

**House Foreign Affairs Committee: Investigation of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan**  
**Summary Prepared by Democratic Committee Staff of Key Transcript Excerpts**

**Transcribed Interview of Samuel Aronson**

Conducted on Thursday, September 15, 2023.

**Samuel Aronson was a junior foreign service officer with roughly two years of relevant experience as a Foreign Service officer. Aronson volunteered as a consular officer and aide to Ambassador John Bass in Kabul from August 20 until August 29, 2021.**

Page 7, line 4

A: Good morning. My name is Samuel Aronson, and I was a State Department diplomat in Kabul from August 20th until August 29th, 2021. I served as both a consular officer and aide to the State Department's head of evacuation, Ambassador John Bass.

Page 47, line 4

Q: Yeah, and during your time in Kabul, just so we understand, were you responsible for any diplomatic security related duties?

A: Absolutely not, no.

Q: You were only responsible for duties that Foreign Service officers performed?

A: Absolutely, yes.

Q: So, is it fair to say that your most relevant experience for your time in Kabul was from 2019 onward in the department when you joined as a Foreign Service officer?

A: Yes.

Q: So, you had roughly 2 years, two and a half years of relevant experience when you got to Kabul?

A: Correct.

**Aronson expressed admiration for Ambassador John Bass, Deputy James DeHart, and Mustafa Popal, and considered them “the best of the Foreign Service.”**

Page 8, line 8

A: Like any large organization, there are State Department officials I would trust with my child's life while there are others who I would not trust to tell me the time. Speaking only to the former, I'd like to express my admiration for Ambassador John Bass, Deputy James DeHart, and Mustafa Popal. These senior diplomats demonstrated exceptional leadership and creative adaptability in the tragic conclusion of our Nation's 20-year, trillion-dollar,

generation-defining war. But even sending in the best of the Foreign Service that August could only remedy so much.

Page 27, line 10

A: Okay. So, my belief is that Ambassador Bass had previously been the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan until, I believe, 2020 and was widely regarded, both within the Afghanistan community but also the larger U.S. national security community and the White House probably as well, as a very strong leader, a very diligent thinker, someone who's able to handle tremendous stress and still be resilient, and someone who's able to show compassion while still making difficult decisions.

Q: Was this an understanding that was commonly held by others on the ground as well?

A: I believe so, yes.

Page 30, line 1

Q: What was your impression of Mr. DeHart?

A: I believe Jim DeHart has significant experience in Afghanistan spanning almost 20 years. He is a strong leader. He's a diligent thinker. He shows compassion. He has very similar qualities to Ambassador Bass.

**Aronson believed that extending the timeline of the military withdrawal may have placed U.S. personnel in harm's way and "that the safest option was to leave when we predetermined we would leave."**

Page 37, line 20

Q: Do you believe that extending the timeline would have positively benefited the evacuation?

A: Yeah, I mean, that's a tricky question. From a purely evacuation standpoint, absolutely yes; however, there could have been ramifications given our arrangement with the Taliban that we would be leaving on the 31st. I mean, from an operational standpoint, yes, that would have been tremendously helpful to have even 5 more minutes, even 30 more minutes. But whether the Taliban would have accepted that, and if they didn't accept that, whether that would've led to violence or attacks against us, you know, there is a risk that by extending it, I believe, could have also put our personnel in additional harm's way.

Q: So, am I correct in understanding that we were dependent on the Taliban's permission in that instance, which you didn't believe, or which others didn't believe we would get?

A: Yeah. I mean, from my perspective, from my vantage point, we were dependent on the Taliban insofar that we decided to be dependent on the Taliban. Based on everything that

I saw and overheard and witnessed, I'm not so sure that we would have necessarily faced violence had we said we need an extra 24 hours, or we need an extra 48 hours. But I believe the decision was made by leadership in our administration and, you know, possibly State Department leadership, that the safest option was to leave when we predetermined we would leave.

**Aronson confirmed that he had no reason to dispute Jayne Howell's testimony, which confirmed that State sent an email to consular officers worldwide seeking volunteers to assist with the Afghanistan noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO).**

Page 53, line 23

Q: Exhibit No. 2 is a trans -- a portion of the transcript between the committee and Jayne Howell, dated Friday, July 28th, 2023. And if I could call your attention to the bottom of page 7, to line 23.

A: Can I just have a minute to read through this page?

Q: Yes, of course. Yeah. If you want to read through line 23 on to page 8.

A: Okay. Okay.

Q: So if we could start on line 23 of page 7. A "Q" represents the question.

The question was asked of Ms. Howell: When did you first learn of the opportunity to assist with the evacuation?

Ms. Howell responds, moving to line 24: I don't think I could recall the exact date, but it - I know that I departed on August the 17th, so a day or two prior to that there was a call for volunteers, and I volunteered.

Continuing on page 8, line 2. The question reads: How did you learn of it?

Ms. Howell responded on line 3: There was an email sent to consular officers worldwide seeking volunteers to travel.

Do you dispute that that's what Ms. Howell's testimony is?

A: That that was what her testimony is? No, certainly not.

Q: Okay. So, her testimony reads that there was, in fact, an email sent to consular officers worldwide. You previously testified as to Ms. Howell's credibility. Is that correct?

A: Correct.

Q: Do you have any reason to dispute her testimony regarding an email having been sent to consular officers worldwide?

A: No, certainly not.

**Aronson considered the After Action Review (AAR) to be “very compelling and accurate,” and he was confident that Ambassador Dan Smith drafted the AAR in an “objective and fair” manner.**

Page 62, line 21

Q: Understood. Have you read the unclassified version of the AAR?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you dispute the findings of the AAR?

A: No. I agree with the findings.

Q: What percentage of certainty would you agree with the AAR findings?

A: You know, I don't have that in front of me, but if I can recall what my sentiment was after reading the AAR or the -- sorry, the unclassified summary that was publicly released, I found it to be very compelling and accurate.

Q: Okay. And are you personally aware of who Dan Smith is?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you aware that he drafted the AAR?

A: Yes.

Q: What's his professional reputation, in your opinion?

A: Dan Smith has a phenom -- or had -- I think he's since retired, but had a phenomenal reputation at the State Department. He was a career ambassador, I believe, which is the highest ranking official -- the highest rank attainable as a career official. And it's incredibly rare. I think there's only about three State Department people who are named who rise to career ambassador per year. He was the head of the Foreign Service Institute for some time. I met him probably twice in my life, and have nothing negative to say about him; in fact, all positive things.

Q: Okay. Would you have any reason, therefore, to dispute his ability to conduct the AAR and draft it in a way that is objective and fair?

A: I have no reason to think he would not draft it in a way that was objective and fair. In fact, I am, you know, confident based on what I know of Dan Smith that he would do his best to draft a fair and accurate AAR based on the information that he received to go into that AAR.

**Aronson noted that “the overwhelming majority of those consular officers on the ground were tremendously hardworking, brave, knowledgeable, compassionate, [and] experienced professionals.”**

Page 65, line 9

Q: I'd like to read into the record on page 6 the blue box entitled, Consular Officers at HKIA. I will read it in part beginning with: Consular officers responded heroically to extraordinary challenges while on the ground at HKIA. Under relentlessly hostile and threatening circumstances, they assisted thousands of panicked U.S. citizens and at risk Afghans in navigating a path to safety, drawing on their experience and judgment to make often wrenching decisions about who can enter HKIA to be evacuated and whom to turn away. The AAR team found the account of their experiences both uplifting and heartbreaking. I wanted to read that into the record and also note with it that it's your testimony out of the 35 to 40 individuals who were working on the ground in a consular function, only one departed, in your firsthand knowledge, related to lack of good fit. And also emphasize the fact that 150 people were interviewed in relation to the AAR. And it's also your testimony that you found the findings of the AAR to be credible as well as reliable, and also in terms of Dan Smith's judgment and character related to his reputation at the Department.

A: Yes. Absolutely. And I just want to make clear, because I want to make sure I didn't misspeak earlier when the majority side was interviewing me. While there were a small handful of consular officers who I believe were not a good fit for that environment, the overwhelming majority of those consular officers on the ground were tremendously hardworking, brave, knowledgeable, compassionate, experienced professionals. So while I spoke specifically to a small handful who were not, in my opinion, a good fit for that assignment, I just want to be clear that I am not denigrating the 30 plus or even, you know -- there were many who were rotated out -- so even 40 plus consular officers who I would gladly work with again in the future and who I would -- when I gave my opening remarks and I spoke to those who I would trust with my child's life, most of -- almost all of the individuals on the ground who were consular officers I would trust with my child's life. I just want to be clear about that.

**Aronson confirmed that it was “incredibly useful” to have Ambassador Bass’s expertise on the ground in Afghanistan.**

Page 69, line 14

Q: To your knowledge, does Ambassador Bass have Afghanistan experience?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you describe what you understand it to be?

A: Yes. Ambassador Bass was the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan for, I believe, at least 2 years, ending at some point, I believe, in 2020.

Q: Okay. So, was it useful to have his expertise on the ground during the unusual NEO experience?

A: It was incredibly useful, yes.

Q: Was he, to your knowledge, working full-time?

A: My experience, watching Ambassador Bass and being his staff aide for a period of the evacuation, was that he worked incredibly long hours. He slept on a mesh cot -- no mattress -- on a mesh cot in his office, using an MRE, a military ration, as his pillow. He did that to free up a bed so that one of us lower ranking officials could have a mattress with a sheet to sleep on.

Q: So, in these extenuating circumstances, was it reasonable to deploy a senior official from Washington like Ambassador Bass to contribute to the mission?

A: In this particular instance, it was incredibly useful, from my perspective.

**Aronson believed that the NEO benefited from having both Jayne Howell and Jean Akres on the ground in Afghanistan, as they both were “tremendous selections” for their roles.**

Page 70, line 7

Q: And would you say the same of Jayne Howell, who I believe you also testified previously had duties that seemed to run in parallel with Greg Floyd's duties?

A: Yes. It was incredibly useful to have Jayne Howell and Jean Akres there. And I believe both were tremendous selections for that.

Q: And they're both senior Foreign Service officers with a lot of consular experience, in your knowledge?

A: Yes. My understanding is Jayne Howell was already in the Senior Foreign Service because Senior Foreign Service is an actual career designation.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: What I learned about 2 weeks ago was that Jean Akres was just promoted into the Senior Foreign Service, as well, the first week of September.

**Aronson had a clear understanding of the overall goal of the mission and duties he was tasked to perform on the ground within an hour of arriving in Kabul. He began working almost immediately.**

Page 72, line 3

Q: And you testified initially that you didn't know what your mission was when the wheels touched the ground in Kabul. At what point did you have a mission that was clear to you?

A: When you say -- well, the mission was clear to me early that morning, certainly before 7:00 in the morning.

Q: And what did you understand that mission to be?

A: For that particular day -- well, are you asking about the overall mission for why I was sent there or what duties I would be doing that day?

Q: So, I appreciate the need for clarification. Why don't I ask you both? Did you have a sense of what your objectives were, as a State Department employee, that you should be pursuing and performing on the ground?

A: Yes, absolutely. It was clear to me that day that the mission that I would be doing for the foreseeable future was working with the U.S. Marines at the various gates or at the passenger terminal for me to safely vet individuals and families to determine whether they met the qualifications to be evacuated out of Afghanistan.

Q: Okay. And that mission, that became clear to you within an hour of arrival in Kabul?

A: Yeah. Yes.

Q: Okay. I think -- so the last topic we just wanted to unpack and make sure we understand so I believe you testified earlier that you got confirmation that you would be going to Kabul -- you maybe had a sense of it on the night of the 17th, but you understood it fully or it felt confirmed to you midday on the 18th. Is that correct?

A: That's correct, yeah.

**Aronson noted that, during this “chaotic one-in-a-generation sized NEO,” he did not consider there to be a lack of consular officers on the ground. He believed that the dedicated consular officers could have been used more efficiently in particular instances, but he noted that they were generally never sitting idle.**

Page 109, line 19

Q: With that said, I wanted to touch back upon the issue of staffing considerations in Kabul. So, I believe you had testified that there weren't -- there wasn't a dearth of consular

officers but, rather, the issue, from your perspective, was how such resources were used. Is that correct?

A: Yeah, that's my assessment. And, you know, with the caveat that I think it's really easy to look at anything in hindsight and figure out ways that we could have done better. Like, I probably, you know, could look at my commute to get to this building today and I probably could have done that better. So, I just -- you know, to be -- to be fair and balanced, there -- in my perspective, there were ways that officers could have been used better, but with the contextual understanding that this was a chaotic once in a generation sized NEO.

Page 111, line 5

Q: Okay. And could you perhaps clarify so I understand a little bit better. When you were saying resources weren't being used as efficiently as they could have been, what did you mean by that?

A: So there were times and circumstances where an Afghan family or an American family who came in from a gate was vetted on three separate occasions by three different teams of consular officers before getting on the airplane. And in doing so, that meant that at any one of those checkpoints if that family or that individual did not overcome their burden to prove that they were eligible to be on a flight, the consular officer who was vetting them at that particular instance could have and in many cases did make the determination to send that family back out.

Page 111, line 21

Q: Okay. So, is it correct then that when you were referencing the resource issue, it wasn't necessarily because the gates were closed? That wasn't the issue?

A: If the gates were closed, generally speaking, we wouldn't keep consular officers there very long. You know, there were occasions where I was sent out to a gate to see if I could convince the military to open it to some capacity. I never succeeded in that. So, after trying for, say, 1 hour, I was then sent back to the Joint Operations Center to then go to a new assignment.

Q: Okay. So, when the gates were closed and you weren't processing visas or other information, were you redistributed to other tasks?

A: Yes.

Q: So, you weren't sitting there idly. Is that correct?

A: Generally speaking, no. The only time I was sitting idly was if I really physically or emotionally needed a break for 30 minutes or an hour.



**Aronson argued that the decision to burn several hundreds of passports made by a fellow consular officer during the NEO was “a life safety decision” conducted in line with embassy shutdown document destruction training, which Foreign Service officers undergo biannually.**

Page 123, line 17

Q: And just to be clear, did you have any sense from what your colleague relayed to you about that series of events how many passports were in the bag? Were they Afghan passports and American passports or --

A: From what he relayed, it was Afghan and American. And from what he relayed, it was several hundred, in the low hundreds.

Q: Okay. And the concern, if I'm understanding you correctly, that your colleague had that he relayed to you was that the Taliban would overrun the airport. If those passports came into the possession of the Taliban, those individuals would be at risk?

A: Correct.

Q: So, the reason for burning the passports you understood from your colleague to be to minimize risk to hundreds of individuals?

A: Correct. It was a life safety decision.

Q: A life safety decision. Okay. As a Diplomatic Security agent, had you ever had any familiarity with or training in procedures and protocols that are necessary when an embassy shuts down?

A: Yes.

Q: And did that include training or experience with respect to document retention and document destruction?

A: Destruction, yes. Retention, no.

Q: Okay. And did you have any experience or training on that as a Foreign Service officer later in your career? Granted, you were a political cone officer, it's a slightly different set of activities you're undertaking --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- but just for clarity.

A: No. The only -- the only training I had was in embassy -- or document destruction for when you're evacuating an embassy, which it's required per the Foreign Affairs Manual that at least twice a year the embassy does a document destruction drill.

Q: Okay. So, is it fair to say then that employees in the Department have some sense or some familiarity or some opportunity to become familiar with emergency procedures, including document destruction, should it become necessary?

A: Yes. Any Foreign Service officer who spent at least 12 months overseas has -- should have gone through at least two document destruction drills.

Q: Okay. I think just the last question then. You testified earlier about the discretion and the judgment that commissioned consular officers and consular officers generally have to exercise 80 to 90 percent of the time in their regular job. Would you say that the Department -- that employees at the Department generally have to exercise their best discretion and judgment in the course of carrying out their duties?

A: Yes, on a daily basis.

Q: And do you feel that the Department gives reasonable latitude to employees to do so?

A: It's hard for me to make an assertion based on the institution.

Q: But in your experience.

A: In my experience, overwhelmingly, but not 100 percent of the time, yes.

**Aronson described the security situation directly outside of HKIA as chaotic, in which “it was routine to hear gunfire exchange between or from the Taliban generally firing warning shots.” To create a “semblance of order” at an airport, which was vulnerable to terrorism attacks, the military ultimately had to close all gates except Abbey Gate, which became the “only viable gate” for much of the evacuation.**

Page 128, line 19

Q: Are you able to talk about what the security situation was like outside the airport, as you perceived it?

A: Is there a specific gate you want me to speak to?

Q: Sure. You can talk about Abbey Gate.

A: Yeah. Okay. So outside of Abbey Gate -- Abbey Gate became our only viable gate for much of the evacuation, starting on or about August 22nd, 2021. The other -- South Gate was closed, East Gate was closed, North Gate was closed, all by the military, just to be clear. And Abbey Gate was our one gate that we could still process people, thanks to the marines at that gate who created a semblance of order in what was otherwise a very chaotic situation. So, it was routine to hear gunfire exchange between -- or from the Taliban generally firing warning shots. The very first -- so I went outside the gate on August 21st and August 22nd. I processed people outside Abbey Gate not far from where the explosion ended up taking place a few days later. And the marines had a good sense

of order at that point. But beyond that was a British military checkpoint, where I believe they fired warning shots from time to time. And even in that initial area managed by the marines, it was not infrequent to hear stun grenades or have smoke grenades to try to gain the attention of individuals and corral them.

**According to Aronson, the day after the Abbey Gate bombing, the consular team continued working to evacuate the remaining high-profile civil-society groups through a sealed-off HKIA, under the threat of additional attacks.**

Page 140 line 9

A: So, the 27th, I came from the KAK to the JOC at 7:00 a.m. -- or, sorry, 6:00 a.m., and Jayne Howell told me that Ambassador Bass and Jim DeHart requested that I staff them that day. We were told overnight -- or I woke up to an email -- sorry, a WhatsApp message from Scott Weinhold, who was the assistant chief of mission, that said: Be ready on 30 minutes' notice to get out, to leave. So, you're only bringing what you can physically carry, no suitcases, just what you can carry in, like, a backpack or in your hands. And be ready to leave on 30 minutes' notice, because it's incredibly fluid, we're expecting more attacks. But keep doing what you're doing. I also woke up that morning to an email from Secretary Blinken that was sent to those of us who were still in Kabul, just the 70 or 75 of us, saying that his thoughts were with us and that he would support us, you know, with our reintegration back to normalcy when we got home. So, on the 27th, I was staffing Ambassador Bass up in the executive office. And all of the gates were closed. Obviously, Abbey Gate was our last viable gate, and that was no longer a viable gate, so everything was closed. There were no State Department personnel at any gates throughout that day, to the best of my understanding, my knowledge. So, we were focused on the remaining high profile civil society groups that were still waiting to be evacuated. And the general sentiment -- I'm paraphrasing -- was that most of these would not get in, but that if an opportunity presented itself, we would do our best to call them and get them in.

**Aronson stated that consular staff on the ground “rose to the task” and repeatedly contacted every single American who registered their interest in leaving Afghanistan. Aronson expressed frustration over accounts from politicians who said that Americans were left behind, as he asserted that “we gave [Americans in Afghanistan] multiple opportunities to come to the airport.”**

Page 143, line 13

Q: When you were working on that day, helping staff Bass, were you aware of how many Americans remained in Afghanistan who were trying to get out? Is that a number that was being tracked?

A: That was a number that was being tracked. It's not one that I can recall off the top of my head. But the issue that we faced throughout the entire evacuation, one among many issues, was that we had a list of Americans who wanted to be evacuated, and we contacted every single one of them multiple times. You know, I'm not sure if every single American was contacted the exact number of times, but we continuously were in touch, not -- I was not in touch with them, but our team was in touch with them. When it came time to actually come into the airport, a number of them, a large number of them, expressed they were either unwilling to face the risk, the security risk, or were unwilling to come if we wouldn't allow in their relatives, additional people, or simply said they weren't ready to leave. So, one of the things that bothered me personally after the evacuation ended and I got home was hearing accounts from politicians that said that we left Americans behind. It's an obvious fact that Americans were left behind; I can't dispute that. However, I believe, based on my personal experience, that we gave every single American citizen who registered with us their interest -- we gave them multiple opportunities to come to the airport. And I don't believe it's the State Department's fault that these individuals chose, for whatever their personal reason was, not to come to the airport.

Page 154, line 19

A: [. . .] So, I believe that the State Department rose to the task. I really do. And I think that the media and I think there are Members of Congress who have been a little bit -- or maybe even a lot of bit -- unfair to the career State Department officials who were on the ground for this evacuation making these incredibly difficult decisions. [. . .]

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