull back but keep the consulates in Mazar, Herat, and Kandahar, we fought like mad to allow our FSNs to stay. So, for a while they were allowed to stay, as long as there were one or two direct hire Foreign Service officers. Once those PRTs were told to scale back or to close, then we made the case, just like we were able to do in Iraq and we got documentation and assessments from Iraq that once the PRTs closed, and in this case, our consulates in these four key cities closed, we made the case for our FSNs to be able to stay there and work from there and to be our eyes and ears on the ground there. State refused. So, in that we really pushed. We put together security data and other information on pros and cons for the USG. But it just wasn't going to happen because State felt it put these FSNs at risk

even to have any kind of connection with the U.S. government. So, they all had to go to Kabul.

Q: Okay, so the one asset that the U.S. government had was tried and true, which is the quality and courage of our Foreign Service nationals, based on experience in the places you mentioned, including, actually, West Bank Gaza, State, Diplomatic Security, RSO, whatever, refused. And so, you know, we did that to ourselves I guess is a finding, and again, I'm thinking you know, operational, on the ground lessons learned that affect our ability to actually implement policy, we didn't, we the U.S. government, and we are basically subservient to a dominant State Department security approach, and rules, State was not willing to budge on this one, and with that then went our ability to have more effective impact at the local level, I would assume.

HAMMINK: That's correct. It needs to have more—have some eyes and ears, have a USAID representative being able to go talk to local officials, so absolutely. Not to know as much what's going on was a detriment, plus without the FSNs on the ground we were not able to have that impact on program implementation.

Q: So, we should, there's so much to cover and little time, but let's talk for a minute about leadership. You know, in your observation within our own government, but also within the government of Afghanistan or the private sector, as nascent as it was in Afghanistan. Was the leadership corrupted on the Afghan side? I'm assuming the U.S. government wasn't corrupted. Were there outstanding cases of men and women of courageous integrity that you know, that commanded the following and the respect of fellow Afghans who the U.S. pinned hopes and expectations, or were we projecting too much on, you know, such national leaders or local leaders, whether it's the cabinet level or it's—they had a few government parastatals or whatever? I mean, can you talk a little about leadership, what kept you motivated or what concerned you or disappointed you? And not only you, but people on the staff because that's the—that's where, again the policy meets the operational and the feedback from operational goes back up to policy.

HAMMINK: Yeah, I would say, especially the first year and a half of President Ghani's administration, when he came in, including Dr. Abdullah, they said all the right things about leadership. They came out with reform agendas that made a lot of sense, to USAID, to the donors. They put in place, as I mentioned, some anti-corruption actions. There were other issues, huge issues, you know, between Ghani and Abdullah on leadership and authority that severely impacted decision making and appointments. Ghani had some weaknesses as well that came out over time in terms of his inability to really listen to other Afghan leaders and his own team and wanting to do it all himself. And anyway, there's a lot written on this. I interacted the most with key ministers, whether it was the minister of finance, the minister of agriculture, of health, education, infrastructure and the like. And some of them were very capable, but they just didn't have the staff that were trained or had the experience to move forward, and that's unfortunately why so many projects had to have so many technical people being paid big money to actually carry out line functions within ministries. So, you didn't have the leadership and you didn't have

the capacity in some places. Some places you did, and when you have that kind of ministerial leadership and deputy ministers, you had real progress, and I saw that in finance, for example, in a few areas, as well as health. The minister of health was very good.

And so, within the U.S. government, let me just say, we had a very active interagency. We had excellent leadership from first, Ambassador Cunningham and then Ambassador McKinley, the other deputy ambassador, DCM [deputy chief of mission] and the like, and then while I was there, they still had the coordinator for development, and that, Ken Yamashita did that the first year and the second year was a guy from State who became the coordinator, including overall USAID. I met weekly with the ambassador and with the DCM and the coordinator together, and I met several times a week with the coordinator, so that channels directly into the front office. I could call any time if there was an issue. The ambassador of course wanted to know about problems and issues beforehand. He didn't want to hear about problems afterwards. That, I thought, was excellent and I'm not sure it could have been better. But it was a complicated time because there was a time when the embassy was being forced to also downsize, along with USAID, and so, there was a rush to try to figure out, well, how the U.S. government could continue to implement U.S. government foreign policy, including the USAID program. This included a look at not just money, but especially our own people, our own staff. So, you had the leadership which, from the Afghan government side, was very dependent on the minister, and then you had, within the U.S. government I thought it was excellent, but we were continually pushed back and forth by the kind of scaling down issues with the military significantly decreasing its presence.

Q: So, to maybe summarize for today, and now you see the quandary I had when you were interviewing me, oh my God, how do you compress all this experience and life that was super compressed during one of two years in which we—or more, two and a half years, which we may have served in Afghanistan as mission directors, which is where the rubber tends to meet the road in lots of the civilian part of, you know, life in the country, how do you do it in an hour or two and set a context for lessons learned. But we can get into more of this tomorrow, but at this point, when you look at your couple of years there, do you have regrets, or are you glad you did it? Would you do it again? And should the U.S. again do this sort of thing, first at your level and second, in terms of an overall a-ha lesson learned, if you were sitting in that situation room, which you did, and we'll get into that more tomorrow, and you know, national security advisor, deputy national security advisor, you know, is in there, and deputies from the cabinet, what would you—and you see this thing coming at us, at America again, having to make hard choices whether to get involved, should we, would we, could we do it again? So, we can get more into that tomorrow, but for right now, just to sort of get your brain juices focused on this, at your personal, career, professional level, knowing what you know now, if you rewind the tape back to when the administrator asked you to serve in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and you chose Afghanistan, would you do it again?

HAMMINK: So, to answer your first question, absolutely zero regrets. To the contrary, it was one of the most important of my nine countries where I served with USAID, and I

felt that I was able to make a difference. I felt that USAID was able to make a big difference while I was there, realizing I was just one of a number of mission directors who come through there for a few years and moved on. And it was, as I mentioned before, incredibly challenging, but a huge opportunity to make a difference, especially with the transitions during the period I was there. In terms of the bigger picture, it's hard to say when the U.S. should have been clear about whether our policy was state building or not. Probably very early on. And with nation or state building, you have to have this vision of especially in a place like Afghanistan of a multigenerational time for change. Change is slow. We always said that Afghanistan was not a sprint, but it was a marathon, and that, I'll say more tomorrow about whether I thought we should have stayed, and there's a lot of parts to that. But you asked, should we have done it differently? I think, again, we should have had clear expectations. One of the things that many people have said to me and we've heard this from even military folks, we didn't have a twenty-year strategy, we had twenty one-year strategies with people coming in and out, not only Foreign Service officers, but military folks as well. And so, I think that hindered success, but especially if we're looking at long-term development, and there has to be a commitment for the long-term.

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Q: Okay, good morning. Just to pick up where we left off, this is Jim Bever, retired Senior Foreign Service officer, AID, with William Hammink, retired Senior Foreign Service officer in AID, mission director in Afghanistan, around the years 2013 to—

HAMMINK: To fifteen.

Q: Two years plus. So, Bill, good morning. We were talking about your time as mission director in Afghanistan. And one of the elements you mentioned was your observation that over twenty years we may have had twenty one-year strategies.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: And it made me think, how does this relate also to one of the assets that USAID brings to U.S. foreign policy in a country is we tend to stay for years at a post, and that's a normal tour, a normal assignment. And yet, our officers in Afghanistan, because it was a conflict zone, were not allowed to bring their spouses, except in very unusual circumstances where the spouse also could be employed at the mission and of course, weren't allowed to bring dependents, and were assigned for one-year. There were exceptions and sometimes our direct hire officers signed up for more than one year, you being among the rare handful that did so. How do you think this affected our ability to succeed in Afghanistan? And what would you suggest the lesson learned here is for future such engagements, if there is a lesson?

HAMMINK: Sure. I suspect that this issue affected not just USAID, but State and others as well, for one-year tours. When I arrived, there were, as I mentioned before, about four hundred and fifty USAID, U.S. direct hire employees all over the country, and probably, I don't know exactly, but probably three hundred to three hundred and fifty of those were what's called Foreign Service-Limited, or FSL, which meant a five-year limited appointment in the Foreign Service, and they—if they left Afghanistan, they wouldn't have another job. So, they had a high incentive to stay as long as they could because there was work, it was interesting. A lot of the FSL officers were outside of Kabul, in pretty tough conditions, living and working on U.S. and NATO military bases, whether it was at forward operating bases or the regional provincial bases.

What I found when I got there was a lot of these career U.S. direct hire USAID employees, like you said, who left their families, and stayed for a year. In fact, there was a perverse disincentive to extend beyond a year because the Foreign Services officers coming to Afghanistan had to bid on their next assignment before they even arrived at post, depending on the timing, but a summer arrival had to bid in the summer for the next year. So, my deputies and I talked to everybody who came and tried to encourage them to think about staying a second year, talking about how it would be good for their career, exciting place to work and we had plenty of money to really do make a difference. But a lot of them had already bid on their next assignments and gotten handshakes for their next assignments, even before arriving. We were able to increase the number of officers who did decide to stay a second year after being in Kabul a few months, but like you said, it was, unfortunately, a small percentage of FSOs who stayed a second year. And that definitely impacted on continuity, especially within USAID, and negatively impacted our design of new programs, our management, and our oversight. All that was somewhat suboptimal because of these one-year tours. But that was the reality, and the military faced the same thing and so did the State Department. So, I think a lot of those FSLs who were outside of Kabul stayed, in fact, three years, four years in some cases. That also wasn't good because it was so difficult that some of them got burned out and we should have seen the signs before the end of their tours at times.

The head of OAPA at the time was Larry Sampler, and he put in place a process whereby before Washington approved the extension of anyone, whether they were career or the foreign service limited appointments, they had to go through a discussion with counselors to see what made sense. We had to work through the impact of one year tours in different ways by putting in place systems whereby when people leave, there was actually a discussion with his or her successor. There was also a lot of backstopping so that people who were staying knew what was going on with the work of the person who was leaving, especially related to his or her portfolio. So, we worked through how to minimize the negative impact of those one-year tours.

Q: So, when you said consular, what did you mean?

HAMMINK: So, USAID had a social worker, remember?

Q: Oh, counselor, like a counselor.

HAMMINK: Yeah, that's right.

Q: So, a social counselor, yeah, clinical—a clinical social worker.

HAMMINK: There was no—I don't think, if I remember right, there was no kind of formal system, per se, although it was required as discussion, but in terms of criteria and the like, it was more kind of checking in with folks and helping them to think through extending and staying in a conflict zone.

Q: So, would you say that was a best practice, a good practice? Meaning the handover, the transition, the sharing of knowledge for one FSO or direct hire left and another one came.

HAMMINK: I think that's very good practice, no matter what, and I think it's essential when you have a one-year tour where often a few months after arriving they're starting to think about leaving and what's going to happen in their next post. And so, I think that's essential.

Q: So, just stick on this for a minute because it relates to operational effectiveness to carry out, execute policy or provide feedback to policy only credible. When there was a period for both Iraq and Afghanistan when we established what became a precedent elsewhere in other country programs, which was having more than one deputy mission director. This was partly because of the enormous workload, the flow of funds for which we were accountable, and just the demands on the mission director. And so, I want to ask about that, and I want to ask about the office director level because an office director in Afghanistan during your time was probably responsible for a hundred million or two hundred million dollars a year at office director level, overseas in our field posts, which most missions don't have that much money for the entire mission in terms of management and leadership responsibility But what it did allow, if I recall, was for up and coming officers at the FS-1 level to enter into what's called the Senior Leadership Group of the agency, and to test their mettle as the head of a health office or the executive officer or whatever, and groom them for future possible agency higher leadership. So, how did that work out by the time you got there?

HAMMINK: Yes, like you said, the office directors were made senior management group positions, which means the same group in Washington that approves mission directors approved officer directors in Afghanistan. And I think that was an incentive for, like you said, up and rising and the best and the brightest to bid because they were managing huge portfolios, and it was an opportunity to be able to show what they could do both on designing big programs, showing impact, but then also managing those as well in a situation like in Afghanistan with continuing conflict situation.

Q: So, you would say that was a good practice, at least in this particular case.

HAMMINK: In this particular case, absolutely it was, although unfortunately, you know, anything that's good also may have some negative consequences. For example, it limited the pool of people who could bid because at the time, it was just FS-2s and above who could bid. So, it limited the pool a bit, but at the same time, we got really good people who wanted to come.

Q: So, I asked this question because for AID, and that kind of a program that you were leading, it has to be a team of leaders to make it work. There are so many big moving pieces, any one of which could cause the whole system to collapse because of accountability or just failure to implement. What we're looking for is some lessons learned, some quiet lessons learned to help the machinery of our foreign aid programs succeed in very difficult circumstances.

So, there is another feature for Foreign Service officers which you and I both signed up for when we were young guys, you know, in which was the letter to serve anywhere.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: Anywhere. And of course, when we're young, we may or may not be married, we usually don't have children, we might have one, we're thinking of hardship posts, meaning, you know, health-related hardship posts or posts where there might occasionally be a coup and you've got to sort of stay in place a little bit. And those are risky enough, but most of us didn't—in the posts when most of us signed up for the agency, for Foreign Service, we didn't think we were going to be going—to be sent into a warzone, hot warzones.

HAMMINK: Yeah.

Q: And yet, the agency never called on those letters and commitments. And instead, to meet the requirements of the surge, we went the route of Foreign Service-Limited officers, as I recall, historically we weren't allowed to use personal service contractors by the Obama administration, which was different from Iraq, we did use PSCs and we used for-profit contractors or non-profit grantee employees. So, would you say the Foreign Service-Limited officers should continue to be part of the professional staffing up for this kind of a program if it should happen in the future, and/or should the agency call the letters of officers around the world and say, Hey, Bever, remember that letter? We need you in Afghanistan. We know you're in a tropical paradise somewhere in the Caribbean, doing good development work, but we need you, your country needs you, so pack up, we need you in thirty days there. We'll take care of your family.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: I mean, what's your view on that? Did that ever come across your mind, that and the Foreign Service-L question?

HAMMINK: So, the agency, as you know, Jim, was told to surge on the civilian side when the decision was made by President Obama to surge on the military side, and we were told to surge hundreds of additional Foreign Service officers, which was a very large percentage of the total number of Foreign Service officers in all of USAID worldwide, so it was impossible to even consider that that would come from the ranks of the career Foreign Service officers. I think you were involved in those decisions in Washington, but it was the right decision, good decision to go the FSL route. You know, in hindsight, in reading some of the assessments and analyses that have been done about the civilian surge, you know, myself, I'm not sure about the benefits, the broader benefits of sending out hundreds and hundreds of these fairly new FSOs. I mean, USAID had to go recruit them quickly. We didn't have time to train them up like we do with the career folks, and they may have had some experience overseas, but they were thrown into very difficult situations with little training and minimal USAID experience. They had some training, but not much.

And so, there's that aspect, and then, also, by the time I got there, as I mentioned, the word was, Okay, now we need to desurge. So, just as we got to that level that the White House wanted us to have in terms of USAID civilians, we then had to start pulling them out. So, I'm not sure about the efficacy of that. It probably would have been better, and of course, our presence in the field at that level depended on the U.S. military or NATO presence outside of Kabul, so, and outside of consulates in the big cities. And so, that we didn't have a choice. But if they had been able to stay longer there would have been more benefit, but just kind of sending them in and for many of the FSLs within months or a year or two in some cases, pulling them out. So, I think if we're looking for best practices or lessons learned, you know, in a conflict situation where we're supporting counterinsurgency stabilization, absolutely we need to stay the course enough to make a difference. You know, if we have to surge, we need more people out there to see what's going on. But it can't be done where you send them in for a little while and then pull them out. And you need a little more time to train and to think through their role to really make it the most bang for your buck; having them out there.

Q: So, as far as I know, and I wonder if you know, what happened to those four hundred or so, three hundred—because there were another hundred and fifty or so like them next door in Pakistan, if I remember also.

HAMMINK: Yes.

Q: What happened to all those people? Most of them were actually middle-aged. They were in their upper thirties or forties, they've had experience. Now that they knew something about AID from the inside, and we then systematically, methodically, you know, said, Thank you, have a good life, and I don't know whether the agency kept track of them or just, you know, asked if they would be interested in being on a surge roster for

the future or something, so that, you know, we could keep, if we needed them again, we could bring them in again. Any thoughts on that one?

HAMMINK: When I was back in Washington as head of OAPA, USAID had tried to follow up and locate some of them. However, every one of the FSLs who had served in Afghanistan, when they came back through Washington, were interviewed by a very senior USAID officer in OAPA, and after the surge and the bulk of FSLs had departed Afghanistan, she did a detailed analysis and wrote a really good paper on what we learning from all of these FSLs who were out in the field for a year, two years, three years in a few cases, that was very useful. Some of the FSLs stayed in USAID, as you know, and they applied for a Foreign Service officer career. Some of them were able to transfer to other missions and continue working for USAID as FSLs and a few went on obviously to have other careers and went to work in other areas and had that experience behind them. Many probably went on to work in other countries as well.

Q: So, again, I'm looking for lessons learned here, that paper that you say to your senior colleague at headquarters, and we're going to move to headquarters now, that she wrote up, was that available publicly?

HAMMINK: I'm not sure it is. I'd have to look, Jim. It was definitely shared widely within USAID and with the interagency.

Q: Just because it makes me think, Wow, that could be a treasure trove of first person stories out there, you know, outside the wire, you know.

HAMMINK: As you know, I spent a few months at USIP [United States Institute of Peace] when I came back to Washington from Afghanistan and—

Q: Yeah, let's talk about that. We're now shifting to your time as the head of the Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs, which by the time you got there, had the formal title of being the assistant to the administrator for Afghanistan and Pakistan. So, let's talk about the paper, the think piece, and that interregnum, I would say, you're shifting from, you know, fifth gear into maybe a different gear in come to headquarters that required you to go through neutral to get to the next gear, in this period of six weeks or three months or something. Tell us about what that was with U.S. Institute of Peace that you initiated and/or that they asked for.

HAMMINK: Sure. If I could, Jim, I'd like to mention one other quick lesson learned—

Q: Sure, yes, please.

HAMMINK: As I discussed before, we put in place a multi-tiered monitoring program.

Q: Yes.

HAMMINK: That, I've been told, and I've seen, has been picked up by many missions around the world. So, that is, you could maybe say, a best practice as well, that has been picked up by those missions where it makes sense, this kind of multi-tiered monitoring system, to give USAID not just one avenue and one voice, but several to be able to compare all these data points so that USAID really knew what was going on in the field.

Q: And those missions that picked up that practice, they're generally missions which I would call are cross-border programs where it's hard because of danger for us to either ourselves and or our Foreign Service nationals to get eyes on.

HAMMINK: Correct. Where both management and program staff had a hard time getting out. You know, unfortunately, a lot of AID officers don't get out as much as they should or could.

Back to Washington. I left Kabul on September 30, 2015, as we mentioned, and I took a month of home leave and decompressed from the time in Afghanistan. And then, USAID basically approved for me to spend a few months at USIP, and that was my idea because I knew the head of the Afghanistan program and the vice president for the region at USIP quite well. And USIP is quasi-governmental, so there was no problem of me being paid. I was there for two months.

Q: It was Bill Taylor at the time?

HAMMINK: Bill Taylor was the senior vice president at the time. It was Andrew Wilder, who was the head of the Afghanistan and South Asia group.

Q: Okay, right, yeah, yeah.

HAMMINK: And so anyway, I was able to spend time doing a lot of reading and writing, thinking, talking to a lot of people and looking at you know, what's been written about Afghanistan and how little was written about the development side of USAID and lessons learned. There was quite a bit already being written on lessons learned for the military. So, I developed a paper on USAID and Afghanistan lessons learned or challenges and successes, which was published by USIP. And I was going to mention, you know, this paper I talked to you about where this senior person in OAPA interviewed all the FSLs who were leaving. That's cited in my paper.

Q: Who was that?

HAMMINK: Her name is Norma Parker.

In any case, a few things of interest from my two months at USIP. I read and heard and talked about information and analyses that I wish I had known before going out to Afghanistan. I could have done a better job if I had known whether it's about local culture or history or you know, the kind of aspects of working in Afghanistan, even from the sixties and the seventies. There were some things that I was able to find and read. And so, it's unfortunate that I had not taken the time to read more about Afghanistan and USAID's history there and talk with former officials. I talked to senior leadership at USAID and encouraged them to encourage and support new mission directors going out to one of our large posts in complex situations spend a week or two in one of the think tanks that specialize in that country, could be USIP, could be one of the others. And that never went anywhere because people said, Oh, you know, these officers going out, they're too busy, they don't have the time. I also recommended that after they're done with these very high-level, very intense, whether in a conflict situation, but a very high U.S. foreign policy priority area that they spend a month, two months at a think tank, able to write up their thoughts and their lessons learned from their time. That would be of use for others. And so, again, I don't think that went anywhere, again because of time. I don't think cost is an issue because there are no additional costs involved.

Q: Oh, I think when this is—when this recording is transcribed I would recommend that you double stomp that one.

HAMMINK: Well, maybe through UAA we could have a discussion.

Q: Yeah, because I remember when I was the DAA, whatever, in legislative public affairs, you and I acted, and I think I read every line of your report because it was going to be published, and that was part of our requirements. And the idea of giving an officer, especially a senior officer on whose shoulders all of the manifestations of a conflict zone fall, did two things. One is, the agency and he, in this case, you were able to take some time to decompress, which was the word you actually used.

HAMMINK: Yeah.

Q: In your case, it was home leave. But also to reflect and record your ah-has for the benefit of not only the agency but other foreign policy practitioners and implementers. And that, it seems to me, is a best practice. And I think as far as I know in my career, you're the only one that ever did it.

HAMMINK: There actually was one other person who spent some time at USIP for a two-month time period to do some research and write a paper. It was Kevin Brownawell.

Q: That was on Pakistan?

HAMMINK: Yeah, I think that was on Pakistan.

Q: Oh. So, I think that it's something our colleagues in the military do very well.

HAMMINK: I see.

Q: And they do the hot wash sort of thing but at the leader level I think they are required to submit a written, you know, report on their experience and their counsel to the incoming commander or area AOR leader.

HAMMINK: Right, right.

Q: Especially in the conflict area. So, we'll move on, but I think you just—and from the point of view that USAID should make the time, invest the time, when this officer, the officers we're sending out are risking their lives, especially in these situations, and handling hundreds of millions of dollars or billions of dollars of the people's money, then we've got our priorities wrong. So, we—okay, so good.

HAMMINK: Let me just, if I can, keep going. So, I was at USIP until December of 2016. I then joined the Africa bureau as senior DAA. And then, by July of 2016, yeah, 2016, they asked me to be the head of OAPA, the A to A, as you said, the assistant to the administrator. Larry Sampler, who was the AtA at the time, wanted to leave. He had been there for some five years, and so, they asked me if I would take that on. I went back to working on Afghanistan and Pakistan in August of 2016, and Larry and I took a trip to the region in September 2016, met the ambassador, met others, and that was extremely helpful. And by then, if you remember, Donald Trump was elected and I was in that position during the transition period after January 2017. Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster was the national security adviser. He had quite a bit of experience in Afghanistan and in the region already, and he wanted to relook at the U.S. government strategy for Afghanistan and for the entire region, and put together a high-level team led by the NSC. The strategic review went through the whole interagency process at the NSC, starting at working levels and then moving up, and developed a new U.S. government strategy that became a regional strategy, realizing the situation and the U.S. role in Afghanistan really relied on the regional players as well, of course, Pakistan, India, north of that, west of that.

And so, as AA, which is kind of similar to the assistant secretary level in the State Department, I was able to be part of all of the high-level discussions. And at one point, National Security Advisor McMaster basically said he wanted to take a ground themed trip through the region and he flew out in his plane and invited the assistant secretary level people from four agencies, including USAID, so I was able to go along on that trip with McMaster as well as the State Department Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Laurel Miller, and senior DOD and intel officials.

Led by NSA McMaster, in Kabul we met with Ghani and his entire team at the time, and I had a chance to meet with the USAID team again, including the entire mission, which

was a lot of fun to be back, the first time and last time I was back in Kabul. But being part of that process made me realize just how important USAID's role in the interagency is. And I was happy and encouraged to see now that in this new administration, USAID had a larger role on the NSC, a more permanent role as member of the NSC. So, that was very useful. We put together this new strategy that was going away from a time based policy, but being a more conditions based policy. And so, USAID had to also consider what are those conditions that we would continue in different areas. I think we were able to influence that revised U.S. strategy because of the terrific team we had at OAPA and support from the mission on some of these policy issues, and because we had a lot of data, so our discussion could be backed by data, which was, you know, from our monitoring system, from our evaluations, other analyses and studies and assessments. And I think looking in terms of lessons learned, if there's a major high-level U.S. government strategy review, I think USAID, especially in a country where USAID plays a big role, I think it's very important and helpful for the USAID side to bring together the data and analysis that's out there so that we can come to the table with the kind of data that will back up what we say. If it's part of the final policy or strategy, that's great. If not, well, we've done what we could to bring it to the table.

Q: We did our duty.

HAMMINK: Yeah. And some of what was in the new strategy supported what we were doing, looked to the future. The new strategy was approved, as you know, by President Trump. He announced it, I believe, in August of 2017. And it stayed in place for a while, for a few years, until a new policy decision was made to talk directly with the Taliban.

Q: Okay, so now you're in Washington. First of all, I wasn't aware that you took that trip. That is an awesome recognition of USAID's role in the interagency, you know, others would think the U.S. government that in a situation like Afghanistan our government ignores USAID and ignores the foreign assistance role on the civilian side at our peril.

HAMMINK: Yeah.

Q: And so, this is really important to have recorded, Bill. And again, I hope you double stomp this one. It means having the right people in that position interacting at the National Security Council level like yourself, who has the bona fides and gravitas and experience and humility to, you know, speak quietly but carry a big stick of experience and data, as you say, that then makes policy decisions, hard choices hard to ignore for the record. So, tell me, you know, you said the U.S. government interagency worked very well at post in Kabul.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: Did you find the same thing in Washington? Did you find there was genuine teamwork because AID is, of course, a sub department agency that currently and in the time you

were there reports as an independent agency, statutorily, but reports to the secretary of state and certain budget decisions are made by the secretary of state if he or she decides to exercise that discretion, which they have pretty much ever since the idea came along in law. How did that work and you know, if you were the national security advisor to the president, would you do anything different vis-à-vis that interagency coordination from the perspective of what you experienced? I assume your time in the deputy's committee from time to time you were certainly in the interagency coordination committees that usually the NSC runs. Can you talk about the U.S. government interagency?

HAMMINK: Sure. My experience when I was in OAPA for just over a year was that we had an excellent relationship with all parts of the interagency. Again, we need to put this into context here. At this time, this was, you know, March, April, May, June of 2017, when all these almost daily meetings took place at different levels at the National Security Council on this new strategy for Afghanistan because there was a lot to look at. And we had a great team at OAPA, many of whom had been there and worked on and in Afghanistan for many years, and so they already had good relationships with the interagency at their level. So when they were called into the sub-PCCs and other lower level coordination committees they already knew everybody and there was already some trust between the participants.

At the time we had a Senate-approved secretary of state and there was a Senate-approved secretary of defense because they're the first ones approved. We had an acting administrator. Wade Warren was acting administrator. He did an outstanding job. I would go with him as his plus one to these kinds of secretary-level meetings at the NSC on the strategy, but again, we didn't have a Senate-approved administrator or appointee. At my level and below, that didn't matter because everyone knew everyone at the table, including, and I think this was including the national security advisor, General H.R. McMaster. And they knew just how important a role AID played in Afghanistan, within the whole U.S. government, and within foreign policy priorities AID played an important role. So, I think that helped a lot, that people at the table knew our role, knew how important it was, and invited us, welcomed us, but with some clear directions. You know, we had to do our homework just like everyone else and come back with recommendations based again as much as possible on data. So, it was a very good interagency process.

The situation in Afghanistan at the time was very complex. The surge during the Obama administration, the de-surge, and then how to move forward on support to the government at a time when there was a resurgent insurgency in the Taliban. So, very complex, but the interagency worked well together because of these factors that I just mentioned, despite the fact we didn't have a political appointee at the top of USAID.

Q: So, that is very heartening to hear. And I think that's an important takeaway. It didn't always work like that.

HAMMINK: Our folks at OAPA from USAID had been meeting for years in the NSC on different topics, of course. So, they knew each other, there was mutual respect and the like. I don't know how many situations would be like that, because this very high U.S. foreign policy priority policy, had been going on for many years. USAID OAPA had experts who had been with OAPA many years so we were able to use those relationships and have the expertise on our side, on USAID's side.

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Q: So, this is session number three with William Hammink, former mission director to Afghanistan by Jim Bever here. My question is did you have the sense that the leadership of AID and your fellow USAID assistant administrators in the administration at that time were all in as it were in terms of the Afghanistan effort or was the agency conflicted at the career or political level as to whether this was really something that deserved that much attention and that much resources given all the other demands on the agency as a humanitarian assistance relief agency and a development, long-term development agency?

HAMMINK: Right. So, let me just say that the first few months of my time as assistant to the administrator, head of OAPA, were the last few months of the Obama administration and the administrator, Gayle Smith, was extremely supportive. In fact, one of my first jobs was to go to the UN General Assembly in New York with her and obviously many others from USAID, and she had a big agenda. But one of them was to speak at one of the events that the donors and the World Bank organized on Afghanistan. And she nailed it. She did a great job of talking. And President Ashraf Ghani was there as well as Abdullah Abdullah. She was very supportive, as was everyone in the administration. During the transition, of course, as I mentioned before, especially during the time of the development of this new strategy led by National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster under then President Trump, USAID had no political. But I received full support from all of the acting senior leaders. Now, again, I probably went on this trip with McMaster as a senior representative of USAID because there weren't any political appointees in USAID at the time, especially who knew Afghanistan like I did at the time. So, I think that was a moment of opportunity, if you will, so it wasn't anything to do with me per se. That being said, to answer your question, I received full support from the senior career officials in acting capacities within USAID, the leadership within USAID at that time. Clearly, it was a time when USAID was decreasing the number of staff and budget in Afghanistan was also decreasing. There was full support for the mission out there, but the importance of the role of USAID-Afghanistan just like the importance of the role of Afghanistan more generally within the USG was not as big as it used to be within the agency, and so that was fine.

Q: Okay. So, that's great. And did you feel like you needed that full support?

HAMMINK: Absolutely, yeah, because you know, Acting Administrator Wade Warren represented USAID at the principals meetings. I represented at the deputies meetings.

Wade at the time, appropriately, I think, spent a lot of time preparing. He did a great job at these meetings representing USAID, chiming in with secretaries when it was the right time to chime in with a USAID perspective as the strategy was developing and being finalized and then prepped to go to the president.

Q: So, you said you went with him to one of those meetings. Was that at the principals meeting where you were a plus one?

HAMMINK: Correct.

Q: That's remarkable.

HAMMINK: You know, when USAID administrators are invited as a principal you go to secretary level, then being a plus one often it's the assistant administrator or sometimes deputy assistant administrator. So, that was kind of normal. What was not normal was we didn't have any political appointees. It all worked out though.

Q: Well, you know, the others around the table probably were political appointees.

HAMMINK: Right, exactly.

Q: And so, that, you know, that, as you know, that gives them a special insight to a familiar kind of gravitas and trust and team thing, and when the agency is there as a non-political appointee they have to earn those SES or SFS officers like you have to earn their trust.

HAMMINK: Yep.

Q: What helped you and Wade build that trust inside the principals committee or the deputies committee of the National Security Council of the president?

HAMMINK: Well, I think one is, as McMaster's staff was working with him to build the agenda, build this out for these meetings, they were all aware of the role that USAID played, and they were all involved in the dozens of meetings prior to that point, you know, at the lower levels, coming up to the point where a draft strategy was ready to be presented to the principals. And so, it was after dozens of meetings and their acknowledgement and understanding of the role that USAID played in Afghanistan as part of the overall U.S. government foreign policy program and priorities.

Q: So, did you and Wade feel or sense that there was genuine appreciation and respect and value for the role that USAID plays in foreign assistance as part of the tools available to the American government and to the president of the United States in addressing a foreign policy challenge like Afghanistan?

HAMMINK: I can't speak for Wade but my impression was that it varied. There were principals who had knowledge of and worked on Afghanistan for some time who totally understood the role of development of USAID for the last many, many years, and there were others who were new to Afghanistan and perhaps new to their jobs and there were quite a few different secretaries at this meeting or on the screen, and they did not understand nor cognizant of the role of USAID. They probably did not understand the role of USAID. That being said, McMaster did and he was chairing the meeting and he, you know, allowed whoever wanted to speak to speak, which was great, so Wade was able to make a few key USAID and development-related points.

Q: As you look back on it and you recognize that now we have the rare historic opportunity out of sixty years of AID that not only do we have an administrator who basically reports to the president, which was always the case before, but at least from an internal executive branch and legislative perspective, but the administrator of AID now has a formal seat on the National Security Council.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: Which is an awesome responsibility, both for the current administrator, but also, I assume for the agency. You and I are both out of the agency now, but in your experience, what could or should the agency be doing going forward to assure that its senior career officers such as yourself found themselves in a position of regularly going in and representing the agency in the deputies committee meeting, especially when there's no political appointee in a particular position that normally would attend the deputies meeting of the NSC? What are your thoughts on whether that's important, number one, and if it is important, number two, then how do we do a better job of grooming our officers, senior Foreign Service and senior Executive Service usually, for that kind of function and role?

HAMMINK: So, I think USAID is definitely moving in this direction and that's what I've heard most recently. USAID officers, including career officers, should be encouraged to attend on a regular basis all of these IPCs. You know, I think that's like the lowest level, maybe office director, at the NSC to gain that experience, what kind of discussion, what kind of information, and then some support from within USAID, and maybe that's in the front office or chief-of-staff's office to help aid representatives, whether they are from Global Health or from a regional bureau who are going to these IPCs or PCCs regularly to come up with best practices or a format for the preparation to basically think through beforehand when they have the time. Sometimes these meetings are announced quickly. But they know the topic and to bring in from across the agency the thinking and those who have been involved in some of the evaluation, analysis and data to come up with USAID positions that then the USAID rep, at whatever level the representation is, can actually have something right there that they thought through and to present the USAID positions. And again, as much as possible based on data of USAID's experience in the field because that's where our real comparative advantage lies. So, there's that, and support for those who do go out, a lot of preparation. That's what we found in OAPA,

that for each of these IPCs we knew the topics, had to spend time on the high side, of course, but that we had thought through and come up with USAID positions for these and not just winging it, but to really have thought it through. And you need the time to do that, and you need some expertise and some available data, but with that we found that that's really worth it.

Q: So, that AID has value to proactively contribute to those inner sanctums at the highest level of the president of the United States and not only be present to respond to issues, but actually initiate policy considerations that need to be brought and truth spoken to power sometime.

HAMMINK: Yeah.

Q: So, okay, thank you. What else on your mind from the point of view of policy lessons learned or operational process issues and lessons learned as an assistant to the administrator with a team that's functioning within a multi objective agency that is a little engine that could, if you will, and doesn't have the resources of a cabinet department, and maybe you can also reflect on leadership issues that may, you know, may flow from that?

HAMMINK: Right. So, one is, and you're aware of this from the Washington perspective, and all my time overseas, you know, obviously influenced this, and that is support to the field, support to the missions. And that must be one of the main roles of OAPA. And that includes, of course, being the liaison with the interagency back in Washington, being the liaison within USAID and supporting the mission vision, the mission strategy, and not just every operational issue but also mission and strategy and vision within the Washington bureaucracy, and I think that's very important. And so, there must be that linking up and understanding of where the mission's going, the kind of strategy level but also operational, personnel and the like. That took a lot of communication. I can't overemphasize the importance of communication. We had a weekly call at my level as head of OAPA as well as the mission director and all the deputies and my deputies in OAPA. We had another weekly call with a lot of the office directors so that it was a broader audience. So, communication is key between the mission and Washington. And then, obviously, just like any organization within the OAPA here, and I'm sure you did this too, is a regular kind of stand up discussion. This is something that Larry Sampler introduced and I continued. We had a morning stand up every single morning. Most embassies do this of course so that was pretty standard. The key was to have this level of communication, planning and priority setting every day, not only on operational issues but also on broad mission vision, strategy.

Q: So, this was when you were the assistant to the administrator you're saying the stand up meetings with your own staff?

HAMMINK: Correct.

Q: At the time you were there, how many staff did you actually have?

HAMMINK: OAPA had about thirty staff when I was there. But this was at a time when there was a lot of churn going on and actually, I had put in place, along with the assistant administrator for Asia, a process of looking at wither OAPA because there was a lot of discussion about thinking more long-term for USAID and for USAID's role in Afghanistan. Important questions had to be addressed, especially with a new administration, such as, should OAPA be a separate organization, and I know you had helped set it up and there were some very good reasons at the time, and you know, did it still make sense to be separate or should it be part of Asia bureau and what that meant. So, we put together a very thoughtful and substantive analysis on the future of OAPA, with options. We wanted to be ready for the inevitable questions from the political appointees once they were appointed. That's one example of thinking long-term within the kind of bureaucracy of USAID and taking a little proactive action and coming up with your own thoughts on options for reorganization.

Q: So, one question that begs, is one national hotspot foreign policy issue like Afghanistan that gets the daily attention of literally the president of the United States, did you find it advantageous for you to have a direct phone call, a direct access to the administrator and the deputy administrator, or whoever was acting in that role, was that important for you, or could you have just as easily gone through one or two other levels of an Asia bureau assistant administrator, for example, before you got to the administrator or the deputy administrator for policy calls?

HAMMINK: That's a great question. During the development and thinking and rolling out of this U.S. government strategy for Afghanistan and for the region, South Asia region, I think it was extremely important that I had direct discussions and communication with the acting administrator, Wade Warren, and I think that was extremely important at the time. With the complexity and fast movement of the issues, it would have been a little bit tricky if I would have had to go through another AA and then a deputy administrator and then the administrator, because inevitably the administrator's probably going to be the one at the principals' meeting and you need to have had the time and trust to come up with what USAID's points are going to be. So, that was helpful and that was, again, the context at the time.

Q: So, would you says that access by you, or whoever would be in your position, where you're actually functioning almost as a deputy of the agency for Afghanistan and Pakistan in this case, you needed, whoever's in that seat in the future, that kind of seat, needs direct access to the top decision maker of the agency, whether Senate confirmed or career, acting?

HAMMINK: Yeah, I believe so, especially when there's a high-level and high-profile NSC-led process of strategy development where USAID plays a major role. Putting it into context, as our own military was drawing down to eight thousand, five thousand troops from a hundred and twenty thousand or whatever they were at, their role became

much less important, of course, but the role of USAID, because the U.S. government still wanted to support the Afghan government and to play a role and to be there, I mean, at the time for the long-term, the role of USAID actually significantly increased when the role of DOD decreased, and State, of course, was always very important there. So, that changed how we were seen at the table as well.

Q: Would you say, because what you're describing is exactly what happened in Iraq just six months earlier or a year earlier, it was kind of a gradual thing, the military peeled out, primarily, I mean, there were some internal bilateral agreement issues related to whether U.S. troops even as advisors could stay in Iraq and the same issue arose in Afghanistan, as you know, with every increasing day it left AID as the principle, hands on, on the ground, in the field actor of the American people, at least in our function as open, unclassified roles, and so, what would you advise future mission directors and assistants to the administrator equivalent responsible people in the agency, when we're in this kind of a context in terms of what to anticipate our role to be as our military colleagues pull out?

HAMMINK: Part of it, USAID was heavily engaged throughout the last twenty years in Afghanistan. But when there was this major surge, the DOD became the dominant U.S. government player there, and so, how to get ready for that. I think in those situations USAID needs to basically go back to the basics where you can, what makes good development, the due diligence we do, the analytical work, the clear expectation of risk management review. And localization, using local systems and being clear about our medium and long-term goals and objectives. And I think that's also a broader lesson learned for our work in Afghanistan because we weren't always able to follow our own best practices, when we were pushed into doing quick response, quick impact types of programs in different areas. And so, the other point is expectations, be clear about what we think we can do and what we can't do. Don't just say, Yes, we can do it, even without having thought it through and done some initial analysis, feasibility analysis and the like.

Q: So, sometimes in the deputies' committee, as you know, USAID can be put on the spot.

HAMMINK: Yep, that's right.

Q: And the assumption is if you are in the deputies' committee for your agency that you can make a commitment for the agency on the spot. The Pentagon can get away, I've found, by saying, Well, we'll get back to you on that, sir or ma'am, tomorrow. That doesn't work so well for us.

HAMMINK: Or you won't be asked twice, will you?

Q: Exactly. And you may not be asked back.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: And so, that's why I asked the question about your ability to have an immediate, direct access to the administrator because sometimes they will leave the room, make a phone call and come right back in with an answer. So, it's that trust between the person playing in your role and the top person in the agency is extremely important. The person like you, it seems to me from what you're saying, needs to have the assurance that they can make a commitment on behalf of the agency and not have to condition or qualify it on going back and talking to mom or dad.

HAMMINK: Right, yeah.

Q: So, let me take it from there for a question we haven't talked about, which is Congress. And any reflections on how, at this time, the agency was faring with the key committee leaderships, subcommittee leaderships in the Congress, and the key staffers who, as we know, are, you know, the most powerful, unelected and Senate unconfirmed people in our government to appreciate our role, these roles and trust what we were advising them. I mean, how was your relationship with Congress during—one your watch and hearings and testimonies and those kinds of internal meetings that—tell us a little about that and any thoughts or reflections on the importance of those or not.

HAMMINK: When I was mission director, something very important for me and for the agency, every single time I came back to Washington, and it was quite often because we were urged to get out, I sat down and had an organized meeting that LPA, Legislative and Public Affairs Bureau, organized with key interested staffers on both sides, the House and the Senate, so two separate meetings. They would send out the invite, whoever came, came. I would basically update everybody, here's what's going on out in Afghanistan on the ground from an AID perspective, here's what we're doing, here's what we're not doing, here's what's going well, here's what's not going well. Tried to be very honest when I could, and they appreciated that. So, they got an update every six months or so from somebody who had just come from Kabul. Some of those staffers also traveled, of course, so they came out and we saw them in Kabul and they traveled around. Some didn't, and so they really appreciated my regular and timely briefings. When I was head of OAPA, I would make sure when the mission director came from Kabul —they would go to the Hill and the regular briefings would continue. I did not have any hearings where I had to testify when I was assistant to the administrator just because it was a transition in administration and they were just coming up with a new strategy so Congress was waiting to see what that was going to be. But we did continue the briefings with staffers, and that was very important and very useful.

Q: Did State Department always come with you when you went up to the Hill to brief them when you came in as mission director?

HAMMINK: The Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, SRAP, was always alerted and they were always invited. Sometimes they would come and sometimes they wouldn't. After they came a few times, they saw that much of the

discussion was technical about development issues and the like and didn't get too much into political issues.

Q: Would you say that's a good practice?

HAMMINK: Absolutely. I don't know how USAID does it now, but I think it's always good practice. When USAID has a counterpart at State that is responsible for these countries, in this case SRAP, it is pretty clear that we have to invite them. Plus, I didn't mention, but you know, I and my deputies at OAPA had regular meetings, probably every two weeks, with the SRAP, him or herself, and their team.

Q: So, all of this pyramid, basically, of communications, you would say, is again vital for internal U.S. government interagency teamwork process and clarification of policy?

HAMMINK: Yeah, absolutely. At least my impression, and I could be wrong, but my experience back in Washington was this was more of a regular practice than it was an exception, that kind of continuous discussion, meeting, building trust that we did in OAPA with SRAP, and my experience was that that was more kind of a regular thing in other bureaus, especially regional bureaus.

Q: So, you mentioned Codels [congressional delegations] and staff DELs, did you pay attention to Codels and staff DELs when they came out, or if you hadn't been invited did you, when you were mission director, did you, or as the assistant administrator, when you heard that such a group was going to the field, did you alert the mission director that was there at the time to ask to join in those visits when they got briefings in the Congress, or I mean, got briefings at the embassy or wanted to travel to the field, how did you view the value of Codels and staff DELs basically on Afghanistan, both as mission director and as assistant to the administrator?

HAMMINK: Sure. As mission director, when I was out there and when I was back here as assistant to the administrator, I viewed Codels and staff DELs as, again, extremely important. They were a key constituency that we absolutely had to meet with if we could. Some of these staff DELs and Codels, especially Codels, knew what they wanted when they came out and what their key topics were—they knew who they wanted to meet with. Sometimes they asked to meet with USAID, truer for the staffers, and sometimes the ambassador would give a country team briefing and would absolutely every time invite USAID. And so, as it went around the table and different agencies would present to the Codel, USAID was at that table.

Q: Would you say that's a good practice?

HAMMINK: Absolutely, key. And that, again, comes with trust with the ambassador; you're on the country team. When I went out there as part of the team with National Security Advisor McMaster, the ambassador at the time, Mike McKinley, did the same

thing, presenting the country team, and my successor as mission director, Herbie Smith, did a great job of presenting USAID. So, that was kind of fun to be part of the country team briefing for a Washington high-level delegation from a different perspective—I used to be on his side, it was to see that from a Washington team perspective.

Q: Yeah.

HAMMINK: But you know, back in Washington, it's key sometimes when LPA heard about a Codel or staff DEL to Afghanistan they contacted their contacts and staffers and said, Hey, are you interested in talking to USAID, or even this team was one of the projects, whether they were interested in health or education or infrastructure and the like. And sometimes they would, and sometimes they would say, No, thanks, we have these other topics we're focusing on.

Q: So, I wanted to ask about a couple of more sensitive things, not classified, but just more personnel and sustainment kinds of issues, and then wrap this up with a question about the future of U.S. foreign assistance involvement with Afghanistan and the Afghan people. So, during your time there were there, sadly, because it's a conflict zone, were there fatalities that, you know, led to, unfortunately, you know, among American, Third Country Afghans who were under our programs, our contracts, our grants or our subgrants and subcontracts, because they were in the line of fire, because they were out in the countryside and they may or may not have had security with them, but it was not sufficient to keep them from being attacked and killed, injured or kidnapped, was this, you know, something that didn't happen on your two years or did it happen and did it happen a lot or did it eventually decline as we pulled people in from our PRTs and FOBs and so on?

HAMMINK: You know, any fatality is terrible, but USAID, and this happened before I arrived, suffered one fatality, which is amazing considering we had hundreds and hundreds of USAID officers, as well as a thousand USAID-funded implementing partners around Afghanistan, especially in Kabul. One of the USAID direct hires was out on a field trip with the U.S. military, and I think it was an insider attack. Anyway, he was killed. But that was something we thought of, we worked closely with RSO and the ambassador, of course, but we thought of that any time anybody was asking to go on a trip. Was the trip a true mission priority? What did the RSO say about the threat level? The U.S. military outside of Kabul took responsibility for security and they did an incredible job. Within Kabul it was RSO-managed security teams, which also did an incredible job. And so, I think USAID was very fortunate. I mean, one fatality is one too many, but given the extent of the presence of USAID-funded, USAID direct hire and other USAID-funded implementing partners across the country I think USAID was very fortunate. Let me just say, because I think you're the one who told me this early on, we lost quite a few of our USAID-funded implementing partners, especially during the building of the road to Kandahar. But when I was in Afghanistan, offices of several USAID implementing partners were attacked viciously by the Taliban, including the American University of Afghanistan and Counterpart International, with casualties sadly.

Q: I was always curious about that because the debate in 2003–2004 was pretty serious and it actually then, I think, continued at a very serious level for quite a few years after that, I mean, hundreds of people on our pay, mostly Afghan but third country nationals from Germans to Brits to Indians and Pakistanis and Turks and so on. So, that's very reassuring to hear. So, in terms of the comment that you made earlier about the duration of our assignments of AID officers, career officers, Foreign Service usually, occasionally rarely a Civil Service officer would sign up for an excursion tour, but were there things we could have done as a government to support and encourage, motivate, incentivize direct hire officers to serve more than one year tours, especially ones who were, you know, had a special person in their life, married or otherwise, who, if they could have been bivouacked somewhere nearby like within the U.S. embassy community in India or in Kuwait or in Dubai or something, within a single flight either way so they could literally reconnect with each other as human beings, and therefore, you know, be willing to stay in-country a second year or a third year and basically building on a model that we know worked well in Vietnam where family members were bivouacked in Bangkok or Manilla, I mean, were there things that U.S. government could have or should have done to learn some of those lessons of those lessons of the past that we should think about for the future, or is this just not realistic in AID's means or in the U.S. government interagency network?

HAMMINK: You know, I think the U.S. government, State Department, and then USAID together and then USAID separately, put in place a number of incentives to try to encourage two- or three-year tours. For example, spouses could come if they wanted to come, and they got an EFM [Family Member Employment] job. And agencies at post were strongly encouraged to design and develop and put in place EFM positions to allow spouses to come. That was a big incentive to stay more than one year. Another was, of course, the financial incentives, and I believe they put in place a financial incentive to stay a second year, in addition to the regular danger pay and the like. So, that was another thing. And you know, to encourage people to come they gave preferential bidding, as you know.

Q: For onward assignment?

HAMMINK: Yes, for onward assignment. So, those were all incentives. The other thing they did for officers who came to Afghanistan, if they were coming from another post, they allowed their spouse to stay at that post and to stay in housing, keep the kids in schools, if the officer and his family wanted that, and his or her family wanted that. That was a big deal, and so, I think a lot of people took advantage of that. That way they didn't have to uproot. So, there was always a subset of AID officers who came out to basically check that box. They had to bid on a hardship post, and they came for a year and moved on. But there were some who came out and said, Wow, this is really exciting because we're at the forefront of a major U.S. government foreign policy priority, we have money, we have an opportunity to make a difference, and they stayed a second year. A few of them wanted to stay a third year. We had one guy who was force placed, if you will, because he had to put Afghanistan or a hardship post as a bid, he put it last, and USAID HCTM assigned him to his last bid and only told him through an email he received on

Christmas Day. He arrived a very unhappy person. However, he loved the job. He extended for a second year. He came back on another tour a few years later after serving in Washington. So, that happens, you know. It just depends on the people. And we encouraged people to not make a decision until they'd been at post for a few months to decide if they want to stay a second year or not. So, there were ways, and I think AID did a lot of these with support from Washington. Many of these incentives were broader State Department policies as well for their people. And we were successful in some cases, like you said, some people only wanted to stay a year in any case and that wouldn't have changed. But overall, the lesson learned is to continue the incentives, but give people the option, don't force them to bid on their next post even before they arrive.

Q: Or give them, maybe give them the option if they are forced to bid to cancel that and stay in Afghanistan.

HAMMINK: Correct, yes.

Q: And so, with regard to Foreign Service nationals, and third country nationals, in the early years we couldn't have functioned in Afghanistan without our FSNs that were willing to leave the missions with the mission director's permission and come out for six months or whatever, or longer, and eventually what we put into place was if FSNs came and were willing to stay a year or beyond, we had to work it out so that they wouldn't lose their job back at the post they came from, India or posts we had them coming from all over. But what we put into place at the time anyway, as a transition, was they could then convert to third country nationals and be paid at a GS-equivalent level to their SN grade. So, if they were FSN at ten or eleven, they would suddenly be earning a GS-ten or eleven salary, which is usually five to ten times in dollar equivalent and paid in dollars, plus all the benefits that come to a direct hire in terms of danger pay and so on, so we were able to get some of the best FSN brains from around the world to apply and stay for a year or two or three and train up the local Afghan FSNs that way. I don't know in the end whether that was a best practice, I think it was, and eventually Afghanistan, if I recall by the time you were there, it was probably, the FSN cadre was probably almost all Afghans and maybe only a very few third country nationals. Is that right?

HAMMINK: No, actually, we had a substantial number of TCNs or third country nationals when I was in Kabul. I think there were thirty to forty at any one time from all over the world, from different USAID missions.

Q: Okay.

HAMMINK: And it was a big draw. Whenever we advertised there were many people who applied. Early on, you had to get the mission directors from those different countries to push, but when I was in Kabul, we got a lot of applications—there was huge interest. Partly it was the financial incentive, partly because it was a great opportunity for FSNs to learn a lot and be in a place that was much bigger than where they came from, for most of

them, and so that helped them when they went back to get a better position or, to move on as a TCN in another country.

Our FSNs, I didn't talk about this, but we did everything to recruit, continually recruit top notch FSNs. We had many incentives for FSNs also. We had salaries that were decent. The problem was that when I was in Kabul, the rule for FSNs who wanted to apply for a special immigrant visa, an SIV, was that they only had to stay in their job for one year before applying. It took much more time than a year to recruit, to go through the security clearance, which was tough, and then when these folks came onboard, we would train them. That would take time. And then within a year they were applying for SIV and many of them got it and six months later they were gone. So, it was a continual process of recruiting. You know, we never wanted to or could influence FSNs one way or another whether they applied for the SIV. They had to make the decision themselves. But we never got ahead of the curve on that because we were losing so many FSNs through this SIV process.

Q: So, and the reason for that when you're SIV was because we as a government recognized these people were at risk.

HAMMINK: Yes.

Q: Associated with us and their family members.

HAMMINK: Yep. When I left a year later or so Congress had changed the rule. Instead of one year I think there was a two year employment requirement.

Q: So, let me ask one question of you on a more kind of health basis, health issue, and then, in terms of whether it's a good practice or not, and then move to the future. Is there anything else you'd like to add in terms of lessons learned, obviously related, operational or leadership questions vis-à-vis the OAPA time period for you before I do that?

HAMMINK: No. When I got to OAPA it was well established. My predecessors as head of OAPA, including you, had set up this well-oiled machine, and we had terrific staff who knew Afghanistan very well and many had served out there and went out on regular TDYs to help the mission, and so it was really a good team, a great team and a good experience. During the transition from one administration to another, my replacement was a political appointee who came in for different reasons at that time. But no, I think we were positioned to support this U.S. government strategy development process and to play a role, and that was a great experience. For me it was in a sense being in the right place at the right time but with the requisite experience and knowledge to play a role.

Q: So, lessons learned?

HAMMINK: You asked about health. Let me just say, every time there was a newcomer who arrived at post, myself and the deputies, we had three, would meet with them, all the newcomers every single week. We would have lunch, go to the dfac, bring our lunch, and amongst different things we would ask them to always check their health. And we would say, Always also look at and be aware of the health of others as well. Not only physical health, but also mental health, of people you work with, of your neighbors in the next hootch, because it was such a tough place to work. The embassy endured rocket attacks when I was there, and there were regular terrorist attacks on restaurants and other places in Kabul. In early 2014, the Taliban attacked a restaurant in Kabul and I personally lost several good friends, including the head of the IMF, in that attack. Then a few times you'd be walking on the embassy compound and boom, a nearby explosion would shake you and shake your bones.

Q: Yeah.

HAMMINK: And so, maybe we could have done more, especially when people went back to the U.S. and had PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], to make sure everyone was aware of symptoms, treatment and ways to deal with it. My wife was with me for two years in Kabul, and after we returned to the U.S. we continually had dreams and flashbacks of attacks. And I'd see someone walking into the store with a backpack, I'd be, Oh, no, what does this have, a bomb? So, maybe there's more that USAID can do for the next time when we have many staff in a very highly kinetic area with ongoing terrorist attacks, as well as major security issues when we do travel.

Q: Did you use Staff Care?

HAMMINK: Absolutely, yes.

Q: Would you say Staff Care is a best practice for the agency?

HAMMINK: I think USAID could have done more, specifically focused on PTSD issues and the like for those who spent a year or two years or more in Afghanistan and came back. It might have been useful to talk things through. I think at one point we required, when they came back as part of their check out in Washington, to talk to the social worker, to go to Staff Care and talk to somebody there. But there was very little follow up. I think we could have done more, and maybe that's a lesson learned.

Q: So, you would also, just in terms of that kind of thing, you took some time to write down your thoughts when you came back, and to do some research and reflect on it, and you actually published. Would you recommend that to future administrators, that when you get your senior leadership group guy or gal out there in the field and they come back after a year or two in that kind of a situation that they should be given some time, administrative leave or whatever, to do what you did, which is get their thoughts down on

paper to debrief people at headquarters, including the administrator. I mean, or not bother, just go on and let people learn the lessons themselves the hard way?

HAMMINK: I do not think that all USAID officers have that interest but I think it should be encouraged. I think it should be something that USAID allows, encourages, and puts out there as an option for mission directors and others from these very high profile and kinetic and conflict zones when they come back. Again, as I said before, just as importantly I think USAID should encourage mission directors, deputies, to take a week at a think tank and spend time with experts on these countries who have been studying them for decades. It could help to prepare the new MD for what is coming and help to set the stage and the context for the work that that mission director is going to be doing when they get out there.

Q: Yeah, one thought, because I had been at Foreign Service Institute as the senior development advisor to the director, so I realized we don't require of our senior leadership group officers before they go out to their assignment just to take what's usually a three-week course of area studies on their country and their country's region before they go out.

HAMMINK: That's right.

Q: You know, that's above and beyond speaking the language of the country, which is a whole other discussion, but your comment that in the strategy you worked on with the National Security advisor, it took a regional dimension.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: And one of the things that gets drilled into you when you take an area studies course at FSI, and I took one in, I think before I went to Indonesia or something, was you know, no country is a vacuum, no country is an island, even if it is physically an island it is not a diplomatically, culturally, socially, intelligence wise or anything else an island, and having that regional understanding, it sounds kind of similar to what you're getting at, that ought to be a best practice in the future for our leadership, our career leaders.

HAMMINK: Agree.

Q: So, the last question from my end anyway for today is, well, there's two last questions, one is the evacuation.

HAMMINK: Right.

Q: And you were not there for the evacuation, you were retired.

HAMMINK: Correct.

Q: And well thought, kind of play out in the news in real time as can happen now, frighteningly so, and we knew, you knew and I knew, you know, friends and colleagues and trusted revered people in Afghanistan who were caught up in that evacuation among our Foreign Service National group and other implementing people who worked for the implementing partners or retired FSNs for example, the American direct hires were taken out and quickly the Foreign Service Nationals that wanted to leave, left, and were able to leave. But what were your thoughts and reflections, could this have been planned better, could this have been prepared better? Were there warning signs that should have been known? Could there have been ways for the embassy to have been able to locate, say, former or retired FSNs who were still living in the country and swoop them up and get them out of the country with their loved ones? I mean, what was going through your mind and what were your thoughts on that, Bill?

HAMMINK: So, two quick points. One was for the last few years I have been on the board of trustees of the American University of Afghanistan, and I was chair of the finance committee, and so, back in the summer of 2021 the board was watching the situation very carefully. AUAF still had a number of expats on the campus in Kabul, a lot of Afghan staff were there, and so, a lot of responsibility, obviously. AUAF had a lot of operating funds in its Afghan bank account, it was an Afghan institution, Afghan registered. I was heavily engaged in watching what was going on and then being involved in decisions on evacuation, for example, of the AUAF expats who were there, including the American president of AUAF, who was still there, as well as those Afghan faculty staff, students, et cetera, who wanted to get out. They begged for help. So, how best to help them within the few options that the U.S. had at the time, P-1, P-2, these were different programs. So, there was that.

And then, at the same time, on August 14 and 15, when the Taliban were at the gates of Kabul, my wife and I started getting calls from people we had worked with when we were there just a few years before. My wife got a call from a former minister and head of the maternity hospital, who was a good friend of ours. She was at the airport; she basically said her life's in danger. She had stayed through the Taliban period the last time. She had been beaten because she insisted on being in the hospital to support Afghan mothers and children. She needed to get out. She begged for help—what can she do? She got out on her own to Delhi and then flew to Istanbul where her family was. I got a call from people with whom I worked, and their family who was in the U.S., Help, help. So, myself, former ambassadors and former mission director Ken Yamashita, all sent in references and forms to get them on the list of evacuees, basically to do everything we could to allow them to get on the list to get out. That was the key thing for those two weeks until the end of August. And night and day we worked on these references, on filling out the required forms saying yes, I worked with this person, he or she contributed significantly to the U.S. programs in Afghanistan.

I think one of the issues was that there were so many people who were in the government who were doing everything, you know, with the U.S. in supporting our programs, and they didn't qualify because they weren't U.S. government employees or employees of NGOs and contractors. So, that was a category of key U.S. supporters for whom it was really difficult. We tried and tried and very few of them got out unless they were lucky and somehow got into the airport and got on a plane but not on the list. And so, it was a stressful time for us but especially for our friends and colleagues stuck in Kabul. It was a difficult time because there were so many people who asked for help and we were trying, within the systems we knew, and called people we knew. We knew that people all over the country were doing the same thing trying to help Afghans with whom they worked. Unfortunately, I don't think anybody thought that Kabul would fall so quickly. Maybe they thought that that might happen, but within six months, within a year. And I think the U.S. was unprepared for or had not thought it through for the surge of hundreds of thousands of Afghans who came to that airport and broke through, wanting to get out. I mean, they were just so scared.

I think, Jim, you asked about my thinking on that in hindsight and having been watching the news throughout the summer, I was frankly very surprised when the U.S. military closed down Bagram overnight and didn't even tell the Afghans they were leaving. And Bagram was an air base that the U.S. military could actually control.

Q: Right.

HAMMINK: And control the space. And it was close enough to Kabul they could have used that—I'm no expert here, but just thinking about it, they might have been able to use that as a base of evacuation instead of relying on the airport in Kabul, which is surrounded by houses and people. And you know, it's not defensible. And the Kabul airport is right next to the population of many millions, obviously some of whom would want to get out. So, tough situation. I would not have wanted to be a planner then. You know, you try to think of all the scenarios, but obviously in hindsight it could have been done better.

Q: So, any thoughts on the current U.S. government policy that in order to qualify for asylum, for example, a person must actually physically leave the country, they're trying to escape, and then be a refugee, basically, in a third country, in order to then try to get the attention of a consular officer at the U.S. embassy in that third country and wait and wait and wait before they get a chance to leave to come to another country or eventually maybe the United States, is there, is that a best practice?

HAMMINK: That I don't know. I read a bit of the articles that came out after August 20, 2021 about our experience in Vietnam and after Vietnam and supporting that evacuation and bringing hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese to the U.S. And you know, I think the situation today is different politically, and in any case, I don't know what the best practices are here. I just think that approach you've just mentioned limits, you know, those people who are in danger. If they don't have the necessary funds to support

themselves while they wait for a year or two years for the U.S. to decide on their case and then no guarantee they'll even get approved for any kind of visa, they couldn't do it. So, I'm not sure that's a great approach in this situation.

Q: Yeah. I mean, again, we can spend a lot of time on this one.

HAMMINK: Exactly, yeah. A lot of people have done a lot of thinking about this.

Q: Things you have to do to get through checkpoints, and then get into the other country, which may or may not be welcoming you, all for the privilege of being able to apply eventually to an embassy, to our embassy, and then come to the United States in order to be considered, and meanwhile, you have to find people who can vouch for you who may not even be employed anymore or alive and their companies may have devolved, and so it's just a nightmare. And I don't know the answer. All I know is it seems like an anticipation of the possible future. Would you agree this requires some serious reflection by our foreign affairs agencies with Congress on how to handle this kind of situation better the next time. There will be another next time.

HAMMINK: Yes, there will be another next time, I agree. I think that would be useful. I'm not sure it hasn't been done, maybe not at the level you're talking about, but I do know at USAID they've been looking at this internally, but obviously a lot of this is State Department, it's DHS, it's, you know, across the U.S. government in terms of setting up these programs that DOJ has a role in as well, obviously. And so, it's a tough one. But, I agree with you, they need to look at how to do it better for the next time around.

Q: Yeah, it would seem to me that at a minimum, when Foreign Service Nationals, let's say, working for the agency, they retire, they take another job, maybe in a classified context, their onward contact information should be protected and kept inside the embassy with the emergency evacuation book so that they could be located and contacted in the future. At a minimum we owe that to our FSNs and to help protect them, but also have ways where they could be contacted, because that, I think, was part of the problem just parochially with local employees whether they're working for State Department or AID or other agencies.

So, one final question, which is about Afghanistan and U.S. assistance for Afghanistan in the future, clearly from a humanitarian perspective we are still engaged and I think we, the U.S. is the biggest bilateral, just the biggest donor period. But do—and you're involved in AUAF, American University of Afghanistan, for example, I mean, should we be walking away from Afghanistan? We put twenty years and significant blood and treasure into it and will continue to put treasure into it just to cope with our military colleagues who have been wounded and to support them for the rest of their lives, which will go on for many decades into the future through Veterans Affairs. Or is it still in our U.S. interests to find ways to stay engaged or invest in the future of the country and what is that future?

HAMMINK: I am strongly encouraged that USAID has stayed in Afghanistan. My understanding and what I've learned is, besides the very important humanitarian assistance, that there's continuing development assistance, especially focused on where possible and however possible support for Afghan women, and education and health. And I think that's great. I think that USAID is continuing to support AUAF. I know of some other programs that are continuing which are helping Afghan women maintain some ability to continue to earn money, even if it's in their home like making carpets. So, I'm encouraged that those continue. I hope that the relationship with the Taliban is such that USAID-funded programs can continue, although of course, stay limited. Hopefully, these programs funded by USAID can continue and can achieve some impact for Afghan women without a lot of interference from the Taliban. We don't know. I mean, obviously USAID's tracking that closely. So, I'm encouraged. And I do think that we need to try as much as possible to maintain the gains in terms of support for Afghan women, as well as for infants and children and mothers. And also, education, for primary education. I believe USAID is supporting that through the World Bank program, the ARTF. A major issue that the U.S. must continue to pound on is allowing girls and women to attend high school and universities. But I'm encouraged right now there is continuing to be a USAID Afghanistan and continuing to support the people of Afghanistan.

Q: Thank you. And look forward to how this all comes out in the wash.

HAMMINK: Well, thank you very much, Jim, and good talking.

End of interview