

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 Edward (“Ned”) Price

Conducted on Tuesday, December 12, 2023.

Ned Price’s work during the withdrawal and noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) focused on coordinating State Department messaging and communication related to Afghanistan. He was not involved in the interagency contingency planning or operational policy processes.

Page 15, line 20

Q: [. . .] And this is a broader question, so please feel free to take your time. But what was your involvement in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, including communication aspects relating to the Department’s equities?

A: It was really a function of my role at the Department as engaging with the press, helping to coordinate messaging and communications across the Department and within the interagency. So, again, it was largely confined to how we would speak about it, how we would message it publicly in that regard.

Page 16, line 20

Q: And where did you fit within the Department’s overall sort of planning process? Was it just with respect to communications or was there a broader role?

A: I was not really -- I was not directly involved, as I recall, in the planning process, if you’re defining the planning process as the operational process that culminated in the U.S. military withdrawal and the U.S. military facilitated evacuation. Of course, there are planning elements, there are contingency elements that take place on the comms side. There’s a unit within the broader office that is responsible for contingency planning, for thinking through and considering crisis communications. I spoke with them quite frequently as July and August approached. But, again, I was not a part of the -- certainly the interagency discussions about the withdrawal and later the evacuation.

Page 19, line 3

Q: [. . .] Can you speak to your involvement in the August 2021 emergency evacuation from Afghanistan?

A: Really the same involvement as it was in the other phases of our engagement on this challenge. I was responsible for formulating -- helping to formulate, coordinating, and ultimately deploying our messaging on the evacuation itself.

- Q: Thank you. Were you involved in planning for the possibility of an emergency evacuation throughout 2021, including related communications aspects?
- A: I wouldn't say I was involved in the planning for it. I was involved in planning for the communications and public facing aspects once the prospect became more of a realistic prospect.
- Q: And when did it become more of a realistic prospect?
- A: Well, I should say that I became involved as it neared. So certainly, I was engaged in these conversations in August of 2021.

Page 50, line 22

- Q: What about your office as to interagency planning processes to implement a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?
- A: So my direct office was not engaged in the planning process that culminated in the U.S. withdrawal that ended at the end of August 2021. We -- and I mean "we" collectively, as public affairs specialists and communicators within the Department -- did feed into an interagency process certainly as decision points became closer, whether it was the decision in April regarding Afghanistan or into August of that year.
- Q: So the role was communications.
- A: That's right.
- Q: Was your office involved in screening or issuing Special Immigrant Visas for Afghan applicants before, during, or after the withdrawal?
- A: No.
- Q: Was your office involved in implementing the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program before, during, or after the withdrawal?
- A: No.
- Q: Was your office involved in preparing for a U.S. embassy presence in Kabul post withdrawal?
- A: No.
- Q: Was your office involved in ensuring the security of U.S. personnel in Kabul before, during, or after the withdrawal?
- A: No.

Price testified to “inherit[ing] a challenging situation” in January 2021, and described the Biden Administration’s interagency policy review of Afghanistan that occurred between January and April of 2021.

Page 31, line 1

A: Officially, I think it was a very challenging situation to inherit. Again, it was -- I suppose because I said it, it was the official policy of the U.S. Government, that it was not a decision that -- it was not an agreement with the Taliban that this administration would have struck.

Q: And what did the Secretary, Secretary Blinken, communicate to you regarding the Department’s approach toward Afghanistan when you assumed your role?

A: Well, first, the looming question was the very capital Q question we’ve been discussing: What would the incoming and at the time new administration do in the context of the deadline that the previous administration had set for us? And we had wide contours because, again, there was not a plan that was on the shelf. There was nothing that we inherited that spoke to how the U.S. military, how the Department of State, how any other Department or agency would execute against a fairly rigid set of requirements set out in the U.S. Doha Agreement of 2020. So I don’t recall the Secretary ever saying, we need to get out, we need to stay. I recall the Secretary taking part in a number of policy discussions with the interagency regarding the considerations at play, putting -- that ultimately culminated in the decision the President announced in April.

Page 34, line 22

Q: And roughly how long did this policy review last?

A: My recollection is that it started shortly after the inauguration, shortly after January 20th, and really went up until, as I recall, April of 2021.

Q: Thank you. And what, to the best of your understanding, were the goals of the policy review?

A: My understanding, again, as someone who only heard and saw reflections of the policy review through readouts and engagements with the Department’s senior leadership, was to understand the options available to the United States, given the facts on the ground and our inheritance, and also to receive the best considered advice and judgment from the relevant interagency players -- from the Department of State, from the Department of Defense, from the intelligence community -- to determine how we should position ourselves vis à vis the requirement of the May 1 withdrawal.

Price described the “very challenging dynamic” the incoming Biden Administration inherited on Afghanistan after President Trump kickstarted the U.S. withdrawal with multiple incremental troop drawdowns and the Taliban reached its strongest position over the course of the 20-year war.

Page 54, line 24

Q: And one more point on the Doha deal. You had mentioned that you were aware of the withdrawal when you started in January of 2021. Is that correct?

A: That’s correct.

Q: Is it fair to say that the withdrawal began with the Doha deal in February 2020 and that was, in fact, why you were apprised of such issues when you began in the role?

A: That’s fair. I don’t have the graph in front of me, but, as I recall, when the Obama administration left office in 2017, I think there were 8,600 U.S. forces in Afghanistan. By the time the Trump administration left office, there were 2,500 U.S. forces left in Afghanistan. I recall an order -- or, at least, what I understand was an order from President Trump in, I believe it was, December of 2020 to take that number down to zero, for reasons that aren’t known to me firsthand certainly. I understand that we inherited 2,500 troops, we inherited a Taliban that was in the strongest position it had been in some 20 years, and a very challenging dynamic.

Price described the Doha Deal as an “erratic” policy that President Trump agreed to without adequately planning for its implementation. This left the incoming Biden Administration with “no good options.”

Page 29, line 24

Q: So what was your perspective on former President Trump’s policy and approach to Afghanistan, having received all that information, the briefing and materials and, of course, being privy to sort of his policies? [...]

A: My personal opinion is essentially what I believe I said publicly from the podium. It’s not a deal that this administration would have struck with the Taliban. I think personally it was an erratic policy. It was a policy that wasn’t moored to national interests. I think it, unfortunately, was moored to something else. And it was a policy that left the incoming administration with no good options. So when we came into office, I think the challenge we faced was, do you hew to the agreement that the previous administration stuck? Do you hew to the deadline that they set without any plan for fulfilling that deadline that was handed over? Or do you risk what had been at that point a 20-year war escalating even further, with American troops once again having a target on their back, potentially additional American troops having to go into what would have once again become an active combat zone? Or do you end the war and undertake that withdrawal and later the evacuation? So, personally, I think it was a very challenging situation to inherit.

Q: And officially?

A: Officially, I think it was a very challenging situation to inherit. Again, it was -- I suppose because I said it, it was the official policy of the U.S. Government, that it was not a decision that -- it was not an agreement with the Taliban that this administration would have struck.

Price explained that the Biden Administration's "overriding concern" during early discussions with the Taliban was the risk that U.S. forces would come under direct threat, and the war in Afghanistan would intensify after the May 1 withdrawal deadline passed.

Page 33, line 3

Q: And what was the status of negotiations with the Afghan Government and the Taliban at the time? And "at the time" being when you assumed your role as spokesperson.

A: There were discussions with the Taliban. You know, as the spring approached and as May neared, there were discussions with the Taliban about that May 1 deadline, regarding any flexibility that we might be afforded in terms of that withdrawal. Knowing that, again, our overriding concern was that, if May 1 approached and as May 1 approached, that American soldiers, were they still there, could have a target on their back once again if that withdrawal had not started. So there was engagement with the Taliban on a whole host of practical issues. As the deadline approached, you know, that May 1 fixture, I think, became more and more of a topic of discussion with them. At least, I gather it was.

Page 65, line 18

Q: And can you please address the decision to proceed with the withdrawal despite violations of the agreements conditions by the Taliban?

A: I can do so with the caveat that, again, I was not part of the formal process. But I will just to put it very simply, as I understood it, as someone who was not present for those meetings, but as I understood it, the fundamental decision was do you seek to blow past the deadline that was negotiated by the previous administration with the force of some 2,500 U.S. servicemembers, confronting a Taliban that had not been as strong in some 20 years, confronting the specter that those 2,500 forces would come under direct fire from a Taliban force of, you know, what some several hundred -- well, tens of thousands certainly to put it conservatively, come under fire, face harm. Potentially require that the U.S. Government make the difficult decision not only to prolong the war, but also to intensify it with additional servicemembers going in to safeguard the servicemembers who are were already on the ground, or do you follow through with the contours of what the previous administration had negotiated and began the military withdrawal.

Page 74, line 4

Q: If the best way to advance U.S. interests as you noted here was to press the Taliban to comply with the Doha agreement among others, why would the U.S. go to zero order be announced before the Taliban met these set of commitments?

A: So again, I think that is a question that is better directed at someone who is intimately familiar with that review and who was involved in that review. I will just restate the point that I have conveyed previously in that in some ways, what mattered most was the way the Taliban chose to interpret the agreement that the last administration struck with them. And if they were to have made the decision to resume pursuing U.S. servicemembers, official Americans on the ground, NATO forces, that was, in some ways, dispositive, or close to it. We had lost thousands of American servicemembers in Afghanistan. The specter of finding ourselves in a position where our servicemembers were coming under fire, having to reinforce those servicemembers is not something that this administration took lightly. I think there is another relevant data point here, and that is that we certainly understood the desire to have an ongoing -- we certainly understood the utility that could come with having a longer presence on the ground that went past May 1, military, like, for our purposes, diplomatic. There was an effort to determine whether the Taliban would go along with an arrangement where we stayed on the ground longer without our forces coming under direct threat. My understanding is that it was the conclusion of those diplomatic efforts that that type of arrangement was impossible. So it boils down to a simple choice, do you blow past that May 1 deadline and potentially have American servicemembers become targets, and unfortunately, in some ways, easier targets as the Taliban was making advances and the ANDSF was ceding ground, potentially having to reinforce them, potentially having to medevac injured servicemembers, or worse yet, sending some home in body bags as we had done for 20 years, or do you make the decision to withdraw militarily from Afghanistan.

With Secretary Blinken's support, Price immediately reinstated the daily State Department press briefings that were halted under the Trump Administration to ensure that the American public received transparent communication from its public servants.

Page 42, line 7

A: [. . .] When I became spokesperson on January 20th of 2021, there had not been a Department press briefing in over a year, perhaps close to 2 years, as I recall.

Q: Why was that the case?

A: My understanding is that the previous administration and the previous Secretary of State opted not to have daily press briefings.

Q: Do you agree with that position?

A: I think the fact that I reinstituted daily press briefings with the encouragement and consent of the Secretary as soon as possible is testament otherwise.

Q: Okay. And why are daily press briefings important?

A: They're important because we're public officials, we're public servants, and we have a responsibility to serve the public. And if we're not communicating to the public what we're doing, why we're doing it, with whom we're doing it, we're failing in that core mission. On top of that, it's in our -- to be honest, we're self interested in it, as well. Our policies, our priorities aren't going to have legitimacy with the American public, but also publics around the world, if we're not out there explaining and offering information and context and answering the hard questions. My job would've been so much easier if I could've, you know, sat in my office all day and not faced a reporter's question from the podium, but that would've been, at least in my opinion, a failure in terms of what's expected of me.

Q: Fair to say that these press briefings were also to further transparency from the Department?

A: Of course. And transparency is part and parcel of our democratic system. When I -- to your previous set of questions, when I was out of government, I taught a class on the importance of transparency and the balance, especially in the national security realm, between national security and transparency and the imperative of both and how both can be carried out effectively.

Page 88, line 2

Q: And that is because it didn't exist prior to you coming into that role with the transition and administration?

A: There was no process currently and prior to the last administration known as guidance collection because there were no Department press briefings.

Q: And that was, in fact, a priority of Secretary Blinken to reinstate a regular process and transparency to the American public on foreign policy issues. Is that correct?

A: It is correct to say the Secretary, as do I, but most importantly, the Secretary, believes we have an obligation as public servants to be transparent with the American people, to convey facts and intent and priorities and values to the best of our ability.

The press statements that Price relayed to the public were underpinned by research conducted by subject-matter experts and extensively vetted by the State Department.

Page 52, line 18

Q: Fair to say that you therefore had confidence that the press statements and press guidance

released by the Department during your tenure were accurate?

A: As the Department spokesperson, I personally reviewed everything that went out in my name, everything that went out in the Secretary's name. And if I wasn't comfortable with it based on my understanding of the facts at the time, it wouldn't go out. It would be -- it would not go out.

Q: Okay. And is this because the press statements, as you testified, were underpinned by research, briefing from, in fact, subject matter experts?

A: The press statements that emanate ultimately from the spokesperson's name or the Secretary's name are not written by the spokesperson or the Secretary. They are drafted by the subject matter experts in any given bureau. Not only are they drafted by subject matter experts, they are then coordinated and cleared extensively throughout the building. So something that is drafted by SCA could be seen by CA, by PRM, by L, and then ultimately others on the 7th Floor, before it would then come to my desk. So, by the time something came to me, there was typically a -- you know, almost without exception, unless there was a -- almost without exception, you know, a thoroughly vetted statement that had been drafted in the first instance by people who knew these issues best.

Q: So fair to say it was a pretty rigorous process?

A: Yes.

Q: A very rigorous process?

A: That's fair to say.

Price felt that the State Department successfully kept the media and American public informed about policy and activities related to Afghanistan.

Page 53, line 16

Q: During your tenure, did the nature or frequency of queries from the media to the Department on Afghanistan policy evolve over time?

A: They did, yes.

Q: Do you feel that you and your office were successful in keeping the media and public informed about the dynamic U.S. policy and activities with respect to Afghanistan?

A: Yes.

Q: What informs that opinion?

A: My recollection of that year. When we came into office, I faced, we faced, regular questions about the May 1 deadline, about the policy process that was ongoing at the time regarding that May 1 deadline. We answered -- while maintaining space for that

deliberative process -- those questions to the best of our ability. The President's address to the American public and to the world in mid-April of 2021 announced our policy. Certainly, thereafter, I spoke -- you know, every day I was in Washington at the podium, but then also, you know, constantly back and forth, email, texts, phone calls with reporters, answering their questions, again, to the best of my ability, as did my colleagues at the Department of Defense, the White House, other departments and agencies who were engaged in this.

Q: Did you feel that you had the confidence of the Secretary to speak on behalf of the Department related to Afghanistan policy?

A: I do -- I did.

Q: What about on behalf of the interagency?

A: Yes.

Q: What informs that opinion?

A: That opinion is informed by the fact that I was installed in that role in the first instance. It's a role that, yes, you're speaking on behalf of the Department, you're speaking on behalf of the Secretary, but you're often the voice of U.S. foreign policy. And I recall instances where I received compliments or kudos from, you know, senior officials within the Department, from senior officials throughout the administration on the way in which I was answering questions.

Price commended the extraordinary bravery, courage, and determination that his State Department colleagues and U.S. military partners displayed within the security context of the NEO.

Page 56, line 5

Q: [. . .] That concludes our formal questioning. We'd like to provide you with an opportunity to share anything in the affirmative that may help the committee in its processing and understanding of facts related to Afghanistan policy.

A: You know, I'll just say that, of the issues that I confronted during my time as spokesperson, this was, of course, the most challenging. Ending a 20-year military engagement in a country halfway around the world was never going to be easy, but, even in the midst of that challenge, as a public servant, you know, I have never seen more extraordinary bravery and courage and determination and grit and talent than what we witnessed certainly during the latter half of August. I recall the burden on me personally, but that is nothing compared to what my colleagues from the Department of State and from our partners in the U.S. military were doing on the ground. And the fact that, in the space of -- well, let me back up. The fact that, in the space of just a couple days, we could

relocate our entire embassy from the compound to what was then Hamid Karzai International Airport using prepositioned assets, all of the logistics that went in that direction, and in the case of 2 short weeks we could facilitate the evacuation of 124,000 of our fellow citizens, of their family members, third country nationals, diplomatic partners, SIV recipients, SIV eligible individuals, it's something that I didn't think could have been possible. And the fact that they were able to do that in what was an extraordinarily challenging security context, a security context that was punctuated, of course, by Abbey Gate and the sacrifice that those 13 servicemembers made at Abbey Gate, what they were able to accomplish that was enabled by the U.S. military and the bravery of Department of State, I think it is, to use that word again, nothing short of extraordinary.

Page 153, line 3

A: [. . .] I would just make the broad point that, you know, as in all ventures in government, I think what you saw in the case of this decision and this process was a collection of good people with the best of intentions making the best of circumstances that were on the ground and the information that was available to them at the time. I understand that there are certain elements that individuals might wish to quibble with, but, again, having played a role in this and having been a part of it, at least from my lane, you know, the determination and the grit and the creativity and bravery, in many cases, that culminated in our country's largest airlift and an enduring commitment to our Afghan partners who served alongside us over the course of 20 years in executing on a decision that, frankly, had been made by at least two of his predecessors to wind down and to end this forever war, you know, is a -- it's a feat that obviously came at some cost, but it was, however -- I was, you know, humbled to play some role in the process and to be a part of it.

Price asserted that it was in America's national security interests for the State Department to continue negotiating with the Taliban until every avenue for a peaceful transition of power was exhausted.

Page 92, line 4

Q: Did it ever become clear to you in your capacity as spokesperson, being privy to the interagency meetings, briefings, et cetera, or, more broadly, Department leadership, that the Taliban was not interested in the peace process?

A: It became undeniable in August as their march toward Kabul continued unabated. Yeah.

Q: How about when they were making rapid territorial -- by "they", the Taliban -- making rapid territorial gains throughout the various provinces in Afghanistan in June and July of 2021?

A: That certainly didn't point to -- it wasn't a good sign for the potential for a negotiated

outcome.

Q: But at that point in time the Department still believed that the Taliban was interested in the peace process?

A: The Department believed that we had a responsibility to exhaust every single avenue to arrive at an outcome that would have been undeniably in America's national security interests, in the interests of the Afghan people, in the interests of the region. And it's not our nature to walk away when issues become more challenging.

Price noted that the Biden Administration utilized months of prior contingency planning as it conducted policy deliberations and tabletop exercises in response to the Taliban's territorial gains in June and July 2021.

Page 99, line 22

Q: What actions did the Department take in response to the Taliban's territorial gains in June and July of 2021?

A: I'm not the one to speak to actions that we took. What I can say, I think I already have said, is that there was contingency planning underway. This is contingency planning that was already months in the making at this point. And I know that events on the ground were factored into policy deliberations, tabletop exercises, the considerations that were at play in senior meetings.

Price explained that military assessments and information from the intelligence community warned that if 2,500 U.S troops had remained in Afghanistan they would have likely been targeted by the Taliban and potentially required additional reinforcements.

Page 107, line 5

Q: [. . .] You say that 2,500 U.S. troops wouldn't have been able to maintain the status quo, but also wouldn't have been able to stop what we're seeing now, "now" being August 10th when the Taliban is taking provincial capitals and moving towards Kabul. That's what you said. Had you been briefed that 2,500 -- if 2,500 U.S. troops had remained in Afghanistan the Taliban would have been able to take provincial capitals, move towards Kabul, as they were on August 10th?

A: Again, I don't recall specifically what I was briefed or when. But it was the judgment of, as best I understood and understand it now, of the State Department, of the intelligence community, of the U.S. military, and ultimately of the White House that the size of the force we were talking about would have put us in a position of our servicemembers coming under fire and potentially having to reinforce them again and again, as had been the case previously. I don't recall if and when I had been briefed on military assessments, but my understanding was that it was the military conclusion that a force of this size

could potentially just leave our forces as potential targets once again.

Price displayed confidence in the Biden Administration's rigorous and fact-driven Afghanistan policy development process, as proven by his ability to explain and defend this policy from the Department podium.

Page 125, line 25

Q: So – here's the stepping back part -- based on the observations that you were able to make in these policy processes and policy meetings, some of which you've recalled today on record, would you characterize those policy processes as thorough?

A: I would.

Q: Would you characterize them as rigorous?

A: I would.

Q: Would you characterize them as fact driven?

A: I would.

Q: Would you characterize them as incorporating dissenting views and debate?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you characterize them as reaching consensus on policy paths forward?

A: Yes.

Q: And you also testified previously that your role as spokesperson for the Department was to explain the Department's policies to the American people. Is that correct?

A: That's correct.

Q: And so is it fair to say that in that role you frequently took questions from the media asking you to explain U.S. policy?

A: That's correct.

Q: Did you receive questions essentially asking you to defend U.S. policy?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: And as a part of performing that role as spokesperson and subjecting yourself to those questions, did it contribute to the confidence that you had, that you just testified to previously, that the policymaking process was rigorous and thorough?

A: Absolutely. The messaging element tends to be a tool by which to pressure test the policy, and when there are challenges in the messaging realm, sometimes it can point to

challenges in the policy realm. The fact that, you know, the administration emerged from a policy review process with a coherent policy process that was rigorously, inclusively debated, that emerged with a consensus among the administration and that we were able to explain and defend, I think, points to the qualities that you were depicting in that policy process -- the rigor, the discipline, the deliberation, the inclusiveness, and ultimately the consensus.

Q: So, just to summarize your testimony today, even though you've said on multiple occasions today that you were responsible for communications and messaging, not policy development or operationalizing policy, you have confidence in the policies that were developed in 2021 with respect to Afghanistan?

A: Yes, I do.

Price recalled the Biden Administration's early contingency planning and preparations for a NEO in Afghanistan.

Page 135, line 17

Q: Were you, in your capacity as spokesperson, involved in discussions about the possibility of a NEO?

A: I was privy to discussions about the possibility of a NEO.

Q: And when did you first become aware of these discussions? Or, better phrased, when was the first time you became privy to these discussions?

A: There's contingency planning across every -- virtually every country in which the United States is involved. In most cases, that sort of resides within the embassy and it only rarely reaches decision makers in Washington. So the first time I heard of a NEO in the context of Afghanistan, I don't recall specifically. I imagine it was sometime in the early part of the administration, given the active contingency planning that was ongoing. Of course, it was, you know, really in August when there was a concerted, regular discussion of NEO activation when I recall being regularly a part of those discussions.

Price described that "the situation on the ground changed markedly" after August 14, 2021 and the ensuing departure of Afghan President Ghani from Kabul—requiring a pivot in focus from keeping a U.S. embassy presence to evacuating from the country. He described concerns prior to that about signaling contingency plans—including for a NEO—that could "spook" the Afghan government, noting that he relied on experts on the ground to convey appropriate messaging related to the NEO, while ensuring no additional burden was placed on those working around the clock at the HKIA compound.

Page 136, line 16

Q: Of course. And we certainly understand that's not the role of the spokesperson, but let

me sort of refine that question. When, based on your communications and briefings that you received, did it seem likely that a NEO would be necessary?

A: I can say, 2 years later, it was a very dynamic period in August of 2021. I recall even as late as August 14, 2021, of being under the impression that we sought to keep a diplomatic presence in Kabul. Of course, things continued to be dynamic, and over the course of 48 hours the situation on the ground changed markedly. But when I first heard that we would be executing a NEO? I don't recall precisely when I heard that for the first time.

Q: Were there ever discussions about avoiding using the term "NEO" at any point during the planning phase?

A: Look, it's not a term that you want to throw around loosely. And, you know, one, as just a general practice, we tend to not speak publicly about contingency plannings. We plan for all sorts of contingencies across every single country in which we operate around the world. Number two, there was a desire, I think a very sound desire, not to, for lack of a better word, to spook the government in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic, more so than was already necessary, not to undermine the government of the Islamic Republic more so than the Taliban was, itself, already doing. So it would only stand to reason that I'm not going to go out there and say that, you know, among the things we're considering is a noncombatant evacuation operation. It wouldn't have been in our interest to do that.

Q: Fair. Thank you.

Q: And in your capacity as spokesperson, how did you go about the process of supporting and responding to the evacuation from a communications perspective?

A: Well, it was my role not to support the evacuation itself. I should rephrase that. It was not my role to support the evacuation itself; it was my role to speak about what we were doing, how we were doing it, both broadly and, you know, the very, sort of, targeted questions: Who is eligible for evacuation? What should people do? What should the American citizen community do? What about LPRs? What about family members? What about SIV recipients, SIV applicants, SIV eligible individuals? So a number of audiences, a number of considerations. And it was my role to convey the appropriate messaging in various forums and fora to those audiences.

Q: And how did you obtain information from on the ground to formulate that messaging and to convey information to the public?

A: Look, the people on the ground were -- and I think I referred to John Bass in this context earlier -- they were up around the clock. They were, you know, running around the HKIA compound. It was the last thing I wanted to do, to place an additional burden on them for them to brief me, when I knew that there were individuals at the Department who had

that connectivity, who had, you know, just gotten off the phone with them, who had digested all the SITREPs, who could then brief me. So, just as I explained in other contexts, the context here was exactly the same. I would turn to -- if we're talking to the period when the task force had already been established, I would turn to a task force rep. I would turn to an SCA rep. I would turn to a CA rep. If there were high level, you know, policy questions, I would look to 7th Floor colleagues. But, again, I relied on the experts to provide me the information that I felt I needed.

Price witnessed firsthand the extraordinary, round-the-clock work demonstrated by Ambassador John Bass throughout the NEO.

Page 23, line 11

Q: And how about Ambassador John Bass?

A: Yes. But as I -- so -- yes. Certainly during the evacuation -- and, yes, thank you for that prompt -- John became a primary interlocutor during that time. Here too I couldn't begin to imagine the pressure he was under because he was, judging by the emails that I would be copied on from him, awake at all hours, working around the clock, just doing extraordinary, extraordinary work to ensure as effective a flow as possible of individuals onto planes departing Afghanistan. So here too it was not my inclination to go to him directly when I thought an answer could be secured from someone else, whether that was from CA, from SCA, from another bureau, from Derek, from Toria, Brian. The list goes on.

Q: But you did have direct communications with him at some points, correct?

A: I did.

Price asserted that the decision to send Ambassador Bass to Afghanistan to assist the evacuation effort reflected the broad and complex needs of the NEO.

Page 139, line 14

Q: Are you aware if Ambassador Bass was sent to Afghanistan by Department leadership because they were concerned that Ambassador Wilson, as chief of mission, wouldn't be capable of conducting the evacuation on his own?

A: That's not my understanding. Again, I was not a decision maker in the notion of sending John Bass to Afghanistan, but what I recall from the time, what I have gleaned since, it was a reflection of the mission broadening and changing. And Ross Wilson was serving as our senior diplomatic representative on the ground, engaging with the Islamic Republic, engaging with the diplomatic community that was also on the ground. That work was still necessary, especially vis à vis diplomatic partners on the ground, the diplomatic community in Kabul, leading the mission itself, the people on the ground. But

this was a massive undertaking, the evacuation effort, and it was additive to all of the work that was ongoing prior to that. So it only stands to reason that you could use a very senior figure like John Bass, who had run a large mission, who had been in charge of complex operations, to go there to be an extra set of hands and to really help run the NEO operation and all that it entailed.

Price explained that the Biden Administration's support for American citizens and Afghan partners continued long after the NEO.

Page 149, line 6

A: Well, I think as has been stipulated, during the course of those 2 weeks in August, the NEO brought to safety 124,000 individuals, some 6,000 American citizens, as I recall. But our message to those who remained who either --who may have wished to leave or later decided that they wished to leave was simple: that our obligation to American citizens, just like our obligations to our Afghan partners, didn't expire on August 30th, and we remained committed to American citizens and to our Afghan partners into perpetuity. And I think if you reflect on the track record since then, you will have seen that we made good on that pledge. Americans who later decided that they wished to leave have come home. In some cases, Americans who left, who went back, who then decided again that they wished to leave, have been able to do so in many cases with our support.

###