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

AMBASSADOR RONALD NEUMANN

Interviewed by: Joe Relk
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is an Afghanistan project interview with Ambassador Ronald Neumann. Today is the twenty-eighth of October 2022, and we're in Northern Virginia, just outside of DC. My name is Joe Relk. This interview is being conducted under the auspices of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Ambassador Neumann was interviewed by the oral history program previously, which covered broadly his background and diplomatic career. He has generously agreed to a follow-on interview that will focus on the use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan and the fall of the Afghan government in 2021.

So, Ambassador Neumann, I thought we'd start with a little context for people that haven't looked at your previous Afghanistan interview and provide some overview of your extensive history of your experiences in Afghanistan, which date back to your childhood, right?

NEUMANN: Well, my interim after graduate school, right.

Q: Oh, is that right? Yeah. When your father was ambassador?

NEUMANN: My father was ambassador to Afghanistan and he went out in 1967, which is when I was finishing up a master's. I had gotten carried away and volunteered for the army. I had three and a half months between the end of graduate school and when I had to report for the army, and so my wife and I went to Afghanistan, which was where my parents were living. Afghanistan was a peaceful country in those days, and we traveled extensively, sometimes with my parents, often by ourselves. We drove all the way from Herat to Kabul through the center of Afghanistan, camping at Band-e Amir, [a group of lakes, the name means Lake of the Amir], and seeing Bamyan and going up, sitting on top of the buddha. I went with a hunting party up into the Wakhan Corridor in the northeast, where we went to the end of the road by jeep and then by horse along the Oxus, the Amu Darya, and then by yak up into the Pamirs and base camped about thirteen thousand feet. Down south we were in Lashkar Gah and Helmand and Kandahar. I hunted gazelle outside Lashkar Gah. We drove ourselves from Kandahar to Kabul, no problems. We saw a lot of the country.

Ambassador Neumann with his wife Elaine in Ghor

Q: And you had, I believe, some language training before.

NEUMANN: Well, I had language training before I went to Iran, which was my second tour, and my Farsi was pretty good when I was in Iran because of the Kurdish war of 1974 in Iraq. All the Kurdish areas of the Iran-Iraq frontier were in our consular district and I used to spend about a week of most months up and down the frontier reporting. I realized that my interlocutors would say more if I didn't have an Iranian interpreter with me. I'd had about six months of Farsi before I went, so I stopped using the interpreter and worked and did all my mission travel for two and a half years without an interpreter. The trouble was, I came back and a couple of years later started studying Arabic, which almost totally destroyed my Persian. When I went back to Afghanistan, I went back to work on it. The Afghan Dari and Iranian Farsi are really the same language, sort of like New York to Alabama for accents, but the written language is the same. But I didn't get

as far as I wanted. I lost a lot. When I was a younger officer in Iran, I felt like I could just work in the language and sort of play in it and, you know, figure things out. But when I was ambassador in the middle of a war, I felt like I really needed to be sure that people understood me, that I understood them exactly, and that I just didn't have the freedom to experiment that way, but that's the way you get better in a language. So, I got some of it back, but never back to where I'd been.

Q: And then what was your ambassadorial—when I arrived in 2006, you were already there.

NEUMANN: Yeah. I came in July 2005 and left in April of 2007.

Q: Two thousand seven. And then, since then I know you've written a lot about Afghanistan, you traveled a lot. Can you speak a little about that?

NEUMANN: Well, I started going back to Afghanistan in 2010. I retained an interest in Afghanistan, maybe it came from those years with family as well as my own, some feeling that I was following in my parents' footsteps. And so, I continued to write and talk about it, and I have a deep horror of people who do that and get progressively more and more out of touch while sounding still authoritative, so I started going back in 2010. I was back every year at least once until 2018, some years more than once, mostly trips to Kabul but I went to a number of conferences in Herat. In 2012, I think, I went back for a survey of the Afghan local police program that was being done by the special forces, joined their team for a couple of weeks partly in Kabul and partly going to ALPs [Afghan Local Police] in Kandahar and Helmand and Zabul, which was great fun. Special forces would not let an ex-ambassador take any particular risks. When I went to Zabul they wouldn't let me go out of the base because they thought that the reason the young Foreign Service woman, Anne—

Q: Smedinghoff?

NEUMANN: —had been killed, they thought there was a leak, and so they didn't want me to go out. But in Helmand I was out at some village, but they had so much security out there you wouldn't believe it. They ran a mine detector up the dirt track before I was allowed to go up and sit under a grape arbor. In 2019, I had a health problem, couldn't go back. Two thousand twenty we had Covid, but I did go back in '21. I was in Kabul about six weeks before the fall of Afghanistan and came back and wrote an article in the *Washington Post*, in which I noted some things I thought we could still do at that point. It might not have worked, but I noted that if the cities start falling, this could go very quickly, we could have a very messy evacuation. And I wrote that about six weeks before the collapse.

Q: Wow. So, I don't know anyone else who has the range of experience that you do with it, so of course I've been thinking about it a lot myself, so I really look forward to talking to you about it. If we can dial back in time a bit to the PRT time.

You know, when you were there, I was assigned to one of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and for those not familiar with PRTs, they're Provincial Reconstruction Teams, interagency teams, that are designed and assigned to help stabilize provinces and support

the Afghan government using a whole government approach. Typically, the military provided security for the PRT, usually around one of Afghanistan's provincial capitals with a representative from USAID, U.S. Agency for International Development, and provided development advice and projects, and we typically had a representative from the State Department that developed relationships with the local leadership and focused on governance. Most of them were U.S.-led, but NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] partners led others, for example, UK [United Kingdom], Spain, and the Netherlands. And I'll go further into the background of that. Of course, people are welcome to get on the internet and delve more into it.

But ambassador, there's a lot to unpack with the PRTs, and I wanted to start with the general concept. I remember when I was heading out, I heard some skepticism on the part of a USAID colleague who had opined on this early on in 2003 or 2004 when they were just getting off the ground. He was asking where the proof of concept was that would lead us to believe that placing U.S. officials in the middle of these provinces would help stabilization. And he had actually argued it might have the opposite effect. Now, this is all before we had done anything, so he was just speculating without any background or any result that would lead him to believe these things. But I'm interested in how you were introduced to the PRT concept, coming in as an ambassador, what your initial thoughts were, how it evolved over time when you actually got out and had a chance to visit, you know. And I'm asking you to walk back in time with me, you know, back to that time and share—

NEUMANN: Yeah, that I remember that far back.

Well, first of all, it's kind of an odd comment from the fella when you haven't done something like this for fifty years, what's your proof of concept before you do it. I find it a slightly useless question. A more useful question might have been, how are you going to analyze your performance once you're there. There was a precursor for the PRT, although it was quite different, which was CORDS [Office of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support] in Vietnam, which I hadn't worked in directly. I was an infantry officer in Vietnam, but I didn't work in any area with CORDS. Where we were there was nothing but the enemy. But the concept was familiar.

I think it's useful to say something about what the PRTs were in Iraq as opposed to Afghanistan because the U.S. government used PRTs in both places but in a quite different situation. In Iraq, which came later, although they didn't seem to profit from any lessons learned in Afghanistan, you had essentially a functioning government. It wasn't necessarily a very good government. It wasn't always very efficient. But you had a big staff of Iraqi bureaucrats who could run a government. While the PRT's came later in Iraq, I think it is more useful for contrast to explain it first. The PRT in Iraq was essentially set up to help the government that existed function and deliver to its people. The problem in Afghanistan was there was no local government. It was completely absent. It was destroyed by years of civil war and warlords. The problem was not that the government that was set up in Kabul was too centralized, which is another issue that could be discussed separately, but that there simply was no local government in the provinces. As you will remember, you had a governor and you sometimes had the representatives of the ministries in Kabul, but the ministries were just learning to function

themselves. They had no budget. Thus, the PRT in Afghanistan initially served the idea of helping to stand up a local government that didn't exist. And some worked better than others, depending on the quality of the local officials there and the understanding of the Americans.

Originally, the PRT concept, as it was designed before my arrival, was supposed to have a representative of the Interior Ministry based in the PRT to help connect the PRT to the local administration. Most of those positions were never filled. The problem as things evolved was that because the PRT had money and could do things it became a kind of alternative source of government. This may have been okay in the beginning when there was no government anyway. As the Afghan government stood up, conceptually the PRTs should have transitioned into greater support of the Afghans and eventually stood down. That didn't really happen, partly because the PRT had more money, so that on the Afghan government side they would look to the PRT to fund things, but that meant the PRT was the ultimate decider so that there was an internal tension later on in the concept. And then, a lot depended on how smart people were in there, a lot depended on what the quality of local officials was, whether they were interested in standing up a government or whether they were interested in plundering and pilfering for their own benefit. A lot depended on whether the military commander actually understood anything about governance. And then, of course, we were probably our own worst enemy in our rapid change of personnel, so the idea that you could have any organizational concept and keep it was very difficult.

Also, PRTs proliferated then with NATO. I think when I got there, there were three or four. By the time I left, I think we had twelve U.S. let PRTs, NATO had thirteen. I'm not positive about the numbers but it was about that. We had an American political officer and an AID [United States Agency for International Development] officer I think in almost every one of the NATO PRTs as well. They were all different. There was a PRT coordinating council in Kabul, which was an interesting debating forum, but nobody had authority to give anybody else orders, so aside from the proliferation of chains of command within the American process you had then all of the foreign ones, and then in some of those, for instance, the Italian PRTs, the civilians and military didn't get along at all well. I sometimes would hear complaints from our people about their problems with the Italian military. When I asked if they wanted me to take it up, they said no because "they treat us much better than they treat their own civilians." So, the concept was clear. The problem with this, it's a problem with a great many policies, was whether it works or not is all about implementation, it isn't about the concept. That was a long answer to your perfectly reasonable question.

Ambassador Neumann in Nuristan with then Afghan Governor Nuristani, USAID Director Alonzo Fulgham, and Tenth Mountain Commander General Ben Freakley

Q: Can I dovetail from that a little bit. You mentioned the coalition-led PRTs, non-U.S. PRTs. I heard anecdotally some stories about how they worked or didn't work. And we've had all these lessons learned, right, over the years about PRTs and all kinds of other aspects of the Afghan engagement. But do you feel like maybe did someone get the formula better than we did? Were there lessons we could have learned from some of our foreign partner PRTs?

NEUMANN: I don't know if anybody got it better. They certainly had it differently. There were pluses and minuses. I don't know intimately each foreign PRT and how well they worked. The German had a much larger civilian presence, they may have done more in development, but they were so leery about kinetic action that they may have hamstrung themselves a bit. The Dutch in Uruzgan were very good, but they had to deal with a civilian government at home that didn't think they really ought to be at war, so they would tend to, kind of, hide it when they actually had a battle. We had a pretty good relationship with the Dutch. They had their own development efforts, we had ours with them. I didn't really see the Italians closely enough to evaluate them. There was an Icelandic PRT out in Ghor, I think it was Iceland. The aid effort was really ours, but if Iceland hadn't been willing to field the platform, we wouldn't have been there at all because we couldn't stretch that far. Remember how our presence in those days, when you were there, also was so much smaller than it later became.

The other PRT I should remember is the British in Helmand. The Canadians also had a big presence in Kandahar, but I didn't see theirs as closely to judge. The British had a major developmental effort in Helmand. They had more coordination problems than we

did because while our military can't control our AID people, the British embassy can't even control DFID [Department for International Development], their aid people, in Helmand, so they had three chains of command, their DFID people, diplomas, and military. Also, DFID in those days—it's the British AID—DFID had a law that they could only fund things that were developmental in nature, so they couldn't fund something that appeared to be a stabilization program that might have helped their military unless they could construct some kind of developmental logic for it. They had some very good people; they had some very good political officers in Helmand. I think they had a pretty good handle on a lot of tribal stuff. Their political officer at one point was a guy named Tom Tugendhat, who's now a member of parliament. He's a conservative, a strong supporter of Afghanistan still. They had some really bright people, but they had three chains of command, so I don't know that anybody—first of all, I don't think anybody cracked the code in the sense of having a better model.

Ambassador Neumann with the governor in Kandahar and then Canadian Ambassador David Sproul

But also, I think the problem isn't the model, it's the implementation, it's how long you have to stay to understand the local personalities, to understand the power structures, the patronage networks of local people, and to know which things you can make work and which things you can't. And that just takes a long time and it's all about implantation, it's not about policy. And so, I think if one is going to try to replicate this, the place to look for answers has got to be implementation, in tour length, in understanding where is the

overlap between U.S. policy and local politics, what things can you change and what, you know, like that old Niebuhr prayer about give me the the courage to change what I can, the strength to endure what I can't, the wisdom to know the difference. That's a big piece of working successfully in any of these countries.

Q: Yeah, and I think my tour was only six months, and I think over the years we did improve on some of those things. But I remember hearing, along the lines of something you said earlier, that as the Afghan government stands up, the PRTs would stand down. And back in 2006 there was talk about closing PRTs and then, of course, I left, and a lot of things happened. And then, you get to the civilian surge and we're going very much in a different direction.

NEUMANN: That went to absurd lengths. During the civilian surge we put in district development teams, but it was based on the notion that we had something like eighty critical terrain districts that had to be secured before a couple of years was over, forty in the first year and then they were supposed to swing to the second. Well, there was no possible Afghan ability to backfill. You could put in as many Americans, as much money as you wanted, but if you couldn't stand up the Afghan structures to take their place, it was like putting your fist in a bucket of water. It didn't leave anything when you pulled it out. And then, this became a very acrimonious issue between the civilians and the American military, as I saw when I was touring Afghanistan in 2010, with the military complaining vociferously that the civilians couldn't get things going fast enough and the civilians complaining that the military was rushing to failure, and everybody badmouthing everybody at the highest levels of command in front of the other. It was quite a poisonous atmosphere. But I wasn't in charge anymore.

Q: I'm glad I missed that. It's hard to talk about, you know, PRTs and what we did in the field without talking about spending a little bit, so I wanted to approach that. You know, a lot of experts and special inspector general for Afghanistan reports criticized PRTs and U.S. project spending as being too much for Afghanistan to absorb, not having adequate safeguards against mismanagement and corruption, and not just USAID, of course, but CERP, Commanders Emergency Response Program and State Department programs as well. What are your thoughts on the project effectiveness piece of this and what we might learn should we be asked to do this again in the future?

NEUMANN: I like the concept that we might learn something.

On the funding problem—there are several different layers of problems. One is that initially we didn't have enough money and so, for instance, in 2005, I proposed a roughly six-hundred-million-dollar supplement for economic aid, part of which was supposed to go up in the north. But out of six hundred million dollars that I proposed, I got forty-three; eleven of that was a paper transfer to cover debt rescheduling, so basically, I got a nickel on the dollar for what I thought I wanted, and we didn't do any of the projects for which we received no funding. Condi Rice told me that we would work on our partners, get them to help fund some of these things. I was able to tell her a year later that while the allies had funded many things, they had not funded any of the major priorities we had set out a year earlier. Later, when the surge came, we stuck a lot of money in it. I think the criticism then of the absorption capacity is absolutely correct. We

put way, way too much money into places like Helmand, where there's no possibility of absorbing it, and we really did fuel corruption.

The other problem was that when we had money our whole budgeting process and political process wants to see it spent, and they're focused on the burn rate, and so this is an incentive to do things badly because it really presses you to get the money out of AID, get it out the door. And it really mitigates against putting up enough safeguards. But we have a whole lot of problems; we had a problem in our aid structure that because we have to fund through large so–called implementing partners, because we have to contract everything that puts multiple layers in the way of small projects. That also makes supervision more complicated. There's a big area out here. When you get down to the PRT, the problems were a little bit different. The main problem was the American AID people in the PRT didn't have control over AID money, so that even if it was being spent in the province, they were not the primary project director. And sometimes they could get a better handle on things and sometimes they were not welcomed in AID Kabul when they tried to say that things were not being done. Well, that's again, very personality dependent. That wasn't so much that the structure was deficient in a way that you didn't have enough project supervision close to the project but more fundamentally of not having any people. AID, when I was in Afghanistan as ambassador was about 10 percent of the size AID had been when visited Afghanistan in 1967. And over the years it has lost a great many people and increased its budget so that the ratio of dollars to contract officers has gone way out of whack in terms of any capability for effective supervision. So, there's multiple areas here.

CERP had its own problems and its own benefits. The military with CERP funding could move much more quickly than AID to fund things. But CERP had several problems. For instance, in roads they could only build tactical roads, so they could build a gravel road, but they couldn't program any money for maintenance, and the Afghans had no money for maintenance, so within a year or two the road would be washed out. That didn't mean the road was a bad thing, it was just the second piece of making it a more permanent addition was outside their capability. In a very few cases AID and the military partnered. They did the roadbed with CERP and AID did the paving. That was an effective partnership, but it was rare.

Another problem with CERP was that while they could build a school or a clinic far quicker and maybe cheaper than AID could, the U.S. military had no operation at the national level to get those buildings or clinics programmed into the relevant Afghan ministries. The Afghans had no budget to staff the additional facilities with teachers, books, or clinicians. So, the military could build the school and then they'd say to the Afghans, Now it's yours, you've got to do something, and the Afghans were, Well, we can't do anything, we haven't got any money.

Q: That's fair, right?

NEUMANN: Yeah, that's perfectly fair. The Americans often didn't understand that and then they had the same pressure on burn rate we had. So, they did some very good things. They did many that were wasted. They didn't have any better control process or evaluation process than we had. In some PRTs where the military worked cooperatively

and we had a good AID representative, the two could look at projects together and I think did fairly well with the CERP money. In other places that dynamic didn't work, things weren't as good. But the military was trying to use money as a weapon, which has limits. On the other hand, the military was under enormous pressure from Washington, from the strategy, especially in the surge, to produce results so that the fundamental problem for the military was that they were under a time pressure driven by Washington policy, which was completely unrealistic from the get go.

Q: Yeah, for what they wanted to achieve. R*eally something you said earlier about not getting the money early when it wasn't a lot of money, but might have done a lot more good, you know.*

NEUMANN: Oh, for sure.

Q: I kind of felt like there was a window of opportunity and I feel the same way about military operations generally to get it done and get it right so that you can leave.

NEUMANN: Yeah. Yeah. No, we wasted a—

Q: I wanted to talk a little bit about continuity of policies with PRTs. I think we actually covered this, you know, how civilians during the push, just to try to increase the numbers of civilians during the surge and then shortly after Benghazi and the Anne Smedinghoff killing, then it was just the opposite, trying to turn it down, which I thought sent very peculiar, odd signals to the Afghans.

NEUMANN: Yeah, we were hurt by the shift—cowardice is not a respected trait in Afghanistan.

Q: Yeah, true. So, not only undermine the effectiveness, but undermine a little of trust.

NEUMANN: Yeah, for sure.

Q: Yeah. Talked to many former PRTers about human rights, combating corruption, and I heard some conflicting views on whether we pushed too hard in some areas and not hard enough in others. Some criticism of one size fits all approaches that don't account for different cultural norms in different parts of the country. Do you have any thoughts on that, and I guess more generally the one size fits all approach?

NEUMANN: I think we have to be concerned about corruption. I was always more concerned about corruption because of its ability to rot the state than I was about its moral dimension. I mean, corruption exists all over the world. If you get what you pay for and the price is known, then corruption functions like any other system of taxation, maybe less respectably, but it functions economically the same. When corruption's rapacious and just takes and doesn't give, then it's destructive, which is often what happened in Afghanistan. Tom Barfield, who's probably the best anthropologist on Afghanistan, refers to state building and state destroying corruption. We need to distinguish between them. We don't have, in policy terms, we don't have the ability to distinguish, so we want to suppress it everywhere. We have all kinds of contradictions. We want a proper judicial system, but getting cases made in building a judicial system is

a very long process, so if you want to stem corruption you're probably going to have to put up with some non-judicial harshness, which we also didn't want and would then complain about. So, we had various contradictions. Personally, I've always felt that what we ought to be focused on more was efficiency rather than whether there was or was not corruption. And within that you've got to look at the local situation and find out what's going on and why, which we didn't often do. So, we had a problem with those things. I think we had to complain about them, we had to work on them. We also had to be realistic, which means you're constantly going to work in gray areas and make the least bad decisions. You won't get to have easy right or wrong decisions.

Let me talk about one place where I felt we were deficient, one that I tried to work on it in Kabul but I think not always as well as I wished. We very rarely looked underneath what we wanted people to change to ask what level of political or personal pain we were asking them to endure, whether it was just that they weren't going to be able to build as big of a mega mansion for themselves or that we wanted actions that would jeopardize our contacts political or physical survival. For instance, an Afghan governor has to be corrupt. He has a responsibility that he cannot avoid for constant hospitality for everybody who comes to see him; to feed them. He has no budget for that. If he doesn't steal somewhere, unless he's just so rich that he just feels like laying out his own money all the time, he's going to have to have some level of corruption in order just to be minimally respectable and to provide any services at all. So, then the question becomes, well, how much is he taking and what's he doing with it, rather than whether he is or is not corrupt. I remember my father telling me many, many years ago he'd gotten to know one Afghan governor well enough to ask him about stories of corruption and the Afghan governor replied with some offense, "I never took more than was expected." But if you don't understand that and you can't differentiate, then you look ridiculous.

Q: That's right. I remember when I was out there there was an actual budget item for governors to meet with people, to do outreach.

NEUMANN: That was our budget item.

Q: Yes, it was.

NEUMANN: Yeah.

Q: And you know, people reviewed that and said, This is unacceptable, and tried to take it away.

NEUMANN: Yeah.

Q: So, that was, more generally on the approach on this, lots of talk about us mentoring the Afghans, mentoring them on democracy, mentoring them on governance, mentoring them on economics, mentoring them on how to run a modern military, human rights, et cetera. I always got the feeling that there wasn't enough emphasis on us being mentored by the Afghans. In other words, there was a little bit of arrogance in the approach.

NEUMANN: Yeah, I don't know where you got the little bit of stuff, but there was a huge amount of arrogance. And some of it was justified, some things they did badly. I think

one thing that we had a very hard time with was understanding what their view of a problem is before we go and have a solution, and sometimes the problem would be tied up with local issues that we didn't understand. There's a wonderful story in Noah Coburn's book about working in—and he's an anthropologist and has a book called *Bazaar Politics*—working in the pottery village in Istalif, and engineers, Afghan engineers come from Kabul, they want to talk about paving the road. And there's this—you probably heard me talk about that story before—there's this huge argument with all the villagers, they can't agree on anything. They talk about another area that maybe the road should go there, but it's not a suitable area. And the engineers give up; they never pave the road. It takes Coburn around six months living in the village before he finds out that the road would have gone through the land of somebody who was on the wrong side in the previous war. The villagers don't want his economic status upgraded by the economic benefit he'll get from the road, but they don't want to just oppose it because that makes a feud in the village. Well, if you're just an American engineer and your view is, what's the matter dummy? Why don't you know where the road should go? You're never going to be able to reach a solution because that's the second priority problem for them, it's not the first. And we rarely took the time to find out that kind of problem.

Q: Well, I completely agree with that. I think we created a perverse incentive on the part of our officials at PRTs to create results and a very unrealistic time frame that they're making decisions on projects, on relationships when they don't fully understand the environment.

NEUMANN: Yeah.

Q: And that's compounded by the continuity issue, and it's compounded by the need to show results and to show results quickly. And you get into this, I'm sure you've heard the PowerPoint presentation example of all the areas of the province being red when the PRT arrives—

NEUMANN: Oh, yeah.

Q: —and green when they leave.

NEUMANN: Yeah, and then they're red when the next PRT comes.

Q: Correct, right.

NEUMANN: Yeah, no.

Q: Wash, rinse, repeat.

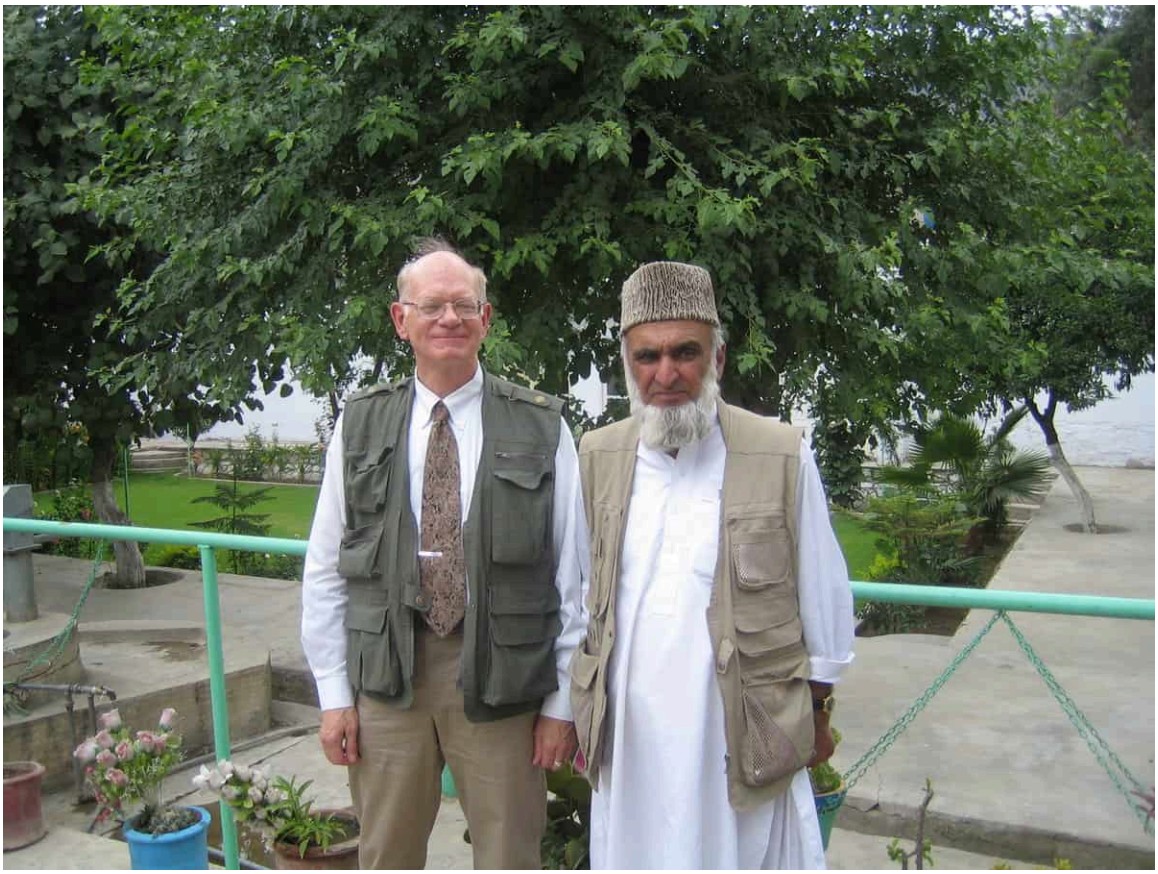
NEUMANN: Yeah. There was a huge need, I think particularly on the military side, for external evaluation of progress, particularly on military training, where we never were able to come to an adequate system of measuring our success, but that's a different story.

Q: Yeah. I mean, those nuances, first you've got to care about them, and then two, you've got to learn them, and that takes some time.

NEUMANN: It's a time-consuming process. If there were one lesson, only one that I would draw from Afghanistan and Iraq, if we ever have the misfortune to do this kind of thing again, we have to have longer tours. You can't have a learning culture in a short-tour environment.

Q: And see how you talked about the model not being the problem. Should we be going down this path again in the future, can we dust this model off for future conflicts?

NEUMANN: Yes, with some twerking, but you know, the first place to start would be with longer tours because it's not the made in Washington model. In the end, it's how that gets adapted in the field. There's a very good book on more or less successful UN [United Nations] operations that I read by Lise Morjé Howard, a professor at Georgetown and one of the points she makes in this comparison of successful UN missions is that they had a learning culture, they learned how to work effectively with the local authorities. And you could only do that if people stay significant lengths of time.



Ambassador Neumann with the governor of Laghman

Q: The other thing you were saying about all the bureaucracy involved with the project up to Kabul, through DC, back down, one of the stories I heard about the Spanish PRT was they didn't have that problem because they didn't have the protocols in place. You know, this is not something that they ever imagined that they might do. And in some ways that was useful in the fact that they were given X about of money, a certain quantity of money and told to work with that toward the broad goals of stabilization, which sort of

acted as a forcing mechanism to make them understand, to create an incentive for them to understand what's going on in the province, and then to have the freedom and flexibility to apply those funds where they thought they would be the most effective.

NEUMANN: Yeah. I think it's very important to have multi-year funding to be able to have metrics, I hate the word, but metrics for success. Metrics for success need to be output-based. Now, that's very difficult, but too often the metrics were simply outcome-based, really, which is hard and often useless. As an example, if you get into gender training, so often the metrics would be how many courses you brought in, not whether anybody learned anything, whether you were training anybody new or retraining the same people. But at least that kind of metric you can qualify. It gets very hard, then you want to say, you know, how are you going to try to measure if, in those particular gender programs, people actually learned, and even harder when you need to follow up over time to see whether they used the skills you've imparted. That's much, much tougher.

Q: Yeah, well, just on education, there's the school's built, is it the teacher's trained, is it the people educated and how do you measure all that. And then, you've got a lot of manpower and resources going into the metrics themselves. I remember, after I had left, I received some reports of the military going all in for metrics and having very long forms to fill out on every aspect of civility that you can think of.

NEUMANN: Yeah.

Q: And one of the PRT commanders made the point that he discounted the value of all that and said, "My metric is when I look out the window and I count the number of vendors at the local market because that tells me something."

NEUMANN: Yeah, there are simpler metrics there.

I remember one marine general said his metric was, are parents sending their kids, particularly girls, to a local school. If they let them go to school the province is stabilizing.

But there's a great book called *Embracing the Fog of War. Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*, by Ben Connable on comparing the campaign metrics of Afghanistan and Vietnam that concludes that both are nonsense. But one of the things he concludes is when you add more metrics, reporting requirements, to the same people who have other jobs, what you get back is less useful because you inundate them, and they just give you crap to get it off their back.

Q: Mm-hm. Check those boxes.

NEUMANN: Yeah. So, on to next.

Q: All right. I'm going to—unless you have something else you want to talk about regarding PRTs or civilian efforts in the field, I want to just transition to the modern stuff.

NEUMANN: Sure. Mm-hm.

Q: And the question for that is sort of in both—I asked more than thirty U.S. field representatives in Afghanistan whether the Afghan government would survive without our help in 2013 when I went back the second time. Only one said unequivocally that it would not. Switching gears to 2021, the speed of the Afghan government's collapse caught a lot of people by surprise. I was wondering how surprised you were when Kabul fell and the speed in which it fell.

NEUMANN: I was unhappy. I mean, the final collapse the last day, August 15, was very surprising when that went down. But that it went quickly, I thought, was not surprising. In fact, a group of former ambassadors published an article on the Atlantic Council in May in which we also warned that if the cities started going everything could go quickly. We even said then it could be a messy evacuation. But what we were looking at is a function of Afghan history, that you get to a certain sort of tipping point when people decide that this just isn't going to go and then it's not that they're not willing to fight up until that, but when they decide it's hopeless, then they quit. They don't feel like dying for the principle of it. After all, they've been at war for forty years and people who want to die for principle are dead a long time ago. So, you've seen this phenomenon repeatedly. It happened when the Taliban went to Kabul, and they had very few fights between Kandahar and Kabul. And in fact, I remember Afghan friends telling me how they went to sleep, being told the Taliban were thirty kilometers outside of Kabul and woke up to find them in the street and things had dissolved. That was true when we went in with our invasion. After the big battles in the north and big fights around Kandahar, the Taliban dissolved very quickly. That was one of the reasons that we couldn't keep the Northern Alliance from entering Kabul. The Taliban just faded away. And this happened in previous wars as well. So, it's not like you could say it's going to take three and a half weeks, but that you could have a meltdown like that was highly predictable and that's what several of us were looking at when we talked about this speed.

I think there were several differences between 2013 and 2021. One, of course, was the Taliban had become a great deal stronger. In two thousand thirteen you were at the apex of our surge and the Taliban that was weaker then and we had done maximum damage to them in the surge, and so there was a lot of confidence in the Afghans. I think that lasted a long time. You know, people say, Why did the Afghans not fight? Well, I think that's the wrong question. The Afghans were fighting, they were losing more people every year than we lost in the whole campaign. The question then becomes why did they quit fighting? And I think there were two main reasons for the collapse of morale. One was us. We said—when President Biden announced the strategy, that we would take our troops out and we would support the Afghans, and we have a plan. Well, he either didn't know what he was talking about, or he was lying. We had no plan. What really just killed the Afghans was that we built an army for a lot of reasons very much like ours, which depended on a lot of contractors, depended on contractors to keep the airplanes flying, depended on contractors to keep supplies moving. The whole supply system was very modern. So, what really hurt the Afghans was not the thirty-five hundred troops we pulled out, it was the fifteen thousand contractors. They all left with no plan for how that work was to be done. And that was devastating. So, that told the Afghans that the Americans are no longer not only fighting with them, we weren't fighting with them anyway. Remember, the last year we were in active combat in Afghanistan before signing

the agreement in 2019. We had fifteen KIA [killed in action] that year. This is not a very active war for us in terms of our military operations. It's an active war for the Afghans.

But our air support was critical. We, of course, stopped that. There was not yet an adequate Afghan air force. There had been a lot of progress. It's a long story. There's a lot of fault on both sides, a lot of corruption in the early days, a lot of big mistakes. The Americans bought over forty transport planes for millions and millions of dollars and ended up scrapping them all as inadequate. We swapped out the airframes we were giving the Afghans for helicopters. We were originally buying Russian helicopters, which they knew how to operate, and which are much simpler, and then we cut that off because of problems with the Russians; we cut off all funding for Russian equipment, so we had to switch the Afghans out from an airframe they understood with MI-17s and MI-8s, into Blackhawks. That's a much more complicated aircraft. They had a limited number of these. Then we took all the support away. We stopped flying combat support missions even when our aircraft were still on the ground as part of the withdrawal.

There's an interesting article by General Sami Sadat who was in Helmand who probably the best corps commander in Afghanistan. He fought right up until the end, and he talked about American planes being overhead while the Afghans were under attack by the Taliban and the Americans couldn't get orders to allow them to drop ordinance. The Afghans could be talking to them, and they couldn't get help. So, what you had on the American side, I'm going on pretty long–winded here, is huge undermining of morale, compounded on the Afghan side by gross mismanagement by President Ghani, who, with Hamdullah Mohib, his national security advisor, were changing out officers at a rapid rate several months before all the way up to the final battles. Many of these command changes wee probably for political reasons. Even if the officers were good, they had no time to become really familiar with their units and that also destroyed the confidence of their units. That again was not a situation that was so prevalent in 2013. So, you had this incredible misgovernment. In fact, when I saw Ghani about six weeks before the fall and it was clear they were going to have to give up some cities in order to consolidate. And I said to him that he had—and I wasn't unique, he was hearing this from a lot of people, but I said to him that you need to have a plan for what you're going to give up and what you're going to hold, and you need to take responsibility for it and be public about it because none of your commanders will take this responsibility if you're not backing them because they'll just assume that you're going to find fault with them when they lose ground. And he said, yes, yes, we have a plan, we're about to announce it. Well, whether he had a plan I don't know, but he never announced it.

Q: Expectations management.

NEUMANN: Expectation management was ghastly. Micromanagement was excessive. The fiddling with the military's chain of command was bad. One of the things I saw when I was there just before the fall was there were some effective, fairly effective local resistance movements springing up. There were local groups that were fighting in Takhar, in Baghlan, in Samangan, even down in Nimruz. They needed support, and we were hamstrung in giving them support aside from policy because we couldn't vet them for reservations about human rights. But even when they got support, that was one of the things I said needed to be done quickly, they got very little, but it was directed through

the intelligence services, the NDS [National Directorate of Security] that was under Ghani's direct control, and therefore it was not coordinated with military in the field at all. So, almost everything you could imagine at a political level was done badly. And then, many garrisons were cut off. The Taliban fought a brilliant campaign. They first went into the north, which was the area that had the greatest potential for holding out against them, but it had a weak, probably the weakest Afghan corps. They knocked it out quickly and took over. Often very thin garrison forces were left behind them, keeping their most active forces moving, rolling forward. It was a very effective strategy because it took out an area that would have been most likely to have rallied against them.

Q: Later on.

NEUMANN: Later on. So, they did that. Secondly, they surrounded a lot of places and cut them off from supply and the Afghan problem then became that they couldn't supply a lot of their garrisons. Vice President Amrullah Saleh told me when I was in Kabul, "I've got a lot of places I can sustain, but I can't support." Well, that began to undermine Afghan morale. One of the things I suggested in an op-ed I wrote when I came back is that we needed supply drops, we needed very visible symbols that we were going to support them. We didn't do it, they didn't have the aircraft to do it, and so, you had many people who began to say, Well, you know, I can fight here, but I can't get a casualty evac, and when I run out of bullets I'm going to be overrun because I can't get any more bullets. So all of these things were feeding in together and nobody was taking effective action to deal with it. But those were all factors peculiar to the rundown of the war. They weren't things you could have predicted in 2013 because they didn't have to be there. And they'd been building though ever since the signature of the Doha Agreement, which was not a peace agreement, it was an American withdrawal agreement totally yielding to the Taliban. And the things the Taliban sort of agreed to, they didn't perform, except for not attacking us. So, really from Doha on, the Afghans began to question where we were, what our stance was, what our politics were. So, I would say the disaster was jointly made in Washington and Kabul, but very much helped from Washington.

Q: I wanted to pick up on something, you just talked about the Doha Agreement a little bit. You go on to new tours but Afghanistan's always in the back of my head a lot. And I heard about all this happening and went down to Fort Dix where you went to basic training there or—?

NEUMANN: I went to, no, I went to Dix after OCS [Officer Candidate School]. I was there for six months on a—

Q: Yeah, I was just reading over your old interviews. I went there for Operation Allies Welcome and did some work there and watched from afar as, you know, the final days of this unfolded. And I remember thinking the political reaction here in the United States was very disappointing to me. I kind of felt like it's if your house is on fire, you get people out, you don't start talking about who started the fire and who's to blame and all that sort of thing. I understand the rationale for looking for accountability on some of these things, but that so quickly bleeds over into a blame game in Washington, and it seemed to me the people on the right were, of course, blaming the Biden administration and the people on the left were blaming the Trump administration for the Doha Agreement that set things in

motion, but there seemed to be some ignoring the fact that this has been a twenty-year conflict.

NEUMANN: Concerning Doha, you know, the Trump and Biden administrations really dovetailed in making this mess. I mean, the Doha Agreement was a lousy agreement, but even that might have worked if we had followed through because when it was signed, we said it's conditions-based. That was the statement by Secretary Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Esper. Well, the conditions that counted were the Taliban engaging in substantive negotiations with the Afghans and our withdrawal schedule. The Taliban did not engage in substantive negotiations. They engaged in negotiations, but they were not substantive. They stalled for six months. We pressed the Afghans to make concession after concession in order to get the Taliban to the table, but did not press Taliban for comparable concessions.

And then, Trump picked up the pace on the troop withdrawal over and above any conditions. We said that they were conditions-based we then completely violated that. We totally undercut any confidence that that was true, any confidence in us, then we had other problems, Ghani believing that we were trying to undercut him, which I think we were, and Khalilzad having to negotiation while looking over his shoulders to see if the president was about to forget negotiations and just take the troops home. So, there were impossible conditions under which Khalilzad was negotiating. The result was that undermined us and we undermined the government. We did a certain amount—we never said we were opposed to the 2020 elections, but we undermined them by talking about transition governments, so it was not clear what our policy was.

So, then you get to the Biden administration, about which I'm extremely critical. Like you, I probably have Afghanistan in my blood. The Biden administration comes in, says we're going to consult with allies. They consult with them and then they ignore them. It's a strange world where the Italians and the Germans want to stay involved in a war, the Americans want to run, contrary to our normal methodologies. So, we ignored the allies and made the pullout decision. Biden said he had either to go out or go big and that this was what he got from his military. I'm sorry, that's a flat out lie. I know what General Miller said to him, and General Miller was commander on the ground. I know what he reported because of the chain of command directly to the president. And we know now from public statements from General McKenzie that his view was we could hold with twenty-five hundred people. In fact, General Miller had told me two years before that he thought at that point that forty-five hundred was what we needed to hold them. So, there is no reason to accept the president's statement as fact that it was his military advice, it was not the military advice he got. And it was not the idea that we would have big casualties.

Well, 2019 was the last year we were at war, we did not have big casualties, we had very small casualties. And the reason was simple, we weren't fighting the war in the field. We were doing air power and we were doing training and there were very few targets for the Taliban to hit. So, the Taliban's capacity to have large casualties, that we had to have a big force or go home, that's total nonsense. That's the president's rationalization because it is not true. So, that we had a plan was false. That we had to go or go big is false. That we were obliged to go by Doha is crap because it's not within the conditions, that we said

it was conditions–based, and we finally, frankly, ignored a lot of other things the Trump administration did. It's not a treaty, it's an executive agreement. So, on every level the Biden administration misrepresented parts of the situation.

Now, their strategic judgment that we should get out, that's a different question, and you can argue both sides of that. We've been there twenty years, a lot of war, a lot of time, it would work, it wouldn't work, those questions can be debated endlessly. But every one of the proximate factors the president cited was not correct and there was no plan and there was no ability to back it up. By the way, we consulted a second time in mid-August after the crazy evacuation was beginning, we consulted particularly with the British and the French, maybe the Canadians, I'm not sure, about whether we should extend the withdrawal, and again everybody else wanted to extend and we said thank you very much, no.

If you detect a certain sense of contempt for the Biden administration as well as the Trump administration on Afghanistan, you would be reading me correctly.

Q: Fair to say there's a good amount of blame to go around.

NEUMANN: There's lots of blame to go around. There's blame on our military— But the fundamental blame is a policy that was carried over by two administrations that wanted to get out no matter the consequences.

Q: So, this notion that he was locked into the Doha Agreement and had no choices?

NEUMANN: Is pure bullshit.

Q: Okay. What about, step back a bit, it's a separate question, but the question of whether we should have stayed. McMaster had a very eloquent defense of this on strictly moral grounds.

NEUMANN: Yeah. Remember twenty-five hundred troops, remember how vested I am in the policy. There is an argument that says it was never going to work, you should have got out. Maybe. You can make those arguments and the Afghan government was not performing well, and corruption was high, our ability to restrain that stuff was very low. And you can make an argument also that it's been twenty years and it's just not working. There's no definitive answer to that.

There are replies. One I would make is when you look at what it took to get to success in Korea or to get to democratic functioning government in Taiwan, or even to get to democracy in Greece where we had battalion-level troops involved in 1948 in the Greek Civil War and it was 1974, the overthrow of the colonels before you got to democracy. These things all had a very long timeline. That doesn't prove you would have succeeded in Afghanistan. It just forces you to raise your sights and say that you can't know on the basis of even twenty years, especially when you don't make twenty-year commitments, you make one-year-at-a-time commitments. The problem that I first heard from John Paul Vann in Vietnam where he said we don't have twelve years' experience; we have one year's experience twelve times. We replicated that for twenty. And so, whether it could have worked or not, that's the most fundamental question and in the end, it's not

answerable. You make your choice, but you can't prove it. Whether it was sustainable is a different question. It was unquestionably sustainable. We were losing fifteen, twenty people a year, which is way less than we lose in non-combat training incidents in the military. We were spending big dollars, one and a half, two billion dollars, but they amounted to about 1 percent of the defense budget. So, if your casualties are low and your dollars are within 2 percent of your defense budget, it's sustainable.

Q: When you talked about troop commitment, twenty-five hundred troops, how many troops do we have in Korea?

NEUMANN: Oh, about thirty thousand, I think. I mean, I think the real number, by the way, is about thirty-five hundred because we played games with our statistics. But nevertheless, it's still a very small number.

Q: Yeah. So, the opportunity cost of—

NEUMANN: Yeah. So, now, you know, now you see, well, what have you got? I mean, I personally, and again, this gets maybe too personal to be good, strategic judgment. First of all, we did a terrible job of taking out the people that we had a legal obligation to, who had worked for us, particularly the interpreters and people like that. That goes back to the Trump administration as well, undercutting the whole process. The process itself is bureaucratic. But we left about, best estimates, about fifteen thousand of those people behind, that we did not bring out. That's just the primary applicant, that's not family members. So, if you add their wives, their kids, you're talking seventy-five, eighty thousand people that had a valid claim on a visa. The system is also absurd in some respects. For instance, an Afghan has to be able to prove that he worked for the U.S. government or for a U.S. contractor. And there are lots of cases out there of people who were, say, interpreters in the field that have letters from the company commander they served attesting to their being with the company, but the company commander was not their employer, that was a contractor who in some cases has gone belly up or gone out of business and they can't get a letter from that contractor and this other stuff doesn't meet the level of proof, so tough luck, Charlie. So, that's a bad system.

But then, beyond all those people, I do feel that we have a really big moral commitment, that we spent twenty years encouraging Afghans to take risks for democracy, to women to go into various professions and teaching. And now we have a lot of people who have bought into those things. They didn't buy into it because of us. They really accept those morals, those values, but now our view is well, we spent twenty years trying to get you to accept these values, and now that you have, we're leaving and that's tough, I think there's a huge moral failing on our part.

Q: Yeah, and not just a moral failure but geostrategic interests for us. I mean, it's not just to help them.

NEUMANN: Yeah, al Qaeda, we know al Qaeda is growing although we don't know how much there. Whether or not they're planning attacks on us, we'll find out over the course of time.

Q: Yeah.

NEUMANN: There is a risk of destabilization spreading out from Afghanistan, you've got Islamic movement in Uzbekistan, you've got the Tajik independence movement growing, scaring the hell out of the Tajiks, the Pakistani Taliban is giving the Pakistan government fits and Pakistan's government may be having a little buyer's remorse. How much do we have to care about that kind of spreading ring of instability coming out of Afghanistan? Again, you could argue whether or not that's something for the U.S. to worry about or not. We'll give it another ten, twenty years, we'll know. We know that in the past every time we turn our back on Afghanistan it exposes another area to get bitten. But will, you know, the past be prologue? Can't say. We do know that every prediction about how horrible the Taliban would be is proven true.

Ambassador Neumann near the Pakistani border with U.S. forces

Q: Yeah. That's unfortunate. This kind of ties back into the conversation about spending and an Afghanistan-weary public. Let's talk a little bit about the future, right?

NEUMANN: You mean the American domestic—

Q: I mean the domestic, American domestic—

NEUMANN: But there was no significant domestic political pressure on Biden. There was grumbling. There was no pressure in the Congress to cut funding. So, I think the need to get out was very strong in Biden and it may well be that this was basically a decision he wanted in 2009 and didn't get, made in 2021. Be that as it may, he had lots of political room if he wanted to stay.

Q: Yeah, lies about choices.

NEUMANN: Lies about choices.

Q: I wanted to, so, mid-term elections are upon us, right? I remember a year ago people were saying foreign policy doesn't generally factor into elections in a real significant way, but that this would be the exception, that Afghanistan would be the exception. I'm not hearing that right now, are you?

NEUMANN: No. Foreign policy is an exception only if it is very proximate to the election. This is too far back, too many other issues are overlapping. So, the service personnel who absolutely hate the administration for the pullout may also be the people feeling an economic pinch of inflation or alternatively there may be people on a base in the south who are worried about the lack of abortion facilities for female service members and for their families who are posted there. So, there are all kinds of issues that can be very close to people that are going to cut different ways and they're going to loom larger in their vote than the election. And then, there's the whole business of what do you think about MAGA ["Make America Great Again"] Republicans and Trump, and you know, can you accept the alternative, even if you're angry at the decision. All those things go into the mix and no, it's not dispositive.

Q: What about our future policy in Afghanistan? So, there's a fair amount of Afghanistan weariness in policy circles as well, but among the public, how do you make the argument that we need to continue to help the people in Afghanistan, and how do you do that without empowering the Taliban?

NEUMANN: There's very little we can do about Afghanistan. We've thrown away all our tools, now we can't build much of anything. That's the starting point. We have very little influence. The Taliban doesn't take us seriously. They'd like more money, more influence, but so far, it's not even clear that they take our threats very seriously because we don't do much of anything. But there's not very much we can do either. I think we do have a moral responsibility to keep people from starving to death, and we can put some money into that. That's about all we can do. You know, the Taliban government may not last. It is governing miserably. This also follows a pattern of Afghanistan governments that come to power, suddenly at the end in a rush think they've got all the power, don't need to work with anybody else, and eventually alienate enough people to be challenged and overthrown. You can find parallels going back into the nineteenth century.

So, right now the things that may bring the Taliban down are almost all their domestic failings. The United States government has no particular interest in bringing the Taliban down. Our interests are counterterrorism, women's welfare, humanitarian conditions, and general terrorism in the region. None of our interests are served by Afghanistan descending into greater chaos than it's in. All of those things then get worse and there is no armed movement that shows any capability to overthrow the Taliban. So, we have no interest in overthrowing them. On the other hand, we have no interest in helping them be miserable, miserable in governance. So, particularly on the women's issue, which is the highest profile issue in America, as long as they're going to, Taliban are not going to change their ways on that, we're not going to have any political maneuver room anyway. We can do a limited number of things to help people survive, and that's really about all we can until conditions change. We can tell the Taliban that, you know, if you govern better, we could do more to work with you, but we can't, we shouldn't do anything about it when they don't.

Q: Yeah, I don't know that we have a lot to offer them to incentivize better behavior.

NEUMANN: Their biggest incentives should be the resentment they are building in their own people, which may limit their ability to control the country. But that's not how they are seeing things now. I would say that talking to people who are in and out of Kabul, Afghans, and foreigners, I think there are a number of people in the Taliban movement, apparently some of those in the ministries in Kabul, who are fairly pragmatic and who do understand this. But that's not where their top leadership has come out and so far, the perceived need for unity is holding them together, even though the course of action they're on is one that a great many of their senior people think is wrong.

Q: What about this notion of a Taliban 2.0, a Taliban that's learned from exile?

NEUMANN: It was a pretty notion that seems to be completely lacking in performance. There are probably such people but they're not governing. And people who are most in charge, like Haibatullah Akhundzada and others, sorry, are the ones making the final decision. And it was very clear in the case of the restriction of women in school that their people, their ministers in Kabul, I think, including Sirajuddin Haqqani and some of the others, expected the schools to open and were fine with that, and then Haibatullah overruled them all. And in the interest of unity, they sucked it in and accepted it. But what you have is a government in Kabul that is not the ultimate authority for governing, which is in Kandahar, and which is very opaque, we don't know very much about it. When you start trying to probe who are the leading mullahs around Haibatullah you don't get very clear answers. Some of the people that we thought were more modern, like Baradar, don't seem to be exercising a lot of power. So, at this point they're pretty resistant to the changes we want. That may change, but I don't know that we would see the change coming. We might see it if it happened, but we wouldn't see it coming because they're pretty good about keeping their inner discussions close hold. I've had talks recently. In the last couple of months I've talked to Abdullah, I talked to Karzai who's in Kabul; they don't understand these things either.

Q: Ambassador, what do you, when we talk about our obligations to interpreters and folks that used to work for us out in the field, I am freshly working on some of these issues, what can we do both to make the policy a little more workable for Afghans that are stuck in the country, and is there anything we can to do increase the number of flights out in trying to get people out logistically? Is that anything the academy's looked into or changes or anything—?

NEUMANN: It's not an academy issue. The academy as an institution doesn't get into foreign policy issues. There are pretty active discussions with the Taliban about laying in more flights and that goes up and down. I'm sure I'm not absolutely current. The biggest problem we have now is we have no place to take them. Last time I heard, a month or so ago, we had four thousand people in Qatar. The Qataris are putting a freeze on bringing more people in until we move some of those people out. Fair enough. Our damn security procedures and our processing is so slow that we're not getting them out. Same thing in Abu Dhabi. We've had people there for a year. We've people, as I'm sure you know, you're working on this, a whole bunch of people stuck in Albania. You know, when we flew people out in that crazy evacuation in 2021, military flights were going to military

bases and charter flights, of which there were many, were going anyplace we could find a place to let them come in and put it down.

Q: Wow. And a year later—

NEUMANN: And a year later, they're stuck because we have not been willing to make the necessary decision. There's a lot we could do, you know. We could open bases in America. Instead of closing the bases, we could open bases and move people in and keep them on a base until the finish clearance, instead of keeping them abroad until we let them into the States.

Q: Like we did—

NEUMANN: Like we did for Vietnam. We brought in thousands of people and kept them on bases until we finished our clearance protocols. So, we could do that. We could open the tap. I know some Afghans, you probably do too that are, moving from safe house to safe house and trying to hide. But people are able to get passports and we have thousands of people that we've given this P-1 or P-2 status to, but we won't process those cases until they get out of Afghanistan. They have to get out to a country where there's a U.S. embassy and then they have to tell us they're there, then it takes us a year, eighteen months, two years to process, so they have to be able to sustain themselves and their families if they're out. I don't know how they're supposed to do that for up to two years. Our system is bogged down. We have enormous numbers of people working really hard, seven days a week in many cases, but we don't have enough people put against the problem. So, our system is just drowned from the get go.

I think in the first two, three months of the evacuation, the months following August, I think we had something like eighty or ninety thousand people on P-2 referrals. And I don't know how many more thousands have come in since then. I mean, I'm sure you know everybody around who had anybody they worked for who they knew was putting in referrals. I put in a bunch of them myself. And then, some of them just got lost. I've had to go back sometimes three or four months later and say, you know, did this actually get in the system. In some cases, I was told by our embassy in Kabul, or our Kabul embassy in Doha, we've approved it, we've sent it in. And then, I've checked sometimes two or three months later when the person hasn't heard anything, and nobody can find it. So, the system is just drowning. But it's not the people working in the system, it's the unwillingness to staff it at a requisite level.

Q: Well, this is where we talk about the rhetoric of Operation Allies Welcome and our commitment to the Afghans, I'm not seeing that that's being matched by the—

NEUMANN: To me this is like cracking your ship up on the rocks, slamming the waterproof door in the face of a lot of people who are left to drown, and then congratulating yourself on how well you handled the lifeboats.

Q: Could not have said that better. So, it's not just me.

NEUMANN: No.

Q: I checked months back and there's no case number on a person, right?

NEUMANN: Yeah. And you've got to go back and back and back. And I don't blame the State Department. I think they're working as hard as they can, but they're not getting adequate support. I believe, but I cannot prove, that the White House simply doesn't want to act on Afghanistan, that they screwed this up to a fare thee well and the last thing they want to do is think about it. And so, any proposal to do more, to have more people, to spend more, takes very long to get any decisions.

Q: So, final question for me and then you can add whatever like, sir, but I talked to a lot of folks that have been involved in this effort over the last twenty years, and as you know, there's a lot of soldiers, diplomats, aid workers that have dedicated a lot of resources and blood and treasure to this effort. The response to "was it worth it" question and one acquaintance who says that she's heartened by the fact that she was able to make changes while she was there, that a lot of girls received an education that would not have otherwise received an education, a lot of bad things that could have happened didn't happen because they were there, talk about metrics, the things that you prevented are so hard to accurately track, whether we achieved our goals, I guess, depends on how you define that, right? People attack the mainland United States, did we create a thriving free and prosperous Afghanistan and everything in between there. I was wondering if you could talk about sort of our difficulty establishing what we were trying to do there and whether you think we can at least say we had some success there, and what do you tell those folks that are trying to make heads or tails of this and their involvement in it?

NEUMANN: This could be a very long conversation. On the personal level I think a lot of people did a lot of good, and I think people also should take satisfaction and pride in the fact that when their country needed them, they responded. There's a limit to what any individual could do, but what they can do is follow through on their duties. And that's true of NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], although that's a little different. Their commitments are humanitarian, but when you're talking about Foreign Service officers, AID officers, military, you fight the war you've got. You don't get to say whether or not you thought the war was a groovy idea to begin with. So, I think people should not lose sight of their pride, that they met their own call of duty. There are a lot of people who didn't. You can't define that satisfaction by whether or not you win the war. That's one thing.

We did have policy problems. By my count we had ten separate policies in Afghanistan, and I could go through them, but the main point is we did not go to do nation building. And when we got into nation building it was as a means to figure out how to get out, was how do you leave something behind you and that can endure. And that got different answers from different administrations and got changed repeatedly and we didn't crack that code. Underneath that I think is a deeper problem that we still have to live with, and that is how do we define victory. Americans have got themselves, without thinking about it, locked into defining victory à la World War II, surrender on the decks of the Missouri. When you fight non-state actors who have regenerative capacity you cannot have that kind of victory. Maybe you could do it with ethnic cleansing if you, you know, carpet bombed and gassed every Pashtun in Pakistan, but you know, short of that you can't have that kind of victory. And then the question is, okay, so now you're going to have to define

whether you call it victory or strategic success. You have to find definitions that are not just coverups for not being able to do more but that represent adequacies. To me, strategic success in Afghanistan meant you had to control the Taliban, al Qaeda, and ISIS [Islamic State]. You had to keep them from expanding and you had to continue to work on keeping the Afghan government more and more in the lead. We made a lot of progress in that with a lot of fits and starts and mistakes and wasted money. It was sustainable, we chose not to sustain it. You can't answer the what if question. You know, given another ten or twenty years would it have evolved like Taiwan from a corrupt kleptocratic authoritarian system into a thriving democracy or not? And you can believe one or believe the other, you can argue endlessly, you can't prove it on either side. But if you had defined your strategic goals in those terms, you would have had a strategic paradigm firsthand. If you defined them in the need to get this clear-cut victory where we could just go away and do something else, then you defined yourself in a way that you probably can't succeed. And we're going to have that question in another place. And we're not politically able to have that discussion. It is very difficult for us to talk about anything short of victory and yet, when we do that, it's easy for political speeches and it's really hard to deliver.

Q: I think we kind of lock ourselves into that or set ourselves up for that when we use the rhetoric of war, right? War on terror, war on poverty, you have to have that Missouri declaration of surrender to achieve the end point victory. Yeah.

Anything else you want to add either about the field experience or the last year, the downfall of the evacuation?

NEUMANN: No, I mean, people are on that stuff endlessly. Right now I don't see us with many lessons learned. I see a few lessons observed. I haven't seen any evidence that we're learning anything. And I worry that we are substituting bumper sticker phrases for any possibility of learning. You know, I'll give you a couple of examples.

One criticism that people make frequently is don't build an army in your own image. And there's validity in that. But if you want to make that a lesson then you have to go on and say how will you have another image because you can't send five or ten thousand army troops out to a country and tell them to build another army and have no doctrine and no model. And again, tell them, okay, we're going to send a marine brigade. You know, just make it up. We can't do anything coherent that way. So, if you don't want to build an army in our image, then you're going to have to be willing to spend a lot of time and a lot of intellect, probably a lot of money, figuring out either what you're image is going to be or how once on the ground you're going to get that image. But otherwise, this is no lesson learned, it's just a cheap bumper sticker.

Another one is don't do nation building. Well, nobody ever chose nation building as their goal in Afghanistan. In fact, the Bush administration was dead set against it, probably wasting a good part of the first couple years because they were so resistant to it.

Q: Deliberating.

NEUMANN: But as we moved into it periodically, episodically, it was always in the search for a way to have something to get out. So, if your lesson learned is that this bumper sticker, don't do nation building, you've missed the whole question that generated the problem, and therefore you've contributed absolutely nothing to any useful lesson. And there's probably a few more out there, but I just detest bumper stickers and the chattering classes and catch phrases as an excuse or a substitute for thinking.

Q: And don't do something, it's not really guidance.

NEUMANN: Yeah. If you don't want to go in and make the effort to think about what it is you should do instead, you have made no useful contribution to the problem. Or at least a solution.

Q: We do that across the political field, don't we?

NEUMANN: Yep, we're good at it.

Q: Mm-hm. We can tell people what's wrong, but we can't tell them what to do to replace it or fix it.

NEUMANN: Well, that takes more effort.

End of interview