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

HERBIE SMITH

Interviewed by: William Hammink
Initial Interview Date: January 2023

INTERVIEW

Q: My name is Bill Hammink, and I'm representing ADST, and I'm here with Herbie Smith, the former U.S. mission director in Afghanistan. This is part of the oral histories of U.S. diplomacy in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, looking at that period, including the evacuation in August-September 2021.

It's a real pleasure, Herbie, to see you again and to have this interview. Let me start by asking if you could please tell us when you joined USAID [United States Agency for International Development]. And what were some of the countries you worked at, were pre-Afghanistan, and then when did you serve in Afghanistan? I understand you were there for two different tours. Thank you for joining us today.

SMITH: Thank you, Bill. It's good to see you again. I started with AID when I was a small child, after Peace Corps, in 1978. I actually retired in February '19 after serving about forty-three years, if you add all the Peace Corps experience.

I served for a significant amount of time, thirteen years in Washington with the Bureau of Food for Peace. It eventually became the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance. I was a senior officer with Food for Peace as a GS and later transferred into the Foreign Service. I started my Foreign Service career in Bangladesh as a food aid officer. From there, I served in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Haiti. In 2007 I volunteered to serve in Iraq as one of the Provincial Reconstruction Team [PRT] directors in Fallujah. I served for a year in Fallujah, Iraq, embedded with the marines.

After that year in Iraq, I went to Afghanistan. My experience working in the Fallujah PRT was great preparation for Kabul. I served in Afghanistan from August 2008 until November 2010, during which time I was the director of the PRT office. I was in charge of all the USAID folks that were embedded in the PRTs throughout Afghanistan.

After Afghanistan, I went to Haiti, where I was acting mission director. From there, I went to Yemen, where I was mission director for about three years until the fall of that government and the evacuation of the embassy. I came back to Afghanistan as the Afghanistan mission director, replacing you there in September '15, and served until the end of December '18. I then retired in February of '19. Looking back on my years in

these war-torn countries, I feel perhaps my presence somehow is responsible for the devastation of Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

Q: Destroyed or built it up?

SMITH: Tried to build. When you look at it in perspective, the Iraq experience prepared me to work in the PRT office in Afghanistan. That was the Obama surge. Richard Holbrooke was the special envoy. General Karl Eikenberry had taken over as ambassador, and it was a complete whole of U.S. government ramp-up, all-hands-on-deck effort. By August 2010, we had about a hundred thousand troops in Afghanistan. I was there at the peak of U.S. government involvement; it started in 2001 and was still going on in 2021.

Q: When you were there, how many USAID officers did you oversee who were out in the PRTs?

SMITH: I can't remember the numbers exactly, but it was a hundred or so. We had civilians representing USAID, the Department of Agriculture, and some of the other U.S. government entities as well. We were establishing a footprint that the whole of government was paramount to this endeavor. We followed the stabilization model, the clear, hold, build perspective that Petraeus brought from Iraq. I'm not sure if we were actually importing the concept since the PRT concept began in Ghazni in Afghanistan. Ultimately, we pushed the whole government concept of the PRT as an expansion of government out into the rural areas.

Iraq was a bit of a different animal from Afghanistan, obviously, in terms of its infrastructure. The Iraqi cities were bigger and more modern, and there was less ungoverned space. There was more ungoverned space in Afghanistan, largely because of the geography. Much of Afghanistan is like the Wild West.

Q: While you were there and then later, with hindsight, what was your thinking on the PRTs? Do you think it was a good approach? Did it serve USAID interest and the U.S. government more broadly?

SMITH: Yes. I thought we were doing a pretty good job. I think AID has to take some credit for what it was able to do, given the conditions on the ground. We had some arcane policies and programming in terms of being able to apply our resources rapidly. The quick action stabilization efforts from OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] were fitted to do that better than the core development programs. But I think we adapted as best we could.

We were always accused of being slow and risk-averse. But, ultimately, at the end of the day, we pushed a lot of money through the system. I think, for the most part, when we talk about the delivery of services for health, education, and social services, I think we did an excellent job.

When I look back, it's a little bit depressing. The capacities we tried to build, the systems we tried to establish, and the fact that they're back to where they were or they are in worse shape is a little depressing. Looking back at the evacuation in August '21, it was a dark day for us.

Q: You mentioned during that time you were also working closely with the military, the insurgency, the COIN, clear, hold, build. What was USAID's role in that? You personally in Kabul, did you work with the military on a regular basis?

SMITH: Very much so. Our folks were all embedded with the military at the PRTs. In some cases, we were responsible for getting them resources that they could use to be responsive to stabilization efforts, the clear, hold, build efforts that the local commanders were trying to impart there. We had to be nimble. I think our guys did a great job partnering with the military.

At that point in time, we had aviation assets. USAID had an aviation contract with seven aircraft to support our PRTs. We supported the PRTs throughout the entire country, were able to get supplies out to them, and ferry personnel back and forth. Our folks could bring local government officials into Kabul to talk to the ministries, which we could facilitate, as well as other support. It was quite an experience. I thought, at that point, we were doing a pretty good job working with the military, and they were working with and understanding us.

I thought that we had a very good relationship with the military. I think USAID works very well with them, even though our missions are different. I think we need to think about our broader objectives again, though, thinking in terms of future strategies we should keep in our own lane. The military perhaps should just stick to winning the war or counter terrorism or counter insurgency and not mix with development. That's probably something we have to think about for the next time. Hopefully, there is no next time, but there is a good chance there will be.

Q: You talked about the whole government. How would you describe the whole government approach especially led by the embassy, that was used when you were there, around the PRTs and working as one government?

SMITH: There's always internal bickering and fighting, and the State Department believes it is in charge, which is fine, but they're not really in charge. The military is in charge. AID is the little dog at the trough, but it brings the resources that make a difference. You dealt with it. I dealt with it. You live with it. Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke, God rest his soul, was stomping around and demanding this and that, and that's the way it is. It's bureaucracy. Sometimes I think we fought to have a seat at the table. Maybe we didn't need a seat at the table. We get sucked down too many rabbit holes because of that.

Q: When you were there this time, what were some of the policy issues that you dealt with?

SMITH: When I was there this last time, we were trying to actually establish government accountability, Afghan government accountability. We dealt with that every day in terms of corruption but also the lack of capacity. During the Trump administration, we established a strategic framework in which the Afghans could demonstrate they were actually making substantive progress. We were incentivizing them if they made progress in policy development or passed a new law, or opened their systems to more transparency

across all government sectors. We rewarded them with incentivized payments. I don't think that it probably ever had a chance to work, but it was something that we used to get them to take responsibility for their own government and their own security. Economic issues, social issues, and security were all woven into the framework. It was a complicated thing.

It took a lot of time and effort monitoring it, but then ultimately, as we know, not much came of it. It was an effort to get them to stand on their own and take responsibility.

The other concern was the accountability issues. We lived through the SIGAR [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction] experience. The approach used by the auditors was not, to me, positive. There are still scars from that, although the oversight is something, in the context of the culture of corruption in Afghanistan, that was necessary. This approach started before Sopko; it was General Fields who started this in 2009, brought in because of the corruption, but to me, it was framed as a gotcha approach as opposed to being helpful.

We're looking at each other, knowing we're not stealing anything. We don't want to steal anything, but ultimately it has to be looked at. When I was there as a mission director after you left, the auditors were the only ones who had the wherewithal of moving around the country and actually going out to see people and projects. We were actually shut in. We would occasionally get off to the World Bank meeting or a ministry, and that was about as far as you could get around town. We had no real access outside. I think I went outside Kabul a couple of times in my last three years there. Ultimately, I think we got short shrift on that.

The auditors spent a lot of time pointing out little process misses; for example, you didn't follow your implementation plans to the letter as opposed to them pointing out what could have been done better in a particular program that would have been helpful. We missed an opportunity here from a really important strategic programmatic standpoint.

I want to add that AID's own inspector general followed that approach as well because SIGAR was capturing headlines all the time with their reports. I think our own IG [inspector general] was jealous.

The other thing that was happening, even when you were there, was the change of perspective on alternative cropping and poppy cultivation, really looking the other way in terms of the impact that poppy cultivation has on funding for the Taliban. The drug trade, they looked at it from every way they could but couldn't figure it out. Ultimately, I think that poppy was a big problem that was fueling the insurgency. We let that one go. Then as always, you had the other elephant in the room, the role of Pakistan, their role in harboring insurgents, shielding them, and allowing them to retool in the winter to be ready for the next fighting season. That was never really dealt with. It's a difficult one to deal with. Bigger brains than mine failed.

Q: When you were there from 2008 to 2010 and responsible for the PRT work on the USAID side, was there a lot of discussion about purpose? Was this about state building

or decentralization, or just trying to build the capacity at the local level, or all of the above?

SMITH: The lack of a clear objective was always a problem. The objectives widened as we went along, ultimately. For example, if you started to have success with a well activity and then you added a health activity, that's mission creep from clear, hold and build to one of development. That brought the questions, how much longer are we going to be there? When are we finished? When you're pumping all these resources in, and ultimately you're starting to actually clear, hold, and build, you start to ask how many more resources are needed for the objective. And the answer is probably fifty years if you're going to do this right.

I think in 2009, the Obama administration started to look at this. They supported the surge and added a hundred thousand troops. Then quickly turned around and decided what the reality was. I think Obama realized he didn't want to send more letters of condolences to more American families about the loss of their sons and daughters in this place. There was also the concern about the accountability for the resources going in and the challenge that, ultimately, the Afghans would have to stand on their own and sustain the effort themselves.

The reality is with that culture. Looking into the history, it's ethnically atomized. It's always been tribal. The Soviets weren't able to pull it together. We weren't, obviously, able to do it either.

Obama announced the increase of troops in the summer of 2009, trying to deal with Marjah in Helmand to get the marines in and stabilize that area where we were losing ground to the insurgents. It was precipitous for the Obama administration to, just after announcing the troop surge in Helmand to turn around and say we'll be reducing troop levels drastically by a certain date. It didn't play out that way, exactly.

As the troop levels were reduced, the Taliban moved into control of rural areas. By the end of it, we had to retreat to more secure key cities leaving the rural areas to the enemy. That was the beginning of the end, but then it had to end sometime. Still, it was hard to deal with at the time while the Pakistan issue and poppy went unaddressed, and mission creep and unclear objectives continued to plague.

The other problem was there was too much money and the expectation we would pour in more drove corruption. We have to be careful with that in the future.

Q: When USAID was trying to recruit during the surge to get people out into PRTs, USAID folks, was it difficult, and did USAID have a hard time meeting the government's levels that they wanted USAID folks to be at?

SMITH: There were folks from the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture], Commerce, and other U.S. agencies, as well as USAID on the PRTs; it was very difficult to field enough people. Lots of USAID folks had already served, and we didn't have a bunch of old experienced people like you and me standing around waiting to go. It was quite difficult to fill slots. It's kind of an inside joke, but I was always asking myself, do I need to take a wheelchair out to the heliport to meet the new guys coming in because

some of them didn't have the wherewithal to deal with what they were faced with at a PRT in terms of the physicality of it.

We had to institute some physical requirements during the training to try to weed out some of the folks that would have had problems. But it was difficult, I have to say.

We would have to go back and look at the actual numbers of people that were on those PRTs and the number of AID folks. I can't remember, but we had a lot of people. I think almost everybody in AID eventually served in Afghanistan at one time or another over the course of their career. There was a span of ten years where people were coming and going, it was a revolving door. That said, we had some really good kids working out there, and they did a good job. Difficult and dangerous conditions every day.

Q: Were you able to travel?

SMITH: Yes. I went out to every PRT during that time. We took it upon ourselves, my support team in Kabul; we had the aircraft contract in our shop, so we thought it was important. I would take the mission director, Bill Frej, we went to every PRT. You need to talk to Bill sometime and Mike Yates as well.

We tried to get Bill out of the office for a bit because we were used to living with Mr. Holbrooke around and with General Eikenberry as ambassador; there was a lot of pressure at the embassy. I think when I sat with Bill one time, I said, "Do you want me to get you out of this cooker for a couple of days every once in a while?" We started to go out every week and see our USAID guys, and we'd have meetings with the PRT military commanders and all the other folks on the PRT as well as the local leaders. That was really helpful. I think we went to every one of them, but Bamiyan, I don't think I got there; the only place I didn't get to visit.

Q: The nicest place.

SMITH: The nicest place.

Q: When you were in Kabul in the embassy, did you have daily meetings with the military, State, and others related to PRTs?

SMITH: It was constant. Those days it wasn't an eight-hour day. You know how that is. The mission never stops. Nobody stopped at that time. We lived and worked in a little rat barn, a container farm, which eventually was replaced by the new embassy building and five-star apartment complex that few ever got to live in. I still have frostbitten feet from working in my container.

Q: You left in December of 2010.

SMITH: November, December.

Q: Went to Haiti, went to Yemen, difficult places as well. How did you get interested, or how did it happen that you came back to Afghanistan?

SMITH: To complete the circle, I guess, ultimately, I had a really good deputy in Yemen, Tami Halmrast-Sanchez. We were a good team there. She had been in Iraq as well at about the same time I was there. The director and deputy jobs were open, so it was a good fit. It was great for me to come back. Sarah was able to return as well as a nurse for the embassy. She had been with me here on the first tour as well.

Q: Terrific. When you got back to Kabul as mission director, how were things different from when you left in 2010?

SMITH: It was dramatically different. You were picking up dry cleaning. We had never thought of that concept before in Afghanistan. With the new embassy construction and the compound, it was completely different. Then at the same time, the security had greatly deteriorated. You weren't getting out anywhere. You couldn't get out anywhere. Security movements were completely restricted. Even as mission director, I could only move around Kabul to the ministries or the banks. That made a big difference.

It was very risk-averse at that point. It impacts how you do your business. It was nice living in the beautiful compound, but ultimately you're still wondering what's going on outside the compound and how we are doing. You had to rely more and more on your AID partners at that point. I'm not sure hope is a strategy, but you're hoping you're doing the right thing and being accountable and that what you're being told is true.

Q: When you came back as mission director, were all the PRTs closed by then?

SMITH: I think there was one to finish closing. The last one was down in Kandahar.

Q: I think Kandahar and maybe Jalalabad. When I left, they were all closed.

SMITH: It was closed up. PRTs were done. I think maybe Kandahar had some residual cars and equipment that we had there. I think that was it. Then we had to dispose of all the property and get all that disposed of. I think they did a big sale of that.

Q: When you were there as mission director for those three years, what were the biggest issues you had to deal with?

SMITH: We took security very seriously with staff. That was a big one. Security for our partners as well. We went through the attack on the American University. That was awful. Then numerous other attacks that we had to deal with, so we set up our partner liaison office, which was critical in its role of monitoring partner security. The office had great contacts and was critically important to our work. Security was deteriorating rapidly, so we had to be very careful. Maintaining staff and NGO partner safety was paramount.

From our own AID strategy, I wanted to finish what we started; one of my priorities was the Kajaki Dam. We actually did get the dam done and finished the expansion of the power lines, and set up a revenue generation service provision situation where people were actually paying for the service. The downside of that one is the Taliban imposed their rent-seeking strong-arm tactics and then charged the recipients for power as opposed to the government receiving the revenue from the dam. But, we did get the Kajaki Dam completed after decades of work. When I was there the first time, the Brits and the

marines undertook a huge security effort to have the third turbine delivered to the dam. The whole process of getting that up and running, that was good. That was a watershed moment.

One important part of our new strategy was focused on developing markets in key cities, focusing on the urban areas and delivery of health and education services there. We prioritized private sector-driven economic development, focused on export-led agriculture. We hosted a number of trade fairs and tried to get some of the Afghan products to the international markets.

I was proud of the strategy that we were able to put in place, but it was really a reaction to the reality that we didn't have access to areas outside of the key cities. The Taliban actually held about 50 percent of the country's territory. They were already in control of significant swaths of territory, and their influences were widespread. People recognized that, but we tried anyway, hoping that our assistance and our presence would have a positive influence in at least the urban cities where the population centers are so that our efforts become a tipping point to change, but that didn't happen, unfortunately.

I thought we had a good strategy. I thought we had a good start implementing it. Knowing the importance of the extractive industries, we worked a lot with the Ministry of Mines and tried to build some accountability there. That sector was also another area where the Taliban had control of a number of mines, and they were able to extract resources illegally and then sell the minerals and generate resources for the insurgency.

The mining sector was an important potential area of revenue generation to sustain the government. Because the Afghan government was so dependent on foreign aid, the objective was to generate its own tax base, generate its own revenue, and ultimately be able to pay for some of the government services. Albeit they wouldn't be able to do it at the extent the U.S. government and donors were funding, that would be the path that they would be on. I'm proud of the strategy. I think we were doing the right thing at the time, but realistically they probably would have needed twenty-five years more help with some more political will and some good governance to go along with it.

I don't think we recognized the resource capture of the elite and their corruption and the fact they're not really caring about their people. There was a lot of lip service to us as a donor community, but nothing really changed, which concerns me, in hindsight.

The other major important effort was that we continued the women's empowerment program. That was a new program just up and running. You started it all, but we expanded that. It was important. Getting women in the economy and girls in education, you can't argue that that wasn't a good thing to try to do with AID resources. That's one of the most depressing areas that we're experiencing now after the U.S. exit with the Taliban resurgence. That one is troubling.

Q: When you were there, how did USAID deal with the fact that your officers couldn't get out to monitor projects?

SMITH: NGOs were open to coming into Kabul. Whatever they had to do, they didn't mind. Even some of the little NGOs you would think might have been concerned to meet

us for security reasons would come in. You have to have open doors. We had them coming in all the time. As mission leadership, we tried to engage one way or another as they came through. And we also give them access to the ambassadors as well so they'd also have a good perspective on what they were seeing, what they were learning, and what they were able to accomplish in the conditions they were working in. I think that was really good. Ambassador John Bass got that and was generous with his time. Ambassador Bass and Ambassador Hugo Llorens were really good to work with.

Q: How was the interagency coordination set up when you were there as mission director, and how was that different from when you were there before?

SMITH: As mission directors, when we were there, it was rationalized. We were in charge of AID stuff and coordinated with the embassy and, to a lesser extent, the military. They were still around but not in the numbers as in the previous tour. It was more of a normal mission relationship. The previous time with all the bureaucratic infrastructure associated with the surge with General Eikenberry and Ambassador Holbrooke, having to respond to all the intense focus on foreign policy in Afghanistan, we were under a lens; it was quite a super infrastructure we had to deal with. I think we had at one point five ambassadors in charge of different sections in the embassy. The embassy was huge. We had Ambassador Joe Mussomeli in charge of management and Ambassador Tony Wayne managing us. Then you had a couple of others, handling Rule of Law and Ambassador Frank Ricciardone as Ambassador Eikenberry's deputy and, of course, Ambassador Holbrooke looking over all things. It was wild and wooly. We had a lot of bosses.

Q: The second time, it was more normal.

SMITH: Yes, it was normal. Our relationship with Hugo and with John was very rational and made more sense. The other was crazy times. At one point, I was, well, I was two heartbeats away from the ambassador yesterday, and now I'm about seventeen heartbeats away from the ambassador in terms of the imposed infrastructure. You should talk to Dawn Liberi sometime about this. At one point, she came in and was in charge of the PRT infrastructure. We were, as the PRT Office, technically under her. Our civilians in the field were under her as opposed to being under AID, which created some conflicts between Bill and Dawn. Those were good times.

Q: Dawn Liberi was part of the embassy then?

SMITH: Yes.

Q: She reported to one of the deputy ambassadors.

SMITH: Probably Tony. I'm not sure. Maybe Ricciardone. That was wild.

Q: When you were there as mission director, looking at it in hindsight now, was there a period when you were wondering why is USAID here? Was there a time when you were wondering what's the future of this government, the Ghani government, the Ghani-Abdullah government, and the role of the U.S. here?

SMITH: I think it was the last year we were there when John came in as ambassador things started to fray up a bit. The expectations for the Ghani government to take hold of things weren't happening. It was frustrating. And, you're seeing the resurgence of the Taliban, the loss of territory, the inability to get out. They had usurped control of the education systems and the use and control of the health systems in the rural areas. It was starting to move backward, I thought we were retreating and started asking how are we going to continue this.

You got some positives here and there. Some of the smaller organizations were able to do some positive things with grapes and pomegranates and some other things. But you ask how much of this is really going to stick with these institutions? It was about six months before I left that I had a meeting with the MRRD, the Relief Ministry. Meeting one of their deputies, I got the impression if I looked behind the curtain on this guy, he was actually really Taliban. That was a concern that Taliban influences were creeping into the government, even at the central level. I was a little bit worried there. I think about a year before I left, it was starting to really turn.

In terms of efforts associated with our portfolio, we organized export trade fairs. It was exciting. We were also working with some young women ministers, Kamala Saddique and Adella Raz; these young officials were smart and energetic. They were the hope. Then some of the younger guys, for example, Mohib, came in as national security advisor. There was some hope there, but ultimately things were turning bad.

Q: Did you have interference from USAID Washington or State Department or NSA [National Security Agency]?

SMITH: We tried to work with them closely. When we had the new Trump administration coming in with the new security advisor, McMaster, it was a little bit exciting. We were changing dynamics. We weren't changing our programs so much, but ultimately our USAID strategy fit well into the new administration approach. I think it all made sense. It was exciting. This actually might work. This is where the idea of conditionality came in, starting to focus on what's next and how we get things moving.

I remember standing with McMaster out on the ambassador's patio and asking, "What do you see different as you're looking out at the night?" And he said, "Electricity, lights everywhere. The last time I was here, it was dark. We made some changes." The opportunity was there. You look at the expansion of the media, the press, and TV, and there were a lot of good things that happened.

Q: How much of that do you think will continue to stay around, the training that a whole generation of young women had through grade and high school? You can't take that away. Now with the Taliban in charge, how much of what you think USAID was able to accomplish was going to stay around and influence the future?

SMITH: I don't know. I'm not optimistic about that. I continue to be fearful for the women who are even associated with this advancement and all the young guys who worked with us who didn't get out. The Taliban shut down all the education for girls. They shut down their employment in ministries.

You look back on when the Taliban came in the first time and what they did and were able to do, they succeeded in sending the place back to the stone age. They might succeed in that again since this is once again a backwater in terms of foreign policy. Whatever the black eye of the precipitous withdrawal, I don't blame Biden or Trump or Obama for not figuring out how to try to do this. I think the Taliban approached this with some rigor and with the adage that they have the time. Theirs is a long-term plan. They'll have setbacks, but they had safe havens in Pakistan that allowed them to regroup. We're never going to deal with that. I'm not saying a lot of positives here. You ask yourself what is sustainable in this kind of situation, it's a tough one. It's depressing, I have to say.

Q: One thing that ADST, this Afghanistan project they're looking for seeing leaders like you, what are your insights and reflections during the time you were there, but the broader twenty-year U.S. government experience?

SMITH: I guess we had to be very careful; you'd better know your ground before you go out and step into it. This situation was driven by 9/11, and that's a whole different context. In terms of the nation-building concept, you have to be very careful of what we'd be able to do to succeed, particularly in this culture, a tribal culture. It's traditionally Islamic, with Sharia Law; trying to mix and match that with the modern world was difficult. We became labeled as another occupying force in their country, one like the Taliban liberated from the Soviets.

The reality is we should look at that history. Maybe a light footprint is better than the concept that we're going to change the culture to a thriving self-reliant democratic western looking country. Back in the '50s, maybe we would have had a chance to do that, but not at this time frame.

I think that links to the whole government concept as well. If you have a military operation, the military needs to be focused on fighting the war, winning the war, or on counter insurgency or counter terrorism. But when mission creep comes into play, and the military gets involved in development, then we have confusion. We know how to do development. Our military shouldn't be doing that. We should stay in our lanes of authority; mixing everything into one big basket may not be the correct approach. I'm pretty sure pursuing development in a warzone was not viable.

Q: I would add throwing in billions of dollars as well.

SMITH: Too much, too soon. The expectations are too high. You can't turn around a culture and expect success in six weeks. I can't even get the necessary paperwork through in six weeks. These are societal changes, as you say. I hope some of our work sticks for the next generation. Hopefully, there was enough positive impact on the Afghan youth during our time there, but I don't know.

Q: What was your involvement, and what key issues might you have dealt with during the evacuation in this August period, August-September?

SMITH: I was out chasing wolves in Yellowstone at that point. Looking at the news reports, a day after the evacuation, there was talk about the economy collapsing and that the Afghan society was going to collapse. Everybody is going to be hungry, and winter is

coming. The aid complex starts into high gear immediately. It starts shifting to address how we are going to get humanitarian assistance into Afghanistan. For me, I'm not sure that's where we need to be right now. We're going to add more resources and funds that the Taliban can leverage to use to gain more power. What's the accountability of that? We weren't able to account for the resources that we had there before. Now we're going to ship another half billion dollars of foreign assistance and have NGOs doing deals with the Taliban for access to women and children for food distribution.

I think this needs to be talked about. After the first couple of days of media discussions on this topic, I sent a note in and asked my buddies in the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance [HA] what was happening. I also sent a note to Seth Jones at CSIS [Center for Strategic and International Studies] to ask him to convene some policy reviews, at least to gain some perspective on this. If you provide the Taliban resources, there is no way to ensure accountability. We will not know how our funds are used or ensure the people in need receive the relief. I was concerned about that, and I remain concerned about that. That's the only role I've had. I did go see Adela Raz in Washington a couple of times just to see how she was doing. She's a good friend of mine. She was stuck in this limbo land of being nominated ambassador and then having the Ghani government fall. She's stuck in DC with no support. I talked to her a few times to see what she was thinking.

Q: Did you get calls from former employees or Afghan folks you knew?

SMITH: Yes. I got some calls, and then AID established some structures to help out. Sarah even got calls from her nursing staff. An employee had gotten out, but the family was still there. Some buddies of mine who worked for IRD had staff that worked with them trying to get out. All you can do is pass the information on, give them your condolences, and basically try and set up communications so they can get to the right people to help them in terms of figuring out how to get out.

Q: Any insights and reflections about the evacuation and that whole period?

SMITH: I'm disgusted by the whole thing, quite frankly. To me, it's so precipitous, just ridiculous. We couldn't take the time? We had been there twenty years. We didn't have to leave today. The wheels were coming off, I guess.

We started doing secret negotiations with the Taliban in 2009 under the Obama administration. These negotiations continued under Trump and then on and on. I don't think Biden handled this properly at all. To blame it on the predecessor, he certainly has enough blame, but ultimately you didn't have to go through with it as he did. I don't have any insight into the withdrawal other than what we saw publicly.

My reflection is, what was that all about? I spent almost six years, Sarah and I, doing this, working day and night to try to help. That's nothing for us, really; there are kids that lost their legs, lost their lives, were scarred for life, and asked themselves what it was about. I saw this stupid movie a while ago, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. Have you ever seen that movie? The operating quote from that is, "Embrace the suck and move on."

Q: Do you think there was just a lack of planning?

SMITH: I'm sure they had enough plans, but apparently didn't have the right plan. The whole idea of abandoning Bagram and then having a completely Kabul-centric evacuation, and not thinking through the impact on the Afghans who had been with us, worked with us, depended on us, it's really sickening. There weren't enough people who cared enough. You would think that the Biden administration had a lot of their folks from the Obama administration and some who would have carried through that knowledge, but I don't know. I don't know why. What was the driving factor getting it off the plate? It certainly ripped the duct tape off, that's for sure. I think it was a complete debacle. I'm not sure how long it will take to recover again. It took us twenty years to recover from Vietnam, so I'm not sure. Although, it didn't take us very long to take us back into another war.

Q: Any other thoughts about that evacuation period? Any concluding reflections or insights you'd like to share? As you said, in six-plus years there, you were involved in the major surge and then consolidation trying to help the new government.

SMITH: One is AID's role. Our leadership really needs to think about what it is that we're doing when we commit ourselves to these operations. It's good to look back and see we had success working with the military. We did some good in stabilization in Iraq. We did some good in Afghanistan, but at the end of the day, what's stuck in terms of development? What is sustainable? What's still there? The other question to think about is, did we do more harm than good? We put a generation of little girls at risk now. That's a concern.

The idea of our getting to go to the NSA meeting every day and talk to the big dogs, maybe that's something the leadership of AID needs to think about. They like having a seat at the table. We might not want that seat at the table in some of these cases. Stick to our own lanes and know what we do, do what we know. Ultimately, if that means fewer resources, so be it but do a better job with what we have. I think there is too much money. The AID complex chases the money. It's just like the military-industrial complex. It's just the same. Start feeding this beast, and you can't stop feeding it. It lobbies, goes around to the Congress, and gets more resources. So, we can't let the Afghans starve now? I think the Taliban has enough resources; if they really want to take care of the people, they can take care of their people. They've got billions of funds coming in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, the drug trade, the minerals extraction, all of it. That's a concern of mine for AID. I think it was the glamor associated with it, and we're with the big dogs, and sometimes we end up holding the bag when we're at the table. I'm not so sure we need to be at some of these tables.

Q: Part of it gets back to what you said previously, which is how much sustainable development can we do in a war situation. In Afghanistan, when you were there, and others say it was following the troops, it was trying to support quick impact, quick response type activities using slower mechanisms that USAID normally uses.

SMITH: I look back at Iraq; it was clear, hold. The build, I don't know about that one. We would go out every day into Fallujah. We had partners that were expeditionary there, and we had the wherewithal to move money quickly. We would hire fifty guys off the street and have them, instead of toting guns and fighting us, cleaning up the

neighborhood, and cleaning debris. You would give them a useful daily wage. We were doing those kinds of activities. That's stabilization. It basically worked.

Fallujah turned to the positive, we were able to get the economy going and keep it moving, shops opening, cars moving. It was good to see the economy flowing. It's not sustainable, though; it's not development. It looked good but not development. I think we tried to twist that stabilization effort into development.

I think we tried to shove our processes and procedures and shoehorn them into something that didn't necessarily work or fit. As you say, we had too much money. The expectations were too high, activities too quick, and you ultimately engender corruption. And in Afghanistan, we all know that the money corrupts. If there's anything you want done, it's going to cost you money.

I look at it now; look at what's going on in Afghanistan now. Abdullah Abdullah is still there. Karzai is still there. I'm not sure who's following this anymore or what's happening. It looks bad; we'll see. I don't see the positives coming from this, ultimately. I think that maybe somebody in the other three-letter agencies needs to be looking at how this entity, the Taliban, and its resurgence in Afghanistan actually impacts the stability of Pakistan. They would have the ability to destabilize Pakistan. I assume somebody is looking at that.

Q: When you went back to the second time as mission director, you stayed for three years. Why did you decide to stay? That was fairly unusual. I think Ken Yamashita was there for three years, but he was mission director for two and coordinator.

SMITH: I think I'm the longest. I'm a slow learner, I guess.

Q: I don't believe that.

SMITH: We had a good team, an exciting team. We were developing a new strategy. It looked like it might work. We were hopeful. Despite the insurgency and the conditions, we were able to make some progress, we had that hope associated with a new generation of leaders there, the young women particularly, who were smart and engaged and had moved into positions of leadership. Ghani actually encouraged that. That was a positive for him.

I don't think any alternatives to Ghani were around. I liked Abdullah a lot. Those two men were probably the best options we had to work with, but, unfortunately, the fact was they hated each other. I guess there was enough excitement within what we were doing. I enjoyed the embassy. Those two ambassadors, Hugo was acting, and then John was very good. They gave you the wherewithal to do what you needed to do and left you alone to do it, and then trusted you to do it. We had great communication with them and think we helped them as well. That was all positive.

As I said before, it was an exciting strategy that we developed there, and we were hopeful. It's always interesting, and you can grab a lot of positive things despite the dark clouds gathering that you're well aware of. It's not that we weren't aware of them, but we

still tried to fight that good fight. That's why we stayed. I was proud of AID being in Afghanistan. I think AID did the best they could do there.

End of interview