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

AMBASSADOR FRANCIS RICCIARDONE

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
Initial Interview Date: August 24, 2022

INTERVIEW

Q: Good morning. It is August 24, 2022. I am Robin Matthewman and today I am interviewing Ambassador Frank Ricciardone for ADST's Afghanistan project.

Frank—may I call you Frank?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, absolutely.

Q: Great. So, to start off, can you give me a sense of your background prior to working on Afghanistan. I think you came into the Foreign Service around 1978?

RICCIARDONE: I came into the service in 1978 from Iran. I'd been a schoolteacher there since 1976. Before that, I had taught at an international school in Trieste, Italy, following my Fulbright Fellowship at the university there. I studied abroad in Florence, Italy, when I was an undergraduate at Dartmouth. The late Professor Lawrence Harvey and a senior administrator, Alex Fanelli, had been Foreign Service officers and they introduced me to the notion of the Foreign Service. I had never really thought about any form of government or public service. My family looked upon "government" jobs as "political patronage," unworthy of people who could do more meaningful and productive work.

Q: So, you started off speaking Farsi?

RICCIARDONE: Yes. I had picked up Italian and French from Dartmouth study abroad. After several years teaching in Italy, my wife and I thought about exploring other parts of the world. So we applied through the mail at other international schools. Ultimately, we each got hired in Iran. Iran proved our immersive introduction to the Muslim world. In Iran we experienced Ramadan and the warm and fascinating cultural aspects of its society. We traveled all over that country. We traveled to Afghanistan for the first time at Nowruz break in 1977 or '78 without any inkling of the fateful Russian invasion that was to follow a couple of years in the future, much less any thought of returning decades later as American diplomats.

Q: And before the fall of the shah?

RICCIARDONE: Neither we nor the State Department, for that matter, had any sense that the Shah would be dethroned and in exile less than a year after our departure from Community School in Tehran. We had traveled to Turkey from Iran in the summer of '77, which later was to figure very strongly in my Foreign Service career. We spent a month as tourists traveling by bus with very little money through a still infrastructurally underdeveloped country.

When I came into the Foreign Service directly from Tehran in June 1978, we were obliged to bid on at least twelve among the available posts for our first assignments. I didn't bid on Tehran. My wife and I had loved our previous summer tour through Turkey, so I bid on Ankara as my only high choice. The assignments officer came back to me because nobody in my class wanted to go to Tehran that summer of '78. He said, "So, Ricciardone, you speak Farsi, and you've been to Iran. Why don't you want to bid on Iran?" I said, "You just answered your own question. First: been there, done that. Second: That country just doesn't feel right to me. If the Shah goes down, that country's in trouble. But I'd love to go to Turkey. He admitted that no one in the class had bid on Ankara. So, I said, "Okay, let me solve that problem for you." This proved a serendipitous decision.

Instead, they drafted my classmate, Steve Lauterbach, to go to Tehran. He and I each went out from language training to our respective first posts in March of '79. By then, in February, the "students," or "militants," had taken over the embassy briefly before retreating. On November 4, 1979, the militants took over, and took Steve hostage, among the others, for 444 days. I was watching all this from Ankara. So, that pre-Foreign Service experience in Iran, and my first experience negotiating with assignments officers, determined the course of my career from the very outset: I started at what turned out to be the right place—from which I retired as ambassador thirty-six years later—instead of what must have been the wrongest place in U.S. Foreign Service assignment history.

I had a great and varied career. Later, in my second overseas posting in Cairo, I served under Frank Wisner, in whose footsteps as ambassador I later followed a couple of times: first to Manila, and then back to Cairo. Wisner proved my most inspiring and influential mentor. He was a close friend with Richard Holbrooke. I had got to know Holbrooke a bit from a couple of professional contacts involving my service in Turkey and with the Iraqi opposition to the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. When President Obama appointed Holbrooke to lead the Afghanistan project, at Wisner's recommendation Holbrooke invited me to serve in Kabul.

Q: Just before we go into your Afghanistan assignment, you had been in Foreign Service for about thirty years at that point. You had been ambassador twice, right?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, in Manila and Cairo.

Q: So, your tour in Egypt was right before Kabul?

RICCIARDONE: I left Cairo in April 2008 for a secondment to the U.S. Institute of Peace, which I intended as a stepping stone into a second career, while writing a book on "The Negotiating Style of The Egyptians." I went to Kabul after less than a year at USIP.

Q: And so, how did you come to be assigned as deputy ambassador to Kabul?

RICCIARDONE: Obama was elected while I was at USIP. A cornerstone of his foreign policy platform was that Iraq was the wrong war, and Afghanistan was where we should be concentrating in the War on Terror. Richard Holbrooke had served Obama as a foreign policy advisor during the election campaign. Holbrooke was heavily influenced by his own experience in Vietnam and the dangers of too much emphasis on military power and not enough on development and diplomacy. Holbrooke had drawn another lesson, he told me, pertaining to his mission regarding Afghanistan: that in order to do the diplomacy right, we needed to get someone on the ground as ambassador with a strong military background in the region; but such a military man also would needed a strong, senior Foreign Service officer with chief of mission experience to know how to run a large and complex embassy. The experienced FSO would be needed to shoulder the diplomatic part of mission leadership with the host country and third country missions and to coordinate all the different agency elements within an overseas mission and with their headquarters in Washington, along with the regional and higher military commands. It's really different from the military command experience.

According to Holbrooke, U. Alexis Johnson, one of our career giants who had served as ambassador several times previously, went to Saigon in the mid-1960s with the unprecedented title of deputy ambassador, rather than deputy chief of mission, in order to emphasize his authority and rank, while he would serve under former U.S. Army General Maxwell Taylor as the ambassador and chief of mission. This position of deputy ambassador, filled by very senior officers who had previously served as ambassadors, persisted in Saigon until we closed the embassy there in the 1970s. As far as I know, that practice had not continued there or elsewhere until Holbrooke revived it with my assignment as deputy ambassador to Kabul.

Q: So, the ambassador that they chose was General Eikenberry, right?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, then LTG Karl Eikenberry. I had known him as a fine officer while he served at the Pacific Command while I was at Manila. Eikenberry had incomparable experience through two tours as the top U.S. military commander in Afghanistan. Still, I was gratified to hear Secretary Clinton and Obama emphasizing diplomacy and development as equal elements of American interests and power, along with defense. So I wondered why they would appoint a military man to lead the Afghan mission on the ground.

Word had already leaked that President Obama was going to appoint retired Marine General Tony Zinni, whom I knew well and admired for his candor in advising the Clinton administration regarding Iraq. But for reasons that I never did learn, Obama abruptly changed his mind—if indeed he had personally decided upon Zinni, and opted instead for Karl Eikenberry.

So Wisner put me together with Holbrooke. We met in his new office on the ground floor of the State Department. Holbrooke explained that he needed the ground floor, with its greater availability of real estate, rather than the prestigious Seventh Floor, in order to build a whole new Af-Pak-India team. He intended and ultimately did build his Af-Pak

team to eclipse the size and influence of the South Asia regional bureau, which theretofore had held responsibility for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. In the end, the SA Bureau successfully resisted ceding India to Holbrooke.

Holbrooke explained his concept of the mission he wanted to build in Afghanistan. "We really need someone strong and very senior to run the embassy. You'd be great as ambassador there, except that we really need someone steeped in Afghanistan and the U.S. military engagement with the tribes and factions there. And since the U.S. military is now really running the show there, we need someone who will be able to go in with them as equal partners on the ground, keeping the policy lead with the civilian leadership in Washington." Without challenging that argument, I asked who the president had in mind, if not Zinni? Holbrooke then informed me that Karl Eikenberry, rather than Zinni, had accepted the presidential appointment. I told Holbrooke that I respected and rather liked Karl whom I had known while I was ambassador in Manila. I recalled Eikenberry as a brilliant and witty guy. He had earned a PhD in Chinese history or politics, and spoke Mandarin. Eikenberry was and is a soldier-scholar of the first order. We became close friends through our service together in Kabul and remain so today. He was then serving as a U.S. Army LTG at NATO HQ [North Atlantic Treaty Organization Headquarters] in Brussels, if I recall correctly. He would retire from military service to accept the civilian appointment as ambassador. Holbrooke agreed that I would first speak with Eikenberry before Karl and I would each let him know whether we accepted this unusual appointment of myself as Karl's deputy.

So, after first conferring with my wife—more on that shortly—I called Eikenberry the next day. Though our previous relationship had been friendly, it had been on very different professional terms: As ambassador in Manila, I had been dealing directly with his boss's boss, the four-star "PACOM" commander, and his direct boss, the 3-star deputy commander. So when we spoke, we acknowledged Holbrooke's vision for organizing the mission under the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan with the former U.S. chief of two of our largest overseas missions serving as his deputy. We both recognized that our good personal chemistry was a critically important asset. We hadn't known each other very well, but we were both candid about our concerns. Eikenberry preemptively professed his need for a seasoned career hand to serve as alter ego and partner in command of a unique civilian environment in a complex, inherently political-military mission. For my part, I recognized the need for a partner in mission leadership who, I confidently presumed, would bring instant credibility up and down the ranks of the U.S. and allied military commands, and with President Karzai, tribal leaders, and other influential Afghans. The conversation was not long, but it was deep and sincere—and neither of us subsequently found occasion to find fault with the other's commitment to the understanding that we had so easily reached.

My wife, Marie, had encouraged me to take the job if the talk with Karl went well, though we had planned to take a different trajectory together after Manila and Cairo. Marie said, "You know that you'll hate yourself if you don't do this. You *have* to do this. And besides, I'll come with you." Marie is a PhD molecular biologist who has had her own unique and distinguished career in international science diplomacy, in tandem with, or despite, my itinerant diplomatic career. While I was ambassador in the Philippines, she

had done environmental program work at USAID's [United States Agency for International Development] mission in Manila. From Cairo she telecommuted to report to her Washington-based office director at the State Department, while traveling to Libya to work with scientists formerly involved in Qaddafi's nuclear weapons program, under the Nunn-Lugar "re-direction" concept. So, we were both confident that she could make a very meaningful contribution to the mission in Kabul. I was deeply grateful [and as always, proud of her too] that she was willing to do so.

So, I told Holbrooke that I would accept the assignment, on the understanding that my wife must accompany me in a meaningful professional contribution of her own. To comply with anti-nepotism regulations and to avoid all perceptions of nepotism, she obviously could not report to me, but her professional track record of success in a variety of private positions and USG agencies and functions suggested many possible fits in Kabul. She had developed a strong reputation at USAID from her work in Manila. And she had worked for OES [Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and Science] as a AAAS [American Association for the Advancement of Science] Fellow, and for DOD's [Department of Defense] DNA Forensics Identification lab [in Rockville, MD]. When I served as DCM in Ankara in the mid-90s, she taught and published research in her field entirely outside the embassy, at Bilkent, a prestigious private Turkish university. So, she and I expected that she could serve in Kabul, whether at an international organization or private international employer, or inside the mission where there would be clearly meaningful, necessary work. If within the mission, she would have to report through an entirely separate chain of command, with a lot of distance from me. Holbrooke said, "Wisner has told me about her. We need her there as much as we need you. USAID or the military will jump at the chance to get her, unless she would prefer to work outside. Leave it to me, no problem."

Karl Eikenberry also warmly agreed to accept any suitable service for Marie in Kabul. In fact, over our re-introductory dinner in Washington a few weeks later, with Karl's wife Ching, much of the conversation was about how Ching, too, might be able to pursue her own career in Kabul while steering clear of nepotism issues. Karl also undertook to promoting spousal employment as a general policy, as did Holbrooke. Both agreed that recruiting "tandem couples" would make excellent practical sense for the U.S. mission all around: we needed all the professional American talent we could recruit to the campaign. And with housing scarce, having couples on the ground meant not only a boon to morale and mission effectiveness, but also an important fiscal economy for the USG. If I recall correctly, by the time we left Kabul in May 2010, there were over twenty tandem couples serving under chief of mission authority in Afghanistan.

Marie wound up working for the USAID mission in Kabul, at a position many ranks down in the hierarchy. But she accepted this, and again proved brilliant at working collegially with others in her down-to-earth, no-nonsense way, as a fellow laborer in the trenches rather than as "spouse of the big boss." In fact, at Kabul, as also at our other posts before and afterwards, many colleagues of several agencies appreciated her as a sympathetic, discreet, informal and uniquely effective channel to get truth to the Front Office. Kabul turned out to be another chapter in her amazing but [thanks to me] disjointed career of international science diplomacy and scientific applications in

development. She had an especially satisfying contribution to make in Afghanistan, and traveled more widely there on USAID business than I did as deputy ambassador. A few years later, she featured in the cover photo of the *Foreign Service Journal* magazine, as she was disembarking, in her flak jacket, under the dusty blasting helicopter rotor blade wash at a remote outpost.

The department, and Holbrooke, wanted me to get out to post immediately, without having to wait for the long nomination and Senate confirmation process required for a presidential appointment as ambassador. So Holbrooke emphasized the Vietnam precedent of Deputy Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson: retaining the personal title of ambassador, albeit with the deputy modification. He claimed that Secretary Clinton had approved this arrangement. He also said that we may well bring aboard other experienced ambassadors too, in order to counterbalance the top-heavy military rank in the U.S. and allied military commands in Afghanistan. We had more generals than anyone could count in Afghanistan. To ensure the tightest possible collaboration, the U.S. military commander detached his own one-star [brigadier general] as a liaison officer to the embassy country team. This struck me as odd, as both Eikenberry and I approached the U.S. commander and his immediate senior lieutenants as peers and intimate colleagues of a single U.S. team. Besides, at first, DIA, and the Pentagon insisted on posting its own Defense Intelligence Agency officer as a standard defense attache at the embassy, notwithstanding the large DIA cohort under the U.S. commander of ISAF, then General Dave McKiernan. His successor went on to hire innumerable U.S. [and other] civilian experts as members of his direct staff, outside the ambassador's purview.

Q: So, you were going with your rank, but since you were going as deputy ambassador, you didn't have to go for confirmation?

RICCIARDONE: Correct. There would be no presidential appointment, and, therefore no need for Senate confirmation. Frankly, I believe they didn't want to have yet another presidentially-appointed, Senate-confirmed position there, with good reason, in my judgment. In any case, it was much easier and quicker to get me out the door.

So, I left at the end of March directly for Kabul. A Codel [congressional delegation] was going in, and Holbrooke wanted me to meet Karzai either in advance or with the Codel. Bill Woods, a well-regarded career officer, had been the ambassador. However, Holbrooke thought it necessary to replace him immediately. Holbrooke never made clear why he saw this as so urgent, but I suspected he simply wanted to underline the change from the previous administration, and make clear he was installing "his team" under his tight direction.

Q: And you went before Ambassador Eikenberry?

RICCIARDONE: Yes. Karl still had to retire from the army and then to go through nomination and Senate confirmation process. The White House and Senate acted with what now would be considered lightning speed, and Karl arrived in Kabul by mid-May.

In the interim, both before and after my arrival in Kabul, Eikenberry, Holbrooke, and I spoke often about how we would organize and staff up the mission, and pursue the

transitions from U.S. [and allied] military operations in essentially diplomatic and development functions. This was precisely what Holbrooke saw as the primary thrust of the mission that he sought to build in the field under his own direction from Washington. Holbrooke aimed to build up a civilian powerhouse at both the program [field] and policy [headquarters] levels, because the nature of both the strategic objectives and their inherent, complex task set was fundamentally political, diplomatic, and economic-developmental. The strictly military objectives had been more or less accomplished with the routing of the Taliban and al Qaeda. There was mopping up to do and some stabilization requiring military force or presence, and a major training program for the Afghan military. But the rest was going to be all about development assistance, including building up civilian law enforcement and the full rule of law infrastructure, preparing for national elections, and diplomacy and managing our relations with allies. The latter was critically important because we realized that we needed sustained, broad, and substantial multinational support in all those fields: development, diplomacy, and military or counter-terrorism, which was becoming re-defined as counter-insurgency, or COIN in U.S. military argot. Along the way, Holbrooke would be handling communications with Pakistan, which was supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan through various Taliban and related factions, as well as seeking effective channels to communicate with the Taliban one way or another.

Holbrooke also was keen to work with Iran, and for that matter, China and India, and all ISAF partners—all the stakeholders in a stable Afghanistan. Holbrooke was aware of my pre-Foreign Service experience in Iran, and often discussed with me how we might find discreet openings to exploit that, for example, regarding counter-narcotics or in multilateral settings. He made me to understand that he was actively pursuing possibilities, without mentioning specifics. Our relations with Iran had always been fraught since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Despite a few highly tentative and quiet contacts with Iran on counternarcotics over the previous years, and some acknowledged common interests in confronting al Qaeda, as far as I am aware, the Iranians showed no interest in further communications with the U.S. on any subject during my time in Afghanistan. The first highly discreet and tentative U.S.-Iranian contacts that culminated in negotiations and agreement on the Joint Nuclear Plan of Action would not take place until several years later. I never had any direct contacts with Iranian diplomats when I was in Kabul, or for that matter at any point during my career.

Q: Khalilzad describes in his book that when he was working on the very early outlines of what the transition would look like in 2001–2002, he worked with the Iranians. They were sort of the unsung heroes from his point of view.

RICCIARDONE: Holbrooke, Eikenberry, and I were in frequent contact with Khalilzad on all matters pertaining to Afghanistan, including Iran. We all presumed that the Iranians must have legitimate national security and economic interests which, by American logic, should have required Iran to share our interests in promoting stability in their immediate region. They had arrested some al Qaeda leaders and at times had shown some cooperation against narcotics traffickers. But some combination of their historical experience with the US, their revolutionary and religious outlook, and their unsettled domestic politics and factions within their power structure—particularly the

Revolutionary Guards—left the Iranian leadership then, as now, resolutely hostile to any direct or meaningful cooperation with us on Afghanistan, and as far as I know, other countries in the ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] alliance.

Q: So, you mentioned that they expected there would be more ambassadors in the front office to deal with the generals. That was to have people back in charge of politics or in charge of assistance at the same level as the military that had been handling some of those issues as well. Is that right?

RICCIARDONE: Yes. Holbrooke explained that they wanted me, and in time others who had previously served as chiefs of mission, not only for our area knowledge, but also for the rank and experience of leading big embassies, with many agencies, different funding streams, and, at least in my case, in having worked closely with the military on major military assistance programs. I had done that in Manila and Egypt, and would later do it in Turkey as well.

Holbrooke also wanted more former ambassadors in the Kabul mission leadership to help drive the new administration's global approach there. Secretary Hillary Clinton spoke often about the three Ds: defense, diplomacy and development. She and President Obama emphasized the development and diplomatic aspects of our foreign policy and our strategic engagement with the world while not neglecting defense. They recognized what our own military leaders themselves have long recognized: that the U.S. has put far more emphasis on the military aspects of defense and not enough on diplomacy and development. The U.S. military have been the Foreign Service's biggest champions for greater resources. That was especially clear both in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The U.S. military commanders wanted more resources for the Foreign Service precisely so that they could decrease the military engagement in those places. I had also been involved with the U.S. and allied military to civilian transition in Iraq. Secretary Powell had pulled me from Manila to establish the embassy out from underneath the Coalition Provisional Authority of Jerry Bremer. Powell had assigned me to that role, as Clinton and Holbrooke subsequently assigned me, with Eikenberry, to build a multi-agency civilian mission in Afghanistan.

So, that was the theory of the case: we must greatly build up the diplomatic and development strength of our mission across Afghanistan, and that meant going from a combined embassy-USAID mission, as I recollect, on the order of maybe three hundred Americans at the end of the Bush administration to something over a thousand by the time I left a little over a year later. By then, Holbrooke's vision, which I had begun to challenge as both impractical and unsustainable, was to get up to about three thousand American civilian direct-hire employees under chief of mission authority, not counting outside contractors. These would include not only State Department personnel but also people from USAID, Treasury, Agriculture, Commerce, Justice, FBI, DEA [U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency], and of course CIA [Central Intelligence Agency].

I thought this was far more ambitious than the President's intent as I understood it from the well-articulated foreign policy statement on Afghanistan promulgated in March 2009, and in numerous public statements in various forms by President Obama and his cabinet-level officers and spokespeople. Holbrooke seemed to me appropriately careful

not to exceed those limits nor risk appearing to set new policy in his own public statements on Afghanistan. In my view, our correct emphasis on civilian-led development and diplomacy—as well as larger policy and strategy—did not require us to vastly scale up the civilian resources that we were devoting to the effort. On the contrary, I believed that by growing too large and unwieldy we would fall into the trap that our military were already in: meaning we were doing far too much *for* the Afghans instead of *with* them; we were displacing Afghan officials and their authority instead of growing them. We clearly lacked "strategic patience," and many of us knew it. It would obviously take much more time—years, even decades—not to mention much skill and luck, as well as great foreign and Afghan financial and human resources—to accomplish the kind of historic social and political transformation of Afghanistan to which very many Afghans, we, and our allies aspired. To approach the task with a smaller footprint would have taken even more time. Our military colleagues always were especially conscious of time limits, and not only at the strategic level. Many of the military officers and enlisted personnel were sent to Afghanistan on tours as short as nine months. So naturally, each unit commander from company grade up to the top wanted to accomplish specific, identifiable "results" on very short timescales. They reported on specific objectives using "stoplight charts," aiming to turn objectives at the start of their tours from red to yellow to green by the end of their rotations. This resulted in some self-deluding reporting. Afghanistan doesn't work according to foreign-defined objectives or foreign timelines. A tiresomely, commonly repeated saw, probably first heard in the British Empire some generations ago, was "You foreigners have the watches; we have the time."

Q: Well, also, Afghanistan really didn't have as sophisticated a government structure as even Iraq did, right? You went to Iraq, you had an underlying bureaucracy, but in Afghanistan they had been in civil war for thirty years at this point—or twenty years plus the eight years the U.S. had been there when you came. We often talk in development about the ability to absorb development, to absorb assistance, and this was an incredibly large effort, right?

RICCIARDONE: It was. People on the ground used well-worn terms like "drinking through a firehose." Afghanistan was not simply a primitive society and state, but a country and people that had been devastated by three decades of war, foreign occupation, internal strife, massive population displacements and general lack of the rule of law. The country just did not have the absorptive capacity, and they did not have the governance traditions and experience with planned or organic national economic development and systems for allocation of resources that were familiar to well-intentioned foreign forces and experts. Their versions of governance were tribal, even internecine arrangements, with frequent clashes and truces, and arrangements that were necessarily temporary and highly local, personality dependent, and situationally dependent. So they were very fluid. In this context, religious conservatism offered a kind of underlying stability, which worked especially in those areas most isolated from central government [and foreign] control—that is, much of Afghanistan.

Very often Afghanistan's traditional practices of governance didn't work, or didn't work in a positive way, when they came into contact with the modern world. Existing, traditional systems of politics and governance could sustain tribal ties, and intricate local

and ultimately international criminal enterprises like the opium trade. But they were not good at sustaining complex social services in growing demand like education, public health, infrastructure development, or ultimately, broad public confidence in community safety and security beyond very local confines. So, we had to build up a lot of the infrastructure of governance in ways that would be compatible with Afghan traditions and desires and needs—as the Afghans saw them, and might be prepared to build and sustain them. We had to work on a sustained, knowledgeable basis with personalities often with severely limited or negative education and life experience, with their particular histories, tribal relationships, outlooks on race, religion and gender, all really important things. The military were certainly aware of these factors. Col. Mike Flynn, then a senior advisor to ISAF Commander Stan McChrystal who later went on to head the Defense Intelligence Agency and to advise President Trump, focused on what he called "the human terrain." He and the ISAF command hired civilian experts from the U.S. to come to Kabul and ISAF's outposts across the country to study and lecture about the human terrain. Some had past experience in Afghanistan, even going back to Peace Corps days, and could even speak a little Pashto or Dari. Holbrooke's senior staff in Washington also had some authentic academic experts, who routinely urged sobriety in their analyses about program approaches to policy objectives. I observed little interaction between Holbrooke's experts and the ISAF command.

Our rapid ramping up of mission staff imposed predictable problems. We had tapped out our civilian cadres for Iraq and Afghanistan, not only in the State Department, but also among our other civilian agencies, trying to help establish a central bank, and national systems for health care, education, justice, food, and power production and distribution, roads, and all aspects of social services and hard infrastructure. We had already taken the people who were willing and available to serve in these difficult places from around the U.S. government and were resorting to exotic new fast-track civilian hiring authorities developed by DOD for Iraq. Many people had served well and admirably over several years in Iraq and were willing to do it again in Afghanistan, but we had long since reached the limits of available talent. The military had a comparatively unlimited number of people that they could simply order and put into places and train them up with unlimited amounts of money, and in limited amounts of time. Still, ultimately time is just not fungible. You can only get so much training into anybody in a few weeks before shipping them out and assigning them, as foreigners, to run major functions for a village or a province. The objective is supposed to be supporting the headman somehow in running it.

The name of the game then was staffing up, organizing, bringing an interagency process together in the field that was supposed to operate under U.S. civilian concepts of government. That is to say, a country team, not a military concept of a civilian interagency collaboration or a civilian appendage to the commander, but a country team of which the military would be just one very important component. That was the theory that Holbrooke tried hard to accomplish. But inevitably, the far superior resources, including cash, available to the military at every level gave them the upper hand not only on the ground, but also, it appeared to us in the field, in Washington.

The U.S. military had something called the Commander's Contingency Fund, or CCF, or another acronym that became notorious for loose control of taxpayer resources. Military leaders like Dave Petraeus talked about cash being the best weapon. They even called it "walking around money for our officers in the field." Their processes for approving disbursements of funds were necessarily "streamlined." Meaning that they dispensed with cumbersome USG civilian accounting for cash, and devolved authority down to the local U.S. commanders to give out amounts that shocked civilian officers of any agency, particularly the State Department. Amounts ranging from hundreds to thousands of American dollars, in cash. It was a recipe for corrupting the country. The military officers up to the top command levels saw the risks, but believed that the ends justifies the means.

Q: Ooh!

RICCIARDONE: Naturally, both the Americans and Afghans involved became cynical about each other, so it corrupted both sides. The Americans perceived that you can't buy them, you can only rent them, and the rent keeps increasing. Our officers knew full well that while the local Afghans were taking the money from us, they'd also be taking money from the Taliban too. Or if not money, they'd be caving to Taliban threats and the Taliban would be happy for them to take the money and then share some of the proceeds with them. We helped feed a thriving, corrupt ecosystem. Our military did what was expedient in the field. But the United States of America as a whole has and preaches a theory of development and diplomacy, both of which take time and a lot of resilience and patience, and which explicitly recognized that we cannot just infuse a lot of cash into local dynamics and somehow shorten the timeline and stabilize another country and put governance in.

We kept pumping up the military footprint, although we understood that this ran against the President's own instincts. Holbrooke saw this happening and went along with it as an ingrained element of U.S. government funding mechanisms.

Q: Well, prior to doing this meeting and a couple of these interviews I thought that there was a decision to do the military surge and they wanted to balance it with the civilian development surge. But what you're describing, and I think what I read in Tony Wayne's oral history is that the decision to do the civilian surge was first and—

RICCIARDONE: It was chronologically first and deliberate. The new administration put together a stellar team, under principal author Bruce Riedel, to collect all the previous studies on Afghanistan. The central conclusion of the resulting "study of studies" in March 2009 was the need for a civilian surge. This would enable us to wind down the military component. Holbrooke was among the architects of that major white paper.

Our military leaders strongly endorsed the civilian surge, but also insisted that we urgently needed many more soldiers for special operations and for training Afghan soldiers and police. Famously, then-Vice President Biden was cool to the idea. Obama also was reluctant but convinced over time. McChrystal had great credibility from his accomplishments in Iraq.

Holbrooke and Secretary Clinton worked hard to sustain their excellent relations with the military. They ultimately supported the U.S. military request for more men. We sought to convince our allies to send more people too. Already they were growing cool to that idea, but we succeeded. One example: Holbrooke wanted the Egyptians to increase their military medical personnel and civilian engagement with the Afghan judicial system. As I had recently served as ambassador to Egypt, he invited me to join him on a trip to Cairo in July 2009.

That was the enduring context: a constant struggle to build and to manage the civilian surge, make it successful, take care of people. They're not commodities, supplies, or weapons. I saw both in Afghanistan and in Iraq that for many, there was a Foreign Legion aspect to service in those hard and remote places. Many showed all the right motivations, or classic Foreign Service spirit of adventure and curiosity and commitment to country. But there were others who were fleeing personal problems or career problems. Assignments officers desperately trying to fill holes, would advise some: if you want a prayer of rescuing your career you'd better go to Iraq or Afghanistan. We in the field had to fight with HR [human resources] to stop them from sending us people who shouldn't be in our dangerous environments.

Q: This is actually worse for them than going someplace safer.

RICCIARDONE: They will not thrive and prosper individually, and they will not have the support here that they have at a normal embassy. We were at war. Every day there were bombs and we heard fire closer or farther away whether in Kabul or at our civilian and military outposts all around the country.

Q: So, the people in the group that rose from three hundred to fifteen hundred, those were in the development field. Were they spread out around the country in PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams], were they in consulates or were they mostly in Kabul?

RICCIARDONE: We aimed deliberately to build our strength in the field outside of Kabul. If I recall correctly, maybe two-thirds went out to the Provincial Reconstruction Teams and larger regional outposts, including consulates that we were developing for Herat and Mazar-i Sharif.

Q: And they were usually development teams, small teams that worked with a military unit for security?

RICCIARDONE: Correct. In most cases our teams in the field relied on the military—not always U.S. military—for their security, and at the same time they advised the military components of the team on engagement with the people at the local level.

And as we had begun doing in Iraq, we had two layers of field teams. Since the U.S. military and ISAF had four regions of Afghanistan, north, south, east, and west, and then they had the provinces within those regions, so too we had to mirror the military organization. That's not how Afghans had ever administered their country, but that's how the U.S. military organized there. So, there would be a U.S. or other ISAF major general at each region, and we had to put at least a two-star equivalent civilian, if not ultimately another ambassador, at each of those places. The concept was that we would have the

most senior civilian talent we could recruit to serve, under chief of mission authority, as co-leader of the regional and provincial teams in the field, with a U.S. or allied military counterpart. The military components of such posts were supposed to take care of the logistics, feeding and sheltering and security, as well as any security cooperation with local Afghan counterparts. The U.S. civilian leaders in the field would focus on the development projects and general political and social engagement with the local Afghan civilian population, while also attending to civilian program administration—their career development of subordinates, their performance evaluation, the assignments process, all and interagency coordination.

One of our outstanding provincial chiefs was Scott Kilner, who has written an extensive personal diary about his experience in Afghanistan, accompanied by his beautiful photography. He worked hand-in-glove with the U.S. military commander at Bagram air base, covering all of Eastern Afghanistan, really setting an exemplary standard. Scott also brilliantly ran our Kabul-based coordination office for all PRTs country-wide. Coordinating all of that at the Kabul level was a huge job. I would highly recommend that you capture his oral history.

Q: And then you had recruited Tony Wayne.

RICCIARDONE: Yes. Holbrooke had issues with USAID and its mission directors all along. Whether in Washington or the field, USAID is very sensitive to their independence as an agency. They don't like to be considered part of the State Department and reporting through the secretary of state to the president. In the field, they strive to show the independence of the mission director while showing due deference to the ambassador as chief of mission—meaning the U.S. mission or embassy, not simply the USAID mission. I've always had great relationships with USAID mission directors. I've only worked with great ones.

In the face of this interagency tradition, Holbrooke demanded nonetheless that the USAID mission director in Kabul report to Eikenberry [and ultimately, to Holbrooke] not only through me as "The" deputy ambassador but also through yet another layer of a second deputy ambassador, charged to coordinate all USG development assistance programs. Holbrooke did not want simply to add those broader interagency coordination duties to those of the USAID mission director. That naturally chafed more than a little bit. Hence we had to recruit not only a former ambassador with the requisite economic development subject matter expertise, but also one with exceptional interpersonal and interagency communications skills. Tony Wayne was not only technically excellent and experienced—he had served not only as ambassador but also as assistant secretary for Economic and Business Affairs—but as importantly, he's just such a wonderful man. It took someone with his warm and polished personal skills to manage this structural awkwardness, and he did so very effectively. Tony became the widely respected—and liked—czar of every form of development assistance. He's given you his history, so he would remember the challenges and satisfactions even more vividly than I do. What I remember best is just being delighted that Tony would take the job, so I didn't have to be the guy between Holbrooke and USAID.

Q: This part of his interview made me chuckle. I asked, "How did you come to go to Kabul? It was a big change from Argentina." And he said, "Oh, well, I was on the seventh floor and Frank came out of the bathroom. He said, 'Hi, Tony.'" And Tony says he said, "Hi, Frank. Whatcha doing?" (both laugh) And you made a pitch for the need to have somebody who could coordinate because there was so much assistance going on without coordination.

And I think what was interesting from his oral history was that he had created coordinating structures all throughout his career.

RICCIARDONE: He was a master at human organizations. He knew how to organize people effectively to produce teams and results across agencies, and how to set up and run effective interagency meetings and agendas. It may sound boring to people outside or even sinister, like "the swamp," but in fact, having good bureaucracies is what makes America work as well as it does, or did.

Q: So, who was the fourth ambassador you had? What did that person do?

RICCIARDONE: The fourth ambassador was Joe Mussomeli. His role was to serve almost the classic DCM function in a normal embassy, effectively as chief operating officer on behalf of the chief of mission.

He's not only a talented manager, but also, as a leader, he is widely known as a special character. He has an outrageous sense of humor, great judgment, wonderful people skills. Just a decent human being who cares about and takes good care of people. He can be firm or decisive in dealing with someone who either needs counseling and support in order to succeed, or to depart from post if there is no better alternative for both the individual and the mission.

Q: Was there a lot of construction in order to handle this surge in—

RICCIARDONE: Yes, huge. Building up these four regional centers, new housing and office space in Kabul, dealing with OBO [Overseas Buildings Operations] back in Washington. So he handled buildings, communications, technical support of all kinds, human resources, and finance—all in the context of supreme awareness of the need for security balanced with the freedom of movement and other necessities for our people to accomplish the mission. Human resource management skill is vitally important in the leadership of any organization, in any embassy, but especially so in a wartime area where the stress is unbelievable. In Joe, we had the brilliant senior manager and leader we needed, with the heft to work directly with a director general or assistant secretary or DAS [deputy assistant secretary] in any of the management bureaus at the headquarters level, who could cajole, demand, push back, or just speak as a respected peer in defining a human or other resource problem and our needs in order to solve it, and fast.

Q: So, was there a decision made to not build apartment buildings and things but to put people into temporary housing during your time as you had all these people come in, or were people able to go into—?

RICCIARDONE: We had to do both at once: for immediate needs while building more permanent housing, we wound up bringing in temporary housing adapted from freight shipping containers, or "conexes," called "hootches." We stacked them three stories high. These were field expedient solutions that we had been using in Iraq. We brought in more of those to Kabul while we were planning to build a new embassy and permanent housing. That was well underway by the time I was leaving and one of Mussomeli's biggest projects.

We also had a State Department inspection during our assignment there, and the permanent presence of SIGAR [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction] and several other agency inspectors on the ground either permanently or episodically, often overlapping. Joe bore much of the responsibility of responding to their requirements.

Even years later, SIGAR was performing its own post-mortem review through oral interviews. SIGAR focused particularly on development assistance but asserted an even broader writ claimed directly from Congress.

Q: So, what was going on politically in Afghanistan that year?

RICCIARDONE: Well, let me address the peculiar way in which the USG interacted politically with the host government of Afghanistan. We adopted not merely a bifurcated approach to the government of Afghanistan with two co-equal senior American officers, one military and one civilian, each appointed by and speaking for the President of the United States. In fact, there were not two but rather three independent channels of USG communication directly with Karzai. Normally, foreign governments understand that U.S. ambassadors speak for all U.S. agencies and speak for the president, and even convey the majority and diverse views of the Congress, because they are appointed with the advice and consent of the Senate.

The reality in Kabul was that the commander of all U.S. and allied military forces [ISAF] had vast U.S. and other international resources at his unquestioned command. This naturally gave him his own independent channel directly into Karzai, which he—and Karzai—routinely used. The military commander could see Karzai at will. The third USG channel to Karzai was the CIA station chief, who had his own special access both through a prior close personal history with Karzai, and through his own very special resources.

Though the three USG senior officers generally kept each other well informed as approximate peers in authority [though with vastly different resources each independently could deploy in dealing with Karzai and his Government], the coordination naturally was far from perfect. Karzai took full advantage of this. He also sought to exploit any disconnects he might perceive between these U.S. authorities on the ground and senior executive and legislative branch visitors from Washington. He likewise sought to use to advantage any daylight he could find between the disparate American entities and the UN mission under Kai Eide. We all did our best to stay in close communication, but Karzai ultimately was the focal point who could best compare, contrast, and exploit what he was hearing from and saying to each of us separately.

There are few countries around the world in which the senior U.S. military officer has his own channel to the chief of state or government. Iraq had set an exceptional example, which both the U.S. military commanders and U.S. ambassadors there worked deliberately to shift, over time, to the more standard model. And there are also only a few other countries where the CIA Station chief really has that kind of direct access to the head of state and government. Everyone in Afghanistan and every other country in the world knew that Karzai had worked extremely closely, and practically openly with the CIA.

Karzai would give different messages to each of the three of us. I met with him often, usually in the company of either Ambassador Eikenberry or senior visitors from Washington. In Ambassador Eikenberry's absences from the capital, whether at field stations in Afghanistan or occasionally in Washington, I sometimes met with Karzai alone. More often, I called on Karzai's very talented and experienced chief-of-staff, Umer Daudzai. He played a key role in clarifying communications between Karzai and the USG, across our several channels, and in what we were hearing from others—Afghans, the UN mission chief, others—about what Karzai was telling them. He was truly a pivotal figure and stayed on to serve President Ashraf Ghani in several roles, including as a cabinet minister, right up until after Ghani's secret and sudden departure in August 2021. He was my own principal point of contact in the presidency and the cabinet, and I remain in touch with him to this day. He is writing a book, including much reference to his dealings with Karzai, Ghani, the Americans, and others. He served his country with heroic dedication and skill. He's now exiled with his family in the UAE [United Arab Emirates].

Q: Did we consider Karzai at that point a friendly power, or was he—?

RICCIARDONE: We reciprocated his wary but ostensibly friendly dealings with us. We saw our relations based on what to us were obviously congruent national interests, but he made no attempt to disguise his suspicion that the U.S. had hidden motives and goals—including, specifically, to remove him from office. He was the most bizarre national leader I've ever known. He was a masterful manipulator of people, rather than an inspirational leader. Given the cultural context, he was obliged to manipulate tribes. He would appear to conclude a deal with someone, until the next guy would come in, and he would make another deal with him without regard to the previous deal. He did this also through channels to elements of the Taliban, who had their own tribal and personal factions. Some were closer to the leadership of the top of the Taliban, and some were farther out, like the Haqqanis. Elements of the Haqqanis reportedly were in touch with Karzai through intermediaries who were ex-Taliban, yet still currently in communication with the Taliban leadership. It was all part of the treacherous miasma of Afghanistan that challenged even Afghans themselves to manage or even understand. It was hopeless for Americans to do so. Umar Daudzai was good at understanding it, and Karzai was really masterful in engaging in it.

Karzai was especially skillful at telling the foreigners what they wanted to hear, for example, to members of Congress or other Americans demanding he do more to fight corruption, or to support women and human rights, or free elections, or whatever causes of the moment. He would sometimes say things to placate us, but other times say things

to provoke and annoy us. Famously, as several journalists and authors have reported, the chemistry between him and Holbrooke was dreadful. They did not hide their contempt for each other. A major American and UN objective in 2009 was to support free and fair presidential elections in the course of helping Afghanistan build its own form of a democracy. We acted in close support of a big UN-led effort to establish and supervise those free and fair elections—

Q: So, it was parliamentary elections, right?

RICCIARDONE: There were also elections for the provincial council seats, but the big focus in 2009 was on the presidential elections that kept getting postponed.

We supported a genuine multi-candidate approach, and that fed Karzai's suspicions. Zal Khalilzad visited several times, and Karzai suspected that Zal was himself interested in being elected, and that he enjoyed USG backing. Holbrooke only fed Karzai's suspicions. He, and we at the embassy and the UN mission, would often meet with prominent rival politicians , even before they formally became alternative candidates. These included Dr. Ashraf Ghani, who years later was elected to succeed Karzai, and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. There were several others. The complicated story of the Afghan elections of 2009 is well-reported and documented. Likewise, there's a fair amount published about Holbrooke's climactic clash with Karzai, as I recall about August 2009, as the elections had taken place under stressful circumstances and had yielded claimed results in which few outside Karzai's camp had any confidence. The UN and ISAF allies favored a run-off, which Karzai opposed and the second candidate, Dr. Abdullah, ultimately also rejected as farcical. So, Karzai continued to suspect foreign, and especially American purposes, even after Secretary Clinton and Senator Kerry, among other high international dignitaries, came to witness his inauguration that November.

Karzai even more deeply distrusted and even hated the Pakistanis, and the Pakistanis evidently reciprocated. His closest ties were with the Indians, as he had taken refuge in that country for some years during the Soviet and/or Taliban eras. The Indians and the Pakistanis' long-standing conflict plays out also in Afghanistan, not only in Kashmir. Karzai always suspected us of favoring the Pakistanis and making too many concessions to them. Sometimes he stated this to us explicitly. There were times when he was very upset with us. With me, the few times I saw him alone, we certainly had positive and respectful interactions. But there were some shouting matches between Holbrooke and Karzai. We had to do a lot of recovery work with Karzai after Holbrooke's visits.

Q: Right.

The fighting against insurgents did tick up, along with the increased military operations, what they call the Afghanistan surge. Did the raids or the bombings or the accidental killings of civilians that the U.S. military or U.S. contractors caused, did that have a big impact in your time there on our relationship with the Afghan government or with just the support of the Afghans for us to be there?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, absolutely it did. The U.S. military recognized that this was a very serious problem. From the chairman of the joint chiefs—who visited several times—on

down, every senior American military leader recognized explicitly that for every step forward, civilian casualties would take us ten steps backward. So, it wasn't for lack of awareness or intent. The commanders made emphatically clear their intent to avoid civilian casualties. And yet, they kept happening, as a result of the way we and the way the Taliban wage war and the nature of the human terrain, the term I first heard used there by then Major General Mike Flynn, the ISAF J-2, the head of intelligence.

We made "reparation" payments through a large office that our military set up and funded especially for this purpose. That was this American idea of torts, that you can pay someone for having wronged them. There's an analogous tradition in Afghanistan. We were paying out sums of money that were quite large by Afghan standards, but this wasn't solving the problem at all. It certainly undermined Karzai. We were trying to build up a government of Afghanistan, but whether it was a governor of a province or Karzai himself or the ministers, they all were disrespected by the people. They were seen as put in place by the Americans. Even if they could bring some money or projects to their town or get some jobs for local people, they couldn't prevent the Americans, or maybe they were even in cahoots with the Americans, in killing innocent people.

Q: This is mostly in the countryside, right?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, mostly. There were really terrible incidents where we bombed children in a field or a wedding party. In one series of special operations night raids on civilian homes, we killed innocent relatives of members of parliament from a party that supported Karzai. These were prestigious tribal leaders that Karzai depended on for support. Parliament was extremely upset. Karzai called the leaders of parliament together. Ambassador Eikenberry was away, so he hauled me in as the chargé, along with then Special Operations Commander Major General or Lieutenant General Joe Votel, to listen directly to these Members of Parliament and tribal leaders. [Votel went on to rise in his career and has since spoken publicly about the mistakes we made in Afghanistan.]

They showed us photos of their nephews, nieces, sons, daughters, and wives. They made clear what these killings and violations of their homes meant to their constituencies as well as their families. We apologized and expressed condolences, but we could not find sufficient words to express what we felt, much less to ease their pain and anger. They all said, That's all very well, but you'll never bring them back. You keep apologizing, but this never stops. What are you going to do? Karzai had to show that at the very least, he could call us on the carpet in front of them—to apologize and offer compensation. But that was all he could do, and it did not suffice either for him or for his constituents.

The unending civilian casualties seriously undermined not only the United States and ISAF, but also Karzai. It made him look like not just a puppet, but worse, a puppet who couldn't deliver the most basic thing that Afghans wanted, which was security: security from the Taliban, security from the foreign forces. Just peace and security, that's the first thing those poor people wanted.

Q: Were we looking for al Qaeda or were we just trying to eliminate people who we thought were Taliban that had attacked coalition forces?

RICCIARDONE: We were going after al Qaeda and Taliban and all such insurgents against the Afghan government. I saw the wing camera footage that the USAF bomber pilots and the crew saw when they released bombs on what they thought were insurgents. There were heat images of people running in a field. The pilots had reason to believe from reports on the ground that these people were insurgents. But in fact, they were villagers who apparently had heard the airplanes and ran together from their fields along a path into a building for shelter, and then our bombs struck that building. It was horrible to watch, and to hear the voiceovers of the aircrew and pilots saying, Oh, yeah, they're the ones, all right. The pilots and aircrew felt terrible after they realized their mistakes, but they were working with the intelligence and the technology they had to bomb targets often at night.

Q: They called them night raids?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, both for aerial bombing and ground attacks. There were night raids in which U.S. and Afghan special forces broke into and violated the homes of Afghans. This was even worse than the aerial bombings and another big issue.The American colonists revolted against the British for that very offense. In the Declaration of Independence, in the list of King George's offenses, one of the most outrageous was that he had sent soldiers into our homes. That's exactly what we did in Afghanistan, and evidently often the wrong places. Our intelligence reports might have been no more than one tribal informer identifying his enemies who had cheated him, or were fighting over land or other claims, and seeking to unleash U.S. military force on their internal enemies or rivals. Although we were aware of that risk, too often we took such reports as accurate intelligence and went in and wound up killing people that were innocent.

Q: So, was the embassy, Ambassador Eikenberry, and you and others, were the Afghans expecting you to fix it?

RICCIARDONE: I don't know what results they truly expected, but they certainly demanded that the Americans stop this.

They perceived that "the Americans" had full and accurate intelligence, the most advanced technical means, and we were providing them so much training in how to develop and use intelligence. So they questioned, Why can't you stop this? Don't you see what it's doing? Afghans inside and outside the government would press such questions on us—not only to the ubiquitous U.S. soldiers but to all American civilians they met, both informally and through established official intelligence, military, law enforcement, and diplomatic channels.

Q: I think I saw that there was an American hostage that was released during the time that you were there or just after maybe. I think it was a journalist or something. Do you remember working on American hostages of the Taliban during your time?

RICCIARDONE: We were involved in various cases. The one I remember working on most personally and directly was to release Italian hostages. I received an award for this from the Italian state, though my role was mainly to assist the Italian ambassador in communicating with the Afghan intelligence and security authorities.

Q: How did you do that?

RICCIARDONE: This experience revealed the degree of privileged access that we enjoyed to the highest reaches of each Afghan government agency, versus that of other countries' missions. We had routine, immediate access to the heads of Afghan intelligence and law enforcement agencies, and the Italians evidently did not. Perhaps because Italian diplomats understood just from my name that I'm an Italian-American, I always enjoyed friendly relations with the Italian diplomats wherever I've served. The Italian ambassador in Kabul turned to me for advice and help when the Italian civilian aid worker hostage case became a big political problem in Italy. I urged the Afghan intelligence chief to pay direct personal attention to this as a priority—among the innumerable daily security cases he faced—and urged him to give the Italian ambassador an immediate appointment. That's really all I did, but the Italians deeply appreciated the demonstration of American solidarity with them in this sensitive case.

Q: And they were able to rescue them?

RICCIARDONE: They successfully negotiated for their release.

For American hostages, I had less direct personal involvement. We had a strong FBI contingent and we had a nuanced, then rather new policy for dealing with hostage situations. I had been involved in the Philippines in developing that new policy, set forth in a presidential directive regarding paying ransom. It was and remains U.S. policy not to pay ransom. But we put an asterisk next to that when we were pursuing the captors of an American missionary couple taken hostage in the Southern Philippines. It has since come out publicly, I believe, that we could tolerate private parties paying ransom, if that was necessary to enable us to deploy certain technical means to help lead to the rescue of a hostage. That policy and procedure ultimately enabled Filipino and U.S. special forces to effect the rescue of one of the Americans in the remote jungles of the Philippines, though one of them was killed in the rescue attempt.

Q: You mentioned the intelligence services. So, in your time there, what was the status of the military—Afghan military and the Afghan intelligence services? Had they started to become professional forces?

RICCIARDONE: The military, intelligence, law enforcement, and even prosecution and judiciary had developed greatly. Building and developing each of those elements of national security and the rule of law were central to our civilian and military programming in Afghanistan, and a big thrust within the ISAF alliance and the broader international civilian collaboration under the UN umbrella.

Developing the Afghan national military and police forces were particular points of emphasis of U.S. policy, programming and resourcing, whether through direct financing, training, or equipping them. We had some excellent, capable, deeply committed Afghan counterparts. But they were working in a very different cultural and historical context, with zero resources of their own beyond their determination and commitment. Some were educated and had substantial professional and life experience outside of the country, particularly in the West, but also throughout the region in Pakistan. There are some very

sophisticated Afghans. However, it was not a broadly educated society. Illiteracy was a vast problem, particularly among women and in the provincial areas where the Taliban held sway. We all were humbled by the enormity of the challenges and appropriately sober about our expectations. We understood that it would take a huge amount of money and time to realize sustainable accomplishments in Afghan capabilities in national defense, internal security and the rule of law.

All that said, there were substantial, critically important, and encouraging advances. Security was the first requirement for a fertile and supportive environment for the seeds of governance, eventually democracy, and the rule of law. We hoped to see concepts of local and national governance take hold in a country that had been brutalized, that had been under either foreign occupation or bad governance by the Taliban, since the Russian invasion some thirty years previously.

For all the frustrations, most of us felt that we were making meaningful strides. We worked in the whole arc of the rule of law, not only policing, but also the many elements that the rule of law entails. USIP [U.S. Institute of Peace] refers to "the arc of governance" or the rule of law: It starts with good law, which requires a good process of legislation. Then good law must bewell applied. That requires a citizenry who not only know what crime or wrongdoing is under the law, but who also are confident that they can report crime or injustice safely, and with expectation of effective official response. Then a society needs skilled investigators to investigate reports or indicators of possible violations. The rule of law requires prosecutors who can prosecute and judges who can listen and decide competently. Finally, a country needs an effective penal system on the other end of the arc of justice to deal with violators. Americans take all that for granted. These things are not natural in other countries where they haven't existed, especially in societies that have been brutalized and fractured. At best, some Afghans in some localities may have had some relatively benevolent, well-understood, and widely accepted tribal or traditional way of dealing with governance and the rule of tradition, if not of written law, even religious, or putative religious law. But even these had diminished under the national trauma of decades of war, foreign occupation, Taliban misrule, criminality, and for many, life in exile with scant civic experience beyond their camps.

Building up a national police force was just one element of our approach. We also worked with the judiciary and the various ministries and local jurisdictions to develop a legal apparatus at the national level and to try to translate that down to the local level. We tried to broaden that by having popular education at the same time. One of the most interesting experiments in that endeavor was our engagement with the Mohseni brothers, Saad and Jahid. Idealistic, patriotic, committed, sophisticated and internationally networked and respected, they established the independent Tolo TV network and associated communications platforms. They produced some wildly popular TV and radio programs, often knockoffs of what had worked in other countries. For example they created an *Afghan Star* show inspired by *American Idol*, featuring young women as well as men amateurs performing various entertaining and artistic feats, especially musical. We worked with them to develop the kinds of crime-solving TV serials that we have in the West, in which the police serve a heroic and valorous social function, where the

police are the good guys, protecting the citizens, upholding justice and the law—directly contrary to the ordinary Afghan citizens' daily experience with the police and all authorities. Even if those shows sometimes include a policeman or woman who goes wrong, the overall vision is of a system that's working, in a gritty way upholding the interests of the citizenry at a local level. So, we helped the Mohsenis get in contact with the producers of shows like *NYPD Blue* and get whatever talent or intellectual property rights they needed to develop their own version—like "Eagle Four." These programs deliberately featured smart, confident women detectives, among others, going up against criminals, drug dealers, and protecting the Afghan people. They were not shaking down the citizens in league with the criminals, or extorting bribes. Here were attractive, articulate, younger Afghans serving their people with skill and dedication. Such US-supported, Afghan-led programs were exemplary, I thought, of the most effective and promising work we could do. They were part of a methodical way to support visionary Afghans in building their future. These TV shows were popular, and they were getting a lot of attention. We did not need to force such initiatives on reluctant or bewildered beneficiaries.

Q: I think that's a genius move.

RICCIARDONE: Such projects were so gratifying because Afghans led and produced them. Afghans were choosing their future direction, enthusiastically putting their own lives, money, and full commitment into them—and succeeding and building momentum. Admittedly, the Mohseni brothers were and are visionaries of global sophistication, but they found no shortage of ambitious, open-minded young Afghans to grow their media operations. They developed their own messages and the most authentically Afghan, effective style to deliver them. We played strictly supporting roles, not directing, not ordering this or that course of action or blocking their own ways of pursuing their objectives—which we shared. Our most successful development assistance and governance programs were strongly led by capable and dedicated Afghans, many of them truly inspirational. There were many such people in the world of the various law enforcement entities as well. They were developing specialized agencies like the anti-narcotics police, really heroic people taking on very dangerous, well-funded criminal elements. I met tough, savvy women judges that were in the special narcotics courts sending hardened, violent narcotics traders to prison against all tradition. Imagine women judges in a conservative, traditional Muslim society sending men to prison. They knew how revolutionary this was, and they were proud of their roles, though they faced continuing death threats. I don't mean to paint a rosy picture, but there was undeniable, visible momentum in many areas, so much that was encouraging Afghans and all of us in the international community. These Afghans were invested for life, while we foreign supporters were committed only for brief periods.

Likewise, on the military and law enforcement sides, there were veteran soldiers and officials of long and exceptionally difficult experiences who were dedicating their lives to building the country. Some had been active either in government or in opposition to the government, going back to the Russian occupation of the 1980s. The minister of the interior, Hanif Atmar, was one of the most competent, committed to the country and to the rule of law. He appeared successful in his leadership. He had lost a leg fighting the

mujahideen while serving in the Russian-backed regime as a security officer. Despite his past "communist" associations, he was respected for his bravery and his lifelong commitment to the struggle against the Taliban, and for his knowledge and erudition—he had studied in the UK, and could have made a tranquil life for himself and his family in the West. There were so many other heroic, battle-hardened people who had been committed to their country for a long time. Some came from tribal backgrounds, but many of them were working to overcome the negative aspects of Afghanistan's history of tribalism and ethnocentrism.

We all recognized that we would never build a military in our image. We set up a special operations element using the highly trained and technical advances of the Americans' special operations. Some of that began to take root. Certainly, close friendships were formed between American soldiers and other foreign soldiers and their Afghan counterparts. But we all recognized that sustained high quantities of foreign support were going to be necessary for the military to stay committed and survive. We knew, and the Afghans certainly sensed, that that was not a sustainable proposition. Many of us understood that sooner or later the Americans and the rest of the foreign community would tire of that level of commitment. We saw the countervailing problems of corruption, tribalism, and political pettiness at the leadership level that the Afghans ultimately were not able to overcome, regardless of our level of oversight, pushing, and supporting.

As the embassy, we were more involved in the civilian development programs than in the military training side, though we worked closely with those programs as well. We collaborated very closely with ISAF and the American military commanders at ISAF's Kabul headquarters and at each level in the field. Eikenberry and I would often see the successive ministers of defense, and attend groundbreakings and ribbon cuttings for graduation and other ceremonies. We particularly celebrated the graduations of women officers, whether in the military or the police. Those were all firsts, and the participating Afghans' pride in these accomplishments was immense.

Many have pointed out one of the most debilitating inherent flaws in our approach of short-term assignments of American officers, whether civilians or military personnel. The same was true of most other allied countries in Afghanistan, with rare exceptions such as the Turks. American civilians at the embassy and field posts were assigned usually a year at most, and sometimes stayed on for a successive tour of a year. American military officers were assigned for as little as six- or nine-months rotations. Some would come back for second or third tours, or had been serving in Iraq, so they had vast experience. But those units and individuals did not stay long or continuously on-site, at great and widely recognized cost in effectiveness. I believe this exacerbated the design flaw in our campaign of being too ambitious, too impatient, and putting in far more resources than Afghanistan could absorb in an impossibly short time.

President Obama's administration was making clear that Afghanistan was not to be another "forever war." This would be the "right war," unlike Iraq. But there was an inherent contradiction. Although those of us on the ground recognized that this was going to take a lot of time, especially on the military side we set that fact aside and acted as if it was going to be possible to throw a lot of money, goodwill, and American and Afghan

lives, into building a modern military, tailored to Afghan realities, and make it work. All of us knew that neither President Obama nor President Bush had said we were going to be doing this in Afghanistan forever. But the abrupt, chaotic, and total withdrawal of U.S. and allied support in August 2021 was really a great tragedy of American foreign policy, I think.

Q: Thanks. Let's talk about the military, because at the end of the war in 2021, that really was the question with which Americans weren't able to really grapple. We supposedly had this military that had been trained for years, had been equipped for years. Did they have the will to fight and why were they being overrun by the Taliban during that last year? So, did we get some of the way, or did we just keep running into the same obstacles over those years after you left?

RICCIARDONE: I can't give direct testimony to what happened afterwards. But I think the simple answer is: both. We ran up against intractable problems and yet, we did see great progress. Many Afghan soldiers and police, and in the civilian services, demonstrated amazing will and commitment, not only to fight , but also to put their own and their families' lives on the line to serve as judges or in other public service functions Many of these people had good lives outside and yet, chose to come back to Afghanistan. The anti-narcotics campaign, involving several ministries, the police, prosecutors and the judiciary. The ministers of health, many of them were very distinguished doctors who had been making good livings outside the country. The Afghan diplomats in their Foreign Service had been doing well and yet, they chose to come and live back there. Ashraf Ghani had been working at the World Bank and came back and lived in a very modest home and style, without his wife, showing inspiring commitment as he was running for office and gathering people around him. So many people founding and running their own, or international NGOs [non-governmental organizations] in one or another form of social service, conflict resolution, education, health, infrastructure. There certainly was a lot of progress in all those areas.

However, one of the fatal flaws was bad national political leadership. In many ways, Karzai was brilliant, in other ways he was mentally unfit. He was emotionally unbalanced. Without prejudice against psychiatric treatment, there were plausible rumors that Karzai had received unspecified psychiatric treatment during his several years in exile in India. Karzai's years of exile in India also fed hostile allegations that he was an Indian-influenced agent in the struggle between India and Pakistan that was being played out in Afghanistan. In any case, it is hard to lead people effectively and to model leadership down through the ranks of subordinate officials when one explicitly and continuously communicates suspicion of nearly everyone, including those who most obviously demonstrate friendship and support for the state and government. Karzai was highly suspicious, understandably enough in the Afghan context, of everyone around him in his own palace and among the tribes. From the perspective of Americans and other foreigners who were so obviously sacrificing so much to support him and his government, it was far less reasonable for him to suspect, and worse, so blatantly to profess his suspicion of his foreign allies and supporters. This poisoned his own and also many of his subordinates' relationships with the American leadership, including of ISAF, and the UN-led multinational effort to help rebuild Afghanistan. He never quite trusted

any of us. He never really built a strong following beyond his own Pashtun ethno-linguistic group and his clan within that fractious group. To his great cost as the leader of such a polyethnic nation, he instinctively played the ethnocentrism card, even when he pretended to reach out beyond the Pashtuns. Finally, I could observe no evidence that Karzai was enriching himself through public office, but he clearly at least tolerated official corruption as a tool of his own influence. This cost him the confidence and support of both foreign governments and of his own people.

Ghani succeeded Karzai years later. I had met Ghani a few times, including in his modest Kabul home, even before he was officially a candidate. I had immense respect for him, as I think everyone did at that time.

Q: At the beginning, he was minister of finance. Was he minister of finance for a long time?

RICCIARDONE: Not when I was there. Karzai had appointed him minister of finance several years earlier. He was a world class, international academician and technocrat, with distinguished past service at [the World Bank. He wrote books about finance and development. He carried a scholarly and intellectual demeanor. Even his antagonists might concede that he was brilliantly intelligent, though some saw him as arrogant. His ultimate failure was in leadership skills, not intelligence or, as far as I could see in my own time, personal ethics or honesty.

Q: So, it wasn't really possible to create political parties and that kind of political democracy in Afghanistan because of tribal politics and sharia law? And you think there weren't really parties, they were more factions, right?

RICCIARDONE: There were no Afghan political parties in the Western sense of that word. Aspiring national politicians generally failed to reach out effectively beyond their traditional ethnic, clan, and tribal sources of support and organization. There is much published history of attempts by the Afghan monarchy in the early twentieth century and the Russians in the 1980s to build a modern national state in that socially and geographically fragmented country. But the national concept never took sufficiently deep root to overcome deeper ethno-linguistic, tribal, and clan identifications, particularly in the largely illiterate rural majority of the country. From top to bottom, the social and political structure was male-dominated, patriarchal, and at best, benevolently paternalistic. All accepted that the national figure head would be a Pashtun, and of course, male. In return for their support or at least submission, the smaller minority ethnic groups expected the Pashtun leader to show them paternal benevolence and respect, within a traditional religious sense, and to ensure they received their fair share of national benefits, including security and stability—that is, protection from others. Karzai played to that traditional social and political understanding. Ghani was genuinely nationally minded and seemed free of ethno-tribal prejudices, consistent with his advanced Western education and formation. Yet he affected traditional Afghan clothing. He was not naïve. But he was never able to sustain deep and broad popular support, even later, after winning election to the presidency.

Q: Ghani never had the tribal connections that Karzai did?

RICCIARDONE: Ghani wasn't as good at using what tribal connections he did have as a birthright. Karzai was brilliant at playing off one tribe against another. Ghani was not. He was too intellectual and rather aloof from the traditional leaders. He appeared unwilling or just unskilled at playing the kind of game that Karzai had played with relative success.

Q: Was Abdullah Abdullah an important political figure during your time there?

RICCIARDONE: Yes. He was a critically important one, not least as the leading opponent of Karzai in the 2009 presidential elections. Holbrooke, Eikenberry, and I, along with the UNAMA [United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan] Chief Kai Eide, the ISAF Commanders, and all the resident internationals and senior foreign visitors in Afghanistan saw him frequently. He too was inescapably hostage to the ethno-tribalism of national politics. He had a significant advantage in appealing across the ethnic spectrum: he claimed parentage both among the Pashtuns, through his father, and with the Tajiks [and the Northern Alliance] through his mother. He, therefore, seemed a potentially effective figure to help pull the country together. His prior anti-Taliban activity with the Northern Alliance also added to his national political credentials. He ostensibly "lost" to Karzai in the 2009 elections. Following contested elections several years later, he worked out a leadership condominium with Ghani that endured a few years but never proved effective.

Q: What was the emphasis of our democracy work? Was it focused on elections and on doing work on developing the parliament?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, we focused intensively on setting up the full administrative and political infrastructure for national elections, working closely with the UNAMA office under the affable and skillful Norwegian statesman Kai Eide and his American deputy, Peter Galbraith. Karl Eikenberry and I were personally close with Kai and admired him. Holbrooke consulted with him on each of his visits. UNAMA led the international effort to bring in experts to train Afghans to set up the balloting systems, polling stations, and to secure the physical premises and the ballot processing and tallying. UNAMA, ISAF, and associated diplomatic missions [worked with the Afghan military and police on all the logistical and security aspects of campaigning, voting, and tallying the ballots from each polling station to the national elections office. These processes had not existed and had to be created from scratch. This was a huge and costly Afghan and international effort. The results, however, were open to wide suspicion of fraud and manipulation. Many polling places saw scant turnout under continuing security threats even back in the relative stability of 2009. Karzai led the campaign of disparagement when the results didn't come out in a way that favored him sufficiently. As referenced earlier, this was what precipitated the breakdown in Karzai's relationship with Holbrooke.

Making a long and painful story short, we papered over it all and made it work, and we had the elaborately-staged, somewhat awkward inauguration in the fall of 2009. Then-Senator John Kerry came, and Secretary Clinton came. Her UK and French counterparts, David Milliband and Bernard Kouchner, also came, as did the UAE foreign minister and other international coalition luminaries. I remember that occasion vividly. The ceremony with international VIPs seemed to lend a veneer of legitimacy to a process that was modern in form, and which the Afghans appeared to accept, if not fully credit.

Before and after the 2009 election and inauguration, Karzai tried to blend that Westernized political overlay with the Afghan tradition of loya jirga, which is a pan-tribal council held from time to time on no predictable schedule. Karzai was good at staging those for the benefit of his traditional Afghan constituencies. He went along with and even seemed to enjoy, the 2009 inauguration, not only to impress his traditional constituencies with the international pomp, but also to gratify the predominantly Western coalition of countries that were supporting his government in attempting to build a sustainable modern state.

You asked about how the wheels ultimately fell off from our Afghanistan project. I believe that the failure of leadership, the weaknesses in Karzai's and later Ghani's leadership, the unrealistic foreign ambition and shifting definitions of American and allied purpose, and finally and most critically, the starkly clear statements of the Americans' intent to leave fully, finally, and by a short and hard deadline, made failure inevitable. The Afghan state held together and Afghans accepted it as long as they saw all these good things would continue to flow from the foreigners: the relative security and stability, the massive development assistance, the medical care, the education, the power plants, the sewage plants, other infrastructure like roads and dams, helping with governance and legal structure to encourage economic investment, building up successful private companies and scaling them, seeding new industries also for export like prospecting for rare earth minerals and hydrocarbons, quarrying and finishing high-quality building stone for export, helping with irrigation projects and new high-nutritional crops like soy and soy processing. And above all, supporting police and military security forces with training, equipment, and the confidence that depended on the foreigners' continuing demonstration of commitment through their physical presence. As long as the foreigners supported the government of Afghanistan, its leadership was able to intermediate or broker the flow of these good things and able to hold itself and the country together.

During my own time in Kabul, Obama was equivocal in the American commitment. Afghans saw that we were there in a big way, and continued despite American deaths, to pour in money and people. But we always expected that at some point, after accomplishing the objective of building up the Afghans' own capacities to a sustainable level, we would pull back to a much smaller civilian and military presence, along lines of our historical experience in other countries, though there were no exact parallels.

I have been candid in acknowledging the errors in our policy and execution at that time. Probably no amount of resources, wisdom, or skill would have succeeded in accomplishing our over-reaching ambitions. But I believe our course need not have been doomed to the debacle of 2021. Let me refrain from commenting further on our involvement in Afghanistan following the period of my own direct experience there. Naturally, I have followed events from outside with great interest and dismay. There is no shortage of published commentary by people who were directly involved and therefore have greater insight.

Q: And Korea is different, but we still have troops in Korea, right?

RICCIARDONE: Yes. We knew that Korea or Europe would not be models for Afghanistan, but still, some precedent like we were then developing in Iraq seemed plausible. Even though we were drawing down in Iraq, there was a more planned execution that was driven and pushed by the Iraqis who, after all, had had a modern tradition of statehood and a strong national security apparatus. Iraq was a brutal dictatorship, but it had a constitutionally national state that suppressed, for a long period, ethnocentrism and sectarianism. Saddam exploited ethnocentrism and sectarianism only later. The Iraqis had clung to a tradition under the monarchy and then even the Ba'ath dictatorship well into the '80s of having a multiethnic parliament and government or later, dictatorial command council. The Ba'athists were oppressively secular, and methodically put down religiously based opposition as a matter of national security. Afghanistan had no such modern history of a national security or secular state, for better or worse, except for the Russians' failed attempt to build a client state on such a model.

Q: They didn't have that base to build on. I would think that we did make a lot of advances on education and health. Can you describe what the U.S. government was trying to do and how you felt we did?

RICCIARDONE: We had data showing meaningful success in increasing access to potable water, sanitation, vaccination for polio eradication, school building and student attendance from elementary to university. Measurable accomplishments like those demonstrated truly dramatic progress. Numbers of students starting with the primary level, with girls in particular, jumped yearly. Statistics can be manipulated or culled selectively to sustain self-deception. I saw this in Iraq. But I think we had learned something from Iraq, and we were much more rigorous in gathering the data and extracting its meaning for ourselves and the public. Still, there was a natural bureaucratic and political tendency to put a gloss on current assessments, particularly on the military side. I have huge admiration for our people in uniform and what they really did accomplish and their commitment. But under the pressure of nine-month assignments and the need to reduce data on a highly complicated situation to simplified red-yellow-green stoplight charts, all nuance was deliberately lost. You start off with red, you go to yellow, and up to green, and you want to get as far as you can towards green by the time you leave. So, you tend to look for the good news and accentuate the positive and rationalize away the negatives. Yes, we've just had another attack, yes, we still haven't gotten rid of the suicide attacks, but those are just part of the baseline instability of the background that we've inherited. They were using the "ink blot theory" of counterinsurgency, where our side would aim to spread the inkblot of government control over the maps vs. the insurgency spreading its ink blots.

Q: Am I right that on education, outside of Kabul, there wasn't that much of a tradition of public schools. They had madrasas, which were religious schools not academic, right?

RICCIARDONE: Correct. Public, secular education became wildly popular, not just in terms of the numbers of schools that were founded and welcomed everywhere, but also in the number of students enrolled—including girls. We were meeting with religious sheikhs, or elders, who had viewed this with suspicion. But those we met all across the country had come around to favoring education, because their people so clearly wanted it. Even many very traditional families in the provinces wanted their girls to be educated.

There was a social value in that. Their daughters became more desirable as spouses. This was catching on not because of foreign pressure or ideology or politics or government information campaigns, but because of the powerful intrinsic appeal of basic education and literacy to ordinary Afghans. The Taliban did oppose that as did a few religious reactionaries—not very loudly. I myself met with a group of religious teachers, leaders of these madrasas, with whom I was able to converse in Arabic. Those at least professed that they favored the opening of schools in their villages. Perhaps they may have been telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. But either they perceived some benefit, or the people they lived among saw a benefit, so when they had a chance to speak directly with the foreigners, they wanted more. Perhaps those same people were telling the Taliban what they wanted to hear: please come in and save us from these foreigners who are corrupting our youth. This would have been a practical survival tactic: One of these two sides is going to prevail. At the moment, it's the foreigners, but the foreigners themselves are saying they're not here forever, so let's make sure we have links on the other side, and let's play both sides against the middle as insurance policies. I suspect that that's what was going on.

Q: Right. In your time, schools were being built and there were some inroads into the illiteracy, into cutting illiteracy.

RICCIARDONE: Cutting illiteracy, yes, but the enthusiasm went far beyond elementary levels and basic literacy for adults. Enrollment was explosive at all levels. The private American University was a bold, brave little experiment. I went up there a couple of times. I saw what was going on. I saw females enrolled, families that had chosen to stay in Afghanistan, but had interests in the Gulf and could easily move, and ultimately did move back out. But they chose to enroll their kids, especially girls, at the American University. I also went to the national public university. That was vastly under-resourced. But I saw professors there trying to make a go of it in different fields, especially those related to national development. So, at all levels I went to physical places where I saw Afghans teaching and studying together across the genders and mixing ethnicities together at some of those national-level entities. It was all very encouraging. We were seeing the positive advancement that we wanted and needed to see. It was very gratifying, and it seemed very real.

To get to the larger questions that you're after in this interview: yes, I think what happened has been catastrophic. Yet, I think so many seeds were planted, even if they've been cast to the winds. Many of those most educated and dedicated Afghan builders and reformers have left Afghanistan. But there were so many courageous people, some women judges, men, people in all walks of life who were so committed. I'm sure that at least a few have stayed behind and have gone to ground, maybe because they couldn't leave. Others have left but still have a longing to do something for Afghanistan, even as they struggle to start new lives for themselves and their families. The story of Afghanistan is not over.

It has not ended with the Taliban. This is another dark chapter in a succession of mostly dark chapters. But I choose to believe that what so many of those Afghans did, many giving their lives, many more surviving and giving many years of their lives and their wealth and their families, and with such vast foreign support, will yet yield positive fruit

under the right conditions in future. At least some of the seeds they and we planted will over-winter or survive a brutal drought. But it will be difficult for the Taliban to eradicate all the germs of a different vision of what Afghanistan can be in a different future. Remember, the Taliban themselves have enemies, as they are keenly aware. They too have to contend with tribalism. They too have to contend with dire poverty, the corrupting national criminal enterprise of narcotics, which is directly contrary to everything in their religious basis for their political rule. They too have to deal with corruption of all sorts, which antagonizes the people. They too have to deal with the Iranians and the Pakistanis and other foreign entities playing games of one sort or another, not to mention the Indians, Chinese, and Russians. So, quite beyond the international sanctions and their diplomatic isolation, they are not at all in a stable, strong position, though they may well endure for many years, as they had done between the fall of the Soviet-backed regime and their routing after 9/11/2001.

So, it will be interesting to see how this unfolds. It's tragic, it's painful. So much suffering, so much loss. But I think that we should not believe that everything we have done as foreigners, everything that visionary, committed Afghans have done has been a total waste. Yes, there have been dramatic losses, terrible losses. Yet I think there's much there to work with, whether some or many of the Taliban ever come around, or whether they are overthrown or fall from within in some way. It will likely take many years. I don't expect any dramatic turns for the better in that country soon, but the story is not over. And we should not underestimate the impact of these Afghans, people like Ghani at his best, even Karzai, and Abdullah Abdullah, Hanif Atmar, Umer Daudzai, Dr. Amin Fatimie, Fawzia Koofi, and so very many others whose names are less known abroad, certainly including enlightened tribal leaders. Many of them are either still in the country, or eager to go back, and to see their sons or daughters go back to heal and rebuild. It will be fascinating to watch.

Q: Yes it will. Okay, Frank, so a very important part of what we, the U.S. government, tried to work on during the whole twenty years was on helping give opportunities to women, girls, and also just generally the development of civil society. And I know this meant a lot of courage on behalf of the Afghans that participated. So, I would be interested in your perspectives on what you saw during your time there.

RICCIARDONE: I think what kept so many of us committed, motivated, and engaged was our work with individual Afghans, men and women, young and old, all ethnicities, of both the main religious sects, the Sunnis and Shiites. I hope that people will be writing an Afghan version of the book I remember as a young person, John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*. There are so many Afghan profiles in courage, who chose to return from better and more comfortable lives abroad, or could have profited internally and had more peaceful lives. Yet, they chose to commit to a larger vision of public and community service, whether in education or in law, healthcare, security, economics, defense and law enforcement, or even political office. The Afghan women we met stand out because they came from farther behind and showed even greater courage and independence of mind and spirit.

There was a woman governor—one of the Hazara, a smaller minority ethnic group in the remote mountain region of Bamiyan, who deservedly got quite a lot of attention, and a

very competent administrator. Famously, women were better off among the Hazara than in other ethnic groups. Hazara women were not as relegated to second-class status and more education, though there was not a lot of education up there. They worked on developing tourism for that spectacularly beautiful area. But beyond this, she was known for her sense of governance and social service, and of course, promoting education. She was inspiring. Another woman judge, I think her name was Miriam, from Herat in the opposite, Western side of the country, faced relentless harassment and death threats to herself and her children. Her opponents threw bombs into her garden. She evacuated her children to Germany and could easily have found refuge abroad herself. But she stayed to serve as the national provincial-level judge. We nominated her and she successfully won a Woman of Courage award, conferred by Secretary Clinton.

Successive ministers of health were so impressive. Minister Fatemie, a doctor who went on afterwards to serve as ambassador to Japan, was utterly committed to national service. He and his wife, a writer, lived in very modest homes. These are not people who lived flashy lifestyles in grand palaces or gated communities. I know because we visited them in their homes. They showed heroic commitment, as well as great expertise and compassion in public health issues. They too routinely and stoically faced death threats. The Afghans serving in such positions accepted their mortality and the fact that they could be blown up any day on the way to work, or at work or home, with great equanimity. Certainly many held a religiously based faith that they were doing what they were called upon to do on Earth, that they were doing good things for their people. They were not pocketing money for themselves and living a glamorous or a desirable lifestyle in any way, other than the quiet admiration that accrues to people who give their all to public service.

The members of parliament whom I met, and particularly the women like Fawzia Koofi, demonstrated that same sense of service. Many of those women especially faced death threats and actually were bombed or shot at. Yet they stayed with it as long as they possibly could until the Taliban came in. These are heroic people, hard not to admire once you hear their stories and even more so when you meet them and see the sincerity of their effort. Absolutely no sign of personal gain or any external reward other than the personal gratification of public service. They lived every day with the knowledge that they or their families could suffer loss of life or limb for that service. Some of them did lose their lives, but some still live in Afghanistan. I know that many of those now in exile—some for the second or third time in their lives—remain committed and hope that they or their children will return home one day to start again.

Q: Did you work on counterterrorism during your time there in terms of looking for Taliban or looking for al Qaeda?

RICCIARDONE: Yes, constantly. Of course, our intelligence services worked to try to build Afghan intelligence services, law enforcement, and military special operations services. It was a coordinated U.S. interagency and international effort. The FBI and Drug Enforcement Agency had a strong presence and collaborated closely with Afghan counterparts, because the narcotics trade fueled a lot of the terrorist capability. We were constantly engaged with the different Afghan services, up to the level of President Karzai and his chief-of-staff, Umer Daudzai.

The CIA played an important role, focusing on the narrower counter-terrorism operations rather than on developing the Afghans' wider governance capacities. I rarely got involved in particular operations, except for a few which required real-time communication with Karzai, Daudzai, or a minister [like Interior Minister Atmar]. Normally, operational communications were best accomplished at the field or lower national levels, while officers at those levels kept the upper levels of the embassy informed, particularly on actions likely to reach ministerial or international media attention. Often it was after the fact when something would either work or not work, but we knew about the broader lines of effort even of clandestine intelligence operations on our side.

Q: And was poppy cultivation mostly controlled by the Taliban, or was it all kinds of criminal elements that were vested in this?

RICCIARDONE: It was controlled by the traditional mostly tribal and regional players, in the nature of criminal enterprises in areas of the world there is weak law enforcement or central governance. The Taliban was much better at that kind of playing field than either outside powers or a national government still under development could ever be, because they could use violently coercive methods quite effectively. They could assassinate, torture, or threaten with great impact, since they weren't restrained by the rule of law or any sort of human rights considerations that the foreigner donors would attempt to require of the formal government. Moreover, the Taliban were able to move cash around outside of traceable national and international financial systems. So, the Taliban used that combination of carrot and stick effectively to exploit the opium farmers at the bottom of the totem pole. Poppies were by far their most profitable crop. We tried to induce them to substitute other crops, and we worked with the government through diverse and strenuous efforts to eradicate poppies: We tried aerial spraying with herbicides and aerial seeding of cultivars suitable only for medicinal purposes, requiring different harvesting techniques that would stanch the production of the poppy gum.

Q: Right, the raw materials.

RICCIARDONE: Yes. The farmers found they could store the gum buried in plastic bags for three years. The government would try to get informants and modern technical means to search for poppy fields, buried gum, processing laboratories. We had limited success in intercepting the opiate gum and suppressing the crops. It was ultimately a losing battle, even though we made some inroads and were starting to build a pretty good anti-narcotics specialty within official law enforcement, justice, public communications, and education capabilities. It would be interesting to see how the Taliban are managing it now that they have power.

Q: And then, did you work with the embassy in Pakistan to try to work on the sanctuary issue?

RICCIARDONE: Yes. Holbrooke himself led the constant effort with Pakistan. We communicated directly and continuously with our colleagues at the embassy in Islamabad. Ambassador Anne Patterson visited one time while I was in Kabul. Counter-narcotics, as well as security and authority in Afghanistan were high on the U.S.

agenda with Pakistan. Holbrooke put a great emphasis on trying to build international collaboration against narcotics.

Q: Well, thank you. This has been really a very, very useful conversation. Is there anything else that you'd like to add on your reflections and experience over the twenty years?

RICCIARDONE: I regret that as I reflect on my experiences in Afghanistan, as in Iraq and some other chapters of my career, too often Barbara Tuchman's *March of Folly* comes to mind, for the tragic harm to our own national interests, not to mention to others, that too often resulted from our own actions—despite what we all believed were unassailable good intentions. So often, our own ideological blinders, hubris, and ignorance just got in the way.

For that reason, I truly admire and commend you and ADST for doing this important work. Our military attempts to record the lived experience of our key officers and to extract the lessons we must learn for the benefit of future policymakers and technocrats—and the larger American and even world public. We must seek out and deeply absorb the lessons of the results of our own policies and actions—and avoid absorbing the *wrong* ones, which sometimes enter our folklore. What we do in, with, and to other countries matters profoundly to our future security and prosperity and to our standing and influence among the community of nations.

End of interview