The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

AMBASSADOR HUGO LLORENS

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good morning. It's September 22, 2022, and today I'm starting our oral history interviews for our Afghanistan project with Ambassador Hugo Llorens.

LLORENS: Great to be with you.

Q: Thanks. To start, could you just give a brief summary of your life and career before you actually got involved with Afghanistan.

LLORENS: Yes, I had a thirty-six-year Foreign Service career. I joined in 1981, the first year of the Reagan administration, so I served President Reagan, President Bush, President Clinton, President George W. Bush, President Obama, and I concluded my career with President Trump. I'm an economic cone officer, started out in the Philippines on a consular tour in Manila back in 1982 after regional studies and language training. Then after that, I went to Bolivia. I met my wife, Lisett, in Bolivia. We've been married since 1985, so thirty-seven years! Have two boys, Andrew and Dirk, Foreign Service brats. By the time they went to college, Andrew had lived in eight countries and Dirk in nine, so we were very Foreign Service, I am very much a field guy. I spent a considerable amount of my career as an economic officer in Latin America, and I'm not going to devote too much time on that. But then, went back to Washington, served in the old ARA [Bureau of Inter-American Affairs]. I am also a National War College graduate [Class of 1996]. My first major leadership position overseas was Principal Officer in Vancouver, Canada. That was 1999–2002. I returned to Washington and worked on the National Security Council staff during the Bush administration.

Q: Also working on Latin America?

LLORENS: Yes, on Latin America. I was director of Andean Affairs, and worked with President Bush, National Security Advisor Dr. Rice, and Steve Hadley, who was the deputy. Then I went back out as DCM [deputy chief of mission] in Buenos Aires. It was an interesting time. President Kirchner had just been elected. Argentina was sort of in total collapse, bankruptcy. So, it was about trying to help Argentina get back on its feet. Then went to Spain as DCM. Again, Spain being a major NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] ally where we had some significant military bases, and they were logistical hubs for our military effort in Iraq and Afghanistan. The DCM tours were 2003–2008.

Q: So, you worked with them on both the conflicts?

LLORENS: On Iraq and Afghanistan, correct. And so, that was a key part of our job in Spain.

Then went to Honduras as the U.S. ambassador. There I dealt with the coup crisis. That fell on my lap. And again, I was nominated by President Bush to be the ambassador 2008 and served with the Bush administration for six months. And then, the bulk of my ambassadorship was with President Obama and Secretary Clinton. This was the first major crisis faced by the Obama administration. That was 2008 to 2011.

I left Honduras in 2011 and was proud to have led our team in preventing a bloodbath, helping organize free and fair elections, and restoring the democratic order. The Honduran crisis was politically very controversial in the United States. Some elements of the Republican party, a minority element but very strident, didn't see what happened in Honduras as a coup. It was unequivocally a coup. The military went to the president's house, grabbed him, put him in handcuffs, exiled him, and took power. They took the radio stations and all key governmental institutions. It was a classic coup. But they did it in a way that gave it some legitimacy. The president of Congress took over as the de facto president. Anyway, some elements of the Republican party were never satisfied with the Obama administration's approach on Honduras. So, the end result was that although—and I'm not going to get into details—Secretary Clinton was going to recommend me to the White House for another ambassadorship. In Latin America, I had good sources on the Hill that one or two senators might put a hold on my nomination. As you can imagine, that's the last thing you need as a career ambassador. I've been a totally apolitical person, faithfully serving Republican and Democratic administrations. Under these circumstances, I went back to the secretary and the director general and thanked them, but quietly declined to pursue the ambassadorial nomination. I opted to take a sabbatical of sorts at the National War College and serve as ambassador-in-residence there. Again, I love National and thoroughly enjoyed returning to Roosevelt Hall. In a practical sense it was also a way to sort of get my bearings after the Honduran crisis and have a better sense of what was going on in Washington.

Q: Okay. And that brings us to 2012, right? Your time there would have been 2011 to 2012.

LLORENS: Correct. But prior to leaving Honduras, this would have been June of 2011, I had discussions with Deputy Secretary Bill Burns. Bill thought that Afghanistan would be a great place for me to serve on the leadership team. I agreed since I had always been intrigued by Afghanistan but also it was a way of getting myself out of Latin America and doing something different. And so, upon concluding my stint at the National War College, I headed off to Afghanistan in May 2012. And I did fifteen months in Afghanistan. I left in July 2013, from what I remember.

Q: And what position did you go into?

LLORENS: I was the assistant chief of mission. So, at that time, we had five ambassadors in Afghanistan. It was a unique model, as we all know. I mean, an

ambassador is like a CEO [chief executive officer]. You only have one CEO in a company, and the same in diplomacy. The exceptions here were made for a brief period of time, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. I think, in the case of Afghanistan, at the time we had the largest embassy in the history of the world. We had a staff of, I believe it was eighty-three hundred U.S., local staff, and third country nationals, as well as a large contractor presence. We had twenty-two U.S. government agencies working in the mission. But I believe that the five-ambassador model was probably more since the U.S. and NATO military presence was so large; we had a hundred forty thousand U.S. and NATO troops on the ground leading the fight against the Taliban insurgency, and there was something like a hundred forty flag-ranked officers, that is generals and admirals. As you know, the military is very hierarchical, and if we are going to deal effectively with them, having a large group of ambassadors was the best way to engage. Yes, and I think that made it easier for us to have some symmetry, having the five ambassadors.

Ambassador Llorens on Afghan news

Q: So, my understanding of the front office of that embassy was that there was an ambassador, which in your case was Ambassador Cunningham, is that right?

LLORENS: No, I started with Ambassador Crocker for the first part of my assignment. And Ambassador Cunningham was the deputy ambassador.

And the way that embassy worked was that the ambassador and the deputy ambassador were sort of like two sides of one coin. They were in the front office, and when Ambassador Crocker was off on R&R [rest and relaxation], Ambassador Cunningham was in the lead and he was Ambassador Crocker's alter-ego. I was the third ranking ambassador in the embassy. As the assistant chief of mission, I essentially was the chief operating officer of that embassy. I ran it like a traditional DCM. All the management, human resources, budget, and the entire security portfolio was mine. Of the eighty-three hundred staff, we had something like twenty-five hundred security personnel. We were in

a sense a post-Benghazi embassy, before Benghazi, in the sense that we could take care of ourselves. We had a lot of firepower for a time, and were ready if we were attacked.

Q: And then, the other two ambassadors were dealing with assistance issues, is that right?

LLORENS: Well, again, my job was chief operating officer running all aspects of embassy management. But I also had the lead policy accounts. I had the political portfolio and the political-military portfolio. They were both gigantic sections. And I had public affairs, again, the largest public affairs office in the world.

Media obviously, but also, we had a large cultural affairs section. And then, I also ran the consular section, where we had—as you can imagine, thousands of American citizens working in the country—so our U.S. Citizen Services, passport and the visas were quite large. It was a great job, but seven days a week, fifteen-hour days.

Q: Okay, let's start with the context on U.S. policy in Afghanistan at that time before we go on to the actual details. So, was this the period in which the military surge had been announced to be winding down?

LLORENS: Maybe I'll give you a five-minute walkthrough of my understanding of what had happened before. Obviously, the U.S. came into Afghanistan after September 11. We were back in Kabul with Ambassador Crocker in December of 2001, and I call that the liberation phase of our involvement. In my own thought process I describe it as the liberation phase, which was roughly the period 2001–2005. At the time President Bush made the decision to create the ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] along with our NATO and other allies. Everyone was there with us. Initially, it was a modest size ISAF, twenty-thirty thousand troops. We didn't think we needed more since we had completely defeated the Taliban. During our invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 we broke the Taliban military machine. The remnants had gone into Pakistan. It was also the time that we supported the creation of a political structure in Afghanistan.

A Loya Jirga, or traditional gathering, was convened. It brought together representatives from all over the country, all the tribal groups and all the political factions. There was a large representation of women who as we know had suffered greatly under the first Taliban government. President Karzai was made a caretaker leader. Eventually during that liberation phase, we supported the drafting and enactment of the new Afghan constitution in 2004. Elections were also held, and President Karzai was elected as the first president under that constitution.

But then, after 2005, in the second half of the Bush administration, we went into what I call the 'bogging down' phase, where the Taliban is able to reconstitute from their sanctuaries in Pakistan and they begin an insurgency, initially in southern and somewhat in eastern Afghanistan across the border from Pakistan. They took us by surprise, very much like the Iraq surprise. We talk about the many mistakes we made in Afghanistan. I'm a great admirer of President Bush, know him well, and worked with him, as we discussed, in the National Security Council staff. I have great admiration for him and his performance after September 11. Having said that, I think a case could be made that his

vectoring to Iraq so early—I'm not arguing the case of whether Saddam Hussein should have been removed or not, that's above my pay grade—but the point is the administration took its eye off the Afghanistan ball, and the intellectual focus that you needed. And it helped the Taliban rebuild.

One of the tangible results of loss of focus was we lost the intensity of our engagement with Pakistan. The move to Iraq sent a message to President Musharraf that maybe Afghanistan wasn't quite as important to the United States. Initially, President Bush said to the Pakistanis, "You're either with us or against us," and I think we really did had Pakistan's attention initially, but as we drifted towards Iraq, Musharraf looked at his own strategic equation, his game with India, this idea that India was trying to, potentially, strategically encircle Pakistan through the establishment of close relations with the post-Taliban Afghan government. And so, that was a potential major strategic mistake. I just wanted to pause and put that on the table.

Then, President Obama ran for office in 2008 making the argument that Afghanistan was the good war, and Iraq, the bad war. He made the case that he was going to use all the elements of U.S. power to have a successful outcome in Afghanistan. He took office in 2009. But very early on, and I have a lot of admiration for President Obama, and I worked with him on Afghanistan. He knew the country well and worked on the issue extremely hard. But maybe President Obama might have made some strategic mistakes, as well, in the sense that he sent many ambiguous messages. Soon after taking office, he dithered on what he really wanted to do in Afghanistan. There was a whole debate about the military pushing him for more expansive involvement than maybe others within the administration were advising him, for example Vice President Biden, who was always a skeptic to avoid stepping up our military presence. But at the end of the day, in the summer of '09, the president made the decision to significantly augment our presence.

The president's decision launches the third stage that I describe as the surge period. And the surge began in 2009, ramped up quickly. The surge phase covered the 2009–2012 period. So, we went from twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand troops to a hundred thousand U.S. troops and a dramatic increase in NATO forces and others, as well, including Australia and some of our other principal non-NATO allies. The U.S. was in the lead; we were fighting quite an intense war. We were waging COIN [counter insurgency strategy]. We were everywhere in Afghanistan. I mean, we had U.S. and NATO military presence everywhere. We had civilians embedded in the effort. This included U.S. diplomats, members of the intelligence community, and development officers working closely with our military.

I recall prior to arriving in the summer of 2012, I had consultations in Washington. These were quite extensive. One of the things that was really lucky for me was that while I was a senior manager at the National War College as ambassador-in-residence, the commandant knew I was heading to Afghanistan, and he knew I was not an expert on Afghanistan, and so he let me shadow for a year, the Afghanistan Fellows Program at National, which comprised some of our best people working on Afghanistan. They are special forces guys who spoke fluent Pashto and Tajik—and they were taking a very high-end series of studies on Afghanistan. And I shadowed them. I never spoke, I was just there, so I was able to get an incredible introduction to the country and what was

happening there. So while I was teaching and I was part of the leadership team at National, in a sense I was also a student. So, by the time I arrived, I was quite an expert on Afghanistan from an academic perspective. I read every book under the sun, and I was engaged, cross-fertilized with this Afghan policy community which was remarkably talented and committed to the fight. So, I learned a tremendous amount. So, when I went, I was steeped in the complex history, politics, culture, and society that was and is Afghanistan.

But going back, what I learned in my high-level consultations was that the administration and many on the Hill were very much committed to ending the surge. Most of the senior Obama people really wanted us out. They wanted to phase out our presence. They wanted to Afghanize the conflict. And so, my instructions, both from the White House and State, and talking to our military people, but particularly the White House and State, was that a key part of my role in the embassy was to implement the transition to an Afghan-led approach.

Q: And this is on both the military and the civilian side, right?

LLORENS: Correct, correct. So, the first thing was the military withdrawal, yes. So, as the U.S. military withdrew from the field, and although we were responsible for the security of all U.S. diplomatic personnel in Afghanistan. However, under a previous State-DOD MOU [memorandum of understanding], all those civilian officials embedded with the military outside were under the security umbrella of our military. In these circumstances the local U.S. military commander had the last word on security for our people deployed in PRTs, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and FOBs, Forward Operating Bases. So, as we started withdrawing our forces there was no way for us to protect them and had no practical option but to withdraw our people along with our military forces. As a manager, I was very much involved in getting our people out of the field. At that time, of course, Ambassador Cunningham was the chief of mission, and I worked very closely with Jim in implementing the transition of bringing our people back from the field.

In our engagements with the Obama administration, State, and the NSC, principally, Ambassador Cunningham and I faithfully implemented the withdrawal, but at the same time we advocated what we called a one plus four presence. Our recommendation was for having a very large embassy in Kabul, but also maintaining a presence in four points in the rest of the country so that we would have a presence outside of Kabul. And that of course included the consulate in Herat out west. We created the consulate in June of 2012 soon after my arrival in Afghanistan. I'd been there a month and we had Deputy Secretary Burns go out to Herat and cut-the-ribbon on our consulate in Herat. At that time, Herat was not facing any major security challenges. And then, we advocated standing up a consulate of sorts up in the north, in Mazar-i Sharif. The Germans had a large military presence there and were in the lead in the north. So, our proposal was to have a consular presence, political and consular officers, security people, some development people at Camp Marmal under German security. So, that would be our diplomatic presence in the north. In the east we proposed a very small State Department and USAID presence [United States Agency for International Development] in the Jalalabad area embedded with other elements of the U.S. government. And then, in the

south, of course, we had a giant military facility in Kandahar, and we also proposed having State Department officers embedded there. So, 85 percent of our people would be withdrawn back to Kabul, but we would still have a significant profile through the one-plus-four model.

At the end of the day, again to be very honest, we went back and forth with leadership at State and the NSC. We worked this extremely hard, but really, the decision that the White House and the State Department leadership opted for was far more reduced than our recommendation. Bottom line: they did not agree with the one plus four. They essentially agreed with a one plus one, which was keeping the consulate in Herat and the large embassy in Kabul. But just to emphasize that in my fifteen months there, a big part of the management work involved the transition and Afghanization of the conflict and a significant reduction of not just the military presence, but the civilian-diplomatic footprint as well.

Q: Okay. But didn't they build a building in Mazar-i Sharif? I thought they actually built—

LLORENS: Well, they did, but that was before our time. By the time I got there, the State Department had long concluded that the proposed building was in an exposed location and presented an unacceptable security risk for our people. In the end, the IG community rightly labeled it as a huge white elephant. The Germans bought it from us because they were looking for a facility for their own consulate in Mazar. Eventually, this German compound was attacked, and the Germans were forced to close it down. So, I think our assessment, our security assessment was the correct one. But all that had happened way before my time. By the time I arrived, we had already ruled out the facility, and again this is one of the many examples of imprudent use of U.S. taxpayer money. Yes, there was a pattern of inefficient use of U.S. resources, both on the military and the civilian side. Not that it didn't mean we didn't do a lot of good, we did, but we also did it in a very inefficient way. The Mazar consulate building is a prime example of one of many white elephants of our venture in Afghanistan. That said, maintaining a diplomatic presence in Mazar was important. Why? Think of the Northern Alliance. Our strongest allies were up there and it's a very vibrant Tajik community. We were welcomed in Balkh province, and the German military facility made it easy for us to be there. Again, Ambassador Cunningham and I were advocates of staying in Balkh province and keeping a foothold in Northern Afghanistan.

Q: What was happening politically in the Afghan government? Was 2012 an election year?

LLORENS: It wasn't, but by then, the administration was fed up with President Karzai, so the lovefest of the liberation phase had gradually faded, and everything that went wrong with the second election, with Karzai's re-election and allegations of fraud, the whole Holbrooke period, right, the relationship had really soured. So, it was tough. Ambassador Crocker, who was one of our great expeditionary ambassadors, had done yeoman's work. When he arrived in 2011, he devoted a considerable amount of his time negotiating the Strategic Partnership Agreement with President Karzai, and I will say a very angry and disgruntled President Karzai. Crocker was truly brilliant in salvaging the

relationship with President Karzai and leveraging those ties to conclude the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement, which President Obama and President Karzai signed in May of 2012.

So, the week before I arrived in Afghanistan that agreement was signed in Washington. You could almost mark that as the formal end in a way of the surge.

Q: Well, since we touched on it, what was the Strategic Partnership Agreement and why was it necessary?

LLORENS: The Strategic Partnership Agreement essentially defined the long-term relationship between the United States and Afghanistan in this new construct where the Afghans would be in the lead. There were several aspects to the SPA. One was we designated Afghanistan a major non-NATO ally, so there were a lot of strategic and military cooperation commitments we made. And as such, the United States in the SPA committed to a long-term diplomatic and military agreement to stand by the Afghan government and provide military and economic assistance, although the Afghan government would assume primary responsibility for defending their country. So, the SPA defines the new long-term relationship in a very clear way. But one of the elements of the SPA was that we would negotiate a Bilateral Security Agreement, and that would really get into the heart and soul of our military and security relationship.

Q: Is the Bilateral Security Agreement like a SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement]?

LLORENS: It is like a SOFA. We had a temporary SOFA that was established soon after we arrived on the ground with the interim Afghan leaders, but it was never fully defined. Now we were dealing with a government that's formally established, so the Bilateral Security Agreement would be a more traditional SOFA.

Q: Is it right that the bilateral security agreement is the part of this that became controversial for the Afghans?

LLORENS: Well, yes it was, but as the ambassador responsible for the pol-mil account, I had oversight of these negotiations. That is, a key part of my management portfolio was the organizational planning and implementation of the transition to an Afghan-led war effort and repositioning our diplomats, bringing some of them home.

The other piece was the pol-mil task, where I was the senior U.S. official on the ground negotiating with the Afghan government the new Bilateral Security Agreement. We had a lead negotiator, Ambassador Jim Warlick, who was Washington-based, and he would come once every six weeks or so, and negotiated with his Afghan counterpart, but I was on the ground with an inter-agency team, that included my pol-mil team, and members of the U.S. military in Afghanistan under the commander of U.S. and NATO forces. We had a combined civilian-military team, and I can tell you that in the fifteen months I was there, we successfully negotiated the agreement. We had 95 percent of the agreement done. What was in brackets was a very small amount of text.

Of course, the BSA included traditional SOFA provisions. We covered everything: customs terms and procedures; jurisdiction over U.S. forces, e.g., if somebody committed

a crime; how the U.S. military would operate within its bases and facilities. It defined very specifically our obligations to the Afghan government in terms of our security and advisory assistance. It defined what would happen if Afghanistan was attacked by a third country. We were not going to go to a NATO arrangement, that an attack on Afghanistan is an attack on us at all, although we would view that anyone from the outside, whether it was Iran or Pakistan, whoever, attacked Afghanistan, it would be considered a very grave issue. But on all those elements, in the end, we reached agreement. What was in brackets was essentially meaningless, but President Karzai made the decision that he didn't want to close it because of political considerations. He did not want to sign off on this long-term U.S. military presence. He completely misread us, of course. He wrongly believed that we wanted to stay there forever. Yes, there may have been some elements in the Pentagon and so on who did, but the body politic in Washington was of the mind that if the Afghans could do it, when they were ready to do it, we wouldn't stay a day longer. But Karzai misread us, and essentially, he froze the BSA process. It was only until the election of President Ghani, and the creation of the government of national unity at the end of 2014 that we were able to conclude the BSA. And really, that agreement, the Bilateral Security Agreement that we completed, that the very savvy Jim Warlick and I completed with our Afghan counterparts by the summer of 2013, was finally in force at the end of 2014.

Q: Usually with a SOFA, the host government balks at the extraterritorial reach of the U.S. court system if anything arises regarding our soldiers. But in this case, do you feel that the Afghan government was hesitant politically because of the sovereignty issues related to U.S. forces being on the ground?

LLORENS: Correct. I think President Karzai always hoped that a deal could be had between the Afghans themselves, between his government and the Taliban. He always kept that door open. And by agreeing to the BSA, it was almost sending a message to the Taliban that the Americans are never leaving. And so, he did not want to send that political message. Also, our presence in Afghanistan was by and large tolerated by the Afghan people, particularly in urban areas. However, in rural, very traditional Afghanistan, particularly in Pashtun areas in the south and the east, where the Taliban had their constituency, and where most of the fighting was going on, a lot of the bombing and so on, so there was genuine resentment against us. Also, the prevailing view in rural Pashtun districts in the south and east was that U.S. and NATO military activity had been too heavy handed. We would disagree, but that was the sentiment on the ground. So, President Karzai saw a lot of these people who were Pashtuns—remember, President Karzai is a Pashtun—that he was competing with the Taliban and wanted to maintain his credibility with these people, and he was always looking to reach a future agreement, which is understandable.

Now, if I look at three strategic issues that I was involved in, it was the transition to an Afghan-led fight, the Afghanization of the conflict, and related to that the BSA. Also, on the ground in Afghanistan, I was also the senior U.S. official working reconciliation. As such, I coordinated very closely with our SRAP [Special Representative for Afghanistan] in DC, Marc Grossman, a former under secretary for political affairs, who was our lead policy person for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He had the lead in Washington on

reconciliation. Working with his team, I had a small reconciliation cell. I don't want to get too much into that because at that time this was extremely sensitive. These were secret discussions that we were having. I mean, I'm not revealing anything by the fact that we did have some contact with the Taliban at that time, but at that time, it was a highly compartmented process.

Q: Okay. And you had some involvement. So, I just—

LLORENS: Very much, very much. I was the person who engaged with the Afghan government. The peace commission that was created by President Karzai was the entity that was going to engage the Taliban at the time in what we believed would be an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace process. The Taliban had created its Political Commission, which was their lead entity for negotiating with the other side, The Political Commission was seeking to establish an office in Qatar, a Taliban office. I was involved in that all the way through. This effort collapsed the day I left Afghanistan in mid-July of 2013 when President Karzai made the decision that because the Taliban were flying their flag it was unacceptable and concluded that the Taliban were manipulating the creation of the Qatar office to gain legitimacy, and he would have no part of that. So, that ended that whole process.

Q: You worked on it during your whole time there.

LLORENS: Yes, I did.

Q: So, can you give us, as much as you're comfortable, can you give us an overview of what we thought an outline of a reconciliation agreement could look like?

LLORENS: With the senior peace team for President Karzai, we did discuss a roadmap for peace. It was an Afghan roadmap, but my team worked with them on it, getting input from Washington. So, there was a roadmap that was an Afghan roadmap. And it was based on engaging the Taliban and it would be traditional, in the sense that ultimately it would involve the Taliban agreeing to a political settlement, a ceasefire, and a negotiated end to the conflict. The Taliban leadership would be allowed to return to Afghanistan, and they could participate in the political process. The Afghanistan government, and the international community would guarantee the security of Taliban political, and military leaders. As I said, they would be allowed to be reincorporated in the political process. Within that, it would be normal, think of El Salvador in 1989 and the reintegration of the FMLN [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front] into the political process. I had served in El Salvador at the time and knew the peace process well. I'd served in Colombia, in the National Security Council, so I knew the Colombia piece of this as well.

Ambassador Llorens in the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation

But there was also, within the Afghan government many who accepted some form of power sharing with the Taliban. They were not completely averse to that concept that the Taliban might be able to exercise leadership and control in areas where they had very strong constituencies, for example, rural parts of southern Afghanistan, eastern Afghanistan. In other words, the possibility existed for the election of Taliban as district governors and mayors. So, the Taliban would have been given a chance to gain political representation in their traditional constituencies. At that time, the Karzai government's assessment was that Taliban as a political force lacked the popular support to be given provincial governorships, but the district and village level was another matter, and Karzai I don't believe opposed it. Obviously, that wouldn't have been their opening line. The opening position was you come in and demobilize, but we had significant plans on how to provide resources and employment to demobilized Taliban fighters and might even include the incorporation of some Taliban elements into the Afghan security forces.

Q: Oh.

LLORENS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, again, this is not formal. I'm giving you a roadmap that would be a discussion document.

Q: The idea that you all had as a concept?

LLORENS: Yes. The Afghans were willing to discuss it. And they were willing to consider that that might be a way to do it. So, the Afghans had thought about it and were not closed-minded at all. They had some very bright people and very serious people working towards reconciliation, and I think that, again, if the context had been right a deal was eminently possible. President Karzai, I think he was serious, and understood that ultimately you needed a negotiated settlement. Anyway, we never got anywhere near that

during my first term, but I devoted a lot of my time to it, and the intellectual framework was there regarding what might be possible.

Q: At the end of the day, the problem was that the Taliban did not want to deal with the Afghan government?

LLORENS: Well, throughout the Taliban always took the public position that they would not negotiate directly with the Afghan government because they asserted that the Kabul government was a puppet of the United States. What they wanted was to talk directly with the U.S. But the reality when I was there in 2012–13, was that there was contact between the Afghans that I was dealing with on reconciliation and the Taliban. They had their own channel. Very discreet, but they were in touch.

Q: Right, right.

LLORENS: But we did, and the possibilities were there. And of course, we had our own line to the Taliban, as you know.

Q: And did you have a sense, the day that it fell apart, as you left, did you have a sense of what it was about the context that caused it to fall apart?

LLORENS: That this fell apart was simply that President Karzai was unwilling to countenance the establishment of a Taliban Political Commission diplomatic presence in Doha, Qatar. Karzai was concerned about the high profile of such a Taliban office. He simply was not willing to grant the Taliban insurgency the legitimacy they craved.

Q: They were proclaiming themselves to be an alternate government, right?

LLORENS: Correct. And they were given an opportunity to travel, it would give them an opportunity to gradually gain legitimacy and possibly give them leverage to remove some of the UN [United Nations] sanctions placed against Taliban leaders. What President Karzai would have supported was the establishment of the Political Commission in Doha, but in a very low-profile way and serve principally as the platform for talks to be held between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Ultimately, it might have required third party assistance and all that. I mean, the Afghans had thought about that and maybe they would have preferred direct negotiations, but at some point, they understood that maybe the UN, maybe the U.S., maybe the Germans, maybe the Norwegians, could have served as facilitators in the negotiations.

Meanwhile, of course, the Taliban had not agreed to formally engage the Afghans in Kabul. The Taliban had a channel and they were talking to the Afghan government, but not admitting contact. By the way, the Afghan government likewise did not officially recognize publicly that they were talking to the Taliban. But it was happening, and the embassy was following these tentative reconciliation efforts closely. In summary, the core issues on my portfolio in my first tour in Afghanistan involved running the embassy, directing security for our people, working the transition to an Afghan lead, and supporting the back channels on reconciliation.

On the personal side, following three years of crisis in Honduras and fifteen months in Afghanistan, Lisett and I had decided to do something different. Understand, for me Afghanistan was seven days a week, fifteen-hours a day job. I was getting to the end of my career. I was into my thirty-second year in the Foreign Service, and I said, "One more tour." I was offered some chief of mission jobs, but again, they would have been crisis spots, because I was known in the department as a bit of a crisis manager. It was the reason that I went to Honduras, and Afghanistan, despite the fact that I was not an Afghan hand. My strengths were more in the areas of leadership and crisis management. And I was lucky, as I mentioned, that I was able to get the bonus education of the Afghan Fellows Program during my second stint at the National War College.

Q: And you went unaccompanied?

LLORENS: I went unaccompanied. Lisett had wanted to come, but ultimately really couldn't get the right job. There were all sorts of issues related to conflict of interest because of the chain of command in my position as ACOM—it would have been a consular job and I was directly supervising the consular operation. So, in the end, it just didn't work out under our personnel system. So, I promised Lisett she would have a decisive say on our next assignment. I remember as a last assignment I was offered some crisis, chief of mission jobs. She looked and said, "No way!"

Lisett said, "Let's try for Sydney, Australia." So, I went to Under Secretary Kennedy. I'd paid my dues and he wanted to help me get the job I wanted, and so he supported my bid for Sydney, which I had the qualifications for. We had a wonderful time in Sydney. By the way, it's a great job because you're going from what is a very difficult, complex, dysfunctional relationship in Afghanistan and Honduras, to be the senior U.S. diplomat with one of the most functional relationships and strongest alliances we have in the world. We're working on really twenty-first century issues across the board, whether it's clean energy or women's entrepreneurship or—the fact that the U.S. and Australia economic relationship is valued at a trillion dollars, and Sydney is the financial hub for all of that. I was an old econ officer, and so Sydney is about being engaged with the boardrooms of the great corporations of Australia and the core financial, trade and investment ties we have. There were also critical geopolitical and military issues and the growing presence of China in the Western Pacific. We were a key interlocutor for Seventh Fleet operations in Australia, which are extensive. It's a fun job. No doubt, we had a great residence, we had an excellent team in Sydney, the Australian people are terrific. Really a dream job and I expected it to be my last.

Q: Before we move on, I just wanted to ask you a few more questions about what was going on in Afghanistan and in the embassy in your time there as the assistant chief of mission. Did you work with people like Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah? And on the political portfolio, can you talk a little bit about the people you got to know that were important and within the Afghan government how it was working?

LLORENS: Yeah. Let me talk a little bit about the leadership and the management model in Kabul at the time. We had five ambassadors. Ambassador Hilda Arellano was our economic-development ambassador. She was the fourth ranked ambassador. She ran the largest USAID program in the world. She ran a massive economic, commercial, and

agriculture policy portfolio, so that was a huge, huge job, heavy on the program and resource side. And then, you had Ambassador McFarland; he was the rule of law ambassador, and he ran all of our Justice rule of law programs, the DEA [United States Drug Enforcement Administration] program, and our extensive law enforcement activities. We had the largest DEA office in the world, seventy-five DEA agents, larger than Colombia and Peru by far. They were all over the country, so it was very sensitive. They were doing operations in the middle of a war with Afghan counternarcotics forces. So, he had a big portfolio, trying to reform the justice sector, dealing with the problems of corruption, which I also dealt with in terms of the political account. But what I would say is that we were five ambassadors. Ambassador Crocker and Ambassador Cunningham were first among equals. But we really ran it in a very collegial way. The five of us really ran that embassy in a very professional and harmonious way, and there were no petty jealousy or foolish turf battles. No one had time for that nonsense.

Q: Okay.

LLORENS: Now, when Ambassador Crocker was in his final three months [May–July 2012] I served under him. Ambassador Crocker did brilliant work, but he faced some health issues at the time and Ambassador Cunningham was nominated to replace him. While Jim was back getting ready for his nomination back in Washington, I served as the deputy ambassador. So, as I started out, most of my work was as Ambassador Crocker's deputy. And when he wasn't around, I did serve as the chargé or acting chief of mission. And then, when Ambassador Crocker left, I was chargé for a couple of weeks, in the gap between Crocker and Cunningham. I recall I met with President Karzai in July 2012 and submitted the agrément papers for Ambassador Cunningham. President Karzai gave us the agrément in twenty-four hours. I did deal with President Karazai during that period and then, during the period when Ambassador Cunningham returned, I was the deputy until the arrival of Ambassador Tina Kaidanow. She arrived sort of at the end of September. So, for the other three months, I was the deputy ambassador, as well. So, I was doing the assistant chief of mission as well as doing the front office work as acting ambassador or deputy ambassador. I was in the front office with Ambassador Crocker and Ambassador Cunningham for a considerable amount of my tour.

Q: Okay. This was about ten years into the structuring of the Afghan government. How was it operating from your point of view as a government?

LLORENS: It was difficult and complicated, and clearly there were major difficulties in the functioning of the government. But we were really focused on the job at hand. For example, let me go back to the pol-mil issues because it is important to understand this was a war and everything revolved around what was going on the ground militarily, okay?

Q: Okay. There was a war going on.

LLORENS: Again, the civilian side was not primary. You're in the middle of a war. It's an insurgency. The exogenous element is that you have this armed force assaulting the political forces in Afghanistan that we were supporting. I would say the primary political

staff work was of a political-military nature. It was the creation of sustainable Afghan security forces. I go back to my pol-mil account. And so, let me go back on that.

I remember early on in my assignment in 2012, I had a long conversation with General Allen, who I worked with very closely. He was the commander of U.S. and NATO forces at the time. General John Allen was relatively optimistic about the evolution of the Afghan security forces—a military we had created from nothing back in ’02 or ’03. For more than a decade we had been building them up slowly, but now our priority was building them up quickly because we knew we were getting out. And so, General Allen’s assessment was that he was trying to both fight a war and conduct an orderly withdrawal. The way he described it was like flying and building a plane at the same time. We still had hundred-forty thousand U.S. and NATO forces, but he was laser focused on the creation of viable Afghan security forces that could stand on their own. And our long-term presence would be more of an advisory presence. He felt it was going well in terms, particularly the special forces. He was very happy with how we were really creating quite capable special forces. I mean, they would not be capable like SEAL and Delta forces, but they would be more like good U.S. infantry, and they were mobile, and that was one thing. He lamented the corruption in the military. So, at that point, corruption was rampant, okay, and he was really worried about that, as worried, obviously, as I was, about civilian corruption, which was out of control.

Ambassadors Crocker and Cunningham, and the team consistently engaged the Karzai government on the issue of corruption, it was a cancer. I remember President Karzai developed an anti-corruption strategy which looked wonderful on paper, but it was never implemented. And so, you had progress being made on the military side, slowly. That was our priority, but a lot of corruption in the military and a lot of corruption on the civilian side. General Allen on the military side believed that as we professionalized the military, we would gradually begin to erode the influence of the warlord culture within the military, and gradually ease them out. But he saw that as a longer-term process.

We were of the same mind on the civilian side. On the political side I dealt with Dr. Abdullah, he was in opposition at the time, some with President Karzai, and also with Ghani, who was minister of finance but also worked on transition issues. Just like I had my counterparts on the reconciliation side, Ghani was one of my counterparts on transition issues. Ambassador Kaidanow also worked on the transition. She was a key player, our deputy ambassador. The two of us worked with Ghani on how to sustain many of our development programs as our USAID teams pulled back from the field to Kabul. Finally, knowing the allegations of systemic fraud in the previous Afghan elections, I also devoted much time and attention to reforming the election process.

Ambassador Llorens with Abdullah Abdullah

So, returning to the transition to an Afghan-led approach, we worked closely with Ghani and a number of other senior Afghan officials on how we could continue to maintain our development programs once we no longer had USAID officers deployed on the ground in the provinces. We devised numerous arrangements to include using NGOs [non-governmental organizations] to help us manage projects and more effective use of virtual technology to maintain close communication with our provincial and district counterparts. We and other donors were attempting to do this through all of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces. Yes, a key question was how to manage our vast economic assistance portfolio when we were withdrawing back to Kabul. Well, it could not be done very well and we in the U.S. embassy in Kabul were still making the case for the one plus four, and we underscored to Washington that a one plus one would seriously undercut our ability to work effectively in the field. Let me emphasize we were not alone in this effort of seeking to make the transition work. All of the donors were engaged, including the EU, the Japanese, the Australians, the Koreans, and the international agencies and development banks [UN, IMF, World Bank, and ADB].

Ambassador Arellano was in the lead on the development issues and devising mechanisms for effective disbursement of our program funds. As I said, this included working closely with international and Afghan NGOs who were our partners. We used technology, video conferencing technology to work this. And so, it was really, how do we do it? How do we maintain a presence and can continue to deliver our development infrastructure goals and our political goals. How do we stay in touch with the provincial and district governors? We encouraged more regular visits by provincial officials to Kabul for meetings with our embassy team. All of that was a big part of the transition. It was like we were making a transition but already developing a blueprint of what was sustainable. Trust me, it was very hard to do. I mean you could not retreat to a fortress Embassy in Kabul and a small presence at the consulate general in Herat and hope to be very effective, but that was our reality. Our leadership in Washington had made the decisions and we needed to find something workable consistent with our instructions. Yet, I believed then and I continue to believe now that we could have been far more effective and successful if we had been able to maintain some presence in the field. It

would have been a small investment in resources, but from a management oversight perspective, from the perspective of being able to know what was happening on the ground.

But then, on the political side, for me, one of the insights I had early from my work on reconciliation, and seeing the intelligence that I was seeing, I came to understand that having credible elections were a key element to facilitating peace. When I thought of elections, I thought of peace. I thought that ultimately, if the Afghans could deliver reasonably credible elections that would be a huge step in helping achieve a level of legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people and facilitate an eventual political settlement. By having a legitimate elections process that reflected the will of the Afghan people, the legitimacy of the Afghan state would be strengthened. The Taliban argument that the Kabul government was a puppet regime would be significantly weakened and in the eyes of the Afghan people. And so, I felt that to promote a serious political dialogue you really needed a very successful election process. We knew we weren't going to get anywhere near perfection, but to have a reasonably free and fair election—far better than the second Karzai election with the perception of massive fraud, would have been a huge step forward.

Q: So, what kind of structures did you put in place or reforms did you encourage to try to make sure the elections were credible?

LLORENS: Remember this was early [2012–13] and the elections were scheduled for 2014. But the system was broken, and we pretty much were starting from scratch. It started by putting in new and better trained personnel into the Afghan elections commission. But it was key to bringing in more brain power, more technically competent people. It also involved embedding international advisors in the system from the U.S. UN, EU, Canada, and others. It required us to work closely with UN elections people, EU [European Union] elections people, bilaterally with the Germans, who played a big role, the UK, the Japanese, the Norwegians, and the Canadians. Of course, we had donor meetings where we tried to make sure we coordinated our election assistance very carefully, and I thought we did it well. And then, we would go to the Afghans together, so it wasn't just me and my elections team. It was about improving the capability of the Afghan elections commission and establishing a more viable observer system of both Afghan observers, but also international observers. Of course, there's always a problem of doing that just as you're pulling out our security because the security envelope was no longer there.

Yes, because there was a huge security component to holding good elections, and it would require a major effort by NATO forces to help the Afghan forces secure the election centers and the polling centers.

There was also the need to reform Afghanistan's elections law. It started with the elections law, but it included creating a more transparent system of counting, a process in which observers would be present and witnessing the vote count. I spent a lot of my time on the political side working on elections. Again, tough, as you can imagine. This is Afghanistan and at the end of the day they can say we're going to do the right thing, they take your money, but at the senior level there were many people who were only interested

in their own political power and cared nothing about having truly credible elections. In the end, despite all the money we invested, as we all know, the 2014 elections were highly flawed. Not as bad as the previous one—but flawed enough so that Dr. Abdullah could make the charge, credibly, that the election had been stolen. And what happened was that Abdullah got 45 percent of the vote in the first round.

Q: But he didn't get 50 percent, so it had to go to a second round?

LLORENS: Yes, they went into the second round. So, if you look at almost any normal election in any country that goes to a second round if somebody gets 45 percent and the nearest opponent [Ghani] got less than 32 percent because there was a split between numerous Pashtun candidates. And the Tajik vote rallied around Abdullah, so Abdullah did well, plus he had some Pashtun support. Abdullah was a statesman and a highly respected individual. The margin in the first round was very large between Abdullah and Ghani, very large. The math was simple, Abdullah just needed to 5 percent more in a two-horse race. Think about that, that's all he needed to do. But in that election, it's not the case because what happened is that 90 percent of Pashtuns did rally to Ghani once the other twenty candidates were gone, and he was able to be the victor. Yet there was evidence of significant fraud. Yes, it was a better election than the previous one, and there were significant technical improvements in election management. Also, there were forensic audits done by the UN. They believed that Ghani won the election based on the forensic audit, although they admitted there was significant fraud.

Q: There was fraud on both sides, right?

LLORENS: There was fraud on both sides and at the end of the day the fact that it was such an internationally watched event meant that despite everything we failed. I'm willing to acknowledge that. While I was in Sydney by the time the elections were held in 2014, I had been the lead U.S. official for elections for fifteen months and felt some responsibility. In this context, I really respected Secretary Kerry's decision to press for the creation of a National Unity Government. The secretary understood there was enough doubt as to the legitimacy of the election that it required both sides to agree to share power. To his credit, Secretary Kerry brought together the two sides—by creating this National Unity Government—and helping to restore the legitimacy of the election process. Why? Because everyone in Afghanistan recognized that both in the first round and obviously in the second round, the two biggest vote getters were Ghani and Abdullah. No one could deny that. If they were both in government sharing power, it gave more legitimacy to the result.

A lot of the Afghans don't like it. Ghani certainly did not like it. Why? Because their political culture was winner takes all. You take care of your people, make as much money as you can, wield as much power as you can, and screw the other guys. That was a big flaw in the thinking of the political class in Kabul.

Q: I want to go back to the military transition. During this time—the fifteen months that you were there—was there a sense of confidence that the military could be made to stand on its own, as hard as it would be, or was there a lot of skepticism in the embassy?

LLORENS: That's a great question. Look, again, General Allen was confident we could do it. I believed we could do it, but always believing that for the long-term we would need a U.S.-NATO presence. So, that was always on my mind. Yes, the Afghans in the lead, but they needed our support.

I always worried as I was engaged in the BSA negotiations that the support might diminish over time. If you read the text of the BSA, it reflected a lot of the senior thinking in the White House, not the Pentagon, and not necessarily the State Department. The White House was comfortable asking the Afghans to allow us to keep not only U.S. and NATO advisors, but also a small Special Forces contingent, SEALS, Delta Force, NATO Special Forces, to be able to conduct military operations. But the White House people wanted these special forces combat contingent to focus exclusively on targeting the international terrorist groups, like al Qaeda, but would leave Afghans to fight the Taliban pretty much by themselves. This was something that worried me all along.

We would have an advisory role vis-à-vis the fight against the Taliban, obviously, and provide very robust military assistance, but beyond that the Afghan army was on its own. And this was also not just in terms of the special forces' component, the ground component, but also the air component. Again, if you read the language of the BSA, which I helped negotiate, it says we would use our forces to target al Qaeda and leave the Afghans to tackle the Taliban. There could be certain situations where the commander on the ground could make an exceptional determination to use American forces, but it would be a strategic exception. I think that was a mistake, but we negotiated that because that's what the White House wanted.

I felt that that was a flaw, and we should have been a little bit more ambiguous, giving us a bit more flexibility. That would be one observation. Yes, al Qaeda represented the most visible threat to us, but we seemed to fail to understand that the Taliban at the end of the day were allies of al Qaeda, and a victory for the Taliban would be a victory for al Qaeda. At the end of the day, I always subscribed to the view that we needed to give ourselves a lot more flexibility in terms of helping the Afghans on the Taliban piece. I worried about that. I felt there was too much confidence that the Afghan military could deal with the Taliban on their own. Or maybe they didn't believe it, but if they didn't believe it, they were cynically condemning our allies in Kabul to eventual defeat.

Q: Changing subjects again, one of the things that became a controversial topic last year in 2021 was the status of our Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans who had worked for us. At that time, in 2012–2013, was that an active activity for the consular section?

LLORENS: Yeah, great question. When I got there, the SIV [Special Immigrant Visa] program was in trouble. We hadn't devoted enough resources, and it was floundering. But thanks to Ambassador Crocker, who from his experience in Iraq believed that we owed it to people who had risked their lives to have the option that, after serving for a couple of years in our embassy and with our military, that they would be able to immigrate to the U.S. through an expedited SIV process. We had a law, and we wanted to zealously implement it. Ambassador Crocker made clear to me that he wanted us to fast-forward the SIV program. I put a lot of effort into getting it going, to really ramp it up. So, I would say that in the period I was there, thanks to Ambassador Crocker as the driving

force, my role as the manager was to get it going, making sure that we really accelerated the issuance of visas. Now, I already told you everything I was doing, I mean, my in-box was sky high. I was the guy who signed all the SIVs!

Q: Right.

LLORENS: And even today, there are people trying to get out of Afghanistan who have their SIVs, my name is all over their documents. There are thousands that I issued. But later, when you did the final security vetting, there may have been a problem. I still get called by people inside of Afghanistan, which is very tragic; but I was proud of the fact that we executed the law and were able to move the SIV program forward.

Later it bogged down again during the Trump administration. We can talk about that later.

Q: And was that purely a consular function or did you have to bring in the Department of Homeland Security to do the interviews? How did SIV issuance work?

LLORENS: Well, it was a process that involved Homeland Security and State. It was like a petition process. Again, I'm trying to remember all of this.

Q: Oh, it's okay. It was a long time ago.

LLORENS: But just so that you understand, the candidate would assemble the required documents, a medical exam, a security clearance, professional information, and recommendations from supervisors. Once that package was completed, it was sent to the visa center in New England. They would take all this information, they would analyze it, and there would be an adjudication resulting in the issuance of a petition.

Q: And so, that was very satisfying. Was it hard on the embassy in terms of turnover? Did you have Afghan local staff come and work for you for a year and then apply for a visa to leave?

LLORENS: Oh, there was huge turnover with our FSN [Foreign Service national] staff. We had all these very talented Afghans, and after a few years we would lose them and so, one of the management challenges always, once the SIV program was in full gear, was trying to manage an embassy that had such rapid turnover. So, we brought in these young, bright, motivated folks, and they were gone in a couple years, they were gone. And that was just the nature of that embassy, which is why it was so important for us to be bringing in a large contingent of third country nationals that could provide the continuity and fill in the gaps from the incredible turnover caused by the loss of Afghan FSNs through the SIV visa program. We had a big budget and brought in some excellent third country national staff from other embassies around the world. Nonetheless, it was a big challenge.

Q: How about facilities? Were you building or winding down?

LLORENS: We were in a big building mode. Remember, the Obama administration wanted us to pull everybody back to Kabul. The administration envisioned a long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan. And that included a very, very, very, very, robust, and

hardened embassy. So, again, it declined some, but not that much. I think we had 8,200 people in 2012–2013, with the five ambassadors. When I came back in 2016–17, and I was the only ambassador, I recall we still had a staff of 7,200 people. Yes, the people who were deployed outside, a lot of those were gone, but we kept a very robust presence.

And so, we were building big. And it was all very expeditionary. When I arrived in 2012, you'd be walking around on a rainy day, and it seemed you were in Tucson, Arizona in the cowboy days, and there was mud everywhere. You'd have your suit and boots on, high boots, right? And you get back to your apartment, and the place was caked in dirt and mud. We brought in contractors to undertake major public works projects. In 2012–13, the embassy was transitioning from hootches to apartment buildings. We had the main chancery and main housing on the chancery side, and then you had the east side, the east campus, which were mostly hootches and very flimsy housing. We started building a city on the other side. We were building major structures that were hardened and far more secure. And when I came back, we had gone from a mud village to a modern city.

Q: Was there a lot of terrorism in Kabul at that time or was it relatively quiet?

LLORENS: In 2012–2013, the Taliban was active in Kabul. Not as active as when I came back, but active. In 2012–13 we were in that transition where if the Taliban came in and attacked an objective, for example, a hospital, killed a bunch of people, and they had a dozen suicide people holding it, or a university or a government office, we were just starting to get the Afghan Special Forces to be able to surgically remove them. I recall it was the Swedish Special Forces who served as the advisors embedded with the Afghans to deal with the security threats to Kabul.

The special forces work of taking out terrorists holed up was an example of passing the torch to the Afghans. By the time I came back in 2016, the Afghan had come a long way and were able to take on these hardened terrorists and suicide bombers on their own. In 2016–17, the Taliban was more active in Kabul, but the good news was the Afghans would take them out themselves. Their capability had grown dramatically, you know.

Q: Do you think there's anything else about your first tour that we should cover?

LLORENS: No, I'll just end by saying that at that time we had a long-term horizon relating to our presence in Afghanistan, but our focus was on creating sustainability and self-reliance on the Afghan side.

Q: Sounds like you thought it was manageable. that was something you could look forward—

LLORENS: In all the development conferences, the international donors conference, the vision was of a ten- or twelve-year horizon. There was a long-term perspective on both the economic development and political sides of the issue.

I was struck by Ambassador Crocker when I arrived and I had my courtesy call with him in the beginning of May of 2012, and he said, "Hey, Hugo, I want to tell you something, when I arrived in Afghanistan in December of 2001, I came in with a couple hundred

marines." I remember he told me that there was an FSN who had the key to the chancery waiting for him. He came in and the Taliban had not violated our diplomatic property. It had been left the way we had left it. No one had gone in and done anything. But he told me, "Hugo, Kabul presented a dantesque situation. It was something out of World War II, a bombed-out city in World War II in Germany or Eastern Europe. Kabul was destroyed, people were starving, there was great misery and suffering."

And this is the way it was in most of the cities because as he reminded me the Soviet Union invaded in 1980, and then they waged a total war on the Afghan people. But because the mujahideen were operating in the rural areas, the Red Army did most of the damage in rural Afghanistan. The Soviets destroyed villages, they destroyed irrigation canals, they put fifty million mines in rural Afghanistan. Every day some Afghan child walking in the countryside gets blown up by a mine. I was very much involved in addressing that in 2012–13. In my pol-mil account we had a lot of money in 2012–2013 for mine removal. We supported a great Afghan mine removal initiative. We were removing a couple million mines a year. That was a very positive initiative.

Rural Afghanistan was destroyed by the Red Army. And then, when the Soviet Union withdrew, the Mujahideen factions turned on themselves. This was after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the period 1992 to 1996. During this civil war phase, the fighting was in the cities. The mujahedin fought over the cities. The Russians controlled the cities, so the cities were intact when the Soviets left, but the Mujahideen factions fought over the cities and destroyed the major urban centers of Afghanistan. This was the situation until the Taliban emerged as the victors and planted their flag in Kabul in 1996. Just like Kabul, Mazar, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Herat suffered great damage. The point that Ambassador Crocker made to me was that, "Hugo, when I came here in 2001, the country was completely destroyed. It was hell on earth, but when I returned ten years later there had been huge progress in so many areas, and the cities had been largely rebuilt."

And he was right, of course. In my first tour, I traveled across Afghanistan. I visited our people embedded with our military in the PRTs, in the FOBs [forward operating bases], at our consulate in Herat. In those visits I could just see, yes, we'd spent a huge amount of money, probably wasted a lot of money, but there was a huge amount of infrastructure being built, the roads, the rural electrification, the rebuilding of the cities, the rebuilding of the irrigation canals. All of this led to a dramatic increase in economic activity, a dramatic increase in agricultural production, in basic grains, in everything that makes the Afghan economy go, the production of fruits and the vegetables, and the economy was growing at 10 percent per year. And on the political side, there was a liberal constitution, the dramatic investment in education and in the restoration of the rights of women. So much was being done.

Anyway, Ambassador Crocker's point was that the needle was moving inexorably in the right direction, but we needed time.

Q: That was very helpful because I interviewed people who served there two years before that, and they were just having to ramp up these huge amounts of assistance in record time. They were concerned that it would be too hard to be able to find a way to help the

country absorb it. So, it's nice that by the time you got there two years later you could see the fruits were starting to be gotten.

LLORENS: Absolutely, Robin, and let me mention a couple of things on the human resources side.

Q: Please.

LLORENS: Again, the work of our Foreign Service people in Afghanistan, in both tours, was truly remarkable. I mean, I came in and I worked with some of the greatest teams in my entire career. I served in places where you could recruit the best people, whether you're in Sydney or in Buenos Aires or in Madrid or in Vancouver. I was CG [consul general] in Vancouver and Sydney, and DCM in Buenos Aires and Madrid. You could easily recruit the cream of the Foreign Service. And yet, arguably, the best teams I worked with were those we assembled in Kabul. I suppose people self-select, and they also rise to the occasion. Sometimes in life the event makes the person.

And, yes, that jumped right out at me when I arrived in 2012. No doubt, people self-selected. Maybe in some of these positions in Afghanistan, a danger post, conflict zone, maybe only four or five people would bid, yet we still got incredible people. And just the work ethic. Granted, there's not that much to do there, obviously, but still, people were so dedicated, and had such a good can-do attitude. Yes, they were being compensated with a very generous incentives package of pay and benefits, that is true, but the attitude was remarkable. And within that mission there was a remarkable Battle of Britain spirit when you walked around. It was inspiring.

And, as you got into the field you felt this even more. The selfless dedication and the ability of our diplomatic, development, and intelligence officers to work effectively with their military colleagues. Again, I visited our people everywhere, and again, they were doing amazing work, whether negotiating with a provincial governor, building infrastructure, doing the political and economic reporting and alerting us to a fast-changing situation on the ground. Yes, I was proud of them.

The other thing, though, is my observation. As the senior human resources person in the embassy, I was committed to enforcing a very very strict discipline code on the team. We had such a massive presence that every week we would get a new crop of people. I mean, I'm talking about 150 new people a week! It was an assembly hall, and I would talk to people right off the plane. These people would arrive, their first meeting was with the assistant chief of mission. And my message to them was to let them know what we were trying to accomplish in Afghanistan. I explained our objectives. But I also tried to tell them a little bit about our expectations of them. I said, "You are the best of America, the very best of the Foreign Service. You volunteered. You raised your hand and put yourself in the middle of a war."

And I always emphasized that there was no safe place in Afghanistan. You're in the middle of a war, so you're risking your life being here. So, we hold you to that. You're the best we've got, and we hold you to that high standard. But my message was that if you violated that trust, we will be very hard. I made a point of telling the new folks that if

they broke the Mission's discipline code, they were gone. And I made that very clear in the first meeting. I will not accept any excuses that you had a bad day, or you called home and mom's got a headache. If you violate our discipline code, you are gone. We are in a war zone and the chief of mission has no margin to be lax on discipline. So, what I found, this is a management lesson, was that very early on, and I spoke to Ambassador Crocker and Ambassador Cunningham, that I wanted to do it this way and they agreed. We had a couple of instances where, think of the guy in the bar, hanging upside down from the chandelier, you know. urinating on the chancery wall. We've got the camera. And we sent them home immediately, within twenty-four hours. The way you could do it is to give them the option: take voluntary curtailment where there's no permanent record or face the ambassador sending you home for cause. But the message of zero tolerance, for example, cases of harassment of our female staff, or unruly behavior would have a cancerous effect on morale. This approach worked extremely well, and we had an impeccable discipline record during both of my tours.

Q: Right.

LLORENS: Remember, we had great morale, but it was very fragile. Somebody did something, somebody's bothering somebody, harassing someone and it can immediately impact on morale. So I created a committee that I chaired that would evaluate those situations. And while we could turn a decision over to Ambassador Crocker or Ambassador Cunningham, essentially it was my decision. That authority was delegated to me. But I will tell you that an inspection team came six months into our tour from the IG [Inspector General], and they said they didn't understand why we had such a pristine discipline record. They'd been to another post, which I will not mention, where they saw a Sodom and Gomorrah situation. They agreed that our approach to strictly implementing the discipline code was likely the difference. The bottom line, though, was that we had great people in Afghanistan—the very best people and the best teams I served with in my thirty-six years in the Foreign Service were without a doubt in my 2012–2013 and 2016–2017 assignments. I wanted to mention that.

Q: Thank you. Anything else for today?

LLORENS: No, I think we're done.

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Q: Good morning. It is September 23, 2022, and we are having our second conversation with Ambassador Hugo Llorens about his time in Afghanistan. Hugo, can you tell us about, after serving in Sydney, Australia, how you ended up being tapped to go back?

LLORENS: As I was coming to the end of my tour in Sydney—I was scheduled to leave Sydney at the end of September of 2016, and this is sometime in June of 2016. And I was approached by a very senior State Department official on behalf of Secretary Kerry, indicating to me that the Secretary wanted me to return to Afghanistan and run the

mission in the transition between the Obama administration and the subsequent administration. At that time, we were in June, so we were very deep in the campaigns in the Democratic and Republican Parties It was very clear by then that Hillary Clinton was very likely to be the candidate for the Democratic Party and that Donald Trump the nominee for the Republicans. I am not a political person, never have been. I have proudly served all our presidents, Democrats and Republicans, and I had no problems with working with the individual the American people chose to be their president. I was very proud, as we all are in the Foreign Service, that our job as professionals is to provide the administration in the office with our unvarnished, honest advice. However, once the president, the secretary, and the administration make a particular foreign policy decision, as professionals our job is to carry it out as zealously as we are able, whether we agree with the policy or not. And as I said, I'm very proud of that, as are all my Foreign Service colleagues. So, I wasn't concerned about the political issue.

But the question I had for Secretary Kerry was more on the substantive policy side. I made clear to the administration that my one concern was to return with the objective of pulling the plug on our involvement in Afghanistan. If that was the case, my message to Secretary Kerry was that he could find much better people to do that than me. I underscored, despite the difficulties and problems we faced in Afghanistan, I continued to believe in maintaining our presence and that Afghanistan and the South Asia region were vitally important for our security. The message I received from the very top of the department was the view that if Hillary Clinton won the election, they were confident she would maintain a firm U.S. commitment to Afghanistan. As a senator, and as secretary, Clinton had been a strong advocate of maintaining a strong presence, both in Afghanistan and in South Asia, and the secretary expected a robust policy there. And then, with regards to a potential Trump presidency, the secretary's view was that yes, while candidate Trump had been running on 'ending the endless wars' theme and was a severe critic of our involvement in Afghanistan, the Republican Party's commitment to staying engaged in Afghanistan was very strong. The secretary was of the view that once Trump assumed office the reality on the ground and pressure from the Republican foreign policy establishment would likely keep him in the box.

I reiterated to them my one caveat, my one condition, was that if they wanted me to go back, I didn't want to be the person who was going to pull the plug out on our project in Afghanistan, and that while I recognized the complexities of Afghanistan and the difficulties, I felt it was a worthwhile project. So, I was given the best reassurances possible at the highest levels of the administration, that certainly the Obama administration would not ask me to do that, and their expectation was that there would not be a radical change in approach with a new administration. Based on that I agreed to take the job, which required a D Committee decision and White House approval as a special chargé d'affaires. I was asked whether as a reward I was interested in another ambassadorship following the tour in Kabul. I made clear to them that my plans were to retire but I was willing to devote as much as a year to Afghanistan and help the new administration get their bearings and direction until they could formally nominate and confirm a new ambassador.

Q: So, Mike McKinley was still there, but he was about to leave?

LLORENS: Correct. The administration had dropped the ball on getting a nominee to replace Mike and so they needed someone to serve as interim chief of mission in between administrations. They told me that I would have been a very strong candidate to be the ambassador, but that there was no longer enough during the election cycle to get anything through the Senate. As I said the administrative process required the D Committee to designate me. I had been told by senior administration officials that based on my performance it would be only natural for the new administration to formalize me and nominate me for the position once they were settled. I made clear that for personal reasons [related to my aging parents who needed my help], I was not seeking the nomination, and that my commitment was to give a year [until the end of 2017], until the new administration could get a confirmed ambassador on the ground. That was pretty much the terms we established. The D Committee made the decision later in summer, and following completion of my tour in Sydney and Home Leave, I arrived in Afghanistan in late November 2016.

Q: Late November 2016, so after the election.

LLORENS: It was after the election, so it was funny.

It was really significant because I remember the last thing Lisett and I did before departing our home in Marco Island on November 8, 2016 was to cast our vote at our tiny little Marco public library. While employment opportunities for Lisett did not work out in 2012, this time she applied and was able to successfully get a job with USAID as director of communications for their Education Office. She's a former schoolteacher and had worked previously in embassy consular sections and public affairs jobs. Anyway, we voted that morning and took a flight to Washington that afternoon for our several weeks of consultations. Early that evening we arrived in our temporary apartment in Arlington, bought some takeout Chinese and settled down to watch the election returns on television. Like many Americans we were stunned by the results. I think it does not reflect my political leanings one way or the other, but no doubt Donald Trump's victory was a big surprise to many irrespective of your political affiliation.

I will make one political observation, and that was that in the six weeks of R&R [rest and relaxation] and home leave that I spent in Florida, Lisett and I were able to travel quite a bit around Florida. In our travels we both had a feeling that the polls showing Secretary Clinton leading in the Florida polls by two, three, four points consistently, did not really square with the enthusiasm we were seeing on the ground for Donald Trump. There seemed to be a huge groundswell out there that I'd never seen. For example, you'd be driving on a highway in Florida on a Sunday afternoon, and Floridians are very laid-back people, and yet people would be out there with Trump signs. These were indicators that made me think that in Florida the polls may not be accurately reflecting what was happening on the ground. But still—I was as surprised as everyone else.

I remember we walked into the department on the morning of November 9 to start my consultations and found a shell-shocked building. Again, not reflecting the politics so much as a reaction to a result that was so unexpected. All that said, in the next several weeks I had an excellent set of consultations from the outgoing Obama team at State, at the Pentagon, at the White House. I had excellent meetings with Secretary Kerry, Deputy

Secretary Blinken, Under Secretary Shannon and Under Secretary Pat Kennedy, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dunford, as well as very senior people at the NSC and the intelligence community. I also went on the Hill and met with Democrats and Republicans and had several excellent sessions with the think tank community.

Q: Do you remember who was head of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Office?

LLORENS: Yeah, Laurel Miller was the SRAP at State. Again, it was her office who put together my schedule and they were very supportive.

Q: And from Washington, before you got there, what was their message about what you were going to see?

LLORENS: I'll focus on the secretary. The secretary, obviously, had been the person who had been the driving force for the political agreement between President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, and he recognized that the relationship was inherently unstable. Yet he really urged me to do everything in my power to prevent the National Unity Government from falling apart. Yes, his main advice was to work the political piece very hard and prevent the collapse of the government. In his mind that was the key, the center of gravity to maintaining political stability in Afghanistan. The secretary recognized it more than anyone else. He devoted a lot of time to the Afghanistan account, and he knew the existing political arrangement was a highly explosive and unstable formula, as I think he would describe it. And of course, I have great respect for Secretary Kerry. I assured him I would carefully adhere to his instructions and would not betray his political formula. I assured him I believed in the imperative of a National Unity Government as an expression of broad-based coalition. I always agreed with the secretary on that.

During my consultations I also was able to read a great deal, including the embassy political and economic reporting, as well as the intelligence reports and battlefield reports covering the existing and fluid military situation across Afghanistan. As chief of mission, I also spent considerable time with Pat Kennedy and his administrative team discussing human resources, financial issues, security, and the ongoing building and hardening of the embassy platform. As the consultations concluded, I was ready and eager for the assignment. Arriving in Afghanistan sometime after Thanksgiving, I had the luxury of overlapping with Ambassador McKinley.

Q: That is fortunate. It doesn't happen often.

LLORENS: Yeah, and what I did was stay out of his way, keep my mouth shut, but just shadowed him and learned as much as I could. I was lucky, Mike, Ambassador McKinley, is an old, old friend of mine, a very close friend of mine. We go back to 1984, Bolivia, where we were both junior officers. We both married Bolivian ladies, so we have something very big in common. We both are Latin Americanists.

Mike was very generous with his time, while trying to get himself out. He had had three years on the job, one year as deputy ambassador and then two years as the ambassador. I had been one of the people who had recommended Ambassador McKinley when I was assistant chief of mission back in 2013. I strongly recommended Mike to Ambassador Cunningham. I believed he was the right guy for Kabul. Mike was coming out of

Colombia and, like me, while he did not have Afghan experience, Central Asia experience, he was a crisis manager. Colombia presented similar challenges, a drug issue, the insurgency, supporting a democratic Colombia, so there were a lot of parallels and Mike would be able to add a lot of value.

As his tour wound down, Mike was rightly very frustrated about just the inordinate amount of time that he was devoting to the inherently unstable, dysfunctional relationship between the various factions within the government and principally, President Ghani and his chief executive, the CEO, Dr. Abdullah. And Dr. Abdullah, of course, under the agreement that had been pushed by Secretary Kerry had sort of prime ministerial functions. The power conflict between the two men made governance very difficult.

Another issue that came up during our consultations related to General Dostum, who at the time was vice president of Afghanistan. He had assaulted a political opponent I think during a sporting event up in his hometown. The victim was not an ordinary citizen, but a prominent political figure in his own right, an Afghan senator, and he was badly hurt. I mean, they did horrible things to him. Perhaps not Dostum himself but his security team. And so, Ambassador McKinley felt very strongly about the issue as a classic case of the impunity of the warlord culture. We'd been doing this for twenty years, and here is the Vice president of Afghanistan responsible for these kinds of just brutal acts against political opponents. He felt very strongly about it and had discussed the incident with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah. The U.S. view is that there needed to be consequences. I remember I told Ambassador McKinley that I would take that issue on, that I agreed with him that this crime provided us an opportunity to try to do something about the warlord culture that was still very prevalent in the political class in Afghanistan, which I did.

Ambassador McKinley left mid-December and I assumed chief of mission responsibilities. We were in the last six weeks of the Obama administration. We were in a Christmas lull. In the wake of Clinton's election loss, there really did not seem to be much focus on Afghanistan from the White House or State Department. No one seemed to be seriously engaged anymore. The Obama administration was packing up their stuff back in Washington and working on their resumes. Back in Kabul, I took the opportunity of this lull during the last two weeks of December, to really focus on in-house issues. I knew the embassy well from having been the ACOM [assistant chief of mission] and day-to-day chief operations officer for the embassy in the 2012–13 period, but now I had the chance to get to know my vast inter-agency staff. I recall I made a of not to summon the staff to see me but to meet with the sections and agencies, the twenty-two agencies and all the sections of the State Department, in their own offices. The embassy, I mentioned, had declined in size, but not by much. From what I recall we went down from eighty-three hundred total staff to seventy-three hundred. The biggest difference being that in 2016 there was only one ambassador as opposed to five. But the point is I went to all the sections and agencies, and I was very much in listening mode.

I also had a couple of town hall meetings in that period, for U.S. staff, LES, and third country nationals. I repeated these sessions in January once everyone was back from holiday season. In this session I discussed my management and leadership style, and what my expectations were for each individual member of the team. I had a sense many people

were not happy with the result of the U.S. elections. My emphasis was on the fact that we were a completely professional and apolitical entity. This included everyone: Foreign Service, Civil Service, and every employee representing the nearly two dozen agencies working in the embassy. I told all of them we had a job to do, that this was a great opportunity to show what professionals can do in loyally and zealously serving our new president and his administration. Those town halls were successful, and the team's response was good. Whatever their misgivings, they were ready. They wanted to do a good job. There was some concern, obviously, about what might happen in terms of the policy because we all knew that candidate Trump's position had been very negative about our involvement in Afghanistan. Anyway, my biggest focus early-on was to get a real handle on my Mission and bring everyone together in common purpose. In fact, as I had done in my previous stint as ambassador in Honduras, in Kabul I held quarterly town hall sessions in my time in Kabul. Never missed one!

I reiterated my views again on my strict interpretation of the discipline code and explained to people how we had done it in terms of zero tolerance, and how we were going to do it under my leadership. I created a discipline committee that would be run by our ACOM Steve Bondy, to handle individual violations to the discipline code and make recommendations to the chief of mission in dealing with individual cases.

And I also took advantage of the holiday season lull to begin making my normal courtesy calls. Most important were one-on-one meetings with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah. I also paid courtesy calls on Foreign Minister Rabbani and all members of the cabinet. It was all intense and substantive since we had so many issues across the Afghan government, as well as a huge program portfolio across the Afghan inter-agency.

I immediately understood and was faced by the difficult relations between Ghani and Abdullah. Very early on, I requested a joint meeting so that they could hear my message together. And my message was that during the consultations that I had just had in Washington, I had learned a lot about president-elect Trump's views about foreign policy and Afghanistan. I had never worked with him, but it was very clear that he was deeply skeptical of our involvement in Afghanistan, and that he appeared convinced it had been a disaster from both a blood and a treasure perspective. And so, I said to Ghani and Abdullah, "If you think this is the same as we've had before with President Bush and President Obama, you are going to be very wrong. This is going to be completely different." And so, our new president was going to assume office—and be our biggest skeptic in the U.S. government about our involvement in Afghanistan. So, I said to them, "This nonsense, the constant infighting and all of that, it was only going to prove to President Trump that he was right, that Afghanistan's leaders were not serious, the country was ungovernable, and most of what we'd done in the last nearly twenty years or whatever, was not working."

So, I urged them to collaborate. And my message was, "Help me help you!" I told them I wanted to send a message to Washington that the governance piece was coming together despite the differences, and that the senior leadership of the National Unity Government could come together in confronting this existential threat that Afghanistan faced. So, I begged them. I said, "Look, I have no personal interest beyond my retirement. My

professional interest is our new president getting his bearings and direction on Afghanistan in the first year. Beyond that, I underscored that my intention was not to get a plum ambassadorship but to simply go home and retire. Yet, I was in Afghanistan because I believed passionately that our involvement was of great importance to the United States." And so, I told them that in the coming year we had an opportunity. In the meeting I believed I had their attention. They were concerned. They were also as surprised as most people in Washington inside the Beltway about the election result. All their intellectual calculus was based on a Clinton victory and their mental calculus was in gaming that. That's the impression I got. And the Trump victory confounded them, and put them on the defensive, and they were in listening mode. Remember they knew President Obama very well and all his key decision makers. Again, it's the elephant and the mouse. And remember in the African Veldt the mice stampede the elephants! The Afghans were masters at that. They understood us so much better than we knew them. But this time, I think we had them—I had their attention. I knew the Afghans well and I think I had their attention.

The first thing I asked them is to agree for just the three of us to have a weekly meeting [we agreed to do it every Wednesday afternoon]. In that weekly session, with no one else in the room, we could put everything on the table. I told them I wasn't going to try to tell them what to do, but that maybe as the U.S. ambassador, I could play a role in facilitating communication, serve as an honest broker and try to work through the differences between the two men and their supporters. We agreed that in the weekly meeting we could discuss all aspects of substance and policy including the latest political, military, and economic developments of importance. I said I would be very straightforward in giving them a readout of what I was seeing in Washington, and where the new administration and Congress were coming from on these issues. I noted it was also important to manage their political differences and not allow rumors and gossip to drive a wedge between the two of them. We needed to be able to look each other in the eye and try to find common ground. They agreed. Again, I had their attention at this moment, and they agreed to the weekly meeting. And by the way, we had these two-hour weekly meetings the entire year I was there, except for a couple of occasions when President Ghani was on travel and in those cases, we would reschedule the session.

Q: And this is in the afternoon, right? Because Ambassador McKinley said his meetings with Ghani used to have to be at night.

LLORENS: Yeah. Yeah, it was. It was sort of three to five in the afternoon. And it was funny because we'd have it right in the middle of afternoon prayers. The afternoon prayer would come almost in the middle of the meeting. That would be our break. So, I was in the office, and they would go off to pray together. That served to create the very best karma at intermission!

So, as I said, that was important to allow us to put everything on the table all the time, and mitigate, although not always successfully since the governance formula was inherently explosive. Why? Because this was not just Ghani and Abdullah. It was driven by patronage networks who wanted power and power gave you influence and access to resources, and that was the game, right? And so, many of the problems were being driven by their own people. I'll be very undiplomatic on this one, but to myself I called a lot of

these underlings the palace eunuchs. Yes, the Argh and Sepidar Palace eunuchs were constantly spreading lies, rumors, propagating disinformation, engaging in intrigue, and so the eunuchs were making things worse. They were driving the divisions, and by doing so seeking to control ministries, agencies, programs, and pots of resources, at the expense of the other network. Above all, the eunuchs were trying to advance the interest of massive patronage networks that represented a very complex web of ethnic, tribal, and regional interests. Again, Ghani and Abdullah would meet in formal sessions numerous times a day, but the real Afghan stuff was going on behind the scenes, and so there was this huge lack of understanding, and intermediation between these two individuals. The result was that the government was constantly lurching from one internal crisis to another and the looming danger that Ghani would fire one of Abdullah's people, or Abdullah's people charging a Ghani insider with some transgression. It was just constant turmoil.

President Ghani, CEO Abdullah, and I always had an agenda for these meetings. We had so many policy issues in the political, security, economic, and development realms. We devoted considerable time to preparation for elections. But, again, there was a lot of time trying to deconflict the differences, and sort out issues related to appointments, and this was continuous. Again, eunuch mischief was continuous, and they kept us very busy. Yet, the Wednesday meeting really helped mitigate the damage and helped keep the government together. It got more difficult later as they got a little more comfortable with me and the new administration. The early period was the easiest and the most productive. I'd say from December until August, because remember, President Trump did not roll out the new strategy until August. So, in that entire period there was great uncertainty about what the president was going to do, and which direction he was likely to go. The Afghans were most nervous in this period. Once the South Asia Strategy was rolled out, I think they felt their oats, and regained some of their old confidence and probably felt they had more of a margin to play the political game. However, throughout the Wednesday meeting was still critical to mitigate the damage and keep the government on track.

Q: And in terms of them gaming people, there had also been earlier in our presence there, there had been a lot of interplay with trying to play off the military or the intelligence agencies against the ambassador trying to play a different message to different audiences. Was that a change as well?

LLORENS: Well, they would always try that. To me, my most consequential relationship was my working relationship with my military counterpart, General Mick Nicholson. So, again, in that transition period between administration—say December 2016–January 2017—General Nicholson and I devoted a lot of time at working lunches, one-on-one policy discussions, coordinating planning sessions and exchanging views on how each of us saw the situation in Afghanistan. Very early on, General Nicholson and I were able to establish a very close bond, a personal bond. We had good chemistry. We became very close friends to this day. But beyond the personal relationship and the trust was the fact that we agreed strongly on what we needed to do in Afghanistan. On substance we were very much joined at the hip. I was lucky. General Nicholson was an individual who had numerous tours in Afghanistan, knew the country forwards and backwards, not only understood the military equation, but understood everything, the society, the culture, the political dynamics, and how the patronage networks worked. He was very sophisticated.

And he understood. And so, what I said is, "Look, we have an opportunity right now to get the administration's focus and influence the direction and crafting of a new approach that can give us a better chance for success."

Well, before that, let me backtrack a bit. I'd like to mention something about President Obama before we close out. One of my main tasks on the substantive policy side was closing out the account for President Obama. President Obama had devoted eight years of his life to Afghanistan. I mean, a lot of his gray hairs were caused by Afghanistan, okay? And so, just a lot of final messages from the administration, from the president to the Afghans.

I remember that just two or three days before he left office we had this lengthy video conference, secure video conference. He was in the Situation Room with National Security Advisor Rice, just the two of them, and it was President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah, and I at the Palace, I'm not going to go into the substance details of the meeting because again, it would be highly classified, but President Obama did provide some heartfelt advice to these two principals about the way forward and some suggestions on how to manage the things going in the coming months and so on. He shared some of the lessons he had learned in a very unvarnished, honest way as with two old friends that he had known for many years. He spoke of his own experience and insights into the situation in Afghanistan. It was a very emotional meeting. Remember, I'm the fly on the wall, you're the lowly ambassador. And it was a very emotional meeting. I mean, because you ultimately learn that national security and foreign policy—we're not machines that push buttons—this is about real human beings and people and the dynamics between these flesh and blood human beings. So, that was one of those great examples that diplomacy at its essence is deeply human and personal and carries a lot of emotion. Obviously, the intellectual piece frames it, but at the most basic level it is very human. And one of the good things that President Obama said, which I appreciated, was, "Hey, listen to Ambassador Llorens. He's here to help you. I put him there for you. Listen to him. Help him." So, I really appreciated that. That was the sort of message he passed on to them, and that was very helpful to me as well.

Anyway, when President Trump came into office, we knew, General Nicholson and I, that we had someone who was a great skeptic about Afghanistan. The general and I believed we needed to stay engaged, and that the Afghan project was more than worthwhile to American core security interests.

Q: And on that point, what was the state of play with the Taliban, the insurgency and the state of the Afghan military and police forces at that time two years after you had left the first time?

LLORENS: Yeah, that's a great question. Remember, in my mind I see our involvement in phases. There's the liberation phase, the bogging down phase, the surge, the transition or Afghanization phase, right? So, we're coming to the end of the Afghanization phase. I would say all in all it had gone pretty darn well. I mean, we—U.S. and NATO—had removed 90 percent of our forces from Afghanistan. We'd been able to establish frameworks like the Strategic Partnership Agreement and similar agreements that Afghanistan had with other of our allies. There was the Bilateral Security Agreement in

place, and we had continued to focus on our training and advise and assist mission to the Afghan military. We continued to provide substantial military assistance. We were introducing new weapons systems, particularly trying to ramp up the Afghan Air Force. So, those things had gone relatively well.

Having said that, and I credit the Obama administration, they've done a pretty good job. But my criticism was, again, because the policy thinking was a bit too inflexible of putting the full burden on the Afghan National Security Forces the task of handling the Pakistani-supported Taliban insurgency, and we [the U.S. and the allies] would focus on al Qaeda. The Afghan military in my view was still not completely ready to take on the Taliban just by themselves and go toe to toe. They still needed more help from us. So, what I found, my own assessment, and this I told to the Trump administration when I came in, was that we had a stalemate on the ground, which is pretty good, but my view was that it was a degrading stalemate. It was a slowly eroding stalemate against our side. And we'd seen that in the year or two before—in '15 and '16 with the Taliban becoming bolder in concentrating more military forces and, for example, attempting to seize provincial capitals. So, now they were operating, they were moving beyond an asymmetric insurgency of the surge years and transitioning to a more offensive and proactive military posture. The Taliban was keen on demonstrating more significant military capability where they could threaten major political centers, major economic targets, and major Afghan military facilities. The Afghans were still holding their own, but they were spread out and I was concerned. The Taliban was ramping up and maybe the capability of the Afghan military was constantly getting better, but I always looked at it as a delta. I always looked at the delta. Was it the Afghan security forces were getting better, but the Taliban was showing more capability? And so that was the situation I saw.

The other one that was very, very important, was the economic piece. I mentioned the political piece, which was a gradually degrading political formula. When I arrived the National Unity Government was increasingly dysfunctional. I think I described that to you. And then the economic piece. And remember that in those years of the surge we were everywhere in the country with a huge military presence, huge economic development presence. We couldn't spend money fast enough. And money was being spent by the U.S. and all our Allies hand-over-fist. Our military commanders were handing out cash in our COIN strategy. So, in those years they were boom years for the Afghan economy. There was so much money coming in that the economy in those final years in the Karzai administration, despite all the corruption and their dysfunctionality, was growing 10-12 percent a year, you know. And this was amazing.

Well, poor President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah came into office at the end of 2014 when we were completing our military withdrawal. By the end of 2014 the troops, diplomats, and development officers deployed in the field had left the country or been reassigned to Kabul. I mean, we still had nodes in Jalalabad, in Mazar, Kandahar and in Herat, but basically, we had come back to Kabul. The economic impact of our withdrawal was devastating outside of Kabul and the major cities. So, in addition to the military and political challenges, we were facing a serious economic predicament with broader social implications.

Q: In the countryside more than in Kabul.

LLORENS: Totally, in the countryside. Again, 50 percent of the population is rural. But the overall macro impact was negative, so the situation when I came in was an economy that was essentially dead in the water. I mean, it may have been in an initial recession, but now it was 1 or 2 percent growth. Remember, population growth in Afghanistan is above 3 percent, so per capita income's declining, leading to a rise in poverty, rise in unemployment and underemployment—the end of the COIN bonanza. The party was over.

So, I wanted to tell you that I do give a lot of credit to Ghani and Abdullah. They inherited very, very severe economic headwinds; and yet, from a macro perspective, they proved to be far better, more prudent macroeconomic policy managers than Karzai. Karzai didn't need to do it. Ghani and Abdullah did a significant job in increasing government revenue, strengthening the public finances, and maintaining robust international reserve levels. I mean, they were taking Afghanistan on a sure path towards more self-reliance.

Q: Ghani was the first finance minister. Before that, he had worked in the World Bank and other international organizations. So, he had a certain amount of development and financial experience. That must have helped, right?

LLORENS: Absolutely. I mean, you had a guy who understood Afghanistan's public finances, who was a development expert. Dr. Abdullah was someone who was philosophically a very pragmatic individual in economic policy, quite sophisticated, although he's a medical doctor, as you know. They were trying to deal with this very challenging situation, but I thought that they were, on the policy side, they fundamentally agreed on most things, and they were doing a reasonably good job.

I think overall, from the time I left in 2013, there had been a weakening of the security situation, a weakening in governance, and a weakening of the economic picture. None of this was in any crisis mode, but it was an eroding situation.

Q: And on the terrorism side within Kabul?

LLORENS: It was ramping up. So, their ability to target the cities—and of course, we also had the rise of ISIS-K, so that was a new element.

Q: Can you describe what ISIS-K was?

LLORENS: ISIS-K is the chapter of ISIS in Afghanistan. It was created by the caliphate in Iraq, as their arm for jihad in Afghanistan. ISIS-K, the K stands for Khorasan, or the ancient name of Afghanistan. And they were mostly situated—the Taliban at that time had roughly fifty thousand to sixty-five thousand active fighters, fighting all over the country, but principally in the south and east, but they were everywhere. ISIS-K had several thousand, but they were particularly brutal and nasty, and they were bent on unleashing terror in urban areas, particularly Kabul. They were developing their cells to target Kabul. So, the security situation would have deteriorated not only somewhat in rural Afghanistan with the departure of U.S. NATO forces, but in the sense that security in the major cities had deteriorated as well.

Q: On our side, 90 percent had left and so, the numbers were fairly low, and therefore, not as spread out around the country, right?

LLORENS: Totally. And you could see that the number, when I talk about the eroding stalemate, the number of districts that the Taliban—rural districts that the Taliban was able to control—had grown. Not dramatically, but they were clear—the momentum was slowly moving in their direction evidenced as well by their targeting of provincial capitals; they tried to take several provincial capitals.

The physics of this was obvious. I mean, you had a hundred forty thousand U.S. NATO troops, the most powerful, most modern, sophisticated military ever deployed in war had been deployed in Afghanistan. In that context the Afghans were doing pretty darn well. The Afghan security forces were committed to protecting the entire country and the population, and so they were spread out. So, it might have been a force of whatever, two hundred seventy-five thousand to three hundred fifty thousand, take or remove the phantom soldiers or whatever. But they were trying to hold on not only to the main bases and to protect the cities and population centers, but they were up there in the FOBs, in the forward operating bases and in remote places. Now that NATO was no longer there, there was less patrolling because you didn't have the proactive COIN NATO strategy. The Afghans were more hunkered down in their bases. Under these circumstances, the Taliban was operating more freely. The Taliban were taking more rural districts. Again, my analysis was that in December 2016 at the end of the Obama administration we were in a stalemate, and I would say it was an eroding stalemate, and I worried that over time we would see the cracks, and there was potential peril out there in the medium term.

Obviously, I am not a general or anything like that, just an old-fashioned diplomat. But what I really tried to do both in the time I was ambassador-in-residence in the National War College and shadowed the Afghan Fellows program in 2011–12, and in the time that I served as ACOM where the pol-mil account was mine, I devoted a lot of time to understanding the military side, not because that was my issue, but I needed to understand it well. Because there's no way you can be a good diplomat and be successful in a place like Afghanistan where the war was the driving phenomenon, without really understanding the military phenomenon. So, almost as an academic, I became quite an expert on the military situation. Not as a practitioner, that's zero for me, but I think it was important to know that, and I think General Nicholson appreciated the fact that I had that knowledge. He respected not my view, but my understanding, he wanted that. And I wanted his understanding. I wanted his understanding and expertise on the political, the economic, the sociological, the development aspects, and he understood it, again because he'd been there. He had done multiple tours in Afghanistan. He was one of our great Afghan hands. So, he's not a political guy, he's not an economist, he's not going to be doing this stuff. We were clear about each other's turf. I am not going out there and talking to President Ghani on how to wage war, or General Nicholson making recommendations about how to run an election. But the fact is that those issues would come up and we both understood them. If I am meeting with Ghani and Abdullah and there was a military event that happened, and I could talk to them about that credibly without giving them military advice. I could talk intelligently about the issue. The same thing with General Nicholson. An issue came up, did you see what with the governor in

so-and-so province, and he would understand it and be able to discuss it, without making a recommendation. And we both, again, respected each other's turf, but the fact is that we were really steeped in the entire tapestry. We really integrated our thoughts.

One of the things I recommended, I said to General Nicholson—by the way, he was ahead of me because he'd already been thinking about this himself—I told him we had a great opportunity to get in early now and give the incoming administration our assessment of the situation on the ground along with some recommendations of what might be a way forward. We agreed that if we came up with the same old, same old that President Trump was going to tear everything up and we would lose all credibility. We needed to think about and respect where he came from, at least from what we knew from the campaign, and try to present something that might be viable. And that was what we both agreed on. We agreed to offer the new administration strategic and policy proposals from the field that were sustainable from a blood and treasure perspective.

Q: And can you outline what the final recommendations were?

LLORENS: I think as good bureaucrats what I tried to do is I prepared a document, kind of a country team document, and interagency strategy and policy piece. Our country team document provided an assessment of how we saw the situation unfolding on the ground, and then we made a series of recommendations on the political side, corruption, managing the elections, the economics, the macro picture, as well as our economic development priorities. We also analyzed the drug situation and made some suggestions on the counternarcotics side. But we also included the military piece. However, the military assessment I got from General Nicholson, but it was incorporated in my State Department document, a document that was sent in February, just several weeks after the new administration had taken over. Our country team strategy piece was highly classified and compartmented and distributed to the secretary of state, the national security advisor and a handful of the administration's most senior national security officials.

Meanwhile, on the military side General Nicholson was working on an identical document for Secretary of Defense Mattis and Chairman Dunford. So, we cross-fertilized the two documents and sent them in at the same time. We had my Country Team and the General's Leadership Team discuss the substance. So, they cleared our document, and we had a look at theirs. So, when we sent these two documents that were highly limited in distribution, I gave a copy of my document to General Nicholson and told him to share a copy with Secretary Mattis and Chairman Dunford. This is the document I had sent to Secretary of State Tillerson, it was a State cable, but also to the new National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster.

So, these are some notes that I've taken from another thing I'm going to eventually write. But I said, Nicholson and I brought our embassy and U.S. leadership teams together in a series of strategy, policy, and program sessions. Based on those intense discussions the embassy drafted a country team Afghanistan strategy options paper. I want to be very precise here because this is what this was all about for us. We shared our draft with General Nicholson and his command team and encouraged their comments and clearance. While our document was more focused on the diplomat, political, economic development, intelligence, and counterdrug issues, the military component very much

reflected General Nicholson's perspective, which I fully concurred with. Likewise, Nicholson prepared a military strategy document that had our embassy input.

These strategy documents were drafted in the transition phase, and both were submitted to Washington within weeks of President Trump's inauguration. In my case, the country team document was sent electronically at a very high level of classification and given the most limited access to the secretary of state and the national security advisor. Copies were given to an extremely small group of senior policymakers at State and the NSC. Nicholson's document was similarly classified and had strictly limited distribution to include the secretary of defense, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, and if I remember correctly, possibly the CENTCOM [Central Command] commander. I gave a copy of my paper to Nicholson to share with the secretary of defense and Chairman Dunford, and they shared their paper with our people. The main point here is we were able to influence the senior policymakers, decisionmakers very early on. More importantly, the leadership at State, Defense, and the National Security Council and the intelligence community could see the diplomats and military teams on the frontlines of the fight were fully joined-at-the-hip on what needed to be done as to strategy, policy, and programs. We felt that if we came in with any light between us, we were doomed. It was the same thing as the light between Ghani and Abdullah and would just be seen as part of dysfunction, the mess. But again, it originated with a real concurrence of views. If it wasn't, it wouldn't have worked out. And we had the personal dynamic that we really were able to get along. General Nicholson's a wonderful man, and a gentleman. He was a good man to work with. For me, it was a dream to have him.

But I'll give you some elements of what we recommended. And our approach from the field contained some basic points. First, the importance of implementing our approach on Afghanistan in a broader South Central Asia regional context, as well as bringing in the key stakeholders from the outside region, the EU, UK, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, others. Of our many recommendations, front and center was recommendation on the need to take a persistently tough and unambiguous line with Pakistan. On the military piece we advocated giving the military commander on the ground the full authority of using our small ground and air contingents as needed. There were all sorts of restrictions during the Obama administration, which hampered the effectiveness of our operation on the ground.

Q: This is an important point. Is it true one key reason for the restrictions on air use especially were related to trying to cut down on violence or unintentional killings of civilians.

LLORENS: Correct.

Q: If I understand correctly from my reading. But also had the side effect of not helping the Afghan forces fight against the Taliban. So, it was a problem, right?

LLORENS: Correct, correct. Absolutely. You laid it out. But I said the U.S. NATO commander needed to have the tactical flexibility and freedom to fully utilize our forces in a very fluid battlefield. And again, I'll be very honest here. I have a lot of respect for President Obama as I do for President Bush. Trust me, I think very highly of both men. But unfortunately, for most of the Obama administration micromanagement or the

ten-thousand-mile screwdriver stifled initiative and at times paralyzed and demoralized the effort in the field. We also advocated shifting to a more market-based economic policy and development approach. That was something I really instilled in our team, we worked on it. We have a great cable that I think was one of the best policy cables we prepared called "The Phoenix Economy". It was an interagency piece proposing a major shift in the economic policy model. For too long the main economic policy question for Afghanistan was how the Afghan government would manage and direct the huge flows of international donor assistance. The notion of having the right policy formula to more efficiently allocate resources and help those Afghans who were creating some wealth and value needed to become our priority. So that was a big part of our recommendation. And we also proposed a limited, but more effective counterdrug approach focused on restricting the money flow to the Taliban generated from the opium/heroin trade.

So, those documents went in early, within a couple of weeks. They were sent in February. And so, the new administration was coming in, Afghanistan was a hot potato, they were focused on it, and those strategy assessments from the field were some of the first things they looked at, and we thus were able to influence the conversation from the very beginning. Understand we don't make policy, okay, but what we sent in were reference pieces to be able to get the conversation going. And if you get in early, that's a great bureaucratic trick and I believe it really helped shape and influence the new administration.

Q: I don't think it's a trick. I think it's you who's giving them the material and the knowledge. You're helping them get up to speed quickly and giving them the knowledge that they need to make decisions.

LLORENS: Correct.

Q: So, I think it's a really important practice, actually.

LLORENS: Yeah. It's a bad word to use, trick, you're right. Or because we had this problem at the very top of the government, we were eager to get it right from the very beginning.

Q: But also, the secretary was brand new to government, so—

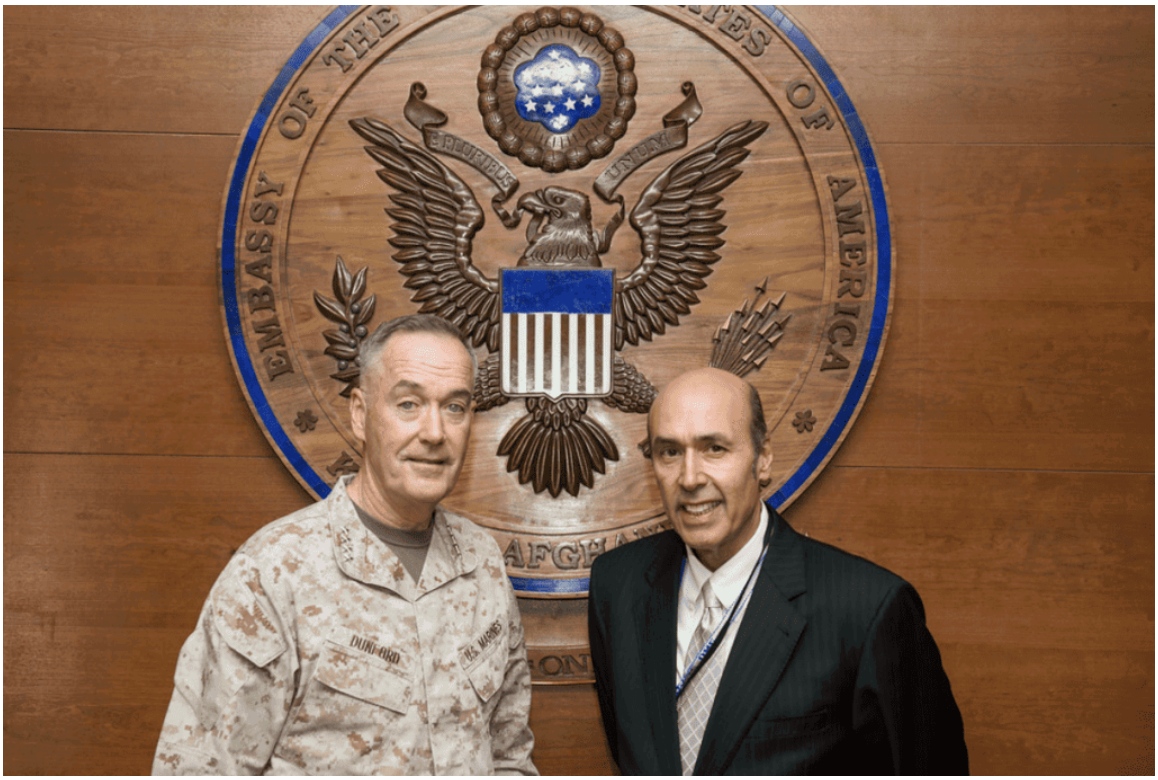
LLORENS: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: I think you did a really good service, no matter how you look at it.

LLORENS: No, well thanks.

Again, but I was lucky and I was just lucky being able to work with someone as professional and competent as General Nicholson. I was lucky again in the sense that when you looked at President Trump's new national security team, you had a lot of Afghan expertise. General Mattis, he'd fought in Afghanistan. He was one of the first marine generals on the ground in Afghanistan. He knew the whole country in a very sophisticated way. National Security Advisor General H.R. McMaster, I'd served with him in Afghanistan. He'd been the anticorruption guru for us, for the U.S. military, back

in 2011–2012, or 2010–2012. He knew Afghanistan forwards and backwards, knew all the players. Chairman Dunford, he'd been commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. I served in my first assignment, 2012–2013, with General John Allen and General Dunford. Again, Dunford was a great Afghan hand, so we were lucky that three of the key people understood Afghanistan perfectly.



Ambassador Llorens with General Dunford. This photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY

In the case of Secretary Tillerson, and I know Secretary Tillerson has been much criticized by the professional service, but in talking about Afghanistan, I will give Secretary Tillerson his due. He was a high IQ individual and very early on I think he understood the strategic stakes in Afghanistan. Although, as you say, he had no experience. He had a world view because of his role as chairman and CEO of Exxon. He traveled all over the world, knew many world leaders, but Afghanistan was a Black Hole. But again, he was a high IQ individual, and my sense is he got it. And so, what you had was early on, relatively early on, as you got into March, April, May, a kind of a triumvirate, an iron triangle that included Mattis, McMaster, and Tillerson, who believed that we needed to stay engaged and that we needed to succeed in Afghanistan.

Again, the guidance that Secretary Kerry had given me back in June 2016 when he offered me the job was to help the Obama administration close out the account for them and help the incoming administration in their first year in office get their strategic bearings. Yes, my primary roles were to help the new team, get up to speed and develop their approach on Afghanistan. And I remember we had a secure session once at the very

highest, highest level. A very senior individual, someone who was very skeptical about our involvement, and they wanted to know what my formula for victory might be.

My reaction to that was, "I've just gotten on the ground. Very respectfully, I don't have any magic solutions here about victory. But if I had one little humble piece of advice, rather than discussing the formula for victory or what victory looks like, it might be a good idea to start the conversation with what defeat might look like. In other words, what are the consequences if the U.S. and its allies are defeated in Afghanistan. What are the security, geopolitical, regional and humanitarian consequences." But that was my first exchange with the administration at a very high level.

Obviously, we're lucky that we had a lot of Afghanistan expertise in the incoming administration. And I give tremendous credit to Secretary Tillerson, to Secretary Mattis, to National Security Advisor McMaster for their unwavering engagement with the president and others on his team on Afghanistan. Again, General Nicholson and I gave our input very early on, but the heavy lifting on developing a new strategic approach on Afghanistan, the South Asia Strategy, was done by Mattis, McMaster, and Tillerson. The three of them kept coming back again and again and again trying to get the president to understand the importance of Afghanistan, and the consequences for U.S. interests if we got things wrong. Remember, the president had people who were very political and were now embedded in the national security making process and they argued for us to cut our losses and get out. They, like the president, believed it was a mess, a disaster, the biggest disaster ever. They reflected some of the president's neo-isolationist constituents. So, we were dealing with that.

In fact, my view is that in some way the removal of Tillerson, McMaster, and even Mattis had an Afghan element. I know that. It may not have been *the* only issue, but it was part of the fact that they were coming back to their boss and arguing something that ultimately, he did not want to hear. And, of course, the boss has the final say. If the boss is not there, you're going to have problems. But still your job is to give the boss an honest view. Tillerson, McMaster, and Mattis were not yes men. These were honorable people who were going to give the president the best advice they could. Others, in my view, for example the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] director at the time, Pompeo, played all sides and were more interested in advancing themselves than advancing America.

Again, I am digressing, but at the end of the day in 2017, we came up with a South Asia Strategy that was the best we could get from a very skeptical president. The South Asia Strategy we proposed, and the president deliberated and ultimately accepted, provided a sustainable way forward in Afghanistan from a blood and treasure perspective. And it was a conditions-based approach. We moved from what I felt was a time-based approach in the Obama administration with all these rigid calendars and timelines on reducing troops and all of that and replaced it with a conditions-based approach premised on the basic notion that we will stay in Afghanistan as long as it takes to preserve our core security equities. What is the core U.S. and ally strategic goal in Afghanistan? It was and is to ensure Afghanistan is never again used as a platform or a base to attack the U.S. and our allies. And that has been the overriding objective since September 11, 2001. The conditions-based approach would be a continuance of that, but we would do it in a much smarter way.

I am going to digress a bit again. Look, we made huge mistakes in Afghanistan. I mentioned President Bush's possible mistake of vectoring to Iraq too early and taking his eye off the Afghan ball. Again, I have great respect for President Bush. I also have a lot of respect for President Obama, but the Obama approach was a little erratic. He went in wanting to win the good war [Afghanistan] and end the bad war [Iraq]. He surged in Afghanistan but had already established a timetable for withdrawal before the surge had been completed. During the Obama administration there was also too much micromanagement and ten thousand mile screwdrivers that hampered smooth operations. These were strategic and tactical mistakes. In the Obama case, too much money, and a ten-thousand-mile screwdriver over time had strategic consequences. Throughout our twenty-year involvement in Afghanistan, we blundered seriously in not being more forceful in protecting U.S. taxpayer money. I am guilty of that. I'm one of the senior officials involved. We should have done better. It didn't mean that we didn't care; but of course, we care about the people's money, but at the end of the day, on the margins, in too many cases on the margins we weren't tough enough on the Afghans. We were not strong enough, and these were major mistakes.

You know there were so many good Afghans that came back after December 2001. Very talented and dedicated people, technocrats with great skills, and yeah, they were brought into government, but we were never able to get them in sufficient numbers in real positions of power and authority. Throughout warlordism prevailed. We continued somehow to believe that the warlords had some legitimacy and could get things done. The reality is that most of these people were very ineffective and a huge liability. And again, we were all guilty of that. These warlords were rapacious, and they didn't have legitimacy with their people. I mean and we had twenty years to help change things, we had the influence, not just the U.S., but all our allies to be able to do better in eroding the influence of the warlords in the government. Obviously, we were not able to completely eliminate them, you can't, but we could have done far better in pushing for higher standards of governance and that starts with having good people at the helm.

I think President Bush was right on the nation building concept, although I don't think the president called it nation building. I think President Bush is a very smart guy. President Bush understood if the United States goes into Afghanistan and all we offer are bullets, we're going to fail. This is a country that was destroyed by the Soviets, the Mujahideen, and the Taliban. And we needed to be able to provide sufficient economic assistance to create what the president would describe as poles of stability. Call it nation building if you want, but it was necessary to have any chance of coming out well in this venture.

We needed to be able to deliver something to the Afghan people. We needed to be able to get buy-in by helping women and youth, and the poorest of the poor. And by the way, the president's premise, again, like the democracy proponent he was, he believed that after everything the Afghan people had been through from the Soviet occupation to the dark night of the Taliban—and all the intolerance and repression, the Afghan people would be best served by a dose of democracy. President Bush never believed you're going to have Vermont town council democracy or anything like that. No one I worked with in the Bush or Obama administrations, ever believed that. But what the Bush premise was, and I think President Obama certainly bought off on this, was that you needed to create a more

tolerant Afghanistan where disputes would be solved peacefully, and that other people's views would be listened to and respected, and within that came the whole concept of adopting a liberal constitution. President Bush and President Obama are both right on that score. Installing an Afghan dictator wouldn't work. Having said that, you could criticize if you're getting into the detail that the constitution as it was written centralized too much power, and that proved to be a strategic governance flaw. The last King, Zahir Shah, ruled the country for forty years. He was Pashtun and the most powerful man in the country, but he was tolerant and respected by all the other ethnic groups, the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. He was not absolute but first among equals. Again, as a Pashtun, he allowed a remarkable amount of authority and decentralization in the country.

Q: When the constitution was written, the president still had the authority like a king to appoint and withdraw governors. There wasn't a lot of voting for other offices, right?

LLORENS: Totally, totally. So, you had the crazy situation where a Pashtun would be governor of a predominantly Tajik province. People were running these provinces who'd never lived there, never been—it was crazy. Yes, the constitution was wrongly designed to give inordinate power to the center in Kabul. That may have proven to be another major mistake. Corruption was another major problem area, as I said. There is the fact that we and our NATO allies tried to create an Afghan military in our image. We should have thought a little bit about the longer term, what might have been a militarily sustainable model. Although in knowing and learning from our military colleagues on how we're designed, it's very hard for us to train someone on a system that's different from us. We know what we know. We don't know what we don't know. So, in the end, again, I wonder if we could have created an Afghan Army different from ourselves. Certainly, in an ideal world we would have created a military that was somewhat more flexible, somewhat more low intensity.

So, it is vital to acknowledge that during these twenty years, we made many mistakes. Yet at the same time, we're not total dunderheads either. The reality is we learned over time from these mistakes, and my view was that when I returned at the very end of the Obama administration and with the new Trump administration in 2016–17, we are coming in having learned these lessons and looking to develop a new approach that hit the sweet spot in terms of policy and programs. We'd taken what Bush had done right, taken away what he had done wrong, and the same thing with President Obama. First of all, we moved away from the flawed Obama approach based on calendars and timetables.

The most important element is the military element because the principal phenomenon was war. Security was going to drive everything. Yes, governance, economics are all related, but the driving force, the driving element in that formula was the military equation and what we had created I think under the South Asia Strategy was a very limited U.S. NATO presence of under twenty thousand or so troops. Again, this was a very small fraction of our military posture during the surge years. The military piece set-up in 2017 included a very small special forces contingent of twenty-five hundred troops, that the U.S., could use in the battlefield, but under the Trump South Asia Strategy could now be used in the battlefield not only to take out an al Qaeda cell, but could be used very liberally used by the commander for strategic effect anywhere he wanted, including against the Taliban. We also had six thousand advisors. What General

Nicholson, and I completely agreed was you needed to deploy the advisors from the headquarters level under Obama and bring them down to the battalion level. You wanted those advisors on the ground, not fighting but making sure that our assistance was not being stolen by the battalion commander, that the food wasn't being stolen, that the military was following their own operating manual. The newly deployed advisors played a huge role in enabling the Afghan security forces. So, the U.S. military contingent was six thousand advisors and twenty-five hundred special forces combat, that's only eighty-five hundred troops. There were others providing security and helping with logistics, but the numbers, including our NATO allies, were very, very small.

And then, we had the air contingent. What did we have in terms of combat air? We had all of a hundred and twenty aircraft. If you look at U.S. combat aircraft, whether the air force, navy air, marine air, army air, all of it, fixed and rotary wing, we are talking about 1 percent of U.S. combat air was in Afghanistan. That was our model. That was the residual force model we had created. It was small, affordable, effective, and sustainable. Now, they were deployed in U.S. and NATO bases all over the country, in the south, in the east, in the west, and in the north. And what did they include? I'm trying to recall this, but maybe two squadrons of F-16s, and two squadrons of predator drones, the very big drones that carry a lot of ordinances. There may have been a couple of squadrons of Blackhawk and Apache helicopters. And yes, there were a couple of Puff the Magic Dragons aircraft, a big carrier plane with a big 105-millimeter howitzers on them.

The point I'm making is that it was a very tiny air contingent. But so, what was this deployment that we perfected in the South Asia Strategy? Leading with the military piece, the U.S. and NATO had a residual force, a tiny one. We had learned a lot about the battlefield. The battlefield lessons learned of the previous twenty years were being applied so that we could maintain a small combat and advisory capability that could serve as strategic enablers for the Afghans. Under the South Asia Strategy, the Afghan military, the Afghan Army, the Afghan National Police, were doing 95 percent of the fighting and 99 percent of the dying in 2017. That was what we were offering President Trump. Yet we could, with this reconfigured model of the South Asia Strategy, we could pretty much prevent the Taliban from ever achieving a strategic military victory at very small cost in blood and treasure to ourselves and our allies. That was the essence of what we were offering to President Trump. Now if it was an eroding stalemate it was eroding against the Taliban and in our favor.

Once he had the authorities, General Nicholson significantly ramped up the air campaign. And what was the premise? What was our military premise? It was that for the Taliban to win a strategic military victory they would have to concentrate forces. The Taliban could keep the insurgency going forever, in a very asymmetric way. They could atomize their forces and conduct small ambushes of a small number of Afghan troops. They could use suicide bombers. The Taliban could plant mines or IED [improvised explosive device] somewhere, and someone, military or civilian, might get blown-up. Bottom line: if the Taliban retained the will, they could continue such a small insurgency indefinitely. However, on our end, you could easily guarantee at a minimal cost of blood and treasure enabling the Afghan security forces to prevent the Taliban from winning a strategic victory on the battlefield. And so, I go back to that premise that for the Taliban to

maneuver on the battlefield for strategic effect they need to concentrate forces. You want to seize a provincial capital? You want to seize a major military installation, a major economic target? You need, not five Taliban running around with an IED or firing a mortar, or a suicide bomber blowing himself up somewhere; you need to bring together and concentrate hundreds of fighters to successfully take these big targets, doing it consecutively. By the time I arrived in late 2016, under the eroding stalemate the Taliban was already concentrating two or three hundred fighters trying to attack major targets including attempting to seize provincial capitals.

However, with the change of administration and their decision to give General Nicholson the tactical flexibility to use the small residual force as he saw fit, he was able to use both our small air contingent and our special forces to give the Taliban a big bloody nose in 2017. I will give you a great example that I saw firsthand. I was in a U.S. Marine base somewhere in Helmand in mid-2017. The Taliban had concentrated a major force. There were several hundred Taliban fighters that were attacking Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand, the outskirts. What essentially happened is with this little, tiny air force that we had, but with the aircraft deployed everywhere because we had the NATO bases across Afghanistan, we could very quickly launch one or two aircraft to provide air support for the Afghan forces. In this case, within fifteen, twenty minutes, literally, there were two predator drones over. And I watched them with the marine commander there and watched that attack being destroyed. Because, again, once they concentrate forces, we have high precision weaponry, and they were done.

Ambassador Llorens in Helmand

In 2017 we were able to completely flip the military equation. For example, in 2017 our losses, I believe, and I'd have to check data, but I think we lost twenty-five people killed in action in 2017. Now, that's twenty-five too many. Trust me, every single one of these men and women that were killed in battle General Nicholson, and I would be in Bagram bidding farewell to that flag-draped coffin sending that young man or woman to their moms or dads, their wives, their kids. I mean, it's just horrible. For all of us who served there we have skin in the game. In that fight we lost our best people there, we really did. We lost our best Americans. But by 2017, like I said, the Afghans were doing 95 percent of the fighting and 99 percent of the dying.

We no longer use kill ratios and so on like Vietnam, but we have some data. And the data I was reading right before I left Afghanistan at the very end of 2017, of Taliban casualties—between killed, captured, wounded or people that we estimated had deserted, was something on the order of seventeen thousand fighters of a sixty thousand strong Taliban force. A quarter of them had in some way been sort of taken off the battlefield. And that was the first time since, I think, since '01, '02, '03 that we had put them in such a precarious position. The Trump administration South Asia Strategy on the military piece had flipped it around completely. We were using our air power, our special forces, and military advisors effectively to enable the Afghans who were very much in the lead and the intelligence I was reading at the end of 2017 was that Taliban morale, which previously had been gradually gaining in confidence, had declined precipitously. The Taliban had been hit very hard, very, very hard, and they were having trouble recruiting people. So, again, that would be one part of it.

Q: And in the course of that, were we more successful than in the past of avoiding civilian casualties by mistake? The wedding parties and things?

LLORENS: I think we had figured out how to do it better. But because we caught the Taliban in a tempo when they were growing their military, and their operational tempo was growing, and they were concentrating forces it made it easier for us to more cleanly target them. It didn't mean that we didn't have problems, but it made it easier for us. We weren't like during the surge that we were trying to use a sledgehammer on the needle in a haystack. During the surge, as I mentioned, the Taliban was really fighting asymmetrically, and they had really reduced their footprint in response to our overwhelming power.

Let me go back to the political piece. President Trump did ultimately agree to this conditions-based approach—the South Asia Strategy.

The point we were trying to make all along from the field was that we could implement an approach that was sustainable from a blood, minimal casualties, with the Afghans doing most of the frontal effort in the battlefield. And then from a treasure perspective, one of the points I always made to our senior people was that I felt confident in going back in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee or the Armed Services Committee and making the case that if we were a government agency we were delivering. Because when I came to Afghanistan as the ACOM in 2012, in May of 2012, we were spending about a hundred and forty billion dollars on the war. That included the military piece, that included the largest embassy in the world, that included the largest

AID program in the world, and the largest CIA operation in the world. In 2017, I don't have the data in front of me, we probably spent more like twenty-three billion dollars, in the low twenties. That was the military piece: the ten-, fifteen-thousand troops we had, the—still the largest embassy in the world, but a bit smaller than in 2012, 2013, a still very large intelligence community presence, but much smaller because we'd withdrawn much of it from the field. Our economic development presence was still very large, but in terms of personnel it declined significantly because they were mostly in Kabul. So, we went from a hundred and forty billion dollars annual price tag to something like twenty-three billion dollars for the combined package.

One of the big lies and myths about our money, our resource commitment was, and I'll be very honest here, was the Pentagon's less than transparent budget sleight of hand. What they did was they looted the overseas contingency operations [OCO] account. That was a fraudulent account because they took money that they said was for the Afghan war and for Iraq, but most of it wasn't. It was a supplemental off-budget for the military to spend as it pleased.

One of the first things I did, when I was in Washington in consultations and I met with the Pentagon, I said, "I want a real accounting of how much is being spent on Afghanistan. I don't want to know what we are spending in Bahrain or Egypt or anything that goes OCO [Overseas Contingency Operations/Global War on Terrorism], that goes somewhere else in the Middle East or somewhere else to buy a new weapons system and the like. How much is Afghanistan's balance sheet costing? I know what it cost me in the State Department. I can give you that number transparently, even with the OCO money that we were getting too. I could give you that number." And General Nicholson and I made that point. So, the Pentagon, because they were looting the Afghan account, it was always coming out that we're still spending something like fifty-five billion dollars a year on Afghanistan. That was a big lie. The whole account was less than half that, and that included the whole formula: diplomatic, military, intelligence, and development. So, what does that mean in terms of the U.S. seven-hundred- and fifty-billion-dollar defense bill? We're talking about spending 3 percent of U.S. military expenditures on Afghanistan. My point is that what to do with Afghanistan is way above my level. I was just a measly ambassador. But we were trying to present that to the president, that the strategic decision he was making, this was not 10 percent or 20 percent or 30 percent of U.S. defense outlays, but more like 3 percent. Ultimately, you must look at the value of Afghanistan in terms of our overall security with that outlay, and what we can achieve in terms of blood and treasure.

I went very long because I wanted to emphasize that we did learn our lessons; we did find the sweet spot; we did flip the equation on the Taliban. I spent a good deal of time analyzing the Taliban, and the Taliban is basically a warrior, monk-like cult, a medieval cult of warriors, you know. They have this religious zeal and are essentially warriors. If there's one thing that I learned is the Taliban understand war, and they understand the physics of war. And we gave them a very harsh reality check, and if you started to see the intelligence starting to come out that I was picking out at the end, that within the political structures of the Taliban there was concern. That was point number one. I led the military because that is the center of gravity.

With regards to the political, again, we were able to get the president to buy in, and again, he gave that speech in August of 2017 where he approved and launched the South Asia Strategy on August 21, 2017. And I think it was one of President Trump's finest foreign policy addresses. While he conveyed his frustration with America's longest war, he made the case for staying the course in Afghanistan and then advocated the conditions-based approach, bringing together the diplomatic, military, development, and intelligence pieces. The president made clear the U.S. would no longer stay silent on Pakistan's complicity with the Taliban. And so, one area where President Trump's unorthodox way was very effective was the very brutal way he went after Pakistan and the Pakistani military for their complete failure to cooperate with us. And I can tell you once again, the intelligence I was reading suggested that for the first time since 2001 and 2002, when President Bush told the Pakistanis, "You're either with us or you're against us, and you'll face the consequences." I think for the first time we had their attention once again. They were looking and just like President Ghani and CEO Abdullah were concerned about the Trump factor, which if we could use it to good effect, we had the Pakistanis' attention.

So, what was the premise of the South Asia Strategy, the president's strategy? We understood that there was no military victory to be had. We understood that if the Taliban chose, they could continue a low-intensity insurgence for a long, long time. What we could ensure with a conditions-based approach is that the Taliban had no hope, zero, nil hope of a strategic military victory. Our view is that once the Taliban and its Pakistani patrons understood this fact, they would engage in serious talks with the Afghan government—an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led process that could lead to a political settlement to the conflict. So, there was an understanding. This wasn't like Idiot City that we're going to win this war. We're not going to achieve complete military victory. But we could prevent the Taliban winning, and we could put sufficient pressure on Pakistan. As the president did, we suspended U.S. military assistance. The president sustained a vicious rhetorical attack against the Pakistanis, which was unnerving them. We were taking a regional approach, and more effectively working the region to try to achieve our objectives in Afghanistan within the context of the broader Central South Asia region. We brought in all those elements, and I believe that we were able to shape the conditions. It wasn't going to be in a year, it was going to take several years, but the situation was going to be moving firmly in our favor.

The Afghan-U.S. Compact was a corollary to the administration's South Asia Strategy. And this was H.R. McMaster's proposal. When he came to Afghanistan in April 2017, he discussed it with me. We had long discussions that helped shape the concept, but that was his brainchild. President Ghani and I inaugurated the compact in a meeting on August 23, 2017. The executive committee included CEO Abdullah, Afghan cabinet ministers, General Nicholson, and senior members of our civilian and military teams. The compact provided tangible, programmatic teeth to the U.S. South Asia Strategy. In the first executive committee session, which President Ghani and I co-chaired, the Afghan and U.S. working leads highlighted the completion of the four matrices focusing on governance, economic and development, peace and reconciliation, and security. The governance matrix had a main anticorruption component. I had talked about that; we worked very closely with SIGAR [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan].

Q: SIGAR is the inspector general's special effort in Afghanistan, right?

LLORENS: Correct.

In the area of corruption, there were big ticket items in which we had learned from experience in areas we had failed before. One was the phantom soldiers. General Nicholson was very effective in using digital face technology to eliminate that. The U.S. military advisor could check through digital records of personnel. We finally had a formula, forensics, to be able to begin to really attack the problem of phantom soldiers. Another one which SIGAR had proposed, and we strongly supported, was the creation of a national procurement agency. So, there was an interagency group that would be chaired by President Ghani. Whether we say whether he was honest or not, SIGAR was present. USAID, people in the U.S. and NATO were present so they could monitor the deliberations, so it made the process more transparent, when the procurement decisions were made. That was important. Again, would that have eliminated corruption? No. But it would have made it harder and reduced it, and that was a significant step.

With regards to phantom employees, we were trying to do the same thing on the civilian side working with the UN on the civilian police and with teachers. That was one of our objectives. I'll quickly mention the economics piece, as I mentioned, my goal was to shift the policy approach more to a market-based direction and focus on generating more private sector investment. And I wanted to really emphasize this is a positive of President Trump's thinking. As much as he disliked our presence in Afghanistan, and only reluctantly took the advice of the experts, he always believed and understood as a businessman that Afghanistan was a remarkably rich country in resources. He was very mindful of the massive Afghan mineral wealth. He was very conscious of Afghanistan's rare earth resources like lithium, and very much wanted them to be in American hands. So, this was very much part of the thinking. It was something the administration welcomed when we went to this private sector approach. The president talked about the possibility of being able to break the monopoly of the Chinese in rare earths. Afghanistan was the ideal place since it potentially has the largest lithium reserves in the world, along with Bolivia and Chile. Lamentably, we never had enough time to confirm the true size of lithium and other rare earths deposits in Afghanistan. Again, the compact's economic policy matrix was steeped in interagency initiatives on the trade and investment side. We proposed more active roles for EXIM Bank and OPIC [Overseas Private Investment Corporation]. The new approach was to create incentives and support those market actors in the Afghan economy that were already adding value and attracting new investors, mostly Afghans.

Yes, and of course, the peace and reconciliation matrix underscored that our success was ultimately premised on creating the conditions on the ground for the launch of Afghan-owned and Afghan-led negotiations ultimately leading to a political settlement and an end to the conflict. And again, as I said, finally the security piece had many components, but included giving the commander more tactical control of our residual force and strategically enabling a more capable Afghan military.

How does this end? We had the pieces. We had the right strategic approach. We had the right policy and program components. In the field, the new approach involved the

embassy, USAID, U.S FOR-A, NATO, the EU, and other allied diplomatic missions, as well as the multilateral banks—the IMF, World Bank, and ADB. Everyone was onboard. The IFIs were onboard supporting a more private sector-oriented approach. We were being more effective in going after the counternarcotics in terms of choking the money flow because increasingly over the years the Taliban had emerged as the leading player in the poppy/opium/heroin business in Afghanistan. They had gradually morphed from providing security for the drug lords to becoming the largest single drug lord. They paid farmers to cultivate poppies and had their own opium and heroin labs. They also developed a sophisticated distribution system to move and smuggle the drugs into Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian states. In this regard we were also able to directly target the labs from the air because it was very easy to detect them from the precursor chemical traces. Yes, no doubt, going after the labs and choking the money from the illicit drug trade was a component of the South Asia Strategy.

I will concede that attacking labs created complications related to civilian casualties. Some of these labs were located e in Taliban-controlled villages. The Taliban tried to keep the drug production facilities as close to civilians as possible to dissuade us from targeting them—so that was an issue.

I ended my tour in December, returned to Washington for my debriefings in Washington, and I retired on December 31, 2017. I felt very good about where we were in Afghanistan. I felt that we had the right strategy, the right approach, we'd learned our lessons, we had the Taliban on the run, we could afford our presence, it was sustainable.

Q: Thank you. Before we go to your overall reflections on the overall picture, I wanted to ask a little more about the situation on the ground as you left. The Taliban was on the run? Were they stepping up terrorist attacks to push President Trump the other way, against commitment? Or were there any peace and reconciliation talks going on during the year you were there? What was the dynamic beyond everything that you laid out?

LLORENS: That's a great series of questions. The thinking in the administration, that would include NSA H.R. McMasters, and Secretaries Mattis and Tillerson were to come out with a strategy, have the president buy in on it, and then let the conditions-based approach—the South Asia Strategy—send a very strong message to the Taliban that we were committed to staying in Afghanistan on our terms. So, there was no effort at that time to talk to the Taliban. We were trying to create the conditions on the ground to shape things in our favor and convince the Taliban that they had no chance of winning a strategic victory. Quetta Shura you're not going to plant the Taliban flag in Kabul.

But again, these are good and very relevant questions. When I was there in 2016–17 the Taliban were already adapting to our new approach. And, of course, they will adapt. They're very adaptable. As they felt the pain we inflicted on them, they modified their tactics. We'd caught them out in the open and really hurt them. So, yeah, the real question was to see what they were going to do? And one of their new tactics was to ramp-up terrorist and military strikes in urban areas. They opted to attack Kabul, principally, but also some of the other major cities. Their objective was to bring the war to the elite, right? So, blowing up a hospital, or the front gate of a public ministry are horrible and dastardly acts, but this was not going to bring them a strategic victory. Yet, the Taliban

was ever flexible and adaptable. The Taliban leaders and military commanders were saying how can we inflict pain on them? The Taliban understands war, the physics of war. They were having a very difficult time getting at the U.S. and NATO militaries simply because our footprint was now too small, and the small residual force was based in hardened and pretty secure platforms in Kabul and other places. So, their big targets were civilians, political leaders, senior business people, and the biggest target was the three hundred thousand strong Afghan military. Yet by late 2017 their attacks were more asymmetric and a symptom of their weakness not their strength. They were going back to a more asymmetric mode of fighting in small units and using suicide bombers in urban areas for the purpose of terrorizing the population.

Q: Then things changed later?

LLORENS: I left, I retired. I was asked earlier in the spring April of 2017 whether I would stay on, and they would nominate me as the ambassador. That was discussed with me. And I said, "I made the commitment to Secretary Kerry to close it out for Obama and give the new administration, whether it was Trump or Clinton, one year until the end of 2017." And I had an issue with my mom and dad, who were in their mid-nineties, and I needed to help them, I'd promised I'd be back. So, that was my deal. Yet in that one year we had really turned the tables, and I felt confident.

So, what happened? My view from watching it now from afar was that President Trump never, never really absorbed what we were doing. In my time there, he did give us, "the experts" a chance, but at the end of the day he looked at Afghanistan as part of one of a campaign political commitment to his constituents to end the endless wars. For him the political element was the overriding factor. Deep down he was committed to delivering on his campaign pledge. Honestly, I don't think the president had thought it through very carefully. I don't think he read the material closely or ever really understood with any degree of sophistication what was happening in Afghanistan and what was really at stake. Anyway, that's the impression I had. I'm not trying to belittle him in any way. But I don't have the impression that he did the deep dive that President Bush or President Obama both did on an issue of such national security significance as Afghanistan.

President Trump seemed to base his whole approach on Afghanistan on his own gut feeling. His gut told him this was a screwup from the get-go, and there was no way of getting things right. The president told himself, I listened to the experts, but in the end, he concluded that he was not going to go back to the American people in 2020 and tell them that the endless war is still endless. This tension was always there with Tillerson, with McMaster, with Mattis. Little by little these tensions and disagreements festered and grew and eventually these three officials were forced to leave. Again, as he should, the president has the last word. None of these other people are elected. He's the commander in chief, and he is running the show, and he started taking more control. As he got rid of the experts he was getting less and less resistance because the new people understood it was not a good idea to go into the Oval Office to say, Mr. President, I think this is a mistake. So, things frankly started to go in the wrong direction as the president began to assume full control of the Afghan portfolio, which is his prerogative.

So, as we got into 2018 the South Asia Strategy we had implemented was still in place on paper. General Nicholson's replacement still had the authority to execute his campaign plan in support of the Afghan security forces. Yet, by 2018 it became increasingly clear that the president was not satisfied and that he wanted us out of Afghanistan. So already in 2018, the Pakistanis and the Taliban were beginning to perceive that hey, this may change. And it really did change when the president appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad on September 5, 2018, to be his Afghan envoy.

And with the appointment of an envoy, the main decision made was to engage the Taliban in direct negotiations. This is something we had refused to do from day one, so it was almost a cardinal element of our approach to Afghanistan. Because the Taliban had always said, "We don't need to talk to the government of Afghanistan. The government of Afghanistan is completely illegitimate. It is a puppet of the United States and its allies. The only people we need to talk about resolving the problem of Afghanistan is the United States of America. And that's it." And we'd always supported the allied government in Kabul, and this is a government that was recognized by every country in the world, in the UN, China, Russia, Cuba, everyone. And so, for us, the legitimacy of this government was a linchpin of our diplomatic strategy. The moment the president gave the greenlight to Ambassador Khalilzad to negotiate directly with the Taliban and cut out the Afghan government, this was the beginning of the end. At that point we began to enter the betrayal phase of our involvement in Afghanistan.

Q: Betrayal?

LLORENS: Yes, there were several phases in our twenty-year involvement in Afghanistan. At the beginning it was the liberation phase, followed by the bogging down, and then the surge, followed by the Afghanization phase, the brief South Asia Strategy phase, and finally the betrayal. The betrayal began right when Ambassador Khalilzad became the senior official running Afghanistan policy with strong support from President Trump. Within a month of his September 2018 appointment, that is in October 2018, Khalilzad held his first bilateral meeting with his counterpart, Mullah Baradar, and a Taliban Political Commission delegation in Qatar. From late 2018 until early 2020, nine negotiating sessions were held. As we all know, on February 28, 2020, Ambassador Khalilzad, and Mullah Baradar, inked this U.S.-Taliban Agreement. And I can tell you, in my thirty-six years in the Foreign Service, I was involved in many negotiations, dealt with a lot of agreements, and helped wordsmith treaties. I'm going to be very honest that this was the worst agreement I ever saw in my thirty-six years of diplomatic work. When I read the text, I could not believe it because it was not an agreement so much as a U.S. capitulation to the Taliban—yes, a surrender. Because if you read the text closely it has one clear black and white element, and that was the complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, fifteen months later. Within the terms of the total U.S. withdrawal are a very specific calendar of the phased withdrawal of U.S. forces ending with a zeroing out in May 2021. That is capitulation because if you read the other elements of the agreement, and the agreement mentions the Taliban's relationship to al Qaeda, there is text on mitigation of violence, and some language on Taliban talks with the Afghan government and civil society representatives. However, if you read those

other parts, it is all mush, gray, and vague. The one clear and unequivocal element is the total and complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces by a date certain, May 1, 2021.

What does the agreement say? Does it say the Taliban are going to break relations with al Qaeda? No. The Taliban will act to the best of their ability to make sure that their allies, al Qaeda, don't attack us again. Well, they could have told us that back in 2001. The Taliban would have said that if we would have asked them back then. Mitigation of violence? What does that mean? Ceasefires? Is there anything concrete like there'll be a ceasefire on September 30, 2020, in the province of Kunduz? It's nothing like that. It is all a vague mention that reducing violence would be a good thing, but in practical terms it means nothing. The issue of the Taliban's willingness to hold some kind of discussions is that and no more. It doesn't say for what purpose? There's no timeline. There is no delineation of the issues to be discussed and resolved. There's nothing. This was a capitulation, a surrender agreement that Ambassador Khalilzad signed following the president's directive that he wanted us out of Afghanistan hell or high water. By the way, note that Secretary of State Pompeo was not willing to sign the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. He was not foolish enough to put his name to a deal that meant a U.S. surrender.

By the way, between the signing of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement on February 28, 2020, and through the rest of that year what were the practical results on the ground? From the intelligence that was available, there was no evidence of a decoupling between the Taliban and al Qaeda. With regards to mitigation of violence, the exact opposite. The moment the Taliban concluded the agreement they realized they had us. They had us, they'd won. It was just a matter of time. And so, they ramped up their military operations. And if you just go back and follow what happened in 2020, you see the Taliban intensifying the military campaign both in terms of attacks against the Afghan military and the terrorist attacks in Kabul and other urban areas. There was no/no mitigation of violence as vaguely mentioned in the Khalilzad Agreement. Yes, they didn't target the U.S. and NATO militaries, since after all we're not going to bother you, since you are in the process of withdrawing, and we will let you leave and abandon Afghanistan in peace. Yes, and once you are gone, we'll take care of the business and go for the final knock-out punch, which is exactly what they did.

And then, finally, yes, they did agree to meet for talks with the Afghan Peace Commission [that included Afghan government officials and other non-governmental players] and the Taliban Political Commission; however, there never was any substantive discussion about a political settlement or peace. The only discussions held in Doha related to establishing the modalities of the discussions. It was all talking about talks and there was no serious substantive exchange. And I can tell you, because I worked on the reconciliation account in 2012 and 2013 and know many people who were key members of the Afghan commission, which was a combination of government and others, because the Taliban refused to talk directly to just the Afghan government. In the Afghan reconciliation commission were other member of the political class, and civil society representatives But I can tell you that I was told by people I trust that I worked with and participated in the Afghan government-Taliban talks that the Taliban made very clear to them from the very beginning that the only thing that they were going to negotiate was their surrender, and nothing more. The Taliban representative told the Kabul Afghans,

"Look what you are negotiating here is your surrender. We're not going to kill you, but you will surrender. The Americans are leaving, they're gone," so again there were no serious discussions held. The beginning of the collapse of the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces, the ANDSF, began with the U.S. decision to talk to the Taliban and exclude our allies in Kabul, it got infinitely worse with the signing of this capitulation agreement, and the process of betrayal was accelerated with its implementation.

If you look back, what made things worse was President Trump's cynical politicization of Afghanistan for his own electoral ends. Remember, we lost some of our best people in this fight. We lost twenty-five hundred of America's best, and tens of thousands had their lives shattered, ruined. And President Trump made Afghanistan a ploy in his 2020 reelections campaign. President Trump went way beyond what his own government had negotiated with the Taliban and spoke about bringing home all our troops by Christmas 2020. That was cynical. The secretary of defense resigned over that to his credit. And the only reason why we didn't completely withdraw by December of 2020 is because the joint chiefs of staff were able to make the case to the president that trying to withdraw so rapidly could result in a catastrophic situation for our military and we might lose people, in Saigon-like panic. So, that was the only reason we were able to keep twenty-five hundred troops. That said twenty-five hundred troops was an untenable number. There was no way we could stay in Afghanistan with only twenty-five hundred troops, so President Trump had created a very dangerous situation for our people—military and civilian—on the ground in Afghanistan.

Now, when I was in Afghanistan in 2016–17 General Nicholson and his team did a lot of work on what would be the minimal number of U.S. forces that you need to be able to maintain our presence, minimally. And the number was eighty-five hundred troops. Remember I gave you that? Six thousand advisors, twenty-five hundred special forces. And it was agreed in the interagency review, although we did plus up that number in 2017 by a couple of thousand more. So again, twenty-five hundred was not a sustainable number. So, when the president left office, he had left our military and civilians in an untenable situation. That is what President Biden inherited.

So, the Afghans in Kabul understood President Trump's intention to abandon and betray them. But then, with Biden' election, there was still a chance, very late in the day, to salvage the situation. Very soon I think it was in February, a couple of weeks after taking office, President Biden announced a policy review regarding what to do about Afghanistan. Now, I am here at home in Marco Island, Florida. I was extremely worried because I knew from my previous assignments in Afghanistan that Vice President Biden was the most skeptical senior official in the Obama administration about Afghanistan. From day one he had continuously advised President Obama against the surge and advocated cutting our losses and getting out. Based on my past knowledge of his views, I was pretty convinced he intended to complete the withdrawal, and that is exactly how it played out.

Yes, Vice President Biden genuinely convened an interagency review. He allowed people to give their honest opinion and they did. But the reality is that President Biden had already made his decision long before to withdraw and nothing was going to alter his

view. He did the review because as an experienced bureaucrat he wanted to be seen as conducting a professional process. Yet the reality was that this was a foregone conclusion, and this was a decision he had made many, many, many years ago. Look, I have a lot of respect for President Biden. I've known him for many years since he was a senator. I'm an old Central America hand from the crisis years of the 1980s, and he was a big critic of the Reagan administration's policy on Central America. To his credit, Senator Biden knew his brief and understood the substance of foreign policy. As you know, he served on the Foreign Relations Committee since 1973, right? Nine years before I was in the Foreign Service. In the '80s he was a critic of Reagan, but he was always a constructive critic, he was not a rock thrower. He had vast experience. If you think about the U.S. presidents with the most foreign policy experience, they are certainly Richard Nixon, George H.W Bush, whether you like these people or not, and President Biden. Their resumes were the strongest, I think. Yet, one thing that Trump and Biden agreed on was that Afghanistan had been a disaster and we needed to withdraw immediately.

But I'm going to tell you what I believe. I have a lot of people that I know in government who work on U.S.-Afghan policy. The president did this policy review in which he allowed people to say whatever they wanted. There's no liability because President Biden's a good man, he is not going to penalize you for disagreeing with him. And I can tell you that the advice that was given by the senior military and senior professional diplomats was overwhelmingly that the administration should not leave Afghanistan. They advised strongly against cutting and running. And even when it became very clear that that's the direction that the president was committed to, the position of the senior military and senior professional diplomats was that at the very least, if you're going to leave, that you hold off on making the decision—that you don't carry it out until the end of the calendar year. The view from the experts was that in agreeing to withdraw, President Biden was validating the Trump agreement with the Taliban. The only difference was that you were moving it back six months or so. The president could have said, look, I just got here. I agree with Trump's agreement, but I can't simply leave. I just got here, and I need a bit more information. I am committed to zeroing out American troops by December 31, 2021, but I would like to have a bit more discussion and understanding of what's going on in the other parts of the agreement. I just don't have a good handle. Where are we on al Qaeda-Taliban relations? Where are we mitigation of violence? Where are we in talks between the Taliban and the political class in Kabul? I just need more information and determine if the agreement is being faithfully implemented by all sides as a prerequisite to complete the full U.S. withdrawal. The president could have taken the advice given by the professionals of either not withdrawing, or if he made the decision to withdraw, he should pause for six to seven months. Seems reasonable.

So, the facts are that the military and diplomatic professionals advised against withdrawal, but when rejected suggested pausing the decision until the end of 2021. President Biden is the commander in chief, and as is his prerogative he ignored the advice of the experts and made the fateful decision on April 14 ordering a complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces by September 2021. Well, once this decision was made, everything else is history. For me and my closest colleagues including most of the former ambassadors to

Afghanistan, most of us believed that the president's decisions would result in the eventual collapse of the Afghan government.

Now, where we were wrong, all of us, including our military colleagues, retired and in government and the professional diplomats in the State Department, and in the intelligence community were never predicting it would all collapse by August 15. None of us predicted that in a matter of a couple of months it would all come crashing down. My assessment was the Taliban already had the military initiative. The disappearance of the U.S. air contingent, the special forces and the advisors, which were a very small resource commitment but had strategic effects on the battlefield would result in the Afghan military eventually unraveling. But I didn't think it would be that quick. I predicted that by the end of the fighting season of 2021 the Taliban would either have seized several provincial capitals, would be threatening multiple provincial capitals, and would be beginning to surround and siege Kabul. And then my personal view was by the start of the fighting season in 2022, spring/summer, that decisive battles would be fought and likely cause the collapse of the Afghan Army and the government. I didn't see the Afghan government surviving beyond 2022, but obviously, I was wrong. This happened much earlier.

And so I don't want to really get into a discussion of what a disaster it was, that this was Saigon to the power of ten, because no one saw it coming. You can blame the president, but no one really saw this happening in August. So, if the fight had lasted until the next summer it wouldn't have been as bad, whether you're talking about SIVs or whether you're talking about the manner in which the government collapsed, the economic dislocation probably would have been less.

Q: Yeah. I wanted to follow up on one thing just to make sure I understood. Did you say that by the time Biden came in there were only twenty-five hundred troops?

LLORENS: Twenty-five hundred U.S. troops, yes.

Q: So, the air contingent, et cetera, had already left?

LLORENS: No, the air contingent was mostly still there. General Miller was an excellent field commander. He was a Special Forces guy. And I think that when he saw that President Trump was accelerating the withdrawal faster than the U.S.-Taliban Agreement, he made the decision to try to keep the special forces component and as much of the air as he could for as long as he could. And what he did is he zeroed out the advisors, okay? That's a debatable argument if you talk to some other military officers. Some other military with a different background would have kept some special forces, maybe a thousand, and some advisors as well.

Q: Okay. The reason I'm asking is because in the news, if I recall correctly, Biden said that he asked the military if they could stay longer, and they said they would need more troops in order to keep it safe.

LLORENS: Correct, correct.

Q: And that's consistent with what you said, the twenty-five hundred.

LLORENS: Correct. He's right. But remember, what we would be talking about, I think, would be what do you need to get back. It would be basically going back to the formula that had been studied for years and years and years, which was that eighty-five hundred number, which was the minimum that you needed with the air contingent to successfully stay in Afghanistan and accomplish the mission. That is eighty-five hundred including special forces, the air contingent and the advisors. Now, the point the president made is that going back to those numbers would have meant going back to a rock 'em, sock 'em war. I disagree.

Q: Okay.

LLORENS: The way our people were deployed, they were not in harm's way. The combat aircraft and the special forces would still be used. There may have been some more casualties. President Trump left us in a very precarious situation. I would say casualties would have gone up in the short-term. To stabilize the battlefield, it might have required more intense use of special forces and more intense bombing. But it would have been nothing like the surge. We would have had a minimal footprint and we would have caught the Taliban even more out in the open, even more out in the open. It would have been a killing zone—a turkey shoot like 2001. Remember, all the bases were still there, as were all our NATO allies. So, President Biden made his decision, and it had catastrophic consequences, and he far more than President Trump must be held accountable and bear the lion's share of the responsibility.

Q: Right.

LLORENS: Bottom line: you have two presidents that at the end of the day, in my view, made strategic blunders of catastrophic proportions. It was a one-two punch that resulted in a cataclysmic result. This is where I'm going to close.

I am going to go back to what I told you earlier in the interview. When asked at the highest level of the Trump administration on my recommendations for achieving victory, I responded that they should concentrate less on what victory looks like and more on analyzing the consequences of a U.S. defeat. What does defeat look like? The first point I always made was that the collapse of the U.S. and NATO position in Afghanistan would first result in a dramatic humanitarian crisis. That is point number one. Number two, it would undermine America's security and that of our allies because it would embolden jihadists, not only in Afghanistan, but around the world. It would prove their point that the United States and the West did not have the stomach for a sustained struggle, long-term struggle against international terrorism. And it would embolden them, and that would have tangible consequences in making us less safe. And finally, and the third point, that there would be serious geopolitical consequences. Look at the humanitarian situation. Since the collapse on August 15, Afghanistan's GDP [gross domestic product] has collapsed 50 percent. The UN World Food Program studies are showing that of a population of thirty-two million people, twenty million or more are not getting the necessary caloric intake of a human being. It's slow starvation, millions of young kids are starving to death in Afghanistan. GDP declined by 50 percent. A collapse in agricultural production, the collapse of the health system. Then, you're talking about the political

side. Women have gone back to 1996. Girls are not allowed to study. Women are being erased from Afghan society. They have no rights or presence. They're locked up at home.

This idea of having somewhat of an inclusive government is not to be. The Taliban is completely in control. It's a very narrow, rural Pashtun leadership that represents a very narrow constituency. The rest of the Afghans, the Tajiks, the Hazaras, the Uzbeks have been marginalized. Women have been disenfranchised, as have urban Afghans. This is the political, social, and economic toll, a humanitarian debacle. From our security standpoint, thousands of the most hardcore terrorists in the world, of all the groups, including ISIS-K, have been released. The prisons have been emptied. Afghanistan today is Terrorism, Inc. They're all out and they're there. The Taliban has been able to seize billions and billions of dollars of highly sophisticated U.S. and NATO military equipment. They can't use it all. The Taliban cannot use it all. A lot of this weaponry is going to go to our enemies. It is going to be turned over to Iran. Other people are going to acquire them. And it's going to go to terrorist groups and these terrorist groups have been emboldened and they will reconstitute, and they will knock on our door again. That's my view, although I hope I'm wrong.

I was very happy to see the Zawahiri strike. President Biden showed great judgment in ordering the strike against him. But again, that's kind of a pre-September 11, 2001, situation. We've gone back to that where, for international terrorism, Afghanistan is ungoverned space.

And then finally, my last point would be the geopolitical impact. I always believed that the defeat of the United States with all its allies, not alone like in Vietnam, but supported by all of our NATO allies, as well as the Australians and the South Koreans, everyone. Our defeat would send the exact wrong signals to China, and it could have longer term consequences in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan. It would send the wrong signals to Iran with regards to nuclear weapons. It would send the wrong signals to North Korea with regards to our commitment to security in the Northeast Pacific. And it would send a signal to Russia as well.

Now, I'm in no way suggesting that Afghanistan has anything to do with President Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. But I will say this: I can't help but connect the dots with regards to the timing of the invasion happening less than six months after the dramatic collapse of the U.S. and NATO position in Afghanistan. That I don't believe is a coincidence. President Putin is not an idiot. He is someone who's taking in information that we provide him. Every day through our actions we give him a lot of information. Yes, we dumped a load of information for him to think about in the weak manner we responded to his invasion of the Crimea. No doubt Germany's disarmament during the nearly twenty years Chancellor Merkel badly led her nation, and her cultivation of the closest trade, investment and energy ties between Germany and other EU nations with Putin's Russia. I mean, on and on and on. But Afghanistan sent messages to him as well. And my view is that, again, Ukraine has nothing to do with Afghanistan. I mean, Putin's view on Ukraine that it should be part of a greater Russia has its own historic dynamic. However, I have no doubt that both Biden and Trump's weakness in Afghanistan sent a message to Putin that maybe if I kick the door down in Ukraine, the West's response

would also be weak. Ukraine will collapse, and the West will do nothing. They are weak, you know. That, I think, was somewhere in his mind.

I remember a meeting I had with General H.R. McMaster in April of 2017 when it was his first visit to Kabul as national security advisor. He stayed with us as our guest in the ambassador's residence. We spent a lot of time together. We talked about a lot of things. I remember having breakfast one morning, I think it was his final morning. This is, I think, an important point. He said, "Hugo, if we ever get it wrong in Afghanistan, if ever we get it all wrong in Afghanistan, hopefully we won't, and I think we can put the pieces right and we can flip this." But he said, "If we ever get it wrong, I want you to read a book, and it's a book called *Strange Defeat* by a French historian by the name of Marc Bloch." Marc Bloch was a very prominent French historian and wrote *the* book on how France, who in 1940, had the most powerful land army on the planet, was defeated in just six weeks by the German Blitzkrieg. Bloch describes it in great technical detail, all the elements of the hubris and the bureaucratic dysfunctionality and the collapse of the will to fight, and their spirit, and how the battle was lost almost before it began. It was a political factor. It's hard reading, by the way, but brilliant work. But he said, "I want you to read that because it's all there. It'll have been all there." So, when this all collapsed, I was back home in Marco Island, and General McMaster is a very good friend of mine, and I called him and I said, "I'm going to read the book." I've read the book and it's all there. And it's a story about something that didn't have to happen. I know people look at it like this was all inevitable, as something that was just absolutely an inevitability. By the way, I'm not suggesting that the French could have necessarily defeated the Wehrmacht, but the way this six-week campaign unfolded is what the strange defeat is all about. H.R. McMaster is not only a great warrior, but he's a great scholar, and I think Strange Defeat should be required reading at FSI [Foreign Service Institute].

Q: Thank you. You talked about the military decisions and the decision to negotiate with the Taliban. Did you want to add anything on politics?

LLORENS: I went very quickly over my understanding of President Trump appointing Ambassador Khalilzad. You had nine negotiating sessions. You had the U.S.-Taliban Agreement, and my criticism of that and everything that flowed from there. I thought there was another huge mistake. Remember early on I told you that my view, one of the things I think I learned early on in Afghanistan, which was valid all through my entire experience, was my conviction that holding good elections was a key political element to getting you on the road to peace. And the holding of free and fair elections, or the best elections that you could possibly have, would lead to the establishment of a government that had popular legitimacy. Reasonably credible elections were one of the most important things that could be done to give strength and legitimacy to the Afghan government, and a strong and viable government was essential to negotiate and facilitate a process that could lead to a political settlement.

One of the key mistakes that the Trump administration made in that 2018–2019 period was following Khalilzad's disastrous thesis that elections were not important. In my tenure in Afghanistan, we had worked very hard in reforming the election laws and putting in place the pieces for more credible elections. We were able to come to agreement on voting machines with forensics—so you could connect the individual voter

and dramatically reduce fraud. The reforms would ensure the end of the paper ballot and the Mayor Daley-like stuffing of ballots and so on. And so, this was a really a major step forward. A big part of my political work was laying the groundwork for the holding of good elections. This took years of work, and involved the U.S., but everyone, the UN, the Germans, the EU, and the Brits, we were all in this together.

Well, Khalilzad didn't care about the elections. He didn't care. And by not caring about the elections he was basically saying, this Afghan Constitution and the whole system is a joke not worth preserving. What he was advocating in September—and the elections were scheduled for September of 2019—he was trying to get an interim government established. Think about that. He was basically saying, your political system's a complete joke. It's not serious. It's completely bankrupt. The result was that the Afghan elections rather than becoming an opportunity for us contributed to our failure, and totally undermined all the good people in Afghanistan who genuinely wanted a more democratic and freer Afghanistan. So, I believe the Trump administration's lack of focus on holding reasonably credible elections, I mean, all they were doing was undermining our Afghan allies and proving the Taliban that what had been created was not worth saving. The point being that Khalilzad's efforts to create an interim government literally on the eve of the general elections of 2019 showed his total disdain for the political process in Afghanistan. These were our friends. Yes, they were dysfunctional, there was corruption, all that. But the system in place was infinitely better than anything the Taliban had to offer. Just look at what things look like in Afghanistan now.

The result was that in the absence of serious international oversight, there were problems with that election. I'll be very frank; I don't believe Ghani won. I don't believe Ghani got 50.2 percent in the first round. If you look at the forensics, he came up short. We should have insisted on the holding of a second round. Anyway, Khalilzad's mistake opened the door for a power grab. That's my own view. Khalilzad didn't care because he was not interested in preserving the constitutional system created with broad international support nearly twenty years earlier. So, the poor election result precipitated an even worse political crisis. But Khalilzad was no longer interested in fixing that problem. He was mistakenly focused on rushing the Taliban into the government rather than creating a more viable and representative government in Kabul that could act with some legitimacy to negotiate a political settlement.

Q: Was this just a division of labor, in which Khalizad was working on peace and reconciliation and our ambassador was working on the elections?

LLORENS: Yes, Ambassador Ross was nominally working the elections, but the senior policy person was completely undermining it by seeking to create an interim government on the very eve of the election. How does that happen?

What I'm saying is what was the result? You had a disastrous Afghan election which precipitated a severe political crisis in Kabul. On February 29, 2020 Khalilzad signed the U.S.-Taliban Agreement, which was a capitulation, and in March you had the circus of two presidential inaugurations. Imagine that! Ghani had his inauguration; Abdullah had his inauguration. That would never have happened in the Bush administration, and never would have happened in the Obama administration. That would not have happened. If we

had been on the ball and made the right assumptions this election would have gone to a second round, as it clearly needed to, and then the result would have been a clearer result and allow for the political class in Kabul to pull together at such a critical moment for the nation. Granted, much fewer people voted in the 2019 election because of the security situation and because it was harder to get electronic voter IDs. So, in the end a significantly smaller number of people voted, I believe 1.8 million, but the result was pretty accurate, except that something like three hundred thousand paper ballots—that were illegally tallied and 99 percent for Ghani tipped the election in his favor. You had the hairy hand coming in at the end.

We should never have allowed that to happen. Secretary Kerry or President Obama or Hillary Clinton or President Bush or Secretary Powell or Secretary Rice, they would have been all over that election because it was important. We understood the strategic importance of these elections—at the very cusp of possible negotiations with the Taliban. If done right there would have been a second round, and we could have had a credible result. We would have had a government that I wouldn't have called the Government of National Unity, it would have been a Government of National Salvation that needed to include not only Ghani's people and Abdullah's people, but it would have required the representation of all the political actors. A government broad enough in its representation that would have been in a strong position to negotiate with the Taliban, assuming we had stuck with the South Asia Strategy's conditions-based approach.

I remember in my last Wednesday meeting with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah at the end of 2017, I said, "The one message I'm going to give you for the future, political advice, is that it doesn't matter who wins the election. There will still need to be some coalition government. You may not like what I'm saying, but that's my advice as a friend. Winston Churchill was the most conservative Tory in the Tory party's parliamentary delegation and Clement Attlee was one of the most left-wing of Labour, but they faced an existential threat, and they joined together in a coalition government for the entire war. So, you're going to need to do it. I don't care who wins." So, that was my final advice. Again, if we had stuck to that, they would have understood.

Q: So, in 2021, when the Taliban was advancing, it was Ghani that was fully in charge of the military and the response?

LLORENS: Remember, a big component of the officer corps are Tajiks, the old Northern Alliance people, very loyal to Dr. Abdullah. What happened was ridiculous. How could we allow that to happen? How could we allow Kabul to fracture? Even if I had agreed, which I didn't, with the U.S.-Taliban talks, which I thought as a betrayal, but even if I did, I would have wanted to ensure that we got the very best outcome out of those elections and create this Government of National Salvation that would have been there to engage the Taliban. Because the fact that it didn't happen showed the complete ineptitude on our side. I'm a pretty old-fashioned orthodox diplomat, but in this forum, I believe I owe it to our Foreign Service colleagues and give them my brutally honest impressions, which is that this was all an example of complete, total ineptitude and irresponsibility of the highest degree.

Q: So, one more question for you. The thing that we were all surprised by was how the military seemed to collapse so quickly though we had seen something like that in Iraq in 2014. So, what was your point of view from the sidelines—knowing the country well—about what happened in 2021?

LLORENS: That's a good question, and as I told you, I was also surprised by the result. I would have expected that the Afghan military would have performed somewhat better. I don't think any of us from the outside could fully appreciate until later what was really happening on the ground in Afghanistan. Maybe you would have had to be there to understand what I was talking about. Just like the French Army's collapse in 1940, the psychological and spiritual blow was so great that it resulted in a total collapse in the force.

But from talking to some U.S. military a little bit, I also learned that the loss of the U.S. air support was key. When the air vanished, we pulled out. By July the U.S. and NATO air in Afghanistan was all gone. The contractors were gone, so even the Afghan Air Force was not getting up in the air. We had trained the Afghan military like U.S. and NATO forces, and they had been trained to fight with air as an element in the fight. So, air for what purpose? I described it a little bit earlier on when I was talking about the 2017 model, the military model that we implemented as part of n the South Asia Strategy. But maybe in a broader sense the air was important for several reasons. Yes, air as ground fire support as I described it, right? Air also as a source of intelligence. An aircraft could fly over the battlefield and tell the Afghan military, hey, you have a Taliban unit three kilometers to your southeast, these are the fire coordinates. We're giving the Ukrainians now in Russia, right now, some of the same assistance on the location of Russian forces to devastating effect. The air piece not only gave you fire support but were the eyes in the sky. This is something the Taliban didn't have, but the Afghan military always had: ground support, eyes from the sky, air for resupply, air for casevac.

If you give some careful thought to the problems facing the Afghan military, the key issues were relatively weak leadership in the professional officer corps and weak logistics. We provided some logistic support from the air and the Afghans were gradually getting better at supplying themselves by ground. But for those units that were out in very remote areas—you remember the Afghan military was deployed everywhere. They were trying to protect all their people. So, you had two hundred and three hundred Afghan soldiers in a remote valley somewhere hanging on. They'd been hanging out there for years since we left. They've been hanging there since 2014. But what would happen? There would be a NATO aircraft that could supply them with ammunition, food, and water. And from one moment to the next—and this has been described by people I've talked to, Afghans who I know suddenly, no more bullets, no more food. Those young men, eighteen-year-old boys, put on a backpack, and they just said, I'm going. We've been betrayed. There's nothing here. And they literally put their backpacks on and walked back to their home villages. That's what they did and that's how it started to cascade. It started to cascade in units in the fringes when the logistics dried up completely. There was no logistics.

And then they started coming. Think of the French Army, on the run, in a panic, and they're seeing them, and then the bigger units and then it was a cascade like the French

Army. So, that's what we were not able to appreciate. So, the complete vanishing of the air support, the advisors, and the special forces, all gone in a matter of two months. That's the betrayal in its final and crudest form. You know, there's nothing more demoralizing to a military unit than having your brother or sister in arms wounded and having them just die around you, you know? So, one of the key aspects of military morale was providing some basic medevac for seriously wounded people. If a NATO aircraft comes in, bring you back to a hospital so you have a fighting chance. And even if that person dies, he's off the battlefield. So, those would be the four air elements, groundfire, intelligence, logistics supply, and medevac. As the combat became intense those soldiers were dying a horrible death. There was no medical assistance at all there.

Q: And as we just discussed, the political situation was different in 2021 than when you had been there. There was no longer a coalition government. Is that right?

LLORENS: It was broken. It's a question you should ask Ambassador Wilson since he knows best. But on that, remember, it just changed so quickly. Look, if the U.S. infantry, British infantry, which is some of the best infantry in the world had to fight in Afghanistan with the topography being what it is without air, yes, we would do considerably better than the Afghans, but we would still find it very difficult. We're just not geared to do that.

The Afghan military was twenty years old, and it had all the dysfunctionalities and so on. But without air for those purposes that I described, our military, the best infantry in the world, the American and British infantry would—it would not be a happy time for them, okay? So, I think we have this appreciation, again, like the French in 1940, that the Afghans were just a bunch of cowards or something. That is dead wrong and a big lie!

Q: And I think we will end here. Thank you very much for this informative discussion.

End of interview