

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 Suzy George

Conducted on Thursday, December 14, 2023.

As Chief of Staff for the Secretary of State, Suzy George's work largely concerns personnel and management matters. She also assists in facilitating inter-departmental and interagency communication.

Page 10, line 11

Q: And how many people report to you as Chief of Staff to the Secretary?

A: The Secretary's immediate office reports to me, so at any given time it's between 10 to 12 people.

Q: And what are your major duties and responsibilities as Chief of Staff?

A: Chiefs of staff to Secretaries, to Cabinet principals, can come in any variety of forms. For me, I work primarily to support the Secretary both to structure his office, to facilitate communications across the agency, to help bring together people across the agency as needed on a variety of projects and issues. I coordinate with the interagency; I work with the White House. I work primarily on personnel and management, supporting the work of the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources, the work of the Under Secretary for Management.

Page 11, line 20

A: [. . .] So my job is to make sure the Secretary is supported as needed so that he is able to do his job. I interact with him on a daily basis when he is in D.C. I travel occasionally but not often with him. My role is not as a policymaker. I am there to, as I said, primarily support on personnel and management issues.

Page 54, line 16

Q: So fair to say that your work of chief of staff was distinct and continues to be distinct from policymaking and the policy implementation process?

A: Yes, that is correct.

Q: But, however, you support the policy creation and implementation through a management and operations lens. Is that correct?

A: That is correct. You aim to create an enabling environment for the policy to be executed.

As Chief of Staff, George was not involved in Afghanistan policy creation or implementation, interagency Afghanistan planning, or negotiations with the Taliban.

Page 13, line 15

Q: Your involvement with respect to the Department's equities in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. So how involved were you on issues pertaining to that?

A: Not particularly involved, given that it was a policy process.

Q: Did you appear on behalf of the Secretary in that capacity at any point?

A: Appear?

Q: On issues pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal, did you engage in meetings or appear on behalf of the Secretary or partake in any of the interagency meetings that you had noted?

A: I did not attend any of the interagency meetings. That's part of an interagency process which the deputies and other subject matter experts participated in. I was in meetings related to Afghanistan, but I did not appear on behalf of the Secretary. I'm not sure I quite understand the difference, but --

Q: And did you oversee any work pertaining to Afghanistan in your capacity as Chief of Staff?

A: I did not lead any work on Afghanistan.

Page 16, line 11

Q: [. . .] Did you at any point engage with military figures working with the Department on issues pertaining to Afghanistan?

A: Not that I recall.

Page 54, line 23

Q: Okay. It, therefore, follows -- let me know if you agree or disagree with these statements: With respect to Afghanistan specifically, is it correct that you have not personally negotiated with the Afghan Government?

A: I have not personally negotiated with the Afghan Government.

Q: You have not negotiated with the Taliban?

A: I have not negotiated with the Taliban.

Q: You have not incorporated yourself into interagency planning to implement a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?

A: I did not participate in interagency planning.

George noted that the Biden Administration immediately began senior-level interagency policymaking related to Afghanistan in January 2021.

Page 14, line 5

Q: And when did you first become involved -- understanding that you were not involved in the policymaking or decision-making processes thereto, but when did you first become involved with work relating to the Afghanistan withdrawal?

A: There was work related to the Afghanistan withdrawal from -- to the Afghanistan policy review almost immediately upon when we arrived at the Department. I do not recall specifically being involved in -- I don't recall being involved in specific meetings, but there was ongoing work which the Department and the Secretary were involved in from the beginning of the administration.

Page 16, line 25

Q: And what were the White House and National Security Council's role throughout this period on issues pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal?

A: So the White House ran the Afghan policy review process, National Security Council process. That went on through -- started in January of '21 and went on through the spring.

According to George, Afghanistan policy was prioritized within the Department and the interagency from the moment Secretary Blinken was confirmed in his position.

Page 69, line 22

Q: [. . .] And now speaking as to the Secretary, to the extent you're able to answer these questions, how much of his time, to the best of your abilities, was occupied by Afghanistan issues from January to April 2021?

A: So, again, I don't have the specific details of it, but Afghanistan was a priority policy issue from the moment the Secretary was confirmed in his position. And so both within the Department -- internally within the Department and within the interagency, he spent a great deal of time working on it.

Q: Okay. And is it fair to say that's from April to August as well as from August onward as well?

A: From January --

Q: Correct.

A: -- to August? Yes. Yep.

George stated that that the Biden Administration was concerned that the prior Administration had not conducted sufficient Afghanistan policy planning.

Page 21, line 10

- Q: So let me -- the question is not what planning the new administration had done. The question was, what was the status of the planning at the time, and had options been formulated by the prior administration. So, when you assumed your role, had there been any plans in place relating to Afghanistan. So that was the question. [. . .]
- A: Thank you for clarifying it. I don't recall specifics. I recall that there was concern that there was not sufficient planning, that sufficient planning had not been done. But I don't recall specifics.

George confirmed that the military withdrawal from Afghanistan was under the primary domain of the Department of Defense and began in 2020 under the Trump Administration.

Page 44, line 15

- Q: [. . .] We'd like to refer you to paragraph one on page 47. I'd like to read into the record. It says: "On November 17, Acting Secretary of Defense, Christopher Miller, announced another reduction in U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan from the 4,000 5,000 reached in November, to 2,500 as of January 15, 2021. Acting Secretary Miller and President Donald Trump had made the decision in order to bring the war to, quote, 'a successful and responsible conclusion,' end quote, and to either bring service members home or reposition them." I'd also like to note that this document is dated at the bottom of January 30, 2021. Would you agree with the sentiment that the withdrawal from Afghanistan began in 2020?
- A: I'm sorry, will you repeat that?
- Q: Looking to paragraph number one, would you agree that November 17 refers to 2020?
- A: Yes.
- Q: And that's because this document is, indeed, dated January 30th, 2021, so November 17th would predate 2021. Is that correct?
- A: That is my understanding of reading this, yes.
- Q: And would you also agree that this paragraph points to a reduction of troops?
- A: Yes.
- Q: Does it, therefore, follow that the withdrawal began in 2020, because troops were being taken from Afghanistan in that time period?
- A: Yes, it appears from this that troops were withdrawn in 2020.

Q: Okay, thank you. Would you also agree with the sentiment that U.S. troops and equipment are primarily the domain of DOD and military leadership?

A: Yes, I agree.

Page 60, line 8

Q: So your testimony is that the responsibility for the military withdrawal lay outside the State Department?

A: Yes, that is my testimony.

During the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO), George worked 20+ hours per day to ensure that the State Department was able to focus on its duties and responsibilities in Afghanistan, as well as throughout the rest of the world.

Page 52, line 23

Q: You testified that your skill set and what you do at State is primarily management and operations, correct?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: So even when, for example, a NEO or the NEO that we're talking about occurs you continue to support in operations and management. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: So you don't divert your time and skill set to focus on the crisis and the crisis only. Is that correct?

A: My time may -- I may spend more time working on the crisis, but I do not -- my responsibilities continue on the other issues that I need to continue working on.

Q: And why is that important?

A: Because the Department is responsible for the entire world. So we need to make sure our work continues in the rest of the world.

Q: And so, you had mentioned when there are times of crisis, for example the NEO, perhaps more of your time is devoted to that, correct?

A: Yes.

Q: What happens to the other duties that you're not able to take care of when your time is diverted? Does someone else pick up that slack?

A: Occasionally, someone else picks up the slack. Occasionally you just work more hours. You do your best to cover it as best you can.

Q: So during the NEO, for example, how many hours a day were you working?

A: Eighteen to 20.

Q: Is that typical for a chief of staff?

A: No.

Page 94, line 3

Q: Okay. What did you understand your top priorities to be during the NEO as related to coordination efforts?

A: Was to support the Secretary as best as possible, and make sure he was able to perform his duties; was to facilitate communication and response between our various bureaus that were working on this issue; to engage with the White House, the interagency, Members of Congress, press, key stakeholders, all of whom were reaching out on various issues related to the crisis.

George described the focused and robust interagency coordination and communication that occurred during the NEO. She detailed the constant nature of the work and how many of her colleagues worked 18 to 20 hours per day.

Page 96, line 16

Q: Okay. And, relating to coordination and management, did you have interaction with the interagency during the NEO?

A: I did, yes.

Q: How frequent was it?

A: The interagency is large, so I was speaking to various colleagues at other agencies and within the NSC on a daily basis during the evacuation.

Q: Fair to say that the communication was constant during this time period?

A: Absolutely constant, yeah.

Q: What was the quality of that communication?

A: Everybody was very focused on the task at hand, and on executing the response as best as we possibly could under, again, dynamic and changing circumstances.

Q: To the extent you were exposed to it, was this communication robust?

A: Communication was robust, yes.

Q: Was there healthy debate and dialogue related to policy?

A: I wasn't part of the policy process, so those were not conversations I was a part of.

Q: But you're aware that there were constant meetings and communication related to the NEO?

A: Absolutely constant, ongoing work, yeah. As I mentioned, I think people were working 18 or 20 hours a day, so

Q: Including yourself. That's correct?

A: Yes.

Q: Right. What is your impression regarding the effectiveness of interagency coordination during the evacuation?

A: My personal experience was, again, we coordinated very well given a very dynamic and changing situation, [...]

George held Ambassador Dan Smith, the author of the After Action Report (AAR), in high esteem and complimented his excellent reputation and extraordinary work.

Page 73, line 11

Q: Ms. George, do you recall who drafted the AAR's overall -- or, had overall responsibility for the After Action Review?

A: Yes. It was Dan Smith.

Q: And what was Ambassador Dan Smith's reputation at the Department -- or, what is his reputation at the Department?

A: Dan Smith has an excellent reputation as a long serving, very senior Foreign Service officer who has done extraordinary work for the -- on behalf of our country.

Q: So is it safe to say he's someone you trust and hold in high esteem?

A: Yes.

George praised the important and diligent work of the AAR team and was confident in the credibility of the report.

Page 103, line 9

Q: You previously testified that you were, in fact, involved in the After Action Review. Is that correct?

A: I was -- yes.

Q: Were you interviewed?

A: I was interviewed.

Q: Okay. And have you read in full the unclassified portion of the After Action Review?

A: I have.

Q: Does it -- understanding you had a more limited management and coordination focus during the withdrawal and inevitable NEO, what is your assessment as to the findings of the AAR?

A: It was -- the After Action Review was an extraordinarily important body of work which the Secretary requested to be done, and as mentioned, was led by Dan Smith. So I am confident in the credibility of the report, and the diligence with which he -- and seriousness with which he and his team created the report. From where I sit, I'm particularly focused on the recommendations and the -- our ability to learn from the experience of the evacuation.

Q: Are there any findings that you take issue with, or feel different than your assessment?

A: I don't -- I don't know that I have fully read it most recently enough to say that I agree in every specific finding, but, in general, I am comfortable and agree with the -- and am confident in the product.

Q: Why do you think the After Action Review was important?

A: I think it's -- I think it's always important to learn. The only way we get better at our jobs is to learn from things we might have done differently, knowing what we know now. So I think it's a really important tool to make the Department, the institution, the government, individuals as professionals, better.

George confirmed that Under Secretary for Management John Bass led an implementation process to ensure that the Department addressed the AAR's recommendations.

Page 74, line 5

Q: Have steps been taken within the Department to address this finding in the AAR?

A: There were a series of recommendations at the end of there, which were then -- we have worked to -- Under Secretary for Management John Bass has led an implementation process to ensure that we are addressing both the concerns that were raised in the findings and the recommendations that were made by the AAR.

George explained that the unprecedented scale and complexity of the NEO made it necessary for both Ambassador Ross Wilson and Ambassador John Bass to assist in the evacuation, as multiple components required senior-level attention simultaneously.

Page 81, line 17

Q: [. . .] And Ambassador Bass, now Under Secretary Bass, was sent to Afghanistan around mid- to late August 2021, correct?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: Why was he sent there?

A: He was sent -- I don't remember the exact date, but he was sent within the first few days of the evacuation. It became clear very quickly, given the scale and complexity of the evacuation, that we would need to have Ambassador Wilson focused on the diplomatic engagement and Ambassador Bass focused on the evacuation piece. There were so many components and dynamics to both that they required senior level attention.

Q: Was the State Department surprised by the scale and complexity of the evacuation?

A: We had done a lot of planning for the withdrawal, but I think as is publicly noted in many sources, the evacuation was unprecedented, yes.

Page 82, line 7

Q: Did Department leadership at any point during this time period -- "this time period" being the evacuation period -- convey concerns about Ambassador Wilson being able to conduct the evacuation on his own?

A: Can you repeat? Did the Department --

Q: Did Department leadership, so members of --

A: Have concerns?

Q: Yeah. Correct.

A: I don't have any recollection of the Department leadership having concerns with Ambassador Wilson's leadership. It was more because of the scale of the operation and the level of the complexity that we thought it was critical to provide additional resources.

George assisted the work of the Afghanistan Task Force by facilitating interdepartmental and interagency communication and ensuring proper personnel staffing. She praised the Afghanistan Task Force's effectiveness throughout the challenging and unprecedented NEO.

Page 95, line 1

Q: Are you aware of what the Afghanistan Task Force was?

A: Yes, I'm aware.

Page 95, line 7

Q: Can you briefly describe your understanding of what the task force was?

A: The task force brought together many colleagues who were trying to do crisis management and respond to the crisis as best as possible and focused on different work streams, so some focused on American citizens; some focused on people departing the country, lily pads, whole variety of things, charter flights.

Q: Did you have any direct coordination or management tasks related to the task force?

A: I was not responsible for managing the task force, no.

Q: But you were aware that it was stood up and --

A: I was --

Q: -- proceeding?

A: -- absolutely aware that it was stood up and proceeding and worked to support the work of the task force as best as possible.

Q: How did you support the work of the task force?

A: Again, it was a fairly dynamic situation, so on different days, it was different activities, but much, similar to the basis of my job, was related to personnel and management, making sure we had the staff available to work on the task force, making sure there was clear communication between the task force and other parts of the building, making sure there was clear task force -- communication between the task force and the interagency as necessary.

Q: What's your assessment as to the quality of that communication? Was it good?

A: The communication was very good under really, really challenging circumstances.

Q: And how large was the task force?

A: I don't know the specifics of the number, but it was fairly large.

Q: Fairly large?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. What is your assessment of the overall effectiveness of the task force?

A: The task force was effective in the sense that 120,000 plus people were evacuated safely from Afghanistan. But, as the after action review notes, there were many lessons learned from this unprecedented activity and from how we hopefully will do crisis management going forward.

George applauded the work ethic of her colleagues on the ground in Kabul during the NEO who worked reliably in very challenging circumstances.

Page 97, line 22

Q: And how was the quality of that coordination related communication between you and those few individuals on the ground?

A: It was excellent.

Q: What was your assessment of their work ethic while they were on the ground?

A: Our colleagues who were on the ground did truly extraordinary work in very, very challenging circumstances.

Q: Is it fair to say they were hardworking?

A: They were hardworking.

Q: Reliable?

A: Reliable.

Q: Smart?

A: Very smart.

Page 98, line 21

Q: Okay. State Department officials have testified to our committee during hearings and transcribed interviews that the efforts of the Department and its personnel on the ground in Kabul were dedicated, entrepreneurial, and admirable under challenging circumstances, to your point. Do you agree with this assessment?

A: I do agree with the assessment.

George commended the Consular Affairs Assistant Secretary who performed extraordinary work during the NEO mere days after their confirmation.

Page 98, line 10

Q: What is your impression regarding the effectiveness of Consular Affairs during the evacuation?

A: Consular Affairs Assistant Secretary was confirmed within days of the -- of the evacuation, and the new Assistant Secretary and her team performed, again, just extraordinary work over the course of the evacuation.

George agreed with the AAR's findings that Department personnel responded to the NEO with great agility and dedication. She praised the work of her colleagues all over the world who volunteered to support the evacuation.

Page 99, line 5

Q: I'd like to call your attention to majority's exhibit No. 8, the After Action Review, to page 4 on the executive summary and introduction. The second paragraph, last sentence, reads, "Overall, the Department's personnel responded with great agility, determination, and dedication, while taking on roles and responsibilities both domestically and overseas that few had ever anticipated." Do you agree with this assessment?

A: I absolutely agree with it.

Q: Is there any further color you'd like to provide for the record?

A: I was incredibly gratified during what was an unprecedented and extraordinarily hard time by my colleagues' work and dedication and commitment across the world. We had colleagues from missions all over the world who participated, both volunteered in person, and volunteered virtually to help support the evacuation.

George affirmed the AAR's findings regarding the Department's speedy facilitation of the evacuation.

Page 99, line 18

Q: [. . .] I'd like to also turn your attention to page 12 of exhibit 8, paragraph 11. Paragraph 11 reads, "Crisis preparation and planning were inhibited to a degree by concerns about the signals that might be sent, especially anything that might suggest the United States had lost confidence in the Afghan Government and thus contribute to its collapse. However, the AAR notes that once it got underway, the plan for closing the embassy compound and evacuating U.S. Government personnel and U.S. citizen and third country contractors proceeded well, considering the speed at which it was implemented." We previously touched upon your experience in crisis management. Given that experience,

do you agree with the assessment about the NEO as set forth in the AAR here?

A: Yes. That was my experience of observing the work of closing the embassy compound and the evacuation.

Q: Is there any further color that you'd care to share for the record?

A: Again, just the extraordinary nature -- the extraordinary work that went on in order to facilitate the closing of the embassy compound and in the evacuation was -- was very gratifying to get to observe and participate in.

George described how the Department developed medical and mental health tools in late August 2021, to support its workforce following the physically, emotionally, and psychologically challenging NEO.

Page 104, line 20

A: So we began planning in -- during the evacuation how we would help support the workforce following the evacuation. The circumstances, particularly for those on the ground in Kabul, brought -- were both physically challenging as well as emotionally and psychologically challenging. So we began planning for a series of medical and mental health support as well as workforce management tools to help the workforce post the evacuation. Many, many of our colleagues over 20 years had worked either on the ground in Kabul, or somehow connected to the Afghanistan work, so it impacted our workforce greatly.

Q: To the extent you can speak to it, did you hear of concerns from employees who returned from the NEO in Kabul about a lack of support from the Department?

A: I didn't hear specific concerns about a lack of support. I heard very specific concerns about what people had experienced.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And again, given the unprecedented nature, we needed to respond in a way that the Department sort of generally is not -- would not be planning to respond, but -- so many of our colleagues did -- did extraordinary work following the evacuation to help support folks.

Q: So you did just testify that the planning on how to support returnees -- Department returnees from Kabul began even before they had returned. It began during the NEO.

A: Uh huh.

Q: But it is your testimony that that planning then turned into operational efforts to support them after returning?

A: Yeah.

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