

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 John Bass

Conducted on Monday, January 22, 2024.

Ambassador John Bass has served as the Under Secretary of State for Management since 2021. He previously served as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Turkey, and Georgia, led the State Department team deployed to Kabul for noncombatant evacuation (NEO), and later served as the Special Coordinator for Afghan Relocations.

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Q: Thank you. Under Secretary Bass, can you please give us a brief overview of your career at the State Department?

A: I have been a career Foreign Service officer for approximately 37 years, three-time Ambassador, served on four continents, including service in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Q: You have made note of serving as an Ambassador for three different tours. Were one of those tours when you were serving as Ambassador to Afghanistan?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you provide the dates for –

A: I –

Q: -- your position then?

A: I was on the ground at Ambassador to Afghanistan from mid December 2017 until early January 2020.

Q: And who nominated you for that position?

A: President Trump.

Q: When were you confirmed?

A: I was confirmed, I believe, in late September 2017.

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Q: And what was your position throughout 2021, including the withdrawal and emergency evacuation as was just defined?

[. . .]

A: So, throughout 2021 – well, from the beginning of 2021 until September, I was a senior adviser at the Foreign Service Institute.

Q: Am I correct in understanding that you held this position immediately after serving as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan?

A: Following a period of leave, that is correct.

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A: So, following conclusion of the evacuation, I returned to Washington and spent 5 or 6 weeks setting up what is now known as the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts. And then, somewhere around Columbus Day weekend in October of 2021, I transitioned out of that role and began preparing for confirmation for my current position.

Q: And that is your role as Under Secretary for Management, correct?

A: That is correct.

Ambassador Bass won numerous awards for his contributions related to foreign service, participated in dozens of crises-related task forces at the State Department, and oversaw an office within the State Department responsible for coordinating an active response to crises impacting embassies and American citizens overseas. These experiences prepared him well for his role on the ground during the NEO.

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Q: In your experience, is being a three-time Ambassador considered a normal occurrence?

A: It – it's a bit unusual.

Q: Exceptional?

A: I don't know that I would characterize it that way.

Q: Are there many State Department personnel in the Foreign Service who get to be three-time Ambassadors?

A: No.

Q: So it's uncommon, in fact?

A: It's uncommon.

Q: Have you received any awards for your contributions related to the Foreign Service or foreign affairs writ large?

A: Yes.

Q: Approximately how many?

A: I don't know. Maybe a dozen, 15, somewhere in there

Q: So quite a few. Have you ever participated in a crisis related task force at State?

A: Yes.

Q: About how many?

A: Probably two dozen?

Q: Is that common?

A: No.

Q: How come?

A: That's a reflection of my tenure as director of the Operations Center and my time as Executive Secretary. When in both roles, I – the responsibilities of those positions involve an active role in each crisis management activity.

Q: And you just noted your role as director of Operations Center. What specifically does that entail related to crisis management?

A: So the director of the Operations Center oversees an office within the Department that is responsible for coordinating the Department's active response to crises impacting our embassies and American citizens overseas.

Q: Do you feel that role helped inform your job responsibilities and performance during the NEO in Afghanistan?

A: Yes.

Q: How so?

A: It provided me in those years, when I was on the Washington end of the crises, with an understanding of how information is received/managed in Washington and how the deliberative process around various aspects of crisis management and response occur in Washington.

Ambassador Bass did not participate in planning for the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan during the Biden Administration, though he actively assisted during the evacuation itself. Ambassador Bass believed that his preparation to assist in the evacuation was sufficient.

Page 33, line 13

Q: Am I correct in understanding that until you were asked to go to Afghanistan to aid with the evacuation, you had no involvement in issues pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal under the Biden administration?

A: That's correct.

[. . .]

Q: What were the circumstances under which you were selected to assist with the evacuation?

A: Could you be more specific?

Q: Of course. Who asked that you go to Afghanistan to assist with the evacuation?

A: So I received a call from Deputy Secretary Sherman asking me to go back to support Ambassador Wilson and coordinate the operational aspects of the evacuation.

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Q: You noted that Deputy Secretary Sherman made the request to you to assist with the evacuation. Was this something that had been preplanned, or was this something that emerged, given the immediate situation on the ground?

A: It had not been preplanned.

Q: In retrospect, how adequate do you think the preparation you were given was?

A: Within the time available to me, it was adequate.

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Q: Thank you. In retrospect, do you wish you'd been given more time to prepare for your role in the NEO?

A: Given how fluid the situation was on the ground, I'm not sure that additional preparation time would have yielded a significant benefit.

Page 98, line 14

Q: And part of what I'm asking here is, in the prior – in the majority's prior round, they were asking whether you had a number of briefings or consultations, et cetera, prior to your departure. Do you think it would have been reasonable to spend the 8 to 10 hours prior to

your departure engaging in long winded briefings, meeting with folks, versus getting ready to get on a plane and serve in Kabul?

A: I would say, given how dynamic and fluid the situation was, much of what I would have expected to be told in a – in preparatory briefings would have not been particularly relevant by the time I arrived or within a short period thereafter because things were changing so rapidly on the ground.

Q: Okay. Do you feel that upon your arrival you were well prepared to handle the situation in terms of your prior experience?

A: I was as, I think, well prepared as one could have been.

Ambassador Bass noted that the Trump Administration made the informal decision as early as 2018 to begin withdrawing U.S. troops in Afghanistan due to a lack of patience and dissatisfaction with the cost of ongoing operations.

Page 25, line 24

Q: Can you share with us when a decision was made to begin [with] drawing U.S. troops in Afghan[istan] by May 2021?

A: I don't recall specifically when that – when a formal decision was made.

Q: Do you recall when an informal decision was made?

A: I think, if one was to look at the public record and what was available – and the media was quite clear that, throughout 2018 and particularly the second half, that President Trump was growing increasingly impatient with a lack of progress and increasingly unhappy with the continued cost of the American Government's activities in Afghanistan. And, somewhere around the end of 2018, it was pretty clear that he wanted to do things quite differently.

Page 42, line 3

Q: So this is a document entitled "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia." It's issued on August 21st, 2017, and it's taken from the former White House's website. Do you see, do you read that that's what this is?

A: Yes.

Q: So in this, President Trump stressed, in unveiling the strategy, that a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would be conditions based. He said, "A core pillar of our new strategy is a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions. I've said it many times how counterproductive it is for the United States to announce in advance the dates we intend to begin, or end, military options." I'm sorry, I should have stopped and said where it is. So this is on the top of page 6. First, it says "A core pillar" – sorry about that.

So I'll just pick up where I left off. "We will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities. Conditions on the ground – not arbitrary timetables – will guide our strategy from now on. America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out." Were you familiar with this element of the strategy?

A: Yes.

Q: And what did you understand the conditions to be that would be pursued?

A: To the best of my recollection, the principal condition was a substantial reduction in violence or – and/or increased capacity of the Afghan security forces to be able to fulfill their responsibilities themselves.

[...]

Q: Did you ever think that these were -- this was an achievable approach when you took over?

A: When I arrived, I didn't feel I had as yet a basis to judge.

Q: And when you left?

A: When I left, circumstances were quite different.

Q: How so?

A: We had -- by January 2020, the administration had shifted away from the South Asia strategy as the principal organizing principle for how we would look at, as I recall, our presence in Afghanistan.

Q: And when you say "shifted away," what changed?

A: I think, as I noted earlier, it was pretty clear, if you look at the body of public comment from the President throughout 2018, he lost patience with the conditionality and the South Asia strategy, did not feel it was producing results quickly enough -- I'm inferring that from the public comments -- and seemed to be desiring more rapid changes on the ground.

Q: Can you provide an example of how the President lost patience or how you inferred as such?

A: I can't cite a specific throughout 2018, throughout most of that year. I recall the public narrative surrounding the President's decision to remove our forces from Syria as including some prospective statements about additional measures to come in other places, potentially or -- and if it didn't say that explicitly, certainly there was an expectation that that would be -- that that was the prevailing mindset.

Ambassador Bass asserted that the U.S. withdrawal was initiated by President Trump and was intended to reduce U.S. troops to zero in Afghanistan.

Page 95, line 5

Q: Is it fair to say that the U.S. withdrawal was initiated by President Trump?

A: Yes.

Q: And that the withdrawal began prior to April 2021?

A: That is correct.

Q: And that President Trump's intent was to ultimately reduce U.S. troops to zero?

A: To the best of my recollection, that's consistent with what I understood the President's intent to be during my tenure.

Ambassador Bass noted that the Trump Administration's South Asia Strategy created "substantial concern" among the Afghan government and elites of a rapid reduction in U.S. and coalition forces.

Page 44, line 11

Q: How do you think the Taliban received initially the South Asia strategy and the evolution of that to the period of from that point when you started to when you left?

A: Throughout my tenure I found it very difficult to understand what the Taliban -- what people in positions to make decisions in the Taliban were thinking or how they evaluated what we were doing or not doing.

Q: Okay. I think often what we end up missing also in this debate is the Afghan Government's thoughts. And since you're an interlocutor to the Afghan Government, how do you think they took the changing approach?

A: In this setting, I can say there was substantial concern in the Afghan Government and among Afghan elites in the capital about rapid reductions in U.S. forces and those of the coalition members.

Ambassador Bass stated that the lack of a Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretary for South Asia during his ambassadorial tenure in Kabul under the Trump Administration undermined the negotiating ability of U.S. officials serving in an acting capacity.

Page 48, line 18

Q: Was there a Senate confirmed Assistant Secretary for South Asia at that time?

A: No.

Q: Was there ever a nominee?

A: I recall there was a nominee, or maybe there was a pre-nominee. There was somebody identified for the position. I don't know that the individual was nominated. I can't remember.

Q: Okay. Did you sense that there was any impact from not having -- of not having a Senate-confirmed nominee as the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you elaborate a little bit more on the impact?

A: So it's been my experience that any time -- or often when someone is in an acting capacity, foreign governments in particular sometimes look at them differently and decide they're going to wait until there's an actual person, confirmed person, in that role. Sometimes it creates doubts about whether that person really speaks for the administration or not. I think that latter piece was mitigated over time by the amount of time Ambassador Wells spent in the role.

Q: And to be clear, there was never a confirmed Assistant -- a Senate confirmed Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia the entire time you were in -- you served as Ambassador to Kabul?

A: That's correct.

Ambassador Bass characterized the transition between the Trump and Biden Administrations as “atypical.”

Page 95, line 14

Q: Turning to a different subject, have you participated in any administration transitions from an incoming administration?

A: Yes.

Q: How many?

A: I think it depends on how one defines "participation." I've, as a career officer, I've been on duty through changes in six or seven administrations. I've been in Washington for, I want to say, three -- three or four.

Q: Okay. And what do these transition processes generally include?

A: It varies depending on whether it is a transition between parties or whether it is a transition between terms.

Q: Between parties.

A: Generally speaking, they involve preparation of a significant amount of background and briefing material and context on the Department of State's operations that is made available to a transition team once that's established. And then subsequently, as senior officials are nominated, the Department prepares a set of position specific materials and makes current officials available to brief those people at an unclassified level to prepare them for confirmation, and then, once they are confirmed, to allow them to take up their duties.

Q: So generally speaking, it typically involves prep, exchange of papers, briefings, a quite robust process. Is that correct?

A: In the transitions between parties –

Q: Yes.

A: -- that I've been involved in, yes.

Q: Understanding that you were at the Foreign Service Institute during the Trump to Biden transition, do you have any recollection or context to provide regarding that transition itself?

A: I don't.

Q: Okay. Did you hear any of your colleagues opine on the quality of that transition?

A: I can't recall whether it would have been colleagues or press reporting noting that the delayed start in the transition period as a result of the delays in certifying the election resulted in a truncated transition period.

Q: Fair to say that was atypical compared to the transitions you've worked on prior?

A: Yes.

Ambassador Bass noted that the evacuation occurred “rapidly” due to the unexpected collapse of Afghan security forces and that the situation on the ground in Kabul was “fluid” as a result.

Page 96, line 24

Q: Okay. Turning to the NEO itself. You previously testified that you had about 8 to 10 hours prior to departure to prepare for your role. Is that correct?

A: I had 8 to 10 hours between the point at which I was notified and the point at which I departed.

Q: Why did you have 8 to 10 hours in advance of your departure?

A: As opposed -- I'm not sure I understand the question.

Q: Would you agree with the sentiment that the NEO was sudden, it occurred rapidly?

A: Yes.

Q: And why -- why would it -- why did it occur rapidly?

A: So I can't speak to specifics. Broadly speaking, my impression as an outside observer, based on what I was reading in the press, was that the collapse of Afghan security forces, the Taliban's rapid move to take control of provincial capitals and their fairly rapid appearance outside of Kabul was faster than people had expected, and that President Ghani's decision -- unexpected decision, by what was available to me in the public space -- his decision to flee the country created a leadership vacuum and that that accelerated the collapse of what remained of the Afghan Government in the capital city.

Q: You previously testified that the situation on the ground was fluid. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: Fair to say that there was a precipitous change in the situation on the ground that necessitated the NEO?

A: I think that's a fair characterization.

Ambassador Bass stated that the “chaos” that unfolded at HKIA was inevitable and due to the nature of the crisis, not due to dysfunction between the State Department and Department of Defense.

Page 69, line 3

Q: In your professional opinion, what do you believe were the biggest factors leading to the chaos at HKIA?

A: Do you mean the chaos outside of the perimeter gates?

Q: Correct.

A: So, as I noted, I think the major factors contributing to the chaos outside the entry points were the large number of Afghans seeking entry to the airport complex, the nature of the physical security measures around the airport, and the absence of the central government's security elements providing broader security in the capital following the collapse of the government after President Ghani fled the country.

Page 76, line 4

Q: What were the biggest challenges for State and military coordination?

A: I would say ensuring that we had a common understanding of priorities as they evolved through the day, ensuring that threat information that was coming from the military was being shared widely quickly, and ensuring that our interactions with foreign governments, that we were saying the same things about priorities to both civilian and military representatives of other governments because, of course, as we were engaging in our activities, so, too, were all of the members or most of the members of the coalition, many with both civilian and military representatives on the ground. And so securing common agreement on a set of priorities for the day in terms of who we would be trying to prioritize entry for required a fair amount of engagement with representatives of other governments.

Q: And was this because DOD and State sometimes had differing priorities or different views on how to effectuate those priorities, or was this largely due to the situation and chaos on the ground?

A: I would say, broadly speaking, the latter.

Ambassador Bass noted that the State Department formally requests a NEO, while the Department of Defense is the operational lead, as the State Department relies on the Department of Defense to provide military and commercial aircrafts to American citizens trying to flee harm.

Page 81, line 9

Q: In terms of the evacuation, do you agree with the sentiment that military personnel and equipment are the domain of DOD? Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: And you have previously testified as well that it was well understood that DOD was the lead of the NEO. Is that correct?

A: That's my recollection, yes.

Q: What is the State Department's role in a NEO as you understand it?

A: As I understand it, it is to coordinate communications with American citizens, lawful permanent residents, others with whom we are -- or others who we are trying to help depart or respond to their inquiries, to essentially get the relevant information from them, ensure they're well documented, have legal pathways, and to coordinate their arrival at a point at which they're picked up by DOD and going to a DOD organized and led system for manifesting on flights or boats or whatever transportation is going to move them out of harm's way.

Q: Who calls for a NEO?

- A: So the State Department formally requests a NEO through the Executive Secretary channels between departments.
- Q: And why is DOD the operational lead of a NEO?
- A: Because the situation on the ground is such that commercial or private means of transport are unavailable to people, and so we are in a position where we are relying on either DOD -- well, we're relying on DOD transport, whether it's military or commercial aircraft chartered by DOD, and we're relying on DOD for a certain amount of security in the environment to enable those -- that evacuation effort to occur.
- Q: Thank you. And so referring to exhibit No. 5, the DOD Joint Publication, looking at the cover page, there are various seals. Do you see a seal of the State Department?
- A: No, I do not.
- Q: What do these seals pertain to?
- A: So we have the seal for the Joint Chiefs and the seals for the services, as well as the Coast Guard.
- Q: Okay. And then turning to Roman numeral I, the preface, who is the signatory on this document? On the preface, that is.
- A: On the exhibit that I have before me, it is Lieutenant General William C. Mayville, Jr., Director of the Joint Staff, on behalf of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.
- Q: Is there a State Department signatory here?
- A: No, there is not.
- Q: And then turning to Roman numeral VIII, entitled, the "Executive Summary Commander's Overview."
- A: Uh-huh.
- Q: And I want to draw your attention to the first sentence underneath "Overview." It says, "Noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) are conducted by the Department of Defense to assist in evacuating U.S. citizens and nationals, DOD civilian personnel, and designated persons --" Does that sentence include the Department of State -- or the first part of that sentence, does it include Department of State?
- A: The Department of State is not specified in that portion of the sentence.
- Q: The sentence proceeds with " -- whose lives are in danger from locations in a foreign nation, to an appropriate safe haven, when directed by the Department of State." That second portion of the sentence, "when directed by the Department of State," is that what we just discussed in terms of the State Department calling a NEO?

A: That is my understanding of what that term refers to.

Q: Okay. And then the first part of the sentence -- "NEOs are conducted by the Department of Defense" -- does that comport with what we just discussed in terms of DOD being the operational lead of a NEO?

A: In my experience and understanding, yes

Ambassador Bass confirmed that State Department leadership did not have concerns about Ambassador Wilson's fitness to serve during the evacuation.

Page 34, line 11

Q: Did Deputy Secretary Sherman express concern about Ambassador Wilson's ability to conduct the evacuation without your assistance?

A: To the best of my recollection, she did not.

Q: Did any members of Department leadership express concern about Ambassador Wilson's ability to conduct the evacuation?

A: To the best of my recollection, no.

Q: Were there concerns about Ambassador Wilson's capabilities in the lead up to the evacuation?

A: I can't speak to that.

Q: There was already a Chief of Mission on the ground in Ambassador Wilson, correct?

A: Yes.

Q: Did anyone explain why they were sending the former Ambassador to Afghanistan to assist with the current Chief of Mission?

A: So, as I noted, Deputy Sherman asked me to go back to coordinate the operational aspects. And once I arrived, it was pretty clear there was more than enough work to go around.

Ambassador Bass commended the efforts by State to contact American citizens during the evacuation as "unprecedented" and "extraordinary."

Page 133, line 23

Q: Would you agree with the sentiment that the outreach for the NEO we're discussing here today was, in fact, unprecedented?

A: I think, prospectively, in terms of the duration and the volume, one might characterize it

as unprecedented. But, in the absence of like comparators, I would -- I would hesitate to make that kind of a blanket assessment.

Q: Would you agree that it was extraordinary?

A: Yes.

Page 130, line 14

Q: So fair to say outreach to AMCITS was being handled by HKIA, D.C. and also through missions around the world?

A: That's my recollection, yes.

Q: Is it a fair characterization to say that the effort was multipronged and extensive?

A: Yes. My recollection is there were tens of thousands of calls or emails to American citizens in Afghanistan over that period of time.

Page 131, line 7

Q: Okay. And are you aware of whether or not the State Department took measures outside of the STEP program to contact American citizens residing in Kabul and Afghanistan writ large during the NEO?

A: My recollection is that we used a range of tools, including broad public messaging. Through those systems, we did direct call outs. And I want to say I recall that, in some cases, if we were not able to reach the American citizen, there were efforts to reach family members or others that the American citizen had said we could be in contact with.

Q: So, to be clear for the record, the Department used the STEP program, public messaging, outreach to family members of American citizens, as part of its toolkit to evacuate individuals from Afghanistan. Is that correct?

A: We used as many different channels as we could. My recollection is we were engaging, as American citizens had allowed us to, with family members, but you would want to double check that particular aspect.

Page 132, line 11

Q: So what we're speaking about here, is it fair to say people make their own individualized calculations about their safety, their family's safety, their wellness, et cetera, that could, in part, relate to their willingness or desire to leave the country?

A: Yes. That's -- that's accurate. And, you know, I can recall at least a couple of subsets of Americans or lawful permanent residents who had returned to Kabul in the days immediately preceding the collapse of the government, despite our travel warnings that

were quite explicit and recommending Americans -- warning Americans not to travel to the country.

Q: Okay. The AAR characterized Consular Affairs' efforts to reach out to AMCITS as commendable and entrepreneurial, despite the limited information. Given your experience on the ground, do you agree with that sentiment?

A: Yes.

Ambassador Bass stated that Dean Thompson “is a very capable professional,” and that the Afghanistan Task Force worked with “a great deal of ingenuity, commitment, creativity, [and] determination” despite numerous, unexpected obstacles.

Page 99, line 18

Q: Okay. And you previously testified that you were in communication with the Afghanistan Task Force. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you clarify for the record what the Afghanistan Task Force was?

A: So the Afghanistan Task Force was the State Department's task organized group of volunteers -- which probably, by the end, numbered in at least the hundreds -- of people who were working to support the evacuation, whether it was in enabling volunteers to go into Kabul, whether it was in identifying resources that we needed on the ground, or coordinating with the military to understand who was coming out when and how many and where they were going. And a big part of that was to try to field the enormous range of inquiries and advocacy coming in on behalf of individual American citizens or Afghans from a wide range of Americans and trying to understand who these people were, where they were located, and how we could best help them to safely and securely get themselves to the airport and onto a flight out.

Q: So it sounds like they were doing quite a bit. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: And do you know who led the task force?

A: So the task force coordinator, as I recall, was Dean Thompson, supported by my former deputy, Karen Decker, in the lead roles.

Q: And what is Dean Thompson's professional reputation?

A: In my experience, now-Ambassador Thompson is a very capable professional who had substantial prior crisis management experience.

Q: Given your time in the NEO, what's your assessment as to the effectiveness of the task force?

A: Difficult for me to judge because I was not present or focusing on much of what they were doing. Of the work of the task force components that most closely overlap with what we were doing on the ground, I saw a great deal of ingenuity, commitment, creativity, determination to try to overcome some challenges associated with reaching people in that dynamic security environment, where security conditions were changing, where communications infrastructure was not optimal, and where our colleagues were hearing from, in some cases, hundreds of advocates on behalf of individuals. So trying to sort all that information and make sense of it was quite a challenge for them. But I saw people doing the very best they could with what they had to work with in the time available.

Ambassador Bass noted that the State Department “responded with great agility, determination, and dedication” while working in an extremely challenging “high-threat environment.” He had never seen in his career such a “singular purpose and focus” by U.S. government agencies.

Page 103, line 2

Q: At this point in the investigation, we've interviewed several State Department officials, all of whom have testified that the Department and its personnel on the ground in Kabul were dedicated, entrepreneurial, and admirable under challenging circumstances. I'd like to read for you the last sentence in paragraph number 2. "Overall the Department's personnel responded with great agility, determination, and dedication, while taking on roles and responsibilities both domestically and overseas that few had ever anticipated." Do you agree with this assessment?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you provide any further color for the record?

A: I think it's -- you should take what's written here and add to it the lens of challenges that are associated with working in a high threat environment with a lot of uncertainty about how long we would have to try to perform this mission, and also try to understand the personal toll on the individuals who were closest to those in need and who spent at least 12 hours a day, every day, at the entry gates face to face with so many people who were seeking to leave.

Page 140, line 20

Q: Is it also your experience that you did everything you could during that time to evacuate as many people as possible from Afghanistan?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you tell us why?

A: Why I come to that conclusion?

Q: Uh-huh. For example, you stated you were working over 20 hours per day for 12 days.

A: Yeah. So, again, our -- I've -- in my career in government, I have never seen elements of the U.S. Government work together with such singular purpose and focus and lack of concern for who's getting credit or who's doing what on people were relentless in problem solving and in supporting each other and in trying to do the very best we could with the time we had available to us.

Ambassador Bass believed that there was a sufficient number of consular officers at HKIA as per the circumstances on the ground.

Page 107, line 10

Q: Do you believe there were enough consular officers at HKIA to execute the mission?

A: For the security environment in which we were operating and the challenges associated with the physical security measures of the airport complex, I recall assessing, after I had been there several days, that we had a sufficient number of people for what we were able to do in the environment.

Ambassador Bass stated that there were several hundred Americans who elected not to leave Afghanistan before the August 31 for numerous reasons. The State Department continued to help these citizens depart after the withdrawal.

Page 118, line 20

Q: And are you aware, do you have an estimate of how many Americans were still in Afghanistan when the U.S. left at the end of August 2021?

A: My recollection is that there were several hundred who either elected not to leave, in part, in a number of cases, because they were part of complex families and their extended families did not have a legal pathway to the United States, or elected to stay for other reasons. Didn't feel secure enough trying to get themselves to the airport. Whatever the circumstances were, my recollection is it was several hundred.

Q: And what was the State Department's post-August 31 plan for getting Americans and Afghan allies out?

A: So immediately following the end of the noncombatant evacuation, we continued efforts to try to help American citizens to depart in the initial weeks by trying to prioritize them for charter flights that were operating from Mazar, and then, subsequent to that, in a

series of efforts to try to organize charter flights into Kabul or, alternately, to find ways to enable them to depart over land to Pakistan.

Ambassador Bass noted that efforts by private groups to evacuate American citizens and Afghan allies created greater challenges for U.S. Government consular staff.

Page 137, line 12

Q: What impact did these private efforts have on the overall USG effort to evacuate AMCITS, those in the SIV pipeline and other Afghans at risk?

A: I think, during the NEO, it -- I would say the impact was primarily in, as I recall, duplicating advocacy and creating greater challenges for the consular professionals offshore who were trying to keep track of individual American citizens and their whereabouts, you know, as they would be receiving in some cases dozens of inquiries about the same person in a given period of time. That created additional caseload work to try to work through without necessarily contributing new information.

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