

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 Jayne Howell

Conducted on Friday, July 28, 2023.

Senior consular officer Jayne Howell was “very qualified” to spearhead the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) for Consular Affairs on the ground in Kabul.

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Q: Why did you think you were selected to serve as the consular team lead during the evacuation?

A: I would be speculating to say why they selected me, but I -- yeah, I'm not really sure. I believe it was because I was very qualified.

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A: Yeah. I have been assigned to two different tours -- two prior tours in Afghanistan. I was the cultural affairs officer in 2004, 2004 to 2005. It was a 1-year assignment. And then I was assigned to Afghanistan as the consular section chief from 2011 to 2012.

Q: Do you believe those experiences prepared you for what you faced in the evacuation?

A: I think they certainly contributed to my preparation, yes.

Q: Is it a fair characterization to say you have regional, sort of, in-country expertise?

A: I would choose the word "experience" over "expertise," but yes, I definitely have some familiarity with Afghanistan and the region.

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Q: One more follow-up question. Why did you decide to volunteer?

A: It's such a hard question to answer. I felt I was qualified, having had two prior assignments in Afghanistan. I have supported other NEOs, and so I felt like I had not just regional knowledge, but also substantive knowledge of this kind of function, including a full NEO training operation at Camp Lejeune with the Marines. So, I felt like I had a unique skill set that would allow me to contribute very directly. But in addition to that, I felt a great deal of personal conviction about the importance of the mission, given my own experience serving twice prior in Afghanistan.

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A: I have received Department awards for my service.

Q: Can you describe for us some of those awards?

A: Specific to Afghanistan?

Q: Broadly.

A: I have received, I believe it is seven individual superior honor awards, several group superior honor awards. I'm not sure how many. I've received the Department's Luther Replogle Award for Management, Innovation, and Excellence. And I have received the Secretary's Award for Heroism.

Howell viewed Ambassador Bass and Ambassador Wilson as a team. Howell stressed that the presence of multiple ambassador-rank officials is often welcomed in complex missions.

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Q: Did Ambassador Bass work with Ambassador Wilson in any capacity?

A: Yes. I mean, my impression was very much that they were in constant communication. Periodically the way that I would understand what the decision had been made about how we were doing something was relayed to me by Ambassador Bass or Jim DeHart who we also worked closely with, as being a -- like a mission leadership decision to include Ambassador Wilson's input or decision making.

Q: To the best of your recollection and experience, did their duties appear to overlap at all?

A: In my experience? No. I viewed them very much as a team.

Q: Can you speak to why Ambassador Bass was asked to go to Afghanistan?

A: I have no visibility on that.

Q: There's already a chief of mission on the ground, Ambassador Wilson, as we noted. Did it seem sort of out of the ordinary to send a second ambassador to the country in a senior role?

A: For me, no. When I had served prior in Afghanistan in 2011, there were five ambassador-rank officials on the ground. I think it was a big and complex mission that required a lot of senior people to help do it effectively.

Q: At any point was there a lack of confidence expressed in Ambassador Wilson by the Department?

A: Not anywhere that I was present.

Immediately after landing in Kabul, Howell heard gunfire, grenades, and a “roar of people.” However, she encountered an organized and ongoing State Department consular operation, notwithstanding the unfolding crisis.

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Q: Upon your arrival, so once you were in-country, what was your impression of the situation on the ground? What was your immediate sort of reaction?

A: My first impression was that it was extremely kinetic. Almost immediately coming off of the plane, you could hear machine gun fire, flash bangs. So, it sounded more like grenades, although I'm not an expert in the sounds, and I could hear this roar of people. I arrived after dark. And then we were taken over to the JOC, first stop that I went. And then I had to wait for transport to be able to safely travel over to the KAC, which could only happen every few hours for security reasons. And so, I went out to -- the first thing I did was walk out to the passenger terminal to observe the consular screening and manifesting operation that was happening there, and it was -- there was a plan. It was organized. It was happening. But the pressure on it, the number of people and the distress of the people in the operation was evident and sad.

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Q: Okay. I also wanted to make sure we have your testimony clear on this one point. During the last round, you had testified when you landed in Kabul, the situation was chaotic. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: And to be clear, was the chaos as related to the Taliban and the situation outside of the perimeters?

A: Yes. The chaotic environment was the -- the chaos was the environment. I don't want to misrepresent what was happening inside the compound. This was a very large operation, and was very also kind of shaped by what was happening outside. Because what we haven't talked a lot -- in this briefing, there was also an element, especially early on where all the NATO partners who were still there. So, by the end, it was really just America. But for the majority of this, there were many nations that were there that had their militaries, that had their citizens, that had their planes, kind of adding to the complexity of what was happening. So, I don't know that I would characterize inside their perimeter as chaotic, but it was certainly complex, and it was noisy and fluid. And everything that was happening outside was chaos.

Q: Okay. So, is it fair to say that the State Department's response to the chaos was not chaotic?

A: I did not feel like our response was chaotic, no.

Senior U.S. government leadership conducted morning meetings with State Department and military personnel to ensure that information was being shared both formally and informally throughout the day, and daily expectations were clear.

Page 42, line 4

Q: You mentioned a battle rhythm meeting. Could you describe that a bit more?

A: Sure. It was basically a morning senior staff meeting. The term the military used was battle rhythm meeting. We adopted their term. It quite often also happened at the end of the day, but it was -- it never -- we never missed the morning meeting. And it was a chance for military leadership, State Department leadership to sit down together and make sure that -- that in a formal, structured way we were sharing information that was happening on an ongoing -- informal basis throughout the day.

Q: And who are the participants of that?

A: It was always General Donahue, General Sullivan, some other members of the military leadership, the senior planner I mentioned before. Lieutenant Colonel Hardman was usually there, I was usually there, Ambassador Bass, and Jim DeHart were almost always there. Where possible, Ambassador Wilson and the acting deputy chief of mission would attend. There may be other people based on certain --

Q: Who was the acting deputy chief of mission?

A: Scott Weinhold. So, the -- but because they weren't co-located with the military, they weren't always able to physically be there, but as much as possible they were there. So, it was kind of the senior State Department and military leadership in-person senior staff meeting.

Howell asserted that a rigid evacuation plan would have hampered the adaptive and flexible nature of the NEO. Instead, daily meetings provided planning and clarity that aligned with the ever-changing nature of the crisis.

Page 46, line 2

Q: Do you feel that you were able to perform your job duties without a written plan?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think it would have been a good use of your time on the ground to be iterating on a written plan?

A: Prior to my arrival or during the evacuation?

Q: During the evacuation itself.

A: No. Because the situation changed so frequently and so completely, that by the time we would have produced a document, it would not have been relevant anymore.

Page 46, line 21

Q: Do you feel that the guidance you were giving to your subordinates were changing in real time as a result of the complexity?

A: Yes. That's why it was so important for us to have the standup meetings, because it was a chance to give them the latest information and explain why things were changing and shifting sometimes even during a shift that they were on.

Q: In your judgment, were the consular officers delivering or executing on those plans?

A: Yes.

Q: What informs that opinion?

A: 172,000 people are safely out of Afghanistan. I -- yes. I thought that the work of the consular officers was absolutely heroic, and I never witnessed one give one ounce less of what they were humanly capable of doing.

Howell noted that her 30-person volunteer consular team was resolute and committed to the mission. They worked extensively to match the urgency and need that the crisis placed upon the operation.

Page 55, line 12

Q: Okay. And how did you find the group of 30 to be in terms of character when you arrived?

A: Because every one of them was a volunteer, I found that they were very invested in the success of the mission and reaching out and protecting as many Americans and Afghan partners as possible. So, in my experience of their character, it was just a resolute and absolute commitment to the mission. I did not have the time to chitchat or get to know them. Quite frankly, a lot of people. My only observation of most of them was are they doing the job and how are they doing the job. And I was extremely impressed.

Page 57, line 16

Q: So, to clarify what you just testified to, when you landed in Kabul, how many minutes or hours lapsed before you were onsite observing consular activities?

A: Very few minutes. I mean, we walked in, probably had some water, got a very quick briefing on these are the groups of people, this is how we're evaluating, this is where the operations are, and then all of the TDY-ers were immediately sent out with other consular officers who had been on the ground who were kind of training them in real time. And I

went, I don't know, less than an hour before we went out to the first site.

Q: Okay. And how many hours until you took your first change of shift where you were no longer technically working?

A: Me, personally? I did not -- I worked three shifts before I took a break. So --

Q: Three 12-hour shifts?

A: Yeah. So -- because we worked overnight. Then I worked the day, then I worked the night again. Then the day again, then that night. So how many hours is that?

Q: Thirty-six?

A: Is that something -- yeah. Yeah.

[. . .]

Q: So, you were working 36 hours. You're immediately pushed into your position. There were consular officers on the ground working 24 hours.

A: Yeah.

Q: Is that understandable given the urgency and need to start processing folks?

A: I did that -- yes. Yes, I felt it was useful. I did that because I felt the urgency, the need, and the need to put structure in place and iterate from the immediate kind of temporary structure and organization that had been put in place when the center of operations had moved from the embassy to the airport. They were in that crisis and unable to step back. As a TDY-er coming in fresh, I felt that it was important to invest the time to think about putting structure in place to scale up so that we could ingest more people in a safer and more structured way.

Howell maintained that the U.S. military oversaw crowd control and perimeter management at HKIA and were crucial to the mission's success. Consular officers and Marines collaborated in proximity as an "integrated team" throughout the NEO.

Page 60, line 13

Q: All right. Okay. What were some of the most significant challenges posed by these large crowds, upon your initial arrival?

A: I mean, the main one was always the stampede; that if there was not appropriate crowd control in place, that people were being crushed or pushed up against the walls. But then, in addition to the just mechanics of the large number of people and the risk of crushing, there was violence within the crowd. The Taliban periodically would start, either at the very minimum, beating people with sticks, and in the worst cases, they were using live bullets and shooting at people in the crowd if they felt that the crowd was out of control.

So, it could be very violent in the crowd as well.

Q: What were some of the tools that you deployed upon arrival to address that?

A: So, I want to be very clear that the U.S. military was in charge of crowd control, not me or the Department of State. And so what my role was to kind of understand from them where they saw the risks and see if there were ways that we could mitigate some of those risks by creating different ways and avenues for Americans and our partners to access the compound. And so we looked at, instead of having just the three or four -- I can't remember the exact number, I'm sorry -- main gates that the evacuation had been using to access the compound initially, kind of public gates, to use the massive perimeter that we had and other access points to the compound to spread some of the populations in the crowd where we could bring them in safely in different ways, and allow us to be more targeted in getting our priority population.

Q: So, is it fair to say you were coordinating pretty closely with military on the ground?

A: For me it was absolute lockstep.

Page 62, line 22

Q: Okay. And I think we'd like to get into some of the more creative efforts you described later. But just to clarify here, generally speaking, consular officers were within a few feet of Marines at the gate --

A: Yes.

Q: -- interacting with them on a regular basis?

A: Yes.

Q: And similarly, because consular officers were otherwise stationed in the passenger terminal --

A: Yes.

Q: -- again, a few feet from Marines?

A: Yes. Together -- together working. Yeah, they were very much -- in my experience, a very much integrated team.

Page 64, line 11

Q: Is it fair to characterize your relationship with the military as collaborative?

A: From my perspective, deeply. Yes.

Q: And did you feel that when you suggested a change of course, the military was responsive to that?

A: Yes.

Q: And vice versa?

A: Yes. I mean, it was a very stressful environment. Like, everyone was sleep deprived and food deprived and cranky and scared. But I did feel very much that if we had an idea and went to them, they would say, okay, fine, we'll try it, or we won't, you know, and this is why, and vice versa. Some of the best ideas came from a military officer walking into my little cubicle and saying, "I have this idea, what do you think?"

Page 66, line 6

Q: And in your prior experience that you testified to, I think at least 20 years of your Department career spent performing consular duties, was this situation where you were working shoulder to shoulder with U.S. military, with tens of thousands of people pressing in a few feet away from you, was that unusual?

A: It was unprecedented in my career.

Howell revealed that she had never done anything that she cared more about than the evacuation of Afghanistan and that she was "so proud" of what the Department accomplished.

Page 70, line 10

Q: If you had to rate yourself on 1 to 10, what was your success level in terms of effectiveness on the ground?

A: I have never done anything that I care more about than the evacuation of Afghanistan. And I am so proud of all that we accomplished, but I will always wonder if I could have done it better, right. Like -- because I take it so seriously. Like, I -- I feel like I'm supposed to say something, but all I can do is be honest with you, which is I am so proud and at the same time I will never think it was good enough.

Page 108, line 6

A: And I'm sorry. I'm not shouting at you. I feel like I'm shouting at you. I am -- I cannot describe to you the level of commitment of the people on the ground from every part of our government. It was like this clock ticking. It was like it was over my head. The plane is going to take off, and I want to take everyone who wants to go with me, and every person did that. And so at some point I started feeling like I don't -- the number doesn't change anything for me. I have to leave on that day, and there's not one plane that didn't take off, there's not one empty seat, there's not one Marine, member of the Army, State Department employee who didn't throw everything we had at getting every one of those people.

Page 155, line 12

Q: What are those, some of those scenarios that you could never have imagined?

A: Asking the Taliban to vet U.S. citizens to access a compound to bring them to me. I could never have imagined that that would be something that I would be doing, and yet it worked. It worked. There are hundreds of Americans who are in the United States safely and their families, because we did that. But as someone who had served in Afghanistan, multiple times, and has strong feelings about the Taliban, it was wild to me that that was something we were doing. But I'm really, really proud of the decision that we all made. And that was not like a single decision, that was a team decision to do that because it saved our lives -- saved many of these people's lives.

Howell believed that the training provided in the Foreign Affairs Manual gave her the tools she needed to adapt to the “unprecedented” Afghanistan NEO.

Page 75, line 23

Q: And you previously stated that you referred to the State Department's FAM, or Foreign Affairs Manual, for guidance. Did the FAM contemplate evacuation of this magnitude or of any magnitude?

A: Well, I think just kind of the building blocks about how to do a NEO, and then I think the idea is that then you scale to the situation, whether it's a small group or a big group. But, no, it doesn't explicitly address how to do every scenario. I think one thing I've learned in a lot of years of consular work is that the specific thing you plan for is never the actual thing that happens. So, most of the guidance focuses on the way things should be done instead of what specifically should be done, if that makes sense.

Page 76, line 10

Q: In your opinion, do you think that the FAM could have properly accounted for, you know, the 120,000-plus people and the airport being surrounded by terrorist groups?

A: I felt that -- for me, the pieces of information I needed to adapt to those kinds of unprecedented scenarios that you're describing, I felt like I did have them, right, because the core functions remain the same. You just do more of them.

Howell provided extensive detail regarding operating constraints on the evacuation, which included the unpredictable nature of the huge crowds, ongoing security threats, and the ever-changing agreements with the Taliban. However, Howell expressed that she did not believe that having more consular officers would have appreciably impacted the operation's efficiency.

Page 84, line 9

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

A: I mean, yes. The constraint -- or let me answer that in a different way. The constraint was access to the airport facility through whatever gate. The bottleneck was never people waiting to talk to a consular officer. Because we had the hub-and-spoke model, wherever -- in my constant coordination with the military, they told us that we were able to do consular operations, which is the kind of the initial triage vetting to determine potential admissibility to the U.S., or board-ability in the evacuation, wherever -- you know, we would have those conversations with the military, and they would say, We're going to do Abbey Gate and the passenger terminal and this other gate today. We would divide the consular officers, send them to those places, but periodically they would stop. But we always had somebody at the passenger terminal, right? So, like, people, if they -- if our military partners or other people who were accessing the compound would bring them into the passenger terminal, they would always see a consular officer. The constraint that I felt was -- the only real reason that we couldn't have scaled up more was simply the kinetic and unpredictable nature of these huge crowds surrounding the airport and the importance of the military providing access control there. There was -- and I can't emphasize this enough. It didn't even start with the military. It was the Taliban. It was what will the Taliban allow? What will they let people move through and how will they do it? Like, there were times that we would have an agreement with the Taliban that we would have a certain population approach maybe, like, the passenger gate is the best example of this, the passenger terminal. At one point we were able to set that up to use that as an access point, and because it had been a passenger terminal, it had more kind of security, perimeter, and the kind of stuff that we're used to at international airports built in, which is great. The Taliban agreed -- it was relayed to me. I did not discuss this with the Taliban. It was relayed to me that the Taliban had agreed that we would do that. We went out there. We had consular officers. We had the 82nd Airborne, and then the Taliban, because I don't find them to be particularly good faith partners, instead of admitting people in a controlled way, they just opened the boom, and tens of thousands of people rushed, again, back to the passenger terminal, and we lost the ability to use that as a controlled safe environment where -- and if we had not had that perimeter, we would have put both the citizens and the partners that we were trying to help, as well as our own mission, at risk if we lost the ability to secure the perimeter. So, for me as the consular manager I never felt that the constraint to assisting more Americans or partners was the

number of consular officers. I always felt that when the military gave me the requirement or said, okay, we're able to open up this gate or we're able to do processing at this gate, that I was always able to meet that demand.

Page 86, line 16

Q: So, in terms of the number of consular officers, are you saying there was never a moment where a consular officer was needed and they were busy with something else?

A: I'm saying that -- I mean, that's a very definitive statement. I'm saying that we didn't -- there was never a moment that we didn't fulfill a demand signal, although it wasn't, like, necessarily instant. Sometimes it involved repositioning things. But if in consultation with our military partners, and they told us that we are able to have a gate open here, we sent somebody. It might not have been -- I might not have had them sitting next to me ready to go. I would have to pull them from another place, redistribute and divide. But usually if there wasn't a consular officer at a gate, it was because of a decision that had been made that -- and when I say "had been made," I want to be clear because I'm using a passive voice -- made in consultation between all the military and State Department partners that were looking at the big picture of where operations needed to be, right? Like if someone would come to me and say -- because Abbey Gate was always the most kinetic gate, right? It was always the one with the most violence, the most issues with the Taliban, the most issues with crowd control. And so, I'm using it as an example because that's the one that we stopped and started the most. But that was not like -- that never started from I don't have consular officers to send there. It was very common that one of the Marines would come into the liaison office and say somebody just got shot and killed at Abbey Gate, or somebody threw a baby over a wall at Abbey Gate, or something happened. We're going to hold on Abbey Gate. The presence of the consular officers there create a pressure on Abbey Gate we can't lose it, right? And so we would say, okay, so we would pull a consular officers back from Abbey Gate. And then we would say, where else are we processing? Great, we will send them there. And then a couple of hours later, or -- I don't know however long it was -- somebody would come back and say, we're ready to start again. Okay. Now I have got to go get the consular officers, you know, and move them. But there was never -- I never felt that there was a moment where I wasn't responding to every place that I had been told it was safe to provide those operations. Although that doesn't mean that it always felt instant, but we were constantly saying, Okay, what is open? Where is it safe to process? And putting people there.

Howell insisted that consular processing backups were rare and that consular officers flexibly adapted to the environment when processing individuals.

Page 99, line 14

Q: So I guess sort of in that sort of holding area, I guess, sort of limbo, for a lack of better

term, where the Afghans are past sort of the Marines bringing them in, before they've gotten the consular officers to screen their documents if they had documents, was there ever sort of a time where there was like a ton of backup, or it was backed up to where the Marines weren't able to bring any more Afghans in?

A: It could have happened. I don't want to say categorically it did not. It was -- there was a lot happening is what I hope I'm conveying to you, a lot of different things happening in a lot of different places with a lot of different people who may not always have the same information. It is possible that there were some Marine groups or 82nd Airborne groups who were holding people to wait for consular officers to come and to do that if it was at a shift change, or if it had been a time that they in their own command had said to me, We're worried about the pressure on that gate. We're going to hold for a couple of hours, you know, or something like that. But also, there were times that at the passenger terminal, people would just walk up with a Marine and say, Hey, we have got these 25 people. They came in this other place. There wasn't a consular officer there. And we were, like, Fine, we'll screen them here, right? So, I don't think it would be a correct characterization to think that huge lines of people were just standing inside, like they had been granted access, and they were just waiting necessarily for a consular officer. There were many ways that people were coming on at different gates for lots of different reasons. So, yes, there could have been times when there was a backup, but I don't think it was the norm.

Howell considered the NEO to be both unprecedented and extraordinary due to the vast amount of people seeking evacuation, the remarkable amount of government resources allocated to the operation, and the exceptional work of consular officers around the world that contributed to it.

Page 118, line 25

Q: So, you just mentioned that the effort to reach Americans was unprecedented and extraordinary. You, I mean, have a breadth and depth of knowledge both in the consular world and in Afghanistan. In your view, what made it extraordinary and unprecedented?

A: I think the -- for me, the number of people seeking evacuation at a -- in a single moment was maybe generationally singular, like, I wouldn't say ever, but in my experience, in my lifetime, far and away the most -- the biggest number that was seeking it at that time. But also, the government resources allocated to this evacuation were also extraordinary and made our ability to provide that assistance at that scale possible. And so, we were able to communicate more and evacuate more than we had been in the past, but primarily because we needed to evacuate more than we had in the past.

Page 120, line 18

Q: I'd like to read into the record paragraph 21 [of the After Action Review], which reads:

Nevertheless, in response to this crisis, the Department undertook a massive effort involving tens of thousands of phone calls to contact directly as many private U.S. citizens as possible to determine their whereabouts, whether they wanted to leave Afghanistan, and to provide information on how they could be evacuated. This was an extraordinary response to a unique situation.

A: Yeah.

Q: Do you agree with this finding?

A: Yeah. I think it was absolutely extraordinary the number of people -- the number of consular officers and Foreign Service officers and civil service colleagues from around the world who volunteered to take these phone calls and to call them back over and over again.

Howell confirmed that that the consular officers acted entrepreneurially and collaboratively through the entirety of the evacuation.

Page 136, line 24

Q: We've had a number of TIs now and hearings, and that word keeps coming up. It was really entrepreneurial, particularly given the extraordinary circumstances. Is there anything you'd like to offer, whether or not you agree with that assessment or have more to add?

A: I have not used that word, "entrepreneurial," to talk about what happened, but I think it is an extremely accurate description. Because I think I referenced before too, at least from my perspective, on the operational piece of this, it was deeply collaborative. There was -- I had no ego about who does what. It's, how do we use the resources we have to get the mission. And so sometimes somebody would come in and have a really brilliant idea about something that wasn't even part of their mandate, and the rest of the people in the room would say, yeah, why not, let's try it, right. It's also why that hub at the passenger terminal was so important because, even though we had the major flow-throughs happening through the big public gates at first, and then we shifted to add in all these other ways, it was the incremental place where if anybody could get one of these people onto the military base safely, then, okay, fine, bring them to the passenger terminal, we will vet them then and there. And I think in the end, there was no one thing that allowed us to get these huge numbers other than exactly this. It was 10,000 small incremental acts of entrepreneurship, that totaled 122,000 people.

Q: Is entrepreneurialism -- or being entrepreneurial an activity that you customarily see in the Department?

A: Yes. I'm going to say yes, at least in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. I think we have to because we have very, very large numbers of people that would like to travel to the

United States and very large numbers of Americans that go abroad and periodically need assistance, and we have to respond to something that there is almost -- there are very rarely playbooks for, because as I said before, we do a lot of planning, but we never plan for the exact scenario that happens. So, if we focus on the planning for the building blocks of things that must happen, then it allows us to be prepared to be entrepreneurial and pivot and take care of our people.

Howell argued that using HKIA as the main point of the NEO did not place unmanageable constraints on the evacuation. Howell's experience paired with the historical ramifications of the withdrawal led her to believe that there was no missing piece that "would have made a difference" regarding the NEO at HKIA. Regardless of the location of the NEO, significant challenges would arise due to the number of people seeking evacuation.

Page 152, line 25

Q: Would you say that the constraints of the using HKIA as the point of the NEO were a significant challenge?

A: In what way?

Q: The urban environment, the access issues that you just mentioned, the massive crowds.

A: No, I don't think I would say that. And I don't know, maybe this is me speaking out of experiences, particularly relevant, but I don't know that I think that there are -- I don't know that it would have significantly changed what happened to be in a different place. At the end of the day, if we had to be in a place no matter where it was or how big it was, it had a perimeter, and given the number people who were seeking evacuation, being in a more remote location, would likely have only made it more difficult for the people we were trying to evacuate to access this.

Page 166, line 17

Q: Okay. What do you think should have been done differently in retrospect?

A: I think that is an enormously broad and speculative question that --

Q: I'll narrow it. If there's one thing you could have changed, whether it be the timing, whether it be -- these are just examples -- you don't have to adhere to these --

A: Yeah, I'll say --

Q: -- what would you have done differently?

A: I am really trying to think of a substantive answer to give you. I swear, I'm not trying to not answer the question. It's almost -- I have spent so much time thinking about it. I'm sorry, I don't think I can answer that question. I just can't.

Q: Is that because you wouldn't have done anything differently, or because of just sort of the magnitude is too great?

A: Well, I think it's not either. It's something along the lines of -- as I mentioned before, I will always wonder -- and I've spent an enormous amount of time trying to think about what would have been different. The situation was so exceptional, and the environment was so complex and kinetic, I think some of the torturing I've done of myself of imagining how it could have been different, I don't ever land on something where I think it would have made it a real impact and change. If I talk about, like, what I had the ability to influence in the window that I arrived and was there, I don't know that there is one specific thing that I could point out to say, that's the missing link. And if only we had had that or been able to do that, appreciably, there would have been something really different. If you accept either the baseline parameters of the question to be, hundreds of thousands of people fleeing for their lives in a circle around a static location, and other people, not just the antagonists that we had that we had been at war with for 20 years, but even a third people of people trying to disrupt it, I just don't know what that missing piece was that would have made a difference.

Howell asserted that further contingency planning would not have been beneficial to the operation, since some of the scenarios experienced on the ground would have been impossible to envision.

Page 155, line 2

Q: I understand. So, you have always said or you said that you'll always wonder if you could have done a better job when you were there. Do you believe that you could have done better if you had, you know, more time to plan and train for the -- for what you were going to undertake?

A: Not really, no, I don't, because the thing about that whole period was that minute to minute it changed. I don't know that it was something -- I could have never envisioned some of the decisions that I had to make or some of the scenarios that occurred. And so, no. I have -- I do not think that I had more time to plan for it. I would have had the creativity necessary to imagine some of the scenarios that occurred.

In the aftermath of the Abbey Gate attack, Howell described that the victims were moved to the passenger terminal and processing was halted temporarily. To ensure the evacuation was not impacted, Howell noted that consular processing restarted while triage was ongoing and that every single consular officer volunteered to begin working again the moment they were able.

Page 161, line 10

A: [. . .] And at about 5:45, I did not hear the blast. We were in a hardened structure. The

JOC was this thing. I walked out, and it was so deafening. The room was silent. And, normally, there are hundreds of people in this room. And Jean, my colleague, was standing at the bottom of the stairs, and she said it just went, the bomb went off. And just -- it was devastating, and it was silent. And the consular officers, many of them were there. The DS agents were bringing them in. Basically, the entire operation, not just consulars, but like the operation had stopped while the Marines were providing the triage in the mass casualty event. And they brought all of the injured and killed to the tarmac at the passenger terminal. So that they were using where we had been doing the boarding as the mass casualty space. So, they asked us to hold, and we were waiting for news about casualties. And I very quietly, Jean and I went around and reminded all of the consular officers and the State Department personnel that their parents or loved ones would start seeing this on TV, please text them, and say you're okay. And we just waited. And then we got the word -- I think it was about 45 minutes, maybe an hour. It's hard to know because time kind of stretches out. And it became clear that the number of casualties was significant, but they still weren't confirming that. And one of the Marines, not one of the senior commanders, one of the kind of the mid-range Marines came to me and said, we're ready to go. Like we're still doing the mass casualties, but we need to start processing again. And so, I said all the consular officers are just looking at me. And I was like, okay, we're ready to go. We're going to the passenger terminal. Who wants to go? And a hundred percent -- like everybody's hands went up. But the Marines said they couldn't handle that many, so we kind of just drew a line down the middle, I put on my body armor, and we talked over there, and they were still just behind us, kind of where normally the baggage comes through. They still had the people being treated, the Afghans, and the soldiers, and the Marines. And then we started boarding people again. It really -- I might be 2 hours, it might be 45 minutes. I don't really know because it was so wildly terrible.

Page 162, line 19

Q: And were there considerations after the bombing to any NEO right then and there; you said that you went back to work?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: Let me shake my head emphatically no. I never heard anyone suggest that we should stop NEO, certainly not the Marines.

Howell considers Ambassador Daniel Smith, who headed the After Action Review, to be an intelligent man of integrity.

Page 172, line 20

Q: Have you ever worked with Dan Smith?

A: I have done -- I have done an exercise with Ambassador Smith.

Q: How did you find him to be in terms of his character?

A: He is a man I respect deeply. He is obviously a man of integrity who cares about the welfare of the people that he works with and for. And he is deeply intelligent.

Q: How have you seen him act with integrity?

A: The specific situation which I worked with Dan Smith is something that I don't think could be discussed here, so I don't want to go into great detail. But I saw him have an opportunity to lead in a very difficult environment. And I thought that the decisions that he made in that environment were clearly made from a place of integrity.

Q: Would you describe his character as trustworthy?

A: That is my impression.

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