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*Interviewed by: Larry Garber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Hi. This is Larry Garber. I'm here interviewing Jennifer Windsor. It is June 11, 2025 — and welcome, Jennifer. Let me just start with a little bit of background. Where did you grow up? What school did you go to for college, graduate school — just to give a sense before we get into the democracy issues we want to talk about today.

WINDSOR: I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, and had a very traditional Midwestern upbringing there. While I read voraciously, I suspect I was relatively ignorant of anything happening outside the borders of the United States until a student whose mother was Israeli arrived at the all-girls high school I attended. Tal gave me a crash course on the Arab-Israeli conflict; that was the start of my lifelong fascination with the Middle East and North Africa. I went to Harvard University as an undergraduate, where my concentration was government, and within that I focused on comparative politics. I took several courses related to Middle Eastern and Islamic history. During the summer of my junior year, in 1985, I traveled to Cairo, Egypt — the first time I had ever been outside the United States. I spent the summer there conducting interviews for my undergraduate senior thesis on prospects for political liberalization in Egypt under Sadat and Mubarak. That trip was made possible by research grants from Harvard. Living there was a life-changing experience for me.

CAPITOL HILL — EARLY YEARS OF U.S. SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

After graduating, I worked on Capitol Hill from 1986–1989, first for Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY), and then for Representative Ted Weiss (D-NY), focusing on foreign affairs. During that time, the role of the U.S. government in supporting democracy overseas was being hotly debated on the Hill. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was established in 1983, and President Reagan was pursuing his so-called "freedom agenda." U.S. support for Central America, including for the Nicaraguan contras and President Duarte in El Salvador was particularly controversial.

Q: Say a little bit about that — your impressions, particularly coming from Congressman Weiss.

WINDSOR: I was the Legislative Assistant for foreign affairs and defense for Rep. Ted Weiss from 1987–89. Ted Weiss was very critical of U.S. policy toward Central America and had initially opposed funding for the National Endowment for Democracy. Holly Burkhalter was representing Human Rights Watch at that time, and she became a role model for me. Ted Weiss was very supportive of a transition to democracy in Chile, and as a result I met Brian Atwood and others from the National Democratic Institute who were doing important work there.

National Democratic Institute (NDI) was working with the opposition campaign in the lead-up to the 1988 plebiscite, and I was very impressed with them. I shared my positive impressions with Ted, who became a supporter of NED because of NDI's work in Chile. NDI asked him to join their observer delegation to the plebiscite; he urged them to invite me in his stead. It was somewhat unprecedented — I was just a staff member, the youngest and least qualified member of the delegation, which was headed by former Governor Bruce Babbitt and former President of Spain Adolfo Suárez. I reached out to NDI staff and told them I wanted to be helpful in any way I could when I was there. I ended up observing the plebiscite in the region of Puerto Montt. It was another life-changing experience — the Chilean people waiting for hours to cast their votes, an indication of the value they placed on being able to choose and hold their leaders accountable. That experience reinforced my desire to be part of U.S. efforts to support democracy and human rights.

In the summer of 1989, I left Ted Weiss's office to attend Princeton's graduate school for International and Public Affairs. I worked for Philip Heymann at Harvard Law School that summer. I had met Phil while on the Hill, he was leading a Guatemala rule-of-law program — this was before he became Deputy Attorney General. He wanted me to delve deeper into the history of U.S. support for police training, to understand what led to the adoption of Section 660 of the Foreign Assistance Act, which banned the U.S. government from training foreign police, and to advise on what would be needed to secure future Congressional support.

At Princeton, I focused on learning as much as I could about the process of democratization and relevant background of U.S. foreign policy in support of democracy and human rights, writing papers and doing independent studies on various related topics, including on religious extremism and democracy with John Waterbury and prospects for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa with Jeffrey Herbst. I also advocated for the creation of a new course taught by two professors — Mike Doyle, who focused on U.S. foreign policy, and Atul Kohli, who taught comparative democratization and was an expert on India. It was a great class, and we ended it with a big conference; Mike Morfit from USAID came up for it.

In early 1991, I started job hunting, talking to NDI, the NED and USAID. The democracy sector was just forming, and there were few mid-level jobs for someone with a graduate degree and a few years of work experience. I applied at my career counselor's insistence to the Presidential Management Intern (PMI) program. At USAID, I talked to several people, including Mike Morfit, Jerry Hyman, and Steve Brent, who was then working for the Assistant Administrator for Africa, Scott Spangler. When I informed Steve that I had been selected for a PMI, he secured one of USAID's PMI slots and offered me a position

in the Africa Bureau. While I awaited my security clearance, I spent the summer working for Tom Melia at NDI, who had worked for Senator Moynihan just before me and had become a close friend and mentor.

SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY AS PART OF USAID'S AFRICA BUREAU

WINDSOR: With a stellar group of five other PMIs, I started at USAID in the Africa Bureau in August 1991. My official title was Democracy Program Officer, and I worked in the Office of New Initiatives, headed by Warren Weinstein, a Bush Sr. political appointee at the time. Two foreign service officers were working on the Bureau's new democracy initiative – Bill Hammink and Anne Williams. My first assignment was to represent USAID in administering a new State Department-established, ESF-funded Democracy and Human Rights fund (DHRF) for Africa, also known as the 116(e) fund — authorized by Section 116(e) of the Foreign Assistance Act, which dealt with human rights.

I had mainly worked and studied the Middle East and North Africa and Latin America and had limited knowledge of the politics and history of sub-Saharan Africa. My immediate concern was that I did not even know the capitals of every country in the region, all the DHRF fund proposals came in via cables that came in from the capitals. (Back then I'd have to go pick up the hard copies from the cable room.)

(laughs)

To learn the capitals, I made flashcards — country on one side, capital on the other — and memorized them while riding the bus to and from work. That job turned out to be one of the most rewarding of my career. I had the opportunity to travel around the region, meeting with civil society activists, human rights defenders, and journalists on the front lines of pushing for change. I vividly remember my first trip to Malawi, where President Banda was still in power and very repressive. I met the brother of an imprisoned human rights defender, and shortly after I departed, the security services picked him up for questioning.

Garber: Tell us more about the process of administering the fund.

WINDSOR: Embassies sent in proposals for support from the 116(e) fund, via cables. Those proposals were reviewed by an interagency group chaired by the Africa Bureau [AF] at the State Department, along with the HA Bureau [Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs], the precursor to DRL [Democracy, Human Rights and Labor] and USAID. AF's regional office was headed by Tex Harris, and my counterpart was Melanie Bixby, a PMI at State. When a proposal was approved, we'd provide a small grant — very small by USAID standards, I think in the range of \$3,000 to \$50,000 — but still subject to the same level of financial accountability as multi-million-dollar awards. I was tasked with looking at how we could administer the fund using the South Africa USAID program of the 1980s as a model. (As part of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 — which I'd actually worked on when I was with Senator Moynihan — USAID was tasked to provide funding for the legal defense of individuals and groups in the anti-apartheid civic resistance movement.)

Q: Say a little bit about the institutionalization of democracy in the Africa Bureau, and then more broadly in the agency, before 1993.

WINDSOR: I was not expecting the level of resistance within USAID's career staff in the Africa Bureau toward USAID having any role in U.S. democracy support given USAID's rule of law programs in Latin America. The Development Fund for Africa was the authorizing legislation funding USAID's work and it had no mention of democracy and human rights at that time. Many within the Bureau felt that working on democracy would make USAID's work too politicized — that USAID should focus on core development issues in the region; they wanted to maintain what they perceived as a technocratic non-partisan approach.

But the State Department that was driving and funding USAID's engagement in democracy support in sub-Saharan Africa as were events in the region were pushing USAID. There were roughly 20 elections scheduled and the State Department made \$5 million of ESF available for election support. - NDI, IRI, and the African American Institute submitted the winning proposal to implement the Africa Regional Electoral Assistance Fund (AREAF). Since both Anne Williams and Bill Hammink left the Bureau for field assignments, I was the sole staff person for democracy and governance in the Bureau for a year and managed the ARAEF program as well as other democracy and governance work. The ARAEF program allowed me to work closely with you and others at NDI and IRI on U.S. support for elections in the region.

The Bureau was also considering how a country's democracy and human rights record should factor in decisions about overall funding levels and country strategies. The National Academy of Sciences had held a series of workshops and produced papers that explored how to assess democratic performance, and what indices were in existence and could be used. I then was asked to review and rate every country in the region based on their performance on democracy and human rights. So I sat down with Bob Charlick, an African specialist then at Associates for Rural Development (ARD), and Lisa Peterson, who was working at USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE). We read every State Department Human Rights Report, all human rights assessments, Freedom House reports, and came up with a methodology, and then we evaluated each country. Both Ambassadors and USAID mission directors from countries that didn't rate well objected to the overall process and disputed their country's ratings. The USAID mission director from Uganda argued that Museveni was focused on good governance, which was more appropriate for Uganda than democracy. At some point, Warren [Weinstein] and I travelled to Uganda for a conference on anti-corruption where we met with the mission director who asked me to revise my rating, I objected citing that neither political parties, civil society nor the media were free. That was one of many moments where I was impacted by the tension between democracy promotion and other U.S. foreign policy interests.

Another example of that overall tension was when I was deputy director of the DG Center and I went to my first National Security Council meeting. It was right after Mobutu fell in Zaire, and Laurent Kabila had seized power. The DG Center and OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] had sent a team early on to assess what was happening on the ground and to make recommendations about a U.S. approach. They came back

with more information than State or the NSC had, and an interagency group agreed to condition any direct support to the government on the precondition that there be free and fair elections. At that NSC meeting, USAID was represented by Dick McCall, the Chief of Staff; Steve Morrison for OTI; and me for the DG Center. The NSC Senior Director for Africa, Susan Rice was chairing the meeting, and she argued that since Kabila had declared he would hold elections in two years that the criteria of free and fair elections had been met. I was planning to defer to John Shattuck, the Assistant Secretary for DRL, but initially no one challenged Susan's assertions. So I raised my hand and jumped in, noting that as long as political parties were still banned, free and fair elections were not possible in that context. Susan pushed back hard, and then Dick McCall jumped in and essentially overrode me, "Well, our founders weren't very democratic either, Jennifer — maybe we're expecting too much." Thankfully, Steve Morrison and John Shattuck supported my position, so direct U.S. assistance to the government was not approved.

Q: Let me back up a bit before we get into the Center issues, just to finish off your Africa Bureau tenure. You mentioned Bob Charlick as an advisor — who else played a role and helped you with Africa?

WINDSOR: Bob Charlick was a professor at Cleveland State University and was hired through ARD to advise the Africa Bureau democracy and governance program. We also had regional democracy advisors on the ground — one of them, Joel Barkan, was the regional democracy advisor for East and Southern Africa.

Q: Just one more thing before you get there — what was the Africa Bureau's relationship to the broader agency on democracy issues? I know there was a democracy initiative that coordinated things.

WINDSOR: Mike Morfit, at that point, was an office director in PPC [Bureau of Policy Planning and Coordination] and he regularly convened all convened democracy staff from different regions, Norma Parker from Latin America, Bill Cole from the Middle East and Asia, Jerry Hyman representing CEE/FSU. This was the Tuesday group predecessor.

After a year of working alone on democracy in the Africa Bureau, a foreign service officer came in above me and he took a much different approach. I started looking for another job, Bill Clinton had just been elected President. I reached out to John Shattuck who was to be the new Assistant Secretary for the DRL Bureau at State, and Brian Atwood, who was then the incoming Under-Secretary for Management at State about possible opportunities. Meanwhile, I had been in discussions with Joel Barkan about coming out to Nairobi to work with him as a regional democracy and governance advisor. I received agreement from Warren Weinstein that would be my next rotation as a PMI. Six days before I was to leave for Nairobi — I'd sold all my furniture, had a suitcase of stuff, and was staying at a friend's house — I got a call from Jackie Stein, Brian's executive assistant, saying, "Brian wants to talk to you right away." He'd just been nominated to be the new USAID Administrator, he offered me the job as his special assistant, and I started working with him the next week.

WORKING FOR USAID ADMINISTRATOR BRIAN ATWOOD

So I went from being a junior program officer who was working on a “fringe” issue to be the special assistant of the new USAID Administrator — this was back when there was just one special assistant in the front office. It was a complete change of perspective and I had to get up to speed on a range of topics which were in the set of large briefing books that had been prepared for Brian and issues that came up in meetings with key USAID staff to help Brian get up to speed.

Q: So, in your own words, describe how Brian brought a democracy focus to a development agency. What did he do, and what pushback did he get?

WINDSOR: Brian was strongly supportive of increased U.S. efforts to support democracy, previously having served as President of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). He wanted democracy to be a core element of USAID’s approach to development. I had told him that I wanted to continue to work on democracy issues in the future, and he assured me that I would be a part of his efforts to elevate the importance of democracy work in the Agency.

Q: Going back — Brian comes in as administrator in April 1993, brings you in, and you support his efforts to make democracy more central to USAID’s approach. What did it require institutionally to make that real?

WINDSOR: There was a need for a new Agency-wide policy framework, and a need for organizational changes to strengthen the Agency’s ability to support democracy and governance globally. An important element of the new policy framework was to have a strong democracy lead in the new Bureau for Policy and Planning Coordination (PPC). I recommended you be the new Senior Advisor for Democracy at PPC, and Brian agreed, despite his concern about your departure weakening NDI. Your immediate task was to flesh out the details of making democracy one of the key pillars of USAID’s work, as part of USAID’s Strategies for Sustainable Development. In terms of organizational changes, Brian had established a Global Bureau, and he wanted to create a new Center for Democracy and Governance within the Bureau. He assigned the two of us to lead efforts to create that new Center.

Q: I’m curious what you remember of the pushback from other bureaus. Brian wanted four core development issues, and democracy and governance was only one of them. This was starting from close to zero, in some ways — what were the bureaucracies like?

WINDSOR: There were some parts of USAID that were against elevating democracy as one of the key development pillars, given concerns about politicization of assistance. But honestly, given Brian’s obvious commitment to support democracy, there wasn’t much pushback on the overall policy direction. The creation of the Center was more of a concern. Originally it was envisioned that all democracy officers in the regional bureaus in the Agency would be transferred to the new Center. Regional bureaus in USAID and State were bureaucratically much more powerful than technical or functional bureau, and they didn’t want to cede any control nor lose staff. We ended up compromising: a few DG officers would remain in the regional bureaus, and the DG Center established regional liaisons to ensure close coordination with the bureaus.

Q: You and I got it started, but it was really institutionalized when Chuck Costello was named director.

WINDSOR: Yes. John Mullen was first named as the Center Director—he came from General Counsel but lasted only a few months before leaving USAID. Brian and Sally Shelton-Colby offered the job to Chuck Costello, who was a highly respected senior Foreign Service officer; he had previously been USAID’s mission director in Guatemala, Ecuador and El Salvador. I had applied to the Deputy Director position, and Chuck chose me, for which I am forever grateful. He took a chance on me, given my lack of management experience, and we became a strong team for the next four years, working together to build the Center and advance its mission of becoming a center for excellence for democracy and governance in USAID.

Q: I'm curious how you'd describe Brian's intent in creating OTI at the same time as the Democracy Center. When I look back at it, I remember that one orientation Brian had that evolved quite differently — a reflection both of leadership and of reacting to circumstances as they changed.

WINDSOR: Brian had different objectives in creating OTI and the Democracy Center but both helped strengthen USAID’s ability to respond in a timely manner to political transitions which was also an important priority for Brian. The Office of Transition Initiatives, part of the Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs, was designed to bridge the gap between USAID’s emergency humanitarian disaster relief, carried out by the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the establishment of a more long-term development program in countries emerging from conflict. OTI was given not-withstanding authority to operate without many of the administrative requirements faced by other parts of USAID. Included in that was the ability to hire individual Personal Services Contractors (PSCs) to staff the Office’s various country workstreams and expedite procurements.

Within the DG Center, we needed to pre-position resources to build that rapid-response capability. Based on the lessons from the Africa elections project, we created a global elections and political-process project with NDI, IRI, and IFES as implementors, and provided some core funding to be able to respond quickly when elections were scheduled.

OTI and G/DG were complementary as we had different approaches to political transitions and we coordinated our efforts. The Center focused more on electoral transitions, and OTI designed a range of programs, including employment and community infrastructure activities designed to show quick and tangible benefits from post-conflict transitions.

BUILDING USAID’S DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE CENTER (G/DG)

WINDSOR: Going back to the Center’s creation, we had been allotted a certain number of FTEs, and we brought over existing staff in other parts of USAID. We also used every possible mechanism we had available to recruit external expertise, including Presidential Management Intern (PMI) and Administratively Determined (AD) hiring authorities, but used interagency agreements such as RSSA and PASAs, and fellowships include the

existing AAAS Fellowship program and a new Democracy Fellowship Program.

The initial leadership for the four main DG subsectors included Debra McFarland (rule of law), Amy Young (elections), Gary Hansen (civil society) and Patrick Fn’Piere (governance.) Jerry Hyman was head of the Strategies and Field Support team.

Q: So you were Chuck's deputy for two years, then ran the Center yourself for another three?

WINDSOR: I was Chuck's deputy for four years, from December 1994-1998, until he retired. I was selected to succeed him as Center Director and Deputy Assistant Administrator in the Global Bureau in December 1998. I was DAA/Director for two years until I left USAID to become Executive Director of Freedom House.

Q: What do you feel were most emblematic of your tenure setting up the DG Center — its impact on policy or operations — and then we'll get into some of the interagency issues.

WINDSOR: The flatness of the Center structure – we were organized into teams, but it wasn't hierarchical – this created a unique culture of camaraderie and exchange within the Center. We also recruited high performing staff, too many to name here, but they included Chris Sabatini, Melissa Brown, Josh Kaufman, David Black, Michele Schimpp, Nadereh Lee. I am also proud of the work the Center did to compile best practices in supporting democracy and governance, and to influence country strategies within USAID to create expectation that every strategy would include an assessment of and an approach to democratic governance challenges. And finally, the creation of a democracy backstop in the USAID personnel system was key to institutionalizing democracy within USAID and providing a career path for democracy experts within the Agency.

Q: You mentioned the DRC case and some of the players in the NSC room. John Shattuck became Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Rights, and Labor for most of Clinton's two terms — what was DRL's reaction to having a robust AID counterpart?

WINDSOR: We were strong institutional allies. It was genuinely symbiotic; we helped each other.

Q: Was there any conflict or tension over resources at that point?

WINDSOR: There was always some tension between USAID and State Department when it involved Economic Support Fund (ESF) resources -- the question was how much autonomy was given to USAID in program decisions to use those funds. But no friction between the Center and DRL specifically, we had a shared goal of increasing resources for democracy and human rights.

Q: You mentioned the good relationship with OTI — was the Center mostly focused on supporting existing missions, or did you also play a role in transitions?

WINDSOR: OTI had its own resources, PSCs and notwithstanding authority, that meant they could operate in countries without a USAID mission. The Center was primarily focused on supporting USAID field missions in designing strategies and programs.

Historically, tensions always existed between USAID field missions and the well-funded technical bureaus in Washington. Starting from the early discussions related to the Center, we wanted to support and influence USAID field missions, given our overall goal of institutionalizing democracy and governance within the Agency. We used some of our funds for global programs and rapid response support, but we also set up a series of IQCs and cooperative agreements that field missions could also buy into.

Q: Were you involved in delineating differences between USAID VS. NED?

WINDSOR: As part of a Congressional request from Rep. Ben Gilman, then Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, USAID and NED were asked to lay out the difference between what USAID did and what NED did in supporting democracy. As USAID dedicated more funding and staff to democracy and governance programs, this led to questions about whether this was duplicative of what NED did. NED was also concerned about its status as a congressionally funded independent agency, accountable to its Board, and not under direct State and USAID control.

Our March 1996 response to Gilman's request noted that NED focused on supporting non-governmental actors while USAID also worked with governments. USAID wouldn't agree to say that we exclusively worked with governmental actors, because we knew that an active civil society and a free press were critical to increasing accountability of government actors. One of the findings from USAID administration of justice (AOJ) programs in Latin America for instance was that institutional reform could only be achieved if we focused both on building governmental capacity and the ability of non-governmental actors to hold them accountable. The response also noted that NED often worked in countries in which USAID wasn't operational. NED played an important role supporting civil society in places like North Korea or Cuba and also continued in places where USAID and State pulled back, including after the so-called transition was over in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. USAID and NED were also different in their field presence, NED didn't have people on the ground — they had people in Washington who traveled, quite knowledgeable, but they operated more like a foundation. NED changed a lot over the years, Congress earmarked funds for NED in the DRL budget. But in our program review, we found that even when NED and USAID worked in the same countries at the same time, our approach was different, so there wasn't duplication per se.

Q: As you reflect on USAID and NED now, did your view change over time on whether the overlap and duplication were good things to have?

WINDSOR: I think it's important to distinguish between the grants that NED gave to civil society organizations vs. their support of their core partners. NDI, IRI, and the Solidarity Center received both NED and USAID and State Department funds for many decades. NED funding was a dependable and more flexible source of revenues for the Institutes, but USAID funding typically involved larger multiyear programs, which spurred organizational growth and increased the global reach of the three institutes.

Q: On the point about non-presence countries — Cuba, North Korea — what was the view at the time about whether USAID should be working in these places at all?

WINDSOR: These countries are not just places where USAID has no presence, they were deeply repressive and difficult places to work in. The main non-presence country that came up during my time at the Center was China. We looked at whether there was some way to do something there and concluded that given controls over what outside actors did in China, it wouldn't have made sense. I do think that NED is better positioned to work in such environments than USAID was.

Q: You mentioned that the original four focus areas didn't explicitly include human rights. Any reflections on those four areas — what wasn't included, and whether that structure worked well or created its own problems? From a mission perspective, they had a democracy and governance program and didn't always think in terms of the four sectors.

WINDSOR: The four sectors were chosen by the democracy staff in the Agency as part of discussions about the organization of the Center. The objective was to create subsectors and areas within democracy and governance as a development sector. That would allow the Center to develop technical and learning products and guidance within the democracy sectors. Indeed, the Center put out a huge number of technical manuals — including on legislative strengthening, anti-corruption, decentralization, elections, political parties — an unbelievable amount of output in a short period of time.

Human rights was added later to the Center's remit, and appropriately so. At the time of its establishment, U.S. human rights groups were adamantly opposed to it being combined with USG programmatic support for democracy, for a whole host of historical reasons. I like to think that my work at Freedom House helped to change the attitudes of some in the human rights community.

Going back to the four subsectors, the idea was never that missions should just select from a menu of activities under those areas, but to think strategically in developing country programs. doing and why. They needed to go through a strategic process and try to answer some fundamental questions. What are the most critical democracy and governance challenges that a country faced? Where were the key actors and their interests in targeted institutions and areas and what resources did they have? Where was USAID best positioned to make an impact? Jerry Hyman developed a strategic democracy and governance assessment tool which helped USAID think more strategically about their DG work — this was probably the Center's most lasting contribution to USAID's work in democracy and governance.

Q: Just to clarify — did Jerry take over directly from you?

WINDSOR: No, Jim Vermillion was my deputy, and he became acting director when I left. Jerry Hyman became the Director after Andrew Natsios became USAID Administrator. Under Natsios, the Global Bureau was dissolved, and G/DG became an office within the new Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Bureau. The Director position was no longer at the Deputy Assistant Administrator level, instead Jerry reported up through a DAA in the DCHA Bureau. Jerry did a fine job, but he had to go through more bureaucratic layers as a result. And as Administrator, Andrew Natsios had different priorities than Brian Atwood, democracy and governance was not his main focus.

Q: A couple more things, then we'll get to reflections. Let me run through a few criticisms we heard back then and probably still hear today, and get your quick take. First: the DG Center was too reliant on contractors.

WINDSOR: I'd broaden that to "USAID is too reliant on contractors" generally. As USAID staff gained more experience and expertise in democracy and governance, they were less willing to give groups like NDI and IRI in particular carte blanche to do whatever they wanted, they wanted their programs to fit into an overall DG strategy.

The Center did take specific actions to design a new type of cooperative agreement that would have some core funding up front but would also have the flexibility for field missions to add their own funding. The most utilized agreements were in the areas of elections and political processes (CEPPS) and rule of law and human rights (RIGHTS). They also corresponded to the areas that NDI, IRI and Freedom House worked in – these three groups were the most outspoken against working under contracts to the U.S. government to do democracy work.

Q: You had the unusual experience of going from Center director to being on the NGO side competing for USAID awards.

WINDSOR: Honestly, I agreed with the core institutes on the issue of working under cooperative agreements vs. contracts even when I was at USAID. When I moved to Freedom House, it became very clear to me that Freedom House shouldn't take any contracts, particularly because we were doing the Freedom in the World assessments, and it was important that we be perceived as having some independence from the U.S. government. So I took up that banner.

Q: Did the difference between cooperative agreements and contracts feel meaningful in terms of field implementation?

WINDSOR: It could be. Under a cooperative agreement, USAID had just a few levers of influence: approval of the chief of party, monitoring and evaluation plan and annual work plans. Contracts allowed much more direction and oversight from USAID. But I also think the flexibility and freedom that partner organizations had on the ground also depended on the operational context within a country. In places like Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. government required that groups comply with security and other requirements regardless of whether they were operating under a cooperative agreement or contract.

I would note that Freedom House was one of the few in the democracy community who refused to work in Iraq and Afghanistan. I strongly believed that Freedom House couldn't do credible work working with human rights defenders and civil society groups when the U.S. government was occupying a country.

Q: Another common criticism was that democracy programs were too fixated on elections — chasing elections rather than taking a holistic approach to DG. Your reflections?

WINDSOR: I think we need to distinguish between programming content and policy and media interest. Particularly in the 1990s, the holding of multiparty elections was an

opportunity to advance democratic development. And the State Department was interested in making resources available to make those elections as fair and representative as possible. USAID never saw elections alone as sufficient for democracy to evolve, that involved creating new processes and changing governance structures to make them more accountable and capable. It's important to look at resource levels. The detailed budget numbers show that USAID was heavily invested in strengthening civil society, as well as funding rule-of-law and judicial strengthening as well as programs that increased government transparency and accountability. Those programs weren't as newsworthy as the holding of elections but still critical.

In the early 2000s, there was much more media attention and scrutiny given to the support for civil society after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The role of the Open Society Foundation funded by George Soros, and that of Freedom House, funded by USAID became much more controversial.

Tom Carothers was a valuable and constant outside critic scrutinizing USAID democracy strategies and programming — the Tuesday Group served a similar function internally. It's good to have your premises questioned, the same way my Georgetown students would push back on me when I taught courses on democracy promotion.

Q: One more premise question, more specific to USAID's DG work — both from your 90s perspective and now — responding to the criticism that these programs go too far in interfering with a host country's domestic politics: picking winners, undermining elected governments we don't like, propping up ones we do. How do you think we did, and how do you see it now?

WINDSOR: We were definitely interventionist — though not, I'd argue, in the sense of picking individual winners. I think we genuinely didn't believe many governments — even democratically elected governments wanted to cede power to legislatures, be checked by the judicial branch or held to account by civil society actors. That was certainly the view at Freedom House too. South Africa is an interesting case. It had this remarkable transition led by Nelson Mandela, but starting with Thabo Mbeki, the South African government wanted to know about and approve outside assistance to civil society organizations — and it felt like they wanted to channel funds to groups they were more aligned with their political interests.

Q: The broader question is whether a development agency operating under an agreement with a host government has an obligation to work in partnership with that government, versus supporting things the government doesn't consider a priority.

WINDSOR: USAID's host country agreements did not define partnership as necessarily mandating government approval for every activity. In some cases, such as Kenya, as concerns about governmental corruption increased, USAID shifted their delivery mechanism away from direct government support and turned to civil society to deliver health and education services. That was not anticipated in the original country agreement between USAID and Kenya.

The whole issue of prerequisites that are needed in order for a host country to become a

full partner in development assistance also came up during the establishment of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Before a country was selected to partner with MCC, they had to meet certain performance standards. The original prerequisites for MCC were focused on the business environment, the legal and operational environment for the private sector to operate in a country. Corruption issues entered the conversation almost immediately, since everyone saw that as the core problem if all funding ran through host country governments.

When I was at Freedom House, in my first and only published *New York Times* op-ed, I argued that democracy and human rights performance must factor into these decisions. It turned out that the Bush Administration chose to include Freedom House's political rights and civil liberties indicators from *Freedom in the World* to be part of MCC's country selection criteria. That brought a great deal of interest in how Freedom House came up with those ratings and spurred my interest in making sure that Freedom House made our ratings process more transparent. Mort Halperin further strengthened the importance of democracy performance in country selection when the Board approved his recommendation that democracy become a "hard hurdle" in the way that corruption was, and that countries must score above the median rating for political rights or civil liberties in MCC's annual country scorecard.

Q: Let me bring up your MCC experience directly. MCC is explicitly government-to-government and incorporates democracy and human rights considerations into eligibility — which echoes the Africa Bureau debates from the late eighties and early nineties. How does that work in terms of policy?

WINDSOR:

Well, at the broadest levels, it meant that MCC should not work in countries that didn't meet a minimum standard in democracy and human rights. MCC's programs were terminated in countries that had coups, such as in Mali and Niger, or in places like Tanzania after badly compromised elections. On the other hand, MCC did work in places like Morocco and Mozambique that were hardly models for democracy and human rights. I was quite outspoken when I was at MCC during the Obama administration when the State Department and NSC were pushing MCC to work in Mauritania, which was moving in the right direction, but where de facto enslavement persisted even after legal changes.

Q: Right — the brand was that MCC didn't go into those places; that was left to others.

WINDSOR: Yes, that was the idea, USAID and other parts of the U.S. government could operate in such places, MCC should be more selective. In the end, Administration officials argued that there was not enough funding available outside of MCC to fund such endeavors, and so MCC agreed to pursue a threshold program which involved a smaller amount of funds than a compact and focused on policy and key institutional reform. The Mauritania threshold program was focused on energy and climate, and there was limited room to address even basic inclusion issues.

Q: We're coming up on two hours, so I'll ask one more before we close, and we can decide separately whether to do a follow-up. Reflecting on your time as deputy and then

Center director, what are you disappointed you didn't get to accomplish? Any major regrets from that era?

WINDSOR: I don't have a lot of regrets about what we did back then. It's easy to look back in hindsight and list everything that went wrong, and we could always have been better. The Center was successful in integrating democracy and governance into USAID's development approach. We did a great deal of work to lay out what we thought were best practices in the field, and we were committed to constantly learning and adapting. Outside donors can only be effective if they support local reformers dedicated to moving their countries towards better democracy and governance. I don't believe we made no difference. I think it was a unique moment in history where there were real opportunities for democratic advancement. I think we should be proud of what we did, while also being humble – we were not in the driver's seat and those of us working in this space always knew we couldn't guarantee outcomes.

Q: You couldn't guarantee that what you set out to do would actually be accomplished.

WINDSOR: Right. But the alternative was for USAID to just support the status quo. I do think there is a universal human desire to have a government that is accountable and representative. Getting there is a lifelong struggle — even established democracies like our own are still fighting to hold onto those aspects. So, thinking back, working at USAID with all of those democracy professionals was an amazing experience for me. I believe we helped in ways that will probably never show up in any formal evaluation.

Q: What's interesting — and we'll end on this — is that we're now getting real pushback on the idea that these democracy programs did harm, and I think that's where we can afford to be humble and acknowledge they didn't all succeed. So why don't we end here? This was a great closing reflection — thank you

End of interview