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

AMBASSADOR RICHARD OLSON

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
Initial Interview Date: September 28, 2022

INTERVIEW

Q: Good morning. It is September 28, 2022. I'm Robin Matthewman and today I am interviewing Ambassador Rick Olson as part of ADST's Afghanistan project. Rick, welcome.

OLSON: Thanks. Good to be here.

Q: You've already previously done your oral history, which included fascinating aspects of your time working on Afghanistan, from Afghanistan, from Pakistan, and in Washington as the special representative for Afghanistan/Pakistan, SRAP. And so, today, I would like to ask you for your general reflections on the United States' involvement in Afghanistan over the last twenty-one years.

OLSON: Okay. Thanks very much, Robin.

So, just to start by saying that I was involved in Afghanistan earlier as well. I was directly involved in Afghan issues from the summer of 2011 until my retirement in November 2015. But before that, I paid attention to Afghanistan because I was serving in the broader Middle East region from the early 1990s. UAE [United Arab Emirates] had been one of the few countries that had recognized the Taliban regime, Afghanistan had always been an important policy agenda for our discussion with the Emiratis when I was serving there in the late 1990s and I was U.S. consul general in Dubai for 9/11 and the start of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. I served at NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] 2006–2008, at the time when the alliance had taken over command of ISAF throughout Afghanistan. So, I'd kind of been watching Afghanistan, but I wasn't directly involved until 2011. And then, I was very involved both for the year I was in Afghanistan, but then as ambassador to Pakistan [2012–2015], Afghanistan occupied a huge amount of my time. It was the largest single issue that I was concerned about, and I spent the most time on. And then, of course, I was the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan 2015–2016.

I later was affiliated with USIP [United States Institute of Peace] working on Afghanistan and Pakistan and I was an advisor to USIP's Afghanistan study group under General Dunford and other luminaries just before the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration.

So, I had, in other words, about a ten-year perspective on Afghanistan. As a result, I am persuaded that there were early mistakes that really came back to haunt us. One I think that's outside of the diplomatic sphere is the failure to build up an Afghan army right from the outset. It's extraordinary that we didn't see that as an exit strategy early on. And, of course, the subsequent failure to build an Afghan army that was sustainable in Afghan terms. Instead, we built one that was a model of the U.S. Army with heavy contractor sustainment and dependent on air power. But that's a military issue; I don't really want to get into it.

I think the big problem that we had in the early days was we failed to consolidate our remarkable military victory in the fall of 2001 with a political consolidation. In some ways, we did attempt a political consolidation. First, we got the Bonn Agreement and then we got the loya jirga and the Afghan constitution and all of it looked good, at least superficially.

But the problem was twofold in my view. First, there was no taking account of the Taliban. And you know, it's extraordinary to me looking back with the benefit of hindsight to see that there were some early feelers by the Taliban that may have amounted in effect to an offer for a dignified surrender—i.e. for an amnesty and for returning peaceably to Afghanistan—that were spurned. In my oral history, I talk about how I think it was a mistake not to include people at Bonn. Well, on balance, as I think more and more about this, I'm not so sure. Bonn would have been very hard. We all remember right after 9/11 what the mood was. It would have been very difficult for the United States and everyone else to accept the Taliban at the table, even though United Nations special representative Lakhdar Brahimi pushed the idea. But I don't understand why the United States in 2002 and 2003 did not allow Karzai to follow his natural instincts to reach some kind of understanding with the Taliban and allow them to come back in. That is one of those what ifs of history; an opportunity missed that caused us huge problems down the line.

The second way in which I think we made decisions that caused us massive problems was in the shift to focusing on Iraq in 2002–2003. A lot of people have talked about this in terms of the military impact, but I don't think what has been emphasized enough, in my view, is the impact on Pakistan. It seems to me that this was probably also when we lost Pakistan. I can't prove this, I don't have documentary evidence. Pakistan is difficult to read even in the best of times. But it seems to me, from my understanding of the historical record, that, in 2001 Pakistan was onboard with us after the "you're with us or against us" demarche and the Armitage-Musharraf conversations because they realized that the United States was serious after 9/11, was serious about going after al Qaeda [which they also viewed as a threat] and were serious about Afghanistan. But I think our seriousness came into question pretty quickly. The Pakistani military is exquisitely sensitive to the moods of Washington and they saw Washington moving on from Afghanistan to thinking about Iraq. In many countries, when they're faced with the challenges of dealing with the United States and its conflicts with other powers, they hedge. But I think that Pakistani instincts for having a hedge in the Taliban were reinforced by the U.S. decision to essentially not focus on Afghanistan and focus on Iraq in 2002–2003. Those decisions have been very hard to overcome.

So, I came into this, as I say, about a decade afterward, and I was in Afghanistan at the height of the surge, but my thinking evolved when working in Pakistan afterward. It seemed to me at the time, and I think this has actually been true for the whole period, that there were really only two options available for the United States. One was a long war in which we'd maintain some kind of garrison of forces in Afghanistan, essentially indefinitely. If we had maintained such a force—I don't know what the number is, ten thousand to twenty thousand troops—we could have held things together indefinitely, but there would have been no exit under that option. But the long war option would have led eventually to the U.S. concluding that the troops were needed elsewhere and that when those troops were pulled out the thing would collapse, which is, indeed, what happened in the summer of 2021.

I'm very skeptical for a whole host of reasons we can get into if you want, but my perspective was that there was only one way to avoid this dilemma of either an abrupt and ugly withdrawal [which was ugly enough when we did it, but it could have been a lot worse] or a permanent presence in the Hindu Kush. The only alternative, it seemed to me, was some kind of negotiated settlement between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. And I think there were many, many challenges with trying to do that. There are a plethora of ways that could have gone wrong, and to me, it was akin to walking along a very narrow path through high mountains with cliffs on either side, vertiginous cliffs from which any negotiator would have probably fallen. And I think we see the pitfalls of that approach, with how it actually developed in 2018–2020. But all that said, I did believe that that was the only way to avoid the catastrophe, such as the one we saw in 2021. It would have required, to have been successful, for the U.S. to take the same sort of conditions-based approach to its diplomacy that at various times it had taken towards its military operations.

There's a long-standing debate amongst the Afghan hands about a timeline-based approach versus a conditions-based approach, and the U.S. has traditionally followed a timeline-based approach. Both Obama and Trump followed timeline-based approaches. And I think to have had a successful peace process would have required a conditions-based approach to diplomacy, and it would have been a long-term undertaking. We would not have been able to accomplish a quick withdrawal. It would have required ongoing expenditure of blood and treasure along the way.

Ultimately, the question is whether that is sustainable. I think this was the choice that Biden faced in April of 2021. He stated in his April address that he was not prepared to risk American soldiers' lives for a negotiating position. And that's an understandable position for the leader of a democracy to take. But I think that's what would have been necessary: a decision that we were really going to take a conditions-based approach and only withdraw in response to concrete actions by the Taliban in a serious peace process. And I think that that opportunity was never given to Ambassador Khalilzad when he was conducting negotiations in Doha. I think he had orders from the White House to make it happen, make it happen fast and bring about a withdrawal. The real underlying reason for the ugliness of the withdrawal is the fact that the Trump administration, having agreed to the Doha timeline, then proceeded to draw down forces that were not required under the timeline.

Q: What was the Doha timeline?

OLSON: It was a clever diplomatic strategy adopted by Ambassador Khalilzad because the basic Taliban position was that there would be no discussions with the Afghan government until the U.S. withdrew its forces. And our position was there had to be discussions between the Talibs and the Afghan government before we would withdraw; there had to be a deal. So, the way around this that Zal came up with, which I do think was a very clever arrangement, was that the U.S. would make a down payment on the withdrawal by pulling out four thousand troops immediately. At that point, I think we were at about twelve thousand to fifteen thousand troops. So, we withdrew four thousand immediately and then the remainder were to withdraw by May of 2021, while in the interim, there would be a peace process with direct negotiations between the Taliban and the government. This got delayed because of the contentious prisoner release issue. When negotiations finally did get it launched, I think it was in September of 2020, so, some six months after the Doha Agreement, the Talibs didn't seriously negotiate because it was clear they were getting a withdrawal if they simply waited.

During that time, what Trump did was continue to draw down U.S. forces in tranches, and by the end, had drawn down to twenty-five hundred U.S. troops. I'm no military expert, but that's not a force that would withstand anything in terms of a significant assault, by the Talibs as the Talibs were already launching. Zal's scheme might have worked if more troops had been left on the ground and it was made clear to the Talibs that we would not withdraw them until there was actually some kind of political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

So, that's my overall view on how we got to the position of the botched withdrawal. I'm sure that those who were on the ground could add more details on the specific tactical decisions that made the withdrawal what it was. But I think the preconditions for a difficult departure were already set by the heavy drawdowns and, in effect, the insistence on a timeline.

Q: Because the Biden administration was under the impression from our military that the only way they could change the equation would be by increasing troop levels?

OLSON: Exactly.

Q: And that was something he didn't see as possible in our environment.

OLSON: Yes. And this was something that came up in the Afghanistan study group, which is probably beyond the scope of this particular interview. But it was very clear to me by December 2020–January 2021 that the choice for the incoming administration was going to be not between keeping the status quo or withdrawing. There was no maintenance of the status quo option and I fully agree with the Biden administration on that and the articulation that has been made by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. If they had decided to stay, it would have required an escalation. I don't know what the number for the troops required would have been, but my guess is it would have probably been fifteen to twenty thousand troops. And I think that that was anathema to the administration. I think the questions that they asked at the time, which no one could

answer, was how long would it be necessary to keep these troops in Afghanistan? We'd done a surge of a hundred thousand troops a decade before and it hadn't worked for other reasons perhaps. But I don't think anyone could have assured Biden that this would have been a temporary deployment. In my view, it would not have been temporary. If we had gone to fifteen thousand or twenty thousand troops, we would have been agreeing to a garrison on the Hindu Kush that would remain there forever. We would have been in the position of the British Empire a century and a half before maintaining a garrison on or near Afghanistan. And I think that that was ultimately politically unsustainable for the U.S.

I want to make one other general observation. When I served in Afghanistan, I was actually the coordinating director for development and economic affairs [CDDEA]. I'm not an econ officer, by the way, I'm a political officer, but for whatever reason, I got the economic and assistance portfolio, which was a great job. However, I did not focus very much on the development side of things, and the reason for that was very simple. We had a very capable USAID [United States Agency for International Development] director, Ken Yamashita. He and I worked closely together. He had the full confidence of the chief of mission, Ryan Crocker, and had a direct relationship with him, as he should have. So, there was really no need for me to be interfering in that relationship and that work. And even though I was theoretically in the chain of command between Ambassador Crocker and Ken Yamashita, I never really interposed myself because I didn't feel it was necessary. I thought the USAID mission was in very good hands and reflecting the views of the chief of mission, so I kept abreast of things but I can't say there was anything in the development field that I would particularly point to where I was a decisive figure one way or the other. With the possible exception of the Kajaki Dam, where we had to overcome some reluctance on the part of the AID mission to take on the rehabilitation of that critical facility.

So, most of what I was doing during that period was focusing on international economic engagement, principally the Bonn conference in December 2011, which was supposed to be about announcing our reconciliation initiative. Ambassador Marc Grossman, the SRAP, was working very hard to get the Taliban to come to the table. He thought he had, working through an intermediary, arrived at the start of a process, but then Karzai nixed it. And that's another whole topic that I hope someone is addressing at some point in these discussions. So, I focused on the assistance issues, building international support, and improving conditionality on assistance both at Bonn and then later at the Tokyo conference.

Q: This was really the time of the economic surge, right, or rather the diplomatic surge?

OLSON: This is the time of the diplomatic surge as well. Today there are people [with an agenda] who say that the military surged then but there was never a diplomatic surge. Well, that's just not true. There was a diplomatic surge. Now it may or may not have been effective, but the military surge wasn't effective either. The embassy in Kabul went from being a medium-sized embassy at best to being the largest in the world. We had a phenomenal number of agencies. I had more than a dozen agencies working for me on the econ side, and we had hundreds of Americans stationed not only in Kabul but in most

provinces of Afghanistan. So, the surge took place and there was a phenomenal level of assistance, and I think we did good work in the areas of health and education.

The area I want to touch on a little bit—because I think this is important—is this. There are a lot of glib assertions now about corruption. And I think one of the things that is often asserted is that the people we were supporting, the government of Afghanistan, collapsed because of corruption. I don't entirely disagree, but I think it's simplistic. I hope someone someday does a study of the Korean War as compared to the war in Afghanistan. Because if you look at the historical record of Korea in 1950, you will see that it was a corrupt country. It was impoverished. It was more impoverished than Afghanistan and yet, somehow, under the American security umbrella, between 1950 and, say the mid-1970s, Korea turned out to be a great success and it largely eliminated corruption. But the point is that at the time of the Korean War, Korea was not much of a partner and had corruption problems.

So, I think what happened in Afghanistan is something slightly different, which is that corruption became an element of predation by the government. It became the perception of ordinary Afghans that the only thing that they could expect from their government in many places was predatory behavior, especially by the police and, in some cases, the soldiers. And so, while there was a lot of good work and service delivery by the government, the positive effects were undermined by this perception that the government was predatory.

The best example of this is the roadblocks. There would be roadblocks all throughout the country manned by security personnel who would demand bribes for getting through. And the Taliban have eliminated that. I mean, the Taliban probably have their own corruption problems; I would be astounded if they didn't. But they've eliminated this predatory behavior by the government at the local level, which was especially visible to the rural population. And given the rural-urban divide in Afghanistan, I think that really came back to haunt us.

So, I would hope that this examination of corruption would be done with some nuance because the brutal truth is there are a lot of countries in the world that are corrupt and yet have stable, functioning governments. I'm engaging in a broad generalization here, but, Southeast Asia has problems with corruption, but the governments are stable, they deliver services, and their economies are booming. So, I think we have to be a little more nuanced in our approach to the question of corruption. And I don't think a moralistic stance is necessarily the right way to approach it.

Q: Thank you. Because a lot of your time was spent thinking about and working on the reconciliation account, I think it might be useful if you talked about your view of the Taliban, what reconciliation mistakes were made by the U.S. or Afghanistan over time and what could have been done differently.

OLSON: I think we did tend to underestimate the Taliban as a movement. One of the things that I find frustrating in retrospect and I found it true at the time as well, is that Afghans and especially the Afghan government, certainly under Karzai but also under Ghani, Taliban entirely to Pakistan. This view was particularly pronounced among the

various heads of the Afghan intelligence service. They saw the conflict as solely a proxy war by Pakistan against the government of Afghanistan.

Look, I don't make any excuses for the Pakistani government. I think the Pakistani government played a duplicitous, dirty game with the United States from perhaps as early as 2001 but certainly by 2003 onward, of supporting the Taliban while at the same time supporting, ostensibly, our war in Afghanistan. Which they did, by the way. They allowed the lines of communication across Pakistani territory, both the ground lines and, much more importantly, the air line of communication. Pakistan could have shut down our war in five minutes at any point during the twenty-year period by shutting the air lines of communication. [That probably would have meant we would have had to go to war with Pakistan.] So, they helped the Taliban, and they helped us. And that is a matter of historical record.

But the point I'm making is that within Kabul, there was this feeling that the Taliban was solely a creation of the Pakistanis and that it didn't have any legitimacy, and that if somehow Pakistan could be coerced into dropping its support for the Taliban then that would end the conflict and the government of Afghanistan would have full writ over its territory. And I reject that view. Afghanistan has a complicated history going back at least to 1973–1978, the beginning of the disaster that engulfed the country. The forty years of civil war arose from domestic political controversies. The Pakistanis did not overthrow King Zahir Shah and they weren't responsible for the communist coup in 1978, and they weren't responsible for the Soviet intervention in 1979. They were, however, responsible for backing and supporting the Taliban and allowing them to have a safe haven on Pakistani territory. I think that may have made the war unwinnable for us, but the Taliban had their roots in Afghan political turmoil.

It has to be said that the Taliban had a domestic base of support in Afghanistan which grew over time because of, as I've already mentioned, the government's predatory behavior in the provinces. Also, the failure of the Afghan government to deliver an effective justice system, an effective conflict resolution system at the local level. They managed to bring in a court system that was, in some ways, like the American court system. It would drag on for years and ultimately reach some kind of judgment, but what the villagers needed was a quick resolution. And that's what the Taliban's offering, quick, summary justice, resolution of the conflict. Ugly, perhaps, in accordance with their version of Islamic principles, but quick and cheap. So, I think those things ultimately fed into dissatisfaction with the government

And it has to be said, the effect of the U.S. carrying out counterterrorism operations that were deeply unpopular, night raids and other operations also has to be considered. Civilian casualties can be exaggerated as an issue. But I think that all of those things fed into a sense of grievance on the part of ordinary Afghans in the countryside, which allowed the Taliban to gain strength. And ultimately, at the end of the day, I see it as part of a long-term trend, as being part of rural versus urban Afghanistan split. And I think that the government that we were backing really failed to ever address the rural issues in a satisfactory way, and the Talibs stepped into that void.

Q: And the practical implications were that the Taliban was able to continue to recruit more fights, get more people involved?

OLSON: Yes. And that's an interesting question because, the entire time I was associated with Afghanistan, a total of about ten years, there were frequent debates, amongst military officers and diplomats, about whether we were paying the Afghan soldiers enough and how we could expect them to risk their lives for the paltry sums they were receiving. And there were frequent suggestions that somehow the Taliban were actually paying their soldiers more, but it's now become clear they weren't. The ordinary Talib foot soldier was not getting paid at all. They were getting food and bullets. And yet, in the end, they beat a force that was by Afghan standards receiving a decent amount of pay. What does that tell us? The implications are troubling.

Q: One view I have heard is that after forty years of war, people were tired, and maybe a very conservative, even brutal regime maybe was more attractive than continued suicide bombs and fighting.

OLSON: Yes, well, it's a Hobbesian equation, right? And I think that for many Afghans, the end of the war was better even if it ended with the Talibs in charge. It might have been better than the continuation of the war. And I'm not suggesting, by the way, the Talibs have secured peace in Afghanistan. I don't think they have. I think the conflict, unfortunately, is going to go on because the Talibs are making the same mistake that we made in 2001. They had a swift military victory and then they didn't consolidate it politically. Their answer is brutality. But the steps that they are taking guarantee that over time they are going to face increasing resistance. But that's another topic.

Q: So, Karzai was in charge of the government for the first half of our time there, and then Ghani and Abdullah were supposed to be in a national unity government that was difficult to keep together. But what perspectives do you have, if any, on how these leaders were doing as leaders?

OLSON: Well, on Karzai, I don't have much of a perspective from firsthand observation. I had the one senior job at the embassy that had no dealing with the palace, because I had the economic portfolio. I dealt with the economic ministries, and I dealt quite a bit with Ashraf Ghani because he was the transition chairman at that point. I had almost no contact with Karzai. When I first arrived, the relationship between Karzai and Ambassador Eikenberry had become very contentious.

Part of that, I think, was the residue of Karzai's suspicion that Holbrooke had attempted to throw the 2009 election, and so he was suspicious of the U.S. And I think part of it on Eikenberry's part was that he felt, and rightly so, that Karzai was not committed to fighting the war against the Taliban. I mean, I would say the great flaw of Karzai, and this—my view now is very much informed by having read Carter Malkasian's book in which he makes the case that Karzai could have probably stopped the Taliban insurgency in 2005 and before 2005, if he had mobilized the Kandaharis, which were his political base, to prevent their sort of resurgence. That's an extraordinary thing and I think Carter is probably onto something there.

But in any case, Karzai was never committed to the war. He never met with his troops, he never supported his troops.That was the U.S. problem as far as he was concerned. And that was reflected, I think, in the deterioration of the relationship with Ambassador Eikenberry, who, of course, was also General Eikenberry. I think he was personally affronted by Karzai's unwillingness to be a partner with the United States in a military endeavor which ultimately did benefit Karzai enormously. And, of course, Crocker came in and did a masterful job of restoring at least a cordial dialogue with President Karzai, which was necessary in order for us to do business. But I don't think Karzai was a solid military partner to us, and that's a serious problem. I think our failures in Afghanistan were of a political nature, and if we had had someone who had been helping us on the politics but supporting the military effort, it might have gone differently.

Ashraf Ghani, in a curious way, was actually much more committed to the military side of the equation, but unfortunately, he didn't know anything about military strategy. He's a very smart man, but he was entirely focused on development, economic development and state building. There are extraordinary stories circulating and I don't know if they're true, but I assume they're more or less true, that even in his final days, he was summoning people into the palace to talk about micro-development projects when the Taliban were literally at the gates of Kabul. And I find that very believable because that's the way Ghani was.

Ghani didn't trust his military. His big worry, and I know this from many conversations with him, was that the U.S. had made a powerful Afghan army that would ultimately represent a threat to civilian authority. So, in other words, he primarily saw the army as a potential coup machine against him as much a bulwark against the Taliban. And so, even though in principle he was supportive of the army—he actually went out and made speeches and embraced the army—he didn't have the sort of experience or even the ability to hire someone with the knowledge to actually come up with a convincing military strategy.

He relied on Mohib, who was, like so many of Ghani's people, a bright thirty-year-old who knew nothing about military matters. We almost had no functional partnership at the political level on military matters for almost the entire U.S. intervention. And again, I think it would be useful to look at some other historical examples. This would be an interesting topic for study as compared to certain other U.S. interventions around the world. I don't know, I don't know enough about the history, but I suspect you would find that in Korea, we probably had more of a commitment ultimately, maybe not in 1950, but over time from the Koreans on military matters.

Q: We still have troops in Korea.

OLSON: Well, sure, we still have troops in Korea, but the question is, at what time did the transition happen? And whereas I think if you look at Vietnam, we didn't have that solid political-military foundation in Vietnam either, I would say. Again, I'm no expert on matters East Asian, but I think some expert should look at that.

I did want to talk about one other thing on this topic. You mentioned Ghani and Abdullah. To me, this is emblematic of the problem that we faced in Afghanistan. The

political leadership in Kabul could not come together even in the face of extraordinary existential threats. The astounding example came in 2014 when Secretary of State John Kerry had to go to Kabul to prevent a clash between Ghani and Abdullah, prevent Abdullah from going to war against the Ghani government. So, we could have had a civil war on our own side in addition to the war with the Taliban. Ambassador McKinley spent his entire tour patching up this relationship with bubble gum and baling wire so that Ghani and Abdullah camps didn't resort to open warfare. Then, after the 2019 election, there was the spectacle of Ghani and Abdullah each swearing themselves in as president.

And again, this is with the Taliban in an increasingly powerful position. I'm sure you will find people who will say, well, that's just Afghan politics. But the problem is that there are historical examples in which political opponents come together when they face a real threat. For example, Winston Churchill decided to go into coalition with the Labor Party under Clement Attlee, with the Labor Party in May of 1940, which was anathema to him and everything he'd ever believed in terms of politics; Lincoln assembled a team of rivals; John Adams and Thomas Jefferson somehow managed to bury their differences in 1776. So, there are plenty of examples of political opponents coming together in moments of existential crisis. On the contrary, Afghanistan was like France in 1940, where it was more important for the left and the right to fight each other than to fight the Nazis. And, this points to something—I don't think that ultimately this is the U.S.'s fault—but it does suggest that we ought to look at what kind of political strategy we were pursuing in Afghanistan. We really did not have the kind of political consolidation we needed to have a genuine partner, I think.

Q: And now, with the Taliban having taken over, they didn't even think about waiting until after the U.S. withdrawal to go ahead and go into Kabul. They just kept going.

OLSON: I don't know. I only know what I read from the press accounts, but it does seem to me that too much has been made of talking about the details of the end game. This idea that somehow if Ghani had not left, if Ghani had stayed and just negotiated with the Taliban, it could have avoided the ugliness of that and a political settlement could have been reached. Well, I think it was too far gone for that. It might have been possible for Ghani to have arranged a more graceful surrender, but that's what it would have been a surrender. The Taliban, by that point, has no incentive to negotiate.

Q: To sum it up then, what do you see now for the future of Afghanistan? Do you think the Taliban will evolve? Or do you think the civil war will continue?

OLSON: Well, the civil war, in a sense, is continuing in a more attenuated fashion, but it's still pretty ugly. Unfortunately, it is an even worse civil war than the one that we were involved in because now the opposition to the Taliban comes from the more extreme Islamist position. And so you have Daesh/ISIS as the principal military opponent. And of course, one of the oddities of the entire peace process is that in and around the Doha process, while we were negotiating with the Taliban and while we were fighting them, we were also tacitly allowing them to fight against Daesh, against ISIS, because that was perceived as a greater threat. Well, now, the Taliban are indeed fighting against Daesh and Daesh is fighting back. Doing what they do, which is instigating sectarian violence through attacks on mosques and hospitals and places where Shia congregate and even

Sunni mosques where they don't like the leadership. So, that is likely to continue. I don't think the National Resistance Front, which is the remnants of the Northern Alliance and the secularists fighting against the Taliban will amount to much.

But there are fissures developing within the Taliban regime itself. Curiously enough, the Haqqanis and the people who are our strongest opponents and the worst opponents and the most terroristic of the elements of the Taliban during our war with the Taliban seem to be in a way more moderate on some of the social questions, especially the question on girls' education, and there are rifts emerging, it seems, between Kandahar, specifically between Haibatullah, the supreme leader, and other elements in the Taliban who would take a more nuanced view, let's say, on the question of girls' education in particular.

So, I don't think the future is bright for the Taliban regime over the medium term, especially since the Kandahari leadership does not seem to be moderating its position. Unfortunately, the U.S. has very few points of leverage on this. The Taliban are not susceptible to pressure in terms of economic development because, fundamentally, I don't think they believe in it. I think that the Kandahari mullahs are concerned about non-temporal issues. They are concerned with the afterlife and salvation and things that haven't been part of Western politics since the Renaissance. They want to build the perfect Islamic system. And I think, at some level, they don't care about economic development, and so the sort of normal tools that are available to us are not useful. I'm not suggesting we should change our principles, but I don't think we should have any illusions that withholding assistance or lifting sanctions will bring about the changes that we want in Afghanistan. We have to stick to our principles because they are our principles. We don't want to be supporting a regime that keeps half of its population housebound, but let's be clear that that's why we're doing it, not because we think it's going to be effective as a pressure technique.

End of interview