

**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 Ross Wilson**

Conducted on Tuesday, October 24, 2023.

**Ambassador Ross Wilson came out of retirement to serve as the Charge d’Affaires in Kabul for six months under the Trump Administration. His tenure extended into the Biden Administration, for a total of 20 months of service. As Charge d’Affaires, he was instructed to support the implementation of the Doha Deal.**

Page 9, line 11

A: In October 2019, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia asked if I would be willing to come out of retirement, accept my recall to the Foreign Service as Chief of Mission in Kabul.

Page 9, line 17

A: I concluded that my commitment on joining the Foreign Service was to go when and where I was asked. I arrived in Kabul on January 19th, 2020, for 6 months. That was extended both by the Trump administration and by the Biden administration to 20. My job was to represent and carry out the policies of two Presidents and two administrations in leading our largest diplomatic mission, which at that time numbered well over 4,000 people. The U.S. Taliban agreement was signed 6 weeks after I arrived, negotiated by Ambassador Khalizad before I came onto duty. It included provisions on counterterrorism, prisoners, intra-Afghan negotiations, a ceasefire, and most importantly, a May 1st, 2021, deadline for the withdrawal of American and other foreign forces. When I met with Secretary Pompeo, he told me that my top priority was to support the implementation of that agreement. The Afghan Government, as you all know, had been excluded from the agreement, was deeply opposed to it and opposed to what it aimed to achieve. Nevertheless, it was my job to press for the release of prisoners by the Afghan Government as required under the accord. I pushed President Ghani and his political opponents to set aside their differences and agree on a strategy for negotiating with the Talibs. I encouraged public support for and involvement on matters relating to peace because that seemed kind of essential for their success. I provided assurances about America’s commitment to their country. Secretary Pompeo also asked me to work on what a post U.S. forces withdrawal mission would look like and what it should do going forward.

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A: Throughout my time in Afghanistan, I sought effectively to carry out the policies and directions of President Trump and President Biden, and I feel privileged to have done so. I tried my best to make prudent decisions based on our leaders' guidance and the resources and information available to me.

**Ambassador Wilson is a career Foreign Service Officer with decades of experience heading multiple large and complex U.S. missions and collaborating extensively with the U.S. military.**

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Q: What was your understanding or belief of why you were the person selected and then retained for that role?

A: In the conversation I had in October of 2019 the issues that were -- the way this was described to me was that I had experience running U.S. missions, two of them, in Baku, Azerbaijan, and Ankara, Turkiye, the latter being a large, complex mission with lots of things going on, in a place where, among other things, I had an immense amount of interaction with the U.S. military on matters relating to Iraq, issues in 2005 to '08 that, of course, dominated both U.S. foreign policy and what we were trying to do in Turkiye, which included trying to get the Turks on board with and supportive of American policy there. The fact that I had an ambassadorial title was not unimportant, in particular in dealing effectively with the military and with other parts of the U.S. Government. That was mentioned to me as well.

Page 45, line 4

Q: I'd also like to ask you about your experience as Deputy Executive Secretary of State. Could you explain a little bit what that position entailed and how it might be relevant to your time in Kabul?

A: The Executive Secretary at the State Department manages the flow of issues to the Secretary, manages the paper, anticipates needs that the Secretary and his top lieutenants might have, with an eye to being sure that they are informed about those things and have an opportunity to play a role as they see fit, and to alert the leadership of the State Department to things that are maybe going on at somewhat lower levels that they need to know and that no one has told them about.

Q: Great. And would this role have included overseeing the operations center and its crisis management components?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you explain a little bit for the record as related to what the operations center is and

your involvement in crisis management?

A: The operations center is the crisis management -- is the crisis focal point for the State Department on a day-to-day basis. That means phone calls and alerting people -- alerts about developments abroad or at our embassies that might directly affect American or State Department interests. The operations center stands up task forces when there is a big problem, as happened on Afghanistan in August 2021. There is a component of the operations center -- or at least when I was there -- a component of the operations center that looks ahead at crisis and contingency planning for the Secretary of State. And in the period after that, later in the nineties, I think, took on a somewhat broader role to work with embassies overseas, not on the emergency action plans because that's more at Post, but on things that people who don't do crises, you know, for a living need to be thinking about as they prepare for or deal with big problems.

Page 47, line 12

Q: Have you received any awards for your contributions related to foreign affairs or the foreign service?

A: I have received a large number of State Department awards for my performance going back to 1980, at least, and a Presidential Meritorious Service Award for my work in Turkiye in 2005 to '8.

Q: About how many awards have you received?

A: A dozen or more.

Q: A dozen or more. Thank you.

**Upon arrival at Embassy Kabul, Ambassador Wilson was “extremely impressed by the staff and their expertise,” and noted that “other agencies and entities also sent their best people to Afghanistan and were extremely helpful.”**

Page 59, line 20

Q: Okay. What is your assessment as to embassy staff once you arrived? Do you feel that they were well suited to support you and ensuring you were apprised of all issues at the embassy and in their region?

A: Yes. I was extremely impressed by the staff and their expertise and help to me. But really their expertise. These were people, Foreign Service officers on 1-year tours, they had only been there for 6 months, 6, 7 months. They were really on top of things. And the other agencies and entities also sent their best people to Afghanistan and were extremely helpful to me.

Q: Okay. And when you say the term “really on top of things,” are there any specific examples you could provide for the record in terms of how you knew they were really on top of things?

A: I asked for a briefing early on -- or a set of briefings early on about the Afghan leadership and the people that I was going to be dealing with, and so had several really very helpful discussions with different segments of the embassy about the people, about where they came from, their pasts, how they had interacted previously, about the outcome of the disputed Presidential election that had taken place in September of 2019, and where things stood now and what the embassy had been doing with Afghan leaders to try to deal with that.

**Ambassador Wilson recounted Embassy Kabul staff reductions in 2019, which permanently removed “35 to 40 percent of [embassy staff]” resulting from a change in administrative policy that aimed to reduce the footprint of the embassy. In comparison, staff reductions which occurred in 2020 and 2021 were temporary, authorized departures.**

Page 62, line 19

Q: Were there staffing cuts that were implemented during your tenure as charge there?

A: Let me put things in a slightly larger context. As some of you would be aware, Embassy Kabul had carried out some large scale reductions in 2019 that engendered some controversies here, if I remember this correctly. It was before I came on board, but I was briefed about this. Cuts on the order, I believe, 35 to 40 percent of our staff that were achieved by consolidating some of the entities that operated outside the chancery compound, and then just reducing staff, State Department staff, other agency staff to achieve a target. In my time in Afghanistan, we made no further substantive cuts until probably later -- late in the year at least, when entities that were part of the U.S. mission, with an eye to May 1, began drawing down their numbers.

Page 64, line 13

Q: And just last follow up on this. The cuts you described in 2021 related to COVID, you saw those as a public health necessity to reduce staffing?

A: The cuts on COVID were 2020, and they were not our cuts. This is authorized departure. The State Department made available to all personnel at posts, whether they were State Department or not, the ability to leave and go -- to have safe haven somewhere else until it was determined either that they had to go back or that they could go back or that they felt comfortable going back.

Q: Okay. So, to clarify, these cuts were beginning in April 2020?

A: They began in probably March 2020 and lasted through the summer really.

Q: Okay. And the cuts that had been put into place in 2019, you saw those as the result of policy decisions to change the footprint and reduce the footprint of the embassy?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: The cuts in 2019 were permanent, permanent reductions, or certainly in practice, they were permanent reductions in embassy staff. Authorized departure and even the ordered departure reductions that we did in 2021, in principle, were temporary. Their positions were not eliminated or transferred to other uses.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

**Ambassador Wilson maintained that the Doha Deal and incremental withdrawal of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan by President Trump created an uncertain situation during which Wilson and the U.S. embassy had “difficulty knowing or threading through what was going to be U.S. policy.”**

Page 67, line 6

A: There was uncertainty with respect to the American military force in Afghanistan. We had the clarity that the U.S.-Taliban agreement required a drawdown to 8,600 from about 12,000 or maybe 13,000 when I arrived and that allied forces would comparably reduce, perhaps not the most important detail. The drawdown to 4,500, which is about September 2020, was news and surprising to those of us who were there. The drawdown orders to go to 2,500 were more disconcerting, I think, to me and to others leading various parts of the U.S. Government operation in Afghanistan. And of course there was always the unknown. What was going to happen? Was something going to happen in early 2021? And what about May 1st?

Page 68, line 6

Q: Okay. And we can unpack this further in the next round, but if you could identify the top one or two reasons for such uncertainty, what would you define those as?

A: The uncertainties in my time had to do with the size of the U.S. military component and the possibility of further drawdowns being ordered. I think the other uncertainty had to do with the U.S.-Taliban agreement and enforcement of its provisions, particularly with respect to Taliban violence and a difficulty knowing or threading through what was going to be U.S. policy with respect to those violations and with respect to what was described to the Afghans and to me as a conditions based agreement that depended on all of its parts if any one of its parts was going to go forward.

**Ambassador Wilson detailed the morally challenging and “very, very difficult” process of releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners in Afghan custody per the Doha Deal, and how this decision by the Trump Administration “contributed to morale issues and disillusionment in the Afghan security forces and the kind of broader law enforcement apparatus that we depended upon to go after bad guys.”**

Page 101, line 1

Q: So you also mentioned in your opening statements and a little bit now the issue to prisoners and that it was your job to press for the release of prisoners as required under the accord. You talked about it being -- just now said it was morally challenging. Can you tell us a little bit more about why you thought it was morally challenging?

A: A significant share of these prisoners were people who had served their terms, the terms for which they were sentenced by an Afghan court but had not been released. There were others who were virtually at the end of their term. There were other individuals who were, you know, in the intervening years, they were really old. They weren't going to go back in to fight, whatever else was going to happen. Those were relatively easy. And it often happens in negotiating -- in trying to get negotiations, to start it, you have some confidence building measures or measures to get the other side onboard. Prisoner release as often come more at the end, but in this particular case, the thought was up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners at the beginning to get things started. Some of these were more complicated. They were guilty of -- individuals who were guilty of attacks on Americans, responsible for the truck bombing of the German Embassy that took place in 2017, other really heinous crimes. And, you know, that was really hard. It was hard for our allies because some of them had attacked -- had killed Australians and I think some others. Very, very difficult.

Q: Was it

A: And the Talibs were insistent that up to 5,000 didn't mean 4,999, it meant 5,000. And they gave a list to us, to Ambassador Khalilzad's team. This 5,000, not those other people. We want the people on our list to be released. And that added to the complication. And it was one area where what the Talibs were asking for was not what was in the agreement. Up to 5,000 doesn't mean 5,000; it means somewhere between zero and 5,000.

Q: And it was in the agreement that the United States would make the Afghans release these were Afghan prisoners, not prisoners that were in the custody of the United States.

A: Yeah. You know, the agreement that Ambassador Khalilzad negotiated on behalf of the Trump administration was to -- was that we would bring -- essentially, that we would bring about the release of these prisoners. The influence was, yes, it was our job to get the Afghan side onboard, but the Afghans and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan wasn't

party to the agreement. They were not mentioned in the agreement. There's no word anywhere in the agreement about the Government of Afghanistan or the Islamic Republic or anything else.

Page 103, line 15

Q: Okay. Could you tell us a little bit more about some of the fallout related to prisoner release component of the deal?

A: Embassy reporting in that period focused on the morale of Afghan security forces personnel and the impact on them as they saw these releases taking place. These were individuals who had been involved in the capture of some of these bad guys or in their trial and conviction for the offenses that they'd committed. They were not happy. We heard by, I want to say, maybe -- by the fall of 2020, we heard -- we were receiving reports that Talibs who had been released earlier in the process had gone back into the fight. And they -- it's my recollection that each one of them had to sign a piece of paper saying they're not going to go back in to fight. Okay. But also contrary to what I recall being told were assurances given to us that that would not happen. And how true that was, that going back into combat, how extensive that was, I don't know. But it was one of, of course, many factors that contributed to morale issues and disillusionment in the Afghan security forces and the kind of broader law enforcement apparatus that we depended upon to go after bad guys.

Q: Would you assess it had a long-term impact on the morale of the Afghan security forces and law enforcement?

A: I think it continued to eat away, because these reports of returns to battle increased throughout 2021.

**Ambassador Wilson was unaware of any Trump Administration contingency planning for a precipitous deterioration of regional security or any preparation for a large-scale evacuation of Americans and Afghan allies.**

Page 117, line 11

Q: Fair enough. Were you aware of any contingency planning or discussions during the Trump administration to handle a precipitous deterioration of the security situation in the country?

A: No.

Q: To prepare for a drawdown or scaling back of the U.S. Embassy there?

A: As I indicated earlier, we had discussions internally and at the U.S. Mission about that, and to some extent with the U.S. military, on the ramifications or issues we needed to understand. If there were discussions of that sort in Washington, I'm not aware of them.

Q: Okay. So, to be clear, those conversations happened at the mission itself?

A: The conversations that I'm aware of, yes.

Q: Okay. And did you lead those conversations?

A: Many. Maybe not -- probably the majority.

Q: Okay. Are you aware of any contingency planning to prepare for a large-scale evacuation of Americans and our Afghan allies during this time?

A: Not in 2020, no. That happened later.

**Ambassador Wilson noted that the Trump Administration failed to address the 18,000-person SIV processing backlog. He explained that “the Biden administration National Security Council drove a process to fundamentally change the procedures, especially in Kabul, but also in Washington, and added staff to alleviate that backlog.”**

Page 123, line 25

Q: So, if you could turn to page 11, I'd like to ask you about some of the [After Action Review] findings. There's a section in there that says: “When the Trump administration left office, key questions remained unanswered about how the United States would meet the May 2021 deadline for a full military withdrawal, how the United States could maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul after that withdrawal, and what might happen to those eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program as well as other at risk Afghans.” Do you agree with that finding?

A: Generally, yes.

Q: How did you go about in 2021 seeking to address these issues? And let's be specific, sorry, to the Special Immigrant Visa program.

A: Sorry. I want to be sure I'm answering the right question.

Q: If I could reframe it. Essentially, there was an identified backlog of SIVs in 2021. What did you do in -- what did the administration do or direct you to do to address the significant backlog?

A: In 2021?

Q: Correct.

A: So, there were several steps that got taken over the course of a number of months in 2021 to address big problems. One is -- one was in Washington, and it involved increasing it's my understanding that the State Department significantly increased the office in the Bureau of South Asian Affairs that is kind of the coordinating entity for the processing of SIV applications, which office had been understaffed for years. A second piece that I



think was important in this, and it came out in these various interagency meetings that we've discussed, is that the problem of SIVs got put on the plate of very senior people at other agencies. The State Department is the clearing entity, but every application depended on a letter from a supervisor and a statement of employment from that agency, among other things. Those two needs were never prioritized by other departments, as far as I could tell. The biggest single problem was the Pentagon. The military -- military personnel hired Afghans, especially in the early days, not informal exactly, but there weren't the most formal arrangements always made. And maybe to make it a sharper point, it's my understanding the Defense Department had no focal point where someone could go to find out where Colonel Bock (ph) in Kandahar can be found to provide a letter, a supervisor's letter, or even the simpler task of providing a statement or some kind of certification that you worked. So, Afghans who are trying to apply for this, they run into a brick wall almost immediately. Those early interagency meetings -- and they put this more on the agenda of some of the -- of the other departments that employed people in this category in a way that I think was somewhat helpful. The second big set of activity that emerged from these, from the Biden administration's efforts -- and the NSC drove this process, and I'm deeply grateful to them, all of us should be -- was to get rid of some of the bottlenecks in Kabul that were part of the way that we had to do this because that was either State Department or usually DHS procedures we had to go through. So, they eliminated the in-person interview. Check. They simplified and centralized the medical exam. The way it worked before, you had your in person interview. If you passed that, then go out the door, talk to your doctor, and get this form filled out. We centralized that. Everybody came in batches to get medical exams that we organized. Biometrics, that was part of the in-person interview. We'll do that at the airport. Thank you very much. We ultimately got rid of visas. Used e-visas. This seemed brilliant. Without all the paper and the grommets and the ribbons. It was a huge package that people would take with them when they got accepted. Just get an e-visa, simplified. And then the last was consolidating or centralizing the travel. At the end of the whole process, Afghans were told: God bless you, here's your visa, make your travel arrangements, have a nice life. And that worked fine in 2020 and years before, in part because the flow wasn't very good. By organizing our own charter aircraft and filling those aircraft and presenting at the airport a manifest, these people are good to go. They don't have visas, and maybe they don't have e visas. They're good to go. We went from maybe 50 a month in early 2000s, before COVID, to hundreds every day. I mean, this is a tremendous achievement. And it took an enormous amount of arm twisting by the NSC of particularly the Department of Homeland Security, which has -- of course, they have absolutely critical responsibilities, but to speed up and simplify these things so we could get more.

Page 155, line 2

Q: And I want to start at the top of the page, the paragraph numbered number 13 [of the After Action Review]. I'll read it into the record. It says, "At the time the Trump administration signed the agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, there was a significant backlog in the Afghan SIV process. That administration made no senior level or interagency effort to address the backlog or consider options for other at risk Afghans despite its commitment to a military withdrawal." Continuing in paragraph 14, it begins, "When the Biden Administration came into office, senior administration officials within the interagency took steps to accelerate the SIV process." We'll stop there. Given your earlier testimony about steps that were taken in 2021 to improve SIV processing, do you agree with this finding that I just read from page 13?

A: So, those two paragraphs?

Q: Uh huh.

A: Yes. There was, when I came on duty in January 2020, a significant backlog in the SIV process -- around 18,000, I believe, is the number I recall. And I'm not aware of any action that had taken place either before or after, in the course of the Trump administration, to try to accelerate the processing and deal with the backlog prior to a potential withdrawal. Absolutely, the Biden administration National Security Council drove a process to fundamentally change the procedures, especially in Kabul, but also in Washington, and added staff to alleviate that backlog.

**Ambassador Wilson maintained that the U.S. decision to withdraw as stipulated in the 2020 Doha Deal played a fundamental role in the weakening of the Afghan military.**

Page 135, line 13

Q: Ambassador, I want to go back to the point about sort of the Afghan military, I have a follow up question. And I'm going to recount a couple takeaways. And again, please feel free to correct me if I'm misstating anything. The first takeaway was that the Afghan military, based on your prior testimony, was indeed hindered by the loss of U.S. contractor support. That being said, there were efforts underway, but that, according to my understanding, that's what you had stated. The second point was that the Taliban, but for not attacking the U.S. or U.S. forces, was not adhering to provisions of the Doha Agreement, which included inflicting violence upon the Afghan population. You pointed to the loss of morale within the Afghan military as an issue. Considering these points that I just recounted, do you think that the U.S. Government set up the Afghan military for failure?

A: I think that the decision that was made in 2020, that American forces would withdraw, and its reiteration or modification in April 2021, those things weakened the Afghan Air

Force, there's no doubt about that -- the Afghan military. But the fundamental decision was made in January, February 2020.

**According to Ambassador Wilson, the Biden Administration conducted an extensive interagency review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, investigating the implementation of the Doha Deal "as soon as the new administration was in office and able to function."**

Page 80, line 5

Q: So, according to the statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne, on January 22nd, 2021, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan informed his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib that the U.S. would review the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement i.e., the Doha Agreement -- including to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments. Ambassador, is it correct that an interagency policy review commenced after this?

A: An interagency -- yes, I believe so. The interagency review on Afghanistan began as soon as the new administration was in office and able to function.

Q: And this review considered the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, correct?

A: This review considered, from my perspective -- and I was not part of all of the meetings, I don't believe -- but it aimed to examine U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, what was in the U.S. Taliban agreement and what we had committed to, how that was being implemented and issues related to that that were important, and the issues that were relevant to the decision that the President had to make about the May 1 deadline and the directions that he wished for the United -- he might wish for the United States to go.

Q: Was the State Department involved in that interagency review?

A: Yes.

Q: What was your role in that review?

A: I participated in lots of meetings, dozens certainly, between January 22nd and April 14.

Q: What was U.S. Embassy Kabul's role in that review?

A: I think the principal role that we played was focused on helping policymakers understand what would go away if -- when -- if U.S. -- whenever U.S. military forces left and what the impact or implications of that would be for our ability to stay in the country and function effectively and safely. The other side of the coin of that was to identify and work through and obtain assets to compensate for those losses. And that occupied a lot of these meetings and was one of the principal areas that we had input in. I had input from time to time on other issues, but I think that's probably the main one and the biggest one.

**Ambassador Wilson explained that the Afghan government believed communications with the Trump Administration during U.S.-Taliban negotiations had been limited as “[communications] did [not] have any much of a realistic chance to have input into the decisions that were being made.” As a result, Ambassador Wilson urged the incoming Biden Administration to “talk directly with the Afghans as soon as possible” because “we needed the Afghan Government’s cooperation.”**

Page 90, line 23

Q: You previously testified -- and please correct me if I’m misstating anything -- that following President Biden winning the Presidential election to the United States, there was uncertainty as to what the next step would be specifically. And you informed the Afghan Government, don’t be so sure about that, for lack of better words.

A: I used somewhat different terms. Ghani hoped that there would be a change. I urged him to be cautious about that. I was in no position to speak for the President-elect or what he might choose to do. I just said, don’t -- you know, essentially, don’t -- be careful in how you act on that hope or expectation. And, separately, I was very clear and adamant, actually, with the new administration, once people came into office, that they needed to talk directly with the Afghans as soon as possible and hear them out, hear their case, and to the extent we could, kind of make them, not part of the solution, but at least ensure that we had better cooperation, good cooperation from them as we went further along. And I can add here -- I should add here that the Afghan Government believed that communications with the outgoing administration had become more and more and more limited, that their voices were not heard, that -- you know, that they didn’t have any much of a realistic chance to have input into the decisions that were being made, like all those troop withdrawals that were carried on in 2020. I wanted an anecdote to that because we needed the Afghan Government’s cooperation, whatever it was President Biden decided.

**Secretary Blinken traveled to Afghanistan to communicate directly with President Ghani and Ambassador Wilson the day after President Biden announced September as the new date of the military withdrawal.**

Page 11, line 5

A: I also urged the new administration to engage early on with the Afghan leadership regarding the way forward. I thought this would make matters easier, implementing the next phase would be easier if we had undertaken those kinds of discussions with the government, whatever direction the President decided to go. On April 14th, 2021, President Biden announced that American forces would withdraw not in -- not by May, but in September. He said that while the U.S. military would be leaving Afghanistan, the United States would not, and that our diplomatic, humanitarian work would continue.

And when he visited Kabul the next day, Secretary Blinken reiterated this intention to President Ghani and to me.

**Intel provided to Ambassador Wilson warned that abandoning the Doha Deal could lead to “renewed attacks against American personnel and facilities.”**

Page 91, line 23

Q: Did you believe the U.S. should’ve adhered to the Doha agreement or should adhere to the Doha agreement?

A: I thought that the Doha agreement represented a commitment by the United States. Yes, it was the Trump administration. President Trump was the President, and he gets to make foreign policy. Any President gets to make foreign policy. That was a commitment by the United States. Walking away from reneging on our commitments comes with costs. So that was, I think, one -- one consideration. Abandoning the U.S. Taliban agreement that among other things itself had several potential consequences: renewed attacks against American personnel and facilities, which the intel that I read pointed to that, and we went on a high alert on May 1st as a result of that. May 1st, 2021, with the passage of that deadline. It would have come with other costs. Those negotiations, somewhat not very successful to date, that’d be the end. The Doha negotiations. The Talibs undertaking, therefore, to enter into negotiations with other Afghans to determine a roadmap for their political future and to negotiate a ceasefire, how in the world would we get back to that or how would they get back to that? Not clear. The undertakings that they made with respect to al-Qaeda. Yes, some of them were not fulfilled. Some had. And what, then, would be our leverage to try to affect that is a tough decision.

Page 93, line 18

Q: What was your recommendation on the decision to remain in the Doha agreement?

A: I wasn’t asked for a formal recommendation. In informal conversations, I told people that I believed and expected that a change in the commitment, the May 1 commitment, would likely lead to attacks on us, on American forces, and American facilities, and people needed to bear that in mind.

**After President Biden announced that the U.S. military withdrawal would be completed in September 2021, Ambassador Wilson focused on ensuring U.S. diplomatic presence in Kabul could continue after the withdrawal, and to prepare “realistic and viable contingency plans in place should the risk of staying become too great.”**

Page 11, line 9

A: On April 14th, 2021, President Biden announced that American forces would withdraw not in -- not by May, but in September. He said that while the U.S. military would be

leaving Afghanistan, the United States would not, and that our diplomatic, humanitarian work would continue. And when he visited Kabul the next day, Secretary Blinken reiterated this intention to President Ghani and to me. Knowing the value of having embassies abroad and the assets they provide for protecting American interests, I agreed with that decision. My job then was to ensure that steps necessary to continue our diplomatic presence and support for Afghanistan got taken and that we had realistic and viable contingency plans in place should the risk of staying become too great.

**Between April and August 2021, in response to increased risk to personnel, Ambassador Wilson conducted numerous emergency drills, reduced staff numbers at post, met frequently with military staff, accelerated SIV processing, and began to develop concrete contingency plans for a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO).**

Page 11, line 19

A: Intelligence reporting suggested that the Talibs would likely attack U.S. facilities and personnel after the missed May 1st deadline. So, we bolstered our security through drills, tightened access controls at the mission, and we reduced our numbers. Already in 2021, staff in country under my authority had declined by hundreds, already by April. From late April to August, we sent hundreds more out of the country. Separately we expanded and sped up the disposal of sensitive materials. A consular -- a security consular and management team led by our Assistant Chief of Mission worked with the military, led our work with the military on evacuation planning. They met frequently with military staff, visited Bagram and Kabul airports, and consulted closely on numbers, modalities, and related matters. We accelerated SIV work by reallocating staff from other parts of the embassy, bringing in temporary help, and working with Washington to eliminate bottlenecks. Recognizing future uncertainties and to ensure that policymakers had options, we finalized a plan for locking up the embassy, moving most staff out of the country, and leaving a small group at the airport to continue diplomatic and consular efforts.

Page 143, line 23

Q: Ambassador, I imagine I know the answer to this question, but are you familiar with what a noncombatant evacuation, or a NEO, is?

A: Yes.

Q: In the course of the withdrawal planning, when did the possibility of a NEO come up?

A: Probably more or less at the outset.

Q: Okay. What date range possibly?

A: I believe the planners -- which is really when concrete planning got underway -- arrived either the latter part of April or certainly the early part of May.

Q: Of?

A: Of 2021. And these are CENTCOM officers under the command of General Sullivan, who came a little bit later, probably later in May or in possibly June.

**Ambassador Wilson ensured that NEO-related discussions and planning occurred in a closed capacity to protect the security of personnel, the military retrograde operation, and the morale of the Afghan Security Forces lest they perceived a “rush to the exits” by the United States and its implications.**

Page 183, line 13

Q: Ambassador Wilson, was there resistance within the Department or within the embassy to discuss a NEO or using the term NEO?

A: No. It was part of our planning in the group that was charged with this. The issue came up in some of our Emergency Action Committee. There was sensitivity -- and maybe this is a good point to get into this -- about our taking actions and making announcements or having information get out that would be perceived as the United States is rushing for the exits, and what would be the implications of that. And this concerned me well before the summer of 2021. And there are a number of issues here that I want to try to highlight. One is the matter of security of personnel. Word gets out that the U.S. Government is rushing for the exits, what happens, what follows from that? The military, General Miller, even in 2020, was deeply concerned that the commitment that we had made, that President Trump had made, to withdraw American forces, and the execution of that withdrawal throughout the year, 8,600, 4,500, 2,500, and the same sentiment later I heard from him in 2021 following President Biden's announcement, concern about endangering the retrograde, the military's retrograde, a dangerous -- the most dangerous and difficult things -- one of the most difficult things that the military does. I did not want loose language being floated around outside of our classified settings about our plans that might result in endangerment of that retrograde, green on blue incidents, which had occurred a number of times over the course of the period that we were in Afghanistan. It was a real concern of mine. I think a second concern had to do with embassy security, and it's kind of the mirror image of the same thing, either for our ongoing presence or something that might endanger our evacuation. As I noted earlier, we have an important commitment to American citizens and to our Afghan friends and partners. I had a special obligation to the people who worked for me, a couple thousand, even in the -- certainly in the spring of 2021, and their welfare, and they not be or feel that they were under risk. I was skiddish about things getting out that would undermine further the Afghan security forces and morale there and therefore their effectiveness and lead to -- add to other

aggravations and concerns that we had about their reliability to protect us. Because they were an essential part of protecting American forces and our embassy and other Western other embassies in Kabul. I was concerned about leaks. And so, yes, I wanted those conversations about our contingency plans to be in a classified setting, among those who needed to be part of those conversations, with input from others. A lot of this did get discussed in our EAC meetings, but there were pieces of it that we discussed in much smaller group meetings. I didn't want to set off a stampede that put at risk something that I think is intrinsically valuable, which is to have a U.S. mission, to protect American citizens, to process SIVs, to collect information, both the way the State Department collects information and the way that other entities collect information.

**During the Taliban offensive in June and July of 2021, Admiral Vasely and Ambassador Wilson worked with President Ghani to rally Afghan leaders and civilians behind the Afghan Security Forces “because we thought the Afghans still had a reasonable chance to defend their country if they took the necessary steps to do so.” This effort was informed by an assessment that the Afghan government and military would last until “quite a bit later in the year than August 15<sup>th</sup>.”**

Page 132, line 1

Q: How did you -- what was your reaction to the rapid Taliban gains in June and July '21?

A: Admiral Vasely -- as I indicated in my opening statement, Admiral Vasely and I took this up directly with President Ghani and his senior commanders over and over and over: You must consolidate your forces. They were spread out, and they were trying to defend 34 provincial capitals, not to mention a number of other targets around the country. They couldn't do that anymore. They needed to consolidate and defend the most vital assets that they had. They needed to strategize or prioritize the use of those forces, which in June and much of July were being used not to defend strategically important targets, but because a provincial governor asked for it or President Ghani decided it. It wasn't a military plan. It was reactive and therefore deeply destructive for the country. We urged, and I worked especially hard on this, on Ghani and other political leaders, Karzai, Abdullah, others, to rally together, to rally all the major leaders together and rally the Afghan citizens who -- the overwhelmingly majority of whom did not like the Talibs and did not want to see a return of the Talibs to power, to come together behind the Afghan security forces. And we did that in part because we thought the Afghans still had a reasonable chance to defend their country if they took the necessary steps to do so.

Page 133, line 12

Q: How long did you believe the Afghan military could successfully hold off the Taliban in the absence of the U.S. military?



A: In my recollection, the intel was pointed to quite a bit later in the year than August 15th. You know, intel is always kind of uncertain and it gets written in a way that that leaves plenty of questions. The intel became increasingly negative about the Afghan Government's prospects, especially as we got to late July. But I think my read of it, and I don't think I was the only one in this category, was that they had time to -- some amount of time, weeks, months, possibly even into early into the new year, if they took steps to consolidate their forces and better prioritize their use and provide -- ensure that good, competent leaders were in positions and they didn't get moved around all the time, which made them newly incompetent wherever it was that they went, and that they rallied their people around their country more effectively.

Q: So, Ambassador, just so I'm understanding correctly, is it your testimony that it wasn't a matter if the Afghan Government would fall in the hands of the Taliban, but a matter of when?

A: No. I think that we -- the way I understood the intelligence reports was that the Afghan Government still had time to get its act together and to defend itself. And in the absence of getting its act together and defending itself, yes, its sustainability and survivability, looking very much further out in the future along the lines of what I described, had an awful lot of question marks beside it. The intel was never definitive in saying here's a date or here's a timeline. It was there's a set of uncertainties there that I think all of us in positions of responsibility were trying to cope with.

Q: What was the Regional Security Office's assessment of the situation?

A: I believe it was comparable to mine. I derived a lot of my views about where we stood and where embassy security stood, and the viability of the embassy stood from him.

**Ambassador Wilson was satisfied with the decision he made to call for the NEO on August 15, 2021. He explained how “[i]f we had waited further, we would [have] complicated our ability to get out. If we had left earlier, several thousand SIV applicants that we got out in whatever the number of days that you want to talk about would not have been able to leave the country.”**

Page 199, line 10

Q: In hindsight, do you wish that you had asked for an evacuation, for a NEO, sooner?

A: I'm comfortable with the conclusion that I came to when I came to it, on August 15th. That was the point where we could no longer safely stay there, and that was the point after that point, our ability to get our people out started to look a lot more problematic. I made the point in my opening statement that we got 1,500 people out without a single casualty, not even a twisted ankle. And if you have been to Kabul, the landing strip was a disused soccer field that was basically clods of dirt that you had to walk through. It's

pretty easy to get a twisted ankle in it. None of that happened. If we had waited further, we would've complicated our ability to get out. If we had left earlier, several thousand SIV applicants that we got out in whatever the number of days that you want to talk about would not have been able to leave the country. We would not have been able to provide support to American citizens trying to get out. Our eyes and ears about what was happening around us would've been drastically degraded. So I will repeat: I am comfortable with the recommendation that I made and with the time that I made it. Hindsight is 20/20. I had to deal with the situation I had, and I'm satisfied I made the right decisions.

**Ambassador Wilson is proud of the evacuation of Embassy Kabul, which occurred over the span of 18 hours, on August 15th, 2021. Wilson recommended the evacuation to Secretary Blinken in response to “the expected seizure of two prisons later that day and the release of thousands of inmates – Talib fighters, ISIS fighters, common criminals – and the abandonment overnight of checkpoints into and within Kabul’s Green Zone that were vital to our security.”**

Page 13, line 3

A: Early on the 15th, Rear Admiral Vasely and I called Washington to describe the more directly threatening picture that had developed overnight. It included thousands of Talib fighters streaming directly toward Kabul, a flow that contradicted orders that we assurances that we had received from the Talibs and orders that we believed had been given for them to stop, by Taliban senior leadership, the expected seizure of two prisons later that day and the release of thousands of inmates -- Talib fighters, ISIS fighters, common criminals -- and the abandonment overnight of checkpoints into and within Kabul’s Green Zone that were vital to our security. We had been striving to maintain embassy operations in accord with the direction given to us. This was no longer possible. And at that point, I recommended to Secretary Blinken our immediate evacuation. He agreed, and the White House subsequently approved a noncombatant evacuation. Over about 18 hours and with military support, we moved 1,500 American and third country national mission staff to the airport, completed the destruction of sensitive materials, and secured our facilities without a casualty, an injury, or an incident of any kind -- something I'm particularly proud of. Most of those people departed the country within 24 to 48 hours. Those who remained turned quickly with our military partners to the task of evacuating others once Kabul airport security got restored.

Page 186, line 11

Q: What did you consider too dangerous to remain?

A: As I tried to describe earlier, and I won't go through the details, we faced a risk of finding ourselves surrounded by an uncontrolled mob and unable to continue the operations that

we, until the day before, we had been carrying out unhindered. Too many people were at risk both at the embassy as well as American citizens and other people we cared about. And that was part of that -- in my mind, that was behind my recommendations to the Secretary, and it's why we moved immediately after our evacuation, the embassy's evacuation to the airport, to proceed with the broader evacuation NEO, the massive humanitarian airlift that we carried out.

**Ambassador Wilson commended the “heroic and extraordinary” work of military, Foreign Service Officers, American and allied personnel, and volunteers during the “massive” humanitarian airlift. He was incredibly proud of the contributions made by Ambassador John Bass and over 100 Foreign and civil service volunteers.**

Page 13, line 23

A: President Ghani's unexpected departure on August 15th, the abrupt collapse of government authority, including at the airport, and the Talibs' arrival, against the backdrop of American withdrawal, produced the scene at the airport. The future looked threatening to tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of Afghan citizens American citizens, Afghans who had worked for us, and others. Fortunately, the massive humanitarian airlift, led and facilitated by our military with mission and State Department support, got some 124,000 people out of Afghanistan in 15 days, an astonishing number. Actions taken by courageous and well trained and experienced military, Foreign Service, and other American and allied personnel were heroic and extraordinary. I'm particularly proud of the work that more than a hundred Foreign and Civil Service State Department volunteers who came to help, and especially for the contribution made by my predecessor, Ambassador John Bass, who arrived on August 19th.

Page 14, line 7

A: Actions taken by courageous and well trained and experienced military, Foreign Service, and other American and allied personnel were heroic and extraordinary. I'm particularly proud of the work that more than a hundred Foreign and Civil Service State Department volunteers who came to help, and especially for the contribution made by my predecessor, Ambassador John Bass, who arrived on August 19th.

Page 179, line 22

Q: I'll go ahead and ask again, and it's okay if your answer is no, but we wanted to provide you with an opportunity to affirmatively share anything you'd like to with this committee.

A: I think the only thing I'd add, and I believe this comes from what I've said previously, is Foreign Service personnel take seriously the obligations that they have. No obligation is more important to us than the welfare of our staff and of American citizens overseas. A

lot of people did a lot of very, very good work on behalf of American citizens. Together, we got 124,000 people out, out of the country, and responded creatively and tenaciously in a set of circumstances that no one could have predicted. Worked well with the military. There were no problems that impeded in any way what we were engaged in. I can imagine circumstances where those things might not have worked out that way. We owe - - I owe -- an enormous debt of gratitude to General Donahue and his people. We couldn't have done this, obviously, we couldn't have done this. And I think the American people owe a big debt of gratitude to those who carried out these activities -- all of them.

**Ambassador Wilson oversaw the evacuation and “kept the State Department and other leaders informed about and coordinated with our efforts in Kabul” whereas Ambassador Bass served as the “number-two of the mission,” reporting to Ambassador Wilson and leading “the day-to-day evacuation work.”**

Page 14, line 13

A: Reporting to me, Ambassador Bass led the day-to-day evacuation work and ensured that it and the military's efforts were coordinated on the ground and produced the desired results. I remain extremely grateful for his service. I oversaw that work and other work that was going on, kept the State Department and other leaders informed about and coordinated with our efforts in Kabul, and attended to the remaining mission staff.

Page 23, line 12

Q: Ambassador, what was your role in the August 2021 evacuation from Afghanistan?

A: As I indicated earlier, my role started at the beginning in the recommendation that I made to Secretary Blinken on the morning of August 15 that we evacuate immediately. As I think you know, we decamped to the airport. The embassy as a whole, as I indicated, the embassy as a whole relocated to the airport. Those who were leaving left. We set up operations to be able to organize our people effectively to work with and support the broader effort and get it staffed and all of those sorts of things. After the arrival of Ambassador Bass, who, as I indicated, took over the day to day, hour by hour work to oversee and very specifically carry out the evacuation, my role then shifted to a couple of other purposes, which I had also been trying to do before he arrived, which included keeping leaders in Washington informed and well-coordinated with what we were doing and what was the situation on the ground and what issues we faced, attending to mission business, which in particular meant our locally engaged staff and steps that we needed to effect their evacuation. And overseeing and mentoring the number of consular officers and security officers who remained at the airport with me from the mission and had not departed with others as they prepared for and then began to carry out these operations. So tried to talk with them when they came back from their 12-hour stints at these gates and commiserate with them and make sure they felt that what they were doing is appreciated,

and try to understand what they were facing so that I could accurately describe to leaders in Washington what was going on and what some of our challenges were.

Page 200, line 9

Q: Did Department leadership ask that you share some of your responsibilities with Ambassador Bass?

A: No.

Q: Did Department leadership ask that you transfer some of your responsibilities to Ambassador Bass?

A: No.

Q: Did Department leadership communicate concern about your ability to lead the evacuation on behalf of the Department?

A: No.

Q: Ambassador Wilson, what was the chain of command at HKIA?

A: The --

Q: Just to be clear, over State Department officials or over military officials, all officials?

Q: Within the State Department, the chain of command.

A: The chain of command was that I was chief of mission and responsible for all the personnel and the activities of people in Afghanistan there under chief of mission authority from the State Department, from AID, and from the other agencies that remained at post after August 15. The assistant chief of mission served as the number two of the mission. And underneath that were all the other people.

**Ambassador Wilson noted that planning for the NEO began “well in advance of August,” between late April and early May, and was directed by Marine Brigadier General Sullivan.**

Page 24, line 25

Q: When was it first clear to you that an emergency evacuation would likely be necessary?

A: The sort of critical period is early August that triggers the need to do this. I think it was obvious long before that that there were a substantial number of American citizens, there were SIV recipients and applicants that we hoped to get out of the country, there were lots and lots and lots of other Afghans on whom we had depended one way or another, with whom we had close relations, who we would want to get out. So, I think for that reason, planning for a NEO began -- the concrete and specific planning for a NEO began in late April or early May. Brigadier General Sullivan, Marine Brigadier General

Sullivan, was directed to lead that effort for the military. He came to Kabul several times in that May, June, July timeframe. A number of relatively senior officers under him were also in Kabul throughout that time, also planning for this potential evacuation, and also engaging closely with our staff. So, this was something that we recognized was a possibility that needed to be staffed and prepared for well in advance of August, and we had been working on it. And as I mentioned, there were actions that we took along those lines in 2020 as well.

**Ambassador Wilson explained that Ambassador Khalilzad served as the negotiator of the Doha Deal and engaged with senior Taliban leaders. During the NEO, Ambassador Khalilzad was a key participant in daily interagency discussions, furthering communication between the U.S. military and the Taliban at Kabul airport.**

Page 26, line 21

- Q: I'll begin with Ambassador Khalilzad. What was his position at the time of the withdrawal?
- A: Ambassador Khalilzad had been serving since 2019 or late 2018 as the Secretary's Special Representative for Afghan Reconstruction. And he had a title --
- Q: Was that Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation?
- A: Yes. Sorry. Thank you. The word was on the tip of my tongue.
- Q: Thank you. What were his duties in that role?
- A: Ambassador Khalilzad was the negotiator of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and he was responsible for the U.S. Government's interaction with the Talibs on its -- and with others -- on its implementation. He was, in particular, the point person with the Talibs. I had no contact with Talibs of any kind at any time during my tenure in Kabul. Khalilzad did that.
- Q: To the best of your recollection, did those duties appear to change throughout the course of the evacuation?
- A: Ambassador Khalilzad wasn't involved in any meaningful way in the evacuation. He remained in Doha. He was engaged with Taliban senior leaders. As Afghan forces are getting closer to -- or, I'm sorry, Taliban forces are getting closer to Kabul, I believe he had discussions with the Talibs about that. And it was at that time, I'm not sure it was him personally, that we received assurances that the Talibs would not enter Kabul, that they would stop before they arrived, which was extremely important to me because that had a lot to do -- a lot potentially to do with the security and welfare of personnel under my authority. Throughout the 15 days that we were at the airport, Ambassador Khalilzad or his deputy participated in many, maybe not most of the -- most of the interagency

discussions, of which there were every day a series that ran roughly from about 5 p.m. Kabul time to 2 a.m. in the morning. Broadly speaking, I think his efforts were to try to support, where needed, the military, our military, in the kind of practical interface arrangements that got made between the U.S. military and the Talibs at Kabul airport, and also to try to point a little bit toward the future, an effort that ended up not being particularly successful.

**Ambassador Wilson asserted that Secretary Blinken was “very involved on Afghan policy” and “very concerned about the welfare of American Embassy personnel.” Blinken additionally ensured that 100 supplemental consular officers were provided to Post during the August NEO.**

Page 35, line 23

Q: Can you please speak to Secretary Blinken’s role on the August 2021 evacuation?

A: So, Secretary Blinken was very concerned about the welfare of American Embassy personnel. I spoke with him possibly on the 15th -- probably on the 15th. And that care that he had for people under his responsibility was important to me and something that I conveyed to our staff that remained with me at the airport. Secretary Blinken was concerned about and helped take action -- or helped get action on the matter of getting reinforcements to our staff. And so, the large number of additional consular officers, on the order of 100 or so, who supplemented the embassy cadre that we had kept in country owed a lot to him. I expect, although I don’t have evidence of this, that he also had a lot to do with the State Department’s mobilization of consular officers worldwide to engage in telephone, email, texting, other efforts to try to make affirmative contact with American citizens who were or had been or might be in Afghanistan as we all tried to deal with the problem of American citizens and the ambiguity that always exists or the lack of clarity that always exists about, you know, who’s in the country and how many they are, and so forth. And in discussions that I had with him and in interagency discussions, he was very focused on this American citizens problem, frustrated by it, as I think all the rest of us were, and determined to get a better handle on things. And that’s the origin of these efforts that utilized people in Bahrain; in Rio de Janeiro; in Beijing, China; in Dushanbe; in Moscow, all kinds of places that helped work the phones and that made a big difference for us in clarifying, as much as one could, this universe of American citizens.

**Ambassador Wilson described that Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources Brian McKeon, believed it was possible to have a diplomatic mission in Kabul once the military withdrawal had concluded. McKeon was also “equally focused on the potential that we might have to go in a different direction, including a drastic drawdown or withdrawal from the country altogether,” and prepared contingency plans for a large-scale evacuation and the complete shutdown of Embassy Kabul.**

Page 72, line 13

Q: At the time of the 2021 military withdrawal, am I correct in understanding that Mr. McKeon was serving as DMR, Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources?

A: Yes. Mr. McKeon was in that position.

Q: Did DMR McKeon believe the State Department could continue its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan following the military withdrawal?

A: My impression from having a lot of conversations with him is that he believed it was possible and that we should work toward that end pursuant to the instructions that we had and also recognizing the inherent value of having a U.S. diplomatic mission in Kabul to protect our interests there. He was equally focused on the potential that we might have to go in a different direction, including a drastic drawdown or withdrawal from the country altogether.

Page 73, line 6

Q: No, did he ever communicate that to you? In the course of your discussions throughout 2021, did he ever consider or communicate to you directly that the U.S. Embassy could potentially collapse?

A: Secretary McKeon and I discussed the possibility that we might have to leave, that the measures that we were taking to augment embassy capabilities and replace what we would lose when American forces left wouldn't be sufficient and/or for other reasons the threat environment would become such that we might have to leave altogether. That was certainly one of the pieces on the table, and it was behind the development of the contingency plan I described earlier that involved shuttering the embassy, moving most people out of the country, and aiming to continue diplomatic and consular work out of the airport for a period to be determined.

Q: Do you recall when you first started having those discussions with DMR McKeon?

A: No.

Q: Did he at any point advocate planning for a large-scale evacuation?



A: The Deputy Secretary certainly was clear enough with me that this is one of the things that we needed to be working on and planning for, yes. He was well aware of the military's work. He was well aware of the fact that General Sullivan and others on his staff were in Kabul to do some of the detailed planning that was necessary for that. And I told him that our people were meeting with them and were part of that effort, supporting that effort.

Q: And when did he have those discussions with you?

A: Throughout the period in the aftermath of the President's decision.

Q: So, after April?

A: And possibly before, but certainly after.

**Ambassador Wilson explained the importance of keeping HKIA commercially operational as the airport's advantageous location allowed the entire western diplomatic contingent to continue to remain in Afghanistan.**

Page 135, line 1

Q: Was the embassy comfortable with using HKIA as sort of its lifeline?

A: HKIA had one huge advantage, which is it's a 5-minute helicopter ride at most from our landing zone to HKIA. And that made it important and interesting to us. I think we and the entire Western diplomatic corps, for that matter the entire diplomatic corps, believed that keeping HKIA open and operational, commercially operational, was an essential underpinning for their ability to continue to stay in the country. We had an Air Force that we could ultimately call upon to get us out. That wasn't the case with respect to the others. And so, for that reason HKIA was very, very important to us. They also, I should say, could get there readily and easily more so than any other airfield that was available.

**Ambassador Wilson's staff formulated an extensive, data-driven NEO contingency plan, which included interagency input.**

Page 145, line 18

Q: Did you ever see or participate in the formulation of a NEO plan?

A: My staff was the primary interlocutor with the military in developing the plans that came about. This was my assistant chief of mission, the head of our security office and some of his top people, the management consular and several of his, the consular section of course, probably a couple of other entities, to work on this. The assistant chief of mission briefed me regularly on the conversations that they'd had and where they were and what the military was doing. As I think I mentioned earlier, they undertook site surveys at HKIA to kind of understand the geography that the military had in mind, the various

gates that we all came to know about, for example, and site visits to consider alternatives as well. And General Sullivan came in May, I think, at some point, visiting for a week here or a week there, and then came to the country to stay a little bit later.

**Ambassador Wilson confirmed that the Afghanistan NEO was a shared responsibility between the State Department and the military, with the latter having its own assets and command responsibilities fundamental to the operation. Wilson was “proud of what State Department and military and other agency personnel did to effect the evacuation of 124,000 people, which is unprecedented in its size and scale in history.”**

Page 147, line 16

Q: Were you aware throughout the course of the withdrawal and the ultimate evacuation that you, as chief of mission, not the officials in the DOD, were the ultimate authority responsible for the successful completion of the NEO?

Page 148, line 7

A: In the conduct of the evacuation, the military and the civilian components have different roles to play. The military has the soldiers, they have the airplanes, they have the people to run the airport. In the case of Kabul, they had or could arrange for food, shelter, water, other things that -- and I think this does come through. The military does whatever the civilians can't do under the peculiar circumstances that pertain. The role of the embassy, then, is the care and the feeding, to the extent that that can be done with embassy resources, or, alternatively, to ensure that the military understands they need to take those tasks on, as well as the screening of personnel to ensure that it's American citizens that we're taking or permanent residents or locally engaged staff or people with visas or people who meet other criteria.

Page 149, line 2

A: The people who carried out this evacuation were combatant command personnel, who were not going to take orders from me. It doesn't work that way. And I absolutely accept a level of responsibility for what happened there and what went wrong, but I'll come back to maybe the second thing I said: this is a shared responsibility. That's the nature of this beast. And I'm proud of what I did, I'm proud of what State Department and military and other agency personnel did to affect the evacuation of 124,000 people, which is unprecedented in its size and scale in history.

Page 161, line 15

Q: Is it, in summary, fair to say that a NEO was necessary due to the precipitous change in the situation on the ground?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. And you just testified that you notified the Secretary that a NEO or an evacuation was necessary. Is that correct?

A: I recommended this to the Secretary, and he agreed.

Q: Does it therefore follow that State has a role in calling a NEO; however, DOD has the role of, like, operationalizing the NEO itself?

A: Broadly speaking, yes. I was responsible for that recommendation, and I fully accept that. I felt, as I tried to indicate earlier, I was responsible for the pieces that we were capable of carrying out and that what remained of the U.S. mission was capable of carrying out and, in particular, the screening responsibilities, but everything else needed to be managed by people who had the assets to do it. That would be the military. As the senior civilian representative, as the President's personal representative in Afghanistan, I had no power to tell a general or a major or a private to do anything and expect -- I couldn't give orders. I couldn't arrange for airplanes. I couldn't arrange for food. The military had to do that. And so the management -- maybe that's another word we can use -- the management of the NEO fell to the military, you know, with a strong supporting role from the mission, including as our resources were augmented by Washington in the couple of days that followed.

Q: In your assessment, did DOD understand that its role was to operationalize or manage the NEO?

A: There was -- yes. Everybody set about the task. There was no discussion among us, you know, who's in charge or who is going to run this thing, or any delay in getting on with it. This had been discussed for days among the interagency prior to the 15th. We all went about the job. And I'll reiterate again how grateful I am for what the military did.

**Ambassador Wilson believed that the NEO was a necessary response to the precipitous change in the situation in Kabul.**

Page 160, line 5

Q: Okay. Well, what were the factors that led to standing up the NEO in mid-August 2021?

A: The NEO was triggered by my recommendation to Secretary Blinken that we evacuate immediately. That set in motion everything that followed, including the NEO.

Q: So, what informed your thought that a NEO was imminent and needed to happen immediately?

A: The pieces that I described in my opening statement get at this: a huge Talib force entering or likely to enter Kabul within hours, if not days, and a Talib force that seemed perhaps not to be entirely under the control of Taliban senior leadership, which poses a different problem and makes it worse. The matter of our expectation that the Talibs

would seize Parwan and Pul-e-Charkhi prisons near Kabul that housed thousands of Taliban fighters, who hadn't been released in 2020, as well as many hundreds of ISIS fighters who were taken during fighting, I think it was early in 2019, and common criminals. To the extent the Talibs already had a command and control problem, these prisoners fresh out of jail add to that and added to our worry about that. The ISIS fighters, I don't think that needs much comment. But all of that increases the image and the possibility of uncontrolled violence, uncontrolled by anybody from the other side. It was an armed -- it could become an armed mob. And then, third, the effective disintegration of the Green Zone that the day before had been operating just fine. Everybody walked off the job. And so crowds of people, cars, trucks, were streaming through on the roads that still existed through the Green Zone without any stops or checks or questions of any kind. That would be called a truck bomb waiting to happen. That triggered our evacuation, my request that we evacuate. And, as I tried to suggest, the rest of what happens directly followed from that. As far as I am concerned, when I -- I didn't use the words "NEO" with Secretary Blinken, but as far as I'm concerned, the word "evacuation" included our whole evacuation, the whole kit and caboodle. And, in fact, that's what people set about to work on

Q: Uh-huh.

A: -- to begin the concrete implementation, basically as soon as we got to the airport. Admiral Vasely, General Sullivan, General Donahue, I think even that first day, first evening, we had a discussion about what was the plan for the next day, and it was a large scale humanitarian evacuation, a NEO.

Q: Okay. Is it, in summary, fair to say that a NEO was necessary due to the precipitous change in the situation on the ground?

A: Yes.

**Ambassador Wilson praised Ambassador John Bass for his immense contributions during the evacuation, noting that it is common departmental practice to send additional senior staff members to assist during a complex crisis. Ambassador Wilson described Bass as "a brilliant choice."**

Page 165, line 18

Q: What was your understanding of why Ambassador John Bass was deployed to Kabul during the NEO?

A: On or about August 17, I took a call from Deputy Secretary of State Sherman. She told me -- she expressed gratitude for what we were doing, which was helpful. She told me that reinforcements were arriving that day and over the next couple of days. And I was already aware that additional consular staff was going to arrive that day, and I think even

some on the 16th, to fill out our personnel. She then went on to say that there was a feeling that we needed more help and asked me, how would I feel about Ambassador John Bass coming out to Kabul to work for me and help us on the scene to deal with this situation. My response was, "Yes, please." We needed more hands. We needed more senior and experienced hands. Ambassador Bass, in addition to other things, is a management officer who, more or less by definition, knows a lot more than some of the other senior managers that we had available to us about how to do things like this -- the logistics and planning, detailed planning, about movements of people and so forth. Probably no senior officer in the Foreign Service had a better feel for Afghanistan. He'd been there for 2 years. He knew the people. He knew the geography of the country, and he especially knew the geography of the airport. There was nobody better, actually, that could've been identified to assist us. He had worked as Ambassador in Afghanistan and as Ambassador in Turkiye extraordinarily well and effectively with the military, which counts for a lot in the situation we were facing here. He had a personal relationship with General Donahue, the senior most officer and therefore the commander, for all intents and purposes, of what was going on at Kabul Airport. He filled a giant need that we had. And I should add, with Bass came at least five or six other senior managers -- a former assistant chief of mission in Kabul who must've been involved in contingency planning when he was in that role, as well as a couple of other senior consular officers and a couple of other, sort of, problem solvers, including one who is Afghan American and speaks fluent Farsi, that just filled out our portfolio tremendously. John made an immense contribution to what we were aiming to try to achieve here. We had asked for -- we'd made clear at the time of evacuation that we needed more people, more consular people.

Page 168, line 3

- Q: Is it common practice in complex crises such as this for an additional ambassador and his or her staff to come out and support the mission?
- A: It's common in crises like this to send additional senior staff to help effectively manage a situation. In this particular case, Ambassador Bass was available because he wasn't in some other high priority job and had all of the expertise that we needed. Other senior people who might have been available wouldn't have had that. It was a brilliant choice. I should add, there was no -- I believe I said this earlier. John worked for me. Wendy was very -- Wendy Sherman was very specific. I'm the Chief of Mission. John Bass will work for you -- for me. That's the relationship that we had. It was the first thing we talked about when I met with him the morning after he arrived. And as I said, the partnership was absolutely essential for the astounding success that we had in getting the people out that we did.

A: Assisting me in carrying out. There was no -- notwithstanding what some of the staff, maybe especially staff that had come in from somewhere else -- I don't think there was among people who were experienced in how we do things, I really do not believe and certainly was not aware while I was there that there was any question that I was chief of mission, that John was there in a supporting role to help all of us carry out an absolutely overwhelming task that required an immense amount of time to work through complex details of moving people and liaison with outside groups and other embassies that wanted to get their people in, that involved complex discussions with the military to orchestrate these things. This is unbelievably time consuming work. John worked just as much as I did, 20 hours a day. You could not combine that role with 8 hours on the phone or in a videoconference with Washington from 4 o'clock to 2:00 in the morning, because at 2:30 in the morning you'd be woken up about some question about another group. This was the right thing. And I am extremely grateful to Secretary Sherman for not only providing reinforcements in general but someone who was so expert and so proficient and so respectful of me and my prerogatives as chief of mission, which he absolutely understood. They were the first words out of his mouth when I met with him on arrival. I just don't think there was a question here, and will reiterate for the 50th time how grateful I am to Ambassador Bass for what he did.

**Ambassador Wilson considered the coordination and interaction he had with Ambassador Bass during the evacuation to be crucial to the task at hand and "the textbook of what you want to try to do in this situation."**

Q: One final question on this. Did you find that your coordination with Ambassador Bass was successful as the NEO ensued?

A: Yes. I think our coordination or interaction is sort of the textbook of what you want to try to do in this situation. We spoke frequently, all day, most days, to -- on what was happening, where John -- and John consulted with me. If he felt he needed my guidance, he got it. Sometimes he got guidance that he hadn't asked for. It was very interactive, is probably the right word, and it enabled me to focus on some other things. That division of labor made it possible for John to do what he needed to do in terms of the mechanics of the evacuation and our role in making it happen and crucial for me in the tasks that I had, in particular to keep Secretary Blinken, other principals in Washington informed about the status, what were the upcoming issues, what did they need to know.

**During the evacuation, Ambassador Wilson was constantly consulting and coordinating with Washington, and considered Washington to be responsive to Embassy Kabul requests.**

Page 169, line 17

Q: And on that piece, it sounds like you were in frequent coordination and consultation with Washington. Is that correct?

A: I was in consultation with Washington from roughly 4 o'clock in the afternoon until about 2 a.m. every day for most of that period.

Q: So, it was constant?

A: Yes.

Q: When you had concerns, did you raise them to Washington?

A: Yes, of course.

Q: Did you feel that you were heard?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you feel that there was responsiveness to those concerns?

A: There was a lot of responsiveness when we made requests, yes.

**Ambassador Wilson described the exceptional work of consular officers who worked 12-hour shifts at HKIA and were “operating under gunfire.” He also expressed how he, along with fellow senior officials, worked to do “everything we could to support our people.”**

Page 170, line 4

Q: Okay. And then can you briefly describe your interactions with the State Department team on the ground during the NEO?

A: So there are a couple of pieces I can speak to. I went to the various gates, or most of the gates, both the ones that everybody knows about, and then there were several less known gates that we used for American citizens, for certain other groups, for our locally engaged staff. And I went there in part to kind of see so that when I talked to Washington I could give them a little bit of on the scene sense of what was happening and how things were working, but also to buck them up. They were operating under gunfire. It was terrifying. Military people are trained for that. We're not. Some of them didn't just try. We had one officer who was an ex Green Beret. He worked 40 hours on a particular problem set with no sleep. They needed to see me, and I tried to fill that need. I met most days in the particularly in the afternoon at the time that the shifts changed. People worked 12 hour shifts. The departing shifts left at, I don't know, 4 in the morning, or something like that, or 3 in the morning. So, I talked to people before they went out. But I talked to them

when they came back. How did it go? How are you feeling? What do you need? And I hoped that that provided a measure of support and solace. I will note that our Foreign Service personnel were spread in two different locations. I was at what we refer to as the Kabul air compound, an embassy facility on the south side of the tarmac, with all of the people who had come from the mission in Kabul, plus probably a third, maybe more, of the TDY personnel who had been sent in by the State Department to help us. Because there wasn't capacity for the rest -- or in part because there wasn't capacity for the rest they stayed in facilities on the north side of the airport, which is where Ambassador Bass opted to put himself to facilitate the hour by hour work that he and Jim DeHart and others on his senior staff needed to do with the military commanders. So, they were housed adjacent to the tactical operations center that the military ran.

Q: Is it fair to say you had a comprehensive understanding of what was happening on the ground in Kabul?

A: I believe I did. On Kabul, meaning at the airport?

Q: Correct.

A: Yes, I believe that I did.

Q: And in your assessment, do you feel that folks on the ground felt empowered to raise any concerns or issues with you directly?

A: I believe so. I hope so.

Q: Do you feel that you were responsive to any concerns that were raised to you directly?

A: I was responsive to requests that were made to me. We did everything we could to support our people.

**Ambassador Wilson expressed his admiration for Ambassador Dan Smith, the author of the After Action Review, calling him “one of most outstanding officers of my generation,” and described the review as “an excellent report.”**

Page 114, line 4

Q: Ambassador, do you know who Ambassador Smith is?

A: Yes. I've known him for a long time.

Q: What is his professional reputation?

A: He's one of the most outstanding officers of our generation -- my generation.

Q: What informs that opinion?



A: He performed in an exemplary manner in very senior positions with lots of responsibility in a difficult and challenging environment. His role as -- the job he had as Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research is one that asks a lot of the person that's in that position. There's a lot of sensitive coordination to do with others. You've got all kinds of very, very sensitive material that's coming through. He did a super job, super enough that he became Acting Deputy Secretary of State for a period, I believe was considered for another position later that ultimately I think he decided he wasn't going to take. But he is just one of the most outstanding people, as I say, of my generation in the Foreign Service.

Q: Fantastic. So, it therefore follows that you would have no reason to take issue with his credibility or professional judgment?

A: No.

Page 175, line 16

Q: And do you know the individual who drafted the after action review?

A: I know Dan Smith. I do not know others who were involved in the report.

Q: What is the professional reputation of Dan Smith?

A: He's one of most outstanding officers of my generation in the Foreign Service.

Page 176, line 13

Q: Right. I was referring to the unclassified portion of the after action review. But regardless, perhaps a better question is, do you have any reason to doubt the validity of the drafter, Ambassador Smith's findings, based on your experience and his professional reputation?

A: No. I think it's an excellent report.

**Ambassador Wilson had absolute confidence in Ambassador Bass' "dedication to working on this problem and to finding the resources, to the extent that resources are what's necessary, to help people who are suffering from post-traumatic stress" in his current role as Under Secretary of State for Management.**

Page 177, line 21

Q: Okay. Did you hear of any concerns during or after your tenure in Kabul, during the evacuation, about the Department's available support toward employees who had served as part of the Noncombatant Evacuation Operation team?

A: I've heard a lot about it in the aftermath from individuals who felt and I know have complained directly to Secretary Blinken about the lack of -- what they've regarded as the lack of emotional and other support from

Q: From? Lack of support from.

A: From the State Department. From the U.S. Government.

Q: And so I believe your testimony is that you understood these concerns from other people who relayed them to you. Is it your understanding that they also relayed them to individuals at the State Department?

A: Yes, that's correct.

Q: And do you have any sense of the response?

A: I think the State Department has tried to be as responsive as they can and worked on this problem quite a bit. It's not unhelpful that Ambassador Bass has moved on to become Under Secretary for Management at the State Department where he is in a position to work on this problem and identify resources, change rules or regulations, procedures where it's necessary to do so, intervene on behalf of specific people in specific situations, another reason why I'm grateful for what he's done and what he's doing.

Q: And do you have any knowledge of steps that Ambassador Bass in his new role as Under Secretary for Management has taken in this regard?

A: My recollections here are limited and superficial. I have heard about steps, some of them recommended in the AAR, some of them just in response to complaints that were made. Ambassador Bass or others at the State Department, I think, can give you a better recounting of that than I could from memory.

Q: Fair enough. But as a general matter, do you have confidence in Ambassador Bass' ability to receive and respond constructively to the concerns of personnel?

A: I have absolute confidence in John's dedication to working on this problem and to finding the resources, to the extent that resources are what's necessary, to help people who are suffering from post traumatic stress. I would note that in meetings immediately after everybody got back, in the course of September, I heard about this from others, and I heard about it from John actually myself with respect to me, he made the point repeatedly, there are resources available for people that need it. And he pointed to something that must have happened earlier in his career that he couldn't deal with, and he finally reached out and got help. I don't know if that story is true or not. But he used that as a way to say there's no shame in asking. Ask. Talk to your supervisors. Talk to State Department counselors. Talk to others who can help you.

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