

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 Brain McKeon

Conducted on Wednesday, November 29th, 2023.

Brain McKeon served on the National Security Council (NSC) transition team during the Biden transition and then worked as Deputy Secretary for Management from March 19, 2021 to December 31, 2022.

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Q: Mr. McKeon, can you please give us a brief overview of your career at the State Department?

A: Well, I served there during the transition of President Obama, from Bush to Obama. I don't really count that as working at the State Department, but I was in an office in the State Department in November, December, January 2008-2009. And I was assigned to the State Department transition team very late in the Biden transition. I was originally on the NSC transition team, and then they dual assigned me once it became known what I was likely to be nominated for. So that was -- it was after January 1; I don't remember the date -- 2 weeks, at most. And then I worked in the State Department from March 19, 2021, to December 31, 2022, in the position of Deputy Secretary.

As Deputy Secretary for Management, McKeon “took the lead on rebuilding the Refugee Admissions Program” and “worked on how we were going to secure Embassy Kabul after the U.S. military withdrawal.”

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Q: And what is the role of DMR within the Department?

A: Well, it's defined in the FAM, although not in great detail. It was created by a House Republican, who's still here, from Kentucky, Mr. Rogers, who I think saw or had a view from his subcommittee chairmanship in the late '90s of the CJS Subcommittee that State Department didn't pay adequate attention to management resource issues at a senior enough level, so he legislated the position in an appropriations bill. There's only a couple of direct reports -- the director of Foreign Assistance Office and the director of the Small Business -- Disadvantaged Business Unit. I'm forgetting the precise title. If you look on the organizational chart, all the under secretaries report up to both deputies and the Secretary. It was broadly understood that the management family, the Under Secretary for Management, and all the bureaus under that position reported to me. But I had other duties that were outside the M family, in a sense.

Q: And what were those duties?

A: I worked on and took the lead on rebuilding the Refugee Admissions Program.

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Q: When did you first become involved with work relating to the Afghanistan withdrawal?

A: I can't remember the first moment that I touched Afghanistan issues. Sometime in March or April, there was kind of a division of labor of issues in the -- following the decision of the President, between me and Derek Chollet in terms of interagency workstreams. I worked on how we would continue to provide foreign assistance. If the Taliban started to control areas within Afghanistan, you know, could we be able to continue to provide assistance to people in those districts? I was lead on the SIV issue and the anticipated flow of refugees out of Afghanistan if the Taliban started taking over parts of the country; and then how we were going to secure Embassy Kabul after the U.S. military withdrawal and thinking about the possible need to evacuate the embassy and ultimately evacuate the country.

Between April and August of 2021, McKeon contributed to work and regular interagency meetings which focused on SIV issues, developing noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) plans, and preparing to maintain residual diplomatic and military forces in Afghanistan.

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Q: Thank you. And what was your role in the August 2021 emergency evacuation from Afghanistan?

A: You mean during the 2 weeks?

Q: Including the planning for the evacuation. That was the 2 weeks prior, or preceding that, that account for that as well.

A: Well, during the course -- let me go back to April. I mean, during the course of April and leading up to August, there was a lot of work going on within the Department and in the interagency on all the issues that I mentioned that I was responsible for. I mean, there were regular interagency meetings on all those topics. Probably the ones in which there were more meetings than others were on the SIV issue, the decision to try to bring people out who had yet to complete the process, which we started with flights in late July. And then the issue of the residual U.S. military force that would assist with ensuring the security of Embassy Kabul and the U.S. Government facilities at the Kabul airport. And then, certainly, there were a lot of ongoing conversations between State and DOD -- I was not directly involved in a lot of those, but -- on planning for evacuation and a possible NEO.

Q: Thank you. So is it fair to say that the planning for a potential evacuation began in April of 2021?

A: No, I think it -- you know, I'm not sure all that preceded my arrival in the Department. I think -- certainly, I think there were some conversations and planning before that, about what the United States would do and try to maintain a platform in Afghanistan if the United States followed the deadline of the Doha Accord. So I don't think the work started on April 14th or 15th, whatever date that was the President made his decision.

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Q: And what did Secretary Blinken communicate to you regarding the approach toward Afghanistan and the Taliban, if anything?

A: So I'm not going to describe any conversations with the Secretary. I think a general understanding in the position of the President and the Secretary was that we sought to maintain a presence with the United States Embassy in Kabul after the military withdrawal, which is why we focused very much on -- one of the things that had been done with the planning -- now it's jogging my memory a little bit -- is, the bureau and post had been asked to plan for different scenarios of the size of an embassy based on the conditions. You know, what functions could we maintain based on certain condition levels, and what would our footprint have to look like to continue to carry out the desired functions. So there was a matrix that described those different scenarios. And the first time I engaged with this issue, I was presented with that, so, obviously, some work had gone on previously. I just can't tell you when that started.

Q: And was this around the April of 2021 timeframe?

A: It would've been in April 2021, yes.

McKeon explained that Trump Administration polices and "terrible" senior leadership under Secretary Pompeo resulted in many vacancies within the State Department, as morale suffered and officials resigned.

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Q: Okay. And you spoke a little bit about staffing constraints as you stepped into this role. Were there any other constraints that you felt you and your team operated under at that time?

A: Well, the whole Department operated under constraints because of what it inherited.

Q: Could you describe a bit further?

A: Well, the first Secretary under President Trump imposed a hiring freeze for some period of time, which meant they were not hiring to attrition. So there were substantial vacancies

in the civil service that were still -- had built up and had not been taken care of. There had been less damage in terms of the numbers to the Foreign Service, although a lot of very experienced people were pushed out or decided to resign or retire.

Q: Why were they pushed out?

A: My understanding from reading press accounts is they were -- some of them were pushed out because they were not seen as likely to be loyal to President Trump and the new administration. For example, the Acting Under Secretary for Arms Control, Tom Countryman, was on his way to some kind of multilateral meeting in Europe, and he got a phone call at the airport that said, "Come home. You're out of the job." So a lot of those people just decided to retire. Pat Kennedy, the Under Secretary for Management for many years, was one of those people. So there was, I would say -- I don't want to say there was a hollowing out of the Foreign Service. I think there was a lot of senior experienced people who either were pushed to leave or what I would describe as self deported, decided they couldn't work for the new President. And then, even in the course of his administration, there was an ambassador for one that I can recall -- the ambassador to Panama, John Feely -- who came to a point where he decided he couldn't be faithful to the lesson he had learned in the 100 course: That if you can't support the President, it's time to resign.

Q: And when you were referring to the "new President" where individuals self deported, you were referring to Trump?

A: President Trump. That's correct.

Q: Okay.

A: So there were morale problems. People were kind of exhausted from COVID and the drama of -- what I would call the drama of the Trump administration. There were a lot of difficult senior officials in the State Department. It was my understanding people were terrible -- bad managers, yellers -- to include the last Secretary of State.

Q: Which would have been whom?

A: Pompeo was a yeller. A major yeller. I heard that from several people. And there's always, when a new team comes in, there's a little bit of excitement about the change, but there's wariness about the new team. So I would just say it was kind of an exhausted workforce because of the challenges of COVID and what I'd describe as the drama. And it's hard to overstate, I think, the sense of isolation a lot of people at overseas missions felt because they were locked down in their homes in countries with substandard health systems, and there were some delays in getting the vaccines out to post. I spent a fair amount of time in the first several months doing outreach to posts by doing virtual town halls, somewhat to introduce myself, somewhat to try to connect with people at a time

when we still weren't really traveling much. The Secretary traveled, but not many other senior people did. And I felt like that was both part of me understanding what some of the challenges were that people were confronting overseas in the workforce, and also showing that we were interested in investing in them.

McKeon detailed the way in which the Department "swung into action" at the onset of the NEO to support principals and ensure that other responsibilities continued to receive senior-level attention.

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Q: Does operational support and management infrastructure persist even when there's an ongoing crisis in the world?

A: Yeah. It's a big department. The world continues. So yes.

Q: Is it fair to say that you continued in your role as DMR processing operational and management on a day to day basis even as the withdrawal and eventual NEO occurred?

A: Up till the middle of August, yes. During the NEO, I probably spent half of my day working on the NEO and the other half doing the rest of my job -- trying to do the rest of my job.

Q: And was there infrastructure to support you when half of your day turned to the NEO?

A: Well, yes, in the sense that the Department swung into action --

Q: And what do you mean --

A: -- and was supporting me

Q: Okay.

A: -- and supporting the other principals.

McKeon asserted that State was constrained by the surprising lack of planning for the U.S. military withdrawal that occurred before January 20, 2021, under the Trump Administration.

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Q: So did it strike you as unusual at that time that, with outgoing President Trump's intent to go to zero and with troop drawdowns all the way to 2,500 at the time he left office, there wasn't more extensive planning that you could perceive related to a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?

A: It's a little surprising, yes.

Q: And what were the impacts of that on you when you began your tenure?

A: Well, I don't want to say there was an impact or a burden on me. It was just a burden on the whole system to get the planning to a better place.

Q: Okay. So the burden on the system, you mean the entire State Department, essentially, was –

A: Right, yeah.

Q: -- constrained by a lack of planning for withdrawal that had happened before January 20, 2021, notwithstanding that troops were being withdrawn?

A: Right.

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Q: But it was your testimony previously that your perception upon starting in the role at State was that there had been not very robust – or there was insufficient planning for withdrawal under the prior administration?

A: Yes, that's correct. And I think one of the – definitely one of the elements of this that everyone was focused on, but particularly the military, was since we were ignoring the deadline in the Doha Agreement or self deciding to extend it, whether U.S. forces would be facing – would be targets on the way out. So I think probably that was one of the factors, making sure there was adequate time for that.

Q: So when you mean – when you said “targets on the way out,” can you unpack that a little bit for us?

A: That as we – as the United States military drew down and withdrew from bases around the country, the Taliban, in retribution for our having blown past the deadline, would take it out on U.S. forces by attacking them.

McKeon recounted Biden Administration efforts to “revive and improve the SIV program” that began in February 2021, in preparation for the possible evacuation of Americans, lawful permanent residents, and Special Immigrant Visa holders. He stated that additional consular staff were deployed to Kabul, and the pace and number of visas issued increased considerably.

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Q: And how about evacuating SIVs?

A: So, when you say “SIVs,” what do you mean?

Q: Special Immigrant Visa holders, so those who are holders of Special Immigrant Visas as well as those who are eligible for SIVs.

A: That's two very distinct and quite different numbers.

Q: And we can address one first and then the other.

A: Yeah. We certainly were anticipating trying to evacuate the SIV holders. And consistent, I think, with the operation that was already underway in late July and early August, we would be looking to find applicants who were well along in the process.

Q: And when you speak to the efforts already underway in late July, early August, can you elaborate on that? Was that a sort of renewed effort, or was that an additional push that came at the behest of the administration to move forward with SIVs? What did that process entail?

A: So let me back up. I think I mentioned earlier, in February, the President issued a directive to revive and improve the SIV program, and the State Department and other agencies took steps to do that, including deploying additional staff to Kabul, consular staff. And the pace and number of visas issued per week picked up considerably if you compare the numbers in February/March and in the summer. I don't have them off the top of my head. We also vastly expanded the staff in the office, in the SCA Bureau that did basically the bulk of the work on chief of mission approval. Ultimately, someone in Kabul had to give the approval. And that staff went from -- I want to say it went from about 10 to 40 or 45, maybe close to 50, by the fall of 2021. So we took all those measures to expedite the processing of SIV applications and getting people through the system and giving them visas in Kabul. Not everybody who got a visa would then automatically get on a plane. Some people wanted it as a safety valve in case they wanted to leave. Then there was a decision made, after several weeks of conversations in the interagency, to begin to bring people out who had not yet completed the process but were pretty far along in it. And we still had them go through their panel medical exam in Kabul. And, you know, so that took a while, to decide how we would do that, where we would do that, where we would bring people. That took several weeks. And that started in late July. So those were two related but slightly distinct efforts. One was building up infrastructure to speed up issuing SIVs, and the second was bringing out people who had not completed the process.

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Q: Okay. How did you go about in 2021 to address the issues set forth here?

A: Well, as I've said earlier today, I took on the task of being the lead State Department person in the interagency, and that's also internally, on working on the question of how we would maintain our diplomatic presence in Kabul post withdrawal and working on the SIV program in terms of expediting the processing of those in the pipeline or moving out those people who are far along in the pipeline. We also, in the summer of 2021, created some new refugee categories for those who were not eligible for the SIV program, so they would certainly fall under at risk Afghans. So we were giving people who had been

helpful to the Afghanistan project, if you will, an avenue for seeking refuge in the event of a bad event because they wouldn't be eligible for the SIV program.

McKeon argued that it was necessary for the Biden Administration to plan contingencies for an embassy withdrawal and NEO to ensure the long-term safety and security of American personnel in Afghanistan.

Page 102, line 20

Q: So, based on what we've learned in our investigation, as well as your testimony, it sounds like there were two parallel tracks within the Department -- one which was focused on maintaining the U.S. diplomatic presence in country; and the other, planning for the NEO. Can you speak to which one took priority throughout your tenure?

A: Well, I would say there was planning for the evacuation of Embassy Kabul and then, by extension, planning for a NEO. Because we could close an embassy or reduce the footprint without necessarily engaging in a NEO. As I think I've said already, the two imperatives of continuing to perform policy functions as directed by the President and ensuring the safety and security of American personnel and being prepared to withdraw if that became necessary were in tension and they were both priorities. I'm not going to tell you there was one priority over the other.

Page 119, line 12

Q: So your testimony is that the planning for embassy continuity that had gone on in 2021, did you see that as reasonable because you thought there would be a longer time horizon in which the U.S. Embassy could continue to operate?

A: Correct.

McKeon considered Ambassador Dan Smith, the lead of the After Action Review, to be a "very well respected senior officer."

Page 108, line 14

Q: Okay. Are you familiar with the Department's After Action Review on Afghanistan?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. Did you participate in the review?

A: I was interviewed by Dan Smith and a couple of other people.

Q: Okay. And who is Dan Smith?

A: He's a retired senior foreign service officer whose last job was -- what was his last job?

Agency Counsel: Acting S.

A: Oh, Acting Secretary, that's right. He had been the Executive Secretary and been ambassador at least once or twice, very well respected senior officer, and he was asked in his retirement to come lead this review.

Q: Okay. And what is your professional assessment of Mr. Smith's character -- Ambassador Smith's character?

A: Very high. He's really a solid guy and I'm sorry he retired and didn't stay.

McKeon believed the Department's pivot from contingency planning to closing and evacuating Embassy Kabul was a fast and successful response to the precipitous change on the ground.

Page 123, line 4

Q: Is it your assessment that, given the understanding at the time, contingency planning was adequate and appropriate as to maintaining a diplomatic presence in Kabul?

A: Yes.

Q: And when there was a precipitous change on the ground in Kabul, did Ambassador Perez shift her plan accordingly to close the embassy?

A: Well, it's a corporate decision. And what I mean by that is it's an interagency decision led by the NSC and the White House that we should close the embassy. It wasn't -- I mean, technically, I think Carol is part of the approval chain, but it was at least bigger than the Acting Undersecretary for Management. So I'm sorry. Your question is?

Q: Was there a successful pivot from contingency planning to closure of the embassy?

A: Yes. And what I should say is, in terms of closing the embassy and evacuating the humans who were working there, I remember at certain points -- and I don't remember when in these conversations -- somebody in the embassy leadership -- maybe it was Ross Wilson or Scott Weinhold -- saying it would take multiple days to close up and destroy the classified and classified equipment and all that. And they were obviously planning to need to do it faster if they needed to, and they did it in 48 hours. So that work that they had done, either in getting stuff out and in thinking about how they would do this, we were able to evacuate everybody from the embassy in 48 hours from the go time, the decision to go, and get them to the airport safely.

Q: And for clarity of the record, is 48 hours to draw down an embassy faster than it would normally be?

A: I don't know if there's data on that. For an embassy of that size, it's pretty fast.

McKeon confirmed that the Biden Administration actively worked to remedy Trump Administration constraints on available pathways for Afghans to enter the United States.

Page 128, line 21

Q: [. . .] Is it fair to say that in 2021 the Department and the administration were looking for other available mechanisms it could use to broaden pathways for entry by eligible Afghans into the United States?

A: Well, yes. As is in that paragraph 15, there was believed to be a community of people who had helped us -- and when I say the Afghanistan project, kind of a broad umbrella term for our investment and presence in the country -- who would not be eligible for an SIV, but we needed to find some pathway for them, and PRM recommended these two category priorities.

Q: And I believe you testified previously that one of your other duties as DMR was to help shepherd that expanding of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, correct?

A: There was definitely a charge from the President to revive the Refugee Admissions Program, which it's fair to say that -- well, the number of admissions that were authorized was reduced substantially by the prior administration from the last year of President Obama. It was around -- I think 80,000 was the authorized number, and I think the last year of the Trump administration it was 20,000 or fewer. And it's not exactly a secret that there was certain antipathy to foreigners immigrating to the United States during -- among some senior officials in the Trump administration, to include the President.

Q: Okay. So then based on your testimony today regarding Special Immigrant Visas and the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, is it a fair understanding for us to have, based on your testimony, that constraints on available pathways for Afghans to enter the United States existed prior to the Biden administration taking office and you worked to reverse those constraints over the course of 2021?

A: I mean, I think that's a fair summary. There's no immigration program that favors one country over another to begin with.

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Q: But you were working to lessen those constraints?

A: We worked to streamline them, and I think we even brainstormed and may have asked we may have asked Congress, when we asked for the money for the Operation Allies Refuge, we may have asked for some legislation to eliminate or streamline some of those statutory requirements.

McKeon contributed to multiple, daily interagency meetings with Embassy Kabul throughout the NEO. He considered the coordination between U.S. military and civilian personnel during these meetings to be strong.

Page 137, line 1

Q: How much interaction did you have with folks on the ground in Kabul over the April to August time period?

A: Well, I left out -- usually Embassy Kabul was in these interagency meetings at the deputy and principals level, Ross Wilson and/or one of his two deputies. Embassy Kabul, as I'm sure you know, had both a deputy chief of mission and an assistant chief of mission, which I don't think we have anywhere else in the world. Maybe still in Baghdad. "We" being the State Department. I'm not there anymore. And we would occasionally, Carol and I, would have phone conversations or email chains with Ross Wilson or maybe even once in a while a video -- a video chat. So it was pretty regular between the interagency meetings and our bilateral within the State Department meetings, our conversations. It was certainly once or twice a week, probably.

Q: Is it fair to say that during the NEO in particular you had a pulse of what was happening on the ground?

A: Generally, because we were having multiple meetings a day, but I tried to stay out of the business of calling them independently because they had enough to do.

Q: Fair enough. And how would you characterize coordination between the U.S. military and civilian personnel during the NEO?

A: My impression was that it was good. I'm sure, as in anything that complex, there were disagreements and people are moving really fast and people didn't know everything they needed to know. But, given the circumstances, my understanding was it was good.

Q: What informed that understanding?

A: Well, the interagency meetings we had during the evacuation. The senior people who were out there were on the screen or on the call were Ross Wilson, Scott Weinhold. Ian McCary, the DCM, was out of the country at the time, [redacted]. And then John Bass went out to help not long after. And so on these calls, those guys, one of those three or two of those three were on the calls. And I think Admiral -- Rear Admiral Vasely and probably one of his folks were always on the calls as well. You know, there's a lot of stuff happens. People get mad at other humans. Those sorts of things don't trickle 8,000 miles back. So I don't want to tell you everything was perfect.

Page 138, line 19

Q: We have heard from other witnesses that support by and cooperation with the military

and the Department was strong and preparation for the NEO was sufficient to get this extremely challenging job, that be evacuating, done. Would you agree with this assessment?

A: That's my own experience, yes.

McKeon asserted that the alleged concerns regarding Ambassador Wilson's conduct during the NEO were "nonsense," and that Ambassador Wilson continued to serve as Chief of Mission following the arrival of Ambassador Bass.

Page 147, line 7

Q: Was Ambassador Bass sent by Department leadership, whether it be by his own request or at the request of another official, because there were concerns surrounding Ambassador Wilson's ability to conduct the evacuation?

A: So I read that in the excerpt of Mr. Foer's book in the Atlantic that says this. And I won't use an epithet, but that is just nonsense. I don't know where it comes from. I don't agree with it. In my view, Ambassador Wilson performed at the same level he had beforehand. So I don't know what's at the root of it, but I don't agree with it.

Q: What did you understand the division of responsibilities to be between Ambassador Wilson and Ambassador Bass?

A: I mean, I don't know all the details of what they sorted out. I think John was focused on working with the consular team and the military on the plans for the gates and getting people into the gates and folks out on the perimeter, whereas Ambassador Wilson was still doing his job as the chief of mission, leading the overall team, responding to Washington demands to be in meetings and take phone calls, though I'm sure Ambassador Bass got phone calls as well. But Ambassador Wilson was still the chief of mission of Embassy Kabul. John was not there to be the substitute or sort of second DCM. He was just there as a senior management coned officer who had served in Afghanistan who was very good in a crisis.

Q: So Ambassador Wilson was in charge of the evacuation, correct, ultimately?

A: Yes, that is correct. But they were working side by side every day with the USFOR-A. Sorry. That's an acronym. U.S. Forces Afghanistan or USFOR-A, U-S-F-O-R-A.

McKeon was incredibly proud of the "historic evacuation of 124,000 humans in a very short time period." He commended the "miracles" performed by the U.S. government "to get 70,000 people placed in communities around the United States."

Page 166, line 3

Q: And I want to give you an opportunity to speak to what you are most proud of about the

withdrawal and subsequent evacuation.

A: I'm proud of the fact that there was a historic evacuation of 124,000 humans in a very short time period, include the embassy staff and the LES staff and a lot of Afghan allies. And the commitment and the ability that we had -- or the operation we undertook to resettle the Afghans who came here in a very short time period. There were about 70,000 of them who were resettled in the space of less than 6 months, depending on where you start the clock on when they came to the United States and when they all were resettled in February of '22. You know, in a good year in the Refugee Admissions Program -- before President Trump, the Refugee Admissions Program would resettle about 70,000 people a year with long lead times -- who's coming when, where are they going to go, what community they're matched with, and all of that. And the government really stepped up and performed a lot of small and medium miracles to get 70,000 people placed in communities around the United States.

McKeon intended to provide personnel in Kabul during the NEO with the flexibility they needed to accomplish their large and time intensive mission on the ground.

Page 172, line 25

Q: But how did you work on these special request cases when someone would call you or

A: I would --

Q: -- call the Department?

A: -- pass them to the task force or I'd pass them to Kabul. But I think Kabul had enough issues with people freelancing and calling them from around Washington, including a Member of Congress who just showed up at HKIA without permission, to get another call. And that was a Democrat. If you don't remember who it was

Q: We do.

A: Yeah. And so I restrained myself from calling folks in Kabul. If they needed to call me, that was fine, but they were getting enough phone calls.

Q: And you restrained yourself and tried to limit the effects of this, quote/unquote, "freelancing," because why?

A: Because those people were working 22 hours a day, and they had a very large task ahead of them, and I didn't think it was very productive for me to do rifle shot phone calls to people and say, please take care of this group.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: They were making judgments based on the situation on the ground and what they knew and the realities of getting people into the gates and how it worked or not worked, and I

just didn't think that was my job, to tell them how to do that.

Q: Okay. So you're saying that it was your intent to afford State Department personnel on the ground during the NEO the flexibility and the space that they needed to accomplish the mission.

A: That was my goal.

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