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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

AMBASSADOR DAVID D. PEARCE

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It's February 10, 2023. I'm Robin Matthewman. Today I am interviewing Ambassador David Pearce as part of our Afghanistan project. David, welcome. To start, could describe your State Department career up to the point you started working on Afghanistan.

PEARCE: Thanks, Robin. Good to be here with you. I'm from Maine and didn't leave the state until I was about twenty years old. I attended Bowdoin College, where I was a Classics major, and my first overseas experience was a junior year abroad in Italy. I stayed through the summer and sold magazines door to door in Italian, so Italian was the first foreign language I learned well. I then obtained a master's degree in journalism from Ohio State University. This was the start of nine years in journalism, first as a broadcast editor with the Associated Press in Columbus, Ohio, and then with the Rome Daily American in Italy, where I was the sports editor and, on the side, a radio stringer for the Associated Press.

UPI [United Press International] recruited me from Rome for a job as desk editor at their Europe-Middle East-Africa hub bureau in Brussels. From there, I went in mid-1975 to Lisbon to help our chief correspondent there cover the aftermath of the revolution in Portugal. After about a year of that, they sent me to Beirut, where I served as UPI bureau chief and Chief Middle East Correspondent from 1976 to 1979. That's where I met my wife, Leyla, who did typesetting and layout at a local English-language publication. Our daughter was born during our assignment there and our son would be as well, four years later.

From Beirut we went back to Washington where I was a copy editor on the Washington Post Foreign and Metro desks, under Jim Hoagland and Bob Woodward, respectively. That was an eventful time—the fall of the Shah, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Mecca Mosque takeover. I wrote a number of front-page headlines at the Post in 1979.

My next move was to the Book Service of the National Geographic Society. A former TIME magazine correspondent was the managing editor there and he enlisted me for a special project they were doing on China. This was just when China was beginning to

open up and they sent writer-photographer teams all over the country. The resulting book was called Journey Into China, and I wrote the concluding chapter on the southeast: covering Fujian, Guangxi, and Guangdong provinces. These are the provinces directly facing Taiwan, as well as Hainan Island and the mountainous areas along the border with Vietnam.

Meanwhile, on the advice of a Foreign Service officer I had known well in Beirut, I took the Foreign Service exam. I had taken the test right out of college, not passed, and put it out of my mind. I took the test again while at the Washington Post and, with such a great job, didn't really care if I passed. So, of course, I did. I waited about a year, but finally accepted the appointment while at the National Geographic.

In the first week of January 1982, I entered the eighth class at the Foreign Service Institute [FSI]. It was a great group. My classmates included future ambassadors Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Bill Burns, Ron Schlicher and George Krol. I worked in the Middle East for most of my career and that meant a lot of overlap with Ron and Bill over the years.

My first assignment was two years in Riyadh as a rotational consular and then political officer. From Riyadh I went to the State Department Operations Center from June 1984 to June 1985. From there it was the Greek desk from 1985 to 1987. I enjoyed working on Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus, but had always wanted to learn Arabic, so I signed up for the Field School in Tunis from August 1987 to June 1988, with a follow-on assignment to Kuwait from 1988–1991 as political section chief.

In the summer of 1988 we began our three-year assignment to Kuwait. This was to be an eventful time not only in Kuwait, but also in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union left Afghanistan in February 1989. One of the things I remember about that time was the visit to Kuwait of Congressman Charlie Wilson who had been very involved in the whole Afghan enterprise on the congressional side. He stopped in on the way back from one of his visits to Kabul. I believe this would have been sometime in 1989–1990, after the Soviets left. I don't recall exactly. I do recall he was quite a colorful character.

In August of 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. My family and I were on annual leave, just about to return to the country when we heard about it. I volunteered to go back in but was told to return to Washington. Leyla and I and the two children returned. I was one of the few people who knew anything about Kuwait who was not being held hostage at the embassy in occupied Kuwait. So I was quickly turned around and sent back out to Saudi Arabia, where I spent most of the war in Taif and Jeddah, doing liaison with the Kuwaiti government in exile and working with ambassador-designate Skip Gnehm who had been tapped to succeed Ambassador Nat Howell. Nat was still at the embassy in Kuwait along with DCM Barbara Bodine and much of the rest of the embassy staff.

After liberation in March of 1991, I returned to Kuwait with Gnehm and helped to reestablish embassy operations in a devastated country with oil fires casting a smelly black pall over everything.

In May, I rejoined my family in Washington and began a very hectic job as special assistant for the Near East and South Asia with Under Secretary for Political Affairs Bob Kimmitt. This was from May 1991 to August 1992. What I mainly did was act as the executive secretary for a high-level Iraq policy group that Kimmitt would convene each morning. This included many assistant secretaries and the Department's legal advisor.

This was the time when the mother of all resolutions was being developed at the UN [United Nations]. It was the time when Operation Provide Comfort was put in place in the north when Saddam attacked the Kurds. And it was the time when we didn't do the same when he attacked the Shiites in the south. It was a very eventful period, both for the high-profile issue of Iraq and for what was now the increasingly low-profile issue of Afghanistan.

I also worked closely in that 1991–1992 period with Peter Tomsen, who was the special envoy for Afghanistan from 1989–1992. He reported to the Under Secretary.

An important background note from this period is the change in U.S. policy that occurred regarding the Pressler Amendment. This 1985 legislation banned economic and military assistance to Pakistan absent an annual U.S. certification that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device and that any proposed assistance would significantly reduce the risk that it would. The certification had been made routinely over the years when we were working with Pakistan and the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan. But in October 1990, the year after the Soviets left, the U.S. declined to make the certification and aid to Pakistan was cut off. That turned out to be an important inflection point in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.

In 1991, after Operation Desert Storm to liberate Kuwait, Iraq was on the front-burner and Afghanistan was on the back burner. The embassy in Kabul had been closed in January 1989 and would not reopen until December 2001, after the 9/11 terrorist attack. Special Envoy Tomsen really tried in the period after the Soviets left to herd all the Afghan cats and push forward the idea of a political settlement. He tried to work on a Statement of Joint Principles with the Soviets for a political settlement. You will recall that the Najibullah government remained in place for three years after the Soviets left.

Peter would go on trips and meet with commanders and talk to our allies. He would visit in Rome with Zahir Shah, the exiled Afghan king. He tried very hard, but I remember him telling me that "Iraq was so dominant it was hard to get anyone's attention on Afghanistan." So there was no aid to Afghanistan, no commitment to brokering a political agreement, and an aid cutoff to Pakistan as well. The effect of this was to leave the field in Afghanistan to the various Afghan factions, and to Pakistan and Iran.

In April of 1992, Najibullah was overthrown by Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik leader from the north. The acting president was named Sighbatullah Mojaddedi. I remember he came with a group of factional leaders, I guess you could call them, to Washington. We set up a little lunch for them in the seventh-floor dining room. We had one of those tables with the window on one side of the table and all these very colorful characters sitting around the table with the Under Secretary and Tomsen, and me taking notes.

Q: Without their machine guns.

PEARCE: Without their machine guns. I mention this because I later got to know Mojaddedi quite well when I went to Kabul on assignment twenty years later. He became an important contact. He played the same role then as he had years before—a senior behind-the-scenes broker among competing groups. This was one of a number of things that turned out to be harbingers of what I would later experience.

I will always remember Peter's valiant efforts to get attention to what he correctly saw as an important strategic interest. But it didn't happen and the area collapsed in chaos and civil war and the warlord period. It was a real tragedy.

So the factions fought. Afghanistan became a policy backwater. Our turning away at that time was one of the big mistakes that we made—again, because of Iraq. Usually people think about the turn of attention to Iraq in terms of what happened after 2001. But in fact, we did it twice—the first turning away from Afghanistan to Iraq was this one, after the Soviets quit in 1989.

The upshot of that was horrible fighting among Afghans. The capital was laid waste. It didn't happen under the Soviets. It was the Afghans themselves that did it. This is one of Crocker's favorite themes. I'm sure he told you about it. The Afghans just bombed the place to shambles. UN peace initiatives didn't seem to get anywhere and this warlord period of the 1990s was when we had the rise of the Taliban. The Cloak of the Prophet incident with Mullah Omar happened in 1996. I presume you're familiar with that.

Q: I know who Mullah Omar was, but I'm not familiar with the incident.

PEARCE: The Cloak story is how Mullah Omar emerged as the leader of the Taliban after leading madrasa students on raids in the south. The Taliban garnered support because people were so disillusioned with the predatory behavior of the warlords. And the predatory behavior of the warlords happened because the world, including the U.S., washed its hands of Afghanistan once the Soviets were out.

Mullah Omar asserted his leadership by means of a relic called the Cloak of the Prophet, which was in Kandahar. In April 1996, he took it out of its shrine, put it on, and was thereafter hailed by the Taliban as Amir al-Mu'minin, the Commander of the Faithful.

I was in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from 1988 to 1991, then on the staff of the Under Secretary for Political Affairs from 1991 to 1992. It was a tough period for my family, between the invasion of Kuwait, our abrupt displacement from home, work and school, and then my extended absence in Taif and liberated Kuwait, followed by another year of long hours on the Under Secretary's staff.

So I got an Una Chapman Cox sabbatical leave fellowship from 1992 to 1993. I used the time to write a book published by Congressional Quarterly and Georgetown's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy called, *Wary Partners: Diplomats and the Media*. I also went to all my kids' soccer games.

The book was a way of exorcizing my demons about dealing with journalists. Having been a reporter, I knew what could happen and found I was being overly cautious about meeting and briefing the press. So I interviewed about seventy journalists and diplomats about how they had dealt with each other. Richard Boucher was one. Tomsen was another. Tom Pickering, Doyle McManus of the LA Times, Tom Friedman of the New York Times, and many others that I had known over the years were generous with their time.

It's basically a practitioner's handbook. It wasn't a book about why we need to engage. The assumption was, you're going to have to do it and here's the deal, from both sides. It discusses ground rules and how to set them. It explains the workings of an embassy for journalists and the dynamics of different news organizations for diplomats.

I did that for a year and then went to Farsi language training at FSI, from 1993 to 1994, in preparation for going to Dubai as consul general, where I served from August 1994 to June 1997. Dubai was a constituent post of the embassy in Abu Dhabi. It had responsibility for six of the seven Emirates in the UAE [United Arab Emirates]: Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al Khaimah, and Fujairah. It was also our premier Iran watching post. We did a lot of commercial work, Iraq sanctions enforcement and Iran watching.

One interesting Afghan-related aspect of this period is that I came to know former Afghan mujahideen commander Abdul Haq. I had known of him from Tomsen's meetings and reporting cables. Abdul Haq was a famous commander who in the fight against the Soviets was known as the Lion of Kabul. Ahmad Shah Masoud, another famous mujahideen commander, was the Lion of Panjshir. Tomsen's vision was that if you could get the Lion of Panjshir and the Lion of Kabul and Pashtun politician Hamid Karzai together, and secure the king's backing, you might have a working deal going to stand against the Taliban regime. But as you know, that never got anywhere.

With the rise of the Taliban to power in 1996, Haq became an anti-Taliban commander. He was in Dubai regularly, and he had a home in Peshawar. When he came to Dubai, he would ask to see me. I haven't gotten those cables researched and declassified, but I met him several times and reported on what he had to say about the current situation in Afghanistan. He was an interesting guy and a very sharp observer of Afghan affairs.

Q: He was a Pashtun?

PEARCE: He was a Pashtun.

Q: Or one of the Tajiks?

PEARCE: No, he was not a Tajik. He was a Pashtun, which was why he was important, because Ahmad Shah Masoud was a renowned Tajik commander and Abdul Haq was a renowned Pashtun commander. Abdul Haq working together with Ahmad Shah Masoud to organize anti-Taliban activity was a threat to the Taliban. In any case, on September 9, 2001, Ahmad Shah Masoud was assassinated by al Qaeda. Two days later we had 9/11. And the following month, on October 26 Abdul Haq was captured and killed by the

Taliban while organizing against them. A decade later, in Kabul, I met Abdul Haq's brother, Haji Din Muhammad, who was a senior member of the Higher Peace Council.

After Dubai, I went to Damascus as deputy chief of mission from 1997 to 2001, four years. The first year was with Ambassador Chris Ross and the last three with Ambassador Ryan Crocker. This was when President Hafez al-Assad passed away and Bashar al-Assad succeeded to power. We managed a lot of very significant policy and security changes and challenges, including two attacks on the embassy.

Q: Was your family there?

PEARCE: Yes. My son went to four years of high school in Damascus and learned Arabic very well, actually, as a result of it.

From there, I had a great job lined up. I was going to go to the Senior Seminar. But in what would turn out to be a recurring motif, Crocker intervened and asked me to come work with him instead as the office director for Iran and Iraq. From September 2001 to September 2003, I was again his deputy, this time in NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] where I served as Director of the Office of Northern Gulf Affairs, which is to say, Iran and Iraq. That included relations with the Iraqi opposition, supervision of the Future of Iraq Project, and taking part in the famously contentious interagency policy process in the runup to the war.

There was a 2002 memo that got some notoriety called the Perfect Storm memo. I drafted this at the request of NEA Assistant Secretary Bill Burns. I titled it simply, "Thoughts on Iraq." It delved into some of the potential consequences of a decision to go into Iraq. You have to recall that this was all pure speculation, and we wrote this well before anything happened. Nevertheless, the internal dynamic was increasingly clear and we wanted to flag some of the ramifications of going down that path. Bill edited my draft lightly, added the title, "Perfect Storm," and sent it as a private note to Secretary Powell who shared it at a high level. Bill later got it declassified and you can now read it in his book, *The Back Channel*.

Following the liberation of Iraq, I worked again under Crocker in the spring and summer of 2003 at the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, mainly assisting with the development of the Iraqi Government Council, which was to serve as the first Provisional Government of Iraq after the fall of the regime.

After that, Bill Burns asked me to go to Jerusalem as consul general, which I did from September 2003 to September 2005. It's worth recalling that at that time Jerusalem was a separate mission from the embassy in Tel Aviv. So I was not only the Consul General but also the chief of mission of an independent post that reported directly to Washington. We were the U.S. representation to the Palestinian Authority. And just as I was in Syria for the death of Hafez al-Asad, and succession of Bashar, so too I was in Jerusalem at the time of the death of Yasser Arafat and the subsequent election of Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority.

NEA contacted me when I was in Jerusalem about a deputy assistant secretary position with responsibility for Iraq and I said no thank you. Long story short, I went to Rome

instead as the minister counselor for political affairs. I had always wanted to go back to Rome. Italian was the first foreign language I had learned to speak well. Plus I was a classics major and wannabe archaeologist. So it was like being in the candy store. And it was a great experience serving in a large mission under strong leadership and working with a major NATO ally. I was there from September 2005 to September 2008.

And it turned out my NEA experience came in very handy. We worked closely with Italy on sustaining troop contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran sanctions enforcement, a Lebanon peace conference, Israel-Palestinian peace efforts and a range of issues related to access to military facilities. For much of my last year in Italy, I was detailed to Iraq, again at the request of Ambassador Crocker who had taken up an assignment there in tandem with military commander General David Petraeus. Crocker and Petraeus commissioned a team to do a bottom-up review of our policy in Iraq. The Joint Strategic Assessment team was co-led by then-Col. H.R. McMaster [as Petraeus's rep] and me [as Crocker's rep]. Its report became the basis of the revised joint campaign plan that featured the so-called "Surge."

After this stint in Iraq, I went back to Rome, finished my tour there and was nominated by President Bush to be the next U.S. ambassador to Algeria. Algeria was a fascinating assignment—the second largest country in Africa [after Sudan before its breakup] and the second most populous in the Arab world [after Egypt]. We significantly advanced bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism cooperation. The general in command of AFRICOM, Gen. Kip Ward, made his first-ever visit and we established a program of joint training and exercises. Along the way, I also had the opportunity to do a lot of commercial advocacy for American businesses. It was a mission of 418 locally employed staff and fifty-seven U.S. employees. I served there from 2008 to 2011.

Charge D'Affaires Ambassador E. Anthony Wayne and Deputy Chief of Mission David Pearce attend the 101st ABN to 1st CAV RIP/TOA (Relief in Place, Transition of Authority) ceremony at Bagram Airfield, Parwan Province, Afghanistan, on Thursday, May 19, 2011. (S.K. Vemmer/Department of State)

In the spring of 2011, my third and last year in Algeria, Ambassador Tony Wayne gave me a call from Afghanistan. This was a bolt out of the blue. Tony was the deputy ambassador in Kabul. I had known him, although not well, since his tenure as the assistant secretary of the Department's Economic Bureau. I had also heard that Crocker was likely to be the incoming ambassador, so I suspected another Crocker-jacking. Tony told me that they wanted me to serve as one of five ambassadors on the leadership team in Kabul, in the assistant chief of mission position. This effectively meant as the chief operating officer in the largest U.S. embassy in the world. I would report to the deputy ambassador and Ambassador and serve as the deputy ambassador when the deputy was away. After discussing this with my wife, I agreed.

They needed me there in May, so I had to leave Algeria very quickly, much more quickly than I had planned. I had been hoping to stay in Algiers until late summer. I departed in April instead, in order to do the necessary training before going to Kabul in mid-May. I served as the assistant chief of mission in Kabul from May 2011 to June of 2012.

So, getting back to your first question, that's the story of my career up to the point when I started working in Afghanistan.

Q: You arrived in May?

PEARCE: Yes, Tony Wayne was still the deputy and Karl Eikenberry was still ambassador.

Q: They were getting ready to leave?

PEARCE: They were getting ready to leave. Jim Cunningham and Ryan Crocker would come out later that summer, a couple months later. So I worked with both teams for a while.

Ambassador Pearce with U.S. and Afghan colleagues in front of Embassy Kabul

Q: What was the context in Kabul? Karzai was still in his second term? We were gearing up for an Afghan surge. What was going on?

PEARCE: The context was that the embassy had grown considerably under Karl Eikenberry—Obama had ordered the surge about a year before—and it had tripled in size to about twelve hundred direct-hire American staff and more than six hundred LES [locally employed staff]. Including contractors there were about four thousand people in country under COM authority in about ninety-plus locations. For a diplomatic mission, it was just crazy huge.

That's why we had five ambassadors. The ambassador and the deputy would do a lot of the external work, for example, high-level engagement with President Karzai, Generals Petraeus and Allen, and a steady parade of Washington VIPs. The Deputy generally took the lead in engagement with the UN and our other allied diplomatic partners.

Q: With this embassy, what did they tell you that you were responsible for doing?

PEARCE: I was the closest thing to a DCM [deputy chief of mission] that we had. COO [chief operating officer] is probably a better term for it because I was managing a team of large teams. I directly supervised the political, political-military, legal advisor, management, security, consular and public affairs sections.

I chaired the mission-wide Emergency Action Committee that monitored and responded to a very complex and evolving security climate. This included emergency preparedness and drills at a time when we faced direct Taliban attacks on the embassy and our other platforms.

Not least, I was also the embassy lead in Kabul for coordinating efforts to advance Afghan-led reconciliation.

Q: That's an unusual combination.

PEARCE: The other two ambassadors were Rick Olson and Hans Klemm. Rick, who later became ambassador to Pakistan, supervised AID [United States Agency for International Development], the PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team] network nationwide and economic reporting. Hans, who later became director general of personnel, supervised all of the DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] and other law enforcement agencies' training and operations, which were quite considerable. Given the scale of our assistance and training programs, these were two very busy portfolios indeed.

The ambassador presided over our weekly country team meetings. At the beginning of every country team meeting we would read the names of the Americans who had fallen that week. It was always a somber moment.

We regularly sent senior embassy representatives to Bagram air base for ramp ceremonies when they happened. I will never forget doing that. You represent the civilian leadership and you stand there with the military leadership to mark the final journey home for men and women who have given their lives for their country. It's usually towards the end of the day. The wind is blowing in your face. Troops from the units that have suffered losses are lined up in front of the planes waiting to make that final journey. The caissons arrive with the flag-draped coffins and an honor guard marches them slowly up the ramps and onto the planes. Then military and civilian leaders present go down silently to the planes, where a chaplain might read a short prayer over the caskets. Like our military counterparts, we ambassadors had challenge coins with our names, rank and agency seal. I would join the military officers in placing mine on the caskets. Then we'd pass outside again, past the ranks of soldiers, men, and women. I recall some of them crying silently as they stood at attention.

The context also included the working conditions: really long hours, six- and seven-day weeks, very little privacy, few outlets for recreation. Travel outside your station, in this case, the embassy in Kabul, was strictly limited and only for official business. No going out to dinner, except to other diplomatic missions. I do recall at the beginning of my tenure, depending on the security situation, small group trips would occasionally be organized to local restaurants. But by the time I left the stepped-up tempo of suicide bombings against western targets had ended even this very limited outlet. On my one day off, I would do laundry, shop at the commissary and clean my quarters. I continued painting watercolors, which I had begun in earnest while stationed in Algiers, and I still have several from this period. We had access to AFRTS and I became a fan of Chef Gordon Ramsay and Hell's Kitchen. Occasionally, Cunningham and I would shoot some pool, reviving pleasant memories of my misspent youth.

Green Turban watercolor painted by Ambassador Pearce — after photo in Stars and Stripes of a man whose son killed four French soldiers in Kapisa Province. Pearce kept this painting in his office in Kabul and Washington as a reminder of how hard the job was

In our EAC [Emergency Action Committee] meetings we monitored the security situation all over the country—not just in Kabul but also Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-i Sharif, Nangarhar, and Jalalabad. It was a lot to track.

Q: Did the embassy have consulates in those places?

PEARCE: Some were consulates, some were PRTs collocated with the military. Our NATO allies also had civilian PRTs collocated with their forces. What we had was a one plus four model. In addition to the embassy there were four main platforms—in Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i Sharif, and Jalalabad. It was the peak of the civilian surge.

One of the lessons learned from Iraq was that there were practical limits as to how much we could depend on the military. So in Afghanistan we had a little State Department air service out at Kabul Airport to move staff around the country. It was called the "DOS Air Wing." Some dubbed it "Pat Kennedy's Air Force." I have a DOS Air Wing cap, which I treasure. The guys there gave it to me when they briefed me on their operations. I supervised the Management section which supervised them.

Q: I was in Baghdad in 2013 and for one week I served as acting DCM when the ambassador and political counselor were in DC. The DCM/chargé happily gave me the job to broker negotiations between different parts of the embassy overuse of the air wing. The DCM was delighted to stay out of it for a week. That was the worst job.

PEARCE: I know. Tell me about it. We actually sent our management counselor from Afghanistan to Baghdad to talk to folks there and see what it was we should not do. The management counselor, Alaina Teplitz, was very able and put those lessons learned in Iraq to good use.

Q: You were talking about the dispersion of people and the need to monitor the security at all times. Did you feel this was a period of relative peace in Kabul or was there fighting and violence all the time?

PEARCE: There was relative peace but the Taliban, unable to prevail militarily, were mounting an increasing number of suicide terror attacks. So we had a horrific stream of daily threat reporting. We had very good information from all sources and we knew what was in the pipeline and headed our way. It was not a pretty picture. So we were very mindful and careful about that. Lots of drills.

On September 13, 2011 the Haqqani network attacked the embassy directly. I think they knew we would be on high alert on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, so they hit two days later. A small group of their fighters infiltrated a high-rise building a short distance from the mission and fired RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] at us. We took a number of direct hits including in the consulate waiting room. The RPG there put a three-inch diameter hole in a wall about a yard thick. It bored through it then detonated in the waiting room. Fortunately, there weren't a lot of people there. And I believe, because of the standoff attack, that they put more of the weight of the projectile into the propellant and less in the warhead itself so it wasn't as big as it could have been. We were lucky that there were no fatalities but it was pretty terrifying for anyone who went through it and several people in the waiting room did sustain light injuries.

Our consular staff, including Consul Jane Howell, Vice-Consul Mary Frangakis and the Afghan LES, were in the section when the Big Voice came on and told everybody to duck and cover. They knew from our regular security drills to get down immediately and take

cover as best they could. So they had managed to get under their desks just before the RPG hit the section.

Q: How long did the attack go on?

PEARCE: It went on for a number of hours. The attackers, clearly on a suicide mission, barricaded themselves in the high-rise building. Afghan security forces had to go in floor by floor and flush them out. It took a long time. I was caught outside the main embassy in an outbuilding that housed the health unit and a cafeteria. It was also the center of our press operation. I was the senior person there so I got everybody inside and we all sat on the floor in an inside corridor. I was on the phone a lot to the ambassador and deputy ambassador and would periodically tell the staff what I understood about what was going on. It was important to do this regularly, even when the situation was evolving and we didn't have a clear picture.

One lesson I took from that episode was from the press folks monitoring the Twitter accounts of journalists covering the attack. By tracking the Twitter accounts of the reporters, they were able to get real time coverage as the attack unfolded and Afghan security forces moved in against the attackers.

Q: The press people in the public affairs section?

PEARCE: Yes. They were monitoring the Twitter accounts of Afghan and international journalists who were covering the attack on the outside. So we had a pretty good idea of what was going on as things were breaking, even though we weren't in the main embassy. That was a big lesson for me. I didn't know much about Twitter at the time but was persuaded then and there of the need to learn more. And later on, when I went as ambassador to Greece, I got my own account.

Q: In a book called The Ambassadors there's a passage recounting that [I believe this is intended to be a reference to Ambassador Crocker, not the PAO] had to work to show that he cared about them. It was a hard sell because he said, "I don't do warm and fuzzy." I don't know if this story is true.

PEARCE: Ambassador Crocker likes to keep a stern facade, but he does care a lot. He really does. Whenever we asked him to do anything for morale, he would do it. I remember this very clearly when we served together in Syria. My wife worked in GSO and we would suggest he go down and schmooze with the FSNs [Foreign Service nationals]. She would prep him with details about individuals, their work and important family events like marriages, births and deaths. He would soak it all up and the FSNs were pleased and surprised at how well briefed he was on them and their work.

Q: And this attack was a very big event in terms of the morale of the embassy?

PEARCE: We were fortunate that not too many people got hurt. But we paid close attention. We took drills seriously. I would go down and meet the incoming orientation groups. We had contractors. We had people who had never been overseas before. We had others who were real area experts and specialists—all kinds of folks doing all kinds of jobs in that very big embassy.

So I made a point of going down and greeting them, and telling them thank you for coming and for putting your hand up because we know you're all volunteers. Secondly, it's important and here's why it's important, and I would sketch out what we were trying to do and how they fit in. I said, "Every one of you has an important role to play, so thanks. But please pay attention to security. It's really serious. If we have a drill, if there is guidance, pay attention. Follow it." And I would open it up for questions.

I remember there was a second attack, in April. We had had a drill just the day before and, man, did it pay off. People knew exactly what to do, they did it and I was proud of the mission's response. And after that attack we did the usual thing, a hot wash, figured out lessons learned and made what adjustments we could.

Q: I think there was an issue of why certain Afghan security forces were placed in a building that was too close to the embassy.

PEARCE: We were in the city. This was a high-rise residential building that was within RPG range. When I went to Greece afterward as ambassador, the first thing I did was ask the RSO [regional security officer] to take me up on the roof. He thought that was a little weird. But I wanted to see where we were relative to other buildings around us. In fact, in Greece, some years back, there had been an RPG attack on the embassy from a nearby building. Lessons learned.

The point is that the security threat was constant and evolving and very complex, all over the country, not just in Kabul. It was a lot to keep track of.

So here we are. We're at the peak of the civilian surge and the operating assumption, as we understood it at the embassy anyway, was that we would have a substantial footprint going forward during the transition. Eikenberry knew the country very well. He often said that governance in the regions, not just Kabul, was key. Planning therefore centered on a continuing one-plus-four configuration. As the planning process unfolded there would be pushback on the one-plus-four concept from the NSC.

One of my tasks at this time was to complete negotiations with the government on acquiring an adjacent parcel of land for new embassy construction. We did that and construction started before we left. Meanwhile, we lived in an old one—incredibly cramped, crowded, and inadequate everything, including toilets.

The macro picture, then, was that we faced three big policy tasks in Kabul in 2011–2012. The first was to plan for the transition to a reduced U.S. role in 2014. On June 22, 2011, after the killing of Bin Ladin [and just a month after my arrival in Kabul] President Obama announced an accelerated timetable for withdrawal of U.S. forces. We were to pivot and reduce to perhaps a quarter of the current military presence by 2015.

In addition to starting the transition, the second major policy task was to conclude a Strategic Partnership Agreement [SPA] with Afghanistan that would undergird that whole process. Deputy Ambassador Cunningham took the lead on this, working hard with our political military section and legal team, as well as Washington interagency colleagues, our Afghan government counterparts and our coalition partners. The concept was to put in place, in time for the NATO ministerial in the spring of 2012, an agreed concept for the

size, training and financing of Afghan National Security forces post-2015. I would back up Jim in these negotiations as needed.

The third major task was to try to nudge the Afghan parties and regional powers toward supporting an inclusive political accommodation. The hope here was to defuse the insurgency by political, not military means. At that time, the lead for the most sensitive aspects of this was with SRAP Marc Grossman and his team in Washington. Grossman has reflected on that in both his own oral history and in two 2013 articles in the Yale Journal of International Affairs. I would refer you to what he has written as the definitive account. He notes that the details remain classified. It's not something he or I can really talk about. But he has said what can be said about it and I would refer you to his as the definitive account. Unfortunately, the Taliban chose in March 2012 to suspend those limited initial contacts.

But there was plenty to do in Kabul as well, engaging with the Kabul government including President Karzai, members of the High Peace Council, and key civil society groups including Afghan women who wanted to be sure their voices were heard as any political process unfolded. And we thought it was important to hear their voices too. The fear of many, especially President Karzai, was that the U.S. would engage in direct negotiations with the Taliban on the future of the country without the Afghan government present. So we repeated, over and over, that we supported an Afghan-led process and an Afghan-Afghan negotiated solution.

Although the Taliban were on their back foot at the time due to the large-scale military effort that we had underway, I think there was a pretty good consensus in the U.S. government that we weren't going to fight our way out of this, that military means alone would not bring peace and there would ultimately need to be a political process as well.

For me, as one of the people involved in trying to get that political process going, I felt the task had been made harder by the June 2011 announcement by the president of an accelerated timetable for U.S. troop withdrawals. This was, after all, the main thing the Taliban wanted and by extension the main leverage with them in any potential future discussions on political reconciliation. So the announcement did not help motivate the Taliban towards more serious political engagement, quite the contrary.

Osama bin Laden had been killed on May 2, 2011. We were at the peak of our strength and presence. And we expected to maintain a substantial footprint going forward. So while the troop withdrawal story got plenty of coverage it didn't have legs. The Taliban certainly took note, though.

Q: Was the idea of political accommodation and reconciliation, that the Afghans would bring the Taliban into some kind of political process?

PEARCE: Yes. The idea was to encourage an Afghan-Afghan political process. A key point here is that this was supposed to be an Afghan-led political process. In other words, the United States was not going to engage with the Taliban about the future of Afghanistan. That was for Afghans to deal with Afghans and to sort out among themselves. We always saw ourselves in a supporting role to the non-Taliban Afghans on

that. That's a very important distinction because, as you know, it went by the wayside later.

Q: In reading and speaking to a couple of these people who were envisioning this in Washington, they seemed to see the big obstacle at that time, to be the Taliban not accepting the Afghan government was legitimate. There seemed to be a lot of effort to try to bolster the Afghan government's legitimacy. Did you feel that?

PEARCE: Of course. The Taliban considered the Afghan government to be a puppet of the United States. They had no interest in talking to the Karzai government. We, on the other hand, envisioned an Afghan-Afghan process that we would support, but not get in front of. The Afghan government, President Karzai in particular, didn't want to lose control of the process. That's understandable. And that's why we were always careful to emphasize the Afghan-led aspect.

Reconciliation was not just about dealing with the Taliban, far from it. If you wanted to have an Afghan political process you needed to have the support of all the stakeholders. In addition to the Taliban, there were many other Afghan constituencies to consider, first and foremost the Afghan government. There was a High Peace Council [HPC] established in 2010 by Karzai as the vehicle for negotiations with the Taliban. This included a number of political, ethnic, and former mujahideen leaders like former president Burhanuddin Rabbani [assassinated in 2011], Abdul Haq's brother Haji Din Muhammad, and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, among others. One of the things I did was engage with members of the HPC on a regular basis and in particular with its Chief Executive Officer, Muhammad Masoom Stanekzai [who was badly injured in the suicide attack that killed Rabbani]. We made a major effort to engage important Afghan stakeholders, in and out of government, in Kabul and in the regions.

The object was to build a constituency for peace among the parties. The Northern Alliance, which had fought long and hard against the Taliban, was dead set against any talks with them. So we would talk to people like Abdullah Abdullah and Rabbani, and Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, another former president. And remember, the Taliban were mounting suicide attacks not only against NATO and Afghan military forces but also against their perceived Afghan political enemies. The assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani by the Taliban was particularly tragic. It happened while I was there. His house was near the embassy and we heard the explosion. Rabbani was the head of the High Peace Council. His killing threw a monkey wrench into things because he was a Tajik who favored the possibility of negotiations. Others did not. After the assassination, I paid a condolence call with other diplomats on Rabbani's son, Salahuddin, at the family seat in Faizabad, in the northeast province of Badakhshan. And, as I said, HPC CEO Stanekzai was badly injured in the same blast. I visited Stanekzai in the hospital in Kabul.

Pen and ink sketch by Ambassador Pearce of men on a wall in Faizabad, from his condolence call in northern Badakhshan Province on the son of President Burhanuddin Rabbani, assassinated by a Taliban suicide bomber in 2011

Q: What role did Abdullah Abdullah have? He wasn't the co-president then?

PEARCE: No, he wasn't. He headed something called the National Coalition of Afghanistan, which was the main internal political opposition to Karzai. He had come in second to Karzai in the 2009 presidential elections. He would later run against Karzai again and after that against Ashraf Ghani. But that was after my time.

So we would meet with all these folks.

Karzai, meanwhile, was suspicious of what everybody was up to. He had a very contentious relationship with Pakistan, and a contentious relationship with us. He was suspicious of any contacts with the Taliban. Who can blame him? We tried hard to maintain good working relations but it was not easy. Karl Eikenberry had a strained relationship with the Afghan president as a result of some leaked cables in the *New York Times* including a reference to Karzai as "not an adequate strategic partner." But Karl worked very hard, he knew the country well, and he called it as he saw it in his reporting.

Crocker arrived with the benefit of a previous relationship with Karzai. Rich Armitage had sent him out to re-establish the embassy back up in 2002. I think he got there in January 2002. The capital was a shambles. So Crocker had known the Afghan leader when he had nothing and we had nothing. He was in a position to re-engage and he did.

But it was still difficult, even for him, because Karzai was so sour at that point on everything. He was particularly angry about civilian casualties in the course of night raids by the Afghan and U.S. military. These were an important part of countering the terror threat, especially from the Haqqani network. But while tactically effective they were politically costly and Karzai often fielded complaints from people in affected villages.

I've been talking about what the tasks were, the three policy tasks. On the last one, on promoting a national political accommodation, we leveraged visits by the secretary, Marc Grossman, and other people to keep women's groups and civil society engaged. In June of 2011 Karzai had publicly confirmed that secret talks were taking place between the U.S. and the Taliban, so everybody was wondering what was up. We kept repeating the mantra that we supported an Afghan-Afghan process. And we did.

In terms of achievements, I think we got things going in a good direction at that time on all of the main lines of effort. We began the planning for the transition to an Afghan lead. We designed a strategic partnership. Although contacts with the Taliban themselves had stalled, we made a start on the very difficult job of promoting a political process, not only via the work of SRAP in Washington but also by means of a lot of contact work and slogging in Kabul with outreach to a wide spectrum of Afghan stakeholders.

I could talk about the various challenges we had. I mentioned the security threat, the September 2013 attack. Media coordination was another important adjunct to both policy and crisis management.

I'll give you an example. In Afghanistan, there were a number of incidents. One of them was in February 2012. The military burned some Korans. It was inadvertent but U.S. soldiers disposed of some Korans by burning them and this was witnessed by Afghans. To make matters worse, it came just a few weeks after another highly publicized incident in which U.S. Marines were caught on video urinating on dead Afghans. So the Koran-burning became a huge thing. Riots, protests all over the country. It was quite dangerous and a public affairs crisis of the first order.

Our Public Affairs Chief Eileen O'Connor worked closely with General John Allen and his top staff to consider our response.

What we came up with was that I would go into the lion's den. It happened that there was then a big ulama council meeting in Kabul, with several hundred mullahs attending from all over the country. It was not a friendly audience. I drafted a message to them and then I went there and delivered it to them in person. It helped. Ambassador Crocker credited it with preventing more violence and saving civilian and military lives. He said it was "one of the best appreciations of Islam I ever heard expressed by a non-Muslim." He ordered the text of the address to be put out in a cable to all Americans in Afghanistan. I can give you a copy; it's unclassified.

The bottom line here is: what happened was that nothing happened. But it took a lot of work for nothing to happen.

Q: We can put it in as an appendix.[1] Can you discuss why it was so hard to get the military to control that kind of thing—offenses against Islam—from happening?

PEARCE: They did their best. We had a hundred and fifty thousand troops in country, and statistically in any organization that large, stuff is going to happen and it did. John Allen was in charge at the time and he did a great job. He apologized publicly. He promised better cultural training. But these are a lot of young folks in an alien context. They don't know what the Koran is, what it means to people. It's a book with stuff written in a script they can't understand. It was an accident, not intentional, but it sure caused a ruckus.

Q: Did you think the embassy's development effort seemed too big and too long term to you or did it seem like the appropriate work that had to be done?

PEARCE: You ought to talk to Rick Olson about that because he supervised all the PRTs, the economic development, the AID, which was where all that was.

The fundamental problem we had was original sin. When you go into a country and overthrow its government, you've got three choices, as Jim Dobbins has eloquently written. You can stay and occupy the place permanently yourself or you can just leave and resign yourself to having to reinvade again every once in a while, or you can try to set up some kind of successor entity that you can hand over to and leave.

The Bush administration chose the last option. I think it was the right choice, probably the only choice. The American people were not supportive of an outright occupation but you also don't want to leave a situation where the problem will recur. So how do you do that? It's not easy. There's corruption. It's a tribal society. Kinship and tribal affiliations are important. It's a whole different culture and context.

The effort, generally speaking, over the years, was to help an Afghan government get to its feet so that we could hand over to them. That's the process that we were transitioning to in 2014. It was made a lot harder by the fact that at the beginning we didn't commit the resources we should have for that job. We did do it right in Bosnia, where we committed far more soldiers and money per capita than we did in Afghanistan, a country with a much bigger population and very difficult terrain. And the degree of difficulty was further compounded because the only way in and out of Afghanistan was through Pakistan, which did not share our objectives and sought to subvert them.

So the original sin was that we didn't put anywhere near enough boots on the ground early on. We did not make a substantial effort in those early days to help the Afghans build a police force and national army. So the warlords filled the vacuum. Then we had the emergence of the Taliban. When we finally, as General David Petraeus puts it, "Got the inputs right" in 2010, it was a real uphill battle on all lines of effort.

All that said, Ambassador Crocker frequently makes the point that you can't overlook that good things that happened over those twenty years as well. Education for not just boys, but girls, too, and a lot more kids were in school generally. There was an economy that was working. There was business and trade. There was a free press and students were attending university.

My view is we didn't have a lot of choice in Dobbins' three options. I do wish that we had gotten off to a better start at the outset though.

Q: Have we covered the key points for your time in Kabul?

PEARCE: I think so. I would also note that in March and April 2012, our interagency civ-mil negotiating teams reached two key agreements with the Afghan government. One established a six-month timetable for the transfer of Afghan detainees held by the U.S. military to Afghan custody. The other established that Afghan forces would oversee and lead the night raids against Taliban leaders that Karzai really hated. These were both seen as important assertions of sovereignty by President Karzai. I think these two accords paved the way for the Strategic Partnership Agreement to be signed by Presidents Obama and Karzai in May 2012.

Q: That was a very welcomed document as opposed to the follow-on one on the military.

PEARCE: Yes. There was progress on the SPA, but the follow-on Bilateral Security Agreement talks, i.e. the detailed status of forces agreement [SOFA], would be a different kettle of fish.

So as I prepared to return to Washington that May, the SPA had just been signed. And in late 2011 or early 2012, I don't recall exactly, Marc Grossman had reached out to me about replacing his senior deputy in SRAP. He added that he, Marc, would be leaving with Secretary Clinton at the end of the administration's first term and this meant that I would be the acting SRAP for some period of time. My old A-100 classmate, Bill Burns, who was by then the Deputy Secretary, re-enforced the request. I had been assigned as Deputy Commandant of the National War College and was looking forward to it. But I saluted and reported to SRAP instead.

I took up my duties at SRAP in late July 2012. Meanwhile, President Obama designated Afghanistan a major non-NATO ally, which was announced by Secretary Clinton at a July 7 press conference in Kabul with President Karzai. Secretary Clinton said at that news conference, "We can't imagine leaving Afghanistan."

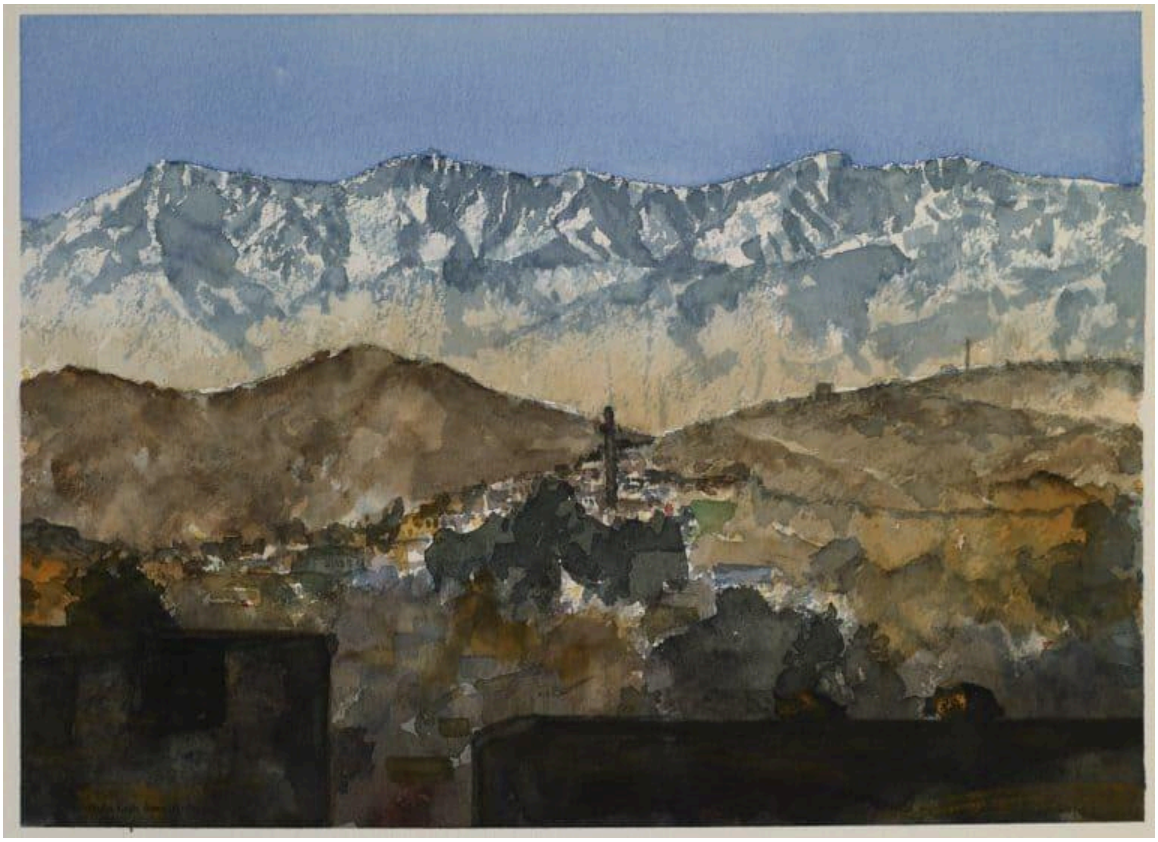
So the SPA was signed and Afghanistan was now a major non-NATO ally.

Q: That's a big deal. Not that many countries get that.

PEARCE: No. And in terms of transition planning, and particularly the Strategic Partnership Agreement and major non-NATO ally designation, things looked to be heading in the right direction.

Q: What year is this?

PEARCE: This is the spring-summer of 2012. I transferred from Kabul to SRAP, Marc Grossman was still there but he would depart in December. The SRAP was an assistant secretary-level job. The senior deputy SRAP was a PDAS-equivalent position with responsibility for Afghanistan and Pakistan. So I assisted the SRAP in advising the Secretary on Afghanistan and Pakistan and in providing guidance and direction to our missions in those two countries. SRAP consisted of thirty FSOs, Civil Service staff, interagency detailees, contractors, and allied government diplomats. I directly supervised another thirty-nine people on the Afghanistan and Pakistan desks.



Hindu Kush ("Indian Killer") mountains watercolor painted by Ambassador Pearce of the view from his embassy balcony

I was also dual-hatted as a deputy assistant secretary in the South Asia Bureau and liaised regularly with Bob Blake, who was then the SA Assistant Secretary, and his leadership team. It was an awkward bureaucratic set up, a Richard Holbrooke construct, but we did our best to make it work.

I represented the office in the absence of, or during the travel of, the SRAP with the Office of the Secretary, the National Security Council staff, DOD, JCS, the intelligence community and other senior interagency contacts. I was in regular contact with the chiefs of mission in both Kabul and Islamabad, as well as the embassies of both countries in Washington and those of our allied partners. I traveled to the region a number of times, especially during the five or so months when I was Acting SRAP.

Tom Nides was the deputy secretary for management. We had an ongoing discussion with his office regarding the details of transition planning, and especially our ongoing plans to configure the enduring civilian presence. That turned out to be a difficult exercise because it was going to depend in part on what the military footprint ultimately would be, and that remained unclear because the BSA had not been signed.

Q: I remember I was in the Economics Bureau working on development policy then. I remember there was a meeting with Alice Wells who I think was chief of staff for the new under secretary.

PEARCE: She was working with Bill Burns in the deputy secretary's office.

Q: I remember great concern they were expressing about the contracting economic impact for Afghanistan as a lot of these people and functions left.

PEARCE: It was a huge thrash and a lot to plan for. You can imagine, we had a lot of stakeholders and a lot of programs—AID, DEA, PRTs all over the country doing development and public affairs. We had English-language teaching programs, all kinds of training and cultural exchanges.

In that regard, I would like to note the death of Anne Smedinghoff on April 6, 2013. This affected us all deeply. Anne was the first U.S. diplomat to die on the job since the passing of my friend and colleague Chris Stevens in Benghazi on September 11, 2012. She was 25, a promising officer on her second FS assignment, serving in Afghanistan as a press officer. She died in a car bomb blast at Qalat in Zabul Province where she was helping Afghan journalists cover an event at a school where the local Provincial Reconstruction Team was to donate math and science books. I joined Anne's family, the Under Secretary for Management and the Director General in receiving her remains at Dover AFB. I also attended her funeral in Chicago and delivered remarks at a department memorial ceremony that SRAP organized. Mary Frangakis of the Afghan desk, who had served in Kabul as well, did a heroic job liaising with the Smedinghoff family and organizing the memorial event. Anne had been planning to learn Arabic and then take a two-year assignment to Algeria, where I had most recently served as Ambassador. It was a terrible loss for her family, for her friends, and for the Foreign Service.

When I arrived in SRAP in late July of 2012, it was the end of the Obama administration's first term. Ambassador Crocker left Afghanistan in July and was succeeded by Jim Cunningham. Marc Grossman left SRAP in December of that year. Secretary Clinton left the administration in January 2013 and Secretary Kerry came on board. I served as acting SRAP until Jim Dobbins arrived to take up the permanent SRAP position in May of 2013. Meanwhile, I was nominated by President Obama to be the next Ambassador to Greece and stepped down from SRAP to prepare for that position shortly after Dobbins came on deck.

Those five months as Acting SRAP were a time of transition and intense flux in policy with both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A key priority of SRAP was to continue to strengthen the architecture of international support for Afghanistan. Ambassador Beth Jones, who played an active role in this for SRAP, has talked about this in her own oral history. We were less than two years away from 2014. The SRAP team and our posts in the field worked intensively with NATO allies, international donors, Afghanistan's regional partners and its neighbors to consolidate both military and the economic/financial support going forward.

A second priority at this time was to build on the SPD and advance talks on a Bilateral Security Agreement [BSA]. My colleague and fellow SRAP Deputy Jim Warlick took the lead on this in SRAP, working with Ambassador Cunningham and his team in Kabul.

A third priority was to leverage a planned visit by Karzai to Washington in January 2013 to undertake a review of relations, especially on the sensitive quest for a negotiated solution to the conflict—i.e., Afghan-Afghan reconciliation.

I should note it was not all Afghanistan all the time. Conducting relations with Pakistan was the other major job at SRAP and in 2012 U.S.-Pakistan relations were at a low point. Osama bin Laden had been killed the previous year inside Pakistan.

Q: Embarrassing the Pakistani government.

PEARCE: Embarrassing the government. There was a lot of hostility to Pakistan, particularly in the Congress. Codels [congressional delegations] would visit Kabul. They would be briefed by the military about how the Taliban, and especially the Haqqani terrorist network, were using sanctuary in Pakistan to attack us in Afghanistan.

The trick here was we also needed Pakistan, on the one hand just for our own logistics, getting stuff in and out internally, but also for the peace process. It would be very difficult to get anything done on the peace front if Pakistan were actively opposed.

My colleague Dan Feldman, also a deputy in SRAP, generally took the lead on Pakistan and I did the same with Afghanistan. But when I assumed the responsibility of acting SRAP I became much more involved in the Pakistani side of things, including travel to the region.

So those were the priorities.

On the BSA, a lot of progress was made on the text and the substance. Remember, this is essentially a SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement] negotiation—what's going to be where, what they're allowed to do, what they're not allowed to do. There's always a big laundry list that our military requires and the host government typically pushes back, especially on jurisdiction issues. You just have to do the knit on that and it's always hard.

Q: The big problem we encounter all over the world with SOFAs, is that it says if you want our military to be present, you have to keep your courts and your legal system off. If something happens, it will be handled in the U.S. and that's a tough sovereignty issue around the world.

PEARCE: It is. I ran into it in the UAE, Greece, and other places.

The conclusion of the BSA came after my time, but briefly, while we made progress, Karzai wouldn't sign it before he left office. So it got tied up until after the 2014 Afghan presidential elections. Those elections were held in two rounds, in April and June and there was a long recount. The BSA didn't get done until September 2014, after Ashraf Ghani had succeeded Karzai.

Consider how transition looked in the spring of 2013. Afghanistan was a major non-NATO ally. The SPA was signed and BSA talks were underway. The architecture of support was being knit—SRAP teams were going to conferences in Berlin, Lisbon, London, Kabul, Chicago,[2] Istanbul, and Tokyo to secure regional and international

support for Afghanistan, including concrete pledges of security and development assistance going forward beyond 2014. After we concluded our SPA, our NATO allies followed suit with a whole series of like agreements. My Atlantic Council remarks in March of 2013 summarize the state of play during this period.[3]

So back to the peace process. This had been in a coma since March of 2012. As Marc Grossman noted, the Taliban suspended contact with us. But there was other stuff to do.

One of the problems we had as we considered the contingency of possible future engagement with the Taliban was that Qatar, where Grossman had conducted his initial talks, seemed to be a logical venue but Afghan-Qatar relations were not good. I forget why, but there was a problem. I went out to the region. We engaged the Afghans at senior levels. I went to Qatar and did the same. In Doha, my Arabic came in handy because I was able to talk to them, small format, in Arabic. Senior officials, including the attorney general, appreciated this. We also leveraged Secretary Clinton's generous willingness—considering all she had on her plate in her final few weeks in office—to help us catalyze some high-level Qatar-Afghan contacts. Secretary Clinton understood very well both the sensitivity and the importance of the political track. We broke the ice and, eventually, the logjam in Afghan-Qatar relations.

At the January 11, 2013 Obama-Karzai summit in Washington a joint statement was issued that called on the armed opposition to join a political process, including taking steps to open a Taliban office in Doha "for the purpose of negotiations between the High Peace Council and authorized representatives of the Taliban." The two presidents urged the government of Qatar to facilitate this.

This was a very big deal, the first positive peace process development in a year. Over the next few months we followed up with the Afghans, Qataris, and other parties including allied and UN representatives. On February 4, 2013 at a UK-sponsored trilateral summit in London, the leaders of both Afghanistan and Pakistan pledged to "take all necessary measures to achieve the goal of a peace settlement over the next six months."4

I led an interagency team to Kabul and Islamabad for followup meetings with Karzai and Pakistani leaders, including MFA Foreign Secretary Jalil Jilani and Army Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. Kayani was very important, particularly in the peace process. To make any progress, we would need to have the Pakistani military at least not actively opposed.

Ambassador Pearce in a Black Hawk helicopter en route to Khyber Pass during a visit to Afghanistan by Deputy National Security Adviser Denis McDonough

Kayani was a heavy smoker and he would chain smoke all the way through our meetings. At the beginning, he would pull out a pack of cigarettes and offer them around before taking one himself. He knew most Americans didn't smoke. I think I shocked some of my colleagues at SRAP by accepting a cigarette from Kayani and smoking with him. On the other hand, I suspect having that smoke with him helped our discussions as much as any of my exquisite talking points.

On April 24, 2013, on the sidelines of a NATO ministerial in Brussels, I joined Secretary Kerry for separate bilaterals with both Karzai and Kayani, followed by a trilateral. The trilateral resulted in a commitment by the two sides to work for better bilateral relations and to cooperate on peace efforts. Flanked by Karzai and Kayani, Kerry said, "I think that everybody here agreed today that we will continue a very specific dialogue on both the political track as well as the security track. We have a commitment to do that in the interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and peace in the region." Reuters reported that after talks over lunch, Kerry, Kayani and Karzai strolled together in the sprawling garden of the residence of the U.S. ambassador to NATO on the outskirts of the Belgian capital.5

I left SRAP in May after Jim Dobbins had come on board as the new SRAP and amid these continuing efforts to get the peace process restarted.

This goes beyond my stay, but I'll note that the Qatar government did indeed find a villa for the Taliban to open officially as their political office. This was on 18 June 2013.

But there was immediately an issue. The clear stipulation had always been that this office would be for the purpose of facilitating Afghan-Afghan talks between the High Peace Council and "authorized representatives of the Taliban." It was not to be identified as an office of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." But then they went ahead and put up a plaque saying exactly that.

Q: They were saying that they, the Taliban, were the legitimate government.

PEARCE: Yes. They were putting themselves forward as an entity that would be an alternative to the government, which we absolutely did not agree with. And it had been made clear to them throughout that this would be a political office. It would not be an Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They put that sign up anyway. Of course, the Afghan government had a fit. Karzai halted talks. The plaque was removed. The Taliban shut the thing down and said they'd been lied to by everybody.

Q: They were not sincere.

PEARCE: I'm not the one to talk to about that because I wasn't involved at this time. You might talk to Barney Rubin. Barnett Rubin of New York University is a long-time Afghan and regional expert. He was on Holbrooke's team, he was on Grossman's team, he was there with me and he was there with Dobbins. He has a tremendous historical perspective on U.S.-Afghan relations.

Q: The elections that took on the Abdullah Abdullah dispute, did that happen while you were at SRAP?

PEARCE: No. I left SRAP in May of 2013 and the first round of elections was in April 2014. That vote wasn't conclusive and there was a second round in June. That round was still disputed and there was a recount that would drag on all summer long. Ashraf Ghani didn't take office until September 2014.

Q: During the time you were in SRAP, the ambassador was Cunningham and the deputy was Mike McKinley?

PEARCE: No. I think Mike went out in mid-2013 at about the time that I left SRAP, so we didn't really overlap. I did meet with him in SRAP before he left.

Q: I think he went on as deputy.

PEARCE: Yes, he was the deputy first and later the ambassador.

Q: That was the team that you were working with?

PEARCE: Cunningham in particular. I worked closely with Jim both when I was in Kabul and later when I was in SRAP. Other key members of the leadership team in Kabul at that point were Ambassador Hugo Llorens, who had replaced me in May 2012 as

assistant chief of mission and then in September 2012, Ambassador Tina Kaidanow came on board to succeed Cunningham as the deputy.

So by the spring of 2013, various lines of effort—transition planning, the Strategic Partnership Agreement, BSA talks, designation of Afghanistan as a major non-NATO ally, an international architecture of support and even the peace process—were starting to look like they were heading in a positive direction for the first time in quite a while.

There were challenges. One of them was the degree of bureaucratic difficulty involved in managing many moving parts in the middle of a transition between President Obama's first and second terms. When Secretary Clinton left and Secretary Kerry began their staff change. A new SRAP, Jim Dobbins, was named. There were many stakeholders with whom to coordinate in Washington and overseas, including many different governments, and not enough hours in the day.

Another challenge was the disconnect on the post-2014 U.S. presence. We never came to closure on the future configuration of that presence, at least while I was in SRAP.

Part of this stemmed from Karzai not wanting to sign the BSA. It had been pretty fully negotiated by the spring of 2013 but needed to be finalized as a SOFA blessing and establishing the rules of the road for any future U.S. military presence. Without a SOFA, how do you plan for a U.S. force presence? And without knowing that, how do you plan for an ongoing civilian presence?

In transition planning, everybody had a view—State, DOD, AID, the intelligence community, the law enforcement agencies. All had programs and personnel in the field. And I think it's fair to say that pretty much all of them had started with the planning assumption of a one plus four model—i.e., that there would be an embassy plus four regional platforms. The question was how much, where and what's that actually going to look like.

But the White House was going in quite another direction. Long story short, the one plus four model suffered death by a thousand cuts. While we did finish construction of the new embassy building after my departure, the other platforms would all eventually be shut down.

And as the U.S. scaled back its planning assumptions, it affected our allies too because they relied on U.S. security and logistical support to maintain their own platforms outside the capital. The Italians, the Spanish, the Germans, the Turks, the UK, and the French all had PRTs. They were running civil society programs and doing outreach locally. They were conducting joint military operations with the Afghan military. It was not just about us.

Yet another challenge was that you don't know what you don't know. For example, regarding efforts to promote national political reconciliation, Marc Grossman notes in his *Yale Journal* articles that the purpose of U.S. contacts with the Taliban was to explore confidence-building measures that could open the door to direct talks between the Afghan government and the insurgents. But then in March 2012 the Taliban chose to suspend

those contacts. That remained the case during my tenure at SRAP from mid-2012 to mid-2013.

We didn't know it at the time [because it did not come out until 2015] but in April of 2013 Mullah Omar died. There were conflicting reports about the Taliban from the Afghans and others but we didn't have direct talks so it was hard to know what was happening on the Taliban side.

We did know that the Pakistanis had arrested Mullah Baradar, a prominent Taliban leader, back in 2010.

Q: What happened in 2010?

PEARCE: The Pakistanis arrested Mullah Baradar in February 2010. I think author Steve Coll and others have commented on this. While it was seen by some as a good thing, i.e. Pakistan cracking down on the Taliban, others said no, actually Baradar was one of the Taliban in favor of talks, so it was not a good sign at all that he was arrested.

Q: Later, in the Trump administration, he became the key Taliban interlocutor with the U.S.

PEARCE: That's right. But in terms of challenges, there were things that we could see, and there were things we couldn't see.

Right-sizing our relations with Pakistan was another area that required careful thought. We tried to build on areas of presumed mutual interest like restoring security and stability in Afghanistan, while not overselling a relationship that was inherently difficult.

So we followed a work plan that SRAP had developed, working with Pakistani Foreign Secretary Jalil Jilani. In late April 2013, I attended an Istanbul Process meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan of Afghanistan's neighbors and supporters. Deputy Secretary Bill Burns led our delegation and I recall that Jilani at one point thanked me for "the quiet, dignified way you have moved things along." He knew it was hard. It was one of those situations where you try to take a step, establish a foothold, take another step and keep expectations very low.

A related matter was that the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship was always fraught. For Pakistan, and you can read it in a million places, the fundamental strategic issue was India. They saw Afghanistan as their strategic backyard and they were fearful of Indian influence and meddling there.

Q: I was surprised to learn that Karzai had been in exile in India as opposed to many Afghans that had gone to Pakistan. So when he came back and led the country, that must have been hard. Pakistanis understand that.

PEARCE: Yes. One of my main interlocutors in Kabul was a top aide to Karzai named Shaida Abdali. He was from the same southern Pashtun tribe as Karzai, the Popalzai. Shaida was sent later as ambassador to India, another indicator for me of the close personal connection that Karzai felt with India.

Q: We like to end these interviews by giving you a chance to give your reflections. It can be about the twenty years of our involvement there, about the way the withdrawal was handled, or the evacuation, our approach in general or particular administrations.

PEARCE: I'll try to make my observations from the general to the specific, from big to small.

You have to think big. Issues like the chaos in Afghanistan can't be considered in isolation. They tie into a wider region. It's important to figure out who all the real stakeholders are and then engage with all in finding answers. The big tectonic plates around Afghanistan are Pakistan, India, Iran and the Central Asia republics to the north. Afghanistan is in the middle. If we can't or won't talk to Iran, for example, or at least develop some kind of direct or indirect working channel, we limit our influence and effectiveness.

Other stakeholders include our NATO partners, the Gulf states, China and Russia. So you have to go work all of those things, not just a few. It's very hard and very time-consuming. It requires somebody senior in motion pretty much all the time. We in SRAP did what we could, leveraging the resources and people we had, but it was a big task.

You also have to do your history homework. You can't understand the present if you don't understand the past. Afghanistan was much more than a graveyard of empires. It was a crossroads of empires with a long history of trade both east and west. We need to remember how nineteenth-century great powers, the British Empire and the Russian Empire, created zones of influence and sealed its borders, cutting it off and creating a buffer state. That's what impoverished and isolated the country. There had been a long history of trade between Iran and Afghanistan all the way to India. Then suddenly there was not.

The Durand Line is another case in point. The history of this is crucial but I suspect a lot of people working on Afghanistan don't even know what it is. We need to remember how it was drawn by the British right through the middle of the Pashtun areas, leaving some Pashtuns on the Afghan side and some on what is now the Pakistan side. The Afghans never accepted that those Pashtuns were not part of Afghanistan. They believed they were, and are, part of Afghanistan. The Pakistanis know this and are very suspicious of any Afghan efforts to assert themselves on Pashtun matters. They consider the Durand Line to be the definitive international border of Pakistan as a successor state to British India. The Afghans do not. So a top-priority national security issue for Pakistan is preserving this equity. And the concern that Pakistan feels about potential Indian meddling in this delicate equation cannot be overstated.

The thing is, you need to understand history because it conditions people's thinking now, whether it's the India-Pakistan conflict and how that plays out, or Pakistan's interest in what it sees as defensive maneuvering room in Afghanistan vis-a-vis India.

Iran also takes a special interest in its Afghan neighbor. There's an expression in Persian, Iran-e Zamin, which means the Land of Iran, or Greater Iran. It's like Eretz Yisrael, the

Land of Israel, or Greater Israel. Iran-e Zamin extends well beyond the current borders of Iran. It encompasses broad areas of historic Persian cultural influence, from the southern shore of the Persian Gulf to eastern Iraq to Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and western Afghanistan. Dari and Tajik are in fact variants of Persian. Herat in western Afghanistan was one of the great cities of the Persian province of Khorasan and in the fifteenth century it became the capital of the Timurid empire under Shah Rukh, the son of Tamerlane.

So the whole belt in the north near Tajikistan all the way to the west and into Iran has been an area of strong Persian cultural influence. If we don't understand that we can't begin to understand how Iran thinks of the area, how they calculate their interests, and indeed how many Afghans see themselves. The Pashtuns will be inclined south and east, Tajiks will be inclined north and west.

I think the general point here is that I find it hard to imagine that the key to stability in Afghanistan can be found without examining more closely how it ties into the larger question of regional stability and figuring out from there what that implies for U.S. interests and diplomatic strategy. The chaos in Afghanistan is partly a function of Afghan internal dynamics but it's also conditioned by what its neighbors, the regional powers, do.

This is all hard stuff, a lot to understand, let alone influence. But you have to work all of these things even when there's no gain in sight, no obvious progress to make. You have to keep that thread, tend the garden, and look for opportunities. Because if you're not there and you're not engaged you won't be able to take advantage of those opportunities when they do arise. That's something we need to work on.

Nothing is easy in Afghanistan. But I would say we lost very few opportunities to make it harder.

Q: I want to ask you something. You come with a deep knowledge of the Muslim world, which not everybody did. In the historical aspect, did you feel that the Taliban strengthening and being able to continue to recruit on the ideas of fighting the invading infidels, do you feel like that was inevitably going to go on and get stronger or did you feel that there was something we could have done earlier to change that dynamic?

PEARCE: I do. The Taliban follow the Deobandi strain of Sunnism, a conservative, Salafist school which developed in India and which they experienced in Pakistani madrassas. But I do not think it was necessarily inevitable the Taliban would come to the fore as they did. It goes back to what I was saying before about original sin in 2001. We went in but were not prepared to devote the necessary resources to the task and then we turned away to Iraq, just as we had turned away from Afghanistan to Iraq in 1989–1990 after the Soviets left. This allowed the conditions to develop that in turn enabled the rise of the Taliban.

True, rural areas of course have always been more conservative than urban ones. And the Pashtunwali cultural ethic was conservative and tribal. But historically, there has been considerable diversity in the practice of Islam in Afghanistan. Ten percent of the country

is Shia. Naqshabandi sufism and non-Salafist Sunni schools flourished in Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek areas.

One factor furthering the growth of more conservative religious trends in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1980s was Saudi funding. They poured money into conservative madrasas at that time in a bid to counter the influence of revolutionary Iran.

The Taliban were able to get support because of the rise of the warlords, oppressing and extorting and doing the things warlords do. Pakistan had its role and interests too. So it was hard and complicated, and would have been no matter what we did in 2001, but I do not think the rise of the Taliban was inevitable had we made different choices early on.

Q: On the issue of building a modern country with democratic institutions, did you feel like that just took more time and care to get it to survive or did you feel that there was any different approach because there were some tribal aspects to the country?

PEARCE: Afghanistan is Afghanistan. When I was in journalism graduate school at Ohio State in 1973, I was teaching assistant to a curmudgeonly professor originally from Boston named Fred Maguire. He put me in charge of judging an editorial contest for local newspapers in Tennessee. He told me to look closely at the relevance of the editorials. He said, "David, the only thing that counts is local news. If people are writing about foreign affairs, it's Afghanistaning." I often think back to that—"Afghanistaning" meant writing about something nobody cares about.

Afghanistan is literally on the other side of the world. It's a totally different culture. So you need to think long and hard about going in at all. The experience of the British and Soviets teaches us that. But on 9/11 we were attacked from there. So we decided we had just cause. But what do you do? You don't want to occupy. On the other hand, you don't want to walk away and have the same threat recur.

So that leaves the option of trying to create a situation of sufficient stability that will allow you to hand off to an Afghan authority and leave. You keep your expectations in check. It is what it is. But you want to have stability and you want to build institutions and get people educated because if they're educated they will make more informed choices. There will still be a tribal element particularly in the rural areas.

But if there is progress and economic development people will start to see that there are possibilities for a better future, and that's in fact what happened. Yes, there was corruption. But I still think, personally, we had little choice except to try, given the situation we were in.

A couple of other things, I'll talk a little bit on reconciliation, a little bit about process and then I'll give you my thoughts on the Biden pullout.

I think in hindsight that the period when we were working on this, 2011 to 2012, was the time to try to make the peace process work. We did make headway. We came close. It was the peak of our leverage, the peak of our troop presence, of our civilian and security presence. The Taliban had an incentive to listen.

So why didn't it work?

When in June of 2011 President Obama signaled that we were going to withdraw our troops we essentially gave the Taliban the main thing they wanted for nothing. That was, at least from the point of view of getting an Afghan-Afghan political process going and getting to a negotiated solution, an own goal.

But there was also pervasive distrust and suspicion among key stakeholders.

Although we had made headway with Pakistan the Pakistani military was still chafing about Osama bin Laden and suspicious of us, of Karzai, and what they saw as our efforts together with the Kabul government to end-run them. They were determined to show this was not possible. They retained their lines to Taliban groups like the Haqqanis who posed a serious and ongoing terrorist threat. They did not want to make a misstep with what they considered to be strategic interests in their own backyard. As I said, they were particularly fearful of Indian influence in Afghanistan.

We coordinated carefully and in full transparency with the Afghan government and the members of the Higher Peace Council. We met and briefed people in civil society, legislators and women's groups. We kept respect for the constitution and women's rights front and center. But Karzai remained very suspicious of any direct U.S.-Taliban contacts at all. He wanted to control the process. We understood that.

So it was an uphill battle to work through all this distrust and get the parties to do the knit.

Meanwhile, on the Taliban side, we didn't know what we now know, i.e. that Mullah Omar died in April 2013 just as we were trying to get things off the ground again. I presume now, with the benefit of hindsight, that the Taliban themselves were divided between their political and military wings about what to do. They were probably as divided on their side as were their opponents in Kabul and elsewhere around the country.

With SRAP team already on board, Ambassador Pearce grabbed this last-minute photo with their aircrew before heading out from Andrews AFB on one of his last trips as acting SRAP in spring 2013

It's worth noting that in June 2013, not long after I had left SRAP, the flap over the opening of the Doha political office demonstrated that the Taliban continued to reject the very premise of the office's establishment—that it was for the purpose of talks between the Afghan Higher Peace Council and "authorized representatives" of the Taliban, not the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan."

A few words on process.

We have lots of intel, the best in the world, but we often come up short on expertise. What good is it to have the best intelligence in the world if the recipients of that intelligence don't understand the significance of what they're looking at?

I've spent most of my career in the Islamic world. I spent years learning languages and cultures and history, and how that drives emotions and assumptions. You have to be humble though. After all these years I still feel like a dummy.

We don't have enough real expertise, and what we do have is often disregarded or undervalued. I think it's very important to understand that language, area, history, and cultural expertise requires years of experience. That's what the Foreign Service does. That's the value added that we hopefully bring to the table.

Q: They ran out of the people with that expertise early on in these postings that people only stayed for a year or two.

PEARCE: That's another thing. But on the other hand, what do you do about that? It's a very difficult thing. You can't have one small group of people doing a disproportionate share of the hardest jobs. What we had in Iraq and Afghanistan was a rotating thing of shortened tours. If you send people in for one year, and they never have to go back, after a while you run out of people in a small service like ours. You then have no option but to start sending folks without the requisite language training and area expertise. One thing we certainly need is stepped-up training, and especially a substantial training float for hard languages. And we have to figure out a way to incentivize people.

Ryan Crocker had an Expeditionary Diplomacy award named after him. I worked closely with Ryan for seven years of my career—in Damascus, Washington, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He certainly deserves the recognition. But I sometimes hear people argue that "expeditionary diplomacy" is not for everyone, that Crocker is a special type. Well, he's a special type for sure but we need that kind of special type. I don't think people should get a pass on doing the hard things in the hard places just because, like Bartleby the Scrivener, they would prefer not to.

Worldwide availability should have meaning and FSOs, like the military, should understand when they sign up that there is risk involved and there is something called service discipline. That means real danger and family separations. That's part of the deal. And if you're not prepared to accept that you shouldn't be commissioned.

Check the box and never go back doesn't work. The military has short tours. They might keep a brigade combat team from the Tenth Mountain Division in Kirkuk for a year. Then they rotate out, but the Tenth Mountain knows it will be deployed again a couple years later. It might not be to Kirkuk but they'll be back. Many U.S. Army and Marine officers did three or four deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan. The Foreign Service never really figured out a good way to do that. The military and the Foreign Service are not the same, of course. I don't know what the answer is, but I do know it's a problem.

Another big process issue is the breakdown of our interagency process.

When I was on the Greek desk in the 1980s, I remember that if there was a Greece-Turkey-Cyprus issue the DAS for southern Europe would manage it. That DAS would convene a meeting in his office of all the stakeholders from around the interagency. The NSC [National Security Council] representative would attend, a mid-level staffer who would take notes but was not a main actor. These expert-level, issue-specific interagency working groups did the lion's share of the sifting and sorting of options on most issues.

Fast forward to 1990–1991 and now I'm on the P staff and my boss, the under secretary for political affairs at the State Department represents State on the Deputies Committee. And the process works pretty well. We had Bob Gates at the NSC and Bob Kimmitt at State. They and their counterparts at the Deputy level in other agencies were colleagues. The system worked horizontally and vertically. And it was pyramidal. An expert-level interagency group was still the issue manager of first instance, sorting through facts and options, keeping higher levels apprised. They would define the issues they couldn't agree on and those issues would then go to the Deputies Committee for decision.

To prepare for a DC, the principal would want to know what was the issue for decision, what were the facts, and what were the options. We would say, this is what DOD thinks, this is what CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] thinks, this is what Treasury thinks, whatever the mix was. And we would add, here's what our building thinks. The point is, it was framed in such a way that, when the deputies went into a meeting, there would be specific issues, specifically defined, with specific options, and they would actually come to a decision. It was a big deal to prepare for a DC. But they went in, they made decisions, they came out and we all saluted smartly and did whatever was decided. If the DC itself couldn't agree, it went to a PC [Principals Committee, i.e. agency head level] but that was rare.

Fast forward again to my experience with the interagency process on Iraq 2001–2003 and 2007–2008, and then Afghanistan in 2011–2013.

The NSC bureaucracy grew from maybe fifty policy positions in 1990 under George Bush senior to close to 400 people now. The original job of the NSC was to coordinate and broker among agencies, but it has now become a separate, operational entity itself. Remember Ollie North, Bud McFarlane and Iran-Contra? The birthday cake and the key? After that scandal, Secretary of State George Shultz vowed there would never again be an operational NSC. Well, Shultz was wrong. We have it again.

The NSC is now the tail wagging the dog. A relatively junior NSC bureaucracy tasks senior officials in Washington and in the field to produce papers and attend meetings. Sometimes NSC staffers write papers themselves in addition to tasking others. Instead of coordinating and framing a specific issue for discussion at a DC or PC [no longer rare], and letting each agency prepare its principal for that meeting as they see fit, the NSC is engaged in senior-level operational meddling and micromanagement.

The result of this is that issues for decision are often poorly framed or not framed at all, principals are poorly prepared, and coordinated decision-making gets muddied. Instead of taking real decisions in relatively few meetings, our most senior officials are being exhausted in numerous unproductive and ill-conceived DCs and PCs. In my experience, it was commonplace for harried principals to have no time to look at their briefs until they were in their cars on the way to the Situation Room, or sitting down to a Secure Video Teleconference [SVTC] call. This is a direct function of a bloated NSC staff. There are four hundred hammers over there looking for nails. The whole thing is broken, in my opinion. Susan Rice, bless her heart, tried to reduce the size of the NSC staff, but the Blob prevailed.

Q: Some of the worst decisions, the early original sin decisions have to do with Cheney and Rumsfeld, what they felt they wanted and how they were going to move it forward. But later as each president came in and wanted to wind down, they were affected by the politics of it, which is not new. This probably happened with Vietnam. It happened with all kinds of things in the past.

It seems like some of the tragedy on Afghanistan was that the president felt he had to announce a withdrawal. President Trump, for example, felt he had made a campaign promise to get out of Afghanistan, and by God, he was going to fulfill it and get all the

troops out and not leave anything left. So the politics in the end trumped any kind of maneuver process.

PEARCE: I think the real original sin was that Rumsfeld, particularly Rumsfeld, not even Cheney, specifically Rumsfeld, was very much in favor of a light, quick in and out. That school of thought prevailed.

Q: Also, the decision of going to Iraq.

PEARCE: Yes. The decision of going to Iraq, I was in the middle of that argument. We lost.

On the Biden pullout, I reread the Doha Agreement recently and it pays lip service to a lot of things. But the substance of it, the fundamental process defect, was that we did this without sufficient consultation with the Afghans, the non-Taliban Afghans who did not agree. Forcing the Kabul government, really twisting their arm to release five thousand Taliban prisoners, that was awful. A big mistake, I think.

Q: You mentioned Biden although the Doha Agreement was negotiated under the previous administration.

PEARCE: Yes it was, but it was retained by Biden. It was a Trump-Biden agreement actually. It discarded what for us was always the cardinal principle, that a negotiated settlement has to be between Afghans, not between us and the Taliban. We effectively abandoned the notion of an Afghan-led political process. This became a U.S.-led process that gave the Taliban what they wanted, i.e. firm commitments on troop withdrawals in exchange for dilute commitments on political process.

Our Afghan allies should have been engaged and leading this. And if the Taliban were not ready to do that, then we should not have been ready to do it either. Instead, we put the cart before the horse, we made concessions, especially on a conditions-based withdrawal, to get the Taliban on board then tried from there to make the political part work. It didn't work.

Petraeus and others have talked about the practical effect of withdrawing our military, our contractors, all of the people who were providing logistical support, medevac capability, all the rest of it. We basically pulled the rug out from under the Afghan forces. What do you expect they're going to do in that situation? They'll do what anybody else would. If you're stuck out in the middle of nowhere and nobody's got your back, you're going to either run away or make a deal. That's what happened. Nobody should be surprised.

I think this was a terrible, unnecessary tragedy because we had a very limited presence there. It was not costing a lot. The Afghans were doing all the fighting. Our allies were fully invested and opposed to us leaving. But we gave them no choice either. They wanted to stay, but they couldn't without us. So they had to leave, too. What happened, happened.

Watching that so-called withdrawal just broke my heart. It was so awful. I was really upset about it for a long time. I think that for a lot of people who served in

Afghanistan—who gave years of their lives to try and advance our interests and get it to a better place—to see it end that way was pretty hard. I just felt ashamed, frankly.

Now we have the Taliban back. Sirajuddin Haqqani is a minister in their government, the same guy who was sending suicide bombers our way when I was in Kabul. ISIS is now the bane of the Taliban's existence. Al Qaeda, I believe, is still there. If you have an ungoverned space or a space where the government can't go, bad things happen there. It happened before, it will happen again. We haven't begun to see the beginning of that. I suspect the Pakistani Taliban is going to be a big problem for Pakistan and maybe for Afghanistan too. It's hard to see where this goes and how it ends.

I understand the argument that we had been there for a long time. I understand that many felt it was time to get out. I don't agree for all the reasons I said, but I do think that's something which you could argue. The thing is, you have to think these things through before you get involved, not after—what you're going to do, what's it going to take and how do you leave. And once you're there, you have to think very carefully about the manner of your leaving because it will be just as important as the manner of your coming. We didn't do that. We just left. We cut the cord and decided to lose.

A final thought about the long-term effects going forward and what signal the pullout sends about U.S. trust and credibility.

I sometimes reflect on things I have experienced in my career and especially how you don't see the impact of events right away. For example, I was in Lebanon as a reporter from 1976 to 1979. Then in 1983, I was back when Rumsfeld was President Reagan's special envoy for Lebanon. I was attached to his mission for several months in late 1983 and early 1984. The Marines were at Beirut Airport. Syria and its Lebanese allies were fighting the Lebanese government and bombarding Lebanon.

In April 1983, the U.S. embassy in Beirut was bombed. In October 1983 the Marine barracks was bombed. This was the work of Hezbollah, supported by Syria and Iran. Then, in February 1984 the Multinational Force [MNF] withdrew from Lebanon. The MNF was a peacekeeping contingent composed of American, British, French and Italian troops. It had been deployed to stabilize Lebanon after the September 14, 1982 assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel by a Lebanese faction aligned with Syria.

Seven years later, I was stationed in the Gulf before Saddam invaded Kuwait. I recall that a codel went to Baghdad, I think it was Bob Dole, and met with Saddam Hussein. Saddam told the codel, "I can afford to lose fifty thousand people. You can't." That always stuck with me. I think Saddam looked at what happened in Lebanon in 1983 and the way we were forced out by the escalating violence of Hafez al-Assad, the Syrians, Iran and Hezbollah. He concluded, wrongly, that he could do the same. He believed we wouldn't have the stomach to take him on in the Gulf. And that was one of his basic miscalculations about going into Kuwait. Why did he think that? I believe it was a knock—on effect of Lebanon. In the same vein, some analysts believe Osama bin Laden also came to view the U.S. as a paper tiger because of our withdrawals from Lebanon and Somalia after taking casualties.

Another lesson for me of Iraq and Afghanistan is the need to remember that when you call on people to do things, particularly if you're the U.S. president, you need to consider the consequences if they actually do them.

Q: What do you mean?

PEARCE: In Iraq in 1991, in the aftermath of Desert Storm George Bush senior called on the Shia Iraqis to rise up. They did and they got massacred. Unlike the drama of the Kurds in the north, which was covered by international media, the fate of the Shia in the south was not on TV. We stood by and did nothing. To make matters worse, one of the reasons the Shia got massacred was because Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf had made a dumb deal to let the Iraqis keep their helicopters, which they supposedly wanted for medevac. Well Saddam used them to suppress the Shia uprising in the south.

When I was working with the Iraqi opposition years later, on the eve of the 2003 Gulf War, it happened that I was the first U.S. government official to meet with Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the leader of the Islamic Dawa Party. And the first thing Jaafari raised in that London meeting, the very first thing, was President Bush's words in 1991. He said, "He called on us and then he let us down."

So big events have long-term knock-on effects. And now we have the Kabul withdrawal which certainly qualifies as a big event. What signal does it send and to whom? How did it play into Russian calculations in Ukraine? How has it played into China's increased belligerence in the Pacific? We'll find out I guess. The point is the repercussions are not always immediate and obvious. It can take a while for them to be felt.

So apart from the inherent immorality of leaving our friends in the lurch, I suspect those long-term, knock-on effects from the Afghanistan pullout are something we will be wrestling with in coming years.

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1. See Appendix—AmEmbassy Kabul cable UNCLASSIFIED 12 Kabul 1088, Feb 29, 2012 "Ambassador Pearce's Remarks to the Ulama Council in Afghanistan."

2. See May 21, 2013 Chicago NATO Summit Declaration on Afghanistan.

3. See Appendix, "Ambassador Pearce's Remarks at the Atlantic Council, March 7, 2013."

4. The concluding Chequers statement said, "President Zardari reiterated that Pakistan would extend full support to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. All sides agreed on the urgency of this work and committed themselves to take all necessary measures to achieve the goal of a peace settlement over the next six months. Both affirmed the importance of regional and international support. President Karzai, President Zardari and the Prime Minister affirmed that they supported the opening of an office in Doha for the

purpose of negotiations between the Taliban and the High Peace Council of Afghanistan as part of an Afghan-led peace process. The end result should be one in which all Afghans can participate peacefully in the country's political future. They called on the Taliban to take those steps necessary to open an office and to enter into dialogue." Prime Minister's Office, February 4, 2013, Chequers Summit Joint Statement.

5. "U.S. Seeks to Ease Afghan-Pakistan Tensions in Brussels Talks," *Reuters*, April 24, 2013.

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Appendix: AmEmbassy Kabul cable UNCLASSIFIED 12 Kabul 1088, Feb 29, 2012 "Ambassador Pearce's Remarks to the Ulama Council in Afghanistan."

UNCLASSIFIED

Action Office:	FIELDSipr, POL, CDDEA, ECON, PAS, MIST
Info Office:	IPA, POL_INFO, POL_LES_INFO, INL, EXEC_INFO, PAS_INFO, ECON_INFO

MRN:	12 KABUL 1088
Date/DTG:	Feb 29, 2012 / 291552Z FEB 12
From:	AMEMBASSY KABUL
Action:	WASHDC, SECSTATE *ROUTINE*
E.O.:	13526
TAGS:	PREL, PGOV, AF
Reference:	12 KABUL 473
Subject:	Ambassador Pearce's Remarks to the Ulama Council in Afghanistan

1. (U) On February 28, Assistant Chief of Mission Ambassador Pearce addressed the Ulama Council of Afghanistan on the Quran-burning incident (REF A). Please see below his prepared remarks as delivered.

2. (U) Ambassador's Comment: I think that this is one of the best appreciations of Islam that I have ever seen expressed by a non-Muslim. I recommend that it be widely circulated and utilized as appropriate. End Ambassador's Comment.

3. (U)

Ambassador David D. Pearce's opening remarks to the Ulama Council
Tuesday, February 28, 2012

Al-salaamu alaykum wa rahmat Allah wa barakatuhu.

Thank you, Mawlawi Kashaf. Thank you for this opportunity to meet with the Ulama Council.

Let me begin by offering my condolences for the tragic loss of life we have seen in recent days.

You have already heard sincere apologies and statements of regret from every level of the U.S. Government – President Obama, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, General Allen, Ambassador Crocker, and all of our official spokesmen.

I have spent most of my working life – 36 years – in the Islamic world. I have lived in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Tunisia, Syria, Kuwait, Iraq, Jerusalem, the United Arab Emirates and, the most recent three years, as Ambassador to Algeria. And now, I am Assistant Chief of Mission

here in Afghanistan.

I have studied Arabic. I am Christian, but I have also made some study of the Quran, and I have memorized the opening Sura of the Quran, the Fatiha.

I mention this because I want you to know that I understand the centrality of the Quran in Islam, and the importance that people attach to its proper handling.

We all know that a bad mistake was made.

We are doing our best to prevent it from ever happening again. That includes providing additional special religious and cultural training to all U.S. and ISAF forces in Afghanistan, and ensuring that everyone understands the importance of handling religious materials, especially the Quran, with full and proper respect.

General Allen has also ordered an extensive and thorough investigation into this. We are collaborating closely with Afghan authorities to determine the facts. The investigation will establish responsibility and accountability.

It is important to understand that this was not a deliberate, malicious act. It was done mistakenly, out of ignorance.

Today, we are in a shura. You are the Ulama. You know that there is a whole Sura in the Quran – number 42 – called Al-Shura. One of the themes in it is that the preferred way for men to settle their differences is through patience and mutual understanding. We do not need more fitna; we need more shura.

That is why I am here today.

The United States values its relationship with Afghanistan. We want to preserve it and make it better. So, I hope we can not only move beyond the current difficulties, but that the United States and Afghanistan will eventually come to agree on a strategic partnership.

You are leaders. People respect you. So your help and guidance will be very important.

And with God's help, I believe we can succeed.

END TEXT

Appendix: Ambassador Pearce's Remarks at the Atlantic Council

March 7, 2013

Introduction

Good morning. Tnx to AC for giving me this opp. Propose to give you brief perspective on U.S. policy as we look ahead to a year of transition in Afghanistan 2014. Immense subject, many parts of which could serve for extended discussion, so this is just a thumbnail review.

You all know there are concerns in both Afghanistan and the region about how to sustain the gains of the past 11 years and how to ensure stability. In my experience, for many Afghans it is that there be no repeat of the experience of 1989, when the international community turned its back on the country.

These challenges are real, but I do believe the work of the past two years — military to be sure, but also the political and diplomatic — has created a fundamentally different situation. There is now in place an architecture of support for Afghanistan that wasn't there two years ago. The international community has entered into a whole series of agreements — bilateral strategic accords, multilateral undertakings — to provide security and development assistance to Afghanistan — now, through transition in 2014, and into the decade of transformation beyond.

The country has changed, too. There have been real gains in the past eleven years. This, and the structure of international support, mean the Taliban are not going to be able to fight their way back to power in 2014.

This changed equation has helped set the conditions for a possible negotiated end to the violence. Two years ago, no one was speaking of a negotiated settlement. Now it is a real possibility.

The 2014 election will mark a historic transition to new leadership in Afghanistan. It will bring its own set of changes and challenges. The world will be watching. The government that emerges will have the responsibility of bringing the country together. But as the Afghans stand up to these challenges — to taking the security lead, and all that transition entails — the international community has made plain they will not be standing alone.

Transition

So what does, transition entail? Let me briefly discuss three components — security, political, and economic.

In terms of the security transition, let's recall that, at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, international partners and the Afghan government committed to the full transition of security responsibility to Afghanistan by end of 2014. And indeed, as we speak, Afghan forces are already in the lead in most of the country.

In this year's State of the Union, the President announced that the United States will withdraw 34,000 American troops from Afghanistan by next February. That means by this time next year we will have cut in half the number of U.S. forces serving in Afghanistan. These troops will be removed in a phased approach over the next year, managed by the Commander on the ground and the military chain of command.

Regarding the post-2014 US force presence, the President has not yet made a decision, but we are continuing discussions with the Afghan government and our international partners on two basic missions beyond 2014: training and equipping Afghan forces through a new NATO-led mission, and a bilateral US counter-terrorism mission against al Qaeda and its affiliates.

In terms of the political transition, Afghanistan will have its third presidential election next year and the first in which the incumbent cannot run. We fully support the Afghan people's desire for free, fair, and, inclusive elections and we support Afghan electoral authorities, the Afghan government, and Afghan democracy groups in their efforts to build the strongest electoral system possible.

A smooth transition to President Karzai's successor will mark the first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power from one president to another in modern Afghan history. I would note that, while in Washington in January, President Karzai reiterated his long-standing commitment to follow the Afghan Constitution and step down in 2014, saying "I would be a retired President, and very happily a retired President."

Now, we recognize that the security, political and technical challenges to the 2014 elections are enormous. So we, and our international partners, are focused on assisting with elections preparations that will inspire confidence in the integrity of the process while avoiding interference in Afghan politics. If successful, this transition will send perhaps the clearest message to all Afghans—including the Taliban—as to the resilience of the country's democratic institutions and the paramount importance of rule of law in the country. And we believe as well that a successful transition from President Karzai to a legitimate successor will also provide a real and meaningful boost to the national peace and reconciliation process.

As such, the U.S. government has stepped up its engagement with top Afghan officials—including President Karzai—to highlight the importance we attach to next year's elections and the political transition. With only 13 months until elections, we are focused on support for Afghan efforts to build a strong electoral framework. The priorities are:

— A strong operational plan from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) for the election;

— Parliamentary-approved legislation to create a credible electoral dispute mechanism and a consultative process for the selection of IEC officials;

— And the appointment of a respected IEC chairperson following a process of inclusive consultation.

While these could all be positive steps, there are serious challenges ahead. Much more detailed planning, both in operations and security measures, will be necessary to ensure the broadest possible participation, and acceptance of the outcome as legitimate, by the Afghan public. And we want to ensure maximum coordination with our international partners in support of these historic elections.

And then there is the economic transition. Dr. Ghani is fond of calling this the elephant in the room. Even if the security and political transitions succeed, it will be development of the economy that secures Afghanistan's future over the long term. It is obvious that, as the drawdown of international forces takes place, there will be an impact on the economy and a significant transition as the country moves away from a wartime economy.

In anticipation of this, at the Tokyo Conference in July 2012, the international community pledged $16 billion for Afghanistan's economic development through 2015 — that's $4 billion a year to help fill the fiscal gap. Some countries pledged funding well beyond 2015. The United States agreed to request civilian assistance from Congress at or near the levels of the last decade, through 2017. In recent years, that assistance has exceeded $2 billion annually. These commitments are real but one of the major tasks of diplomacy in coming years will be ensuring the follow-through.

It will be a different operating environment. Our own assistance programs are focused on building the capacity of Afghan institutions to sustain the development gains of the last decade so that the country will be much less reliant on international aid.

We have worked to ensure that projects in which we have invested in Afghanistan are sustainable beyond 2014 as we shift to a new footprint. That means changing the way we do business, focusing on Afghan solutions, and developing new oversight mechanisms to ensure proper monitoring to guard against fraud and waste. President Karzai and Dr. Ghani have consistently called for more assistance to be provided on budget through the Afghan government and in support of the national spending priorities it sets. About 40 percent (CHECK) of our assistance is already provided this way AID plans to use more third-party monitoring groups as well as technology to ensure adequate oversight.

Our Afghan partners are aware that international assistance comes with responsibility. Through the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, the Afghan government acknowledged that continued international assistance depends on strengthening good governance, grounded in human rights, the rule of law, and adherence to the Afghan constitution.

Now, we recognize that institutional capacity building takes time—in some cases years or longer—to bear fruit. So we have to temper our expectations while maintaining that longer-term vision. But one way of engaging in the short term is to encourage President Karzai to make merit-based selections to key institutions like the Supreme Court, the Human Rights Commission and the Independent Election Commission, because such appointments will significantly strengthen the country's system of democratic checks and balances.

Partnership

Besides Transition in its various aspects, another major policy basket is Partnership, both multilateral and bilateral.

In May 2012, the President flew to Kabul to sign our Strategic Partnership Agreement. He said the SPA "defines a new kind of relationship between our countries — a future in which Afghans are responsible for the security of their nation, and we build an equal

partnership between two sovereign states; a future in which war ends, and a new chapter begins."

As a follow-on to that accord, we are also currently negotiating a Bilateral Security Agreement. That agreement will not be about troop numbers. The BSA will not make security commitments or provide security guarantees. It will provide the legal authorities needed for any military presence and will include provisions on defense cooperation that respect Afghanistan's sovereignty.

The BSA will also include provisions similar to those included in status of forces agreements that the United States negotiates regionally and globally, such as on taxation, entry/exit, import/export issues, and access to host nation facilities. Those details are still being negotiated.

But as I have noted, our Strategic Partnership Agreement, and the follow-on security accord, are just one part of the wider fabric of international support for Afghanistan that has been put in place over the last two years. Many other countries have also completed bilateral agreements with Afghanistan, and the multilateral underpinning has been steadily strengthened in an important series of international conferences:

— At the Istanbul conference in November 2011, Afghanistan's neighbors and near-neighbors agreed to a regional process of confidence-building measures in support of Afghanistan's stability.

— In Bonn in December 2011, the international community committed to supporting Afghanistan's security and development after 2014.

— In Chicago at the May 2012 NATO summit, allies and partners announced an agreed vision for a strong Afghan National Security Force, adequately funded to ensure Afghanistan can meet its security needs after 2014.

— And at Tokyo in July 2012, the international community agreed to support Afghanistan economically as it undertakes the reforms necessary to provide good governance and implement its plan for economic transformation.

I sometimes think the significance of this patient, collective political and diplomatic work gets overlooked. Because it really is a new equation:

— It means the Taliban will not be able to fight their way back to power in 2014.

— And it means the international community will be there after 2014 in terms of economic support, and support for the military, and with political and diplomatic support.

Most important in that new equation, though, is that the country itself has changed over the last 11 years – including important gains in the strength and capabilities of the armed forces; in health and education; in the constitutional rights of all Afghans, including especially women and girls; and in progress toward effective governance.

Afghanistan's GDP in 2011 was $19.1 billion, almost five times greater than in 2002 representing a 9 percent per year average increase, lifting millions out of extreme

poverty. Life expectancy has increased from 42 years in 2002 to over 62. The child mortality rate has decreased from 172 to 97 deaths per 1,000 live births.

We know that the transition to Afghans' control of their own security, their own economy, and their own political future through elections is not going to be easy. But the partnership — bilateral and multilateral — is real. And it will be an foundation for protecting those gains.

Peace Process

The final policy area I would note, besides Transition and Partnership, is the Peace Process. I believe the structure of support for Afghanistan, methodically put in place over the last two years, has helped set the conditions for possible political progress.

A comprehensive political settlement remains the surest way to ensure a stable Afghanistan that can never again become a haven for international terrorists.

At their recent summit, President Obama and President Karzai noted progress in the process of peace and reconciliation and stressed the importance of accelerating these efforts, particularly by countries in the region that have a role to play in support of the Afghan peace process.

They called on the armed opposition to join a political process, and said that they would support a Taliban office in Doha for the purpose of negotiations between the Afghan High Peace Council and the authorized representatives of the Taliban. And at the Chequers summit in London in February, Pakistan formally endorsed the Doha initiative.

These are significant developments. And we are waiting to see whether the Taliban will take the steps needed for the office to open. But the moment will not lie in the opening of an office, it will lie in the first meeting that takes place between the Afghan High Peace Council and the Taliban. Because that will mean the start, for the first time, of a formal channel for talks aimed at finding a negotiated end to the violence.

It is worth noting that the significance of the High Peace Council's role is that it should not function merely as an arm of the government, but rather as a vehicle for involving all stakeholders in the process, including representatives of civil society, women's groups, political parties, and others.

There are many difficulties in this whole process, and a million ways it could go wrong. But I think we all have a collective obligation to try to make it go right.

Conclusion

So that's my review — Transition, Partnership, Peace. Much to do, many challenges.

But as President Karzai said in his speech at Georgetown here in January, "This wheel of progress will move in continuity and not stop." The President credited the United States and the international community for that progress and for the framework that we have all established to help Afghanistan keep that wheel moving forward in a positive direction.

The Afghans are proud people, and naturally keen to see the full restoration of their sovereignty and control over their own future. Through the troop surge, we were able to stabilize and develop parts of the country most under threat, and create some space for Afghan security institutions to grow and gain capacity. Through the civilian surge, I believe we helped increase the capacity for governance, education, energy and economic development — capacity that will be required to maintain those security gains and offer a different future for the people of the country.

And now, we head into a year of transition and then, hopefully, a decade of transformation that will see a final end to over three decades of conflict in Afghanistan. It's time. But everyone's help will be needed.

End of interview