

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 James Dehart

Conducted on Friday, June 16, 2023.

James DeHart considered the situation on the ground in Afghanistan during the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) as “very chaotic” and “extraordinarily challenging.”

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Q: What impression were you given of the situation on the ground in the country prior to your departure?

A: That it was extraordinarily challenging.

Q: In what ways?

A: Well, I'm not quite sure of the impression I had as I was departing Washington, but when I arrived on the ground, the -- the situation was -- was very chaotic. I would distinguish that from our response to the situation, which I don't think was chaotic, but the situation was chaotic. We had -- there were very, very large numbers of Afghans that were -- that had mobbed the perimeter of the airport, that were surrounding the entire airport that were trying to force their way to the gates, trying to get in. There were Taliban in those crowds. There were thugs in those crowds that were preying on people that were trying to get to the gates. There was -- there was a lot of gunfire constant that was ringing overhead in the crowds. So it was a -- it was a -- it was a spectacle that I -- the likes of which I'd never seen before.

DeHart had the expertise and ability to properly manage the State Department's team on the ground in Kabul during the evacuation.

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Q: Given that experience, did you feel qualified to be going to Afghanistan to assist with the evacuation?

A: Yes. I felt very well-qualified to be going. And, when -- when I was previously in Kabul as the assistant chief of mission, my responsibility was actually not policy and political matters. It was -- it was management of the Embassy. It was security of the Embassy. It was our foreign assistance programs. It was consular affairs. It was really everything -- and also law enforcement. It was mostly everything in the management and security domain and fundamentally keeping people safe.

As his deputy, DeHart had complete confidence in Ambassador Bass's abilities to lead the evacuation and effectively uphold civilian-military cooperation during the evacuation.

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Q: And did you have confidence in Ambassador Bass in terms of leading the directives that were set forth for you all --

A: Yes.

Q: -- during the evacuation?

A: I had very high confidence.

Q: And what informed that opinion?

A: Our time together for one year in Embassy Kabul when I worked for him then.

Q: Could you identify for the record any specific actions that he took or instances which built your confidence in his ability to serve?

A: Well, I think one of -- one of his strengths is that he's -- he's -- has a -- he's very operational, and he -- he is always very good at forging a productive relationship with our military leaders. It's something that he excels at. It's -- I saw him do that very, very effectively. He -- he brings that credibility, so he builds that trust with them and without being a pushover. And so, when you gain that trust and, you know, you're able to work effectively with the military and have that civilian-military cooperation, then you can have a very highly effective operation. I saw that in Kabul. I knew that it was his reputation before I went to Kabul, so I wasn't surprised by it. And then he and we were able to do that again, I think, in the evacuation.

While the situation on the ground was chaotic, DeHart asserted that the State Department's response was proactive and as effective as possible given the circumstances of the evacuation.

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Q: You also testified that the situation was chaotic, but you felt that the State Department's response was not chaotic. Is that a correct characterization of your statements?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you describe for us the initial steps that were taken to inform this opinion of State really navigating to make the situation not chaotic?

A: Well, I -- we were -- we were actively, proactively formulating plans, strategies in an orderly way in consultation with Washington, in close collaboration with our military colleagues on specific steps and measures to get people to safety through the operations I

mentioned and also to give guidance to our consular officers and to other officers on the ground who were working at the other gates and picking targets of opportunity. So we were providing that guidance. And we were receiving their feedback on what they were experiencing so that we could understand how our guidance was being interpreted and implemented. So I think that we had good communication. I think we had plans that we developed as best we could, and we implemented those. And so -- so I think we were as -- we were roughly as effective as we could be under the circumstances.

DeHart and fellow U.S. government personnel on the ground were concerned that, if the August 31 timeline was not abided by, the Taliban might attack U.S personnel. DeHart contended that if the timeline was not followed and the relationship between the United States and the Taliban deteriorated, there “would have been a humanitarian disaster.”

Page 53, line 7

Q: And, regarding your testimony that you discussed, the downsides of changing the timeline, can you explain to us what you saw those downsides to be?

A: I think that the main concern was that -- was that, if we had gone beyond August 31st, the Taliban would -- would -- would not accept that, and there could be, you know, at minimum, a breakdown of sort of basic cooperation by the Taliban, but -- but also possibly outbreak of armed conflict with the Taliban if they thought that we were delaying our departure.

Q: Was your concern that the Taliban would overrun U.S. personnel or attack them directly?

A: I think it was -- there was certainly a concern that the Taliban might attack U.S. personnel under those circumstances. But I think it -- there was a -- you know, I heard the concern from military colleagues that, if -- if the -- if the relationship with the Taliban went so downhill that it led to -- you know, to active fighting between us, that there was an expectation that we would prevail, that we would not be overrun, but there were thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of civilians. And so there would have -- it would have been a humanitarian disaster.

Q: Okay.

A: A lot of people would have been caught in the crossfire.

DeHart maintained that consular officers were doing heroic work, were eager to work, and were present at their HKIA posts.

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Q: And our committee has heard testimony that characterized that the State Department at HKIA would completely shut down processing of Afghans and Americans every evening and into the morning, leaving ground forces with a nightmare that they did not work in

reasonable rotations, and very much presented an unwillingness to work in the situation. Do you -- did this characterization comport with your understanding of the consular officers' work at or near the gates?

A: No. I don't understand that statement.

Q: And the committee has heard a characterization that the Department of State personnel -- they would come out to do their shift and randomly show up and leave. They were slowing down the entire process. And I couldn't understand what the thought process was behind this. Does that characterization comport with your understanding of consular officers' work at or near the gates?

A: No. It doesn't comport with my understanding.

Q: And could you clarify just for the record why it doesn't comport with your understanding?

A: Because what I saw of our consular officers was that they were -- was that they were eager to do this work, and they were present. Each time -- I visited -- I visited different gates at different times. Every time I went personally to a gate, I encountered consular officers there.

DeHart said that the security situation around HKIA was challenging but nevertheless, the best option available.

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Q: And to return kind of to the issue about the airport's vulnerability --

A: Yeah. We felt that the airport was very vulnerable. So, I mentioned earlier that South Gate would normally have been the preferred entry point for evacuees. I was -- I was told by military colleagues there that South Gate was difficult to manage from a security perspective. And whether, you know -- with all the gates, including South Gate, there was always the concern that if you made a mistake in how you were managing the flow of people or vehicles through then -- and too many people gathered or the wrong people, you could lose control of that gate. It could get overrun, and it would be hard to retake control. And that -- those considerations guided us in -- really in everything that we did. So South Gate was seen as -- you know, a lot of people came in through South Gate. And it was, you know, always cause for concern, our military's ability to keep that managed and under control.

Q: Did -- would it be fair to say that Hamid Karzai International Airport was very much a suboptimal site from a security perspective, a problematic site from a security perspective to conduct an evacuation out of?

A: I think there were probably many vulnerabilities, but I don't -- but there -- it had -- it had

runways. So, I'm not -- I'm not sure I could provide a better site.

DeHart maintained that the most challenging aspect of State Department-military coordination was the highly stressful environment surrounding the evacuation and that the State Department's leadership on the ground conducted itself admirably.

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Q: And what would you say were the biggest challenges for State Department-military coordination?

A: I think, at the leadership level, I didn't -- I didn't see the challenges. We had -- I really had a lot of admiration for Admiral Vasely and for General Donahue and Colonel Hardiman. He did a fantastic job. We had -- it was very, very smooth at the leadership level. I think -- I think in the -- you know, out -- out on the perimeter with consular officers and -- and the Marines and other servicemembers who are out there, you know, you had people working in -- I think probably the biggest challenge was just people working in an incredibly highly stressful situation. And -- and, you know, the Marines may not have always understood that maybe some of the decisions our consular officers made. There were a lot more Marines than consular officers, and that's not their usual line of work. So, you know -- so I think just the challenge of people working as a team in a highly stressful environment where -- you know, where people are moving fast and things are changing quickly and guidance is changing and all those -- all those things.

DeHart believed that the complementary leadership presence of Ambassador Bass and Ambassador Wilson had a "very positive impact" on the withdrawal operations.

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Q: And did the presence of Ambassador Bass on the ground in Kabul have a positive or a negative impact on the overall evacuation operation?

A: A very positive impact.

Q: And did the presence of Ambassador Bass on the ground have a positive or negative impact on the ability of the residual Embassy to carry out its duties from HKIA?

A: Yes, I think it did because it freed up the Embassy to focus elsewhere.

Q: Okay. Do you agree with the characterization made earlier that the fact that two Ambassadors were on the ground was evidence of, quote, "chaos"?

A: No, I don't agree with that statement.

DeHart underscored that State officials worked together in a flexible manner to achieve a complex mission.

Page 90, line 9

Q: I have one more question. So, you testified the roles between Ambassador Bass and Wilson were informal but well-understood. Can you provide any reasoning as to why the roles were informal?

A: When -- when I say they were informal, what I mean is that we didn't have time to go through the normal bureaucratic steps right down to the online system that we -- that we use to do performance evaluations and to identify supervisors in the online system. And all of those normal bureaucratic steps that are associated with a normal assignment I assume were not taken for anybody who flew out rapidly to join the evacuation. And so that's -- that is what I mean when I say "informal." I mean, we were in -- "we," the State Department was in an extreme hurry to address a crisis, an emergency. And so -- and so we didn't have time for those normal bureaucratic steps.

Q: So, is it fair to say that the informality was by necessity, and that was because the priority was evacuating people versus creating org charts?

A: It is very accurate to say that, yes.

DeHart confirmed that the State Department's attempts to notify American citizens residing in, or traveling to, Afghanistan were clear, consistent, and adequate.

Page 99, line 20

Q: Great. So, does this all comport with your understanding that, indeed, there was notification, whether it be through a specific channel to alert American citizens or through a travel advisory, that there were efforts made to notify American citizens about the situation in Kabul?

A: Yes, I -- there were certainly consistent efforts made to notify American citizens about the situation throughout Afghanistan.

Q: Do you think the efforts were adequate?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think that there were multiple means of communication to reach American citizens about the situation?

A: Yes.

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Q: Understood. But you were aware of multiple methods of communication designed to

reach American citizens related to the situation in Kabul?

A: Yes. I would go further. We -- the Department undertook extraordinary efforts to -- to reach American citizens. Even after they declined the opportunity to be evacuated, the Department reached out to them again and again. And this was the subject of a lot of interagency discussion, all of the efforts that needed to be made to evacuate every single American who would like to be evacuated. There were efforts undertaken elsewhere in the government to try to use other means to figure out where these Americans were, their whereabouts, and do everything possible beyond the normal notification and advisory system to figure out their whereabouts and make sure that we were reaching every one of them. So, I think there was an intense focus on this.

DeHart believed that the evacuation of American citizens who registered for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) was successful.

Page 104, line 25

Q: So, for the individuals that did register for STEP, is it your opinion that there was the successful evacuation of AMCITS?

A: Yes. There was -- there was certainly a successful evacuation of AMCITS. And I was understanding of those who, for whatever reason, may not have wanted to take part in the evacuation. But I do believe we gave every opportunity and took really extraordinary steps to make sure that they had the opportunity to be evacuated if they at all wanted to.

DeHart believed that the HKIA-based NEO was staffed with a “sufficient number” of experienced consular officers.

Page 123, line 8

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

A: Yes. Yes. We did not request -- we could have requested additional officers. We did not request them. We felt that we had sufficient numbers.

Q: Well, why did you feel that the numbers were sufficient and determine not to request additional ones?

A: Because we had to balance the work requirements on the ground with the safety of -- the fact that anybody we brought in was being -- would be put at significant risk in undertaking those jobs. So we tried to find the right number to accomplish the mission.

Page 133, line 14

Q: Do you think that the consular personnel on the ground had the right experience for such a high stakes and intense situation?

A: I think that the -- the fantastic way that they worked and really heroic efforts and -- you know, and what they accomplished demonstrated that they did.

DeHart noted that State leadership empowered consular officers to be adaptive, use their best judgment, and “do the right thing” when processing individuals at HKIA.

Page 147, line 11

Q: Were you aware of any instances when State Department officers on the ground were asked by other U.S. officials on the ground not to process individuals or to skip the State Department's part of the process and to let people through to planes?

A: No. I mean, the original -- the original guidance not to turn away women and children is, of course, broad guidance because that suggests that, you know, documents or certain qualifications are not needed. We're just not going to turn away a category of people. But, actually, my personal guidance to the consular officers who were adjudicating these cases was to use their best judgment and whatever decision they took. I would support that, and they were, by definition, correct because they were -- they were dealing with a fair number of gray areas. For example, if a qualified family came in -- maybe a U.S. passport holder and a couple small children, and then one sister and, in some cases, maybe a disabled extended family member who technically did not meet the criteria. But if you -- if you evicted that person from the base, the rest of the family either has to abandon that extended family member who may not be able to fend for themselves or, you know, take them. And so there were a lot -- I think plenty of instances where the consular officer had to make a judgment call about situations where the guidance was not clear, or really a strict reading of the guidance would say this person is not qualified and should not be let in, but doing that would be wrong and counterproductive in that situation. So, I would say quite the opposite of your question. We empowered the consular officers to use their best judgment, be humane, and, if they needed to bend the guidance to do the right thing, they could do that.

DeHart noted that the numerous special priority evacuation requests from outside groups and members of Congress during the evacuation were “one of the most difficult parts of the evacuation.”

Page 150, line 8

Q: Okay. Generally speaking, though, what percentage of your time on the ground in Kabul was spent tracking and working on these special cases that had been flagged by others?

A: A very significant amount of my time because these were pouring in from people that normally I want to be responsive to and also because we wanted to be helpful if that person really does merit inclusion in the evacuation.

Q: Okay. And can you give us a better sense of the work that you did to track and assist

these special cases?

A: Unfortunately, in most cases, we were very limited in our ability to help because we were -- as most of these came in, we were very much focused on American citizens and then our local staff. And some of these people were the targets of opportunity that we were able to get in at these various gates, but it was very difficult -- and this was one of the most difficult parts of the evacuation. It was very, very difficult to drop everything else and focus on one or two people and to -- and to spend the time making the logistical arrangements to direct one or two people to some spot where we might possibly be able to meet them and to get them in. We were more focused on -- I was personally more focused on efforts to move hundreds if not thousands of people, rather than one or two people at a time. And that was very difficult because we knew that these were important people, but we just had to focus on where we could help the most people.

Q: So, to understand, you testified earlier that these sorts of requests were, quote, pouring in. So, there was presumably a large number of them. But the amount of staff, energy, and time required to deal with any one of them was significantly higher than other activities you were engaged in?

A: Yes. Yes. It was more time-consuming, labor-intensive, to focus on one or two people as -- you know, as much as they may have deserved the help. Which isn't to say that we didn't do it. You know, members of the team did take that time sometimes and were able to help people by the ones and twos and threes and to get them in at various places, including at the lesser known gate that we were using for our -- for our local staff.

Page 153, line 15

Q: It was your belief that the impact of these special requests, including somewhere there was a lot of pressure placed on consular officers, was -- was that consular officers had less bandwidth to attend to other pressing tasks?

A: Yes. That's right. But, also, if somebody is throwing their weight around and just putting pressure on somebody in an already incredibly stressful situation, that was -- that was not fair or helpful.

Q: Thank you. That's helpful.

A: And so, they needed -- our officers needed the support.

DeHart maintained that the Afghanistan withdrawal was the product of the previous 20 years of involvement within the country and that the U.S. "needed to get out."

Page 182, line 20

Q: In addition, could you clarify for the record about what you meant when you just testified don't get ourselves into the situation we were in?

A: Well, I mean, I think that, you know, we -- we, after 20 years of involvement in Afghanistan, we've -- it was never going to end well. And so, I did actually feel that we needed to -- to depart Afghanistan. We needed to leave. We needed to get out. But the nature of our involvement for the previous two decades, you know, set us up for a situation where it was -- it was not -- there was not going to be a good ending for it. So I think the problem -- in my opinion, the problem is -- the problem was the nature of our involvement for the previous 20 years.

Q: So, is it fair to say that the evacuation was impacted not just by the withdrawal itself, but the 20 years leading up to it?

A: Absolutely.

Q: Is it fair to say that it was impacted by numerous administrations, not just the current administration?

A: Absolutely. Yes.

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