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AMBASSADOR P. MICHAEL MCKINLEY

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INTERVIEW

Q: Good morning. It is February fourth, 2022, and we are continuing our conversation with Ambassador Mike McKinley. And Mike, we left off when you were getting ready to go to Kabul as deputy ambassador in September of 2013, I believe.

MCKINLEY: That's right.

Q: And the ambassador there was?

MCKINLEY: James Cunningham who had been our deputy representative at USUN and also ambassador to Israel and a very experienced professional.

I don't think I've explained the deputy ambassador structure. It was in place, uniquely in the world, only in Baghdad and Afghanistan because of the need to have people at a higher rank than a deputy chief of mission to interact with the outsize U.S. military presence, with host government officials who were used to dealing with ambassadors, and under secretaries and cabinet secretaries who visited on a regular basis. Persons who had been ambassadors were drafted in for the number two, three, four positions in the embassies. There were no DCMs really, only deputy ambassadors—three or four of them to complement the ambassador. There was a first among equals which is what I was when I arrived, but it's fair to say it was a team approach because there was so much work.

I very quickly came to the conclusion that it was not necessary to have this structure. You empower your deputies and you make sure they're senior enough as officers. And if they happen to have been ambassadors before, that's a good thing. But to formalize it and have this array of titles walking around the mission, created a certain element of confusion, and depending on personalities, also created unnecessary turf battles. It was an experiment worth trying, certainly not worth formalizing again in the next crisis.

Q: Who was the team then?

MCKINLEY: We had two additional ambassadors when I arrived. By that stage, there were also senior persons who were not formally ambassadors but treated as such. One I had enormous respect for ran the assistance portfolio, Ken Yamashita out of USAID. And one of the best people I've worked with. He had such authority, knowledge, and ability.

Kabul was then our biggest embassy in the world, and the figures shifted constantly, but we had, when I arrived, according to my efficiency report, twelve hundred direct hire and TDY personnel and five thousand contractors, and almost a thousand locally employed staff.

I came in as the number two, thinking I would be there for one year. And the key issue at that time was the military drawdown that was underway. We had at one point over a hundred thousand American troops there into I think mid-2011 as part of a surge of troops that was ordered after 2009 to respond to the Taliban increasingly challenging the government and Kabul itself—notwithstanding the generalized impression that they had been largely marginalized in the first years of our engagement inside the country. The situation became serious in 2008 and 2009, leading to the surge. But by the time I got there, President Obama had long made the decision that the drawdown should begin.

We were at about seventy thousand plus troops when I arrived, and the objective was to bring them down to ten thousand by January 2015. And part of this was setting up the legal framework for our troops which would remain, through a bilateral security agreement or BSA, which we have in many other countries. It was a period in which there were going to be elections in which there would be the first democratic transfer of power from one president to another in Afghanistan's history, because Karzai, the president, was finishing off his second term and was proscribed from running a third time.

In the fall and into December/January, President Karzai, who was no friend of the United States, saw an opportunity to change the dynamic, both for the drawdown and for a continued U.S. troop presence, by dragging out the negotiations on the bilateral security agreement, which were largely being led by the Pentagon with support from State.

It was also a period when the U.S. Congress and others were questioning what our objectives going forward were to be in Afghanistan. These periodic cycles of doubt would surface over twenty years, this was one of those.

And Karzai just started going after us very publicly and did everything he could to stop the BSA from being signed to include convening a large gathering, what was known as a Loya Jirga, bringing together elders, and political figures from around the country for essentially a consultation on the big issues of the day with an end goal of deciding/endorsing approaches to policy. Karzai certainly thought that he was in a position to use the Loya Jirga to block the signature of the BSA.

That was what Karzai was lobbying for, and that's what we were lobbying against to include meeting with influential Afghan leaders to influence Karzai. Senators like McCain, Levin, Graham, came in to reinforce the importance of the BSA for the continued American military presence in the country. Other than Karzai, I think it's fair to say that most of the political leadership of the country realized that the departure of American troops was not in the interest of stability in Afghanistan. Moreover, it could have a knock-on impact on everything from assistance levels to the battlefield. Our allies in the international security arena, dozens of countries, were weighing in with Karzai to try to influence him as well.

We did go through the drama of the Loya Jirga, which we partly attended as observers, and in the end Karzai lost. The atmosphere in Washington, however, at the time was of increasing frustration and frankly, in some corridors of "well, the hell with Afghanistan." Karzai's tactics on the BSA did not help things.

I learned from Ambassador Cunningham and had the opportunity to work with the first of three American military commanders in Afghanistan during my time, in this case, General Dunford who went on to become joint chiefs of staff under Trump. The issues included what to present to Washington in terms of strategies for moving forward, staying the course. We never did a arrive at a signature of a BSA under Karzai, but we arrived at a soft landing in which it was understood in Washington that the best approach was to await the outcome of coming general elections in Afghanistan in 2014 and hope that the next president would move smartly on signing it, before pulling the plug on the relationship of Afghanistan to the United States.

Ambassador McKinley with General Dunford

There was also very significant debate about what troop levels should be by 2015 with civilian Washington skeptical of what the military was proposing. So was I, and the numbers seemed to shift not in relation to battlefield realities but what the Washington policy environment could be convinced to accept. It was an unappealing process, and which ultimately failed to define a bottom line.

Q: What did Karzai want? Did he want U.S. troops out or did he want them to stay in greater numbers, but without the BSA?

MCKINLEY: He wanted us out.

Q: Because of the drone attacks and things like that?

MCKINLEY: Partly. Karzai for years had been focused on the number of civilians killed. In the early months I was there, there were incidents, which we ended up acknowledging responsibility for, but I do believe that our approach to acknowledging civilian casualties has been problematic, whether it's Iraq, whether it's drone attacks in Somalia, whether it's Afghanistan and other conflicts.

Let me be clear that I am not criticizing the use of drones or other forms of attack. Civilian casualties are tragic, but when you're dealing with enemies on the field, who use civilians to hide within cities, use children as shields, you're facing an almost intractable question of when to use force in the context of an ongoing war when that enemy is trying to kill you and your allies, and committing terrorist attacks against civilians too.

Deciding to use drones is a tough call but often correct. But there's also mistakes. My belief, which hardened over the three years I was in Kabul, was that it was always important to admit mistakes up front. The tendency instead was to launch an investigation, and only months later have a clear picture of what had happened. Being transparent in war is so important to the credibility of what you are trying to do.

Anyways, drone strikes were a problem with Karzai.

Q: That was a big issue. Other interviewees of mine have said he was actually getting quite fixated on it, I think.

MCKINLEY: Yes. There are cases, and I'm not going to remember them exactly, and they made a very deep impression on him. Any of us working in wars have been aware of what death is and what unwanted, unplanned deaths are. They are tragic.

Q: Okay. Just to make sure, the elections were when?

MCKINLEY: So, the first round in April of 2014.

Q: In May and June of 2014, ISIS started making really huge inroads in Iraq and started highlighting the problems of U.S. troops having left. That may be jumping ahead too much, but I remember that having a big impact on what we did in Afghanistan.

MCKINLEY: It was so clear that the speed of the drawdown was driven by Iraq and the need to focus on the Persian Gulf area and to send assets to that region. As 2014 turned into 2015 and the war against ISIS in Iraq became an existential one, what became evident to me was that our military was stretched.

And I think this is a debate which continues to this day, how many wars can we fight at once? And what kind of equipment do we have to have at our disposal? What kind of conflicts do we engage in? And there are no easy answers to that. I certainly thought that if we were going to continue to be supportive of the Afghan military, there was a point of drawdown beyond which we could not go, but that was a debate that went on for the entire time I was there.

I'll start by focusing on internal issues. Very much in the news right now is special immigrant visa [SIV] processing for Afghans that were evacuated after the fall of Kabul in August 2021, or were left behind.

When I arrived in 2013, certainly the most difficult public relations issue that the mission was dealing with was SIVs—lots of congressionals, letters from the advocates and family members in the different states. We had a system in which all you had to do was work for one year for the U.S. government and you could apply for SIVs, that is emigrate to the United States. And many of our employees did in that kind of timeframe.

I think that does raise the question of just how committed Afghans felt in 2013, 2012, 2011 or did they already see how fragile things were? This is something for historians to work on at a later date, but it struck me even at the time that a one-year qualifying period led to enormous turnover. I can't remember if it was 20, 25, 30 percent of the mission every year in terms of our local employees. Constant hiring process, constant SIV processing. And given the number of Afghans working with other government departments, like the Department of Defense, it was a very difficult program to administer, and it also experienced significant fraud. You'd have multiple applicants using the same threat letter and thinking they could get away with that. And that's why people working on SIVs were having to go through these applications carefully because the flip side of not doing so was letting in people who could be threats without proper vetting.

But it was clear that we had to do better. We had to really pick up the pace. And so that first year, we worked as a team on clearing the logjams with our law enforcement agencies, how we did background checks, and how we streamlined paper approvals. I believe that we processed twice as many SIVs as we had in the previous five years. And I'd just like to say our consular staff faced an extraordinarily difficult challenge, and the level of commitment was there in trying to process SIVs, all the way to today.

It was a difficult time, but the turnaround improvement helped lessen criticism from Washington, from Congress, on how the program was administered.

We also went through a scheduled Office of the Inspector General [OIG] inspection. I think I've been through four inspections in the front office as ambassador, as deputy chief of mission. Those reports are public, so people can read them and draw their own conclusions. What I will say is I certainly argued against this top-heavy leadership at the mission: by the time I'd been there a few months, I was also convinced the embassy was far too big. I was convinced we needed to scale back our presence in consulates around the country. I was convinced we weren't providing the appropriate supervision of our assistance programs, and we needed to rethink what we were doing.

And I raised dealing with morale challenges and how we dealt with 85-90 percent turnover every year in direct hires inside the mission. I was also interested in creating a more congenial workplace. Without pointing fingers, I think there's a history of mission culture that led people to work seven days a week because they got two months off. I thought the work environment needed to change; burnout was an issue. Stress was an

issue. People's need to see their families—that was respected with the generous leave from post.

What also began to come across to me was these missions when they're combined with our military becomes a microcosm of America. And we have people from every agency, every walk of life. Our hundreds of security contract personnel who risked their lives every single day for the rest of us, our building contractors were there for years, supervising construction projects. Different professional cultures, our soldiers.

And what I came away with was a sense in many ways that across those three years, I saw the best of America. People from all backgrounds pulled together, people worked together, people played together. Of course, there were issues. But I never felt more humbled, more honored, more grateful to be an American serving my country. Kabul was special for us in another very personal way: we renewed our wedding vows in a small private ceremony at the military chapel which somehow symbolized and cemented our lives together in the Foreign Service.

Ambassador McKinley and his wife Fatima renewing their wedding vows in a small private ceremony at a military chapel

Q: Were people able to go around the city?

MCKINLEY: By the time I'd been there about six months, travel outside the compound stopped. I was there for the tail end of people being able to go out with security to restaurants, or to visit other embassies, to meet with contacts in town. The Taliban were certainly more aggressive in attacking provincial areas where foreigners were present. And in the city, terrorist attacks also became more common. There was a restaurant called the Lebanese taverna where thirteen people I think were killed, including, I believe the IMF director, academics at the American University. And that was the turning point. From that attack, which was in early 2014 to the time I left in December 2016, there was no movement outside of the embassy for most staff.

At a certain point—I can't remember whether it was the end of 2014 or in 2015—we stopped driving to the airport all of two miles away, and it was helicopter transfers for the rest of my time there, for everyone. Two miles away and it wasn't safe. And in one of the best parts of town, a developed commercial and residential area, and no travel because

there were attacks along that one stretch of road and the Afghans couldn't secure it. It's astonishing in retrospect and should have been a signal to everybody in Washington, just how badly the situation was deteriorating. We continued throughout the time I was there to have attacks on other facilities we had in town, attacks in which contractors and staff died, and there were near misses when casualties could have been catastrophic. Our local guards and Nepalese Gurkhas certainly paid a heavy price.

Memorial ceremony for the fallen

And as we moved into 2014, we began preparing for elections. The first round of presidential elections was held on April fifth, 2014, I am not going to pretend to have had any particularly distinguished role in the build-up to the holding of those elections. Ambassador Cunningham took the lead in dealing with most of the key presidential candidates. It seemed at that point, the front runners would be the former finance minister Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, a prominent Tajik leader, but it wasn't guaranteed.

And Karzai, a lot of work was done with him because of the fear that he might sabotage the elections to stay in power, using constitutional means, using the fact that the election process wouldn't work or wouldn't be carried out properly or people couldn't vote. To be fair to him, as we moved into an electoral crisis in the summer of 2014 after the first and second rounds of the elections, Karzai played a helpful role, but Karzai before April fifth tipped his hand in support of Ghani, encouraging Ghani to form a broader coalition to include appointing as his first vice president candidate General Dostum, an Uzbek.

This was not good in my view but reflected the complexity of Afghan politics. Dostum is one of the most reprehensible persons the U.S. government dealt with across the time we were in Afghanistan. He was one of the heroes in the eyes of some in the United States during the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. But he was a major human rights abuser who was said to have massacred hundreds of Taliban prisoners by sealing them in train vans. He was a brutal man. So, it raised eyebrows when he was selected as the vice-presidential candidate, but it was important for Ghani to establish a broader ethnic coalition. And as it was important for Abdullah and his backers to broaden their Tajik base by choosing Hazaras and Pashtuns: in Ghani's case Uzbeks and Hazaras support to supplement his Pashtun base. It was part of the ethnic politics of coalition building. No one carried the baggage Dostum did, however. More about him later.

We had an election, and everything seemed to go well, the UN agencies and USAID providing invaluable support. I think there were seven million plus people voting, turnout of 50 or 60 percent. It was, given that the country was at war, notable that elections were held nationwide, I think in all of the thirty-four provinces. The results in the first round were 45 percent for Abdullah and 32 percent for Ghani. And then everybody else. And at that point it was clear, the country would move on to a second-round election since no one had cleared 50 percent.

By that time frame, I had been approached to replace Cunningham as ambassador, and had been approved as the nominee. I certainly continued seeing myself as number two and supporting Ambassador Cunningham. And he continued to do very important work with Karzai, with Ghani, with Abdullah as the elections moved to a second round.

Q: What happened?

MCKINLEY: The second round of elections took place on the seventh of July. Remember the first one was on the fifth of April. It took about four weeks to count the votes from the first round of elections, maybe more. So, we moved into the second round of elections and Ghani was declared the winner with 55 percent of the vote. You can imagine what the reaction was in Abdullah's camp where he had almost half of the vote in the first round. He could not for the life of him believe that he couldn't pick up 5 percent of the vote from the numerous tertiary candidates that had been on the ballot.

Q: So he thought it was corruption?

MCKINLEY: Yes. He thought it was fraud. In addition, for the U.S., Iraq was heating up and the idea that we were going to have failure in Afghanistan, and we were being challenged in Iraq, this moment certainly was becoming a crisis for the administration. Secretary Kerry was to become intimately involved in what happened subsequent to the second round on the seventh of July.

It says here in Wikipedia that John Kerry announced on twelfth of July, that all ballots would be audited, but it gives you an idea of the severity of the crisis because within a very short few days, and unlike the lengthy counting process in the first round, we already had preliminary results and a pledge for auditing of the results. And that was the result of Abdullah rejecting them and a sense that we were headed into a potentially violent political conflict.

I shared the concern of extensive fraud. It didn't take me forty-eight hours from the ballots closing to think there was widespread fraud. In the equivalent of precincts, Ghani's vote total would have risen from five, ten, a hundred votes up to a thousand from one round to the next. I remember raising my concerns, and a senior person saying to me, who makes you the expert on electoral fraud?

As it became a juggernaut of allegations of fraud, and evidence—videos of boxes being stuffed, ballots that were never cast being counted, and especially in Pashtun areas where Ghani needed to run up the vote, I did not need to argue the point further. I was told that one of the key electoral administrators, widely admired as a technocrat by the donors, was deliberately assisting Ghani with fraud. Karzai at that point, was asking, "Well, what

do I do? Do I stay?" And so, we had to go for the audit of the elections. I'll stop there for today.

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Q: Good morning. It is February seventh, 2022 and we are continuing with Ambassador McKinley. Mike, we were discussing what happened in Afghanistan with a lot of apparent fraud in the second round of voting in the presidential elections in 2014. You were describing some of the bad signals that you were seeing.

MCKINLEY: There was a decision to move on to a recount, which necessitated extraordinary coordination with UNAMA, the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan led by Jan Kubis, a Slovak statesman, who ended up as foreign minister in Slovakia. Nick Haysom from South Africa was his deputy, also effective, and senior and experienced working the UN system and who replaced Kubisch and has gone on to work in Sudan. Both men were giants of the moment.

And what the UN did was to deploy a couple of election experts to run the recount, including Craig Jenness, who had handled difficult transitions and questioned elections elsewhere. The effort included 22,828 ballot boxes that were going to be subject to a manual recount and a challenging airlift largely supported by our U.S. military, bringing them back to a warehouse in Kabul. It was a logistical miracle: they succeeded.

The international military force also had to ensure security from terrorist attacks for the warehouse, for the ballot boxes, for election workers, and in particular for somewhere in the region of about two hundred international election experts, who were brought in to do the manual recount. The process included observation by representatives of the political parties involved in the disputed election and involved significant pressures brought to bear by the Afghan parties on the independent electoral commission of Afghanistan.

And I think it's a tribute to the electoral commission that they did face these pressures but did not break and had the full support from the international community. This was in the full public glare of the media. The UN officials who were involved were heroic in many ways, although initially they allowed the Ghani and Abdullah camps too much leeway to dispute the conditions for the recount.

At the end of the day, it was a transparent and full-fledged audit which, while it identified fraud by both sides, and defined the results conclusively, it did not resolve the political tensions between the two candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah. It did provide the foundation for actually reaching a soft landing with a government of national unity, which was largely negotiated by Secretary of State John Kerry.

Q: Okay. To back up just a second. The recount showed that the original count had been successful enough that Ghani had won. Is that what you said?

MCKINLEY: That's largely what emerged, but there was an agreement not to release the results because there was still enormous tension, and Abdullah was still not accepting the results even after the recount. In 2016, the results were finally released, and they largely reconfirmed the breakdown of votes. Some 850,000 ballots of the seven million that were

cast were invalidated, with most of those being cast for Ghani. In other words, much greater fraud on the part of Ghani supporters but plenty by Abdullah's followers as well.

The rejection by Abdullah of the audit as well was so fierce that there had to be an agreement on how to try and arrive at a solution that didn't lead to the disintegration of what was by then almost thirteen years of international engagement in Afghanistan.

I was personally involved in working with our military, the UN auditors and so on, but Ambassador Cunningham carried the load with Ghani and Abdullah and their immediate circle of followers and tried to make clear what the downsides were of not accepting an audit result. But the fact is we reached a point in August, after it was becoming clear there wasn't going to be a change in election results, that we faced another crisis.

Secretary Kerry had negotiated the first agreement on the audit, but he had to return to Kabul and negotiate from August 7, I believe to the eighth or ninth of August an agreement between Abdullah and Ghani on the creation of a national unity government with the backdrop of potential political violence.

It was a very tense environment and very much underestimated by the international community and the media, just how close we were to descending into violence because a significant number of Abdullah supporters made clear they weren't going to accept the results of the recount. We ended up with two to three tracks of engagement working very closely with Kubis and the international community, and Ambassador Cunningham just working nonstop with Abdullah and Ghani followers.

And then there was a third track, which was security focused. And I was drawn into that simply because there was just so much work to do. I ended up in conversations with Afghan security officials. I was called in by the interior minister, Omar Daudzai, an impressive politician. He pointed out, as did others, that we were facing the possibility of the Northern Tajik and perhaps other minorities mobilizing against Ghani and against the transfer of power inside Kabul, and that there was a potential for thousands of armed men descending on Kabul. Daudzai was also communicating this information to our military commanders, but I think it's fair to say this was a collective effort to stand down Abdullah's followers.

But it did fall to me to speak to tribal leaders you never read about in the news in the surroundings of Kabul, to the east and north and who were seen as being capable of marshaling and bringing into Kabul armed men to challenge the results in support of Abdullah. So, I met with at least a couple of them working with the support of a terrific political team. We spent hours listening and trying to suggest what would happen if they moved ahead with violent actions and alternatively the benefits of supporting the transition.

It was a glimpse of the precipice. I remember one week in particular. Daudzai called me in for a meeting early one evening and said the incursion into Kabul was on the verge of happening. And we mobilized and engaged again. Behind the scenes, in short, this was much tenser than just the political standoff.

Kerry's intervention became absolutely the game changer. There's a lot of debate and a lot of armchair criticism of what Kerry negotiated and the terminology employed for the government of national unity that emerged. Since both slates had already run to be president of Afghanistan and they had three vice presidents each—first vice president, second, third—it was not feasible to create a supervisory vice president. And a prime minister title didn't convey because it meant subordination to the vice presidents as well as to Ghani for Abdullah. Kerry was dealing with an impossible task in coming up with something that would be acceptable to both men, fully aware that the election result, the recount, favored Ghani and Abdullah was saying he wouldn't accept it.

Kerry with his staff, with Ambassador Cunningham, with Dan Feldman, set about drawing up this document, which was highly imperfect, trying to divide ministerial positions, and representation in government. The title for Abdullah was chief executive. It was dismissed by some critics as a Western document that didn't take into account Afghan realities. But the agreement did result in a decision on a public statement by both men stating that they had agreed to work together.

And we ended up with an agreement and that was really quite a signal contribution to peace in Afghanistan at that time, allowing a democratic transition producing a national government where the broad spectrum of key actors in the political arena were represented and it allowed us to continue with a government in place.

And so, I would suggest that was a truly quite remarkable tribute to Secretary Kerry and at the time seemed to provide the foundation for a transfer of power from a president who was very problematic for the United States, President Karzai. The crisis went all the way to September twenty-first, 2014. It was months of this, from June to September. Abdullah and Ghani finally signed a power sharing agreement on September twenty-first, 2014.

Q: Before we leave the power sharing agreement and the lead up to it, you mentioned Dan Feldman. Had he taken over SRAP at that point from Mark Grossman?

MCKINLEY: Oh, yes. He was special representative.

Q: Okay. So he and his staff were supporting the ambassador and Secretary Kerry, and coming up with some of the details on this, I assume.

MCKINLEY: That's correct.

Q: And your political section, who was the political minister counselor? Was it a big section?

MCKINLEY: Tom Yazgerdi who was followed by Elizabeth Rood. Well, it was big but I thought it was small given what we were tasked to deal with, with very strong leadership.

Q: So you went for your confirmation hearings in the fall?

MCKINLEY: I can't remember the timing of the hearings, which had tough moments, visits with McCain and others, and there were the usual hold ups by the Republicans. McCain told me privately he would give me a tough time to score points against the

administration but to not take it personally. The partisanship by that stage of the whole process was striking. But I was paired with the person nominated for India and the two of us got through sometime in December. Jim Cunningham left in early December.

It was a period when the Taliban were picking up terrorist attacks inside the capitol. Movement was increasingly restricted. And I'm not going to go into details on this, but across the next two years, there were numerous threats to our people, of attacks on our military personnel. There were deaths. And there was concern in Washington. I dealt with high levels in Washington on security, and they drove home how close we were to being closed down if we could not continuously increase security.

And so, I spent an inordinate amount of time with Diplomatic Security and with OBO [Office of Overseas Building Operations] on security enhancements. When you take a look at what was built out in Baghdad, state-of-the-art. When I arrived in Afghanistan in 2013 and until I left in 2016, people were still living in trailers.

The DCM David Lindwall and I spent our years worrying about security for our people. I worked particularly closely with diplomatic security, during the last two years with Tom Barnard, who was terrific, and who had a large and very experienced team. There were delays, new monies appropriated, decisions on some issues, not others. I think the experience in Afghanistan should become, if it's not already, a study for DS agents and OBO, on responding to needs of a mission in a war front. The threat to expatriates continued, and we responded to attacks on foreign embassies, and a particularly savage assault on the American University of Afghanistan which led to it being closed down for a time. Those days and nights, in which I was personally involved for hours, were searing for everyone.

I believed in taking care of our personnel, I also believed in our personnel doing their jobs. I do believe that certain risks had to be taken. But finding the balance is tough. I don't know what the answer is. Ron Neumann, one of my predecessors and head of the American Academy of Diplomacy, has been leading the charge for years on redefining risk management for American diplomats in war zones. In Afghanistan I became less and less convinced the risk was worth it.

On another issue: we always speak about American casualties. But what about the Gurkhas who worked for us? What about the Afghan soldiers and policemen who provided our protection, who got blown up and killed in the entry and access points to our facilities? Our local employees? We had numerous attacks on our installations in Kabul, Herat, and there would be many deaths, but they did not register in Washington the same way as American ones. They should have because they did for us locally. Our security universe is everyone who works for us.

As the situation deteriorated, there was a debate over our presence nationally, although it was being downsized as our military drew down. Very early on I was against having a presence outside of Kabul. We were drawing down troops. Our assistance programs weren't doing much and would be doing a lot less without supervision in the field, so we had to rethink our footprint inside the country.

Q: So did you close consulates during your time?

MCKINLEY: I didn't have to in the end, because the attack in September 2013 on our consulate in Herat helped concentrate minds, although there was still the inclination of a number of senior persons to keep those offices open. By the end of my first year, there was consensus that we had to concentrate our presence. I also believed that our embassy was way too big. By the time I left in 2016 we had drawn it down more than 30 percent, and I was interested in driving it down further.

I also thought assistance should be cut. We could not supervise what we were funding. And corruption was rife to include key actors in the presidential palace and [allegedly] family. When I first arrived, there was a five-to-six-billion-dollar pipeline of assistance programs. And once I was fully in charge, I thought we should reconfigure assistance, cut out most of the new programmatic investments, not take on major new projects, finish some infrastructure projects that still had a couple of billion dollars to spend for completion, and then move towards budget support to the extent U.S. congressional and U.S. government restrictions would allow. I worked very closely with the excellent USAID director Bill Hammick and he and his staff were cooperative on redesigning things to address what was a changing environment.

We had SIGAR [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction] to help us along because they were constantly pointing out failures in programs, corruption up to a certain level, and we had to respond. I had my own differences with SIGAR. I didn't object, in fact I was strongly supportive of what they were doing. Frankly I believed in bringing them in as much as possible.

But I did not like the personalization of the SIGAR attacks on U.S. officials. Everybody was trying to do their best. These were impossible working conditions. The demands were outsize. And also, I think there were programs that worked, up to the point they didn't, and so some of the broad-brush attacks went further than they should have. There was a SIGAR questioning of the educational investment. Well, I think most people in hindsight would agree getting millions of kids and especially girls back to school was worth it, notwithstanding that there were parts of the country where we did not succeed, or where there were ghost teachers and students and money was siphoned off. Did that invalidate everything that was happening with the entire educational investment program?

I do think there should have been more aggressive investigation of the rumors of corruption of senior Afghan officials which I reported to Washington, to SIGAR, and USAID, and our military commanders. It may have been a challenge, but not doing more only played to Afghan perceptions that we were not watching closely.

Many of SIGAR's reviews were on target. A new program to support women's rights, called PROMOTE, with a commitment that was 240 to 250 million dollars, never took off. SIGAR took on PROMOTE. And what should have been a flagship program was revealed over a period of two to three years to not be particularly effective in achieving its objectives. There is this idea that ambassadors can just direct what happens—the program had so much support in Washington that to question it before it launched would

not have been credible. I thought it had issues because the implementation path was unclear. It wasn't that I didn't think that it was not appropriate to provide money. It was how were we going to use it effectively which was in question.

Q: On budget support, I think that earlier, Karzai used to complain that the officials had more allegiance to U.S. government people who paid them than to the government they worked for.

MCKINLEY: There may have been something to that. We still funded most of the costs of the security forces. The only thing I thought would work at the end of the day was budget support, pay for everybody's salaries, and for us to stop hoping every year at donors' conferences that the Afghan government would assume the responsibility at some point, which it could not.

Overall, AID was trying to do the right thing, finish out infrastructure projects. I remember taking a decision on the fabled Kajaki dam in Southern Afghanistan in Helmand province, which Americans started building in the 1950s. It was never completed, and it was a second turbine that was being put in as the Taliban surrounded it from the countryside. We pulled Americans out. We had Turkish, other contractors, who continued work, but the dam was under greater threat. It became difficult to drive material in for finishing the job.

AID asked for support in keeping the project going. I agreed to fly in all of the equipment to complete the installation. And held my breath. And Kajaki was completed. But if it had been attacked and people had died, it would not have looked like the right decision. This was one of those moments on risk management. The dam just seemed like an extraordinarily important symbol of U.S. engagement, and the gamble worked out.

USAID did a lot right. I have tremendous admiration for their commitment and for what they achieved. It just was becoming more difficult to continue and we had to retrench.

And then there were other aspects to the work. One was the government of national unity and from the beginning the government was in danger of failing—at first every two or three months, then there was a crisis more frequently.

Months after endless months trying to just fill cabinet positions that were representative that both sides could agree to. A particular problem with filling senior spots in security, in the military. I think our military made a very significant mistake trying to influence the selection of generals and of senior security positions. And at times exacerbated the tensions between Ghani and Abdullah. Abdullah would threaten to walk out of the government. Ghani would say he wouldn't work with Abdullah anymore.

There were moments throughout my tenure in which I would be spending days each week going between the palaces of the respective individuals. I'll have to say that my experience was one in which I sympathized more with Abdullah and viewed the efforts by Ghani and his palace cohort to basically cut off Abdullah from key decision making as extraordinarily damaging. Even puerile. The early months when Abdullah wouldn't even be given funding for office equipment. But the tensions would go from ridiculous to very

serious moments when we were within twenty-four hours/forty-eight hours of the government collapsing over military appointments.

Q: When you went to meet with them did you go with a military counterpart or by this time, was this fully in the ambassador's realm?

MCKINLEY: Depended on the issue my predecessors or I dealt with. Because it was a war, it was also appropriate that the head of our military operations should accompany the ambassador to meetings with the president.

There were moments when we'd break out and there'd be one-on-one meetings with the president, under Cunningham with Karzai and Ghani, and I'm sure it was the same under Crocker, but I was helped by the two Afghan leaders who preferred smaller meetings. And so my discussions with them were mostly without the military, unless there was something significant happening on the security front.

I'm not suggesting it was a bifurcation of responsibilities, but in terms of trying to keep the government going, I increasingly went alone. At the beginning, I brought a note taker. I stopped doing note takers because these meetings became one-on-one with Abdullah and one-on-one with Ghani. He didn't have anybody in there and the discussions would often be at unscheduled hours. And so, a lot of the work I did was negotiating the politics of the moment, or, for example, ensuring Abdullah would be included in meetings when they visited Washington—it was a government of national unity, but Ghani would resist. But the fact of the matter is many of the differences were on political and economic issues, security issues affecting the country. There were many near misses, and the crises at times required Washington interventions by the secretary and president to resolve.

And I had conversations, where, as the time went on, it became evident to me that the key people around the president were very concerned about how he was ruling. Senior Afghans from Abdullah's camp, but also a number from Ghani's camp, and then Pashtuns who weren't inside the government inner circle, would say very directly to me, Didn't we [the U.S.] see what was happening?

And of course, I did, I saw a government that was not really functional, and I found ways to communicate that very directly to Washington. I was helped by requests from the White House for my personal assessments, and that of the DCM, from time to time for the most senior levels of the building. We had to be careful, however, not to get out too far ahead of policy endorsed by the cabinet.

I was also struck in conversations with numerous codels from Nancy Pelosi to David Camp, Levin to McCain, of the concern that was beginning to be more evident in Congress about how things were going, but still a disinclination to recognize that fact openly and still looking for how to improve on what was working in our engagement.

Beneath the surface, there were differences over drawing down. I remember one visit by McCain when, one night early into my tenure in Kabul, he tore into me about "my president" "my policy", which was affecting our success. I responded that Obama was president of all Americans, and that McCain was as responsible for that policy over the preceding dozen years. It was frosty. We continued to speak.

Later in my time there I spoke separately with vice-president Biden in Washington, who had reservations I strongly shared.

At the end of the day, because Ghani spoke so well, because our programs moved ahead, because he interfered much less with our security issues, which our military was very happy about—Karzai was a nightmare—and because Ghani had at least in the first iteration, some competent people in key ministerial positions that we worked with, we all felt we were moving things forward as Ghani began his presidency.

I did not by 2015. The deterioration was over time. It was cumulative. By 2018/2019, it was evident just how far-gone governance in Kabul was. But I felt it through the time I was there, and felt governance was getting much worse by the time I left.

And I also felt that we were losing the war. And the DCM and I made this very clear in discussions back in Washington, that we weren't making gains, that the Taliban was advancing every single year. There was pressure to tone down our reporting, which we did not. This understandably led to tensions with our commanders on the ground, and sometimes differing reports back to Washington on what was happening on the battlefield. I have also written publicly about my concerns about how we oversold the fighting capability of the Afghan security forces.

My personal view, which I did express, but didn't put on paper was that without the United States, the place would collapse in six months. I said that in 2015 and 2016. The superb DCM David Lindwall, who followed battlefield developments more closely, at one point looked at the historical record on what had happened in 1975 in Vietnam. This was in 2015–2016, not 2021.

As the USG reported to Congress year after year that the Afghan military were getting better at what they did, the situation deteriorated. We dressed up periodic blows to the Taliban as significant when they were not. I think this was reflective of how we did the Iraq war as well in the early years. Recognizing battlefield realities that reflected poorly on the U.S. was not in our DNA; the celebrated gains in the surges of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan notwithstanding, the question should have been why the surges were necessary after years of effort in both places.

I remember when Kunduz was attacked and largely occupied by the Taliban in September 2015, one of the largest in the country. These things weren't supposed to happen, especially in northern Afghanistan. At the embassy, we spoke to contacts and realized something very serious was happening. The following day, however, and in the presidential gardens with Ghani and our military, the discussion was that the Taliban would be beaten in twenty-four hours. Ghani affirmed, supported by military advisors, that the Taliban didn't have the staying power. I said that was not true. And was politely sidelined. It took two weeks to take Kunduz back with the support of U.S. troops.

I can give so many examples of how we were trying to put a more positive spin on what was happening inside that country, but we had a fraying government that was barely kept together by the intervention of Washington. There was another period when Kerry visited again because Abdullah and Ghani were about to fall apart.

In April 2016, there was another crisis between Abdullah and Ghani. I was meeting with Tajik leaders, to include Foreign Minister Rabbani, and it was another breakdown in the making. And I remember speaking with the secretary who was in the region and had deployed to Kabul. I was direct about how serious the moment was to include threats of a possible breakdown of relations between northern Afghanistan and Kabul to include what I presumed was loose talk about secession. Kerry did one-on-ones with each of them in which it was made clear that if they did not reach agreement on whatever issue was at stake, the U.S. would have to reconsider its support.

Seniors at State, cabinet secretaries, President Obama all got in on the mix across the years. There were National Security Council meetings in which I was included. Just holding the government together became the job, and I believe my successors did the same. By 2020, Ghani the presidential palace started being called "the government of three". It was Ghani plus a couple of young advisors, all Pashtuns. He was often in fantasy land while I was there: on the Friday before Kabul fell, he was reportedly discussing a five-year development plan for the country.

A final vignette that's relevant to what I'm talking about. In June of 2021, Ghani visited Washington as the Taliban advanced. It was meant to be a show of force, of unity, meeting with Biden and congressional backers. The Taliban hadn't taken any provincial capitals. I was invited to a dinner with former ambassadors, former generals, and political figures. There were pep talks and more from Petraeus and others.

I was thinking this was irresponsible—the situation was dire, and the Afghans in the room were partly responsible for it. In retrospect, it was also clear that pressing them to ask for more from the USG was to ignore rapidly shifting realities on the ground. I tried to say something more pointed, directed to others at the table like Abdullah, Hanif Atmar, and Amrullah Saleh, the Tajik vice president, that time's running out and the answer's not in Washington.

Abdullah pulled me aside afterwards. He told me that even in the middle of this crisis Ghani had tried to kick him off the airplane as they were coming to Washington. This, after a dinner and meetings in Congress and with the administration, where we all acted as though it really was a government of national unity. I did not know how or why we kept playing this game until the end.

By the time I left Afghanistan in 2016, I truly viewed the situation as something was very, very wrong there.

The other issue I worked on peripherally was the peace process. Capable people in the department, Jarrett Blank at the beginning, Laurel Miller, Rick Olson all were involved in different stages across the three plus years I was there in efforts of outreach to the Taliban. We weren't doing this unilaterally. At the time, we weren't going to meet with them in any formal way without the Afghan government being part of it.

There was an effort working with the Chinese and the Russians at the time, to come up together with some kind of blueprint of what could be topics for discussion. And it ebbed and flowed. And there was a period in 2015–2016 where it was on the way up with

Ambassador Rick Olson, who was first our ambassador in Pakistan and then the special representative, was working with the Chinese, the Gulf, and Pakistan. There were any number of Afghans doing their own outreach and feelers to the Taliban. The very well-known Gailani family was central to this. But they were just one of several initiatives, President Ghani in principle, was absolutely on-board, not so much on-board with the way we were approaching it. And the minister of intelligence and former peace negotiator Stanekzai, was also engaged in outreach efforts. Stanekzai was a committed, strategic, and intelligent leader who commanded real respect and understood Afghan political realities better than most. The Norwegians were also active.

I was very impressed by the efforts to start negotiations. I thought it was the right thing to do. I did question whether the Taliban were capable of negotiating anything on our terms. But having worked on many peace agreements or conflict negotiations in my career, you could never stop trying in a conflict which otherwise did not appear to have a resolution. Like many persons stationed in Afghanistan, I did believe the sanctuary in Pakistan was the main reason the Taliban could successfully sustain their insurgency over time which included killing hundreds of Americans.

And so did I really believe that there could be a negotiation eventually? Yes, I did at the time because I thought there was a generational shift underway. I'm not saying my reading was correct, and I did not anticipate the rest of Afghanistan being incapable of developing a common political position against the Taliban after 2019.

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Q: Good morning. It is February tenth, 2022. We're continuing our conversation with Ambassador McKinley. Mike, continuing with Afghanistan. I wonder if you could start off by talking about the Taliban. What was happening? What was the Taliban doing during these years? What were we reporting to Washington? You had mentioned last time attempts to get them to the table and that there was a lot of bombing going on, getting closer into the city. So let's start there.

MCKINLEY: I think in retrospect, and I'm not going to pretend to have had this view in any developed form while I was there, but I think in retrospect we have to acknowledge that our understanding of how the Taliban was organized was relatively limited. We could point to their headquarter operations, their shuras, we could identify key leaders, but we really didn't know as much about their political ties and support in rural Afghanistan, what their approaches to different offensive seasons were, what they thought about outreaches related to peace processes.

The relationship between the more overtly terrorist elements like the Haqqani network and the more traditional elements in the Taliban was unclear but should not have been. The moment when Mullah Omar was declared dead, after almost a year—we missed that, although I was suggesting months earlier that he was gone by looking at how just the leadership projected. Mine was dismissed as idle speculation. Well, it wasn't.

I would suggest that gap extended to our understanding of the battlefield. When people look at what happened in 2021 with the fall of Kabul, and ask why we didn't know, I

would suggest we never really knew as much as we needed to know even at the height of our presence. It is interesting how the estimates of Taliban strength were substantially revised over time, and there was endless debate over the best military strategy to pursue: concentration of forces or trying to project in every one of the country's three hundred plus districts. These were not easy decisions but required understanding Taliban gains.

Q: You had just come from Colombia. Was this very different from the FARC insurgency?

MCKINLEY: Absolutely. The FARC wasn't winning. And the FARC did not compare in terms of control of territory. The other aspect, I think, of the Taliban presence that we underestimated and even dismissed was the extent of their popular support. It was a small minority of the population, but even at less than 10 percent that counts as a base of a couple of million people in a country with forty million inhabitants. And the number who were passive or sympathetic was likely to be significantly larger.

Q: Okay. And did we have any responsibility—in how we handled things—for the popular support for the Taliban?

MCKINLEY: Well, we had programs that had been there for a long time, long before I got there, a national solidarity program, which built out thousands of civil society/community outreach efforts throughout the country. We were successful in establishing governments in all thirty-four provinces. In many districts, there was something approaching a government presence—education, minimal health services. But, to repeat, the government was viewed as profoundly corrupt, cynical, and populated with many of the leaders who had led to the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s.

U.S. diplomacy throughout my entire career underestimates the power of ideology, underestimates nationalism, underestimates extremism. We ought to have a much better handle on it now that we have extremists in our own country.

I always thought, from the time I was there, that Afghanistan was also a very conservative society. And so, you're distinguishing between Afghan conservatives who still believe women should be subjugated and the Taliban—there's only shades of difference between them. They may not support violence, but there was a broader popular base for the conservatism that the Taliban espoused.

There's a recent book by Carter Malkasian that came out, that's the standard right now on what happened in Afghanistan. He recounts a conversation with me in 2014 in which I basically was challenging the view of the Taliban as not having an ideology or support base. And at least it proves that I'm not making these comments in hindsight.

We all believed, certainly by the time I was there, all but the most recalcitrant hardliners in the U.S., that the government needed to talk to the Taliban at some point under the right conditions. Getting there proved more difficult than we thought.

Q: And you said in the previous interviews that it was a very big struggle to keep the government functioning at the highest level, but talking to each other. Did the government below that top leadership, did the rest of the government function?

MCKINLEY: Well, it functioned. If we want to put things in historical perspective, in 2002 when we went in after the overthrow of the Taliban, there was not much. No functional ministries, no educated civil servants in place, no functional basic social services for the wider population. The transformation, over the fifteen years by the time I got there, was remarkable. There were tens of thousands of younger Afghans who were running ministries with support and advice from the international assistance world, whether it was consultants funded by AID, by the Norwegians, by the European union, by the Japanese, by the Canadians, the World Bank. I would suggest that it was a significant transformation.

Ambassador McKinley and his wife at the new entrance of the National Museum of Afghanistan on the outskirts of Kabul with a view of Darul Aman Palace in the background

There is another aspect of the work which was significant and it was the retrieval and celebration of Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage. The U.S., and many others, helped restore the Afghan National Museum which had been looted and vandalized during the civil war in the 1990s and Taliban rule. Fatima and I visited early on to see the many different cultures through the centuries that impacted the country. The U.S. assisted with the restoration of the mosque in Herat, and other historical sites. Later, while I was there, we had occasion to support exhibitions of Persian miniatures, and it was fascinating to listen to Dr. Abdullah on the poetry of earlier centuries. Fatima and I had the opportunity to support the landmark exhibition of Turquoise Mountain at the Smithsonian in 2016 on the revival of traditional crafts in the country. It is a tragedy to see all that work now endangered.

Q: So there had been some good nation building going on over those years?

MCKINLEY: Yes. But I'd suggest after a hundred billion dollars of expenditure, there should have been.

Q: I am asking because so many people are saying it failed.

MCKINLEY: Well, that's just not entirely true. These structures were emerging. And as much as I'm prepared to throw stones and talk about corruption all day long, roads were built, hydroelectric projects proceeded, electrification of the capital was a major success. There was a market economy beginning to develop. And the transformation in the education of girls was huge as was the codification of women's rights and opportunities. The emergence of a younger generation of middle/upper-middle class educated Afghans was important. The functioning of a parliament that included all of the ethnic groups and different points of view was significant. There was a media that in the cities was largely free and functioned. The legal system was being stood up and working to an extent. And of course there was the American University of Afghanistan, which was a harbinger of what could be, with young women and men studying to meet the challenges of the modern world, and which, despite its problems, was strongly supported by the United States government.

Three U.S. ambassadors attending the Turquoise Mountain exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC

So, I don't mean to suggest that nothing was built. But we weren't building on very solid foundations inside Afghanistan, and progress was heavily dependent on the international community, and not as much the Afghan government or the Afghan people.

Q: Were you in contact with our embassy in Pakistan a lot?

MCKINLEY: On the peace process, primarily.

Q: So let's talk about the peace process. We did that last time, so I hope it isn't too repetitive.

MCKINLEY: Sure.

I don't remember when we started the peace feelers exactly. The first effort collapsed in 2012–2013. We were very close to the Taliban rep office being set up in Qatar, which would have allowed for some kind of formalized negotiations going forward and it fell apart and it fell apart for good reasons given Taliban violations of agreements.

The next effort was following the contested election in 2014. It was the end of 2014 into 2015. I believe I have spoken about this at length but would only add that the Russians and especially the Chinese were helpful in the process, hosting meetings in Urumqi, in Xinxiang [those were different times!]. Even the Iranians seemed interested. Finally, I think I spoke about Ghani and Abdullah. Ghani's concerns that the United States might usurp Afghan national sovereignty were accurate: those fears were realized when Trump's negotiations got underway in the 2018–19 period. But at the time there was no intention in Washington of not working with the Afghan government.

I also had mentioned that there were efforts to enlist the Pakistanis to reach more senior levels of the Taliban. I don't believe we were particularly successful. Looking at Prime Minister Khan's comments when Kabul fell, it is clear that the Pakistanis always had questions about U.S. staying power, and whether the government in Kabul could hold.

Q: Okay. I wanted to ask you about one aspect of what happened in 2021 with the U.S. withdrawal and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. It seems like even though the Taliban was coming in militarily, they seemed to think they could just take over this government that was much different and much more modern than when they had last been there. And I have a lot of cognitive dissonance on what was happening, what the Taliban thought they were going to achieve. From the basis of your perspective, did they really, do they really, want to bring the world back totally to where it was when they were in power the first time? I hope this isn't a stupid question.

MCKINLEY: No, it's a very legitimate question because there was a constant debate. Maybe here's the best place to do this, rather than when I talk about my time with Secretary Pompeo in 2018 and 2019.

Obviously given where I'd been, when I joined Pompeo's office in May of 2018. I was back full time in Washington in December of 2018, I had a first meeting with Pompeo and Ambassador Khalilzad who had been appointed the special envoy or special representative, in I think September 2018 to negotiate with the Taliban. That meeting with Pompeo was about potential talks and the structure for them and how to go forward on what President Trump wanted.

In early 2019, Khalilzad and company had succeeded in reaching a higher level of Taliban leadership, and they were also dealing with the representatives in Doha. And there was this question that grew more and more central for people who were interested in seeing the agreements move to a peace negotiation or a negotiation with other actors in Afghanistan. Have the Taliban changed? Is there a generational shift? Do they begin to accept the importance of functioning economic ministries? Do they accept that women have to have at least some role? And this was encouraged by the savvier of the Taliban interlocutors who inherited a more liberal approach to society and running the economy. But in the air was the fact that the Taliban across the four to five years they were in charge of Afghanistan in the 1990s represented the most extreme interpretation of Islam in government that the modern world has ever seen anywhere.

So, the fact that they were evolving from the most extreme of positions is a relative concept, but the debate was on whether there was some evolution. But in my view, it did

not follow that they were open to incorporating non-Pashtuns. It did not follow that they were going to give women even the space that they have, say, in Saudi Arabia. When we speak about women in conservative Islamic societies, take a look at Iran. Women work, have something of a voice, and are in movies. There's a different shade of repression from the very fundamentalist extremist approach of the Taliban.

And so, I didn't think they were going to change that much. In fact, what we're seeing with them in power, while it's too early to know, I give interviews, and I'm harsh on the Taliban. Are they going to get more extreme in the coming months? I don't know the answer to that question, but they're sending out conflicting messages. They're not going after businesspeople perhaps because the economy is collapsing, and they need it to function.

They talk a good game on reopening schools for girls in March. It's going to be a real litmus check. My view of course, is I don't think it's particularly significant to allow education for girls up to the age of twelve so that when puberty sets in, you can marry them off. Put me in the skeptic camp, it is evolution compared to what? It still is the most extreme form of subjugation of women in the world.

But, so the jury's out for some observers, and they certainly want to run a more modern state structure, but I'm sorry, I'm not giving them the benefit of the doubt.

Q: And of course, democracy is dead.

MCKINLEY: I'm sorry, but the democracy argument is the weakest. We deal with many non-democracies around the world, including in the Gulf, China, and so on. That's not the central concern. Our worries are girls and women. Our worries are political persecution. Our worries are about the inclusiveness of ethnic minorities. Our worries are their ties to al Qaeda. And if they address all those, I guarantee you governments around the world will begin to move towards accommodation. The most significant indication of how far they are from doing that, however, is that not even the Pakistanis, the Russians, and the Chinese and the Iranians have recognized the Taliban government.

Q: I have one more question that's more related to what happened in 2021, but is there anything else about your time in Kabul that you'd like to talk about first?

Some more on the peace process as it developed in 2018–2019.

The peace process and negotiations that developed in 2018 were very much a product of President Trump threatening to pull troops out from one week to the next or one month to the next. And so the armchair criticism of ambassador Khalilzad on those initial months of negotiation are just misplaced. People need to remember who was president and what he was doing. And what Zal was doing was negotiating a decent interval for an orderly withdrawal of U.S. troops and for the Afghan political class and military to get their act together as we withdrew.

And I don't think anybody could predict quite how we did the withdrawal and the arbitrary deadlines we imposed early in 2021, but to suggest that these [Zal's] were secret talks when they had the National Security Director for South Asia Lisa Curtis

participating, when they had our senior military representative in Afghanistan, General Miller participating, when Donald Trump was kept abreast by Secretary Pompeo of developments as they proceeded, it doesn't compute. It's not true.

And the agreement that was negotiated was on the basis, partly, of the political pressures here in Washington. People working inside had to recognize that reality. Although I was never part of the negotiations, or drafting of texts, I was drawn into policy discussions. I remember in one senior meeting saying, let's just get to the finishing line, satisfy President Trump and when the Taliban violate the agreement reached, we keep a couple of thousand troops there, indefinitely. That was my thinking, and I am sure of others.

I was in the camp of it was time to leave, but I could understand the argument against reducing to nothing as the Taliban took over more and more of the country, and that we should be keeping our options open by holding Bagram and Kabul, and Zal, I think, worked in part on that basis. But we were dealing with the president. I remember December 2018, that meeting I was in with Pompeo and Zal, and Zal outlining an approach to negotiations, building on what Rick Olson and Laurel Miller had done, and Zal being told there was no time for that. He had six weeks.

Zal asked me on the way out, "Was that really true?" I said, "What he had been told was absolutely the environment we're dealing in, but if he made progress at each stage, you'll get more time." And that's the way it happened.

I can say that in our military, at the time, people in the White House, others, were opposed to this, Bolton was opposed to it. Lisa Curtis, the national security council person, was opposed to this. I think General Dunford was opposed to this. Certainly, General Miller in the field was opposed to this. I think our embassy questioned the approach, but this was what the president had ordered. I believe so much of this is in the public domain with books by now.

Zal produced an agreement in late August 2019, and I think there were still going to be some, some refinements and conditionalities worked in. But Trump at that point surprised everybody and invited the Taliban to Camp David. And it was a close run for four to five days and Bolton and others worked to walk it back.

By that stage, I wasn't following the process as closely and just looked at it as the Trump show. But an American soldier was killed, and Trump used that as an excuse to end all the negotiations with the Taliban in September.

And of course, I didn't think that was the right approach either because we had reached a much more senior level of the Taliban than we had ever spoken to before. If we were going to be able to find a way out of Afghanistan that didn't involve an arbitrary decision by the president to pull our forces out, we needed an agreement.

And so the question marks over the decision of how to implement the agreement should have come into play when the Taliban did not renounce its relationship with al Qaeda in terms that we could understand as such. It was a moment to suspend the agreement. That's beyond my time in the State Department and so I don't know what the calculations were either at the end of Trump or at the beginning of President Biden's administration.

The only point I will suggest is that by the time Biden came in, he had no choice, but to either follow through with the agreement, because we were already halfway there in withdrawal, or risk the Taliban attacking American forces again.

And I believe to this day that if American troops had started dying again in Afghanistan, we would get the flip side of the argument, why were American troops still there? The pressure was always there. An editorial in the *New York Times* in 2016 questioned why Obama was leaving troops in Afghanistan, and argued that they should be pulled out by the end of 2016 because Americans were dying for what? The specious arguments by Petraeus and others that the Taliban was no longer attacking us directly—the reason was the agreement. They would have hit much harder if we had walked away. You can't win. And so I think Biden made a courageous correct decision.

I'm afraid I'll join the chorus on why did the administration establish an arbitrary deadline and why didn't they get through the fighting season? And why, when the Taliban began to take the countryside, did we not speed up processing of SIVs [Special Immigrant Visas]? I know president Ghani didn't want us to, but President Ghani by that stage was a shell president.

I think Biden made the right decision. I think we did have to have some kind of negotiation to allow for an orderly withdrawal of forces. I do think we missed a couple of beats in terms of timetable; we could have extended. And I do think that the primary weight of blowing it was on the Afghan political leadership with Ghani spending months weakening his opponents and blocking efforts to negotiate in Doha, to put together the right teams, to empower people, to draw on the support of the senior leadership of other political actors. So much has yet to be written about the extent to which President Ghani from 2020 onwards and the people around him slow-rolled any possibility of moving forward on a united front against the Taliban.

I did write an article published in *Foreign Affairs* on August 16, 2021, the day after the fall of Kabul, detailing why our policy was such a failure over twenty years, "We all lost Afghanistan."

Q: Well, should we end on this cheery note?

MCKINLEY: Perhaps on one incident that demonstrated the turmoil on ethnic strife always just below the surface. We engaged in tensions between the Hazara community and the government for example in 2016, but this other situation is more illustrative.

It was September 2016. And there was an issue over a burial site for a former Tajik king, who was executed in 1929, King Kalakani. And there was an effort to re-bury him by Tajiks, with a state burial in Kabul. The afore-mentioned vice president, Dostum, an Uzbek, said the remains couldn't be buried in the chosen location because it was an Uzbek sacred mound.

I was called late afternoon, alerting me to the fact that hundreds of Tajiks, and more, were on the way to the mound, and that Dostum was ordering a mobilization of Uzbek militias to stop them. I received another call from national security advisor Atmar asking for our help. I asked, since Dostum worked for the president, "Why did not Ghani speak to him?"

The short answer was Dostum wasn't listening. Abdullah called soon after noting the explosive nature of what was happening. He was highly credible. And clearly, he was not in a position to talk Dostum down.

I of course thought we would find a way to reach Dostum. It did not work. We spent the next several hours trying to reach him. Stanekzai, the person I mentioned before, ended up with Dostum in person with some elders sitting with Dostum reportedly out of his mind. I worked with terrific persons from the political section, including the political counselor Elizabeth Rood who was fluent in Pashto and Dari, and Tony Bonville, who just died in New York prematurely, and was a wonderful person to work with.

This was before Zoom, and we were speaking on different phones to people, often at the same time, with Dostum, with Tajik leaders so that their supporters did not provoke things on the ground. I said anything, working with Stanekzai, that might work to help get this psychotic off the precipice. Stanekzai played a pivotal role, but our little team helped. In the end there were many people who thought it was a pretty bad thing to start having guns going off between two ethnic groups in Kabul.

When Ghani would complain about Dostum, I'd say, "Why don't you get rid of him?" "Well, I can't." And I never understood that. There was this undercurrent of fear about the old warlords. Ghani and Abdullah and others in Kabul believed that people like Dostum, Sayyaf, Ata in Mazar, Ismail Khan in Herat, the Karzais in Kandahar, that they all could mobilize militias, which would threaten the state, that they were parallel security organizations. I never believed they were there, especially after they failed to materialize to defend Kunduz when it was attacked by the Taliban.

I despised and loathed Dostum. And towards the end of my time there, he decided to go after one of his political opponents, kidnapped him, held him for days, torturing him personally, according to reports leaving him with serious injuries. I came out publicly as I was leaving, calling for an investigation of the vice president's actions.

And I believe I was the first American to go after a senior government person in public and call for him to be brought to justice. In retrospect, I should have gone further. I went back to Washington and said we can't work with this person.

Nothing happened. And I raise this because what this demonstrates is a sublimation of principle to the realities we were addressing. To remind, the country was at war. So, we also had to deal with people who were unpalatable, but who had influence. But I do think there were points where we could have acted differently, with a number of our questionable contacts responsible for abuses. And Dostum was one of them.

Then corruption. I don't know if I've talked about it enough or not. I reported extensively on it. But it was hard work getting things corrected. Evidence trails were not clear. Even the investigators had to choose their battles on what corruption they pursued with any hope of reaching a clear resolution. And there was always the risk of the palace cutting off access we needed, as I was warned at one point.

I've talked about gender issues but there were gender issues inside the mission.

Q: How so?

MCKINLEY: Well, we employed a fair number of Afghan women. And we were definitely trying to provide space, opportunity, visibility, and we did a lot of good, but if you spoke to them one-on-one, certainly my spouse Fatima did, many of them, the minute they left embassy grounds they would cover themselves to go out into the "liberal" Kabul streets. There were men among the educated Afghans who worked with us, who, when they saw the women being too liberal, whatever that meant, whether in conversation and work, would quietly tell their female colleagues you're free here eight to five, but remember where you're from. We tried to address things like this with regular counseling sessions for the broader community, we underscored respect for women with our male Afghan colleagues, but it was a constant undercurrent.

Ambassador McKinley and his wife Fatima preparing a Thanksgiving lunch

At one of the celebratory lunches that was held for Afghan staff, the embassy leadership was going to help serve the food and Fatima and I walked in, and there was a sea of men. And the far fewer women were all on one side of the wall, waiting for the men to decide proceedings. In the embassy. We broke that up.

There was this constant undercurrent. I was convinced things were getting worse for women in Kabul every year I was there. There was the murder of a woman named Farkhunda, in downtown Kabul, near a mosque she had come out of. She was accused of defiling the Quran and a mob set on her. And it was a horrific event. I remember going to the palace urging an immediate statement. They hesitated but did eventually issue one, but I was struck by their calculations about how far they could go with a conservative Afghan public. It was a real eye-opener: they knew something I did not. Fatima approached an Afghan woman colleague to ask whether something was being done to commemorate Farkhunda on campus—at that point there was not. Fatima later supported the women who organized a vigil at the mission. Fewer people than I anticipated joined. Again, it seemed so fragile, what we were building here.

And you'd meet young Afghan women, whether it was through education in the American university, or the people we hired, and all you wanted was for them to succeed. Fatima at one point hosted an event to introduce engineering female graduates from the

American university to international professional working women. I had tremendous admiration for the courage of all the younger Afghans who were working in government or in civil society.

Q: By and large, you had a good team at the embassy?

MCKINLEY: The answer is yes, but we had up to 90 percent turnover every year. There was the conundrum of how to manage our personnel presence in war zones. Many were there to meet department requirements and needs. Many wanted to be there and had volunteered. With turnover, the management challenge of building a team began anew every year, but people were, by and large, very committed and there was a sense of community amongst most of us. Fatima and I participated actively in embassy gatherings and hosted an annual party at the residence to which all employees were invited. I worked on supporting family members receiving better pay, but that was difficult to achieve.

There was/is this concept of expeditionary diplomacy, except we are not soldiers and the world was/is much bigger than wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and we deploy different skill sets beyond supporting war efforts. That other work globally had to continue and be respected. You were not letting the side down by not serving in war zones.

There were tensions in the dynamic, but they were worked out. People were professionals and worked hard. I don't know what percentage of our service ended up in Iraq and Afghanistan over the fifteen to eighteen years, but it was a significant percentage. And there was a group which believed in these wars, what we were trying to do, not just in Afghanistan, but more broadly in the broader Middle East.

I believe that one year of service was enough, as it was for our military colleagues. And every time there was a suggestion of extending a tour to two years, I very much opposed doing so. People had lives, partners, spouses, children. It was great, however, when people stayed for an extra year, it was very helpful to our work.

Overall, I felt that I met and worked with superb individuals across the board, whether it was at AID, with our military, all the other agencies and departments at post. The State Department colleagues, so many were dedicated professionals, and team players. Staying over three years, I met hundreds. And I worked with real stars in diplomatic security.

Q: One more question on this period. You seem to have had frustrating experiences in dealing with Washington but also you seem to keep people's confidence. And in fact, they asked you to stay a third year as ambassador, which would've been a fourth year in country. So that shows a respect for what you did. Did you see it that way?

MCKINLEY: I don't want to convey that I had frustrations with the people running overall policy towards Afghanistan. I had a fantastic working relationship with Washington. The SRAP [special representative] office couldn't have been more supportive, strategic, helping think through issues, providing direction, understanding things that we in the field sometimes did not. I had enormous respect for them. Dan Feldman, Jarrett Blanc, Laurel Miller, Rick Olson. I just can't say enough good things about them. I thought they were excellent.

And then at the cabinet level, their willingness to give me the time to speak my mind. To cabinet secretaries and to the president directly. I of course followed orders and policy. I had the experience of a lifetime working with Washington during that period.

End of interview