

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 Carol Perez

Conducted on Wednesday, November 15, 2023.

Ambassador Carol Perez is a distinguished State Department officer with 35 years of service, including two presidential appointments. Ambassador Perez has won numerous awards and participated in crisis-related activities that prepared her for work in Afghanistan.

Page 9, line 13

Q: Ambassador, now moving on with the questioning, can you please give us a brief overview of your career at the State Department?

A: Absolutely. So I started in 1987 -- probably before some of you were born, but that's okay -- and joined as a management coned officer -- so somebody very much interested in, sort of, management issues -- and served 35 years, retiring in December of last year. I had an opportunity to be a Presidential appointee twice, once for Obama as the U.S. Ambassador to Chile and then for President Trump as the Director General of the Foreign Service. So, again, spent most of my career working a lot on the seventh floor in staff Secretariat jobs, you know, sort of, staff jobs as we have in many agencies, but also spent time overseas, serving in Spain and Italy, in those countries twice, and then in Chile.

Page 50, line 3

Q: Wanted to pivot back a little bit to your background. Have you received any awards for your contributions related to foreign affairs or the Foreign Service?

A: I have.

Q: Can you describe those for the record?

A: I have had -- I received two Presidential Rank Awards. I have received two Distinguished Service Awards, Distinguished Honor Award. I don't know, 15-plus years of performance pay. Yeah. No, I've had a very incredible career. So I worked hard, but I think that I've -- people have appreciated what I've done and I -- you know, especially I think as the director general, I just really felt I got to my sweet spot, a place I wish I had an opportunity to start earlier in my career. So, yes, I've had a number of awards, dozens. I don't like to take about it, but yes.

Page 10, line 17

Q: Thank you. Do you currently hold any position at the State Department or WAE status? [. . .]

A: So I am an REA. I started in March. And I work at the Foreign Service Institute. And I do mentoring for classes, so DCM, principal officers; the NSELS, National Security Executive Leadership Seminar. And I am studying to be a coach, though I'm not quite done with that process.

Page 54, line 10

Q: And can you talk a little about any additional crisis-related activities you've participated in outside of CMS?

A: So I've also -- we have a very robust program to do crisis management training overseas. It is run by the Foreign Service Institute, and they go out to post on a regular basis. I'm not sure what the cycle is now. Maybe every 3 years or so. So I had participated in those exercises when I'd been overseas, when it's -- it's corresponding with the time that I was overseas.

Q: And so when you say you participated, were you acting in a leadership role or participating as a participant?

A: Both.

Q: Both?

A: Yeah. Well, I -- for example, one where I did when I was the principal officer in Barcelona was relatively small. We only had like five Americans, so we all participated. And it's a role-playing exercise. And then when I was the ambassador in Chile, we did one on what would happen if there was -- we had cruise ships starting to come, what would happen if there was a problem with a cruise ship that sank, there was a fire. So that was more my team, my consular team, my management section, you know, the folks who were military at the embassy. And I would sort of go in and out, but they were the ones who actually participated.

During the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ambassador Perez was the Acting Under Secretary of Management, who reported to Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources Brian McKeon and Secretary Blinken.

Page 11, line 14

Q: And what was your position at the time of the Afghanistan withdrawal?

A: I was the Acting Under Secretary for Management.

Q: And when did you assume that position?

A: January 21st of 2021.

Q: Thank you. And who selected you for that position?

A: The administration asked me to take it on a temporary basis, the State Department.

Q: Was there anyone in particular that made that request?

A: Yes. Uzra Zeya was the one who asked me.

Page 12, line 2

Q: And to whom did you report to as Acting Under Secretary for Management?

A: To the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources, and to the Secretary, but my daily was with -- or, not "daily," but, you know, more constant was with the DMR.

Q: Was that DMR McKeon?

A: Yes.

Ambassador Perez noted that her role in the withdrawal was to “help maintain a safe platform for the ongoing [diplomatic] presence” in Afghanistan—which she understood to have been both former President Trump and current President Biden’s aim. She testified to drawdowns in staffing at Embassy Kabul in support of maintaining a secure presence.

Page 13, line 20

Q: No, that's helpful. Thank you. And, Ambassador, what was your role in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan specifically?

A: Specifically? My role was actually not about the withdrawal but to help maintain a safe platform for the ongoing presence, diplomatic presence.

Q: Uh huh. And so, the ongoing, sort of, U.S. mission at Embassy Kabul, correct --

A: Correct.

Q: And when did you first become involved with work relating to the Afghanistan withdrawal and maintaining the U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan?

Page 15, line 1

Q: And what were your responsibilities in that role specifically relating to the withdrawal and that mission?

A: As I said, to make sure that we had whatever we needed to be safe; that as the military started to draw down, that we had the capability to pick up whatever, you know, safety and security support we needed.

Page 38, line 13

Q: No, that's helpful. Thank you. At the time of the President's decision to withdraw in April 2021, what was the Department's position on continued embassy presence in Afghanistan?

A: We were focused on an enduring diplomatic presence -- again, for both Presidents, withdrawal of troops, enduring diplomatic presence.

Q: Were there any actions underway to reduce embassy staffing in anticipation of the military withdrawal?

A: Yes.

Page 73, line 2

Q: Sure. What criteria did you identify that would enable the U.S. to continue to operate its embassy post withdrawal?

A: So, you know, first of all, we talked about there was a compound, right. So there was a grooming zone, as we called it, which was secure. But there were also security forces that the U.S. Government had been working with, but also our partner nations. I mentioned I had a meeting with like-minded ambassadors since I was in Kabul, and among them were the -- representatives, not necessarily ambassadors, but representatives from like the Australian Embassy, the U.K. Embassy. And they had also been working with Afghan Security Forces and agree that, you know, they would stay and they would provide necessary security. So that was a good thing. And Diplomatic Security themselves were very positive about the relationships that they had built over time with security forces.

Q: Okay. So is it fair to say that, in your assessment, it would be viable to keep a presence at the embassy post withdrawal?

A: At the time of that, absolutely.

Q: Okay. And what really informed that opinion?

A: What informed it was talking to people like Diplomatic Security and embassy personnel - embassy leadership about what we believed were the commitments from the Afghans to continue coming off of a time of quiet in Kabul itself. We had hardened structures, but I was trying to make them as hardened as possible. So, you know, there's risk, right. There's always risk. When you look at Iraq, there's terrible risk there, and -- but, you know, wanting to ensure that, you know, the presence continued as best it could. Was it going to be tough? Yeah. Was it possible? I thought so.

Ambassador Perez noted that if Management solely focused on the withdrawal in the months leading up to the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO), “most of the Department would have collapsed.” But she pointed to her Undersecretariat’s efforts to “give people a kick in the pants” to ensure that multiple challenges were tackled simultaneously. She also noted that she personally convened interagency calls at least weekly on post-withdrawal planning for Afghanistan beginning in April 2021, and that she had latitude from the Deputy Secretary of State to lean into this work.

Page 65, line 17

Q: Okay. So turning back to Afghanistan specifically, I'd like to be really clear for the record in your response. So what would have happened, in your opinion, if M only focused on the withdrawal in the months leading up to the NEO?

A: Most of the Department would have collapsed. I mean, I hate to say that. It's not me. But there's -- you know, it's this idea of the cyber attacks maybe would have brought down the Department's systems, right. Because at this point, DS had a role, IRM had a role. But I started a working group where we sat down once a week. What are you doing? What are you doing, right? What's the plan? We started these little sprint teams. We didn't have that before. Trying to get ahead of it. You notice something, we're going to start the sprint team. Bringing in private sector as well, Microsoft and others, to come and talk to us about what they could do to help us. I think because we had a lot of actings as well, just somebody who's going to say, you know, we're going to do this. You know, I don't know. I mean, people, I assume, would have done what they would have done. But sometimes the world of M is to give people a kick in the pants. I'm sorry, but, you know, it's like -- you know, again, I go back to the payroll, which really got worse before it got better. You know, they were sort of -- and again, they are all good people trying to do the right thing. But you get so focused on your issue, whatever it is, and what you think you need and the processes. And I was like, no, let's lift our head up, right.

Page 66, line 12

Q: Is it fair to say that it was absolutely a necessity for M to continue with its functions --

A: Absolutely.

Q: -- outside of Afghanistan?

A: Absolutely.

Q: Okay. And would it also be fair to say it was an expectation of you to continue M operations in tandem with preparing for a potential withdrawal --

A: Yes, absolutely.

Q: -- related to the embassy?

A: Absolutely.

Q: Okay. And that being said, how did, in effect, your time and focus on Afghanistan change over 2021, and specifically with the onset of your trip in April of 2021?

A: So the big thing after the trip was I started these meetings, right, these conference calls, internal with State, and then, of course, with my DOD colleagues. As I said, I don't remember how frequently I did the DOD ones. I don't remember if it was weekly or biweekly. But for sure the -- you know, the ones internally, as frequently as required, generally at least once a week. That was something new. As I said, a lot of our tasks were smallish, but when you put them together, they're obviously quite big, right. So, okay. Here's contractual issues we have with DOD. Let's start to pluck those apart. What can we and cannot do? Equipment, we could never purchase in time. Is there something that DOD could give to us to manage? What's OBO going to do? You know, OBO had plans, notified to Congress, to build another big building. They had all these great plans.

Page 70, line 17

Q: And just so we're clear for the record, you reported to the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources Brian McKeon?

A: Yes.

Q: And did he direct you to increase your focus on Afghanistan?

A: When I came back from my trip and I explained to him that we needed -- there's a lot to be done, I wouldn't say he directed, he's not that kind of personality, but we concurred that it would be -- I should continue to lead this Department effort, along with post and with DOD, to get what we needed.

Q: Okay. So if I'm understanding your testimony correctly, you had the latitude you needed from your superior, Deputy Secretary McKeon, to pivot, to be nimble, to be flexible with respect to the work that you've been doing in Afghanistan?

A: Yes, yes.

Ambassador Perez noted that the State Department worked with flexibility to “get people out [of Afghanistan] as quickly as possible and as safely as possible.”

Page 76, line 1

Q: And prior to that phone call, did you have any indication that a safe withdrawal would not be possible?

A: No. The airport was open. And I think that was one of the things that, you know, we -- planes were flying in.

Q: Okay. And is it fair to say that upon receiving this call, you quickly pivoted and were able to address the situation in real time?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you describe why that was the case?

A: Well, we had to stop doing what we were doing, which was focused on the long-term presence. And now we needed to get people out as quickly as possible and as safely as possible.

Page 78, line 3

A: One of the things that I did, which turned out to be, I think, a huge positive thing for us, was -- we had these lily pads all over. We had about, I think, nine of them or so, so they ranged from Doha to Germany. And I did a call. I was talking to the charge in Doha one day, and he's like, "I don't know what's going on in Kuwait." And I said, "I can fix that. I'm going to host a call." And then I brought in other agencies -- DHS. Because we couldn't do this alone. People had to be vetted. If CBP wasn't doing their job, we had a problem. So I wanted CBP to come into our phone call so they could hear from the

people on the ground what was going on in Kuwait or UAE or Germany or Madrid or Italy or wherever else they had these things. But that was a call that sometimes would go 3 hours every day. But it was important, because we had to really flow people out and make sure that we could put them in as safe an environment as we were transitioning them as possible. [. . .]

A: And my -- actually, ops, I think, had done an alert. I had a team had just come in, because that's how good they were. They just came in. I came into the office, it was like 6 o'clock in the morning, and there were doughnuts and coffee, and I had, like, five people there. And I'm like, this is great. Let's go. We're going to do this.

Q: So that really speaks to the flexibility and nimbleness we discussed --

A: Oh, absolutely.

Q: -- as well as to the commitment of your staff to --

A: Absolutely.

Q: -- ensure they acted quickly and with vigor to respond to the situation.

Ambassador Perez noted that the State Department worked with an entrepreneurial spirit "that [the State Department] had never done before."

Page 80, line 7

Q: Thank you. A word that -- I know we're just about out of time, but I wanted to put this at the end. A word we've been hearing a lot is an "entrepreneurial spirit," that people rose to the occasion and did their best to meet needs in a crisis.

A: That we had never done before. And, honestly, one of the smaller agencies in Washington, you know, when you take out the Foreign Service nationals. I thought it was amazing, absolutely amazing.

Ambassador Perez recounted that there were conversations and preparations—in keeping with the Department's standard practice—for a worst-case scenario in which the embassy in Kabul would be shut down.

Page 85, line 9

A: I don't think we ever thought -- you know, nobody ever talked about, "Well, what's going to happen when the Taliban come over the wall?" You know, what we did do -- what they did at the end is, you know, the shutdown of an embassy, which we do in other places as well. We've done it in the past in places like Somalia and others, right? You have destructions, and you make sure that there's no sensitive equipment left, and you get people out. And that's sort of the standard practice -- I hate to say it, but that's sort of the standard procedures for closure.

Q: And "at the end," that being in August when the embassy ultimately shuttered?

A: Correct. Yeah.

Ambassador Perez explained that by August 2021, the embassy “[was] in a good place to go” for continuing to operate post-withdrawal, and that she was “so impressed with the level of expertise and planning that was going on.”

Page 96, line 13

Q: That's helpful. Thank you. And I think this next question hopefully doesn't touch upon that. Where did things stand by mid-August 2021 in terms of, sort of, being able to replicate or perform those functions?

A: I think on some of the contracting things we were in a pretty good place to go, right? If I recall, DOD was willing to let the contracts -- you know, trying to work through the modalities of sort of getting through that. Again, this is not -- we're not talking about uniformed military doing this. We were in pretty good shape to go. Because those are, I think -- it was more the hardware that we needed, more than anything else.

Q: Do you believe that the process should've started sooner?

A: You know, I just -- I don't know. You know, I think that the embassy was in a good place to begin with. Again, this is an embassy who for decades had been in a war zone. This is not like, you know, we were living in housing with pools in the backyard, you know? I mean, they were in hardened facilities that, over time, had been made more safe --

Q: Uh-huh.

A: -- to meet threats, which had gone up and down over the years. So it wasn't as if we started from scratch. It was just more, now that a decision has been made -- which was made in April -- and then, you know, now we had a deadline, which was September, now's the time to really kick it into gear. Because, otherwise, you don't really -- what do you talk about? "Oh, we might go, we might not go," you know. I don't know. I mean, maybe. But maybe that's also -- people are busy -- taking up a whole lot of time on something that might never happen.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: So I think that, for where we were, we were starting at a high -- I think I mentioned earlier, this was a pretty -- this embassy team was functioning well. I thought the security people were doing -- they were drilling all the time. I was so impressed with the level of expertise and planning that was going on. This was just to get them that up, right?

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And, again, to me, it was getting people into the compounds, get rid of these offsite locations we have, let's get everybody consolidated. That was what was needed to be done. And I think we could've done most of that, you know, by September 11th.

Ambassador Perez noted that the Biden Administration's extended deadline for the withdrawal allowed Management "additional space and time to prepare for the withdrawal."

Page 123, line 21

Q: So I think your understanding is you had testified previously was that that was President Biden's timeline.

A: So if you remember, it was going to be May --

Q: Uh-huh.

A: -- which was impossible.

Q: That was going to be my next question.

A: Right. So, like, May would have been horrible, right. At least we had now some additional months to really start to work it with this. And, again, like I said, we had a fair level of security there. It wasn't like we ignored it, but we had more time to work on how this was going to actually sort out, which is what I did.

Q: Okay. So then President Biden's decision in April 2021 to complete the withdrawal included a 4 month extension, roughly speaking, of the original timeline --

A: That is correct.

Q: -- to allow additional space and time to prepare for that withdrawal.

A: That's right. It gave me time to prepare.

Ambassador Perez noted that her team worked flexibly in an extremely fluid environment, and that "people worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week" to carry out the varied tasks to be done for the withdrawal and evacuation.

Page 130, line 24

Q: Okay. What is your assessment as to your performance and your team's performance related to the withdrawal?

A: I think we did the best we could do with the information we had at the moment we had it. I think we pivoted when we had to. You know, it's not -- these are not static. I mean, one moment it's -- one moment you're here, the next moment you're there, and I thought my team leaned in. You know, it's one of those things that, when you're in a thing like this, you need to think not only about what's in front of you but what's around the corners, you know, to try and anticipate what might happen, especially during the period of the evacuation itself. We did things we had done never before. Again, I talk a lot about people because that's where I came from. So we gave our Afghan employees who came to the United States a \$10,000 ex gratia payment each to help them when they got here because, you know what, being a P 1 -- this is people that don't have SIVs. You got

nothing, right. You got very little money from the government. I didn't want them, like, begging on the street corners. Nothing like that had been done since Vietnam. Those are the things that we need to capture, right. How do we take care of our local staff so that when they come to the United States and they're refugees, they're not -- they're not SIVs, how are we going to make sure that they -- that we honor our commitment over decades of service together with them? So we did things like this that I would really hope continue. You know, this is one of those good lessons learned. Here's what we should do. But I think my team did an amazing job. I mean, we all worked as hard as we could. I think we were quick. We had planes miraculously coming from everywhere. You know, it wouldn't be unusual for somebody to say, Hey, you know, we've got -- we've got to do -- move this group of people from X country to Y country. And I was, you know, on the phone with TRANSCOM and on the phone with my team, and we'd make it happen. We'd do it quickly, you know, just really being responsive. People worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We haven't talked about consul. People came in from all over, trying to find people, you know, trying to get to that one person. Where are you? How can we help you? Can you get to an airport? It wasn't only Kabul, right. We were sending people out to heart at that time as well. There was no, you know, lack of volunteers. And when there was, I picked up the phone a couple of times and called senior people and said, guess what, you've been identified. You're on the task force. So I think that we did the best we could do. But it does worry me that when these happen -- again, I'm pretty old, but even me had not been through something like this. How do we make sure that we are best prepared for the future? That's what we need. We need something that's readily accessible. It can't be 900 pages long that nobody's ever going to read. It's going to say, yep, here's what worked and here's what hasn't worked.

Ambassador Perez stated that Ambassador Dan Smith has a “fantastic” reputation, and that she trusted his judgment in conducting the After Action Review (AAR). Ambassador Perez agreed that the AAR reflected her viewpoints.

Page 134, line 3

Q: Okay. And are you aware of who drafted the AAR?

A: Dan Smith and a team of his colleagues from the Department.

Q: Do you know Dan Smith?

A: I do.

Q: What is his professional reputation?

A: He's fantastic.

Q: What informs that opinion?

A: Well, he was the Acting Secretary of State. He was selected. He's a former colleague. I worked for him, and he is incredibly smart, incredibly even tempered, and incredibly good at making good decisions. And that's sort of what you want in a leader.

Q: Do you trust his judgment, therefore, in drafting the AAR?

A: Absolutely.

Q: And conducting the AAR interviews?

A: Absolutely.

Q: And in your assessment, when you read the AAR, do you feel that it reflected viewpoints that you had expressed in your interview?

A: Yeah. I was trying to go through this to see what was me. I think I was the piece about they started -- they continued a plan for the continued presence, because I don't see myself too much -- too much else here.

Q: Do you take any issues with the findings of the AAR itself?

A: You know, I don't believe so. You know, some things were done and they weren't done perfectly. And this was a good way to say, look, this was okay but it could have been better and this or that.

###