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AMBASSADOR JOSEPH MUSSOMELI

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: So, good morning. I'm Robin Matthewman, and I am today, as part of our Afghanistan project, I'll be interviewing Ambassador Joseph, Joe, Mussomeli.

And Joe, welcome.

MUSSOMELI: Thank you. Good to be here.

Q: And I hope it's okay if I call you Joe?

MUSSOMELI: Yes, definitely. The last name is too difficult.

Q: Okay. So, thank you so much for participating today. I wonder if you could give us a little summary of your career up to the time that you did serve in Kabul.

MUSSOMELI: Sure. I entered the service in 1980, towards the end of the Carter administration. They loosened the rules, so I was able to pass the requirements. We were the last under the old act, the hundred and fiftieth. From there, I did Arabic training and went to Egypt as a GSO [General Services officer], then to Manila as a consular officer, then to Sri Lanka as an econ officer, finally to Morocco as a political officer. So, I was in all four cones at the time, as well as a couple of assignments in Washington as an ops officer [Operations Office] and the North Korea desk officer and a staff assistant in T.

Q: Did you come in with a specialty, with a cone?

MUSSOMELI: Well, I was a political officer, but I never did political work for the first ten years of my career. I'm sort of ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder], and I needed to have different cultures and countries and functions, so until I was political counselor in Morocco, I'd never done political work. And that was just fine with me. I think it prepared me better to then be DCM [deputy chief of mission] in Bahrain because I'd already been all four of the cones. Since then, of course, we've added public affairs. So, after DCM in Bahrain, I did a year boondoggle in the Senior Seminar, and that was fun, going back to high school. And then, Frank Ricciardone, since he didn't know me, he asked me to be his DCM in Manila, and that's how we became friends. And from there, I became ambassador to Cambodia, went back to Washington for a year to take over entry

level, working with the junior officers on their first assignments, and then on to Afghanistan.

Q: Okay. And you did a lot of management work along the way, so.

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, lots, yes. But that helped, I think, a great deal.

Q: Okay. And so, how did you end up going to Kabul?

MUSSOMELI: Two reasons. First, I've already mentioned Frank, and we became good friends in Manila, and he asked me to go. He said they needed another quasi-ambassador because they were ramping up at that time, 2009 to 2010, and so it's hard to say no to him. And the other, I was, I guess smitten with the idea that maybe we could actually make a difference. And in the spring of 2009, it seemed that we were finally going to pay attention to Afghanistan. Now that Bush was out of office, the focus was on Afghanistan rather than Iraq, and I was hoping at the time that not being distracted by Iraq, which, like most of us, I felt we should never have entered, we could now deal with the real problem in Afghanistan. So, for that patriotic reason and for my friendship, I decided to go.

Q: Okay. So, as you pointed out, we are now entering the Obama administration and the ambassador at the time was Ambassador Eikenberry?

MUSSOMELI: Yes, Karl.

Q: Karl Eikenberry. Generally, or actually also.

MUSSOMELI: Yes, also. Ambassadors are higher rank than generals.

Q: (laughs) But he had already served twice, I think, in Kabul and in military functions. And then, in Washington the Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan was—

MUSSOMELI: True, but then Holbrooke came in with his own sort of duplicate bureaucracy on that, yeah.

Q: Okay. So, I don't know if this is the first time, but they seemed to have several ambassadors in the front office.

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, there were four of us at the time with Tony Wayne as well, so.

Q: And so, how was the work divided up?

MUSSOMELI: Well, it's sort of funny because I had never met Karl Eikenberry either and we had coffee in the cafeteria, and he just said, "Joe, it's great to meet you. From everything I hear, I'm happy you're coming with us, it's terrific. Then he hesitated and said: "What do you intend to do?" He had no idea. And I think the whole broad philosophy was that the generals were not going to cooperate with people who did not have the title of ambassador, so they wanted a bunch of ambassadors, but nobody had really thought through what those specific ambassadors would be doing.

So, I already knew what I wanted to do. I knew we were going to do a civilian surge, and I knew that everybody, almost everybody I've ever met. who's an AMB or a DCM, all

they ever want to do is policy and embassies get neglected that way because everyone wants the sexy stuff. And so, I just told Karl, "Karl, the policy I want to leave completely to you and Frank. I don't want to be bothered with it. There are too many people in Washington who think they know what's going to happen and how to fix things. And so, I'll just be sort of the DCM. I'll take care of our staff. I'll manage the embassy and manage the various other missions and leave me out of poli—" They didn't leave me out of policy altogether. They would ask my opinion on things, but in general, I didn't do anything on policy, and I was very content that way because we jumped from, I don't know, a hundred, 150 staff to two thousand staff, and—

Q: In the one year you were there?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah. I mean, my numbers may be off, but that was certainly the objective, to get up to that number. It continued after I left. And it was such a huge difference. I mean, for the military, it's not a big deal, but for us to find accommodations for everybody, and at the same time there was this delusional notion, which in retrospect I wish I had opposed more vehemently, to open consulates in Mazar-i Sharif and Herat and Kandahar. So, because that all has to do with management that came under my auspices.

Q: Okay, so we're going to get back to all of this, the staffing, the housing, the consulates and all the other aspects of trying to support such a large embassy, but I just wanted to ask, well, you went alone, right? Because several of the ambassadors went with their spouses.

MUSSOMELI: Right, and mine would have, but we had an adopted four-year-old child, so she had to stay with him, of course.

Q: Okay. So, what was it like when you came into Kabul? What did it look like? What struck you?

MUSSOMELI: At first, I was very optimistic. I mean, I had lived half of my career in the Middle East, so I didn't feel out of place at all in that sense. I felt a little strange not having my family with me after so many years. But everybody else except the ambassadors were in the same—I mean, Karl and Tony and Frank had their wives, but nobody else really did unless they were tandem couples. So, actually, that was a good thing because I could identify more with them and empathize with them and be more focused on their morale issues. And that way, I could work twenty hours a day and not feel guilty that I wasn't getting home to my wife and child. So, it was actually—I have to confess, it was liberating in a way. I didn't have—my conscience wasn't bothering me about my family, so I could just focus on my staff.

Q: And what did the embassy look like? Was it a compound?

MUSSOMELI: It was a compound. It grew tremendously. There was going to be a lot of construction that year and the next year or two afterward. Things were reasonably loose at the time relative to what happened just a year or two later. There used to be a tunnel, there was a tunnel connecting the two parts of the compound, and before we got there, you had to use the tunnel to just cross the street. We opened up the street. I believe that was Frank's original thought, but it was a very good one that people, if they wanted to

cross the street in the open, in the sunlight, there was no reason because security was good enough. We had sort of overdone it, security, I thought at that point. And as the months went by, I came to the reluctant conclusion that the surge was a mistake. By that time, it had too much inertia behind it to really do anything to stop it. My concern was that if you're going to increase the staff but also increase security, then all you have is hundreds of people walled in, unable to get out, unable to do the traditional jobs of Foreign Service officers, so.

Q: So, in this case, there was a lot of security from the U.S. military outside of the embassy, around it. Is that right?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah. At the time, we had good RSOs [Regional Security officers], I thought, who were conscientious. But you know, the RSOs only have one goal, and that's to keep you safe. And if that means that keeps you from doing your job, it's a small price to pay if you're an RSO. And it's up to the ambassadors and the DCMs and others to balance that objective against getting the work done. I wasn't there, but I fear that as soon as we left and new RSOs came in and new ambassadors came in, there was a crackdown, and it was even harder to do one's job because the focus was not only primarily but completely on security. And that's true now everywhere we see around the world. Even my last assignment was as ambassador to Slovenia, and Washington would complain all the time that I refused a bodyguard and I refused to not walk around the city and country alone. But there's no safer place in the world. The only danger in Slovenia is maybe dying of boredom.

Q: What did Kabul look like? Did you get out and around the city or because your job was more internally focused did you—?

MUSSOMELI: I went out in the city for meals sometimes, for shopping, and whenever I did, I made a point of making them sort of, this is going to sound derogatory, but it's sort of just more amusing, I'd make them mini boondoggles. If I went shopping, I would take ten or twelve other people from the embassy with me, people who never got out of the embassy, secretaries, communicators, people who—or just to lunch or dinner. I tried to take a few people. I also made a point of going to a different province every month and I would take—I would just ask whoever wanted to come along we could fill a helicopter or two and take people who were dying of claustrophobia and suffocation. They wouldn't have to have a real reason to go. They wouldn't have to write a political cable or econ cable. Just to get them the hell out of the embassy for a little while, for even a few hours. And frankly, I wanted to know the country, so I wanted to go to each province and meet with officials, talk with different groups if that was possible. So, that's pretty much how my days were. But most of the days were just in the embassy for sure.

Q: Okay. And just a final question on atmospherics. Did it look like a Middle Eastern country or just describe what it looked like as you went to the different provinces.

MUSSOMELI: Yeah.

Q: Or did it look very war-torn?

MUSSOMELI: It wasn't war-torn where I went. Certainly not Herat, I didn't even have bodyguards, I just walked around. And Mazar-i Sharif at the time as well. And Kandahar, it was still very much you had to have bodyguards and it was a kinetic environment, as the military liked to put it. But really, Mazar-i Sharif and Herat seemed very similar and many of the other provinces up north, it wasn't much different than Morocco or Egypt in the security environment at that time. It got much worse a few years later, unfortunately.

Q: All right. So, you were the DCM, an ambassador as DCM, and you were the overall coordinator, manager of this big ramp up from 150 to roughly two thousand.

MUSSOMELI: Over a thousand, yeah, who knows? But they wouldn't let me use the word DCM because they thought it was too pejorative to an ambassador, so Pat Kennedy, Pat Kennedy, who has a great mind for history and a great memory, he said in Vietnam they made this new position called ACOM, assistant chief of mission, so that's what was my official title, so that I was still sort of a chief of mission and I wasn't just a DCM. (laughs) I didn't give a damn, but it helped with, as I said, the generals and the military in general if you could say Ambassador Mussomeli is coming, it made it ridiculously easier.

Q: Right. I understand. That's really why they did the whole—why they had four ambassadors, to have four—to have interlocutors with people who worked on these issues with the—in the military who were generals.

So, can you describe the civilian surge and what it meant for Kabul?

MUSSOMELI: It didn't go as quickly or as well as Washington wanted. Washington's problem was that they had Petraeus complaining that the military is surging this many thousand troops every month, and you guys are dragging your feet. Of course, it's a completely different situation. We have to get security clearances for these people, they have to get physicals, they have to be prepared for whatever portfolio they're taking, so there was this sort of tension on the political level at least, to push and push more people out to the field before they were ready, and at the same time we had to make sure there were accommodations for them by the time they got to the field. So, there were a lot of Quonset huts and other things being fabricated very quickly and put into place and to make sure there was enough water and electricity and enough space even, and at the same time, real construction was going on for permanent housing and permanent office space. You were juggling a lot of balls at once, and at the same time, Washington was always desperate to get more and more people out there. And—but to make sure they were qualified. You know, we had some bizarre situations where people wanted to come. You know that old thing about the greedy and the speedy and the needy? There were a lot of those, those who just wanted to make money, those who needed a promotion, or those who just were superstars who wanted to impress people. I don't want to make too much of that because most of the people that I worked with, the rank and file, were there patriotically. They really felt they were there to help the Afghan people and to make things better for America by helping the Afghan people. But there were certainly some people who just wanted to come for the money or the promotion, and it's very hard to manage that sort of situation.

Q: The State Department was only one part of that civilian surge, is that right?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah. I mean, AID [United States Agency for International Development] was a huge portion of it. And that, I think, went pretty well, except again, it was hard for them to get out to do their work. So, I think the embassy became quite bloated. I think we have that in other embassies on a lower scale even today. They're just trapped within the four walls of the embassy, and it makes life and work much more difficult. Morale becomes a serious problem; drinking becomes a problem. I instituted rules when I got there that—Karl, I remember, wanted to just forbid alcohol altogether, like the military had, and I explained to him that we're not the military. You can't or you shouldn't have the same demands on the civilians as you do on the military. But we reached a compromise that there was zero tolerance for any drunkenness. Anyone caught drunk, anyone who came in late or with a hangover, were immediately removed from post. I thought it was a fair compromise because it still allowed people to go to the Duck and Cover, or the café that I insisted they create on the compound, for people to just relax a little.

Q: So, AID was a bit part of the increased staffing. Now, they had—another thing that was related to the Vietnam experience, I think, were the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, the PRTs, which I think had come out of Armacost's original idea of what the CORDS had done in Vietnam. Were the PRTs still important?

MUSSOMELI: The PRTs were expanding at that time and increasing in number, both the number of PRTs and the number of people in the PRT. And it was a good idea in theory like it was in Vietnam. The problem [and to be very frank, by Christmastime, I regretted I had ever volunteered to go to Afghanistan] was that it was clear to me that we weren't going to succeed, and I think it was clear to the other ambassadors also. And we kept trying to tell Washington this. The problem with the PRTs is that they had to be there for, literally forever, not just ten or fifteen years, but for generations. I guess that's not literally forever, but for generations, not twenty years, but at least forty or sixty years of—we weren't going to change that society in just one iteration, and with people coming in and out every year. The training, the getting up to speed and then leaving so quickly, it just wasn't ever going to work. And it's too bad because it was a very noble experiment at first, although I think there was a certain political cynicism to it. I think even Obama realized we were going to have to leave Afghanistan, but none of the presidents wanted to be the one who actually do it because then no matter—even the ones who complained that we shouldn't be there will criticize you for having left there, just like in Vietnam, just like everywhere else that we've had to leave.

Q: So, one thing that was interesting to me when I interviewed a couple of people that were at post with you at that time, was that I thought the civilian surge followed the military surge, but a couple of people told me that actually the civilian surge had been decided first and then President Obama decided on the military surge, which people felt there was a conflict with that. Do you have any thoughts on that?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah. I mean, the right sequential, it was sequential in decision making, but not in application. I mean, the decision to surge the civilians, we made that decision a month or two after I arrived. My view was that we were grossly understaffed for what we wanted to get accomplished in the PRTs and elsewhere—and the military surge didn't come until much later, in fact, early the next year. But since the military could do things

so much more quickly, I would say they were much done before us. And frankly, we thought the military surge would be inadequate and a failure, which it turned out to be, but nobody was listening to Embassy Kabul at that time. Holbrooke and Clinton especially wanted the surge, and you know, I don't know what, I can't judge Obama for this because I think he made the right political decision: if he did accept the surge and then things fell apart in Afghanistan, everyone would say it was because he didn't allow the surge. That's the way things work. (laughs) So, I don't think he had a choice in that sense. But frankly, it didn't make any difference, and it wouldn't have really made a difference if we hadn't had that surge.

Q: Okay. And just to be clear about the civilian surge, what was it that they were trying to accomplish with the PRTs that would have really required generations?

MUSSOMELI: They were trying to change the whole fabric of the society. They were trying to—we weren't just teaching farmers how to farm more efficiently, we were trying to change the whole culture, female equality and education for everyone and no more planting of poppy seeds and democratic rules for those in authority, rather than the tribal customs. And it was just too much, and I'm not even sure it was, even if we succeeded, I'm not sure it would have been so good. You know, by December, I thought that the—I don't know who first proposed it back in 2002, but it probably would have been much wiser to let Afghanistan separate into different countries. If we had allowed the north to be its own country, Herat and Mazar and places up there, they could have, we could have funneled a lot of money into there, billions of dollars with lots of PRTs and they would have been able to protect their local population from the Taliban, who were mostly Pashtuns, and there were very few Pashtuns at that time in those provinces, and it could have been a very prosperous, stable environment. But you know, that went against all our ideals, and we didn't want to have it—I mean, we did the same thing in Yugoslavia, we were one of the last to accept the reality that they should be six or seven different countries. We just didn't want that and in Afghanistan, to allow it to break up along tribal and geographic terms, very few people saw the wisdom of it at the time. So, now we've lost all of Afghanistan. I mean, in a sense, in 2001 the Taliban didn't have as great control as it does now. We allowed that by ensuring a more unified, coherent country.

Q: And it was—the difference between tribal, traditional rule and democratic rule is really vast, isn't it?

MUSSOMELI: It's vast in one sense, in the Western sense, but in another, you know, there's always a certain sense of legitimacy. The tribes respect their elders because they have experience, they know how to take care of their people. They're not autocratic usually from what I've seen in other places like the Western Sahara and other countries. The tribes are just—we don't like it because people don't have a one man, one vote sort of notion of it. But there's still a consensus generally about who is running the tribes.

Q: And I guess what I was thinking of is also that they're a—type of society so what works for them is considered corruption for us. Or is that too simplistic?

MUSSOMELI: No, I just think, I mean, it's a little more nuanced maybe, but we're not going to get rid of that, not overnight and not in a few generations. It took us centuries,

why should it take them less? And we, frankly, haven't gotten over it either. We just hide it better and (laughs)—

Q: But I meant that there are stories where the governors are able to keep things specific and happy because they let so-and-so tribal group get the revenue from this customs site or, you know, just it was a traditional way of doing things that from our point of view looked like corruption. Is that right?

MUSSOMELI: There's a fair argument for that. I mean, even in ancient times, the Roman tax collectors would take a certain portion of the taxes they collected. That was understood. That's the only way to get them to do their jobs.

Q: I think our first consular, our first consulate folks were running ports of entry or something in England in certain ports, and they would get revenue from the—

MUSSOMELI: I didn't know that, but that makes sense to me. It makes it self-perpetuating. It's not the ideal, democratic, liberal democracy way of doing things, but when you're in a war, it's the last thing you should be fiddling with.

Q: Okay, well, this is a digression that will probably come up in the transcript. But thank you.

Okay, so tell me about the PRTs and what you had to do to be able to support them.

MUSSOMELI: Very little other than giving, making sure they had the manpower they requested, and giving them the security they needed. They were pretty much self-governing. We had a whole PRT section managed by a senior officer, and he did a very good job of it, and they would come in now and then to Kabul, and he would go—and his staff in the embassy would go monitor them. I probably only visited maybe ten or fifteen in my year there. But you know, they were, from what I heard, some of them worked very well, especially if there was a good synergy between the military and civilian. You know, usually, we had them together, and if the military guy and the civilian got along, they did good work. If the two of them couldn't get along, then it didn't work so well. (laughs) And you know, we really had to count on that sort of camaraderie and professionalism because they were too scattered to really monitor and oversee on a day-to-day basis. But there were times when we had to remove a PRT civilian or let the military know that their military guy was being difficult. But in general, it worked pretty well.

Q: Can you just explain for the audience what the PRTs did?

MUSSOMELI: They varied from place to place, but you'd always have an AID person, generally a public affairs person, the leader of the PRT and a military component of one to three people. And they would meet with the local leaders and see what was needed, whether it was digging wells or building schools or roads or helping with a vaccination program, anything, I mean, anything you could think of they could help with to sort of, as we used to say in Vietnam, win the hearts and minds of the population. But, well.

Q: So, this kind of work is more like a little bit like Peace Corps, and it's a little bit different from what AID does, of systemic analysis of what development needs are needed?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, I mean, AID also did that, but from Kabul itself.

Q: Okay.

MUSSOMELI: And there is a Peace Corps aspect to it, but also AID, you know, and the Foreign Service officers are better getting more involved in local politics and the local development in a way that Peace Corps could never do or should do.

Q: No, I didn't, I just—

MUSSOMELI: No, no, but you're right, that's a good way to explain it, you're right.

Q: But it was, so it's, they're adjusting current needs and requests to win the hearts and minds, and it's not so much a development policy?

MUSSOMELI: Not usually at the PRT level. Generally, that would come out of—I mean, we did a lot of things from Kabul, the AID folks, building that crazy dam that then they blew up. You know, there's just lots of roads, lots of new roads, all sorts—eradicating poppy harvests, things like that on a grand scale.

Q: Okay. But AID's projects in the countryside were in—

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, they were also with the PRT, yeah.

Q: Okay. Very good. And so, did you spend much of your time on staffing?

MUSSOMELI: I spent a lot of my time [laughs] disciplining staffing. (laughs) I mean, we didn't choose the people who were coming except at the very highest levels. Who came, I think it was sort of funny. I think in my first three or four months, I probably removed fifteen people from post for various infractions. Nothing like that ever before in my career, but there were no questions asked, and there were no appeals. If you were asked to leave, you just left. You couldn't, we didn't have the time or the apparatus or the energy to just focus on—if people weren't working out, if they were too depressed, if they were too explosive in their personalities, if they drank too much, if they whored around too much, whatever it was, they just had to be let go. There was some of that. More, obviously more than in a normal embassy where removing someone happens maybe once every three years rather than several times a month. (laughs) But yeah, but maintaining staff morale,—you know, one of the silver linings of not having my family there was that the entire staff knew they could come to see me anytime. If it was 3:00 a.m., they could knock on my door, if it was anytime, night or day, I didn't mind if they were having a personal problem or a professional problem, they knew they could come to see me. And I think that helped at least some of them.

Q: How did the construction work? Did you build apartment buildings during that time?

MUSSOMELI: Not while I was there. I think there were blueprints for those, for sure, yeah. And we certainly, especially for Herat, I feel guilty now, but I chose the place where we were going to have the consulate there, even though by the time I got there, I thought we shouldn't have a consulate there. It's terrible the things we do following orders sometimes. But it was a good place. It was an old hotel that was completely isolated from the surrounding area, but a car bomb went off there also a few years after I left.

Q: Herat—

MUSSOMELI: So, in Herat, uh-huh.

Q: Herat is near Iran, right?

MUSSOMELI: Yes. But I don't think the Iranians were to blame for that; it was the Taliban. Yeah, I think that was one of our other major mistakes, was not working more with Iran. We could have had a better understanding of that part of Afghanistan, so.

Q: Because my understanding is that Herat was the safer of the areas that the—

MUSSOMELI: It was. I went there all the time with no problem.

Q: And so, they decided, it was the Obama administration decided to open the consulates and so you're, during your year there you were involved in the—

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, I developed and signed a couple of contracts for Mazar and Herat at least. I don't think we ever got to Kandahar, though that was on the list, and one other place, which I can't remember now. We were going to have four consulates.

Q: And we did actually build something in Mazar-i Sharif, right?

MUSSOMELI: We, I believe we renovated something.

Q: Okay.

MUSSOMELI: Made it better. But I don't know if we ever opened it. I was gone before-I know we had people in Herat, but I don't know. The plans fell apart within a few years.

Q: But the construction was done by local employees or did U.S. companies come in?

MUSSOMELI: U.S. companies. You had to have oversight. OBO [Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations] was there. I worked closely with OBO on at least Herat and Mazar to some extent too. But these were multi-year plans, and I was only there for one year.

Q: Okay. And was there anything else that when you got to Kabul, you said, Oh, this embassy needs X? On the facility side?

MUSSOMELI: On the facility side? I think I briefly alluded to it. Within a week or so I decided we needed a place for people to, a café for just coffee and sodas and a place where people could sit and relax outside like in Paris or something. It drove Karl crazy at first. He thought it was not in keeping with a war zone and again—thank God he listened,

he, you know, he deferred to me on this. And it was a good morale boost to have a place where you could go and just relax if you wanted to or needed to. But for the most part, it was mostly setting up plans for more housing, more office space, but again, these things took, they really didn't come to fruition while I was there.

Q: Not for sure. But it was something that something needs to look at.

So, then, moving on to financial controls, a big part of management is to make sure that money goes to the right place and with the—money, right?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah. Mostly with AID. And I really can't speak to that. I'm sure from the OIG [Office of the Inspector General] reports there was massive corruption. I don't doubt it.

Q: Right, right.

MUSSOMELI: But I can't really say. I don't have any specifics to really point to.

Q: Right, right. So, how'd you feel that the relationship was with your military counterparts?

MUSSOMELI: It was uneven. I thought that the military guys I worked with were very helpful and cooperative. You know, whenever I went down to Kandahar or needed them to coordinate something on the surge and things like that, or if there was a problem in a PRT, I found them always very helpful. I thought there was a certain delusion among them that they were actually—I mean, I remember the first week I arrived, I was asked to go to one of the military country team meetings, the briefings, and oh, my God, it was like, three hours long with, it seemed—three hours long with hours of PowerPoint it seemed. (laughs) And at the end, I just was thinking, Oh my God, all they have to do is show this PowerPoint to the Taliban, and they'll surrender just so they don't have to see another one. And it's just, it was just ungodly. And they were doing this all the time, several times a week. And it just, it seemed like our military had turned into a huge bureaucracy. So, right off the bat, I was losing my faith in our ability to really succeed. But that's the way they ran it, and that's the way Petraeus wanted it. He had all these graphs and ways of proving that things were improving, sort of like in Vietnam when we had the body count. We would say, you know, we lost three hundred men this week, but the Viet Cong lost eight hundred, so at this rate, we'll have them defeated by '71, '72, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. Yeah, you know, I can't make fun of our military too much because on the civilian side, we were just as deluded, just on a smaller scale.

Q: (laughs) And we were deluded on the civilian side about what we could achieve, right?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, how we could change society. I mean, but on the military, I mean, the big thing, you haven't asked this yet, but you never win a war where the enemy has a safe haven. That's why we lost in Vietnam, and as long as Pakistan, as long as we weren't going to be tough with Pakistan, we shouldn't have been in Afghanistan. And no president was brave enough or sensible enough, neither Bush nor Obama nor Trump nor

Biden, nobody wanted to smack down Pakistan. And so, there was no way we could really win. They just had to wait us out, so. It was a waste, ultimately.

Q: And when you go back and look at the record from, you know, talked about the importance of Pakistan stopping the Taliban from using them as a refuge from the beginning, it almost sounds like it was never possible?

MUSSOMELI: It was never required of them. But that, you know, again, I think all our presidents failed to some degree, but Bush more than any because he was too focused on Iraq. If he'd allowed more of our military to be in Afghanistan rather than being needlessly distracted in Iraq, we could have tracked down and crushed the Taliban, but that wasn't his priority.

Q: So, later was too late, it was too widespread?

MUSSOMELI: It was too late. By Obama's time, it was way too late. There was no way—they could have been stopped in 2002, 2003 at the latest, but you know. Somebody wrote a book calling it a sideshow, and it was, ironically, even though that's where the terrorists who attacked us in 2001 were sheltered. We focused on Iraq instead, and that ensured that we would fail in both places.

Q: Is there anything else about your work during the year that you wanted to mention?

MUSSOMELI: No, I think we pretty much covered it. It was—they were—everyone worked extremely hard, no matter what people think in Washington, especially on Capitol Hill. I used to have to yell at people to go home because, you know, when you work where you sleep, you tend to work all the time. They didn't have families, they didn't, they couldn't get drunk, they were sleeping most alone, and they, so people were in the offices all the time, 10:00, midnight.

Q: And it was also very large, it was also too much work, too much to do to let it go.

MUSSOMELI: There was a lot of paperwork, a lot of paperwork that really overwhelmed people. If you wanted to work, you could work twenty-four hours a day, yeah. It was like the Augean stables, you just had to keep flushing out all the manure every day to Washington.

Q: (laughs) All right, well, let's talk about Washington before we move on to your reflections. So, did you work mostly with Pat Kennedy and his team or with the management side of the State Department?

MUSSOMELI: Pat Kennedy was extraordinarily helpful, cooperative, and everything. And OBO, of course, which goes under Pat, they were also extraordinarily cooperative. They did their best, given the circumstances. I have no complaints about them at all. They knew their marching orders were to do the best they could for Embassy Afghanistan, and they did.

Q: Okay. And did you have to work with Holbrooke's team?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah. They were more uneven, but they generally were good to work with. I mean, it was a different—I don't want to say they were a cult of personality, but they were different. I mean, a lot of them weren't Foreign Service officers and the Foreign Service officers there understood that their first loyalty was to Holbrooke. It was, ironically, it was sort of a Trumpian atmosphere, even though Holbrooke was a Democrat. The ego was huge, the sense that he was never wrong was always there, and—but in fairness to them they, I had very little problems with them. We had a couple of visits where they decided they could just go out and party wherever they wanted to in the city, but that was cracked down on very quickly. Some of the political appointees figured they didn't have to abide by embassy rules. But I won't name names and it was long ago.

Q: (laughs) And he died later, right? He was—

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, a few months after I left, I guess, yeah.

Q: All right. Did you host congressional delegations?

MUSSOMELI: Lots of them, especially the usual ones, you know, Lindsey and McCain were there all the time. Kerry came. A bunch that I can't even remember. I mean, some of them, I think, were very sincere, wanted to know what was going on in a genuine sense. Many of them just needed to be able to go back and say, I went to Afghanistan. (laughs) So, vote for me.

Q: But your offices, the people that worked with you did the—had the responsibility for all the logistics in all these visits, right?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah. Working with the political section and others we would make sure everything was done well. I don't think there were any really, there were no hitches.

Q: Uh-huh.

MUSSOMELI: Our management folks were very good.

Q: There were places that people, that VIP visitors would stay in at the—?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, if they were senators or the secretary of state, when Clinton came, they would stay with Eikenberry, because he had—he was also on the compound, but he had probably a four-bedroom, five-bedroom place. And Frank, I think, had two or three bedrooms. But other than that, most visitors just had to be in Quonset huts or empty apart—we had a few apartment buildings, and there were always a few empty places.

Q: Okay. All right. Okay, well, after this, did you go right from there to Slovenia or what was your next?

MUSSOMELI: Yeah, what a weird contrast from the Gulag to Disney World. (laughs) It was, I mean, I'm talking to you from Slovenia right now, and it's just, it's really like Disneyworld in the sense that it's so clean, so safe, so pleasant. And you could walk the streets at 3:00 a.m. with no worries. It's far safer than any place in Virginia, for sure. So, it was a dramatic change of pace.

Q: And then you retired after that?

MUSSOMELI: Yes. I had four years in Slovenia, and then I retired, yeah, just in time.

Q: (laughs) So, of course, it didn't go, it didn't end well in August 2021, and there's a lot of history of what happened leading up to that. But I'd be interested in your reflections. You've already alluded to a few of the important aspects, but I'd be interested in your views.

MUSSOMELI: I think I'm sort of, I have mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, if Biden had done it right, I would have nothing but praise for him, regardless of the criticism. It was long overdue to leave Afghanistan, long overdue. A lot of wasted lives and a lot of wasted money. And it was brave of him, I think, to push through with it. My problem with it is not that he did it, but how it was done. After waiting twenty goddam years to do it, why not wait another six months and get things in order, make sure that all those who worked with us were able to safely evacuate? Why not draw down the civilian population of the embassy more gradually? And why not even consider leaving some military, a small air contingent that could, I think something that would have maintained Afghan military morale so they wouldn't break apart so quickly? It's really a pity. I think the way it was done was a disaster, although it needed to be done. And that sounds like typical diplomatic double-speak, I guess, unless you really think about it. But there was no reason for all those civilians to be there. We should have been down to a dozen or two dozen people. And the military could have stayed there much longer, in a much smaller footprint to make sure that the Taliban couldn't just overrun. Because that's all, I think, the Afghan military needed, was some understanding that we weren't forsaking them altogether, just to give them a little bit of confidence. I mean, it's so funny. I was in my early twenties when Vietnam fell in '75, and Jesus, and Biden's there saying, It's not going to be like Vietnam, and then it was worse than Vietnam in ways. And you know, all those loyal Afghans were just stranded there. And it was such an embarrassment and such a disgrace. But you know, the Republicans complained because Biden did it wrong. Trump would have done it wrong too, and the Democrats would have complained. They're all full of shit when it comes to this sort of thing. They just—neither would have done it well, and it's too bad because it's the Afghan people and some of our own people who suffered for it.

Q: Some people have pointed out that the withdrawal of the troops beyond what was possible to act as that stabilization force during the Trump administration basically gave President Biden a losing hand. At least—it would have been that the military was telling him they would have had to bring thousands of troops back in order to play that force, you know, see another—

MUSSOMELI: No, I don't, I think that's nonsense. I mean, presidents always find it easy to reverse the decisions of their predecessors when they want to and then blame their predecessors when they don't want to. It's garbage. And we had too many military there. We just should have kept a small number of aircraft with protection and that would have been sufficient. It's just that politicians they're never to blame, never.

Q: I didn't mean to imply that but thank you for that.

End of interview