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AMBASSADOR ERIC G. NELSON

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Ambassador Eric G. Nelson served as U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2019 to 2022. Ambassador Nelson assisted the country with constitutional reforms, NATO and EU integration, electoral reform in Mostar, among many other issues.

INTERVIEW

Q: *All right. Today is February 5th, and this is part one of the interview on the Dayton Peace Accords with Eric Nelson. All right, Eric, can you tell me a bit about yourself, about your upbringing? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? And, you know, a little bit about yourself and how you get into the Foreign Service?*

NELSON: Thanks, Fran. I grew up mostly in New Jersey, as well as in Texas and went to college in Texas. I studied engineering at Rice University in Houston. Engineering was a choice that seemed to make a lot of sense at the time, but by the time I graduated, I decided I'd probably be interested in something else. Also I had an exchange student experience overseas in Germany and wanted to see more of the world. So I joined the Peace Corps and taught science and math in Liberia, West Africa for two years, came back to Texas and decided to get a master's of business administration. I enjoyed that degree a lot, those studies a lot, but didn't really feel a calling to the "sole" corporate mission of maximizing shareholder returns and saw a good opportunity when the Foreign Service Officer Exam came to town. I took it and managed to pass on the first try and had an offer. And after a lengthy process of sifting and checking background — a process that took really long in the old days, I joined the service in 1990 as a management officer. I was interested in Foreign Service for the opportunity to see the world, to learn new languages, to be a generalist as a career, and to have new challenges every two, three years. I did that for 34 years.

I just retired last year after having served as US Ambassador in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 19... from, excuse me, 2019 to 2022. After that, I moved here to Germany to be Ambassador in Residence at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, which belongs to DOD and the German Ministry of Defense. My other assignments in the Foreign Service were principally between Europe and Latin America, and one year in Pakistan as a management officer. I served in Milan, Frankfurt, Santo

Domingo, and Mexico City, and was "deputy ambassador", Deputy Chief of Mission, in Costa Rica.

I had three assignments in Washington, first working global support services strategy for the Bureau of Administration early in my career, later leading the e-Diplomacy initiative, which promotes technology in the practice of diplomacy. And from there, I went to join the Secretary's team, as Executive Director of the Executive Secretariat, where I was in charge of three Secretaries' tech platform and travel platform and all of the support services that the secretary receives in order to function and communicate both with the building and with our counterparts, even traveling around the globe and still having secure communications and full connectivity. That was my job for three years before I was nominated as an ambassador.

Q: *Where was your first assignment? Where did you go first?*

NELSON: My first assignment was typical consular work where I was in Santo Domingo for 18 months or 20 months of intensive, very intensive visa adjudication, both immigrant and non-immigrant visas.

Q: *And then, did you travel to the Balkans before, you know and at any point in your career for anything else? When was your first time going to the Balkans?*

NELSON: Actually, my first time going to the Balkans was with the Secretary, taking him at one point to Kosovo and at another point to Albania. So for me, the Balkans was a new region. But that helped me differentiate myself among my predecessors in terms of coming at the challenges with a very clean slate.

Q: *So do you remember, given that you were in the Foreign Service in the nineties, do you remember the war in the Balkans and the Dayton negotiations? Was that sort of a topic that was discussed among, you know, junior Foreign Service officers serving all around the world. Was there any sort of, you know, as just an American just observing what was going on or sort of, you know, as, as just an American, just observing what was going on, almost sort of a sense.*

NELSON: For much of the time of the war in Bosnia Herzegovina, I was in Frankfurt. My duties were very much on the support side. We had engagements supporting the missions going in and out of the Balkans. But the war wasn't very present in my daily work.

Q: *So what gets your process of being nominated as an ambassador to Bosnia was, again you said that you were kind of coming with a clean slate. What was something that- did you start studying? What was the training like to, as a preparation for you to go to the Balkans? What were you reading? What were you studying? Were you actively reading books about war? What was going through your mind when you knew that you're going to be heading to the Balkans?*

NELSON: Well, as soon as I found out, I, of course, wanted to start preparing as best I could. And unfortunately, because of the way the nomination process works and the reliance and deference to the Senate, after you're nominated and going through further vetting, eventually to have the White House announce you to the Senate, you cannot access any training support and there are heavy restrictions on whom you can engage. I could not even ask FSI, the Foreign Service Institute, for a reading list officially, but I did work through a list created for me by the Department's librarian. I consulted as broadly as I could, especially with all my predecessors as ambassador. And then my nomination was finally announced in August of 2018, which meant I could begin formal training, which included three weeks of the ambassador seminar and then intensive language training, which I was eager to accomplish. However, I got through about 10, 12 weeks of that to only have it shut down when in 2018 we went into a government shutdown. So all of the language instructors for my last eight weeks of preparation were laid off and I didn't have a chance to continue what would have been good momentum to arrive in Bosnia-Herzegovina with a better command of the language. I was doing the language half time because the other half of every day I was spending time consulting broadly across Washington with all the agencies and experts familiar with our history and our objectives in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Q: *What was it like studying a language like Bosnian and was it hard? Would you say that maybe potentially, studying language is a first introduction to a specific culture and understanding and, but I'm just curious, as someone coming with a clean slate, was it hard, just getting yourself into a pretty challenging language?*

NELSON: I found it a very challenging language. I speak German, Italian and Spanish, and I studied Latin for many years. There are some advantages with cognates and grammar, but I found it yet more challenging to learn Cyrillic, which is how the Serbian language is usually written. The overlap between Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian is very, very high. But I think it's very important to learn the language and it's a great advantage to have it. I was at a level where I could understand a lot, but I relied on interpreters to make sure that my message was very accurate and to make sure that I was hearing very accurately. But I made a real effort to speak, to deliver key speeches in Bosnian, which surprised a lot of people. I thought that was really important because it's an important way to show deference to and your respect for the local population and again, to get your message directly through. I found that time consuming, but an important investment of my time. Some of my peers in Bosnia and Herzegovina from other missions were typically there for four years, while US ambassadors typically stayed for three. Some of the foreign ambassadors put a lot more time into learning the language. I found that given the scope of responsibilities and the level of our ambitions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, setting aside yet more time to continue to learn the language was not something I found I could really prioritize. I didn't advance as much as I would have liked to during my time there.

Q: *Let me ask you about, like you said, you consulted with ambassadors that served there before you. What was that like and why was that important for you?*

NELSON: Well, I did the same thing when… I forgot to mention in my assignment history, I realize now, I forgot to mention that I was Consul General in Munich. So in that assignment, I realized that was a very different assignment for me because that was the first time I was in what we call the front office, the leader of the mission or the deputy leader of a mission and the face of the mission. I thought it was very important to reach out to all of my predecessors then, and it proved to be true that you meet many people during your assignment who say, I remember such and such predecessor. It's nice to be able to say, "yes, I talked to him, I talked to her" and connect so that people realize, hopefully we're projecting that we are a long integrated succession of one department. So that was important to me for Bosnia-Herzegovina. I reached all but one of the predecessors, met most of them in person. Those who I couldn't, I met online. Ambassador Menzies, I think at that time was in Iraq, but I had a chance to meet all of them and really hear their stories and their distillation because so often that separation of time helps you crystallize what you saw as the main challenges and outcomes of your efforts.

Q: *I ask you, so now you're going through, you're studying to learn about the country or preparing yourself for your assignment to serve as an ambassador, so how was your training structured? Were you studying the Dayton Accords, the legality? How did you approach? Because it's a pretty complex legal issue, the complex country, political structure and so on. How were you approaching? How was your understanding? What was the challenging part for you and how you were overcoming those, I guess, questions and challenges? Whether, as you said, whether that was, okay, I'm gonna call my predecessor, or I'm gonna talk to a professor, or I'm gonna look for a local contact. How was your training going on, and how were you navigating through those challenges that might have come up?*

NELSON: Well, there wasn't really an opportunity for training in Bosnia-specific issues. It was a lot of self-teaching and self-reading and consultation. And then, of course, in the language training, you have plenty of opportunities to talk to people who experienced the war and who grew up in the country. My self-guided studies, of course, focused on the history of the country, both the history in the 90s and all of the antecedents. I was mostly focused on not the particulars or the legalities of the history as much as the current challenges and who the players are today. What are the opportunities today to help the country move forward? It was important to understand where important advances had happened for the country, as well as where there were some choices that really were not helpful in hindsight. It's easy to study endlessly the shortcomings of the Dayton Peace Accords. I think it's important, and I think the anniversary is an important time to focus on the big picture, which I see as two key aspects. One is the fact that the US intervention in Bosnia Herzegovina finally, when it occurred with determination, was a deft use of coordinated military and diplomatic power. Our willingness to take the risk to intervene, to end a a genocide, proved to be a well-chosen risk when you look at the outcome and how we successfully ended the violence and suffered no combat casualties when we deployed 60,000 soldiers to implement the peace. We helped create a functional state, which unfortunately is highly dysfunctional. The second aspect of the anniversary is to look at how this peace has not expanded to create a more self-reinforcing path to progress

for the country, how incomplete reconciliation is for the country, and how deep divisions are still holding the country back. There are just a lot of factors in that.

Q: *So let me ask you, so now you're, do you remember when your confirmation hearing was and sort of a timeline when you got confirmed? When did you go? Can you maybe share the dates when that all happened, if you remember exactly?*

NELSON: I think my nomination was announced in August. I participated in the ambassador seminar in August or September. My hearing was in early October of 2018, and I was confirmed with about 20 other ambassadors on the last day of that Congress in 2018. My predecessor had been at post for four years and was ready to leave and leadership wanted me to arrive at the post promptly. I did my best to schedule an early swearing in and I was at post within seven weeks of my confirmation.

Q: *Do you remember the first day?*

NELSON: Rather fast.

Q: *Right, do you remember your first day when you arrived in Sarajevo? Or you probably arrived in Sarajevo, right?*

NELSON: I arrived in Sarajevo. I think it was on a Monday, to avoid the weekend. My second day was presenting my credentials to the foreign office. I think in that first week also, I presented my credentials to the president.

Q: *That was pretty fast like everything.*

NELSON: You know, it was a sign of the US being a key, the key partner in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Typically, ambassadors wait several weeks for the chance to meet to present their credentials to the president. Interestingly, the president in turn at that time was Milorad Dodik.

Q: That was probably interesting.

NELSON: Who was under sanctions from the US for his anti-Dayton behaviors and actions. And we had legal reviews about how I would be engaging him, given that he's a sanctioned individual. But of course, as the elected president of Bosnia and Herzegovina it was a necessity to meet with him.

Q: *Do you remember your first impressions of the country when you first arrived? What was going through your mind and what were you thinking? And then, thinking about your priorities, what were some of your priorities that you had that you were working on that were priorities for your first, let's say, 100 days in office.*

NELSON: My first impressions were of just being impressed with the history that you feel all around you. When you visit Sarajevo, there are tourist points, there are sites and

memorials around the city for various key points in history, including the assassination that unleashed World War I. But to see very much the city with its Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim influences, it's a very international city. It is truly, like the country, the crossroads of East and West. Just walking around, you feel that. I often say the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are its greatest asset. They are very resilient, very adaptive, and very friendly. It was a wonderful time to feel that welcome. But my focus in those 90 days was to really consult broadly with our partners, with stakeholders on what the opportunities were for finding some progress, what the strengths and weaknesses were of our approach to date, and to really identify who our best partners would be. Because the US is a superpower, but without allies, we cannot achieve much. Those who are blocking progress, the political leaders who are not keen on progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are very quick to find gaps between us and our allies. One of my focuses was to really project unity among the quint. The quint is the US, the UK, France, Italy, and Germany, with also robust participation of the EU representative. But also, because the EU has such high stakes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and such resources to offer with their offer of integration to the European Union, to help ensure that Washington and Brussels were as aligned as possible to create a solid wall to try and push the country in the right direction, which is integration to NATO and the EU. That was my starting priority number one.

Q: *Did you travel around the country in those early days?*

NELSON: As much as I could. An early trip would have been to Banja Luka, within an appropriate amount of time, because Banja Luka is the capital of one of the two entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Republika Srpska and the Federation. The leadership in Banja Luka likes to project themselves as independent and not part of the state. It's important for us as representatives of states to engage with the entity leadership, but not in a way that allows them to project themselves as state-like or state equivalent. So getting both entities to function more effectively according to European standards was an important objective of ours. But not all doors were open to us. When I arrived, the door cracked open a bit again. So we had a chance to take a new approach and resume conversations, and part of that is just to listen to people. To me it is important to just listen to people and to their version of history and their assessment of what our shared values and opportunities are.

Q: *Now, speaking of that, how important is it to listen to people as an ambassador? Do you remember certain concerns that you were hearing from people, whether people are raising questions about the Dayton Accords, whether they were raising about a huge unemployment rate, whether they were raising issues about people leaving Bosnia? Do you remember how people were seeing you as an ambassador, what they were asking you to do, what were certain concerns that were going on, people were thinking in their heads, local people in this case, primarily, when they were speaking to you as a newly arrived ambassador.*

NELSON: Well, I think there was a lot of effort to recruit me to a partisan side, project their constituency as the most disadvantaged and therefore deserving, more deserving of Washington support. So my team would always warn me what I would likely hear. Much

of what I heard was not harmonious with the US message of a well-functioning state of Bosnia-Herzegovina ready for European integration. You needed to hear their stories, but focus on the practical opportunities, because part of the problem is that for 30 years now, there has been so little progress of getting political leaders to make the compromises necessary to fight corruption, to build a civic state where rule of law prevails over the power of political connections. We and our allies were looking for any opportunity to try and build the practical cooperation that was necessary. There were only a few examples of success. One of the greatest examples was the defense reform in the early 2000s, where the parliament finally agreed to approve the integration of the three armies that survived the 90s war into one army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. You can imagine how difficult that was, and how essential that was that a country not have three armies that is just coming out of a horrific war. That was accomplished with strong US support and the US has been investing heavily in the armed forces and really having good results despite constant under-resourcing and under-funding of the institution. The B.I.H. Armed Forces are a great example of how Bosnia and Herzegovina does work; how these three constituent peoples and others actually do function well together when you don't have political leaders telling them to not cooperate. The armed forces were a great partner and were a good trusted partner of NATO, deploying to Afghanistan in things that they do well like policing and land mine clearing. That's what we hope to achieve with them being integrated into NATO. We need to do more work in the Ministry of Defense, which is why the NATO reform program was so important, which was a very important negotiation point in my first year there.

Q: *So let me go back to the question about divisions and people trying to pull you into their own camp and so on. Was that visible immediately? How is that? How are you navigating those? OK, you were talking to, let's say, you were talking to this Croat, the Bosnian Croat saying, you should be on our side. You're talking to the Bosniaks and they're pushing it to their side. How are you navigating that? What were certain tools that we were utilizing to navigate from the diplomatic toolbox?*

NELSON: Well, I could see that they were accusing us, Washington, of implicit bias; that we had some bias either in their favor or against them. I worked to disabuse them of that idea, emphasizing that we were actually focused on objective results and outcomes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The history of the war in the 1990s is so impactful and so lasting that even discussion of the victims during the war, unfortunately, is politically loaded. Unfortunately, we see tremendous effort by some political leaders to deny that genocide occurred in Srebrenica, to minimize the crimes. The lack of respect for victims on all sides, I think, extends broadly. Unfortunately, there are very few actors that are working in that space of really trying to promote reconciliation. Part of our work, part of USAID's work, was to try to support leaders of the four religions, the Jewish community, the Orthodox, the Catholic, and the Muslim communities in their engagement in inter-religious efforts to promote reconciliation; because unfortunately religion did play a role in that war and confronting that having current leaders address that is important for real reconciliation and real healing of the people.

Q: *So let me ask you, speaking of truth and reconciliation, and also the role that USAID played in that whole process, can you talk a little bit about why it was important for USAID to focus on that? Why it was important for an agency to do that, but also the question of truth and reconciliation- when you were there, it was, what, 20, 25 years after the day the course of war ended, the truth and reconciliation was a process that should have been potentially done earlier, but why was that still a topic of a discussion and why it was important to deal with the truth and reconciliation. I know you already mentioned the history, but I'm curious more from the political standpoint about whether it was necessary to, you know, bring Bosnia and Herzegovina to the next stage in the implementation or toward integration to Europe and NATO structures and so on. I'm curious about that.*

NELSON: Well, let me talk a bit about — although my predecessors will have very rich stories about this — some of our earliest efforts were to set up the Center for Missing Persons, which really did revolutionary work in identifying victims of the war. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, they continue to find remains of victims of the war. In the case of Srebrenica, there was a conscious effort to hide the remains. Many remains were scattered to different locations around the territory. These remains are being found, even tiny fragments, and can be identified to give closure to the families, who only know their father or brother or uncle disappeared. That was important. The documentation is important and to support the efforts to appropriately memorialize victims.

We, along with the OSCE and our allies, tried hard and vainly to get leaders to have any kind of joint commemoration of victims. In fact, I believe there are only two towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina that have memorials that are not just to one of the constituent peoples. Even though in just about every village, there are victims on more than one side, just the idea of commemorating victims on the other side was a political no-go zone. That, of course, was pretty important because if you can't get past that, which happened 25-30 years ago, it gives you a good sense of how they're unable to have dialogue with each other. Because in private, leaders were all used to dealing with each other and engage in politics, but to publicly agree on a compromise was hugely expensive electorally because the formula remains in Bosnia and Herzegovina that you win elections mostly through promising to defend your constituency better from the threats from another constituency, which requires you to remind people that that other constituency is a threat. The fear of a recurrence of violence, of recurrence of war is really under the surface for people and just is a key obstacle to progress in the country. Acknowledging objectively the cost of the war was always important, and trying to promote effective reconciliation was a fundamental predicate for real progress in the country coming together and establishing strong rule of law where all peoples are equally protected and not feeling threatened.

Q: *Right. Let me ask you, as you were saying it was an ongoing process and during the elections were utilized to basically remind people of those divisions and enemies. Was it something that basically just required a little bit more work from the US or Europe, just more engagement on that front to move it beyond the state of affairs that was at that time and remains still to this present day about the truth and reconciliation being still work in*

progress? The question is pretty much, "what required, were your efforts successful? Did they improve the truth and reconciliation process? And what were the sort of results at the end of your efforts?"

NELSON: Well, I think that without our efforts, the situation would certainly be worse. I don't think any of our teams and partners engaged in this are satisfied with the results, but they are undiminished in seeing how important it is. The problem is that it is so intertwined with politics. For citizens, at that personal level, it's so important for them to be able to work through that trauma and to be in an environment that supports that. Part of the block was political, a big part of the block was political; a part of the solution needs to be political, but it's also a whole of society challenge, which is why it was important to engage even the churches, even the religious leaders among civil society, for these efforts.

It reinforced for me why the European future of Bosnia-Herzegovina is so important. When you look at the history of Europe, you had peoples and states engaging in recurring conflicts. The Balkans are a bit of a microcosm of that same history. You have people and states engaging in recurring conflict. I began to wonder if the result becomes so cyclical, because people suffer what we now understand better as *post-traumatic stress disorder*, whether whole countries don't suffer from PTSD and end up falling back into a renewed conflict. I think that we've learned in our recent history and our support for a Europe whole free and peace, both through NATO and through the European Union, that these distinctions of nationalism, of nationality, and of borders, that the less critical they are to differentiating between the opportunities and the security and the prosperity you enjoy and the freedoms you enjoy, the better. I mean, Europe ended constant cycles of conflict. I think what is underestimated right now is the key role that NATO played in that by bringing France, Germany, and U.K. into a strong alliance, bringing Greece and Turkey into an alliance, and integrating the former Warsaw Pact members. I mean, it's really proven the whole concept of cooperation and collective security is priceless. That these different states decide, the cost of war is just too much. We're going to agree to try our best to protect each other instead of fighting with each other again and again, because there's much more to be gained from recognizing that we have common enemies and we have common threats, but we also have a common interest in peace and security, which we need to protect together.

That formula, I think, is essential for the Balkans, and that's why I worry we lack a bolder vision for how actually NATO integration for all of the Balkans is the true formula for lasting peace and security. That will not be easy for Serbia. But we need to think that boldly, and it may take a generation. Serbia surrounded by NATO members is not comparable to Austria surrounded by NATO members. Austria's a benign state that supports multilateral peace efforts and peacekeeping around the world. That promise of NATO is an important part of US engagement. I did everything I could to make that an important part of our diplomacy. Our engagement of Bosnia-Herzegovina on security levels and on reform issues was very much as a NATO ally.

Q: *Let me ask you-*

NELSON: Many people forget what NATO offered them, all of them, in terms of putting an end to this idea that we're going to end up at war again with our neighbors.

Q: *Let me ask you, speaking of NATO reform, you were talking about getting Bosnia to NATO,integration of the military and so on. Do you think given that was that sort of prerequisite as let's fix security first once people start feeling safer, the security piece is going to remove those ethnic tribal, hatred or whatever, however you want to define it, or actually ability to utilize ethnicity as political or negatively utilizing it as a part of the political rhetoric? That once people start feeling that, their benefits are going to follow. Better benefits such as economic benefits, people returning back, Bosnia becoming more prosperous.*

NELSON: There is that important effect on the citizen level that they feel that they are safe and secure. Institutionally and for the nation it was very important. You know our experience has been that to build a democracy and to support a democracy it needs to begin on the foundation of a security sector that is built on and respects democratic principles. Look at the integration of the former Warsaw Pact members and some Balkan States to NATO. They all joined NATO before they were able to join the EU. NATO looks mostly at reforming the security sector and bringing that up to compatibility with democracy. Once you've done that, it becomes a more secure environment for business, a more secure environment for political compromise. It was an important prerequisite, which I think can be the same prerequisite for Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, there is not unanimity among political leadership in Bosnia-Herzegovina about NATO integration, even though there was a unanimous commitment by political leadership to make that Bosnia-Herzegovina's goal.

Q: *Let me ask Russia-*

NELSON: Here we get into Russian influence where Russia very much doesn't want to see that happen. They like to see the wounds in the Western Balkans remain open. The idea of the Western Balkans being able to achieve, of receiving that full promise of collective security, which NATO has consistently offered to its members, is very counter to Russia's interests.

Q: *All right. In other words, pretty much bringing Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO, not only brings security, but also ends annex 1A, pretty much the first military implementation of the Dayton Accords and basically moves Bosnia to the next level of integration. We're finishing something that, the part of the integration of peace implementation that was maybe long overdue or that is necessary to be achieved. Let me ask you about Bosnia, Bosnian military. We're talking about integration of the military and different ethnicities working together. What was your interaction when you visited the military? What were you seeing? How were you seeing that? What were impressions and how you were witnessing firsthand the process that was ongoing in that cooperation that existed within, among those three ethnicities to one of the armed forces bases there.*

NELSON: I think my first trip out of Sarajevo was to Herzegovina, near Mostar, to one of the armed forces bases where trainers from Bosnia-Herzegovina's National Guard partner in America, which is the National Guard of Maryland, had been leading a training disaster response and medical recovery. They did an exercise for dignitaries. I was very happy to go there and have that opportunity to observe because all the training we offered was available to all of the members of the armed forces and they competed for them in a professional way. Any of the deployments that we helped them obtain with NATO, for example, proved to be a great professional opportunity. You could see that level of professionalism when they were given opportunities to work together and to stretch their abilities. That was a wonderful time for me to begin to emphasize this positive potential, the existing potential of Bosnia Herzegovina, and the intent of our assistance to build that kind of sustainable cooperation within the institutions.

Q: *All right, let me ask you now, let's move to the educational side and education. Were there any efforts that you were doing in the realm of education, school reforms? What was sort of your engagement with the next generation of Bosnians? What were certain priorities that you had in that area of work? I'm curious to hear more about that.*

NELSON: The US Embassy had been trying very hard for years to encourage education reform. One of the fundamental challenges is the continuing segregation of classrooms. In the Federation, many schools separate the Croat and the Bosniak students in the same building. Unlike their parents, they do not enjoy the opportunity to meet and interact on a daily basis with members of the other constituent peoples in their community. That is a huge, lasting perpetuation of the divisions. The OSCE and UNESCO, which had the lead in the international community to try to encourage education reform, were very frustrated in getting any improvement in that. We even tried to focus on technical schools, like the music school in Mostar, where, like in many US communities, magnet schools are a very useful model for promoting good integration across communities. Even that faced really fundamental resistance, that even music students were not allowed to study together. That was hugely frustrating, but that was something where we expected the OSCE would have the lead and to their great frustration, there was very little willingness to advance that. We also tried to encourage reform. This was, this is one of the areas where the politicians' failure and eagerness to stay divided is really hurting the country. We even could not get them all to agree to participate in PISA testing, which is the OECD's offering of universal testing to assess students at… I think it's at the sixth grade and the ninth grade level, and compare them globally on their progress. Really important accountability for any parent in any country, but blocked largely over partisan issues, but it really came down to accountability. The Serb leaders were very resistant to this idea that this kind of test would be offered from the state level, insisting that education must be local and that giving into a state level, global level, that tests of accountability like this were somehow a weakening of local control.

However, we had a very good program supporting civic education across Bosnia and Herzegovina, supporting a local NGO, and cultivating a community of teachers of civics with better curriculum and better programs. That was a very highly effective program, grassroots, and students enjoyed the opportunities that that offered. When I looked at it, I

saw that achieving educational policy reform was hitting a brick wall. Seeking ways to affect change, I heard from my team that they were thinking about opportunities to support youth leaders more effectively. I embraced that idea, making that core to our outreach. We called the program *Youth Leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina,* which in the local language, sounds like the acronym *BOLD*. This was a program that offered training and workshops and ultimately fellowships to students, to young people between 18 and 35, interested in learning how to lead in civic activities or in entrepreneurship because we found ourselves often having to appeal to the next generation, given that the current generation of political leadership was very blunt in telling us and telling the public as well, that they would fail to get the country into the EU. That compelled us to inspire and prepare the next generation to get that done. Helping entrepreneurs and helping young people learn how to organize and how to learn to create change was a tremendously popular initiative; so popular and effective that since I left, the program has expanded across the Western Balkans with a counterpart program in Serbia and North Macedonia. I think Montenegro and Albania are looking at it as well. Because we have to invest in the next generation.

Q: *Do you remember if you visited local schools? Was that on your schedule often or?*

NELSON: It was a standard part of my schedule whenever I travelled or when I was looking into events in Sarajevo. We also had a network of 10 American Corners, which were corners in a library that were sponsored by a local school or local municipality. The corners were a meeting point for young people — staffed by local young people — to come together and talk and get training or engage in conversations about the future of the region, the future of their communities, get skills like robotics and coding or participate in civic activities. We had multiple avenues for engaging the younger generation. COVID-19 really helped us break out into the online level, and each of those centers had an online presence, but COVID-19 made us realize that a lot of this bridging and connecting of young people didn't have physical limits.

Q: *I'm curious about resources that even students had at their home. Was the internet a big thing in Bosnia and Herzegovina that most people have access to? And you're saying it transforms. Did it provide, because I know the American corner often people forget about them, especially, if you are not in the area for them to serve as a soft power tool, but I'm curious, how was that transition? And what were you able to do that you were not able to do? When it was limited to in person when people are just focusing on in person?*

NELSON: COVID cramped two years of my engagement and my team's engagement. Our approach was first to make sure that our team was safe and to help the country protect as many people as possible. At first, that was helping them with materials to try to combat the virus. Eventually that turned into vaccine support as well. That was a difficult time for us. We were in direct competition with the Chinese and Russians. We ended up having the best vaccine and people knew that. But the Chinese responded quickly, making theirs available first, and the Russians as well. While the US focused on America-first and making sure that everybody at home was vaccinated before we offered it to others. We lost a good bit of ground in demonstrating that we were there to support

them. We did our best and we, with NATO's help, responded very quickly bringing in supplies that we could to help. But I think it impacted us all in two ways. One, for us in the practice of diplomacy, my mandate to my team was first to stay safe. We succeeded in that we had no casualties among our employees, which was different from the experience of many missions.

However, at the same time, my message to the team was, we're safe and we're still working. We are not going to think about how our objectives will be diminished. We're going to think about how we will overcome these restrictions and still engage. The team was very adept at this and realized, for example, some workshops they'd set up, where they expected people to come to Sarajevo for the training of prosecutors, for example… Well, we moved them online! Actually we had better participation because people didn't have to lose two days of work just to drive into the capital to participate in the training. So offering that kind of online training well is something we're all learning how to do. Our best universities in America are doing it at the executive level. There's no reason for us to not be doing this. It made us realize that we have these resources, we have these abilities, and we weren't using them effectively. And even in terms of our mobility around the country, as an ambassador, once we realized that many of our meetings we could have online, that meant I could still join meetings even if I was on the way to visit some corner of the country. And that was true for everyone, everyone in my team. So for me, it was true when we returned to the in-office routines. I kept reminding our team that we've learned that our value here is getting away from the flagpole. We have to remember to do that, to not think we're getting our job done by staying in the office every day, but by engaging well outside the capital and really getting that broadest engagement possible with all corners of the country and partners all across the country.

Q: *Right, so it is your ability to have those workshops, removing even budgetary constraints that are constraining you from, and also allowing you to get a greater participation. Let me ask you, was there any impact, positive impact COVID had on Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country and their ethnic problems? Was there unity? What was the sense in the country? Were people again utilizing the ethnic rebels and ethnic past to divide a society or they were getting more united with?*

NELSON: I think for anyone interested in engaging, whether it's for business or education or civic engagement or defending the environment or whatever is your cause, as more and more of these program offerings moved online, people were better able to connect and empower themselves. I think for the government as well, every government had to find a way to continue to operate. For us, it was an important opportunity because one of our efforts was to fight corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina by helping them digitize more of their services. At the height of COVID, government agencies were all trying to serve without engaging people physically. Some of them had the means, some of them realized they needed to develop it. There was a good acceleration of the uptake of the kind of platforms available for engagement, but also for interaction. From our point of view, digitizing more of these services is important for standardizing the service, but also removing all of the rent seeking points of contact where people find themselves having to

pay some kind of unofficial fee to get the service from their government. It gave us a lot of uptake of opportunities.

Q: *It had a good positive impact, even though there were negative consequences.*

NELSON: Frankly, every crisis is an opportunity for diplomacy. Earthquake diplomacy is when there's an earthquake, in Greece or Turkey, for example, and you often find them among the first responders across borders, even though they are historical rivals. A lot of our support of the security sector is around disaster response, because we get less political disagreement in a disaster about the need to cooperate. The COVID crisis, the COVID pandemic was another opportunity for that. It challenged some people's thinking when President Vucic in Serbia had organized to have a very ample stock of vaccines, and he was able to actually offer vaccines to neighbors across the Balkans. Many citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were debating whether they wanted to go to Belgrade to accept help from the Serbian government. Many of them did, because they realized that they didn't want to wait any longer to get the vaccine or to get their parents the vaccine when their parents are at risk.

Q: *Do you remember advocating for American vaccines? You're moving through a response during that period of time. Was there, what was the response for example, from the Republika Srpska, that was, you know, traditionally has been opposed to American influence and American involvement? Was COVID changing that bad relationship as well?*

NELSON: What we were able to bring in was often with NATO's help, actually US military help, which I always tried to englobe as part of: “This is what a NATO ally does”. Even though it was bilateral assistance, I was looking for the opportunity to make that point. I think that the Republika Srpska went out of their way to seek opportunities to cooperate with China and accept their less effective vaccine. The Republika Srpska did not see this as an opportunity to improve cooperation with the US.

Q: *Was this a good opportunity to advance NATO reform, given that you were saying NATO allies and just presenting, you know, this is what is possible when we work together and cooperate together in demonstrating that mission to the Bosnian population and also, explaining how their future is gonna look as a NATO member.*

NELSON: I thought it was a good opportunity to promote NATO and our combatant commander supported me. Even though it was US help arriving, I always wanted a picture of the NATO flag as well. Much of our work was not NATO driven, but bilateral, but our objective was to build a NATO partner, to build interoperability with NATO. I always wanted to have that co-branding. I found my UK counterpart, the UK ambassador, was equally enthusiastic to do this. The other allies, less so. And to the point of key allies, who were also very proactive in their support of crisis response, there were Hungary and Turkey. And while much of their assistance also arrived on military planes, their way of presenting it was, “this is help from our president”. Their intent was to build that kind of client connection instead of “we are partner nations”. That was clearly a

missed opportunity when NATO, if we had approached this collectively, could have helped remind more citizens about NATO's value, which is what we needed to do, and make it less of a divisive issue in election campaigns.

Q: *Or was there any- were there any efforts from your end as an ambassador and from the embassy to expand internet service, or the the challenges that we face here in the US, including down in Texas, where some communities were out of service and they were not able to connect and people sitting in front of McDonald's and connecting and to do their schoolwork. I'm curious whether there are any efforts in that realm, you know, because it was an unprecedented event that happened. I'm just curious whether Bosnia was ready for it.*

NELSON: Well the gaps and importance of connectivity became very clear — and this again was another example of where the pandemic created some progress — because it became very clear when all students had to be equally connected. I visited one village where students had to climb the mountain to download their homework and upload their homework because their school and the nearest signal was on the other side. It was way in the distant valley, and they had to do that every day. Building that infrastructure directly through USAID assistance was not part of our work. We were looking at the business side and the business conditions and encouraging market reforms, which would help consolidate the telecom sector, help invite investment into the telecom sector. The telecom sector itself is divided among the three constituent peoples. That does not create a good competition or good environment for investment that's necessary for the country to build capacity. We were looking at a higher level.

Going back to our engagement with students. It's a good opportunity to talk about the depth and the dysfunctionality of the partisan divides that political leaders choose to perpetuate. One of the most popular programs for schoolrooms that the U.S. government offers is called *GLOBE*, which is a NASA program for elementary and high schools and secondary schools to offer students the opportunity to engage in scientific measurements and share those measurements back to NASA and the global community, and learn about the environment, learn about space, learn science. It's a very popular program at no cost to local schools. Everywhere that I've served, you find that NASA and space are a wonderful, wonderful, inspiring idea for youth. Students really love this stuff. You'd find a few schools that were interested in pursuing that, so we wanted to get the country signed up for GLOBE. In order to do that, you had to have one representative at the country level, because NASA deals, country by country, with one counterpart for the Globe program. The Srpska leaders objected to this, because this would be an erosion of their autonomy, because education could not be "managed" at the national- that is at the state level. For that reason, we could never get them to agree to have just one person designated, which would have probably, in the style of B.I.H. administration, would have been rotated among the three constituent peoples. The fact that that function should belong to a state ministry was a no-go, a red line for them. The country has no participation in this basic, hugely popular, no-cost classroom project. Even though the town of Jezero in Republika Srpska had a wonderful NASA celebration which I attended.

Jezero is the name in the local language word for lake. It is the site on Mars where the Mars Rover landed.

In fact, it was our civic engagement team, our civil military components from EUCOM, from the European command, who discovered this opportunity and went out of their way to develop this partnership with that school. They got NASA to recognize in writing the linkage between Jezero Mars and Jezero Srpska. When the landing happened, we live-streamed it and the kids were just transported. I had hoped that this young mayor who encouraged this kind of interaction with us could be an example for a new way for Serbs to cooperate and benefit from US partnership. Alas, her courage to welcome that kind of partnership could not be scaled up to the entity level.

Q: *You said it was very- I can imagine just, you know, kids sitting in a classroom and just seeing that it was, it's just unbelievable that even something that is universal language as space was politicized and used for political purposes. Were there any similar initiatives that he was trying to push that also received a pushback that the rest of the world would see as an educational scientific experience of worth that is, provides education and what we would call a high impact experience for students.*

NELSON: Since I left, and my successor can address this, the Republika Srpska got very strict about any kind of cooperation to the point of even interfering with any classroom engagement. It even goes beyond the U.S. I was reminded during a recent visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina that in the Republika Srpska, they have a new anti-NGO law, which even restricts faculty's opportunities to cooperate with civil society partners promoting education. It's really, really gotten worse apparently.

I'm reminded of another area of easy reforms that remained out of reach. In my effort to build stronger unity among our partners, we expanded that to the IMF, the International Monetary Fund. They were trying to offer Bosnia and Herzegovina very favorable financing terms for their budgetary needs. Those offers always come with strings. The strings are basically to achieve basic common sense improvements in governance and in business friendliness and government effectiveness and efficiency. We could not get Serbs to agree to any of those. We finally agreed with the IMF, I believe, on nine priorities. The easiest one was a digital signature law. There are many breaks in functionality between the entities. They are even lacking a single digital signature law in the country.

Every country has fundamental key standards like that, which enable investment, enable the governments to develop, enable businesses to expand online services. We could not get them to agree. Instead of accepting the IMF's incentives for reforms and an unbeatable one percent interest rate, the Republika Srpska auctioned government bonds in Vienna at five times the rate. Even the accounting rules differ. They insist companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina have to have one set of books according to Federation accounting laws and one set of books according to Srpska accounting laws. The idea of agreeing on one standard that makes it easy for business to work both sides is anathema

to those who want to keep the country divided or create extra jobs for regulators to create extra standards.

So in our assistance, in much of our assistance we found we had to organize in ways that would get around the political roadblocks. Two of the programs which USAID found to be advantageous, well, three are examples. One program which completed while I was there was work with the agricultural sector to help them raise, and help the governments in Bosnia and Herzegovina raise, their standards to compete in the EU market. At the end of the day, politically and economically, farmers are always important. We had a good level of uptake on that kind of work where we were able to help them open, for example, their producers of dairy to export into the European market. That was important. But the two other areas where we found that the passions of citizens helped create real organic cooperation was our support of tourism, which is creating real jobs that aren't controlled by political masters, as the tourism sector had great growth potential. It was achieving double digit growth without much help and without any coordinated strategy from the government leaders. We encouraged the agencies to have some coordinated strategy, but also we worked through the sector side, the providers. Everybody in Bosnia and Herzegovina really loves their country and its natural beauty. We overcame resistance to selling it as one destination and helped them take advantage of growth. We promote that as an important way to build organic interaction across political divides. Third, the civil society sector was facing a lot of challenges. We found that there's a very strong grassroots, organic effort and commitment in Bosnia and Herzegovina to work to protect the environment. That was an important part of civil society for us to strengthen, including help like legal support against lawfare, that is opportunistic lawsuits by vested interests against these community and environmental activists. Organizations often found themselves with these crushing disinformation campaigns or legal campaigns against them. A key purpose of our efforts, which unfortunately right now in Washington are not apparent to the new administration, was to work to strengthen that kind of citizen-based activism to fight corrupt interests and protect the environment.

Q: *So let me ask you, speaking of still education, what was sort of a response to Fulbright, Ben Franklin, all those resources that we have to bring people to the US to study. Ethnically, who was more applying for them, how were they accepted within the community? Were people happy to apply for it, or was it more kind of, we got to educate them. Can you talk a little bit about that, if you remember?*

NELSON: Those were hugely important to us. I mean, at the top, at the apex of these exchange programs is the Fulbright, which is the most expensive because it's talking about bringing in a professional for intensive studies, either in America or an American coming to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It's also extended to younger students who would come in as teaching assistants. In my time, that kind of assistance was welcome. And, let me catch up with my thoughts. I was talking about the Fulbright and exchange programs. And as I mentioned, the BOLD program that we launched was part of this suite, part of this scope. During the first Trump administration — this was before I arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina — the president tried to cancel all exchange programs and he ran into strong resistance from Congress. Fulbright is named for Senator Fulbright of Arkansas,

who had the foresight to realize how important this kind of engagement is for America to win hearts and minds.

Fulbright alumni include dozens of prime ministers and heads of state and a number of Nobel Peace Prize winners who, when we recruited them for this program, were not necessarily our friends. If we choose well, we often choose people who don't understand America and who need to understand America. Those kinds of programs for leadership are invaluable. There's another useful one called the Invitational Visitor Leadership Program, which brings in people focused on a specific issue, often from a regional grouping. They visit three cities in America for three weeks, usually including Washington, to look at how Americans approach the issues of, Americans approach the issues of health care or homelessness or veteran care or housing or policing. All these community issues, which require the best solutions, involve citizens who are mobilized and empowered. But the overwhelming majority of congressmen and senators know that it's a good use of money, and I hope they're going to have the courage to speak up again and defend these.

It reminds me of one of my successes as ambassador was getting one agreement from the three presidents related to education. As a former Peace Corps volunteer, when I saw that Peace Corps was being invited to Montenegro, which is already a EU candidate, and was setting up a program in North Macedonia, I thought Bosnia and Herzegovina would benefit even more from a Peace Corps program, which often includes opportunities to support education. Those programs are negotiated between the Peace Corps and the host country, but to get the presidents to agree to invite the Peace Corps back was one of my successes. That success is still on the books, but it was hugely interrupted by COVID, which then compelled the Peace Corps to call back all volunteers globally, and to depopulate all of their programs. They were in no position to look at developing a new program in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, I did get the three presidents I dealt with to agree to that. I hope it will be an opportunity in the future for us to expand U.S. engagement, especially at that people-to-people level and community support level.

Q: *So let me, Eric, I think we might stop here and then we can continue at the next time because I think both of us are getting a little bit tired and I'm also running to a meeting. Okay, so I think what we can do is let me just answer. This is the end of part one.*

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Q: *Today is February 27th. This is part two with Eric Nelson. All right, Eric, let's start with elections. Did you do so when you arrived- sorry, so you arrived in Bosnia in 2019. Were there any election schedules around that time, you know, 2019 or were there later during COVID or after COVID?*

NELSON: They had just had elections in 2018. Every two years they have elections. An issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that they do have this two-year cycle because in 2018

they had the presidential and entity level elections. And then after two years, they have the local elections at municipal level and each recur every four years. So you have this kind of constant cycle of electioneering and it complicates the ability to shift the political will toward compromise when they are quickly moving back into campaign mode.

Q: *I understand that Bosnia and Herzegovina's political situation is very complex and that there are various levels of government. Talk a little bit more about the structure of Bosnian political system, how it works, and whether that created complexities and created this reality of constantly running for office?*

NELSON: Well, I mean, that's hard to really be brief about, I think. One of the fundamental aspects of the Dayton Constitution was the recognition of the three constituent peoples and giving them a clear division of powers and the ability to veto initiatives that would be against the national interests of any one of the constituent people. This guarantees representation. There are multiple, complex formulas for how representation is achieved. However, it also tends to divide the political parties along ethnic lines. There's a very strong division because the Serb parties only compete in Srpska and the Federation parties don't tend to try to compete in Srpska either. And the minority Serbs in the Federation are not as well represented because the parties tend to have an ethnic identity, very much pursuing identity politics. All of these elections are important because each of these parties is looking for success either at the national level or at the local level.

Q: All right. Let me ask you now without those local levels and complexities and people running for office, because I understand that there is always a disagreement the way that, for example, Croats are saying, "we're disadvantaged because, we're competing in Federation, they're going against the Bosniaks," and then you have reality and Republika Srpska competing just in that entity. Was that creating a difficult situation in a way?

NELSON: A difficult situation in a way? Well, yes, there are lots of challenges because any government formation gets complicated at the state level. It has to include an array of parties. It's hard to get the votes, and the government - and any laws - has to be approved in the Parliament and the House of Peoples. There's an excess of checks and balances. The main challenge for Bosnia-Herzegovina is that it needs to move ahead on this structure. The European Court of Human Rights has been clear on this with many, many rulings about the incompatibility of the BiH constitution with European rights. The fact that ethnic identity is determinant in elections and in candidacy, and that representation is limited by the Constitution, this is clearly incompatible with the country's commitments to the COE, the Council of Europe. That court, the Court of Human Rights, has sided with citizens who are saying they're being discriminated against for whether or not they belong to one of the three main constituent peoples. To update the Constitution is going to require a dilution of those restrictions, an easing of those restrictions and an evolution towards every citizen being equal. This is very difficult for the political leaders to achieve because this would compel them to compete among all citizens and would dilute the veto powers that they have. For the majority that identify as Bosniak and those who do not want to identify with any of the constituent peoples — they just want to be a citizen —

there's a great frustration that this is not being achieved. That there's not one person one vote. For the Croats, who are the smallest group, they see very clearly the dilution of power that they would suffer and may not trust that the rule of law would actually prevail where everybody would be treated equally. They wouldn't want to be surrendering power to a majority that may continue to be corrupt and discriminate against other constituent peoples.

Q: *So let me ask you, so when, I don't know if you know this, but I'm curious so when they go to polling place, do they have their ID says whether they're a member of, whether they're a Bosnian Croat or Bosniak, how did they know for who they're, for which ballot they're gonna vote?*

NELSON: They don't have to identify but the number of candidates and the selection of candidates has to meet these constituent-people formulas.

Q: *I see, so its more-*

NELSON: A lot of the issues are around the presidency right now. They have a three person presidency: one from the Croat peoples, one from the Serb and one from Bosniak. The Constitution recognizes "and all others", but those others don't have an opportunity to be a candidate. If you are a Serb in the Federation, you cannot run for President. Only one Croat and one Bosniak can be elected from the Federation.

Q: *I see. So there's no Serb on the ballot in the Federation, right?*

NELSON: Yes, for President.

Q: *Yeah, we'll move on from this. Let me ask you. What was the role of the embassy and your role during those election cycles when they're when they had elections? What would you do? Did you go? Did you do observation missions or were you pretty much just following on the side?*

NELSON: Our role was to support the process, to support the Central Election Commission, to help them be impartial, to protect them from undue influence, to support them through USAID support, principally, with capacity building and system strengthening. We also were active in supporting civil society. There's a very effective civil society engagement led by Pod Lupom, which translates as under the magnifying glass. Pod Lupom recruits observers. Each party will have observers at the polling places. Having an independent observer from civil society is important so they try to cover as many polling stations as possible, and we and others support those efforts.

There's a lot of work to be done. There's catching up to do on election systems. They had a pilot last year of new systems with scanners to improve election security. The EU, I believe, will be funding that more going forward. There are, after every election, ODIHR recommendations; the Office of Democracy of OSCE. They observe the elections carefully and they come up with recommendations on where they see weaknesses. We

would be active at all times trying to get the officials to implement those reforms, those recommendations, whether for administrative action or parliamentary action. Of course, we would deploy and do observation the best we could. I would visit the election commission and the civil society headquarters as a show of support for the process of a good democratic election. We also would be very careful to remain impartial. Several months before the election day, we would stop taking meetings with candidates in order to avoid any appearance of endorsement.

Q: *Did you work on any electoral reform or try to include those scanners, did you play any role in that? And because I know elections are under OSCE, pretty much under their control. But I'm curious whether there was any sort of help coming from the embassy and from your initiatives coming from you to digitize and maybe even simplify the process.*

NELSON: The OSCE has the lead on this and we would always follow. Of course USAID support was in alignment with what the OSCE saw as critical needs and other donors worked to do the same. OSCE really works at the process level. At the political level, we would take a more active role along with the EU, or sometimes the quint, the quint ambassadors, to try to really shore up political will to make some of these reforms. There were two main engagements while I was- two main initiatives while I was there.

One was for the electoral issues in the city of Mostar. Mostar had not had an election, I think, for 14 years because the city charter was in dispute over how the city council would be constituted, how the districts were assigned. The city historically had a predominantly, but broadly shared, population of Bosniaks and Croats, and a significant Serb population. Since the war, many Serbs did not return and there's been a segregation of the city. For many years, they had a mayor acting and an administrator in support. The mayor was in poor health, but also one of the European Court of Human Rights decisions supported a request from a local citizen, Irma Baralija, who sued that she had no option to vote or be a candidate. The court's ruling was very different from their typical rulings because they came back and said: this is against European democratic standards; It must be corrected; If the parliament does not correct it, then the court of BIH is instructed to correct it. We had been, and my predecessor, and I don't know how many of her predecessors, had been trying to encourage the leaders to find the compromises they needed to update the charter and be able to have elections. Armed with this deadline — we focused on the need for them to come to an agreement by the deadline. Through a lot of mediation and facilitation locally, we were getting to the point where local leaders seemed to be finding a formula that they thought would work.

So what we did was form a different quint. It was the EU and the US especially leading on trying to pressure the political leaders to come to find the compromise in time for parliament to ratify it and get it into code so that the election could proceed. We also had very active support from the British ambassador, the High Rep, and the OSCE ambassador. This was one of those moments when US leadership was really essential because without the US really leaning on leaders, there just wasn't enough political will. Between the EU and the US, we were able to really lean on the leaders. And then the crux became getting the national party leaders to agree. None of them find it very conducive to

compromise, because they're instantly criticized for the compromise, so they won't take a risk. There was also, I think, another unwritten risk. That was that showing that this kind of dispute could be resolved went against their core platform of showing that this division is going to be eternal, therefore you need to continue to support our divisive politics. We got those national leaders to support the local consensus and to forward the proposal to parliament so that it could be legislated. There was a lot of criticism because it was not a perfect solution, but it was a very good solution and it enabled Mostar to have elections. They now have a mayor and a city council and a strong opposition and good oversight and law. By the way, across BiH, politics tends to work better at the local level where the officials are closer to the people and therefore are more accountable. That was a big success. A lot of people were encouraged by that and we had hoped that we could carry that momentum into further reforms that were necessary for the EU process. And resolving Mostar was one of the highest priorities for the EU to assess Bosnia-Herzegovina's suitability for membership. Because if you can't resolve a dispute like this that's so fundamentally rejected on human rights grounds, on democracy grounds, you're not a good EU candidate. So it was very high on the EU's list for a step that needed to be taken. And we'd hoped that we could continue that in 2021 which was, of course, the COVID year, but also a year that quickly became very partisan. And I could talk about some of the reasons for that.

Q: *Before we go to that, let me ask you, so this was 2020, right?*

NELSON: Yeah. 2020. Mostar was...

Q: *Or was it 2019?*

NELSON: No, it was 2020 because we were there, we were there with masks on.

Q: *Let me ask you, there was certainly a window of opportunity to do that, as you explained, but what were certain lessons that you learned from that experience that guided you through the remainder of your time as an ambassador to Bosnia? Was there any lesson that you learned like, this can be possible, we can try to use some similar model to something else? Was that experience encouraging?*

NELSON: Well there are a couple of lessons. One was the value of a deadline. I think that was the most important lesson: given a deadline, no matter what this would be resolved. You can either resolve it locally, take responsibility for the agreement locally, or let it be decided by the court and maybe get something that's even less favorable for the local needs by ceding the decision to the judges. It was a good exercise for where the agency should be, with the local leaders. I didn't engage until my team at a working level had really been able to facilitate discussions far enough to where it was close enough for us to come in and help them get across the finish line. Another lesson was that these are things that can't be dictated by outsiders. They could be, but that doesn't meet the purpose of how democracy works. Sometimes you hear, "just impose a solution on us". They could have taken that passive approach and let the court come down with some ruling, but this was a real good affirmation of how democracy is supposed to work. It was

another lesson for the value of unity among the friends of Bosnia-Herzegovina: the key leaders; the fact that the quint supported this, that the EU and Washington were closely aligned, that the High Rep played a supporting role, that the OSCE welcomed our efforts, and that the British ambassador weighed in as much as he could as well. You know, it really made the difference having good solidarity to prevent anybody trying to evade responsibility. The deadline, the unity, and also the lesson, as I mentioned, that they can solve these problems. There is no inherent flaw, there's no inherent reason in Bosnia Herzegovina why these peoples can't continue to live together peacefully. The reality is that there's much resistance to diluting those special constitutional restrictions that exist and allowing the country to become yet more democratic where each person is equal.

Q: *That case demonstrates the power of local politicians, local community, and building a trust from get it done rather than trying to do, for example, a constitutional reform on a national level.*

NELSON: At the end, at the local level, mayors and local officials realized they need to take care of their constituents so they're more agreeable to cooperation, because they live side by side. However sometimes you have the national interests coming in and pulling in the opposite direction.

Q: *Do you remember what was sort of a feedback on the ground from regular people and most people on the streets? What were people thinking after everything was done? Was that, they were excited about it, finally there was an improvement or there was reaction of another day and just regular politics?*

NELSON: We didn't do any polling, but the response was very positive. I mean, you could see the response, especially in the news reporting. You could see the response on social media that people felt a tremendous relief and a kind of pride that "we solved something and we can move forward and we're not doomed to continuing to fail". It was very, very positive. People were very encouraged. A lot of people had given up hope and this started to bring back some hope.

Q: *That was early 2020. That pretty much happened in the early days of you being there. Now COVID happens. You said there was a change in attitude into partisanship. Can you talk a little bit more about that?*

NELSON: That happened in 2020. We had hoped that 2021 would be productive because 2021 would be the off year for elections. We had hoped that 2021 would be a year when we could get them to compromise on a few more issues.

Q: *So in other words now you had a victory, now you're moving to a different set of issues, correct?*

NELSON: We moved back to the state level issues. There were some that were economic, there were some that were legal, there were some that were political, and we didn't make much progress on any of them. We were quite disappointed. By the way, last

time I talked about the NATO compromise they achieved, right?

Q: *Right. Yes, we talked about that.*

NELSON: That was the first year.

Q: *Yeah, that was the first year. It was the first year.*

NELSON: The beginning of the second year or the beginning of my third year, 2021, we just couldn't get much traction on greater reforms. I'm trying to remember now what, early in 2021, started a lot of partisan bickering. I'd have to look up specifics, hold on.

Q: *All right, no worries.*

NELSON: Okay. So by July, it got very complicated because the High Rep, Valentine Inzko, was completing his tenure. He had not exercised the Bonn powers for I think about 13 years. He had been promising and trying to push for an anti-genocide denial law in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Of course, that had not happened. Before he left, he used the Bonn powers to write the law himself and this caused a major rift as it really inflamed the political disputes in the country. Once that happened, that was July of 2021, we had a very hard time trying to broker compromises on the EU required reforms. The anti genocide law alienated the Serbs, whom many portrayed as the target of the law, as political leadership denies the Srebrenica genocide and still glorifies war crimes. It's very important that Bosnia have an anti-genocide law. The fact that it was done like that, frankly, was not on advice from the US government or from Brussels. We anticipated that having it imposed, and I think in hindsight, you can see how indeed it didn't necessarily advance reconciliation. At what point would they have been able to write the law themselves? That's very difficult to say because they have such hard divisions. Putting that law ahead of the many other priorities, we knew how politically difficult that was. The law was not one of the EU's top 14 priorities for reforms for Bosnia-Herzegovina. That really burned up what little political capital existed for compromise on other issues.

Q: *So pretty much what you're saying is that all the way until that order was issued, until the Bonn powers were exercised for the first time in 13 years, it seems like there was an improvement, correct? People were working together. You had Mostar, you had a NATO compromise, and as you were saying, there was political capital, there was movement.*

NELSON: I can speak to my two years. In my two years, we had movement. In most of those 13 years, the EU was very strong in discouraging the High Rep from using Bonn powers because they said the country needs to demonstrate that they can undertake these reforms themselves. The problem is during 11 of those 13 years, but largely all 13 years, there was very little result from that local ownership. Things have shifted now in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the new High Rep has been using those powers in a more forceful but very calculated way to cut short some of the fundamental blocking of functionality, the invented log jams that people create. Also to engage for election integrity.

Q: *Maybe because you just arrived there in 2019, or it was just because everything started moving and you got to the point where there was improvement on NATO and most are…but what I'm trying to ask is, what was the secret of your success? How did it happen in a way that you were able to achieve something that maybe other people, your predecessors, were trying to do for years?*

NELSON: Well, I think one part of our success, a key part of our success was that we looked at it as an incremental process. We'd have to tackle each of these piece by piece. You had to unlock these gears that had frozen. These political gears had frozen. We had to find ways to unlock them and to just get things moving at any level so that political development could continue. So, being able to use Mostar as an opportunity was important. We had many things in our favor for getting that done, and it made one of those giant gears move. Before that, they were having trouble even forming the government at the state level in my first year. The EU tried to broker a compromise, and they did that without Washington. They left out a fundamental issue of 'what about NATO.' And so we, the US and the quint ambassadors, came in and reminded leaders, 'you're going to have to sustain your consensus, if not expand consensus on NATO, or you're not addressing the core consensus needed for formation of government.' Then being willing to be flexible on 'what does this NATO consensus look like?' At this stage, Bosnia-Herzegovina's ambition is to join NATO. In terms of the process, the political debates over membership are rather irrelevant because they have so many reforms to achieve to get there. That process of reform is what we needed to accelerate. The phase of the NATO partnership that we moved them into is a reform stage, where Bosnia and Herzegovina is writing their goals every year for what reforms they are going to achieve on their path to NATO membership. That's a consensus document. They set the pace. They agree what they're going to work on with the support of allies. It's a strategic process. And getting them to start that process required us to be willing to say — to rename the annual national plan — this is now the "reform process". That was very important because it should focus then on what the actual work at hand is, and that is achieving step-by-step reforms in the military, and more importantly, in the government.

Q: *Is it fair to say that key to the success is trying to find a common ground in a way of rebuilding a trust, or actually building, fostering understanding and trust among different communities, different parties, and gradually moving them to trust each other and find solutions to their common problems and move more toward European and NATO integration?*

NELSON: *Yes, you said it better than I.*

Q: *Do you remember when you were resolving all those issues? Was there any previous experience from your previous assignments that you were looking back to and thinking, all right, let's see how I can use this, how I can apply it; something that might have influenced your thinking in broad, maybe a different way of thinking about a problem that people are trying to resolve?*

NELSON: I think my general experience is that it's always important to focus on what you can do and not what you can't. In all of my assignments, I've tried to encourage my teams, and use them as my strategic guide, to ask what CAN we do? And a sense that you have to take stock of what the possibilities are. It's not a question of pessimism or optimism. It's about possibleism. What's possible here? And when you see a roadblock, that roadblock is there for a reason, and it's probably heavily guarded and fortified. The key is often to think, okay, well, how do we just go around it? You know we're not going to go through it, but is there a way around it? I think that kind of general strategic mindset for me was very useful.

Q: *Yeah, I knew.*

NELSON: Orthodoxy is not helpful, because you need to think a little bit creatively, you need to sometimes discuss. For me, the exercise of diplomacy is identifying what we agree on and working to expand that. If you're always focused on what you don't agree on, it's very hard to close those gaps. Start from the base and just try to expand that. Getting back to NATO, the Serbs would say, we very much support partnership with NATO. We now, despite our votes 10 years ago, we don't support membership, but we support partnership. We started with that as a positive to frame what the partnership's going to look like. The partnership is going to be about you progressing on all these important reforms that make you a stronger partner and an eventual candidate for membership. Even if you get to that level of being ready for membership, but somehow the political winds have shifted and that doesn't happen, we're still all better off. Because you're now up to NATO standards and we have a partner like Sweden used to be, like Finland used to be before they came in. A real reliable partner. No matter what, we were building the strongest partnership possible and eventual membership of course is the best goal.

Q: *Let me ask you-*

NELSON: Again, they want to argue about membership now, but you're not even ready for membership. Why are we complicating and disrupting the process of reforms by debating membership?

Q: *If you remember when we would start tough negotiations like this, in Bosnia, where you're trying to get a compromise like NATO, when you would walk into the room for the first time and what would be your general message? What would you say- how would you approach a complex issue when you were speaking to those politicians and how would you encourage them and basically inspire them that compromise is possible?*

NELSON: I would always try to identify and affirm where we had agreement, where we were looking for mutual success, where we could cooperate. That was important at the beginning because I needed to establish a relationship with them and show them that I was there to work equally with anyone who wanted the country to progress. That the US has no biases. We just want to work with those who are trying to make Bosnia and Herzegovina safer, more secure, more prosperous, and a stronger democracy. Some of

them had assumptions about who we favored, and it was important to deconstruct that, because those who thought we favored them also tended to think they didn't have to try as hard. I'm a glass half full person.

Q: *Was that hard? I can imagine speaking of, what if you favor one party or one ethnic group over the other? Was that a common thing? Because that's what appears in the newspapers where they're saying, "oh, yeah, they're siding with, you know, the Bosniaks," or "they're siding or everybody's against the Serbs, and so on." Was that a typical accusation that you had to dispute and say we're working for everybody?*

NELSON: It was very hard to overcome., yes. I mean, it was prevalent, the idea that the US was not equal in their approach to the constituent peoples. A lot of that is a bit conspiratorial. In parts, a lot of that is just political mess. Most of it is political machination. I was very conscious of trying to emphasize that these were objective decisions. These were not subjective. And it was important to us to try to be equitable.

Q: *Right. Let me ask you, what was sort of a take on, again, the Serbs are saying their stuff, the Bosnians, they're saying their stuff, Croats are saying their stuff. I'm curious, what was the view of the US? What is the view of the US and the US involvement in Bosnia, whether it's seen positively or negatively by the Bosnians, meaning all three constituent peoples, meaning just the regular citizen. Or was there a sense we needed help or was it more like it's time to move on and it is what it is?*

NELSON: Well, I think in general, the view of the US was very positive in my time. There was a strong appreciation for having ended the war in a small country. I think that the US was seen as straightforward and we were less complicated than interaction with the EU can be.

Q: So let me ask you this. What was your typical day as an ambassador? I bet it would start with a country team meeting in the morning with whatever was in your schedule, but what would you do in the afternoon? Can you talk a little bit through your day when you were-? I know it would be different, every day was different, but I'm just curious what were certain priorities that you would try to achieve to foster that understanding among different ethnic communities, but also for interrelations, relations between the US and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

NELSON: My day typically began with a press briefing. Then there'd be an early morning meeting with some grouping of leadership within the embassy, whether that was the country team, which was all agency heads and all section heads, about 12 people were at the table. The country team met once a week. I met with a core group, a smaller group of leaders, twice a week. And I frequently had a working breakfast to start the day. One of my routines was a monthly breakfast with key American leaders. One of the great assets that an ambassador has is the residence and the ability to entertain, so to invite people to breakfast, invite people to working lunches or dinners was really, really important. A lot of the most important discussions happen over a meal. And then during the day, I would be bouncing from event to event. I often went to an event to give a

speech, or to attend and listen to other speeches. I got out of the capital on an overnight trip no less than once a month to visit different partners, talk to local leaders, talk to some of the AID partners, including in economic development, talk to students. The ambassador would also get a slew of invitations. So having the team review which of those were worthy of the ambassador's time was a whole process because where the ambassador shows up can make a difference. That would often not only take up good parts of my day, but then the evening as well.

Q: *But let me ask you, you're referencing the working lunch and breakfast with key Americans. Was it your priority to engage with the American community in Bosnia? I know there are a lot of Bosnians that are dual citizens that live in the US and have families there. Was that a priority for you to engage with them and try to see how they can also be involved as citizen diplomats and contribute to implementation of peace?*

NELSON: Yes. One important constituency was the American Chamber of Commerce, which we were able to help become a much more effective organization. When I'm talking about the Americans, actually, it's public record, but the American leadership in Bosnia-Herzegovina is beyond the US ambassador. The OSCE ambassador has always been an American. The commander of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an American. The deputy High Rep is an American. So bringing them together along with my deputy, that's an informal grouping that I had. We'd meet once a month over breakfast and update each other and what we're each doing. We all had different commands. It was important for us to just have that opportunity to update each other. Then another even more important grouping for me was the quint: the UK, Italian, French, and German ambassadors. We'd often meet. That's your key NATO leadership. We'd often include the EU ambassador. Almost always we'd include the EU ambassador unless we were talking solely about NATO issues.

Q: *Let me ask, you referenced the role of USAID several times. What was the role of that particular agency? And also, can you talk a little bit more about the role of civil society in the country and how both USAID and the civil societies work together to advance US interests, but also implementation of the Dayton Accords?*

NELSON: USAID, when I was there, I think it was 2021, celebrated its 25th anniversary. The approach we took was to make it a campaign about heroes of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where we highlighted a local partner from across that 25-year partnership; what they had accomplished in their local community, whether that was qualifying their cheese factory for exports to the EU, or defending a river against environmental damage, or becoming a more effective prosecutor against corruption. We got to celebrate all these different people who had really achieved impact with the support of USAID training and sometimes funding. Any healthy democracy must have a strong civil society, organizations where citizens can come together and collectively make a difference, whether that's being watchdogs or being activists or both. You don't have democracy without it. That's really, I think, what USAID in Bosnia Herzegovina was all about. Also working for media freedom, helping protect media and some of these small civic organizations from lawfare, these strategic lawsuits against them by vested interests to

cripple them and drain them of resources. These local, these citizen initiatives really are the fundamental part of democracy, and giving them enough space to breathe and to act was a lot of what USAID did. Unfortunately, that's all been taken apart by DOGE.

Q: *But did you have because I know every ambassador has certain grants that they can give to different organizations. Was that also in your case that you would be able to, that the embassy would provide money? And were you involved through that process? Like what were certain criteria as you're looking as an ambassador who to support? And if you did that?*

NELSON: I didn't have any direct control over any grants. There's one grant that's in my name, in the ambassador's name, but all of these grants were part of a larger strategic process, whether the assistance was coming from the Department of Defense or USAID. These were all developed through a strategic process. And even in my time, in the four years of the Trump administration, development in USAID was a key part of our national security. It's part of our strategy to protect US interests through engagement in development, diplomacy, and defense. Somehow, we're not going to do that going forward. But that was always how the Trump administration worked the first time. Of course, they wanted USAID to work in a certain way, and they did that. They approved the strategies that USAID would then carry out.

There was one fund that was in the ambassador's name called the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. This is a global fund where projects are solicited locally for sponsorship. These are to preserve the cultural heritage of the country. Bosnia and Herzegovina actually has had a very high rate of success in winning these grants. When I was there, I had an opportunity to participate in events announcing the grant or completing the grant or some milestone of the grant. One was in support of the Contemporary Art Museum in Banja Luka. Another one was in support of the National Museum in Sarajevo. The status of the museums, unfortunately, were not part of the consensus at Dayton and they tend to be divided in terms of their mandates. Each of them had their own value, which was useful for us to be able to support, but being able to support the National Museum by restoring one of their halls to put up a first class exhibit of the prehistoric collection was really a great success. Now, another one I got to sponsor was to help preserve the film library because BiH had been a big filmmaking center. It was like the Hollywood of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia had produced a lot of films and they had this archive which was disintegrating and we supported the film center to digitize those. We were happy to get Washington's approval and we got to announce that during Sarajevo's International Film Festival and talk about how important film is as well for culture and identity.

Q: *Right, so did you go to the festival as well? Did you do it there?*

NELSON: Yes, always.

Q: *Was that a fun part of your time, like doing events like that?*

NELSON: It's the best time to visit Sarajevo. It's a very accessible event. Everybody attends. Tickets are a few euros. Some of the screenings are outdoors, some are indoors. Some of them have red carpet events. So that's fun. Then you'd have different luminaries from cinema come to Sarajevo. It was a wonderful time for Sarajevo to be in the spotlight and a time when the city really felt open and relaxed.

Q: *Right. Is that sort of a normal thing? Whenever there's a big type of an event like that, it's unifying the city, it's unifying the country, maybe even like people are being more, as you said, more relaxed. Is that bringing more optimism or more trust? I'm just curious.*

NELSON: Yeah, it could be more unifying. I think there are political limits on how much you can really expand that goodwill. It could be more, even more.

Q: *It appears that cultural diplomacy worked pretty well in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina during your time.*

NELSON: For me it did. With some interruption from COVID, I revived the idea that the ambassador, as did many of my predecessors, hosted a reception which was a high point of the film festival calendar. I really wanted to restore that. We had a lot of fun doing that, having our own red carpet.

Q: *And people are more relaxed, I bet. It's easier to establish relations, easier to, even do back channels and make sure that you're working, still working, but still providing fun experience for everybody.*

NELSON: And talk to people that you don't get to talk to in your day-to-day interaction, which was so heavily influenced by politicians.

Q: *Were you in charge of invitations? Like you would make sure that various different, diverse groups of people were invited, or how was the invitation going on in order to get the pool of interesting individuals?*

NELSON: My guidance to the team was to look at each of those representation events, those invitation opportunities, as a time to open ourselves to more people and to have a good mix of participants from across the country, age groups, trusted partners and maybe some new partners. I was very big on trying to make these events inclusive.

Q: *Were you doing any other open house events like that? The public affairs was doing more of making introductions engaging with the community. Was that a priority in a way in the calendar year, just outside of the Sarajevo Film Festival?*

NELSON: To have big events at the residence, you mean?

Q: Meaning, at the residence or at the embassy or somewhere else in the country, try to host something, try to engage with business leaders, educators, civil society, Americans?

NELSON: It was really important to be able to go to these events where most often I was the guest and had an opportunity to give some remarks and then to meet people. Also encouraging others on my team to do the same thing. But also having the opportunity to host. There too, we would hit the road. For example, when I had a big change in the leadership at the embassy, we would organize a reception. You'd often welcome these new key team members with a reception, but what we did was then go to Mostar and have the reception there, not expecting everybody to come to us. There we would have greater participation from that corner of the country, and then go to Banja Luka as well, which is a four hour drive away, and be available and engaged there. So going and getting outside of the capital is really important. Just expecting everyone to come to you really limits your reach. There are other things we did to try to be open. For example, for the art collection, which my partner curated and is supported by the program Art in Embassies, we made a video about it and published it. We did a virtual tour of the art collection. We'd have special events like when a documentary film was made about the first Pride March in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was at the height of COVID. We figured out how to have a screening outdoors with safe separation and invite leaders of the LGBT community and leaders of the Pride March to have that screening together.

Q: *You did that once, right, during COVID, correct?*

NELSON: Yeah.

Q: *And what was your support, you know, now you're speaking about a Pride March, were you engaged with it, like? What was the position? I know that it's usually a big event, or used to be a big event for embassies all around the world. Can you take me a little bit through that?*

NELSON: We didn't talk about that last time, right?

Q: *No, we did not.*

NELSON: All right, well.

Q: *Yeah, and then we're gonna- It's important to talk about now.*

NELSON: The Pride March happened in 2019. They had been trying to organize one for years. In our work with civil society, the LGBT community was one of the groups that we had worked with over many years, helping them fight discrimination and advocate for laws that would limit discrimination and violence. They had the ambition to have a Pride March. Only Sarajevo among the Western Balkan capitals had not had one by 2019. They were moving forward with plans for 2019, and we and many other key ambassadors got behind them, letting political leadership know this is an important milestone for the country to be able to demonstrate that they have freedom of assembly and speech and freedom of association. There are a lot of obstacles bureaucratically for them, principally around security where the local officials wanted them to bear a lot of the extraordinary costs required to keep it a safe event. There's a lot of extraordinary costs required to keep

it a safe event. There's a lot of back and forth about that. And of course, security is perhaps the largest area that we invest in with our assistance, including years of training of police. We had a superlative relationship with the different security forces. For my security leaders to be able to talk counterparts through, "what's your responsibility here? What's this going to look like?" That was a very positive experience. What local leadership did was they actually consulted, if not visited, the other capitals in the region to learn from their experience with pride marches that ended up being violent. Our goal was to keep the momentum going; get this done; let's get past excuses.

Of course, there was concern about violence and that created an important discussion within the embassy of who would participate. For us, it was a test not only of the democracy and the civil rights framework in the country, but also of the security structures. There had been counter demonstrations, but they had been pushed to the day before and to areas far from the demonstration to ensure there wouldn't be problems. The city was very secure, almost on lockdown, where the authorities had put up a lot of protection to make sure that there could be no violence. 4,000 people showed up and marched down the main avenue, Titova, to Parliament Square. The authorities were so cautious that they even warned people living along the parade route to not open their windows because they thought, we don't want anybody throwing garbage. We ambassadors, we were in the middle of those 4,000. We were not in the front because this was not our initiative. This was a local initiative. People came up to me during that march and said "we're so glad you're here." And I said, "well, of course I'm here." "You know, we support civil society, we support equal rights, we support the security institutions". And they said, "well, yeah, but because you're here, we believe nothing will go wrong. Because if the US ambassador or any ambassador were injured in any of this, then there'd be really bad headlines." So just showing up was pretty important, but it wasn't my march. I was buried in the middle of that crowd.

It was a beautiful day and there was absolutely no violence. Along the route, I was shaking the hands of the police and thanking them for doing a good job. There was a lot of negativity about the LGBT community. However there is an academic study that showed that that was actually shifted by the experience of the march in the city. People felt, well, "I don't feel comfortable…," "I don't feel like I support this community, but I do think they should have the freedom to assemble" or "I'm so proud that my city could have this happen without violence." That was something that everybody felt positive about. The Mufti came out with a clear statement that there would be no place for violence on that kind of day.

But getting back to how neighbors were not allowed to open their windows. A few did and they'd look down, and the marchers would look up and wave. Because the people were mostly curious, like what the heck is going on here? I've heard about these things and isn't it a big scandal? And they could see, no, it's not. It's just a lot of bright colors and normal people. And so then they'd finally wave and then the crowd would just go crazy cheering, because you know what? They just- they saw us. We are here. That's why you have a pride march. In the old days, I say one of the early manifestations of pride in the U.S. was St. Patrick's Day, when the Irish community was oppressed and

marginalized. So come together on your saint's day, have a celebration and declare pride in your identity, in your community, and be seen. Why that's so controversial is sad, but it's much less so in Bosnia and Herzegovina now because they've done it. Now this community has a better shot at actually fighting the discrimination they face.

Q: *Probably even those counter protesters, like it demonstrate the ability, as you said, of freedom to assemble and freedom to protest and learn the peaceful way of protesting, something that you might disagree with.*

NELSON: Exactly. There were anti-protests. They were the day before. They got their coverage. They got their messages out. But really, actually, some of it got pretty ugly. They started to use me as an example, and there were flyers going around with my official portrait doctored with makeup. Which looked more clownish than drag, and said, "gay is not okay." I think when people saw that, some say wait a minute, this is going against the US ambassador, which is a bit too much. But there was, you know, no shortage of antipathy toward me as an LGBT ambassador. But, I represented President Trump in the United States. This was when President Trump was president. I got absolutely no pushback from Washington on this.

Q: *No. Was that like, because you were communicating with Washington about it, correct? What were you engaging through cables?*

NELSON: We kept them up to date. I didn't ask for permission. It would have been less controversial if I hadn't been gay, but anyone straight, anyone of my straight counterparts would have done the same thing I did. The fact that I was gay added extra visibility, but any of us would have done the same.

Q: *What were the other ambassadors, Europeans, I bet probably, Germans and so on, that joined in? Was there a good showing from the ambassador's side?*

NELSON: All of the Quint was there. The EU, the Dutch were very active supporters of the LGBT civil society organizations. The Swedes as well. I'm pretty sure the Spanish ambassador was there. The key Western European ambassadors were there. Of course, the Hungarian ambassador wasn't there. At that time, the government in Poland was very conservative. He was not there. Of course, the Turkish ambassador wasn't there. And of course, the UK ambassador supported in a big way.

Q: *And that was, you said that was 2019. And then it happened pretty much every year after, afterwards, right? It was pretty much just a regular annual thing.*

NELSON: Next year was COVID. They had a hard time. It wasn't going to work to get a permit. And then if it caused an outbreak, that could have happened even as an outdoor event, that would have been just a huge negative. They had a drive-by instead.

Q: *Were you part of that as well, like the drive through?*

NELSON: No, no, I just knew where they'd be driving and I was waving.

Q: *I'm curious of your time that this was Sarajevo, but I'm curious about other cities like Banja Luka. Was there also a March there or whether those cities, those different communities were seeing that were outside of Sarajevo?*

NELSON: There has been no march in Banja Luka and there's no prospects for one. In the last three years, the political leadership there has come down very hard on LGBT civil society organizations, even arresting them.

Q: *All right. So let me ask you, so we talked about memories. I know when I was in Bosnia and Herzegovina about a year ago, I know there are still visible lines of separation, primarily most are also in Sarajevo. You still see, there is a Sarajevo Rose or certainly monuments and memorials. Then when you go to the Republika Srpska, of course, you can also see different things on the walls and photos of people that were convicted of crimes against humanity and so on. I'm curious about, I know you talked about the grants and all that, but just like a visible reminder of those separate lines of separation, and those memories that are basically forcing segregation, ethnic division rather than unity. I'm curious whether that might have been just sort of like when you were seeing them and how people were seeing them as a reminder that there is a lot of work that has to be done to unify this country and bring that trust that this country can operate as one.*

NELSON: And in terms of how history is, especially in terms of how history is commemorated?

Q: Right, yeah.

NELSON: The way memorials are approached in Bosnia and Herzegovina is unfortunately very divisive. It can become very politically charged. There are some efforts toward reconciliation. I think we talked about this last time with engagement with the religious communities. It's really unfortunate that there is not really a concerted effort to support reconciliation so that the country can heal psychically and move forward. You can see, you can feel how unstable things feel for people remembering 35 years ago, what is it now, 33 years ago, they'd been living in peace and suddenly shooting started and houses were burned down, there were rapes and all kinds of crimes. These were former neighbors. Imagine how that unsettles your sense of security. Even though peace eventually settled quickly, that tension did not go down quickly. For some it's never abated. People kind of have in the back of their mind, “how bad could things get again?”

Q: *Yeah, because I'll tell you, I remember when I was there and I was talking to one of the diplomats, and it was pretty much, just look around the city of Sarajevo, the war lines are still visible and people… if you talk to a person on the street, they would say, “oh yeah, this is still a Serb side,” “this is the line of separation,” and so on, and they still were remembering and had a negative feelings about it.*

NELSON: And many of the buildings have never been repaired. The typical building still has at least facade damage. Those are constant reminders. There are important anniversaries, which are always important to help people remember. The anniversaries then tend to be, again, separate celebrations and separate commemorations.

Q: *Right. One community is celebrating while the other one is grieving.*

NELSON: At times.

Q: *I also heard stories of people in smaller communities where there are still people that work as police officers that were committing crimes and raping and so on.*

NELSON: Some people face that in terms of these criminals or these oppressors are still down the street from them. It's difficult to achieve justice that matches the worst crimes. Retributive justice is difficult to fully reach. Transitional justice can seem inadequate to some.

Q: *Because I know there was a big, in academic writings, there was a big sort of an analysis movement and where it, whether, there was a big sort of an analysis movement and whether more transitional justice, such as what happened in South Africa, where the truth and reconciliation was much more appropriate for Bosnia to bring those communities together rather. It is because when you're going, the argument goes that when you were going after people that are larger players, the ones that the Punitive Justice and International Criminal Court was going after, there are a lot of other people that are important for the community that you can't go after because it would be an endless process. Quite an interesting question.*

NELSON: There, you know that that person may not get punished and sent to jail, but for the person to acknowledge their crime, that alone is important and can help the victim escape the torture of memory.

Q: *Right. Because if I'm not mistaken, in South Africa, everything was about humanity and bringing those two different victims plus the person who committed a crime together and hearing a confession, but also reconciliation at the end. It's quite interesting because people never think about that. Whenever something happens like that, people think the only appropriate measure is to punish, but forgiveness is really hard to get there unless you have an active process of saying the truth and reconciling at the end. You can put someone behind the bars, but if there is no reconciliation piece, the scar is still there. People still remember. There is no closure to it, correct?*

NELSON: And the different religions have different approaches to forgiveness as well.

Q: *Was that something that you were discussing while you were an ambassador, how to do the truth and reconciliation, how to contribute to that process? Was that something that was important?*

NELSON: We looked for every opportunity to do that. That was a key missing element. It's a very difficult goal to define and achieve. It's an area with the least amount of political will. It's an area where the OSCE and the UN were to have the lead.

Q: *Let me ask you, have you, speaking of memorials, have you ever been up on Mount Igman to the place where that crash happened during the negotiations? Was there a commemoration that you were part of? What was sort of the feeling of those three diplomats if you did any commemoration?*

NELSON: There's a small commemoration which the armed forces organized. The armed forces take care of that site. It's a very remote site, because it's where the vehicle rolled down the hill, killing the diplomats. It was a seminal event because it really focused on Holbrooke. He seemed to be able to use that to create a greater sense of urgency in Washington that we needed forceful intervention. That continued diplomatic engagement alone, not only was it not producing good results, but it was even putting our people at risk.

Q: *It became personal in a way. It became important.*

NELSON: I think he saw an opportunity to make the stakes much clearer.

Q: *All right. Let me ask you, Eric, I guess we can do a few more minutes, but I'm thinking we can maybe continue next time if you want.*

NELSON: One thing we didn't reach was….

Q: *Because I still have the Dayton Accords a bit…*

NELSON: The final year we spent trying to broker constitutional reform on…

Q: *And then I would love to ask you about OSCE, a little bit more about OHR working with, as a contact group member, and then briefly get into the criminal stuff, criminal reform and working to build a society that is working. I think you probably did work on corruption and more sides on that.*

NELSON: Yes.

Q: *We can talk more about that. I would love to touch base on Brcko and then also partnership with maybe the neighboring states. What was your relationship with the ambassador serving in Serbia, Croatia, whether you guys were coordinating, and then I would love to get into lessons learned as a final part. I think that's pretty much everything.*

NELSON: Okay.

Q: *Let me just finalize the tape. All right, this is the end of part two.*

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Q: Alright. Today is May 24 2025. This is part three with Ambassador Eric Nelson. All right, Eric, can you tell me, what are some general lessons learned; you've learned about a peace implementation process from your time as an ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of the Dayton accords or just peace in general?

NELSON: Well, I think being here right now for this conference back in Dayton, 30 years after the accords is a time to take stock. It's very important to discuss and learn from history that US intervention, through a good combination of diplomatic and military means, could end a horrific war, that had led even to genocide, after there was much hesitation among the Europeans and in the US to intervene. There was great caution over the potential cost of intervention and what unfolded was a successful intervention, which produced zero casualties, except from routine accidents, but zero casualties from hostilities after the war. It was very much a war that people wanted to see ended. The peace took hold. But also, as you look back through the years, you can see the flaws of the structures agreed at Dayton. Dayton was an agreement principally to end a war, but to end the war, they needed some starter constitution. In that starter constitution, along with annex three, each of the parties agreed to continue to improve on the Constitution and the functionality of the state. That has been a process that has not produced good results. It has not produced satisfactory results because Dayton created a system which very much continues the divisions among the three constituent peoples, and those divisions now have morphed into a perpetual kind of an ossification of a patronage system where the political parties, which are divided along ethnic lines, really control the not just the state, but even the economy. Unfortunately, the political leaders are not interested in reducing their power and giving more power to citizens. The country has just not moved forward quickly enough to resolve these shortcomings in the Constitution, like its discrimination. Another reality is that the action has to come from the local population. For me, that was very clear during my time in Bosnia, and it's clear to any observer that the action is inadequate when it's driven by the leaders, but what is also clear is that the citizens want progress. The citizens want rule of law. The citizens want economic freedom and opportunity, and in the absence of that, they're emigrating, and there's a terrible brain drain. The solutions need to be local, but there is, unfortunately, a learned helplessness that says, we need the US or Brussels to intervene. We've tried that many times. We've tried to broker reforms, and they fail for lack of political will. There's, unfortunately, this big gap between what citizens want and what leaders are delivering.

Q: Can we talk a little bit about a brain drain, and I know we talked a bit of it before, but I'm curious, from a general lessons learned, what diplomats should know about brain drain in in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also, what are some of the approaches that you've taken, but also the approaches that you know current diplomats should take from our side, from the American side, but also the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina should think about how to stop the brain drain and start building.

NELSON: When I think of brain drain, I think about agency. The sense that any person has to control their future, and what's sad to see in the Western Balkans, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is this declining sense of agency that things can change or that people can really change their future. They believe they don't have the power, but they exercise their sense of agency by deciding to emigrate. When they get to the conclusion that I can change my future and provide a better future for my children by leaving, they're demonstrating agency, but it's to the benefit of the recipient country, because these are talented and hard working people. It's a huge loss to the country, because you're losing all this capital, human capital, of people who are committed to and are willing to imagine and work for a better future. I think for diplomats, it's important to take stock of where people are going. No one is emigrating to Beijing, to China or to Russia. They're emigrating to the EU, to the west, to the United States, Canada, to places where they know rule of law reigns and that their identity has little or nothing to do with their ability to succeed, because they are equally protected by the rule of law. The weakness of rule of law in BiH makes that a primary focus among the EU requirements. That rule of law should be strengthened so that people realize that "I can stay here in the region and get ahead based on my own merits, because the law will protect me equally". That weakness in rule of law is hindering the reforms as well, because anyone who's in the minority is afraid to see more centralization or consolidation of power when the system is still inherently a patronage system and not really run by rule of law. Both of these need to progress.

Q: What about education? And I know we talked at length about education, but more primarily in the area of truth and reconciliation. Is that something that is also contributing to that brain drain with various different educational approaches and ability in fighting, sort of, the tensions, but also the fact that there are no economic opportunities, but I'm curious if there is a sort of a mission of actually creating a truth and reconciliation commission or something? What might have contributed to creation of a rule of law, but also, but also a much better opportunity for people?

NELSON: Well, I think the educational system in Bosnia is really failing to help the country move forward, and part of it is that it is not conducive to truth and reconciliation, because there is this anachronism of segregation in the schools and two schools under one roof. That somehow the ethnicities, the Bosniaks and the Croats need to learn separately, or in Republika Srpska, that you need to discriminate based on language. I think that fundamentally contributes to the failure in the sense of insecurity, because while the survivor generation of the war, they have a first hand sense of how terrible war is. This rising generation has been segregated, and that unfortunately creates a greater separateness, which can be more ripe to exploitation and divisiveness, where people are thinking about not what unites them and what they share, even within their community, as much as how they should be competing or fearing the other.

Q: We mentioned a lot of the challenges that still persist and that are still there. Is there a single challenge that a diplomat, an American diplomat, should consider in their approach to BIH.

NELSON: I think the fundamental, most important word is corruption. That is, so much of the problems in Bosnia Herzegovina are related to the corruption of the systems that we call "state capture," where the political parties are actually running much more than the institutions, which do not function independently. That the economy does not function independently, but depends on patronage of the political parties. This is all a distortion of the core compromise at Dayton where we needed to ensure that the three constituent peoples would feel included in a single state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The divisions that were created in the institutions by designing that everything was shared has turned into a perpetuation of this patronage system where you owe your job opportunity to the party. Too many families in Bosnia owe job opportunity to some linkage to a political leader. It's unfortunate, because the US and the UK have been very forceful trying to address the corruption. We've worked for years with the justice sector for the state to be able to discourage and punish corruption. The results are inadequate. This is really what drives a lot of the brain drain from across the Balkans. People leave because they don't feel like they have equal opportunity. When President Biden laid out that actually corruption is a threat to US national security, I think he was spot on. We tried very hard to make that our mission, to combat corruption. Our efforts to reform the economy were frustrated because of these very embedded corrupt motives: to dispute a common digital signature in the country, to dispute energy laws that improve security and markets, to dispute fuel standards that were hindering even their accession to the WTO, all of this over partisan, corrupt self-dealing interests. It was just so pervasive in holding the country back that I think if we don't address it head on and find ways to limit it and to punish it, we're losing the battle.

Q: Let me ask you this, nowadays, everybody's talking about making America safer, stronger and more prosperous. How would you define the region and why? Why do you think so? Do you think it is important for US national security? Do you think that we should be investing more into a region, including through the soft power work of organizations such as the now former USAID, providing civil society groups with funding and providing educational opportunities. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of the region? And primarily BIH (Bosnia-Herzegovina) to the US national security, and little bit about soft power approaches?

NELSON: Every time the US has invested in strengthening a nation to become a stronger democracy and free market, we tremendously benefit. These partners have turned out to be good allies. Not just on the security front and on the political front, but also in business. That all makes the US stronger and more prosperous and more secure. Fewer battles and wars in the world is good for the US. Europe is set as our principal political and economic partner in the world. There's no stronger block that shares our values for freedom, human rights and justice. For this region to be a positive corner of Europe, a positive part integrated into Europe, that is in our strategic interest. If there were conflicts here, and if this region continued to suffer, there would be knock-on effects. We don't want to have to intervene again. We don't want to see that. We shouldn't wish on our partners the need for them to intervene. It's undoubtedly these investments that have been hugely positive for the US.

Q:What would be your message to the younger residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina? That may be sort of questioning whether there is a possibility of the country becoming fully a member of the EU, questioning the Dayton Accords, whether that's ever going to be implemented, whether everything is going to get rid of the corruption. And then, as we talked about the brain drain leaving them, what would be your message? What can they do? Like you talked about people, but I'm curious about your thoughts.

NELSON: What I learned in my three years there was that the potential of the country really rests with the people and the values that they hold. I had no doubt that they strongly shared our values for freedom and for respect for rule of law and human rights. But giving them that- that power and that agency to move their country forward has proven to be very difficult. We looked for every opportunity first in terms of how we were engaging, and also in how we focused on local actors succeeding. I encourage everyone to continue to look for those opportunities, and we even need people to think about getting involved in politics and bringing greater accountability to the political systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Participation. It's important to participate. It's important to believe that one can make a difference. Voting is essential, but beyond voting, holding leaders accountable. Also just engaging to make a difference in your community. The opportunities we had to support that and help people feel that sense of agency and empowerment were priceless.

Q:What would be your advice to a an American diplomat heading into the region, into the into Bosnia and Herzegovina,

NELSON: Don't think that you're arriving with a well studied and researched proposal. The quality of your proposal and the length of research is not going to be adequate for success if it doesn't find local backers and prove to be sustainable, because it finds a consensus and it finds momentum. And don't fall for this idea you hear of "Oh, we can't do this. We need you to tell us what to do. We need you to force us to do this." That's not going to create a sustainable solution, or it's not going to create a dynamic solution. We did that at Dayton, but it didn't create the dynamic process that they need to continue to move forward. It's got to be locally owned, but there's no shortage of value that we contribute by showing up and encouraging and helping protect many of the people who are willing to take initiative and demand accountability.

Q: Looking back to your time as an ambassador, would you do anything differently? Now, when you're reflecting on it, are there some points that you would change, or something that you might have not known, that you might try to use some part of a toolbox that you might utilize?

NELSON: As I look back, I wonder how we could have been yet more effective on corruption and on making the anti-corruption work more of a collective effort. That's very much still a work that needs to progress. The EU needs to be a more effective partner in that. I think that helping citizens appreciate that angle is important. I unfortunately don't see an easy, "oh, gee, we missed this or that." But I see that as kind of a strong current

that I wish we'd been more effective at overcoming. Also, you know, in hindsight, I see how I was very focused on, and I think our team was very effective at communicating with the public what we were trying to accomplish. We did that very effectively locally, I think. It's also important to be telling that story in Washington and telling that story to the American taxpayers. When it came to USAID and assistance, we contributed to efforts to communicate our stewardship of those assistance dollars, to talk about how we were making investments, and how we were being very careful to make sure that there was no waste, and how we were looking for lessons learned and for the highest return on those investments. That still wasn't enough, because the public support for that kind of development work was easily overwhelmed by the actions of the Trump administration. It's a reminder for me that telling that story more broadly is really important to making our efforts sustainable.

Q: Now we're here at the 30th anniversary of the NATO peace in Dayton. How do you see this moment, and do you see it as this conference as a reflection point in making the relationships better? You know, listening to all the speakers? Do you think there is going to be progress as a follow up?

NELSON: I hear mixed messages. I hear some leaders, and I'm going to remain general, but I hear some local leaders, Bosnia-Herzegovina leaders really capturing what the fundamental problems are. That it is about lack of political will. It is about the brain drain. It is about the difficulty of being able to compromise and find the political middle ground needed to make step by step progress. But also disappointing is to hear other voices, generally from outside BiH, talking about the same issues of why the division is important and missing the point of the fundamental challenge that rule of law needs to overtake a patronage system. I find encouraging messages from EU partners who are really seeing more clearly what those challenges are, how it is about rule of law, but also about the value of the region, and the importance of expecting quicker results and really, really wishing for and wanting integration of the region, because this region should be part of Europe's competitive advantage, and it can't be a burden for the EU. So how to get that right? Pulling, pulling within the countries and incentivizing reform, especially through greater investment in economies. There's a better understanding from most of the EU members about what's at stake, and less ambivalence.

Q: All right. Let me ask you as a final question, is there any advice you would give yourself as a younger diplomat, or as an individual heading to becoming an ambassador to BIH and heading, in general, a lesson of diplomacy. What are some of the general lessons of diplomacy that you would give to yourself, and that might be valuable lessons to younger diplomats.

NELSON: For me, public diplomacy has always been a really core part of what we do. Diplomats are looking to not just resolve disputes, but to find the common ground and expand that common ground and build greater cooperation and collaboration for greater shared results. It's important, though, to be able to explain what you're doing to the average citizen, whether it's the taxpayer back at home, or the voter in the country where you're working. If you're in a less democratic country, to the citizens where you wish they

had the power to exercise a vote more effectively. That kind of talking to the people about what we're doing is important also when we're engaging the political leaders — you have to think about what they're thinking about their political survivability. If you're thinking about what citizens think, about how this appeals to the voters, and making that part of your story, that helps you communicate what's at stake. With a political leader, you're trying to broker agreement, and overlap with the power and support of the citizen is important. My time in Bosnia-Herzegovina was a tremendous learning experience for me of that power of civil society. I know we're very conscious of the power of free press, the power of free enterprise. Of course starting out as a Peace Corps volunteer was all about empowering people to be able to help themselves, but it's such an important part of our ability to relate to countries and assert our interests around the world by thinking about civil society, because in any democracy, in any country, they're the first responders to what are the local problems. They're the first identifiers of what the problems are, and giving them some ability to help resolve those problems is all for good. I think Bosnia Herzegovina offers countless examples of where citizens organizing themselves have tremendous capacity to contribute.

End of interview