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5 COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,

6 U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

7 WASHINGTON, D.C.

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12 INTERVIEW OF: UNDER SECRETARY JOHN BASS

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Monday, January 22, 2024

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Washington, D.C.

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The interview in the above matter was held in room 2255, Rayburn House Office

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Building, commencing at 9:33 a.m.

1 Appearances:

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5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

6

7 [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED],

10 SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

11 [REDACTED]

12 [REDACTED]

13 [REDACTED]

14 FOR OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

15 [REDACTED]

16

17 For the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE:

18

19 [REDACTED]

20 [REDACTED]

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1 For UNDER SECRETARY JOHN BASS:

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1 [REDACTED]. This is a transcribed interview of Under Secretary for
2 Management John Bass. Chairman McCaul has requested this interview as part of the
3 committee's investigation of the Afghanistan withdrawal.

4 Would the witness please state his name for the record?

5 Under Secretary Bass. John R. Bass.

6 [REDACTED]. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for appearing
7 here today to answer our questions. The chairman also appreciates your willingness to
8 appear voluntarily.

9 My name is [REDACTED], and I am a [REDACTED] on Chairman McCaul's staff
10 on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and am leading the investigation into the
11 Afghanistan withdrawal.

12 I will now ask committee staff present for the majority and minority to introduce
13 themselves as well.

14 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED], I am the [REDACTED] for the majority.

15 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED], [REDACTED] for the Oversight
16 Subcommittee.

17 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] Staff, [REDACTED] for the minority.

18 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED], [REDACTED] on
19 the minority.

20 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED], I am the [REDACTED] for the Democratic
21 staff.

22 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

23 Before proceeding, I want to make note that our [REDACTED], is in
24 the audience as well.

25 I'd like to now go over the ground rules and guidelines that we will follow during

1 today's interview. Our questioning will proceed in rounds. The majority will ask
2 questions for 1 hour, and then the minority will have an opportunity to ask questions for
3 an equal period of time if they choose. We will alternate back and forth until there are
4 no more questions, and the interview is over. Typically we take a short break at the end
5 of each hour. If you'd like to take a break apart from that, please just let us know, and
6 we will be happy to accommodate.

7 As you know, there is an official court reporter taking down everything you say to
8 make a written record. So we ask that you give verbal responses to all questions.
9 Does that make sense?

10 Under Secretary Bass. Yes.

11 [REDACTED]. So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we will do
12 our best to limit the number of people directing questions at you during any given hour to
13 just those people on the staff whose turn it is. Please try and speak clearly so the court
14 reporter understand and so everyone can hear you. It is important that we don't talk
15 over one another or interrupt each other if we can help it, and that goes for everybody
16 present at today's interview.

17 Witnesses who appear before the committee have the opportunity to freely
18 consult with counsel if they choose.

19 Under Secretary Bass, you are appearing today with private counsel, correct?

20 Under Secretary Bass. Yes.

21 [REDACTED]. Can counsel please identify yourself and state your names for
22 the record?

23 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Yes. My name is Suzanne Sachsman Grooms. I am
24 with the law firm Kaplan, Hecker & Fink. I'm here with my colleague.

25 Ms. Yu. Cathy Yu, also with Kaplan, Hecker & Fink.

1 [REDACTED]. Thank you. It is my understanding that agency counsel from
2 the State Department is also present today.

3 Under Secretary Bass, you understand that agency counsel represents the State
4 Department and not you personally, correct?

5 Under Secretary Bass. I do.

6 [REDACTED]. Can agency counsel and notetaker please identify yourselves
7 and state your names for the record?

8 [REDACTED], [REDACTED], Office of the Legal Adviser.

9 [REDACTED], [REDACTED], Bureau of Legislative Affairs.

10 [REDACTED]. Thank you. We want you to answer our questions in the most
11 complete and truthful manner as possible, so we will take our time. If you have any
12 questions or if you do not understand one of our questions, please let us know. Our
13 questions will cover a wide range of topics. So, if you need clarification at any point,
14 please just say so. If you do not know the answer to a question or do not remember, it
15 is best not to guess. Please give us your best recollection. If there are things you don't
16 know or can't remember, just say so and please inform us who, to the best of your
17 knowledge, might be able to provide a more complete answer to the question.

18 Under Secretary Bass, this portion of the interview is unclassified. So, if a
19 question calls for information that you know to be classified, please state that for the
20 record, as well as the basis for the classification and the original classification authority.
21 If you are uncertain of the classification, please consult with your counsel. We would be
22 happy to go off the record to afford you the opportunity to do so. In the interest of
23 transparency and open access to the Federal Government, we ask that your asserted
24 basis for classification adhere to the uniformed system prescribed by Executive Order
25 13526. Once you have identified the requisite classification, please respond with as

1 much unclassified information as possible. Do you understand?

2 Under Secretary Bass. Yes.

3 [REDACTED]. You should also understand, while this interview is not under
4 oath, you are required by law to answer questions from Congress truthfully. Do you
5 understand?

6 Under Secretary Bass. Yes.

7 [REDACTED]. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff in the
8 interview. Do you understand this?

9 Under Secretary Bass. Yes.

10 [REDACTED]. Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be
11 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C.,
12 section 1001. Do you understand this?

13 Under Secretary Bass. Yes.

14 [REDACTED]. Is there any reason you are unable to provide truthful answers
15 to today's questions?

16 Under Secretary Bass. No.

17 [REDACTED]. Finally, I would like to make note that the content of what we
18 discuss here today is confidential, as per Chairman McCaul's terms. We ask that you do
19 not speak about what we discuss in these interviews with any outside individuals to
20 preserve the integrity of our investigation. For the same reason, the marked exhibits
21 that we will use today will remain with the court reporter so that they can go in the
22 official transcript. And any copies of those exhibits will be returned to us when we wrap
23 up, okay.

24 That is the end of the majority's preamble. Is there anything that my colleagues
25 for the minority would like to add?

1 [REDACTED]. Yes, we note that, notwithstanding any agreement made between
2 the majority, the witness, and his counsel, and/or the State Department, for this
3 transcribed interview, there is no provision governing or mandating confidentiality of
4 investigations and/or transcribed interviews in the House or committee's rules for the
5 118th Congress. Thank you.

6 [REDACTED] Thank you.

7 EXAMINATION

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q The time is now 9:39. We will start the first hour of questioning.

10 Before proceeding, in the interest of clarity, I want to define couple of key terms
11 as they are understood by the majority. First, when referencing the term "withdrawal"
12 the majority is referencing the U.S. military retrograde, i.e., the Go-to-Zero order, which
13 was officially announced by President Biden on April 14, 2021. This includes related
14 planning by the State Department and other agencies in the decisionmaking processes.
15 Does that make sense?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Second, when referencing the term "evacuation" or "emergency
18 evacuation," the majority's referencing the evacuation of U.S. citizens and nationals,
19 civilian personnel, and designated persons in August 2021 resulting in the noncombatant
20 evacuation operation initiated on August 16, 2021. This includes related planning by the
21 State Department and other agencies and the decisionmaking processes. Does that
22 make sense?

23 A Yes.

24 Q Thank you. Under Secretary Bass, can you please give us a brief overview
25 of your career at the State Department?

1 A I have been a career Foreign Service officer for approximately 37 years,
2 three-time Ambassador, served on four continents, including service in Afghanistan and
3 Iraq.

4 Q You have made note of serving as an Ambassador for three different tours.
5 Were one of those tours when you were serving as Ambassador to Afghanistan?

6 A Yes.

7 Q Can you provide the dates for --

8 A I --

9 Q -- your position then?

10 A I was on the ground at Ambassador to Afghanistan from mid December 2017
11 until early January 2020.

12 Q And who nominated you for that position?

13 A President Trump.

14 Q When were you confirmed?

15 A I was confirmed, I believe, in late September 2017.

16 Q Were you given any instruction upon assumption of the position U.S.
17 Ambassador to Afghanistan under the Trump administration?

18 A Could you be more specific?

19 Q Of course. Upon assuming the position of U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan,
20 were you given any instruction from State Department leadership or President Trump?

21 A I engaged in a range of consultations before going out as Ambassador, as is
22 customary for outbound Ambassadors.

23 Q Thank you. And to whom did you report to in that position?

24 A On a daily basis, I worked most closely with Acting Assistant Secretary Alice
25 Wells, in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. But obviously worked for

1 Secretary Pompeo.

2 Q And you noted that you started the position in mid-December 2017. What
3 Secretary Tillerson serving as the Secretary of State during the period as well?

4 A Thank you, yes. So, for the initial period of my tenure, Secretary Tillerson
5 was still Secretary. So I ultimately reported to the Secretary of State, whoever that was
6 at the time.

7 Q Thank you. And can you please speak to your relationship with Secretary
8 Tillerson?

9 A I did not have a personal relationship with Secretary Tillerson. I interacted
10 with him on a number of occasions, couldn't specify how many. It wasn't a huge
11 number, but in those months when he was Secretary, I communicated with him a few
12 times.

13 Q And thank you. And how about your relationship with Secretary Pompeo?

14 A Again, I was not in daily contact with him. I was probably in touch with him
15 a bit more frequently. But primarily provided information through staff and would hear
16 from him periodically on an issue through staff.

17 Q How frequently did you engage with Secretary Pompeo? On a more
18 regular basis? Sporadic?

19 A I would say sporadic.

20 Q And who reported to you in your capacity as U.S. Ambassador to
21 Afghanistan?

22 A So I was responsible for approximately 450 direct-hire employees and
23 several thousand contractors who were there under State Department contracts or
24 otherwise supporting the Embassy and fell under what we called chief of mission
25 authority.

1 Q And Mr. Jim DeHart was your associate chief of mission, correct?

2 A For part of my tenure but not the entire tenure.

3 Q And when was -- when did he come on as associate chief of mission? Do
4 you recall?

5 A In the summer of 2018, and he would have been there for about a year so.
6 Summer of 2018 to summer of 2019.

7 Q And who served as your deputy chief of mission?

8 A I had two. The first was an Annie Pforzheimer, who was in place when I
9 arrived, and she was there through late summer of 2018, and following that, Karen
10 Decker was my deputy.

11 Q Thank you. And can you please briefly explain the distinction between
12 those two roles, associate chief of mission and deputy chief of mission, as it is our
13 understanding it is unique to certain embassies?

14 A It reflected the size and scope of Embassy Kabul. And, roughly speaking,
15 the deputy chief of mission was the chief operating officer for the Embassy, as is
16 customary, and also engaged in a fair amount of work with our outward-facing work with
17 the Embassy with Afghan partners. The assistant chief of mission focused primarily on
18 internal operations, management, and coordination of foreign assistance for a portion at
19 a time.

20 Q That is helpful. Thank you. And when did you leave your post as
21 Ambassador to Afghanistan?

22 A As I noted earlier, in early January of 2020.

23 Q And why did you step down from your position then?

24 A I had been in place over 2 years and had agreed to perform that role for
25 about 2 years and so --

1 Q So as part of the normal rotation cycle?

2 A Uh-huh, yes.

3 Q And what was your position throughout 2021, including the withdrawal and
4 emergency evacuation as was just defined?

5 A Are you asking me from the start of 2021?

6 Q Correct.

7 A So, throughout 2021 -- well, from the beginning of 2021 until September, I
8 was a senior adviser at the Foreign Service Institute.

9 Q Am I correct in understanding that you held this position immediately after
10 serving as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan?

11 A Following a period of leave, that is correct.

12 Q At whose request did you assume this position?

13 A Which position?

14 Q Director of FSI, or senior adviser to the Foreign Service Institute?

15 A The Director of the Foreign Service Institute or Deputy Director of the
16 Foreign Service Institute; I can't remember who initiated the conversation.

17 Q And to whom did you report to in that position?

18 A The Deputy Director of the Foreign Service Institute.

19 Q Did you also report to then Deputy Secretary for Management and
20 Resources Brian McKeon in any capacity?

21 A While serving as a senior adviser? No.

22 Just to clarify, if we are talking about the period during the evacuation when I was
23 technically still assigned to the Foreign Service Institute, obviously, through that period of
24 the evacuation, I was not reporting to the Deputy Director of the Foreign Service
25 Institute.

1 Q That is helpful. Thank you for that clarification. Who were you reporting
2 to during that evacuation period?

3 A So, while I was on the ground, Ambassador Wilson as the charge was the
4 senior U.S. civilian official on the ground and responsible for all Department personnel.
5 I coordinated closely with him. I also engaged with a range of senior officials in
6 Washington.

7 Q And who were those senior officials in Washington?

8 A I engaged most regularly probably with chief of staff and deputy chief of
9 staff of the State Department. Also talked to the Secretary a number of times in that
10 period.

11 Q Did you engage with DMR McKeon during that period?

12 A Probably, I don't recall specifically.

13 Q And how did Deputy Secretary Sherman?

14 A I participated in a set of briefings for foreign governments that were
15 coordinated by or led by Deputy Secretary Sherman through the period of the evacuation.

16 Q Thank you. And you made note that you left your position as senior adviser
17 of Foreign Services Institute in September. Would that be September 2021?

18 A Correct.

19 Q What was the position you held thereafter?

20 A So, following conclusion of the evacuation, I returned to Washington and
21 spent 5 or 6 weeks setting up what is now known as the Office of the Coordinator for
22 Afghan Relocation Efforts. And then, somewhere around Columbus Day weekend in
23 October of 2021, I transitioned out of that role and began preparing for confirmation for
24 my current position.

25 Q And that is your role as Under Secretary for Management, correct?

1 A That is correct.

2 Q Thank you. Who nominated you for that position?

3 A President -- President Biden.

4 Q When were you confirmed by the Senate as Under Secretary for
5 Management?

6 A Late December in 2021.

7 Q And when were you sworn in?

8 A Late -- later in December in 2021.

9 Q Thank you and who do you report to in this role?

10 A Secretary Blinken.

11 Q Can you please speak to your relationship with Secretary Blinken?

12 A We enjoy a cordial professional relationship.

13 Q And how about your relationship with the current DMR Rich Verma?

14 A Also a cordial professional relationship.

15 Q And have you occupied any other positions since being sworn in as Under
16 Secretary for Management?

17 A Last year, no, not last -- last year? Yes, so, for approximately 3 months in
18 2023, I performed the duties of the Deputy Secretary for Management Resources at the
19 direction of the President.

20 Q Thank you. And Mr. Brian McKeon had previously served in that position,
21 correct?

22 A That is correct.

23 Q If we were to look at the organizational chart of the State Department, DMR
24 is technically number three in the Department, correct?

25 A Yes.

1 Q As Acting DMR, did you occupy both the role of M for Under Secretary for
2 Management and DMR simultaneously?

3 A I continued to perform some of the duties as the Under Secretary for
4 Management that could not be delegated. But otherwise relied on an Acting Under
5 Secretary for that period of time.

6 Q Thank you. We are going to rewind a bit, if you will indulge, us and delve
7 into the various positions that you have held. We will start first with your role as U.S.
8 Ambassador to Afghanistan, as we started with previously as well.

9 You testified that you had assumed that role in December 2017 under the Trump
10 administration, correct?

11 A That is correct.

12 Q And you held that role until January 2020, correct?

13 A Early January of 2020.

14 Q Thank you. Can you please speak to your roles and responsibilities as U.S.
15 Ambassador to Afghanistan?

16 A So, as Ambassador, I -- in Afghanistan -- performed all of the roles and all of
17 the responsibilities customarily assigned to a U.S. Ambassador, was responsible for all
18 personnel under chief of mission authority, served as the President's representative of
19 the United States Government to the Islamic Republic, oversaw all of our diplomatic
20 engagement and policy work and all of our foreign assistance programming in
21 Afghanistan at that period of time, coordinated closely with a wide range of fellow
22 Ambassadors, leads for international organizations in country, interacted with a wide
23 range of people across Afghan society.

24 Q That is helpful. Thank you. And what was your relationship with the
25 Afghan Government like?

1 A That is a complicated question, given any government is not monolithic, and
2 there were a wide range of people with whom I interacted, and a lot that happened in
3 2 years.

4 Q And President Ashraf Ghani was the President during your tenure of U.S.
5 Ambassador to Afghanistan, correct?

6 A That is correct.

7 Q Can you please speak to your relationship with President Ghani?

8 A We saw each other frequently, had a relationship that allowed us to be fairly
9 direct with each other, engaged in a lot of efforts to jointly solve problems but failing not
10 to understand each other's positions and be able to communicate to our respective
11 governments those positions.

12 Q Thank you. And can you please speak to your engagement with Afghan
13 civil society?

14 A So, again, as is customary for U.S. Ambassador had a fair amount of
15 engagement with a wide range, a wide cross section of folks in Afghan civil society.
16 Some of them were receiving support from the American Government; some of them
17 were not. But it was part of our ongoing effort to try to understand what was
18 happening in society and also to be able to communicate with a wide cross section
19 Afghans what U.S. objectives were and what we were trying to achieve at the time.

20 Q Thank you. And, just so we can better understand the situation on the
21 ground with Afghan civil society at the time, I just have a couple of questions. During
22 your tenure as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Afghan women occupied the workforce,
23 correct, more generally?

24 A When you say "occupied the workforce," do you mean they were present in
25 the workforce?

1 Q Present and permitted?

2 A Yes, that is correct.

3 Q And women were generally integrated into public life as well, correct?

4 A I think that depended where you were in the country. That was certainly
5 the case in the capital.

6 Q And Afghanistan was a democratic country, correct?

7 A Afghanistan was a country that operated under a constitution, that featured
8 elections, and that tried to operate by the rule the law.

9 Q Thank you. When, to the best of your knowledge, were peace talks with
10 the Taliban first conceptualized under the Trump administration.

11 [REDACTED]. I am going to jump in here. This may call for a response that
12 requires executive branch confidentiality.

13 John, I'll let you respond broadly, if you can.

14 Under Secretary Bass. Okay.

15 I was going to ask you to clarify what you mean by "peace talks."

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Engagements, formal engagements with the Taliban.

18 A And when you say "engagements," are you -- by U.S. officials or by anyone.

19 Q By the U.S. Government.

20 A So, if we are talking strictly about engagement with representatives of the
21 Taliban, I would say early in 2017, there were -- I am sorry; that is incorrect.

22 So what I can say in this setting is that, in the first quarter of 2018, there were
23 discussions about, how do you try to understand better what the Taliban were seeking in
24 terms of a -- in an environment in which there was less violence, less conflict in
25 Afghanistan.

1 Q Thank you. That is helpful. Whose idea was it to engage with the
2 Taliban?

3 A I don't recall.

4 Q What was the intended purpose?

5 A So, as I noted, initially, my recollection is that the intent was to try to better
6 understand what the Talibs' motives and objectives were at that time.

7 Q You noted that discussions surrounding these motives and intentions and
8 potential engagement began the first quarter of 2018, correct?

9 A To the best of my recollection.

10 Q And that was during your tenure as U.S. Ambassador to U.S. Afghanistan?

11 A That is correct. Although I want to clarify, in that first quarter, there were
12 discussions about how it might be possible to engage the Taliban. I don't want to
13 suggest there were discussions with the Taliban at that point in time.

14 Q And what did you think of the U.S. formally engaging in discussions with the
15 Taliban?

16 A I don't recall what I thought at that point in time.

17 Q Did you voice any opposition?

18 A I can't remember.

19 Q Do you recall any inputs you provided?

20 A Specific to that time period, no.

21 Q President Trump wasn't the first to initiate formal engagement or peace
22 talks with the Taliban, correct?

23 A I don't remember.

24 Q Would it jog your memory if I noted that those talks began under President
25 Obama in June 2013?

1 A My recollection is that there were talks during the Obama administration
2 with the Taliban about trying to secure the release of Americans and one American in
3 particular I believe that the Taliban held. But I didn't have at that time specific
4 knowledge of anything beyond that. So I don't know that I would characterize it or
5 agree with you in your characterizing those talks during the Obama administration as
6 peace talks.

7 Q That is helpful. Thank you. And I made note, in June 2013, you were
8 serving as the Executive Secretary of State Department during that time, correct?

9 A That is correct.

10 Q Can you briefly state for the role what the role of the Executive Secretary of
11 the State Department is?

12 A So the role of the Executive Secretary oversees the portion of the State
13 Department that provides direct support to the Secretary, the Deputy Secretary or
14 Secretaries, and other senior officials to enable them to be as effective as they can be in
15 those roles. A chunk of that -- responsibilities are ensuring the appropriate back office
16 support, finances, organization to enable those offices to function effectively, also
17 receives advanced planning and travel support for the Secretary and the other seniors
18 that oversee the operations center, which is the Department's crisis management and
19 information clearinghouse.

20 Q Well, thank you. And the Executive Secretary also manages relations
21 between the State Department, White House the National Security Council and other
22 agencies, correct?

23 A The executive secretary oversees the formal conduit for official
24 communications between the Department, the White House and other Cabinet
25 departments.

1 Q Thank you. So go back to -- let's fast forward actually to the Trump
2 administration and your time as Ambassador to Afghanistan. You made note of
3 deliberations surrounding potential engagement with the Taliban. When did formal
4 engagement with the Taliban actually begin under President Trump?

5 [REDACTED]: Once again, can he talk about this in this setting?

6 [REDACTED]: I think it is public knowledge when the negotiations began
7 that --

8 [REDACTED]: I am just making sure.

9 Under Secretary Bass. To the best of my recollection, that would have been in
10 the winter of '18 to '19?

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q And who was tasked leading that engagement?

13 A Ambassador Khalilzad.

14 Q Do you recall when Ambassador Khalilzad was appointed as a Special
15 Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation?

16 A To the best of my recollection, it was second half of September of 2018, on
17 or abouts.

18 Q Thank you. And the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation
19 was a newly created envoy position, correct?

20 A To the best of my recollection, that is correct.

21 Q What was your perspective on the creation of that position?

22 A Complicated question. I saw the role as an important one if we were going
23 to prioritize as a government efforts to bring that 20-year conflict to some conclusion that
24 substantially reduced violence in Afghanistan. Ambassador Khalilzad was -- he enjoyed
25 a set of experience and history that made him in some respects uniquely qualified. At

1 the same time, his biography and past experiences for some Afghans created a set of
2 expectations about how he would approach the work that potentially could have
3 complicated the effort.

4 Q Thank you. And who recommended Ambassador Khalilzad for the position
5 of SRAR?

6 A I don't know.

7 Q Do you recall who selected him for the position?

8 A I don't.

9 Q Why was Ambassador Khalilzad selected for the position?

10 A I don't know.

11 Q Do you recall who Ambassador Khalilzad reported to?

12 A To the best of my recollection, Ambassador Khalilzad reported to Secretary
13 Pompeo.

14 Q You made note -- and please correct me if I am misstating any of your
15 testimony with respect to the importance of the creation of the position -- if U.S.
16 Government was to prioritize bringing a resolution to, you said, a 20 -- a 20-year war. Is
17 that a correct framing of your testimony?

18 A I don't remember specifically what I said, but I think it is fair to characterize,
19 if the U.S. Government felt it was important to try to bring a 20-year conflict to a close or
20 at least to dramatically reduce violence for Afghans, that it would require somebody who
21 was focused on that full time.

22 Q And what was your perspective as the U.S. Ambassador to the Afghanistan
23 on the U.S. Government formally engaging with the Taliban?

24 A Again, a very complicated question. At the time that Ambassador Khalilzad
25 was appointed, we had seen the first official ceasefire between the Taliban and the

1 Afghan Government in which most Afghans in most places enjoyed a few days of peace,
2 free of violence. And we had seen that was overwhelmingly supported in the country.
3 And I recall being struck by how strongly people felt about that.

4 Q Did you view the Taliban as reliable partners, negotiators?

5 A I didn't interact with the Taliban personally so I didn't have a basis to judge
6 at that time. I think many of us were skeptical.

7 Q And what was Ambassador Khalilzad's perspective on engaging with the
8 Taliban?

9 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. If you know.

10 Under Secretary Bass. It would depend I think on what period of his tenure you
11 are talking about.

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q We will start with the outset of the negotiations, the formal engagement.

14 A To the best of my recollection, he sought to explore whether there were
15 terms that would prompt the Taliban to stop fighting or significantly reduce their fighting
16 and sought to understand if those were terms that could be acceptable to the United
17 States and to our partners and allies.

18 Q Thank you. Who conceptualized the concept of the Doha Agreement, also
19 commonly referred to as the U.S.-Taliban agreement?

20 A I don't recall specifically at what point it coalesced into the specific
21 agreement in Doha, but, broadly speaking, Ambassador Khalilzad was responsible for the
22 work to develop an approach to seeing what might be possible.

23 Q Thank you. And do you recall when that was, a timeframe?

24 A When what was?

25 Q The first sort of formations or conceptualization of the Doha Agreement?

1 A I don't.

2 Q Did you engage with the Taliban at any point in your capacity as U.S.
3 Ambassador to Afghanistan?

4 A No.

5 Q And, throughout the negotiations with the Taliban, the Afghan Government
6 was not included in those conversations, correct?

7 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. You are talking about the conversations he was not a
8 part of?

9 Ms. [REDACTED]. The conversations the U.S. Government was engaging
10 with -- with the Taliban.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q You have already noted that you did not formally engage with the Taliban
13 but that you were aware of Ambassador Khalilzad's engagements with the Taliban. So,
14 to the best of your abilities, are you aware if the Afghan Government was included in the
15 negotiations?

16 A There were a range of attempts over at least 12 months to create
17 circumstances to put the Afghan parties of the conflict in the room together. Those
18 were not successful.

19 Q Thank you. What was Ambassador Khalilzad's position on the Afghan
20 Government's inclusion in the negotiations the Taliban?

21 A To the best of my recollection, Ambassador Khalilzad understood that a
22 successful conclusion of the conflict required both sides in Afghanistan to sit down at the
23 table together, and that was a key piece of what he was trying to achieve.

24 Q And do you recall what the Taliban's response to the Afghan Government's
25 inclusion in negotiations was?

1 A Broadly speaking, my recollection is that they opposed sitting down in the
2 same room with representatives of Islamic Republic.

3 Q Thank you. As Ambassador to Afghanistan, what was your role in the Doha
4 negotiations?

5 A I didn't have a role in the Doha negotiations.

6 Q Did you provide any input or advice from the negotiations or more broadly
7 engagement with the Taliban?

8 A What I can say in this setting is that I coordinated closely with Ambassador
9 Khalilzad to keep the senior most officials in the Afghan Government apprised of what he
10 was actually discussing with the Taliban and Doha and what he wasn't discussing, and
11 offered views on what I thought the reaction of the Afghan Government might be to
12 some of the things he might be thinking about.

13 Q Thank you. Did Secretary Pompeo seek your advice or counsel on this issue
14 at any point?

15 A I recall in 2019 being in a few conversations with the Secretary about broadly
16 what we were trying to achieve and specifically how we were trying to approach that.

17 Q And did President Trump seek your advice or counsel on this issue at any
18 point?

19 A No.

20 Q How often did you engage with Ambassador Khalilzad throughout the
21 negotiations period or, more broadly, your tenure as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan?

22 A Following his appointment, I interacted with Ambassador Khalilzad at least
23 on a weekly basis, sometimes more frequently.

24 Q And did Ambassador Khalilzad seek your advice or counsel throughout your
25 tenure as Ambassador?

1 A We worked closely together to try to understand each other's perspectives
2 and how we might approach his efforts to give us the best prospects of success.

3 Q Thank you. And can you please speak to or can we delve into a bit more
4 your working relationship with Ambassador Khalilzad? Would you say that you sort of
5 operated your own realms and then exchanged information or relied upon the expertise
6 of the other? It would be helpful to us to just better understand how you engaged with
7 him?

8 A Throughout his tenure, throughout my tenure as Ambassador I was
9 responsible for U.S. Government activity, civilian activities inside Afghanistan as the chief
10 of mission. Obviously to enable his work, he needed to be interacting with a range of
11 Afghan officials as well. So we worked hard to make sure each understood what the
12 other was communicating and to try to ensure we were being consistent and that I knew
13 what he was trying to do in a certain period of time, and he understood some of the
14 dynamics what we were dealing with in a country.

15 Q Did you view Ambassador Khalilzad to be a trustworthy actor?

16 A In my experience, he was an effective representative of the United States
17 Government.

18 Q Did you view him to be an effective negotiator?

19 A I did.

20 Q And what was your understanding of Ambassador Khalilzad's relationship
21 with the Afghan Government?

22 A So, again, hard to summarize a relationship with a range of senior Afghans
23 who collectively comprise the government.

24 Q Can you share with us when a decision was made to begin drawing U.S.
25 troops in Afghan by May 2021?

1 A I don't recall specifically when that -- when a formal decision was made.

2 Q Do you recall when an informal decision was made?

3 A I think, if one was to look at the public record and what was available -- and
4 the media was quite clear that, throughout 2018 and particularly the second half, that
5 President Trump was growing increasingly impatient with a lack of progress and
6 increasingly unhappy with the continued cost of the American Government's activities in
7 Afghanistan. And, somewhere around the end of 2018, it was pretty clear that he
8 wanted to do things quite differently.

9 Q Did you and or Secretary Pompeo agree with or attempt to discourage the
10 drawdown of military personnel?

11 A I can't speak for Secretary Pompeo.

12 Q Can you speak for yourself?

13 A As the sitting Ambassador, I worked hard to make sure that senior leaders in
14 Washington could make informed choices, and so they, to the best of my ability, worked
15 to ensure they understood the consequences of potential actions and the potential
16 outcomes that would flow from them.

17 Q Where did you assess the sustainability of the Afghan Government and
18 military to be without a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan?

19 A At what point?

20 Q When the decisions were -- we discussed the formal and informal decisions
21 regarding the troop drawdown. So during that period in your tenure as U.S.
22 Ambassador to Afghanistan -- latter half of 2018?

23 A I don't recall specifically what I advised. Generally it was pretty clear the
24 Afghan Government certainly needed substantial financial support from the international
25 community and that there remained areas on which assistance from the U.S. and other

1 coalition members to Afghan security forces remained important.

2 Q Thank you. When did you assess sustainability of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul
3 to be without a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan?

4 A I don't recall specifically what I recommended in that period, but that would
5 have depended heavily on what was happening around the absence of U.S. Forces.
6 Obviously two very different scenarios if U.S. Forces were absent because there was an
7 agreement between the Taliban and the government to stop fighting as opposed to an
8 alternative in which the fighting continued.

9 Q Was there a reverse in course by the Trump administration at any point
10 throughout your tenure as Ambassador with respect to the troop drawdown to zero?

11 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Reverse in course from what to what? I am sorry.

12 [REDACTED]. A reverse in course, we had mentioned that, in the latter half of
13 2018, there was a commitment to draw the troops down to zero by May 2021. And my
14 question is whether there was at any point there was a reverse in course after that that
15 assessment by President Trump throughout your tenure as Ambassador.

16 Under Secretary Bass. I don't recall specifically -- I don't recall specifically.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q And troops were never drawn down to zero by President Trump throughout
19 your tenure as Ambassador, correct?

20 A To zero? No.

21 Q What were they drawn down to?

22 A I don't recall the precise numbers, but, throughout 2019, the force
23 commander on the ground, General Miller, was already engaged in reducing the size of
24 the U.S. and coalition footprint.

25 Q Were you privy to any discussions or deliberations to continue U.S. military

1 presence in Afghanistan?

2 A Yes.

3 Q Can you please elaborate to the best of your ability?

4 [REDACTED]. Once again, I am just going to remind the witness that this may call
5 for executive branch confidentiality.

6 Under Secretary Bass. I think what I can say in this setting is that, in the course
7 of frequent interactions with my military counterpart, we were always or we were
8 frequently talking about the effectiveness of Afghan security forces, their ability to be
9 self-sustaining, and what the potential impacts of force reductions would be?

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q And what did you assess the effectiveness of the Afghan security forces to be
12 without U.S. military presence?

13 A As a civilian and not a professional military officer or a member of the
14 military, I wasn't -- I didn't feel I could make those assessments. I was aware of a lot of
15 concern in wider Afghan society about the prospect of the absence of U.S. and coalition
16 forces.

17 Q And, in your conversations with General Miller, what was communicated to
18 you as to the sustainability of Afghan security forces without U.S. military?

19 A In this setting, I would characterize it as uneven.

20 Q Thank you. Did you or Secretary Pompeo at any point recommended that
21 the U.S. maintain a troop presence in Afghanistan?

22 A I can't speak for Secretary Pompeo. From my part, I ensured that senior
23 officials were in a position to make informed choices and understood the potential
24 impacts of troop reductions.

25 Q Thank you. And, when you stepped down as U.S. Ambassador to

1 Afghanistan in January of 2020, who took your place upon stepping down?

2 A For several weeks, my deputy, Karen Decker, who was the charge, and then
3 somewhere in late January, early February, somewhere in there, Ambassador Ross Wilson
4 was recalled and served as charge for an indeterminate period while the administration
5 pursued another nominee.

6 Q Thank you. Who recommended Ambassador Wilson for the position?

7 A I don't recall.

8 Q And you noted he was recalled -- is it fair to understand he was retired at the
9 time, correct?

10 A That is correct.

11 Q Do you recall why Ambassador Wilson was selected for the position?

12 A My recollection is that, because he had previously served as Ambassador, he
13 had done a number of stints coming back from retirement to serve as a charge in other
14 missions without a confirmed Ambassador that he had a fair amount of experience in
15 those kinds of settings and was -- understood that he would be serving for an
16 indeterminate amount of time potentially while awaiting confirmation of a successor to
17 myself.

18 Q Well, thank you.

19 You made note of this briefly, but was there any intention of nominating a
20 Senate-confirmed Ambassador to Afghanistan by the administration?

21 A To my understanding at the time, to the best of my recollection, is there
22 was -- and, if memory serves, there was a nominee announced.

23 Q Thank you. Did you provide any briefings or more broadly provide any
24 preparations to Ambassador Wilson?

25 A I recall having a couple of exchanges with him prior to my departure, and

1 then I think I saw him in between, in January of 2020.

2 Q What briefings and/or preparations did you provide him on the state of
3 affairs with the Taliban?

4 A I don't remember beyond ensuring that he -- I mean. I would have made
5 sure that he was aware of the reporting coming in from the Embassy on those topics.

6 Q And what briefings did you provide him on the sustainability of the Embassy
7 without a military presence?

8 A I don't recall if we talked about that at that time.

9 Q Do you recall what Ambassador Wilson's perspective was on the troop
10 drawdown?

11 A I don't recall that he in advance of arriving in Afghanistan had any strong
12 views on that subject.

13 Q And did he engage in any outreach after assuming the role of chief of
14 mission with you?

15 A I don't remember.

16 Q Did he at any point take your guidance or counsel on issues pertaining to the
17 troop drawdown from Afghanistan?

18 A To the best of my recollection, no.

19 Q Were you privy to any briefings or, more broadly, preparations provided by
20 Ambassador Khalilzad to Ambassador Wilson before Ambassador Wilson received his role
21 as chief of mission?

22 A To the best of my recollection, no.

23 Q Thank you. So we are now going to fast forward to your position as senior
24 adviser at the Foreign Service Institute. And, for clarity of the record, you were serving
25 in the senior adviser position when President Biden assumed office in January 2021,

1 correct?

2 A That is correct.

1 [10:33 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q What was your role in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan throughout
4 2021?

5 A I had no role until I returned to Afghanistan on -- in late August.

6 Q Thank you.

7 Did anyone prior to August 2021, or more specifically late August 2021, in the
8 Department, or more broadly the administration, seek your guidance or counsel
9 regarding Afghanistan?

10 A I recall having one conversation relatively in the first couple of months in the
11 administration with a colleague in the administration.

12 Q Who was that colleague?

13 A Jon Finer.

14 Q What was the conversation about?

15 A My recollection is that he was seeking broad views about how I had seen
16 Afghanistan through my tenure, what we'd been trying to do. But it did not, to the best
17 of my recollection, get into any prospective discussions about way forward.

18 Q Thank you.

19 And, to the best of your recollection, what views did you share with him?

20 A I don't recall specifically. I think I tried to give a summary of how I had seen
21 things as I was leaving in January of 2020, a year earlier.

22 Q And how did you see things as you were leaving in January of 2020?

23 A To the best of my recollection, I saw a country that yearned for peace, that
24 was concerned about the uncertainty of the way ahead, that was concerned about
25 whether security would be maintained, and a society that was -- continued to be

1 concerned about infighting among Afghan elites to the expense of average Afghans.

2 Q Thank you.

3 And was the conversation with Mr. Finer the only conversation you had with the
4 Biden administration regarding Afghanistan prior to the emergency evacuation?

5 A Yes.

6 Q Thank you.

7 A To the best of my recollection.

8 Q Of course. Thank you.

9 What was your role in the August 2021 emergency evacuation from Afghanistan?

10 A So I was asked to go back to Afghanistan to coordinate the operational
11 aspects of the evacuation with the senior U.S. military commanders on the ground who
12 were running the noncombatant evacuation.

13 Q Am I correct in understanding that until you were asked to go to Afghanistan
14 to aid with the evacuation, you had no involvement in issues pertaining to the
15 Afghanistan withdrawal under the Biden administration?

16 A That's correct.

17 Q Thank you.

18 What were the circumstances under which you were selected to assist with the
19 evacuation?

20 A Could you be more specific?

21 Q Of course.

22 Who asked that you go to Afghanistan to assist with the evacuation?

23 A So I received a call from Deputy Secretary Sherman asking me to go back to
24 support Ambassador Wilson and coordinate the operational aspects of the evacuation.

25 Q And do you recall when that call was?

1 A Mid-August. So roughly 2 days before I arrived back in country.

2 Q It was after Kabul had already fallen to the Taliban?

3 A Correct.

4 Q And when did you agree to it?

5 A During the call.

6 Q To the best of your knowledge, why were you chosen for that role?

7 A We did not, to the best of my recollection, have a conversation about
8 qualifications. I understood it to be because of my prior tenure in Afghanistan and my
9 extensive crisis management experience in the Department.

10 Q Thank you.

11 Did Deputy Secretary Sherman express concern about Ambassador Wilson's ability
12 to conduct the evacuation without your assistance?

13 A To the best of my recollection, she did not.

14 Q Did any members of Department leadership express concern about
15 Ambassador Wilson's ability to conduct the evacuation?

16 A To the best of my recollection, no.

17 Q Were there concerns about Ambassador Wilson's capabilities in the lead-up
18 to the evacuation?

19 A I can't speak to that.

20 Q There was already a Chief of Mission on the ground in Ambassador Wilson,
21 correct?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Did anyone explain why they were sending the former Ambassador to
24 Afghanistan to assist with the current Chief of Mission?

25 A So, as I noted, Deputy Sherman asked me to go back to coordinate the

1 operational aspects. And once I arrived, it was pretty clear there was more than enough
2 work to go around.

3 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

4 I've got 1 minute left on the clock, so I'll stop the time now and go off the record.

5 [Recess.]

6 [REDACTED] We're back on the record asking questions on behalf of the
7 minority.

8 EXAMINATION

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Before we get started, we'd like to parse a bit further some terminology with
11 you related to the withdrawal and evacuation.

12 So the minority's perspective is that the withdrawal pertains to the retrograde of
13 U.S. troops, equipment, and personnel from Afghanistan. As such, the withdrawal of
14 U.S. military personnel was initiated in February 2020.

15 The Doha deal involved partial troop drawdowns prior to 2021 and was completed
16 by August 31st, 2021, to include the withdrawal of both U.S. military and diplomatic
17 personnel.

18 Do you take any issue with this terminology?

19 A No.

20 Q Okay. Would you agree with the sentiment that U.S. troops and equipment
21 are primarily the domain of DOD and military leadership?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And, by extension, they are not the domain primarily of the State
24 Department?

25 A I would agree with that.

1 Q Related to the evacuation, we understand this to describe the removal of
2 American citizens and their eligible family members, lawful permanent residents and their
3 eligible family members, SIVs and their eligible family members, and certain other Afghan
4 allies.

5 As such, this encompassed the civilian-led Operation Allies Refuge that began in
6 July 2021 and the subsequent NEO that occurred from August 16th to 31st, 2021.

7 Do you take any issue with this definition?

8 A I would note that beyond those Afghans evacuated by the American
9 Government, our evacuation enabled the departure of a number of other Afghans who
10 were evacuated by the governments of allied or partner nations.

11 Q Okay. The key point here is, do you take any issue with the evacuation
12 having begun with Operation Allies Refuge in July of 2021?

13 A I can't speak to that, because I wasn't involved in Afghanistan in that period.

14 Q Okay. But the NEO occurred from August 16th to 31st, 2021. Do you
15 agree?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Okay.

18 We'd like to briefly touch upon your background.

19 You previously testified you have 37 years of experience with the State
20 Department. Is that correct?

21 A If my math is correct. I started in 1988.

22 Q At least three decades?

23 A Yes.

24 Q Quite a career. All right.

25 A We can agree on at least three decades.

1 [Laughter.]

2 Q And you also testified that you're a three-time Ambassador. Is that
3 correct?

4 A That's correct.

5 Q And to which posts were those ambassadorships?

6 A In reverse order, Afghanistan, Turkiye, and the Republic of Georgia.

7 Q Fair to say that you have quite extensive experience as an Ambassador?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And understand the role sufficiently?

10 A I'd like to think so.

11 Q Okay.

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q In your experience, is being a three-time Ambassador considered a normal
14 occurrence?

15 A It -- it's a bit unusual.

16 Q Exceptional?

17 A I don't know that I would characterize it that way.

18 Q Are there many State Department personnel in the Foreign Service who get
19 to be three-time Ambassadors?

20 A No.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q So it's uncommon, in fact?

23 A It's uncommon.

24 Q Have you received any awards for your contributions related to the Foreign
25 Service or foreign affairs writ large?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Approximately how many?

3 A I don't know. Maybe a dozen, 15, somewhere in there.

4 Q So quite a few.

5 Have you ever participated in a crisis-related task force at State?

6 A Yes.

7 Q About how many?

8 A Probably two dozen?

9 Q Is that common?

10 A No.

11 Q How come?

12 A That's a reflection of my tenure as director of the Operations Center and my
13 time as Executive Secretary. When in both roles, I -- the responsibilities of those
14 positions involve an active role in each crisis management activity.

15 Q And you just noted your role as director of Operations Center. What
16 specifically does that entail related to crisis management?

17 A So the director of the Operations Center oversees an office within the
18 Department that is responsible for coordinating the Department's active response to
19 crises impacting our embassies and American citizens overseas.

20 Q Do you feel that role helped inform your job responsibilities and
21 performance during the NEO in Afghanistan?

22 A Yes.

23 Q How so?

24 A It provided me in those years, when I was on the Washington end of the
25 crises, with an understanding of how information is received/managed in Washington and

1 how the deliberative process around various aspects of crisis management and response
2 occur in Washington.

3 Q Thank you.

4 A And other than the NEO we're talking about today, have you ever worked in a
5 complex evacuation?

6 A I've played a role in -- on different evacuations, but none had been of the
7 scale of Afghanistan.

8 Q Have you served in any other NEOs?

9 A I played a small role in 2006 during the multi-week evacuation from
10 Lebanon.

11 Q Okay. And are NEOs frequent?

12 A How would you characterize frequent?

13 Q You described that the NEO in Afghanistan was unprecedented, or
14 something along the lines. Is that, in part, because NEOs are not a common occurrence
15 in foreign affairs?

16 A They -- I don't know off the top of my head how frequently we engage in a
17 formal noncombatant evacuation that involves the military. Afghanistan was unique in
18 its scale and complexity.

19 Q Okay. Have you ever contributed to an after-action review or similar
20 post-crisis review?

21 A I don't remember if I've been interviewed specifically for an after-action
22 before.

23 Q Are you aware of any other after-action reviews outside of the State
24 Department's after-action review related to Afghanistan?

25 A Specific to Afghanistan --

1 Q Writ large.

2 A -- or writ large? Not in -- not of that nature.

3 Q Would you be surprised to learn that the AAR is the first of its kind at the
4 State Department?

5 A No.

6 [REDACTED]. Okay.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q So I'd like to get a better sense of the context in which you took up your role
9 as Ambassador to Kabul in the end of 2017.

10 Were you aware of President Trump's South Asia strategy unveiled on August
11 21st, 2017?

12 A At what -- was I aware when it was unveiled or --

13 Q When you took up the position.

14 A Yes.

15 Q And how did you become aware of the strategy?

16 A I recall being briefed on it when I was preparing to go out to Afghanistan
17 after I concluded my tenure in Turkiye or in the final weeks of my tenure as Ambassador
18 to Turkiye.

19 Q Do you recall who briefed you on it?

20 A I don't.

21 Q Do you recall what you understood the objectives or the elements of the
22 strategy to be?

23 A Broadly speaking, I recall the strategy to have been an effort to compel the
24 Taliban to negotiate a settlement through essentially force of arms by intensifying
25 military efforts against the Taliban, sustaining capacity development for Afghan security

1 forces, and trying to deal with challenges posed by the Taliban's ability to operate from
2 Pakistan.

3 Q So, essentially, if I boil it down, would you agree if I said it was a political -- it
4 sought to elicit a political sentiment as an outcome of an effective military campaign?

5 A Yes, that's accurate.

6 Q And did you agree with these objectives and elements of the strategy?

7 A To the best of my recollection, those were key objectives.

8 Q How did they inform your work in Kabul when you took over as
9 Ambassador? How did the strategy?

10 A How did it? So, to the best of my recollection, the strategy
11 underpinned -- it was an organizing principle for how we tried to prioritize among a wide
12 range of competing priorities, particularly in terms of where we were putting our weight
13 of effort on our diplomatic engagement and, to a degree, how we were making or trying
14 to shape choices about use of foreign assistance.

15 Q This will be our first exhibit, and this is a copy of the strategy announcement.

16 [Bass Exhibit No. 1

17 was marked for identification.]

18 [REDACTED]. This is exhibit No. 1.

1

2

BY [REDACTED]:

3

4

5

Q So this is a document entitled "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia." It's issued on August 21st, 2017, and it's taken from the former White House's website.

6

Do you see, do you read that that's what this is?

7

A Yes.

8

9

Q So in this, President Trump stressed, in unveiling the strategy, that a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would be conditions-based.

10

11

12

13

He said, "A core pillar of our new strategy is a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions. I've said it many times how counterproductive it is for the United States to announce in advance the dates we intend to begin, or end, military options."

14

15

I'm sorry, I should have stopped and said where it is. So this is on the top of page

6.

16

17

First, it says "A core pillar" -- sorry about that. So I'll just pick up where I left off.

18

19

20

21

"We will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities. Conditions on the ground -- not arbitrary timetables -- will guide our strategy from now on. America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out."

22

Were you familiar with this element of the strategy?

23

A Yes.

24

Q And what did you understand the conditions to be that would be pursued?

25

A To the best of my recollection, the principal condition was a substantial

1 reduction in violence or -- and/or increased capacity of the Afghan security forces to be
2 able to fulfill their responsibilities themselves.

3 Q And did you think these conditions were reasonable to guide a U.S.
4 withdrawal -- a withdrawal?

5 A I don't remember.

6 Q Did you ever think that these were -- this was an achievable approach when
7 you took over?

8 A When I arrived, I didn't feel I had as yet a basis to judge.

9 Q And when you left?

10 A When I left, circumstances were quite different.

11 Q How so?

12 A We had -- by January 2020, the administration had shifted away from the
13 South Asia strategy as the principal organizing principle for how we would look at, as I
14 recall, our presence in Afghanistan.

15 Q And when you say "shifted away," what changed?

16 A I think, as I noted earlier, it was pretty clear, if you look at the body of public
17 comment from the President throughout 2018, he lost patience with the conditionality
18 and the South Asia strategy, did not feel it was producing results quickly enough -- I'm
19 inferring that from the public comments -- and seemed to be desiring more rapid changes
20 on the ground.

21 [REDACTED]. Can you provide an example of how the President lost patience or
22 how you inferred as such?

23 Under Secretary Bass. I can't cite a specific throughout 2018, throughout most
24 of that year. I recall the public narrative surrounding the President's decision to remove
25 our forces from Syria as including some prospective statements about additional

1 measures to come in other places, potentially or -- and if it didn't say that explicitly,
2 certainly there was an expectation that that would be -- that that was the prevailing
3 mindset.

4 [REDACTED]. And are you referring to public statements or statements made to
5 you in private?

6 Under Secretary Bass. Public statements.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q I just wanted to pick up a little bit on a point you made where you said from
9 the South Asia strategy, the President became impatient with a conditions-based
10 approach and moved into this different element with the Doha deal.

11 How do you think the Taliban received initially the South Asia strategy and the
12 evolution of that to the period of from that point when you started to when you left?

13 A Throughout my tenure I found it very difficult to understand what the
14 Taliban -- what people in positions to make decisions in the Taliban were thinking or how
15 they evaluated what we were doing or not doing.

16 Q Okay. I think often what we end up missing also in this debate is the
17 Afghan Government's thoughts. And since you're an interlocutor to the Afghan
18 Government, how do you think they took the changing approach?

19 A In this setting, I can say there was substantial concern in the Afghan
20 Government and among Afghan elites in the capital about rapid reductions in U.S. forces
21 and those of the coalition members.

22 Q Okay.

23 Ambassador Khalilzad testified in a prior transcribed interview in this
24 investigation the following. Let me introduce this into the record.

25 [Bass Exhibit No. 2

1 was marked for identification.]

2 [REDACTED]: Exhibit No. 2.

3 Exhibit No. 2 is the interview of Zalmay Khalilzad dated November 8th, 2023, in a
4 transcribed interview before this committee. And if you could turn to page 63.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q And it's line 18.

7 Question: "I just want to be clear, your testimony is that between August 2017,
8 when the South Asia strategy was released publicly and" --

9 Answer: "And August 2018."

10 "Question: -- "and August 2018, you believe that the White House became
11 disillusioned with the strategy and had essentially abandoned it?"

12 Answer: "Well, had a change of heart, I would call it."

13 Question: "Okay, change of heart."

14 Answer: "And then with an emphasis on leaving, on getting the troops out."

15 Does this comport with your understanding of the Trump administration's
16 implementation of the strategy?

17 A Broadly speaking, I don't think that's an inaccurate description of what I
18 understood to be the views of senior-most leadership in the government at the time.

19 Q And what informs that opinion?

20 A Well, to the best of my recollection, there was a desire to focus more on
21 trying to secure an end of the fighting that would enable the departure of U.S. forces.

22 Q At any cost?

23 A Certainly not at the outset. I would say later in 2019 there was a clear
24 desire to reduce the size and cost of the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan, particularly on
25 the military side but not only on the military side.

1 And we undertook a substantial reduction in consolidation of the embassy
2 footprint throughout 2019, in part to demonstrate that we were getting smaller and
3 costing less operationally.

4 [REDACTED]. When you said "clear desire," who were you referring to?

5 Under Secretary Bass. It was communicated to me that President Trump was
6 frustrated with the lack of progress in the South Asia strategy and wanted to see
7 reductions in the U.S. troop commitment, in particular, occur more rapidly.

8 [REDACTED] And who communicated that to you?

9 Under Secretary Bass. I don't recall specifically.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Generally speaking, just to follow up on this point, if you're getting
12 instructions on what's happening in Kabul, I think you testified previously that you
13 reported to Secretary Pompeo. Is that correct?

14 A [Nonverbal response.]

15 Q So a strong likelihood that instruction came from the Secretary's office?

16 A I'm sorry, the instruction?

17 Q Instruction that the President's -- I'm sorry, the direction that the President's
18 patience was -- what's the word you used? Was becoming -- he was becoming
19 impatient with the pace of the implementation of the South Asia strategy.

20 [REDACTED]. I do want to once again make sure we're not veering into executive
21 branch confidentiality. So if we could keep this to publicly known information, that
22 would be helpful.

23 Under Secretary Bass. Potentially -- like, I can't remember whether it was
24 directly or indirectly through Ambassador Wells or prospectively Ambassador Khalilzad.
25 I just don't remember.

1 [REDACTED]. Nonetheless, you understood the directive was coming from the
2 President as related to implementing the strategy at an increased pace?

3 Under Secretary Bass. Yes. If, by strategy, you mean the shift to trying to find
4 ways to reduce the U.S. military contingent, yes.

5 [REDACTED]. Correct. Thank you.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q Were you aware of any point at which the Trump administration formally
8 discontinued or disavowed the South Asia strategy as the way forward?

9 A I don't recall.

10 Q Okay. But you are testifying that within months of the President's
11 announcement of the strategy, the strategy was no longer being pursued?

12 A I don't know that I would say months. A year later.

13 Q Okay.

14 [REDACTED]. And when would that have been?

15 Under Secretary Bass. Late summer-early fall of 2018.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q One of the I think aspects of what we're talking about is, of course, the shift
18 to move into a phase where we talked about negotiations.

19 Were you aware that the Trump administration had closed the Office of the
20 Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the fall of 2017?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Were you consulted about the closure of this office?

23 A I don't believe so, because I think it predated my -- the start of my tenure.

24 Q What did you understand to be the reason for the closure?

25 A I don't remember.

1 Q Looking back, what impact did you think the closure of the -- I'll just call it
2 the SRAP because -- to save time -- had on progress towards inter-Afghan reconciliation?

3 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. If you have one.

4 Under Secretary Bass. So my recollection is that the near-term impact was the
5 loss of some expertise that had a body of knowledge about past interactions between the
6 U.S. Government and the Taliban.

7 Materially, I don't know that it made that big a difference in terms of efforts
8 through the first half or so of 2018 to figure out how to potentially talk to the Taliban or
9 at least establish a channel.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Why not?

12 A I don't recall the Taliban in that period being particularly interested in talking
13 to the United States.

14 Q Okay. And during that time, just to clarify the record, who did you
15 understand to be in charge of Afghanistan policy at the Department after the closure of
16 the SRAP office?

17 A Acting Assistant Secretary Wells.

18 Q Was there a Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretary for South Asia at that
19 time?

20 A No.

21 Q Was there ever a nominee?

22 A I recall there was a nominee, or maybe there was a pre-nominee. There
23 was somebody identified for the position. I don't know that the individual was
24 nominated. I can't remember.

25 Q Okay. Did you sense that there was any impact from not having -- of not

1 having a Senate-confirmed nominee as the Assistant Secretary of State for South and
2 Central Asia?

3 A Yes.

4 Q Can you elaborate a little bit more on the impact?

5 A So it's been my experience that any time -- or often when someone is in an
6 acting capacity, foreign governments in particular sometimes look at them differently and
7 decide they're going to wait until there's an actual person, confirmed person, in that role.

8 Sometimes it creates doubts about whether that person really speaks for the
9 administration or not. I think that latter piece was mitigated over time by the amount
10 of time Ambassador Wells spent in the role.

11 Q And to be clear, there was never a confirmed Assistant -- a Senate-confirmed
12 Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia the entire time you were in -- you
13 served as Ambassador to Kabul?

14 A That's correct.

15 Q I want to turn a little bit more to your tenure. Turning to your tenure as
16 U.S. Ambassador to Kabul from late 2017 to January 2020, you briefed the committee in
17 June 2002 about that tenure, correct?

18 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. June of what?

19 [REDACTED]. Sorry, 2022.

20 Under Secretary Bass. That's correct.

21 [REDACTED]. I want to introduce into the record the opening statements,
22 unclassified opening statements. This would be our No. 3.

23 [Bass Exhibit No. 3

24 was marked for identification.]

25 [REDACTED]. Turn to page 4.

1 [REDACTED]. And just for clarity's sake, this is exhibit No. 3. It's a letter from
2 the State Department dated February 10th, 2023, and it includes the unclassified opening
3 statements from a June 15th, 2022, classified briefing on Afghanistan to members of this
4 committee.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q So if you go to page 4, it's the second paragraph, the one that says, "I do not
7 think" -- I'm just going to start in the second sentence.

8 You testified on page 4 that, "As the U.S. Ambassador, supporting the search for
9 an elusive settlement was my top priority -- but several other priorities commanded time
10 and resources, notably efforts to contain and degrade ISIS-K; manage Afghan political
11 rivalries and plan for elections; and sustain the core capacity of the Afghan Government
12 and state."

13 Can you tell us how the search for a political settlement became your top priority?

14 A My recollection is that it was essentially -- that's a derivative of what was
15 communicated to me as I was preparing to go out as how we were thinking about the
16 problem set, and that we were attempting to use any success in the South Asia strategy
17 to promote efforts to get Afghans talking to each other about a settlement.

18 Q And can you describe the reasons for the many demands on your time and
19 resources?

20 A In terms of why didn't I -- I'm not sure I understand the question.

21 Q You have this primary directive to focus on a political settlement to the
22 conflict.

23 A Uh-huh.

24 Q You also said in this opening statement that you also had to worry about
25 elections and foreign aid and staff.

1 I guess what I want to understand is, how did you balance the various demands?
2 Did you see them as being in tension or in competition with each other?

3 A Yes, they were in tension, if only due to a finite number of hours in a day.

4 But the efforts to promote a settlement, efforts to find a way to talk about a
5 prospective future Afghanistan without fighting by something other than the surrender of
6 the Taliban invited anxieties among a range of Afghan political actors.

7 Q And how did you manage those sentiments?

8 A Through a lot of discussion and trying to articulate U.S. goals and to try to
9 help people understand it wasn't in that period a zero-sum tradeoff.

10 Q And did you feel that Afghan interlocutors received and believed that
11 message?

12 A Difficult to say.

13 [REDACTED]. Why?

14 Under Secretary Bass. A, because my memory is quite hazy. B, because of the
15 inherent challenges in -- on trying to determine if what someone is saying to you in the
16 moment is what they actually believe.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q Did you feel pressure ever to deprioritize or reduce your focus on achieving a
19 political settlement?

20 A No, to the best of my recollection.

21 Q That was always the number one priority for you?

22 A Uh-huh. Yes.

23 Q So turning back to the exhibit, you further describe on page 4 that during the
24 earliest phase of your tenure, you said, "We were implementing the Trump
25 Administration's South Asia Strategy, which sought to push the Taliban to the negotiating

1 table by increasing pressure on Taliban forces on the battlefield -- and on the Pakistani
2 government. We successfully brokered the first countrywide cease-fire between the
3 Taliban and Afghan forces in almost 20 years, but neither party wanted this respite to
4 lead to meaningful talks. Throughout the summer of 2018, I understood President
5 Trump to be losing patience with the lack of rapid progress."

6 Do you have any more details you can add about this phase?

7 A Could you be more -- I mean, about which aspect?

8 Q About the aspect of trying to broker the cease-fire, the Eid cease-fire, trying
9 to deal with the Pakistanis from the Afghan perspective.

10 A Well, I mean, we were trying to do a number of things simultaneously, which
11 are reflected here but also in the preceding paragraph.

12 On any given day, we were trying to understand what ISIS-K was up to and
13 ensuring that we were prioritizing those efforts.

14 We were, if memory serves, trying to help prepare for Afghan provincial elections
15 or parliamentary elections in the fall of 2018, and trying to ensure the Electoral
16 Commission had the capacity to successfully conduct those.

17 And even while doing all of that work, continuing to try to find ways to use the
18 upwell of public support for less violence, to try to figure out how to get the parties to, if
19 not return to the table, at least try to find ways to reduce violence.

20 So, for example, we sought to replicate the initial Eid cease-fire with a second Eid
21 cease-fire in late August.

22 Q And how did the President's impatience that you referenced in the opening
23 statement, how did that impact your work?

24 A I don't recall it having an impact on a daily basis. Once Ambassador
25 Khalilzad was appointed, there was a substantial amount of work to help Afghan political

1 leaders inside and outside government understand what he was doing and what he
2 wasn't doing.

3 Q You noted that the USG brokered this cease-fire. This was known as the
4 Eid cease-fire.

5 Were you aware of any other prior cease-fire during the 20-year war undertaken
6 by the Taliban?

7 A Not on the scale or duration of that cease-fire.

8 Q And so how did you look at the opportunity of a Taliban-led cease-fire
9 potentially for the first time of this scale throughout the war?

10 A My recollection is we sought to take advantage of the demonstration effect
11 and the overwhelming public support for less violence to see if that could be a means to
12 push both sides to actually sit down and try to talk through some of their differences.

13 Q And did you see that happen?

14 A No.

15 Q And was there any -- did the administration have anything on the political
16 side to offer either party to advance those talks?

17 A Complicated question. I would say we were prepared to explore ways to
18 support a negotiating process between Afghans, and prospectively to support
19 implementation of further reductions in violence, or to -- and to work with some of our
20 other partners if those discussions evolved into formal negotiations.

21 Q And who would have led that process?

22 A I don't recall that the hypothetical ever got to the point where we had to
23 think about those practical questions.

24 Q Why not?

25 A Because neither the government nor the Taliban were interested in putting

1 their energy into finding ways to reduce violence.

2 Q Okay.

3 So in July of 2018, the Trump administration reversed years of stated U.S. policy
4 that talks related to reconciliation must be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and the press
5 began to report the White House had ordered direct talks with the Taliban.

6 Would you agree that this was a reversal?

7 A Not necessarily.

8 Q Why not?

9 A Because initially, Ambassador Khalilzad sought to create opportunities for
10 Afghans to sit together and try to work through their differences, and that I would say
11 was the first 3 or 4 months of his effort.

12 Q And he began in September of 2018?

13 A Uh-huh.

14 Q I'm sorry. I just want to be clear that I was talking about in July of 2018.
15 So this predates Ambassador Khalilzad.

16 A I'm sorry, could you go back then?

17 Q Sure. In July of 2018, the Trump administration also reversed years of
18 stated U.S. policy that talks related to reconciliation must be Afghan-led and
19 Afghan-owned, and the press began to report that the White House had ordered direct
20 talks with the Taliban.

21 A I don't remember that.

22 Q Okay. So did you play any role in this shift in policy?

23 A I don't recall. I recall being fairly emphatic about trying to find ways to
24 replicate the Eid cease-fire and to see if that gave us an opening to promote inter-Afghan
25 talks. But specifically as it's characterized in your statement, I don't recall.

1 Q Okay. And when we talk about direct talks with the Taliban, I think you just
2 said that Ambassador Khalilzad initially tried to bring everyone together.

3 A That's my recollection.

4 Q You also testified earlier that the Taliban refused to sit in the room with the
5 Afghan Government, correct?

6 A That's correct.

7 Q So when the policy shifted to direct talks with the Taliban, what did that
8 mean, in your understanding, for the role of the Afghan Government in any kind of talks?

9 A My recollection is that we differentiated between discussions with the
10 Taliban about the U.S. military presence in the country from prospective talks between
11 the Taliban and the Afghan Government about a longer-term settlement.

12 And, broadly speaking, my recollection is that once the initial effort to put folks
13 from both sides of the conflict together, once that was not successful, Ambassador
14 Khalilzad then evolved into seeking to see if he could use the direct talks with the Taliban
15 on the nature of the U.S. presence to segue into inter-Afghan talks.

16 Q Okay. And how did this approach, what impact did it have on the Afghan
17 Government?

18 A Again, complicated and difficult to characterize a government's response. I
19 would say there was a range of views within the Afghan Government about that approach
20 and a lot of anxiety about what might be discussed.

21 Q Can you give us a sampling of the range of views?

22 A So there were people in the Afghan Government who supported efforts to
23 try to promote inter-Afghan negotiations and so saw and believed we were acting in good
24 faith to try to get to that outcome.

25 There were people who were quite suspicious. There were people who took at

1 face value Taliban misinformation about the nature of those talks, notwithstanding best
2 efforts to provide factual information to them about it.

3 Q Would you agree that the talks ended up -- if one was to characterize it as
4 direct talks between the United States Government and the Taliban -- was at the
5 exclusion of the Afghan Government?

6 A They were direct talks between the Afghan -- between the Taliban and the
7 U.S. Government about a discrete set of issues.

8 Q And was there a role in that discussion for the Afghan Government?

9 A There was not a direct role, in that the Afghan Government was not sitting in
10 the room when Ambassador Khalilzad was talking to the Taliban Political Commission.

11 Q Do you think, looking back now, that this was the right approach?

12 A Very difficult for me to say today.

13 [REDACTED]. Okay.

14 [REDACTED]. All right. This concludes our round. Thank you.

15 [Recess.]

1 [11:42 a.m.]

2 [REDACTED]: We'll go back on the record.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q So, Under Secretary Bass, I believe in the majority's last round, we left off of
5 the specifically evacuation period and the request that you received to assist with the
6 Noncombatant Evacuation Operation in Afghanistan in mid-August 2021. Is that
7 correct?

8 A That's correct.

9 Q Before leaving to Afghanistan to assist with the evacuation, what kind of
10 briefings and preparation did you receive in advance?

11 A So I had a couple of conversations in the approximately 8 hours I had, 10
12 hours between the call I received from Ambassador Sherman and my departure for
13 Afghanistan.

14 Q And with whom did you have those conversations?

15 A I recall talking to leadership of the State Department task force. Beyond
16 that, I don't remember.

17 Q And what was communicated to you about the state of affairs on the
18 ground?

19 A I don't remember the specifics of the conversation. I think it was primarily
20 about where -- some of the mechanics where U.S. military and department officials were
21 operating from at the airport, basic state of security, things like that.

22 Q How much time did you spend being briefed and preparing before departing
23 for Afghanistan?

24 A So, as I noted, in the approximately 10 hours between being asked and
25 leaving Dulles, which also included getting a bunch of essentials for myself, probably 2

1 hours.

2 Q Thank you.

3 Did you receive any briefing materials or other documents to review? And, if so,
4 what were they?

5 A I don't recall.

6 Q Were you aware of the July 2021 Dissent Channel cable on Afghanistan at
7 that point?

8 A No.

9 Q When did you become aware of it?

10 A At some point last year probably, maybe the preceding year. I don't
11 remember precisely.

12 Q You noted that Deputy Secretary Sherman made the request to you to assist
13 with the evacuation. Was this something that had been preplanned, or was this
14 something that emerged, given the immediate situation on the ground?

15 A It had not been preplanned.

16 Q In retrospect, how adequate do you think the preparation you were given
17 was?

18 A Within the time available to me, it was adequate.

19 Q What direction and guidance were you given upon assuming the role in the
20 evacuation?

21 A I don't recall specifically.

22 Q Do you recall receiving any direction or guidance from anyone within the
23 Department or, more broadly, the administration?

24 A I recall, broadly, being asked to go out and do the best we could and support
25 the effort.

1 Q And by whom?

2 A Prior to leaving?

3 Q Correct.

4 A Perhaps Deputy Secretary Sherman -- I don't recall directly

5 otherwise -- whoever I interacted with on the task force.

6 Q And how about upon arriving in Afghanistan?

7 A I'm not sure I understand the question.

8 Q Upon arriving in Afghanistan --

9 A Uh-huh.

10 Q -- upon your immediate arrival, did you receive any direction or guidance
11 and/or guidance?

12 A Upon arriving, in the first couple of hours I coordinated with Ambassador
13 Wilson and got a basic laydown on what was going on and understood our task to be to
14 enable the departure of as many American citizens and Afghans we could within
15 whatever time we had available to us.

16 Q Did you understand it -- did you understand the roles and responsibilities
17 of -- did you believe that Secretary Blinken delegated the roles and responsibilities
18 pertaining to the evacuation to Deputy Secretary Sherman?

19 A Not sure I understand the question.

20 Q Happy to reframe.

21 Was Secretary Blinken involved in your preparation prior to your arrival in
22 Afghanistan?

23 A I don't -- I don't recall seeing him, but I don't remember.

24 Q And how about upon your immediate arrival? Did you engage with
25 Secretary Blinken at all?

1 A I don't think I did the first day. Within the first couple of days, I probably
2 had a conversation with him.

3 Q And what were identified to you as the most important priorities for your
4 mission?

5 A So, as I noted, my goal, our goal was to enable the departure of as many
6 American citizens and Afghans with ties to the United States as we could enable within
7 whatever time was available to us and to try to ensure good coordination with allied and
8 partner nations who were trying to do the same thing.

9 Q And who identified those priorities to you?

10 A I don't recall having an explicit conversation about that overarching priority.
11 I think it was just understood in from the circumstances that was why we were there.
12 We were in the midst of by then executing a Noncombatant Evacuation Operation which
13 in and of its nature provides the priority.

14 Q Did you engage with the White House or the National Security Council in
15 preparation for your role in the evacuation?

16 A To the best of my recollection, I did not.

17 Q Were you given an opportunity to assemble a team for your mission to
18 Afghanistan?

19 A In the, again, in the roughly 10 hours between being asked to go and
20 heading out, I may have had a couple of conversations about who was already there or
21 en route, and certainly, in the first couple of days, I was -- I engaged with some folks in
22 the Department about specific individuals or specific skill sets that would be helpful.

23 Q And who did you engage with on that issue?

24 A I don't recall specifically. It would have been a range of senior officials at
25 the Department.

1 Q Thank you.

2 In retrospect, do you wish you'd been given more time to prepare for your role in
3 the NEO?

4 A Given how fluid the situation was on the ground, I'm not sure that additional
5 preparation time would have yielded a significant benefit.

6 Q And you'd noted that, as parts of your priorities, there was an emphasis on
7 getting out, of course, American citizens but also Afghans with ties to the U.S.
8 Government.

9 Prior to your departure to Afghanistan, were you given any instruction as to what
10 that universe of Afghans was?

11 A I don't recall being given a list of those particular categories or prioritization.
12 I, in part based on my tenure as Ambassador, understood broadly what the categories
13 were and the kinds of people who would be at risk in that environment at that time.

14 Q Did Department leadership communicate a timeline pursuant to which you
15 were to operate?

16 A At what point?

17 Q Prior to your departure.

18 A I don't recall having a specific timeframe before I went out.

19 Q How about when you arrived in-country?

20 A At the outset, no. I don't -- I don't recall at the outset a specific departure
21 date. I recall us discussing among ourselves and with folks in Washington how much
22 time we'd be able to devote to the effort.

23 Q And when was the timeline first communicated to you while you were in
24 Afghanistan?

25 A Sometime in the middle.

1 Q The middle --

2 A I don't -- I don't remember specifically in that 11 or 12 days when there was
3 a specific deadline.

4 Q Thank you.

5 Was there any consideration or discussion of changing the timeline?

6 A I recall discussion about how long we could effectively stay without
7 increasing jeopardy to the force. I don't recall once it -- once a departure date was
8 established -- that there was a revisiting the subject.

9 Q Thank you.

10 Prior to your departure, what impression were you given -- what impression were
11 you given of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan?

12 A I don't recall -- I can't differentiate in my memory between what I was seeing
13 in the public space and what someone may have communicated to me in that -- in that
14 day.

15 Q What was your impression of the situation on the ground then?

16 A That it was extremely challenging, that there was an overwhelming demand
17 to leave, that reaching -- well, that the overwhelming demand among Afghans to leave,
18 combined with the nature of the physical security measures for the airport, made it
19 difficult to smoothly enable entry and departure for the folks we were most interested in.

20 Q Thank you.

21 And who did you understand at the Department to be exercising overall
22 responsibility for the Department's equities during the evacuation?

23 A I'm not sure what I -- I'm not sure I understand what you mean by "equities."

24 Q So who did you understand to be leading the Department's interests in the
25 evacuation?

1 A Secretary Blinken was exercising overall authority and coordination for the
2 Department. And, depending on the element, whether it involved efforts on the
3 ground, efforts at interim locations, engagement with other governments, it just
4 depended on what the task at hand was as to who was responsible for that.

5 Q Thank you.

6 And you had testified that you did not speak with Secretary Blinken in preparation
7 for your role in the evacuation, correct? So, prior to arriving in Afghanistan, you had
8 not --

9 A To the best of my recollection.

10 Q Who did you understand the key State Department leaders -- who were the
11 key State Department leaders involved in the Afghanistan evacuation? I know you've
12 made mention of Deputy Secretary Sherman and Secretary Blinken --

13 A Yeah.

14 Q -- but in addition to those individuals.

15 A So, in addition to those two individuals, Deputy Secretary McKeon, Chief of
16 Staff George, Deputy Chief of Staff Sullivan, Under Secretary Nuland, Under Secretary
17 Zeya, and a range of Assistant Secretaries were all playing roles in coordinating aspects of
18 the response.

19 Q And how Counselor Derek Chollet?

20 A I don't recall interacting with the counselor in that period, but I may have.

21 Q So we'll start with Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources
22 McKeon.

23 Did you engage with DMR McKeon in preparation for your role in the evacuation?

24 A Not to my recollection.

25 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. I think he says he doesn't recall who he spoke to before

1 he left. So --

2 [REDACTED]: Thank you.

3 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. -- I don't know that specific names will help.

4 [REDACTED]: That's helpful. Thank you.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Just we're going to name some names and in the event that it jogs your
7 memory, but to the extent you don't remember, that's completely fair.

8 Did you speak with him while being on the ground in Afghanistan throughout the
9 evacuation?

10 A I may have. I don't recall specifically.

11 Q While on the ground in the evacuation, did you engage with the White
12 House or their National Security Council at any point?

13 A Yes.

14 Q With whom specifically?

15 A A range of senior people.

16 Q Did you engage with National Security Advisor Sullivan at any point?

17 A I think so.

18 Q And on what issues did you engage with the White House and NSC on?

19 [REDACTED]: I would just once again note that this is going to veer into issues of
20 confidentiality.

21 So, if you can speak very generally about what you conveyed, I'm comfortable
22 with that, but I'm not comfortable what was conveyed through NSC or White House.

23 Under Secretary Bass. So, broadly speaking, all of my interactions with people in
24 Washington were about the effort to evacuate American citizens and at-risk Afghans and
25 other priority Afghans.

1 Some of those interactions were to provide our, to the extent it was possible, our
2 understanding of the environment in and around the airport, to explain why certain
3 proposals for how we might increase throughput weren't realistic, to discuss threats
4 against the effort, and in some cases to respond to queries about individuals that had
5 come to the attention or were known to people in Washington as needing support to
6 depart.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q Thank you.

9 Just to backtrack a bit, prior to departing for Afghanistan, did you engage with
10 Ambassador Khalilzad at all?

11 A I don't remember.

12 Q How about once in-country in Afghanistan? Did you engage with
13 Ambassador Khalilzad?

14 A I recall interacting with him at least a few, probably a few times.

15 Q On what issues?

16 A It would have been, again, on efforts to figure out ways to enable the folks
17 we were most concerned about prioritizing departure for, figuring out ways to enable
18 them to safely and securely approach and then enter the airport complex. So I may
19 have engaged with him to enlist his support to reinforce messaging to the Taliban about
20 people we were trying to help depart.

21 Q And he was still engaged in negotiations with the Taliban at that point,
22 correct?

23 A I don't know. I wasn't in a detailed conversation with him about what else
24 he was doing.

25 Q What did he communicate to you about the Taliban's intentions or state of

1 mind at that time, if anything?

2 A I don't remember any specific reflections or commentary from him at that
3 time.

4 Q Thank you.

5 And you had alluded to this. But numerous other State Department officials
6 were deployed to Afghanistan around the same time, correct?

7 A That's correct.

8 Q Do you recall who they were?

9 A I don't recall the names of every individual.

10 Q Of course.

11 A But --

12 Q In terms of leadership and the evacuation.

13 A Yes.

14 Q Was Ms. Jayne Howell sent as part of your team to assist with the
15 evacuation?

16 A Yes.

17 Q And your former assistant chief of mission, was Mr. DeHart also sent to
18 assist with the evacuation?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Were there any other individuals that we should know of that were sent to
21 assist with the evacuation?

22 A I can't think of anyone in particular. There were, you know, a range of folks
23 with similar skill sets or experience to those of Ms. Howell and Mr. DeHart.

24 Q Thank you.

25 And this may appear redundant, but I'm just going to walk through the timeline

1 now once you've arrived in Afghanistan.

2 So, if you'll indulge us, when did you arrive in Afghanistan, to the best of your
3 recollection, a range of dates, if possible?

4 A I don't recall a specific date. On or about the 19th. It was about 36 hours
5 after I'd or -- I don't know -- I -- yeah, I won't do the time zone math but, yeah,
6 somewhere around then.

7 Q Thank you. And how did you get there?

8 A I flew commercial to Doha and then flew in on a U.S. Mil C-17.

9 Q Did you travel with anyone?

10 A I traveled with a couple of other State Department colleagues and parts of
11 the 82nd Airborne.

12 Q Do you recall who the State Department colleagues were?

13 A I'm sorry. I don't.

14 Q And how about those in the 82nd Airborne? Any members of the
15 leadership there?

16 A No, it wasn't part of the leadership team. It were -- it was support
17 elements who were continuing to flow in.

18 Q Thank you.

19 And where did you go upon arrival in Afghanistan?

20 A I first went to the passenger terminal on the north side of the airport, so the
21 U.S. -- well, the coalition forces terminal, not the commercial terminal. And then, from
22 there, went to the mil headquarters building.

23 Q Thank you.

24 Upon arrival, what was your impression of the situation in Kabul and, more
25 specifically, Hamid Karzai International Airport?

1 A So, as I noted earlier, I was struck by the numbers of people who were
2 seeking to depart, the challenges that the physical security infrastructure of the airport,
3 which was designed to limit access, the challenges that posed for dealing with masses of
4 people, and the challenges we faced in helping specific individuals to find ways to safely
5 and securely access and enter the airport complex at a particular point in time.

6 Q Thank you.

7 Is it fair to describe the situation on the ground as chaotic?

8 A It was certainly chaotic outside the perimeter of the airport. I found it to
9 be well-ordered within.

10 ██████████ Thank you.

11 I'd like to enter exhibit 4 into the record.

12 [Bass Majority Exhibit No. 4

13 was marked for identification.]

14 BY ██████████:

15 Q This is a piece published by Mr. Jim DeHart in Foreign Service Journal, dated
16 March 2022, titled "The Apocalyptic Airport Scene."

17 In describing the scene at Hamid Karzai airport, ██████████ states on the first page,
18 numbered page 4, "In Kabul, our challenge was getting the people we wanted into the
19 airport. The scenes at the gate were apocalyptic. Getting to the front of the crowd,
20 close enough to grab the attention of our Marines, took a full day of shoving through a
21 mosh pit of roaming Taliban while gunfire rang overhead. The lucky few who made it
22 arrived sunburned, bleeding, often in tears. Random young men who got inside were
23 often tossed right back out. Our Marines hadn't signed up for this sort of crowd control,
24 but they adjusted to the task, as Marines always do."

25 Is this a fair characterization of the scenes at HKIA?

1 A That's consistent with what I saw personally at the individual entry gates and
2 at the area just inside the perimeter around those gates.

3 Q In your professional opinion, what do you believe were the biggest factors
4 leading to the chaos at HKIA?

5 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Do you mean the chaos outside of the perimeter gates?

6

BY [REDACTED]

7 Q Correct.

8 A So, as I noted, I think the major factors contributing to the chaos outside the
9 entry points were the large number of Afghans seeking entry to the airport complex, the
10 nature of the physical security measures around the airport, and the absence of the
11 central government's security elements providing broader security in the capital following
12 the collapse of the government after President Ghani fled the country.

13 Q And the Taliban was also performing security functions around HKIA,
14 correct?

15 A I understood the Taliban to be, broadly speaking, providing security of some
16 nature in the capital and to have established checkpoints at some removed from the
17 physical access gates to the airport, but I don't recall that they were physically present
18 meters away from the walls, for example, for performing any security function in the
19 immediate areas outside the airport.

20 Q Thank you.

21 Where were you and your team based out of at HKIA?

22 A So, operationally, we were co-located with the U.S. military headquarters on
23 the north side of the airport. Most of the people on my team who had come in on
24 temporary duty were -- worked 12- to 14-hour shifts and spent their off-hours at a
25 different location on the south side of the airport.

1 Q And the U.S. military, of course, is that also referred to as the JOC?

2 A Correct.

3 Q Joint Operations Center.

4 And which other officials were based there?

5 A Could you be more specific?

6 Q Of course. You had noted that the military -- this also served as sort of the
7 U.S. military headquarters.

8 A Uh-huh.

9 Q So which members of military leadership were also there?

10 A The commander of the Marine task force, General Sullivan, was based there.
11 Admiral Vasely and General Donahue were right across the street.

12 Q And where was Ambassador Wilson based?

13 A Ambassador Wilson was at a facility on the south side of the ramp.

14 Q How far was that from the JOC?

15 A As the crow flies, probably a mile, a bit longer than that in terms of driving.

16 Q And how easy was it to get there in terms of driving? Were there available
17 vehicles or shuttles?

18 A There were vehicles available to go back and forth. Depended a bit on
19 flight operations because it involved going around the end of the runway.

20 Q How often did you engage with Ambassador Wilson in person?

21 A In person, I don't recall specifically. Probably every other day --

22 Q Uh-huh. And how about remotely?

23 A -- initially. I think subsequently, I mean, for at least a period of it, at least
24 detail.

25 Q And how about remote engagement?

1 A Frequently, multiple times a day.

2 Q And you had touched upon this briefly. But can you please speak to the
3 chain of command at HKIA, namely within the State Department?

4 A I'm sorry. You're asking about the State Department chain of command?

5 Q No. Specifically, my interest, of course, the military presence at HKIA, as
6 well as State Department officials and the volunteers who were assisting with the
7 evacuation.

8 Before getting into the military chain of command, as I believe you may not be the
9 appropriate witness to address that, I'd like to better understand what the chain of
10 command was at HKIA with respect to State Department individuals.

11 A So Ambassador Wilson as the chief of mission had authority for all U.S. State
12 Department personnel in-country. I had operational authority over the temporary duty
13 personnel who were there solely to support the noncombatant evacuation.

14 Q Is it fair to say you were leading the evacuation?

15 A No, I wouldn't characterize it that way. Noncombatant evacuations are led
16 by the U.S. military.

17 [REDACTED]. So I'd like to introduce exhibit 5 into the record next.

18 [Bass Majority Exhibit No. 5
19 was marked for identification.]

20 [REDACTED]. This is the Joint Publication 3-68. I'd like to represent that the
21 provided version of the JP 3-68 was in effect at the time of the withdrawal, and a revised
22 draft was submitted by the Department of Defense on May 26, 2022. And this is just an
23 excerpt thereof, namely the overview.

24 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Under Secretary, is this a document you're familiar
25 with? Is this new to you?

1 Under Secretary Bass. This specific document, no, I'm not familiar with it. It
2 appears to be an internal Department of Defense document.

3 [REDACTED]. This was sourced from a public DOD, the public DOD website,
4 and is made -- is available to the public.

5 I'll give you a couple of minutes to look through. And, of course, as we reference
6 specific pages, you'll have an opportunity to review that indepth, as well.

7 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Is this just an excerpt? Because there's a Department
8 of State Roles and Coordination and Interaction in here, but it doesn't look like that's in
9 the section.

10 [REDACTED]. This is just an entire overview.

11 Under Secretary Bass. Oh, there it is.

12 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Yeah.

13 Under Secretary Bass. Okay.

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q So this should be a summation of the hundreds of pages that comprise the JP
16 3-68. But, in the interest of time, we've limited it to just the summaries. But, if we
17 could first turn to romanette i, the preface, you'll see that this publication provides
18 doctrine to plan and conduct joint noncombatant evacuation and repatriation operations
19 and that it was prepared under the direction of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff.

20 If I could please turn to page romanette ix next, I'd like to point you to the
21 Overview section.

22 A Okay.

23 Q And you'll see under the header "Overview," "Noncombatant Evacuation
24 Operations (NEOs) are conducted by the Department of Defense to assist in evacuating
25 U.S. citizens and nationals, DOD civilian personnel, and designated persons, (host nation

1 and third-country nationals) whose lives are in danger from locations in a foreign nation
2 to an appropriate safe haven when directed by the Department of State. U.S. policy is
3 contained in a memorandum of agreement between DOD and DOS, entitled,
4 Memorandum of Agreement between the Departments of State and Defense on the
5 Protection and Evacuation of U.S. Citizens and Nationals and Designated Other Persons
6 from Threatened Areas Overseas."

7 If you look at the next paragraph, it states, "During NEOs, the chief of mission
8 (COM), neither the geographic combatant commander (GCC) nor the subordinate Joint
9 Force Commander (JFC), is the senior United States Government authority for the
10 evacuation and, as such, is ultimately responsible for the successful completion of the
11 NEO and the safety of the evacuees."

12 As charge, Ambassador Wilson was the CHIEF OF MISSION, correct?

13 A That's correct.

14 Q And, according to the JP 3-68, that would make Ambassador Wilson the
15 senior U.S. Government authority for the evacuation and ultimately responsible for the
16 successful completion of the NEO and the safety of the evacuees, correct?

17 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. You're asking him to interpret this document that he's
18 not seen before?

19 [REDACTED]. I'm just asking according to the JP 3-68.

20 If we're just -- if Ambassador Wilson is the charge, according to this document,
21 which is a DOD document, would that mean Ambassador Wilson was the ultimate
22 authority?

23 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Should we start with, do you think this document is
24 accurate?

25 Under Secretary Bass. This document looks to me to be an internal DOD

1 document, and I have no basis to evaluate whether or not it was coordinated across the
2 interagency, including with the Department of State.

3 In my experience, I have never heard a Department of Defense official or a senior
4 U.S. military commander characterize roles and responsibilities including the -- who's
5 ultimately responsible in this manner.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q So, in practice, was Ambassador Wilson acting as the senior U.S.
8 Government authority for the evacuation?

9 A No, in practice, I don't believe he was. I believe it was well understood,
10 certainly by those of us on the ground, that the ultimate responsibility resided within the
11 Department of Defense.

12 Q Thank you.

13 So, focusing then on the Department of Defense, can you please speak to who on
14 the State Department team was responsible for engaging with the military on the
15 ground?

16 A Could you be more specific?

17 Q Of course. Who was the military's primary point of contact on behalf of the
18 State Department on the ground in Afghanistan? Was it yourself?

19 A During the noncombatant evacuation?

20 Q Correct.

21 A I would say on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis in terms of the operational
22 coordination of aspects of the NEO, I was engaging the senior military commanders
23 regularly.

24 Q And you had mentioned General Donahue, Rear Admiral Peter Vasely,
25 General Sullivan as some of the military figures you'd been engaging with.

1 Did you also at any point engage with General McKenzie?

2 A I don't recall whether I interacted solely with General McKenzie in that
3 period. I expect that I was in some larger conversations in which he was also a member.

4 Q Moving to General Donahue, can you speak to your interactions with him,
5 understanding that we're in an unclassified space?

6 A So General Donahue and I interacted multiple times throughout the day
7 including at a regular meeting we had in the mornings that brought together the senior
8 U.S. military commanders, myself, Ambassador Wilson, and a couple of other senior State
9 Department people where we'd try to assess what we thought was going to be possible in
10 the day ahead, would share information about what we were hearing from Washington,
11 from representatives of other governments on the ground, try to understand what the
12 threat environment might be that day.

13 And then, subsequent to that, as the day unfolded, as developments occurred,
14 General Donahue and I would interact regularly.

15 Q Thank you.

16 And how about Rear Admiral Peter Vasely? Can you speak to your interactions
17 with him?

18 A I also would engage Admiral Vasely each day, sometimes multiple times. It
19 just depended on the day.

20 Q And were there any issues in particular that you engaged with Admiral
21 Vasely on?

22 A I can't recall specifically.

23 Q And how about with respect to General Sullivan? Can you speak to your
24 interactions with him?

25 A I interacted with General Sullivan in those morning meetings and then

1 periodically as there were specific issues related to Department support, Department
2 official support for the Marines' duties and actions within the NEO.

3 Q Thank you.

4 What were the biggest challenges for State and military coordination?

5 A I would say ensuring that we had a common understanding of priorities as
6 they evolved through the day, ensuring that threat information that was coming from the
7 military was being shared widely quickly, and ensuring that our interactions with foreign
8 governments, that we were saying the same things about priorities to both civilian and
9 military representatives of other governments because, of course, as we were engaging in
10 our activities, so, too, were all of the members or most of the members of the coalition,
11 many with both civilian and military representatives on the ground.

12 And so securing common agreement on a set of priorities for the day in terms of
13 who we would be trying to prioritize entry for required a fair amount of engagement with
14 representatives of other governments.

15 Q And was this because DOD and State sometimes had differing priorities or
16 different views on how to effectuate those priorities, or was this largely due to the
17 situation and chaos on the ground?

18 A I would say, broadly speaking, the latter.

19 Q And which foreign officials did you work with during the evacuation?

20 A I worked with the NATO senior civilian representative, Ambassador, charges,
21 or senior government officials from a range of European and other coalition members,
22 lead officials for some of the international organizations that were also operating in and
23 around Kabul.

24 Q Thank you.

25 And did you engage with any Afghan officials during your time on the ground in

1 Afghanistan for the NEO?

2 A To the best of my recollection, I did not.

3 Q Did any -- do you know who in the State Department did engage with the
4 Afghan Government during the evacuation?

5 A I believe Ambassador Wilson. I recall at different points in that period
6 Ambassador Wilson was engaging members of the Afghan Government.

7 [REDACTED]: So I'd like to introduce exhibit 6 into the record next.

8 [Bass Majority Exhibit No. 6

9 was marked for identification.]

10 [REDACTED]: I believe this is a memorandum of agreement that was
11 referenced in the Joint Publication 3-68 as defining the State Department policy, DOD
12 policy.

13 [REDACTED]: Mary, can you clarify where this document was derived?

14 [REDACTED]: Yes, the U.S. Department of Defense's website.

15 [REDACTED]: Okay.

16 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. The document looks like it's dated 1997.

17 [REDACTED]: This was the last version that was pulled from the DOD website.

18 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Or 1988. Sorry.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q So you'll see -- you'll see here that the memorandum of agreement, or MOA,
21 between the State Department and the Department of Defense states, "The parties to
22 this memorandum of agreement wish to set out their agreement concerning their
23 respective roles and responsibilities regarding the protection and evacuation of U.S.
24 citizens and nationals and designated other persons from threatened areas overseas."

25 Section A begins with "Policy Objectives"; section B, "The Interagency Checklist

1 and Other Related Documents"; and section C then with "The Responsibilities."

2 That is on the next page.

3 Here it reflects, C.1. reflects the State Department and the -- the Secretary of
4 State and the Secretary of Defense's joint responsibilities.

5 If you'll turn to section C.2., it states there Secretary of State. And this delineates
6 the Secretary of State's responsibilities, which provides, "The Secretary of State will
7 exercise overall responsibility for attaining the objectives in section A and, except as
8 noted in section C.3.b., shall identify the offices within the Department of State having
9 major evacuation planning and implementation responsibilities, prepare plans for the
10 protection and evacuation of all U.S. citizens and nationals and designated other persons
11 abroad, including Department of Defense noncombatants. These plans shall provide for
12 in-place welfare and protection, evacuation to the United States or to other safe haven
13 areas, and their welfare and protection in those areas in the event in-place protection is
14 not feasible, lastly, coordination to maximize timely use of available military
15 transportation assets and existing host nation support infrastructure."

16 There are also additional responsibilities, including coordination with the
17 Secretary of Defense and, when appropriate, coordination with foreign governments on
18 aspects of evacuation planning and execution.

19 Under Secretary Bass, were you aware of any evacuation plans that were
20 prepared by Secretary Blinken?

21 A So, as I noted earlier, I was away from Afghanistan from early January 2020
22 until I went back in 2021, in mid-August. So I wouldn't have had access or been aware
23 of any contingency planning in that period.

24 Q Were you briefed on the State Department's evacuation plan prior to your
25 departure to Afghanistan?

1 A I was not.

2 Q Did you ever receive a written copy of the State Department's evacuation
3 plan?

4 A No, because most of that evacuation plan would have been already -- was
5 already completed by the time I arrived in that the Embassy complement had been
6 successfully relocated from the Embassy and other State Department compounds to the
7 airport, and those folks had all departed country. And that's the bulk of what would
8 have been or had been in the evacuation plan, at least during my tenure.

9 Q And to what extent did the plan account for worst-case scenarios?

10 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. What plan?

11 [REDACTED]. Worst-case scenarios.

12 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. No, what plan?

13 [REDACTED]. The evacuation plan.

14 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. The plan that he just said he didn't see? I don't
15 understand.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q No, you had noted that it was already in effect. So I assume that you had
18 been briefed, and that's an incorrect assumption then. So let's backtrack.

19 Were you at any point briefed on an evacuation plan or learned of the contents
20 thereof?

21 A I was not because we were already in the midst of executing an evacuation
22 that substantially exceeded I think the scope and scale of what had been contemplated.

23 Q So am I correct in understanding that your efforts in the evacuation were not
24 based on the plan that you believed to have been existing?

25 A That's correct.

1 Q Were you operating off of any plan throughout your efforts in the NEO?

2 A Was I operating off a specific evacuation plan?

3 Q Correct.

4 A No, I was not.

5 [REDACTED]. We have the next subject we'd like to get through, but it looks
6 like we have 4 minutes on the clock. And, rather than stopping halfway, I think it might
7 be prudent to stop here, go off the record, maybe take an early break.

8 [Recess.]

1 [1:25 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED] Go ahead and get back on the record.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Before I turn it over to [REDACTED] for some questioning, I wanted to ask a couple of
5 additional questions related to exhibits 5 and 6, 5 being the Joint Publication 3-68 and 6
6 being the Memorandum of Agreement.

7 In the last round we had discussed various sentiments related to the evacuation
8 and the withdrawal.

9 In terms of the evacuation, do you agree with the sentiment that military
10 personnel and equipment are the domain of DOD? Is that correct?

11 A Yes.

12 Q And you have previously testified as well that it was well understood that
13 DOD was the lead of the NEO. Is that correct?

14 A That's my recollection, yes.

15 Q What is the State Department's role in a NEO as you understand it?

16 A As I understand it, it is to coordinate communications with American
17 citizens, lawful permanent residents, others with whom we are -- or others who we are
18 trying to help depart or respond to their inquiries, to essentially get the relevant
19 information from them, ensure they're well documented, have legal pathways, and to
20 coordinate their arrival at a point at which they're picked up by DOD and going to a DOD
21 organized and led system for manifesting on flights or boats or whatever transportation is
22 going to move them out of harm's way.

23 Q Who calls for a NEO?

24 A So the State Department formally requests a NEO through the Executive
25 Secretary channels between departments.

1 Q And why is DOD the operational lead of a NEO?

2 A Because the situation on the ground is such that commercial or private
3 means of transport are unavailable to people, and so we are in a position where we are
4 relying on either DOD -- well, we're relying on DOD transport, whether it's military or
5 commercial aircraft chartered by DOD, and we're relying on DOD for a certain amount of
6 security in the environment to enable those -- that evacuation effort to occur.

7 Q Thank you.

8 And so referring to exhibit No. 5, the DOD Joint Publication, looking at the cover
9 page, there are various seals.

10 Do you see a seal of the State Department?

11 A No, I do not.

12 Q What do these seals pertain to?

13 A So we have the seal for the Joint Chiefs and the seals for the services, as well
14 as the Coast Guard.

15 Q Okay. And then turning to Roman numeral I, the preface, who is the
16 signatory on this document? On the preface, that is.

17 A On the exhibit that I have before me, it is Lieutenant General William C.
18 Mayville, Jr., Director of the Joint Staff, on behalf of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

19 Q Is there a State Department signatory here?

20 A No, there is not.

21 Q And then turning to Roman numeral VIII, entitled, the "Executive Summary
22 Commander's Overview."

23 A Uh-huh.

24 Q And I want to draw your attention to the first sentence underneath
25 "Overview."

1 It says, "Noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) are conducted by the
2 Department of Defense to assist in evacuating U.S. citizens and nationals, DOD civilian
3 personnel, and designated persons --"

4 Does that sentence include the Department of State -- or the first part of that
5 sentence, does it include Department of State?

6 A The Department of State is not specified in that portion of the sentence.

7 Q The sentence proceeds with "-- whose lives are in danger from locations in a
8 foreign nation, to an appropriate safe haven, when directed by the Department of State."

9 That second portion of the sentence, "when directed by the Department of State,"
10 is that what we just discussed in terms of the State Department calling a NEO?

11 A That is my understanding of what that term refers to.

12 Q Okay. And then the first part of the sentence -- "NEOs are conducted by
13 the Department of Defense" -- does that comport with what we just discussed in terms of
14 DOD being the operational lead of a NEO?

15 A In my experience and understanding, yes.

16 Q Okay. And one more point for the record. I wanted to note that exhibit 5
17 is dated 18 November, 2015.

18 Turning to exhibit No. 6, the Memorandum of Agreement, if I could call your
19 attention to page 6, referring to section G, "Entry Into Force: Amendment."

20 Do you see that on your page?

21 A Yes.

22 Q The first sentence reads, "This memorandum of agreement supersedes the
23 'Memorandum of Understanding between Departments of State and Defense on the
24 Protection and evacuation of U.S. citizens and designated aliens abroad' of September
25 28-29, 1994. This memorandum of agreement and its appendices, which latter shall be

1 considered an integral part hereof, may be amended at any time by written agreement of
2 the parties."

3 Are you aware of whether or not there are any superseding agreements to the
4 agreement we're discussing in exhibit No. 6?

5 A I'm not aware. I don't know.

6 Q Do you agree that this document is dated 1998?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Do you agree that that is several years ago?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Is it possible then that there's a superseding agreement to this one?

11 A Yes, it's possible.

12 Q And do you agree here that there are no signatories? It appears to be two
13 individuals, but there's not a signature on either line?

14 A That's correct on the document in front of me.

15 Q Okay. And regardless of these agreements, you previously testified that
16 you have 37 years of experience with the State Department. Is that correct?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And have served as an Ambassador three times. Is that correct?

19 A That's correct.

20 Q And it is your understanding, one that you find to be well-believed, that DOD
21 is the operational lead of a NEO. Is that correct?

22 A That is correct.

23 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q So I want to talk a little bit more about the Doha agreement.

1 In broad strokes, what role did you play in devising the terms of the
2 Doha agreement?

3 A I remember discussing broad structure and discussing conceptually what
4 Ambassador Khalilzad was trying to do in the various sections --

5 Q And what did --

6 A -- of the version of the agreement that I saw or was aware of in that period.

7 And I want to clarify that I have not seen the final version that was signed in
8 February of 2021 -- or 2020.

9 Q You had not seen the final?

10 A I don't know if the document that was signed in February of 2020 is the
11 same document that was ready to be signed in the fall of 2019.

12 Q Okay.

13 What did you understand to be the written terms of the deal, as you understood
14 it, before the final version?

15 A I don't remember all of the provisions. Broadly speaking, I recall that the
16 agreement laid out a timetable for the departure of U.S. and coalition forces. It laid out
17 commitments from the Taliban not to conduct military operations against U.S. and
18 coalition forces and some other aspects of how they were supposed to conduct
19 themselves in terms of what they would or wouldn't do with their forces.

20 And then there were, as I recall, there was language encouraging promotion of
21 inter-Afghan dialogue.

22 Q And did you find the terms of the Doha deal to be reasonable?

23 A Complicated question. I understood the Doha agreement to meet the
24 intent of direction that Ambassador Khalilzad had been provided.

25 Q And the intent was to remove all American troops from Afghanistan?

1 A The intent was to provide a date specific by which U.S. forces would no
2 longer be in Afghanistan, separate -- unless there was a subsequent agreement for a U.S.
3 security presence -- presence of U.S. forces thereafter.

4 Q And to be clear, the Ambassador Khalilzad-negotiated agreement, the Trump
5 administration's Doha deal, made the determination or set out a pathway for U.S. troops
6 to go to zero by May 2021?

7 A So setting aside the specific timetable, the versions that I'm familiar with had
8 a specific timeframe by the end of which U.S. forces would no longer be present.

9 Q And did the versions you were familiar with have a component related to an
10 ongoing security presence in Afghanistan beyond May 2021?

11 A By "security presence," you mean U.S. military forces?

12 Q Yes.

13 A I don't recall that it did.

14 Q Okay.

15 When I just asked whether or not you found the agreement and the conditions in
16 there reasonable, you said it was complicated.

17 Was there anything in the agreement that you found unreasonable?

18 A I found troubling the narrow focus on parties against which the Taliban
19 would limit their military activities and was also -- was somewhat troubled by the
20 inclusion of the Taliban's self-characterization as the Islamic Emirate.

21 Q Did you have any reaction to the requirement in the deal that was placed on
22 the Afghan Government, who was not party to this agreement, to release 5,000 Taliban
23 prisoners?

24 A So that was not -- I don't recall that being a specific provision in the
25 agreement. So that may have been a later development in terms of its inclusion in the

1 version that was signed. We had extensive discussions at various points in 2019 around
2 the question of prisoner releases.

3 Q Would it have troubled you if there was an inclusion that forced the Afghan
4 Government to release 5,000 prisoners?

5 A I think it's hard to look at that kind of hypothetical without having been
6 there in that period to understand what else may have changed in the agreement or
7 what, if any, side understandings there may have been. It would have depended in part
8 on any assurances that whoever was released would not return to the battlefield.

9 Q Okay. I just want to -- I'm going to introduce this article from The Wall
10 Street Journal. I think this will be our 4?

11 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. We're on 7 now.

12 [REDACTED]. Oh, thank you.

13 [REDACTED] Exhibit No. 7. Thank you.

14 [Bass Exhibit No. 7.

15 was marked for identification.]

16 [REDACTED]. So this is an article from The Wall Street Journal, dated October
17 3rd -- sorry -- August 3rd, 2021, entitled, "Taliban Commander Who Led Attack on Afghan
18 City Was Released From Prison Last Year, Officials Say." I'm just going to read the first
19 paragraph.

20 "The Taliban commander overseeing an assault on the key southern city of
21 Lashkargah is one of 5,000 former prisoners released by the Afghan government last year
22 under pressure from the U.S., Afghan and Western officials say.

23 "The commander, Mawlavi Talib, is one of thousands of former prisoners freed to
24 further peace talks who have returned to the battlefield to join the Taliban onslaught
25 against cities around the country, Afghan officials say. The presence of the Taliban

1 fighters is a fresh strain in relations between Washington and Kabul, as the U.S.-backed
2 government struggles to fend off Taliban attacks throughout the country."

3 Given that some of these prisoners who were forced to be released by the
4 United States did end up returning to the battlefield, does that change your assessment
5 or impact your assessment on whether or not including a prisoner release was troubling?

6 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. So I think he said he never saw a version of the
7 agreement that included that. And this is an article about things that happened when
8 he was not in country, and I think the full extent of it happened not -- when he was not in
9 country, both the release and the later activities. So just flagging that.

10 [REDACTED]. Okay. Thanks. I can move on.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q Were you aware of any potential diplomatic fallout surrounding the
13 discussions of potential prisoner releases during the time that you were ambassador?

14 A Could you be a little more specific with regard to what you mean by
15 "diplomatic fallout"?

16 Q So did the French or other NATO partners express any concern while you
17 were Ambassador about components of the agreement?

18 A My recollection is that at least one and possibly more foreign governments
19 expressed concerns when they saw indications that prisoner releases might be part of
20 what was under discussion.

21 They expressed concern over the prospect of certain individuals who were in
22 Afghan prisons who had been involved in attacks or had been prosecuted for attacks that
23 had resulted in loss of life to their nationals being among those who would be released.

24 Q Okay. So that concern and the concerns you mentioned previously
25 surrounding the Taliban's essentially calling itself the Islamic Emirate, did you ever convey

1 those back to Washington or to anyone before the deal was concluded?

2 A They certainly featured in my discussions with Ambassador Khalilzad at
3 various points as he was working on the draft Doha agreement. And I certainly would
4 have -- and did -- convey to Washington concerns of senior Afghan Government officials
5 about the impacts of potential prisoner releases. I can't recall if I offered my own views
6 on the subject to Washington.

7 Q Okay. Thanks.

8 Turning back to the opening statements -- so I think this is exhibit No. 3.

9 [REDACTED]. Three.

10 [REDACTED]. We're going to go to page 5. And it's the last sentence of the first
11 paragraph, starting, it says, "Even as -- "

12 "Even as Ambassador Khalilzad engaged the Taliban, we continued to support
13 Afghan security forces fighting the Taliban. This approach was not universally supported
14 in either the U.S. government nor Afghanistan's, and there were robust debates over how
15 best to promote a settlement process without undermining the Afghan government."

16 Can you describe more specifically these robust debates? Who was supporting
17 one approach versus another.

18 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. To the extent that you can without [inaudible] privilege.

19 Under Secretary Bass. Yeah. So in this setting, what I can say is that there
20 were -- there was a school of thought, represented in Ambassador Khalilzad, who felt that
21 the process in which he was engaged with the Taliban offered the best prospects for
22 meeting the President's intent that we continue to work to reduce the size of the
23 U.S. military footprint, the overall cost of the operation, particularly the military
24 operations.

25 And separately, there was another school of thought that did not believe that the

1 U.S. Government should be engaging the Taliban at all, that continued to believe the
2 South Asia strategy was the correct approach, and that, because there had not been
3 necessarily a formal updated strategy promulgated by the administration to reflect this
4 evolution, that Ambassador Khalilzad's efforts were not in alignment with the strategy
5 that had been promulgated.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q And what impact did these diverging views have on your ability to do your
8 job in Kabul?

9 A My recollection is they further complicated what was already a complicated
10 job.

11 Q Can you elaborate a little bit more?

12 A So there were, within these schools of thought, I mean, obviously there were
13 folks who had a set of relationships with current or former Afghan officials based on their
14 own prior experience working in or working on Afghanistan, and they were at times, as I
15 recall, in touch with those people directly.

16 And so sorting through messages people would be hearing from Washington that
17 weren't coming through the embassy at times was a bit challenging.

18 We also had the challenge of the Taliban's equivalent of a public engagement
19 enterprise. Their, you know, the Taliban's media operation was much more effective in
20 that period than the Afghan Government's.

21 And we spent a lot of our time dealing with disinformation and misinformation
22 about the nature of the discussions that Ambassador Khalilzad was engaged in or specific
23 content of a specific round of negotiations or discussions, the way the Taliban would
24 characterize that, which was, as I recall, quite different from what was actually
25 transpiring.

1 But the Afghan Government was not particularly effective at taking the facts that
2 we were conveying to them and effectively countering the Taliban's disinformation.

3 Q Did you ever worry that U.S. policy was undermining the Afghan
4 Government?

5 A My recollection is I worried a lot more about the inability of Afghan political
6 elites to find common ground and to understand that whether it was the United States
7 Government or other members of the NATO effort, that our commitment wasn't
8 unlimited in time or funding.

9 And the extent to which Afghan political elites focused on their own narrow
10 self-interests and could not find a way to explore ways in which they could support a path
11 forward to some reductions in violence, even if it didn't come from a negotiated
12 settlement, that concerned me a lot more than what we were or weren't doing or saying
13 in a given week or 2-week period.

14 Q But do you think the Afghan Government, the President, understood and
15 received that this was real, that the troop -- reduction in troops was real, was going to
16 happen?

17 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Are you asking what the Afghan President understood?

18 [REDACTED]. Yes. In your -- during your time as Ambassador.

19 [REDACTED]. What was your perception that was understood by the Afghan
20 Government at that time?

21 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Perhaps as communicated by them.

22 Under Secretary Bass. Yeah. So based on my interactions with Afghan
23 leadership in that period, I think some of the Afghan leadership understood the
24 seriousness of the situation with regard to likely reductions in U.S. forces in country.
25 Some did not.

1 I think, of those who did, there was a tendency to overestimate the capabilities of
2 their own forces.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Okay. Was President Ghani among those who did understand?

5 A Based on my interactions with him, yes.

6 Q Okay. Thanks.

7 I want to talk a little bit about negotiations and leverage.

8 While you were Ambassador -- I'm talking about negotiations with the
9 Taliban -- what did you see as the key component to USG leverage in the negotiations?

10 A From a distance, and without benefit of any direct interaction with the
11 Taliban, my impression was that what they cared most about was a date certain by which
12 they could -- a date certain by which foreign military forces would no longer be operating
13 in the country.

14 Q So what impact, I mean, would you say U.S. troop numbers, presence, had
15 on U.S. ability to negotiate or as a -- in terms of leverage?

16 A I'm sorry. I don't understand the question.

17 Q The question -- it wasn't well phrased.

18 What impact did the total number of U.S. military force presence have on our
19 ability to negotiate with the Taliban?

20 A You mean while Ambassador Khalilzad was engaged in his efforts?

21 Q Yeah.

22 A My recollection is that the Taliban -- that the number of U.S. forces in
23 country at a given point in time did not have a significant impact on the Taliban's
24 approach in the -- at the negotiating table.

25 I don't know that the Taliban had a firm number in their head of how many

1 Americans were in country, and so I don't know to what extent they could assess that an
2 announced reduction was reducing the footprint by X percent.

3 I think they probably thought about the U.S. military footprint based on its
4 activities. And my recollection is that in 2019, even as there was -- there were fewer
5 troops in country, there was actually a more effective set of operations against the
6 Taliban.

7 Q Okay. I wanted to turn a little bit to something Ambassador Wilson said in
8 his interview with us. And so this is --

9 [REDACTED]. Exhibit 8.

10 [Bass Exhibit No. 8.
11 was marked for identification.]

12 [REDACTED]. You can turn to page 10.

13 So this is the transcript of the committee's interview with Ross Wilson, dated
14 Tuesday, October 24th, 2023.

15 [REDACTED]. It's a draft transcript, an excerpt of it.

16 [REDACTED]. Okay.

17 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. You'd like him to read page 10?

18 [REDACTED]. No. I'll read it.

19 It's the first full paragraph. I'm just going to read it into the record.

20 "When I met with Secretary Pompeo, he told me that my top priority was to
21 support the implementation of the agreement. The Afghan Government, as you all
22 know, had been excluded from the agreement, was deeply opposed to it and opposed to
23 what it aimed to achieve."

24 I just wanted to get your assessment of that sentiment.

25 Would you agree that the Afghan Government was excluded from the agreement?

1 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Do you want to see what the preceding --

2 Under Secretary Bass. Yeah.

3 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. -- discussion of that agreement is?

4 Under Secretary Bass. Sure.

5 I think it depends on how one interprets the verb "excluded." If by "excluded"
6 one is talking about, were they present during the discussions and negotiations with the
7 Taliban that resulted in the text of the agreement, it's accurate.

8 However, through the period in which I was involved in the effort, the Afghan
9 Government, senior leaders of the Afghan Government, were consulted and engaged
10 regularly on the prospective content, had an opportunity to read the draft, had an
11 opportunity to provide comments, and so were at least adjacent to the negotiation and
12 aware of what was going on.

13 [REDACTED]. Do you agree that they opposed to what it aimed to achieve?

14 Under Secretary Bass. I think it depends on who one would be talking to in the
15 Afghan Government.

16 There were people who were opposed to the U.S. concluding any type of
17 agreement with the Taliban.

18 There were others who were not opposed in principle if it led to genuine
19 inter-Afghan negotiations.

20 And there were some who were opposed to certain provisions, including those on
21 prisoners, more open to other provisions.

22 [REDACTED]. Okay. Thanks.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q Just to close out this subject, is it fair to say that the U.S. withdrawal was
25 initiated by President Trump?

1 A I'm sorry. Remind me of the definition of "withdrawal" we're using.

2 Q Our definition of the withdrawal is that it was initiated by the Doha deal in
3 February of 2020.

4 A Sorry. Could you ask me the question again?

5 Q Is it fair to say that the U.S. withdrawal was initiated by President Trump?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And that the withdrawal began prior to April 2021?

8 A That is correct.

9 Q And that President Trump's intent was to ultimately reduce U.S. troops to
10 zero?

11 A To the best of my recollection, that's consistent with what I understood the
12 President's intent to be during my tenure.

13 Q Thank you.

14 Turning to a different subject, have you participated in any administration
15 transitions from an incoming administration?

16 A Yes.

17 Q How many?

18 A I think it depends on how one defines "participation." I've, as a career
19 officer, I've been on duty through changes in six or seven administrations. I've been in
20 Washington for, I want to say, three -- three or four.

21 Q Okay. And what do these transition processes generally include?

22 A It varies depending on whether it is a transition between parties or whether
23 it is a transition between terms.

24 Q Between parties.

25 A Generally speaking, they involve preparation of a significant amount of

1 background and briefing material and context on the Department of State's operations
2 that is made available to a transition team once that's established.

3 And then subsequently, as senior officials are nominated, the Department
4 prepares a set of position-specific materials and makes current officials available to brief
5 those people at an unclassified level to prepare them for confirmation, and then, once
6 they are confirmed, to allow them to take up their duties.

7 Q So generally speaking, it typically involves prep, exchange of papers,
8 briefings, a quite robust process. Is that correct?

9 A In the transitions between parties --

10 Q Yes.

11 A -- that I've been involved in, yes.

12 Q Understanding that you were at the Foreign Service Institute during the
13 Trump-to-Biden transition, do you have any recollection or context to provide regarding
14 that transition itself?

15 A I don't.

16 Q Okay. Did you hear any of your colleagues opine on the quality of that
17 transition?

18 A I can't recall whether it would have been colleagues or press reporting
19 noting that the delayed start in the transition period as a result of the delays in certifying
20 the election resulted in a truncated transition period.

21 Q Fair to say that was atypical compared to the transitions you've worked on
22 prior?

23 A Yes.

24 Q Okay. Turning to the NEO itself.

25 You previously testified that you had about 8 to 10 hours prior to departure to

1 prepare for your role. Is that correct?

2 A I had 8 to 10 hours between the point at which I was notified and the point
3 at which I departed.

4 Q Why did you have 8 to 10 hours in advance of your departure?

5 A As opposed -- I'm not sure I understand the question.

6 Q Would you agree with the sentiment that the NEO was sudden, it occurred
7 rapidly?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And why -- why would it -- why did it occur rapidly?

10 A So I can't speak to specifics.

11 Broadly speaking, my impression as an outside observer, based on what I was
12 reading in the press, was that the collapse of Afghan security forces, the Taliban's rapid
13 move to take control of provincial capitals and their fairly rapid appearance outside of
14 Kabul was faster than people had expected, and that President Ghani's
15 decision -- unexpected decision, by what was available to me in the public space -- his
16 decision to flee the country created a leadership vacuum and that that accelerated the
17 collapse of what remained of the Afghan Government in the capital city.

18 Q You previously testified that the situation on the ground was fluid. Is that
19 correct?

20 A Yes.

21 Q Fair to say that there was a precipitous change in the situation on the ground
22 that necessitated the NEO?

23 A I think that's a fair characterization.

24 Q And is that why you were called and asked to serve in Kabul?

25 A I'm not sure why I was called. But clearly the -- by the date on which I was

1 called, there was a -- there had been a rapid deterioration of the security environment.
2 There were tens of thousands of people seeking to depart. And there clearly had been a
3 decision that we would try to facilitate the departure of a substantial number of people.

4 Q So fair to say that there was a precipitous change in the situation and State
5 acted quickly in calling for a NEO and, in turn, calling you to come to serve?

6 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. I think you're asking about a time period when he was
7 not involved.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q Do you have any opinions as to State's reaction to the NEO in calling you to
10 serve?

11 A So with regard to specifically asking me to go back, I can understand why I
12 was asked to go and certainly understood once I had arrived back on the ground why
13 people had thought that I could potentially add value.

14 Q And part of what I'm asking here is, in the prior -- in the majority's prior
15 round, they were asking whether you had a number of briefings or consultations,
16 et cetera, prior to your departure.

17 Do you think it would have been reasonable to spend the 8 to 10 hours prior to
18 your departure engaging in long-winded briefings, meeting with folks, versus getting
19 ready to get on a plane and serve in Kabul?

20 A I would say, given how dynamic and fluid the situation was, much of what I
21 would have expected to be told in a -- in preparatory briefings would have not been
22 particularly relevant by the time I arrived or within a short period thereafter because
23 things were changing so rapidly on the ground.

24 Q Okay. Do you feel that upon your arrival you were well prepared to handle
25 the situation in terms of your prior experience?

1 A I was as, I think, well prepared as one could have been.

2 Q Okay. And what did you understand your priorities to be in Kabul during
3 the NEO itself?

4 A To enable the departure of as many American citizens, eligible family
5 members, and Afghans in priority categories for the United States as possible, within
6 whatever time was available to us, and to also enable representatives of governments of
7 allies and partners to do the same.

8 Q Understanding that you didn't have a particularly lengthy ramp-up period,
9 when you arrived on the ground do you feel that you had adequate access to resources
10 and information needed to perform your job duties?

11 A Yes.

12 Q And individuals briefed you when you had questions or information?

13 A On the ground? Absolutely.

14 Q Do you feel that you had adequate access to intel and information back in
15 Washington?

16 A I felt I had what I needed within the scope of what was -- what we were
17 being asked to do.

18 Q Okay. And you previously testified that you were in communication with
19 the Afghanistan Task Force. Is that correct?

20 A Yes.

21 Q Could you clarify for the record what the Afghanistan Task Force was?

22 A So the Afghanistan Task Force was the State Department's task-organized
23 group of volunteers -- which probably, by the end, numbered in at least the
24 hundreds -- of people who were working to support the evacuation, whether it was in
25 enabling volunteers to go into Kabul, whether it was in identifying resources that we

1 needed on the ground, or coordinating with the military to understand who was coming
2 out when and how many and where they were going.

3 And a big part of that was to try to field the enormous range of inquiries and
4 advocacy coming in on behalf of individual American citizens or Afghans from a wide
5 range of Americans and trying to understand who these people were, where they were
6 located, and how we could best help them to safely and securely get themselves to the
7 airport and onto a flight out.

8 Q So it sounds like they were doing quite a bit. Is that correct?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And do you know who led the task force?

11 A So the task force coordinator, as I recall, was Dean Thompson, supported by
12 my former deputy, Karen Decker, in the lead roles.

13 Q And what is Dean Thompson's professional reputation?

14 A In my experience, now-Ambassador Thompson is a very capable professional
15 who had substantial prior crisis management experience.

16 Q Given your time in the NEO, what's your assessment as to the effectiveness
17 of the task force?

18 A Difficult for me to judge because I was not present or focusing on much of
19 what they were doing.

20 Of the work of the task force components that most closely overlap with what we
21 were doing on the ground, I saw a great deal of ingenuity, commitment, creativity,
22 determination to try to overcome some challenges associated with reaching people in
23 that dynamic security environment, where security conditions were changing, where
24 communications infrastructure was not optimal, and where our colleagues were hearing
25 from, in some cases, hundreds of advocates on behalf of individuals.

1 So trying to sort all that information and make sense of it was quite a challenge for
2 them. But I saw people doing the very best they could with what they had to work with
3 in the time available.

4 Q Are you aware of how many hours per day the task force was being run?

5 A It was a 24-hour-a-day operation.

6 Q Thank you.

7 How much interaction did you have with the interagency during the NEO?

8 A I had some interaction. I was -- I participated in at least one daily call with
9 senior officials from across the relevant agencies.

10 Q And what was your impression of those daily briefings? Comprehensive?

11 A Thorough, comprehensive, focused on the key questions, interested in a
12 range of perspectives, trying to make informed choices.

13 Q Okay. Comprised of experts in Afghanistan policy?

14 A The level at which I was participating was above the expert level. So there
15 were -- it included some folks who were conversant, but I wouldn't say that was the bulk
16 of the folks.

17 Q Okay. Fair enough.

18 How much interaction did you have with Consular Affairs on the ground in Kabul?

19 A Are you asking me how much interaction I had with consular officers on the
20 ground, or are you asking me, from the ground, how much interaction I had with senior
21 consular officials in Washington?

22 Q On the ground in Kabul. Were you engaged with Consular Affairs in Kabul?

23 A I had, as part of my team, several senior consular officers and a wide range
24 of other consular officers or individuals performing consular duties. So it was a key
25 piece of what we were doing.

1 Q And what was your overall impression of these consular officers?

2 A They were all dedicated to a fault. They all volunteered to run into harm's
3 way to try to help fellow citizens and others who were at risk that we were trying to help
4 leave.

5 Q Thank you.

6 I'd like to introduce exhibit No. 9.

7 [Bass Exhibit No. 9.

8 was marked for identification.]

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Exhibit No. 9 is the unclassified portion of the after-action review on
11 Afghanistan, January 2020 to August 2021. It was issued on March 2022.

12 Are you familiar with this document?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Have you reviewed it in full?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Who's the drafter of this document?

17 A It was put together by a team that was pulled together at the Secretary's
18 direction.

19 Q Okay. Would you be surprised to learn that the key drafter and lead on the
20 after-action review was Dan Smith?

21 A No, I wouldn't be surprised.

22 Q What is his professional reputation, if you're aware?

23 A Ambassador Smith was highly regarded in the career service and in the
24 State Department for a distinguished career.

25 Q Thank you.

1 Turning to page 4, entitled "Executive Summary and Introduction."

2 At this point in the investigation, we've interviewed several State Department
3 officials, all of whom have testified that the Department and its personnel on the ground
4 in Kabul were dedicated, entrepreneurial, and admirable under challenging
5 circumstances.

6 I'd like to read for you the last sentence in paragraph number 2.

7 "Overall the Department's personnel responded with great agility, determination,
8 and dedication, while taking on roles and responsibilities both domestically and overseas
9 that few had ever anticipated."

10 Do you agree with this assessment?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Can you provide any further color for the record?

13 A I think it's -- you should take what's written here and add to it the lens of
14 challenges that are associated with working in a high-threat environment with a lot of
15 uncertainty about how long we would have to try to perform this mission, and also try to
16 understand the personal toll on the individuals who were closest to those in need and
17 who spent at least 12 hours a day, every day, at the entry gates face-to-face with so many
18 people who were seeking to leave.

19 Q Thank you.

20 I believe you previously testified that folks on the ground were working 12- to
21 14-hour shifts. Is that correct?

22 A That's my recollection.

23 Q How much were you working each day?

24 A 21 to 23 hours?

25 Q And how many days were you working those hours?

1 A As long as I was on the ground. So 12 days.

2 Q Okay. And if I can get in one last passage before we end.

3 Turning to page 12, paragraph number 11, second-to-last paragraph on the page.

4 "Crisis preparation and planning were inhibited to a degree by concerns about the
5 signals that might be sent, especially anything that might suggest the United States had
6 lost confidence in the Afghan government and thus contribute to its collapse.

7 "However, the AAR notes that once it got underway, the plan for closing the
8 embassy compound and evacuating U.S. government personnel and U.S. citizens and
9 third-country contractors proceeded well, considering the speed at which it was
10 implemented."

11 Is there anything further you'd like to say in regard to this assessment?

12 A So I wasn't present in country for the period at which the team closed out
13 the embassy and relocated to the airport, but I haven't heard anything since the events to
14 counter this characterization.

15 With regard to the first sentence, I wasn't involved, obviously, in any of that. I
16 don't have any knowledge of the planning, the contingency planning through that period.

17 But as was previously noted, with regard to Afghan Government and wider
18 society's focus on departure of U.S. forces, Afghan elites in particular paid very close
19 attention to the scale and the nature of the U.S. Government's presence in country.

20 And I find persuasive the suggestion that if we had tried to start earlier at scale,
21 that might have precipitated the same outcome but potentially on an accelerated basis.

22 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

23 That concludes our round. We can go off the record.

24 [Recess.]

1 [2:36 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Under Secretary Bass, I believe we last left off on the ground operation.
4 But before we get there, there are a couple of things I want to clarify for the record.

5 If we could go back to exhibit 6, which is the Memorandum of Agreement
6 between the Department of State and the Department of Defense.

7 In the prior round, the minority drew doubt to the continuance of this specific
8 MOA based on the fact that it was signed in 1998 and a provision which stated that it
9 would be superseded by any further or future agreements.

10 Were you presented with any superseding memorandums of agreement in the
11 last round?

12 A No.

13 Q Did the minority make reference to any existing superseding agreements
14 with respect to the Memorandum of Agreement?

15 A Not that I recall.

16 Q So their assertion that there could be a superseding agreement is nothing
17 more than speculation?

18 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Yeah, we're not going to comment on your rounds of
19 questioning. But I assume that if you guys want to know if there's a superseding
20 agreement, which he's already said he does not know the answer to, that you can ask the
21 State Department to answer that question for you.

22 [REDACTED]. Correct. And we just wanted to, as was represented by the
23 majority in its initial round -- and we've already affirmed that we speak to the veracity of
24 the truth here -- this was pulled directly from the Department of Defense website. So
25 we've pulled whatever is publicly available as the most existing and current agreement.

1 And then I want to now go back to exhibit 5, which is the noncombatant
2 evacuation operation, the JP 3-68, which we've already represented is a document that
3 was executed by the Chairman of Joint Chiefs. That was represented by the majority.

4 Do you recall that we noted this version of the JP 3-68 was in effect at the time of
5 the withdrawal and a revised draft was submitted by the Department of Defense on
6 May 26th, 2022?

7 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Again, this is a document that he has not seen before
8 today and knows nothing about.

9 ██████████. Correct. That was not my question.

10 BY ██████████:

11 Q My question was, do you recall a representation by the majority that a
12 revised draft of the JP 3-68 was submitted by the Department of Defense on May 26th,
13 2022?

14 A Are you asking me if I recalled that from an earlier round of questioning?

15 Q Correct.

16 A I didn't, but thank you for clarifying that.

17 Q Okay. Just want to make sure we have the correct dates and documents
18 before us.

19 Now that we've resolved this issue, we can get to the reason we're here today.

20 Under Secretary Bass, how many consular officers were on the ground in Kabul
21 during the evacuation, specifically the NEO, the noncombatant evacuation operation?

22 A By consular officers, are you asking for the number of consular professionals
23 or are you asking for the number of people who were performing consular functions who
24 may not have been consular officers by trade?

25 Q That's a great clarification. Thank you.

1 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Great.

2 [REDACTED]: Okay.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Have you had an opportunity to review this after-action review from
5 CENTCOM?

6 A To the best of my knowledge, I have not.

7 Q Well, we're happy to sort of walk through the various portions, all section
8 marked, and any time we can provide any clarifying information, be happy to do so.

9 So we'll start with the first section, titled "Issue," under "DoS Integration":
10 "Consular affairs personnel rotated during NEO."

11 And moving to the "Discussion" section, which states, "On 21 August, DoS brought
12 in new consular personnel and replaced the consular team that initiated the evacuation.

13 "This mid-evacuation rotation caused confusion as the new consular team
14 established operations. The new team shifted to initially AMCIT and legal permanent
15 residents only, but then shifted back, allowing P1/P2 refugees, and establish a level of SIV
16 processing paperwork that was acceptable. This caused confusion for security
17 personnel and evacuees which led to delays in evacuee processing.

18 "Consular staff did not have sufficient manning to supervise all processing at the
19 gates which often led to Department of Defense (DoD) personnel at the gates making on
20 the spot calls concerning paperwork. The Consular provided examples and training to
21 the DoD gate guards for processing paperwork, though with the limited time exposure,
22 there was confusion as to what paperwork was acceptable."

23 You'll see that it then states, "Recommendation: As recommended in JP 3-68,
24 Department of State needs to identify in NEO planning the expected NEO numbers by
25 category. The DoS needs to provide the adequate number of consular officers that were

1 part of the NEO planning to facilitate the evacuee categories. The criteria for
2 prioritization needs to be presented up front and designed with DoD lead ECC planners."

3 So there's a lot to unpack here.

4 First, I want to go back to my question: Do you believe there were adequate
5 consular officers at HKIA to execute the mission?

6 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. He already answered that. Are you -- do you have a
7 question about this particular -- this is, I guess, an after-action review done by the
8 military?

9 [REDACTED]. Correct, by Central Command.

10 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Okay.

11 [REDACTED]. Now, my next question is, can you speak to why Central
12 Command has these critiques with respect to the number of consular affairs officers on
13 the ground?

14 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. If you know.

15 Under Secretary Bass. I wasn't consulted by whoever did this at CENTCOM. I
16 don't know what basis or what information was available to whoever was reaching these
17 conclusions. I don't know if they talked to any Department officials on the ground. I
18 don't know if they assessed the physical security infrastructure that limited access to
19 individuals. I don't know if they considered the extent to which consular staff, unlike
20 Active-Duty military personnel, were not trained for close quarters physical
21 conduct -- contact -- with individuals that might have posed a threat to them.

22 So it's quite difficult to determine whether this is a valid characterization or not.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q Did military leaders on the ground communicate any of these grievances to
25 you while you are were in Afghanistan?

1 A I don't recall anybody suggesting to me that we didn't have enough people.
2 By people, I mean trained consular professionals.

3 I do recall on a couple of occasions discussions about whether or not we would be
4 prepared to put our consular personnel beyond the perimeter to try to assess people's
5 qualifications in the middle of the crowds, and I was not prepared to do that.

6 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

7 Did you at any point request consular reinforcements?

8 A I don't recall specifically. I may have in the first few days. But, as I noted
9 in my earlier response, after being there for a number of days and assessing what
10 throughput realistically was given the physical security limitations, I assessed that we had
11 a sufficient number of people at that point in time.

12 Q And do you recall how many consular officers worked at each gate at HKIA?

13 A My recollection is on any given shift we had between two and four or five
14 per shift, depending on what the circumstances were like at that entry point on a given
15 day, in a given period of time.

16 Sometimes they were substantially overcrowded and it was very difficult to have
17 anyone enter, in which case it didn't make sense to have five individuals there. Other
18 times, in other locations, perhaps there was more predictable flow-through, and so a
19 higher number made sense.

20 Q Thank you.

21 Now, transitioning a bit, how did the Department determine which populations
22 were eligible for evacuation?

23 A Well, our first obligation is always our fellow citizens and their immediate
24 family members who have legal pathways to the United States.

25 Beyond that, we tried to prioritize lawful permanent residents, although that

1 could be more complicated depending on the documentation that they had with them
2 and whether they were considered by the Taliban to be Americans, as opposed to
3 Afghans.

4 And then, beyond that, we prioritized categories of Afghans and -- well, categories
5 of Afghans who had worked closely for or with the United States Government, whether
6 civilian or military, and prospectively were at risk as a result of those working
7 relationships; and, by a corollary, worked closely with our representatives from allied and
8 partner nations to enable them to reach or enable the entry of similar populations of
9 most import to them.

10 Q And when you say, with respect to the legal permanent residents, or LPRs,
11 whether the Taliban believed they were American, is this because the Taliban controlled
12 who got to the gates at the various checkpoints?

13 A It's a function, first and foremost, of what I understood and recall to have
14 been Taliban checkpoints, not right at the perimeter but on major thoroughfares on the
15 approach to the airport, and particularly as we evolved into trying to use entry points that
16 were not available to the entire public, if you will, but that required some degree of
17 coordination with the Taliban to allow people to access that particular neighborhood
18 adjacent to the airport.

19 Q Thank you.

20 A So we, you know, we had -- it was also based in part on feedback we were
21 receiving as we were encouraging American citizens -- or particularly American
22 citizens -- to move to the airport, and they were giving us feedback on their interactions
23 with individual Talibs at checkpoints.

24 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

25 And to what extent were the eligible evacuation populations changed or revised

1 throughout the NEO?

2 A Day to day, sometimes hour to hour, we were shifting priorities to reflect the
3 realities of the circumstances on the ground with an eye to maximizing our ability to help
4 as many people taking access to the airport complex from those categories as possible.

5 I think initially, I recall, we prospectively anticipated it would be easier for
6 American citizens who were well documented to move, but then realized that families in
7 which there was a mixture of American citizens and Afghan nationals, that the Taliban
8 were being quite literal in who they would allow to pass.

9 And so there was a great deal of iteration over many days to try to facilitate access
10 and entry for American citizens. And so, as that stretched out over time, that created
11 opportunities to help other categories move in as we saw those opportunities materialize.

12 Q Thank you.

13 Do you believe that caused confusion at the gates for the marines who were
14 standing outside of them in determining which populations can come into HKIA?

15 A There were a number of factors that created confusion outside the publicly
16 known entry points, and that made it particularly challenging for the marines at those
17 entry points, basic overcrowding being the first of those, coupled with desperation.

18 I think it's fair to say that the nature of trying to identify individuals by virtue of a
19 potentially dated document created challenges.

20 Q And what entities outside of the State Department were involved in
21 determining which populations were eligible for evacuation?

22 A There was, as I recall, a pretty robust interagency discussion on a daily basis,
23 sometimes more frequently. Partly that was other agencies flagging for us on
24 populations of Afghans who had worked with them in some capacity, sometimes directly,
25 often on a contract or as an implementing partner of another U.S. Government entity, so

1 you get these attenuated relationships.

2 So pretty robust ongoing discussion.

3 Q Do you believe this served to the detriment of the State Department, namely
4 in having a determined evacuee population?

5 A I wouldn't put a value judgment on it. I think it reflected the nature of the
6 very dynamic environment in which we were operating and the scale of the need, the
7 scale of the population that was seeking to depart that had legitimate connections either
8 to the United States or to allied and partner nations.

9 Q Thank you.

10 And how did the Department determine what documentation was acceptable for
11 evacuation?

12 A In the case of citizens and lawful permanent residents, my recollection is
13 evidence of a passport or LPR card was sufficient.

14 For other categories it varied according to the size of the population and the
15 degree to which they were well known or not at that point in time. For example, our
16 local colleagues, former -- well, at that point current employees of the U.S. Embassy, that
17 was a known pool, and so pretty easy to verify who they were. Other categories it was
18 more challenging.

19 Q And how often would guidance on acceptable documentation change?

20 A I don't recall specifically. I think on an additive basis in terms of
21 considering other categories or documentation that was specific enough to individuals to
22 be valid. We'd potentially change that every couple of days as it changed in terms of
23 adding possibilities.

24 Q And to what extent were ad hoc decisions made on the ground as to
25 acceptable documentation?

1 A So I empowered my senior consular managers to use their judgment. I
2 can't speak to how frequently that occurred. But we had a set of consular professionals
3 who had spent a lot of time making these kinds of determinations, in visa interviews, at
4 U.S. embassies and consulates around the world, and I trusted that they would be
5 exercising good judgment in evaluating people's eligibility for legal pathways to the
6 United States.

7 Q And was -- how was this training or this sort of judgment imparted on the
8 marines that were at the gates and were essentially the individuals responsible for
9 allowing the inflow into HKIA?

10 A So we periodically had discussions with the Marine Corps leadership and in
11 some cases, other than the entry gates you're referring to, with elements of the 82nd
12 who were at other, less publicly known entry points. And then generally on a
13 shift-to-shift basis.

14 If and as we were adjusting criteria, there would be a briefing by those consular
15 officers who were going out to that specific location at that point in time. And those
16 would be supplemented by the senior consular managers, with military counterparts as
17 needed, as they engaged in troubleshooting.

18 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

19 And once evacuees made it inside of HKIA, can you speak to what would happen if
20 an evacuee didn't have the appropriate identification materials, namely when consular
21 officers would then screen them within the airport?

22 A I recall that at points in time when subsets of people were permitted access
23 to relieve pressure and overcrowding and potential casualties at the gates from the mass
24 of the crowd, that in subsequent evaluation of those people, that if they did not appear
25 to have a legal pathway to the United States or to other allied and partner nations, that

1 they were escorted off the airfield complex.

2 Q So they were removed off the airport premises?

3 A Some were.

4 Q Can you please speak to the electronic blank visas provided to evacuees by
5 the State Department?

6 A I'm sorry, the --

7 Q Electronic blank visas. I believe some referred to them as the hall pass.

8 A So I can't speak in detail to that, because that was an effort that was
9 attempted prior to my arrival. But, broadly speaking, that was an effort to try to create
10 an identifier that would distinguish an individual with whom we were in contact, who we
11 knew had a legal pathway, from the much wider set of people, but, unfortunately, proved
12 to be easily replicable.

13 And soon, as I understood it when I arrived, it was pretty much ubiquitous and
14 therefore not of practical value in trying to evaluate within a big, indiscriminate mass of
15 people who should enter and who should not.

16 Q What impact did this have on determining who was a legitimate SIV holder?

17 A In the subsequent days?

18 Q Correct, once it became ubiquitous.

19 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. I think he answered that. He said it wasn't useful.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q That was not my question. My question was, what impact did it have on
22 SIV holders, what measures did you have to partake in to mitigate the fact that you could
23 no longer use this electronic blank visa?

24 A We did not over the course of those 12 days develop a uniquely effective
25 way of identifying SIV applicants from a large and differentiated mass of people.

1 Instead, we attempted to enable SIV holders who were affiliated with an
2 organization, to the best of my recollection, who were able to potentially gain access
3 through a separate mechanism to do so.

4 Q Thank you.

5 Under Secretary Bass, what efforts -- understanding that your involvement in
6 Afghanistan after serving as Ambassador subsided until your role in the NEO -- are you
7 aware of what efforts the State Department made to identify the number of Americans in
8 Afghanistan in 2021 prior to your arrival mid-August?

9 A No, I'm not.

10 Q Were you at any point able to confirm how many Americans were in
11 Afghanistan?

12 A Are you asking during my 12 days?

13 Q Correct.

14 A Given that Americans aren't required to register with the United States
15 Government, we don't track our citizens overseas. We rely on their voluntary
16 communications with us.

17 Our best number was the number of American citizens who were in contact with
18 us, and we had to work off of that number as our baseline. But I don't know to what
19 extent there was a delta between that number and the overall number of American
20 citizens.

21 Q Thank you.

22 So we'd like to talk a bit more about the U.S. airlift from HKIA during the NEO and
23 the breakdown of evacuees by category, understanding that you might not have the
24 numbers down to a T memory.

25 Do you recall how many of those individuals who were airlifted through the U.S.

1 efforts were U.S. citizens?

2 A So my recollection is at the end of the NEO we had something on the order
3 of 6,000 American citizens that we'd been able to depart.

4 Q And how many were legal permanent residents or green card holders?

5 A I don't know specifically. We, again, because they were not identifying as
6 one or the other necessarily, it wasn't a subcategory that we were actively tracking at the
7 time.

8 Q And how many were SIVs?

9 A I don't know.

10 Q How about Afghan commandos, including those who worked with U.S.
11 Government entities outside of the military?

12 A I don't have a precise figure, and it becomes difficult when you're trying to
13 differentiate. If you're differentiating between principal applicants and family members,
14 it becomes even more complicated.

15 I would say in that category that you've just described, if you include family
16 members, that was easily 20,000. But I don't have a precise number for you.

17 Q And how many were Afghans with no direct link to the United States
18 Government?

19 A I think it depends on how you define direct link. Some people might define
20 that as including people who worked for implementing partners or there were -- you
21 know, many of the people who were of interest to other governments for whom
22 indirectly it was therefore important for us to help gain access or did not have been a
23 direct link to the U.S. Government.

24 So, in the absence of a better definition, it's hard for me to answer that.

25 Q So I would -- let's include implementing partners there. I would -- just

1 given, while maybe more attenuated, it might be easier to distinguish.

2 The question -- I'll get to the follow-up question because I think this is what we're
3 really trying to get out.

4 Many people have suggested that the Afghans who were lifted out of Kabul -- or
5 many of the Afghans who were lifted out of Kabul were individuals without ties to the
6 United States, while many of our Afghan allies were left behind.

7 Do you believe this statement to be correct or incorrect?

8 A I think the majority of people who were able to depart as a result of our
9 efforts in those 12 days were in categories that we had prioritized or were otherwise at
10 significant risk or in equivalent categories for our allied and partner nations.

11 Q So let's talk a bit more about the American citizens in Afghanistan,
12 understanding that we don't have an exact number based on the self-reporting feature.

13 How many Americans have been evacuated from Afghanistan since August 31,
14 2021?

15 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. I'm sorry, August 31, 2021. So this is after the 12 days?

16 [REDACTED]. Correct.

17 Under Secretary Bass. Yeah. I don't have that figure available today. I don't
18 know.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q And are you aware, do you have an estimate of how many Americans were
21 still in Afghanistan when the U.S. left at the end of August 2021?

22 A My recollection is that there were several hundred who either elected not to
23 leave, in part, in a number of cases, because they were part of complex families and their
24 extended families did not have a legal pathway to the United States, or elected to stay for
25 other reasons. Didn't feel secure enough trying to get themselves to the airport.

1 Whatever the circumstances were, my recollection is it was several hundred.

2 Q And what was the State Department's post-August 31 plan for getting
3 Americans and Afghan allies out?

4 A So immediately following the end of the noncombatant evacuation, we
5 continued efforts to try to help American citizens to depart in the initial weeks by trying
6 to prioritize them for charter flights that were operating from Mazar, and then,
7 subsequent to that, in a series of efforts to try to organize charter flights into Kabul or,
8 alternately, to find ways to enable them to depart over land to Pakistan.

9 Q Thank you.

10 Can you please discuss the circumstances under which numerous passports of
11 American citizens seeking to evacuate were destroyed in August 2021?

12 A I don't have direct knowledge of that. It preceded my arrival in country.

13 Q Were you briefed on it at any point?

14 A During my time on the ground, I don't recall it coming up at that time.

15 Q How did you become aware of this?

16 A I want to say I learned of it after the conclusion of the NEO while we were
17 trying to address the challenges for those Americans who remained in country in that
18 initial period. It might have been in preparation for oversight hearings in the fall of
19 2021. I don't remember precisely when I became aware of it.

20 Q Can you speak to why the U.S. Government required Americans to sign
21 forms promising to pay for the cost of their flights throughout August 2021,
22 understanding that this may have predated you coming to Kabul?

23 A So that would have been in accordance with standing Department regulation
24 or practice to ensure that we were following the law as set out by Congress, which
25 requires us to seek reimbursement from American citizens for the cost of evacuating

1 them in these circumstances.

2 Q And this proceeded days after the Taliban took over Kabul as well, correct, to
3 the best of your recollection?

4 A I don't remember.

5 Q When was this policy adjusted with respect to the Afghanistan evacuation?

6 A I don't remember.

7 Q Do you recall if it was adjusted at any point?

8 A No. It may have been, it may not have been. I don't remember.

9 Q No problem. Thank you.

10 [Bass Exhibit No. 11.

11 was marked for identification.]

12 [REDACTED]. So I'd like to introduce exhibit 11 next. This is an excerpt of a
13 transcript of an interview President Biden gave to George Stephanopoulos on ABC News,
14 dated August 18th, 2021.

15 If you could please direct your attention to the page marked 6 in the left-hand
16 corner, bottom left-hand corner. Right below the image.

17 Here Stephanopoulos asks President Biden, "All troops are supposed to be out by
18 August 31st. Even if Americans and their Afghan allies are still trying to get out, they're
19 going to leave?"

20 To which President Biden responds, "We're going to do everything in our power
21 are to get all Americans out and our allies out."

22 Stephanopoulos then asks, "Does that mean troops will stay beyond August 31st if
23 necessary?"

24 To which President Biden responds, "It depends on where we are and whether we
25 can get -- ramp these numbers up to 5,000 to 7,000 a day coming out. If that's the case,

1 we'll be -- they'll all be out."

2 Stephanopoulos then responds, "Cause we've got, like, 10,000 to 15,000
3 Americans in the country right now, right? And are you committed to making sure that
4 the troops stay until every American who wants to be out is out?"

5 President Biden states, "Yes."

6 Stephanopoulos then asks, "How about our Afghan allies? We have about
7 80,000 people." Then follows up to ask, "Is that too high?"

8 President Biden confirms that number is too high and states, "The estimate we're
9 giving is somewhere between 50,000 and 65,000 folks total, counting their families."

10 Stephanopoulos asks, "Does the commitment hold for them as well?"

11 To which President Biden responds, "The commitment holds to get everyone out
12 that, in fact, we can get out and everyone that should come out. And that's the
13 objective. That's what we're doing now, that's the path we're on, and I think we'll get
14 there."

15 Stephanopoulos then asks, "So Americans should understand that troops might
16 have to be there beyond August 31st?"

17 To which President Biden says, "No."

18 And Stephanopoulos asks, "So if we don't, the troops will stay?"

19 President Biden responds, "If we don't, we'll determine at the time who's left."

20 And upon Stephanopoulos asking President Biden vows, "And if you're American,
21 if there's American citizens left, we're going to stay to get them all out."

22 Under Secretary Bass, did the State Department consider President Biden's vow
23 that U.S. troops would stay until all Americans had been evacuated to be a statement of
24 U.S. policy and thus a directive to the State Department?

25 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Are you asking whether at the time he was on the

1 ground he was aware of the statement in this interview?

2 [REDACTED]: Correct. And not specifically with reference to the interview
3 but that President Biden had made a vow to get all Americans out.

4 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. I think a "vow" is a characterization.

5 But sure, were you aware of the statements in this interview?

6 Under Secretary Bass. So, no, I wasn't aware of this press interview at the time.
7 I would say I understood every day that our highest priority was to enable the departure
8 of every American citizen who wanted to leave.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q How about this last portion of this interview, namely, if there's Americans
11 left "we're going to stay to get them all out"? Was this -- did this align with what your
12 orders and directives were?

13 A There were extensive ongoing discussions at senior levels about how long
14 we could continue the noncombatant evacuation operation and whether it would be
15 possible to go past the date the Taliban had in mind that we would conclude, which was
16 31 August.

17 Q When did the State Department realize that hundreds of Americans would
18 be left behind in Afghanistan?

19 A Right up until the morning of August 30th we continued to enable the
20 departure of American citizens. At the time we were focused on getting as many folks
21 out as we could and I was not tracking math on an hourly basis as to what the remaining
22 cohort might be.

23 Q Thank you.

24 I'd like it enter exhibit 12 next. This is a not-yet-final excerpt of Ms. Jayne
25 Howell's transcribed interview conducted on July 28th, 2023.

1 [Bass Exhibit No. 12.
2 was marked for identification.]

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q If you could please direct your attention to the page marked 107 in the top
5 right-hand corner.

6 Here the majority asks Ms. Howell, "Is it fair to say then that you can't definitively
7 say that every American that wanted to get out got out of Afghanistan?"

8 To which Ms. Howell responds, "No, I don't believe every American who wanted
9 to depart was able to depart, but how many, I don't know."

10 If you go further down the page, line 15, you'll see the majority asks Ms. Howell,
11 "Do you think that understanding that number was important, especially given the fact
12 that you believe that some Americans who wanted to leave were left behind?"

13 To which she responds, "I don't know how it would have changed anything that
14 we did, right, like, because -- and the reason I started this answer by telling you I spent a
15 lot of time trying to figure this number out is because I had started with the assumption
16 that it would be important and it would shift what we were trying to do.

17 "But after a time, I realized the President had made a decision, because of stuff
18 that I don't know how Presidents make decisions, that we were leaving before August 31.

19 "And what I know for sure is that there was not one second between the day that I
20 was told that, a second, not half a second, not an iota of a second that every single
21 resource and cell in my body and every person who was there didn't make every heroic
22 effort to get every person.

23 "If someone had told me there's five Americans left or there's 5,000 Americans
24 left, it would not have made a difference in what we did, because there was nothing left
25 on the table, nothing. There was nothing."

1 So looking at Ms. Howell's transcript relative to the transcript of the interview that
2 we just read into the record that President Biden gave, do you believe that President
3 Biden broke his promise to get every American who wanted to get out out?

4 A I think the President had to make a very difficult decision, given the
5 dynamics in the country at the time, and had to factor in a number of different
6 considerations.

7 One of which, importantly, was our efforts, as Ms. Howell noted, right up until the
8 very last minute to reach every American we could.

9 But also to think about the prospective ways in which the situation could have
10 gotten worse if we had stayed longer than 31 August, particularly if, as I understood it,
11 the Taliban had been signaling to all of their fighters that the Americans would be gone by
12 the 31st of August.

13 And the prospect of what things might have looked like if we had still been there
14 and the prospect for a significant loss of life resulting from that if conflict had renewed,
15 that was another factor clearly in the discussions about how long it would be possible to
16 stay.

17 Q Thank you. That's helpful.

18 Under Secretary Bass, you had testified to the differences in the security situation
19 outside of HKIA and what it was like inside the airport.

20 Our understanding was that the outside was very difficult, overpopulated, but
21 once inside the situation was much more controlled. Is that a correct characterization?

22 A Broadly speaking, yes.

23 Q Can you speak to the crowds that stormed the airport and the airfield during
24 the evacuation?

25 A Could you be a bit more specific?

1 Q Of course.

2 It's our understanding that at a midpoint in the NEO, crowds from outside of the
3 gates stormed the airport and the airfield and that there was damage done to the airport.

4 Do you recall that? I believe this would have predated your time in Afghanistan.

5 A Yeah, if you're referring to the initial period when U.S. forces initially were
6 back on the ground and there was those terrible images of the people running alongside a
7 C-17, that all predated my return. So I don't have any personal knowledge of any of
8 that.

9 Q Are you aware of any control sensors or radar systems that were damaged
10 as a result of that?

11 A I don't recall.

12 Q Once were you on the ground, did this have any lasting impact on the
13 functionality of the airfield?

14 A I don't recall.

15 Q Did this at all impact the ability to bring in and send out flights?

16 A I'm not expert in flight operations. Certainly there were days at the height
17 of the NEO where aircraft were taking off every 5 minutes, 10 minutes. So as a
18 layperson, I would say it did not impact the operational tempo.

19 Q Fair enough.

20 Are you aware if the U.S. Government brought in teams to fix the damage that
21 had been done to the airfield?

22 A I'm not aware of that specifically, no.

23 Q During the NEO, and more specifically the 12 days that you were at HKIA, did
24 the Department assess the airport to be vulnerable to a terrorist attack?

25 A I don't recall that the State Department had any individual separate threat

1 assessment distinct from that at the Department of Defense, which was responsible for
2 force protection on the ground.

3 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

4 Did you at any point interact with the Taliban while being on the ground at HKIA?

5 A No.

6 Q Were you aware of claims that the Taliban were beating people in the
7 crowds and robbing Afghans in the crowds of their possessions?

8 A I was aware of reports that the Talibs were beating individuals at
9 checkpoints, yes. I was not aware of reports of robberies.

10 Q Were you aware of reports that Americans were also being beaten by the
11 Taliban with sticks?

12 A Yes. As I mentioned in one my earlier replies, this was part of why it was
13 an extended effort to help Americans to safely and securely reach the airport, because
14 particularly Americans and mixed families experienced significant difficulties with Talibs
15 who were quite literal in looking at what documents people had and then tried to forcibly
16 engage in separating families.

17 And I would say that prospectively was a contributing factor to why we had some
18 Americans remaining in country at the end. We had a subset of Americans who were
19 indicating to our consular colleagues that they wanted to leave but they didn't feel safe
20 enough to get themselves to the airport.

21 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

22 Were you aware of any discussions or agreements struck between U.S. military
23 commanders and Taliban commanders during the NEO?

24 A I was aware of ongoing discussions between U.S. military representatives
25 and representatives of the Taliban concerning functional working relationships in a gray

1 zone outside of the perimeter that the U.S. military was controlling and where the
2 Taliban's forward people might have been.

3 And I was aware that we -- that the U.S. military utilized their communications
4 with the Talibs to reinforce the importance of recognizing U.S. documents, including LPR
5 cards, and as time went on to understand that one American in a family group was
6 sufficient to allow the entire family group to move.

7 Q Thank you.

8 Now, we had discussed sort of the checkpoints that the Taliban occupied now on
9 multiple occasions, but do you have any insight as to why General McKenzie rejected the
10 Taliban's offer to allow the U.S. to maintain security control of Kabul during the
11 evacuation?

12 A That, I believe, preceded my arrival by a number of days, so I don't have any
13 insights into that.

14 Q Were you briefed on the offer at all?

15 A To the best of my recollection, no.

16 Q When did you become aware that this offer was made?

17 A I don't remember.

18 Q Was it after the NEO?

19 A Probably.

20 Q Are you able to speak to which Taliban groups were present outside of HKIA?
21 Namely, did those groups include Haqqani Network groups and Badri 313 groups?

22 A I don't recall specifics about the composition of the Talib forces.

23 Q Are you aware if the U.S. communicated with or coordinated with Haqqani
24 Network Taliban leaders or members during this period?

25 A I don't remember. I don't recall that happening, but I don't know.

1 Q Do you recall who Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis was?

2 A No.

3 Q After the Taliban took over Kabul, did the State Department press the
4 Taliban at any point to extend the withdrawal date beyond August 31 to facilitate the
5 evacuation?

6 A I don't remember if representatives of the U.S. Government engaged them
7 specifically with that question or not.

8 Q Understanding that this predated you getting to HKIA, are you aware of why
9 the Taliban freed thousands of prisoners from Bagram, including thousands of ISIS-K
10 prisoners, when they captured it in August 2021?

11 A No.

12 Q Did the U.S. Government at any point ask the Taliban why they did this?

13 A I don't know.

14 Q Did the Taliban face any repercussions from the U.S. for doing so?

15 A I don't know.

16 Q Are you aware that one of those released prisoners was the ISIS-K prisoner
17 that carried out the suicide bombing at Abbey Gate?

18 A I was not aware of that -- or, if I had been, I don't recall that at this point.

19 Q Can you please speak to which U.S.-allied groups were guarding HKIA during
20 the NEO -- in addition to U.S. troops, of course?

21 A Could you be more specific?

22 Q Of course. I'll go through some of the various groups, which might help
23 sort of jog memories.

24 Did our Turkish allies play any role in assisting with that?

25 A Yes. My recollection is there were several hundred Turkish military

1 personnel who remained and were performing some of the operational functions at the
2 airport.

3 Q And what role did the Afghan Zero units and commandos play?

4 A The members of, as I understood it, at least one of the Zero units helped
5 provide security for a period of the NEO.

6 Q And how about our NATO allies?

7 A There were substantial military cohorts from a number of allies, at a
8 minimum, not -- this is illustrative, not comprehensive -- the U.K., France, Norway, Italy,
9 Slovakia, Germany.

10 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

11 We have 1 minute left on the clock before we get to the next subject. I think it's
12 better if we stop the time here and go off the record.

13 [Recess.]

1 [3:41 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]: All right. We'll go back on the record. We'll endeavor to be
3 brief.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Speaking to American citizens in the country during your time in Kabul, what
6 percentage of outreach to AMCITS was handled by consular staff at HKIA?

7 A During the noncombatant evacuation?

8 Q Correct.

9 A I would say a very small percentage, in my recollection.

10 Q And so was the outreach, in large, being conducted from Washington?

11 A It was being, as I recall, coordinated by the Consular Task Force nested under
12 the overarching task force but utilized consular sections around the world, essentially
13 following the sun, to ensure that we had good ability to do that around the clock.

14 Q So fair to say outreach to AMCITS was being handled by HKIA D.C. and also
15 through missions around the world?

16 A That's my recollection, yes.

17 Q Is it a fair characterization to say that the effort was multipronged and
18 extensive?

19 A Yes. My recollection is there were tens of thousands of calls or emails to
20 American citizens in Afghanistan over that period of time.

21 Q Can you identify what STEP is for the record, the program STEP?

22 A It is the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, I think.

23 Q You got it right.

24 A Wow, that's good.

25 Q It's not a pop quiz, I promise.

1 And do American citizens have to opt into the program?

2 A Yes, they do. And we encourage them to do so when they travel overseas.

3 Q And why do they have to opt into the program?

4 A Because the United States Government does not and the Department of
5 State do not track American citizens as they move around the world for a variety of
6 reasons, including the Privacy Act and other legal protections under U.S. law.

7 Q Okay. And are you aware of whether or not the State Department took
8 measures outside of the STEP program to contact American citizens residing in Kabul and
9 Afghanistan writ large during the NEO?

10 A My recollection is that we used a range of tools, including broad public
11 messaging. Through those systems, we did direct call-outs. And I want to say I recall
12 that, in some cases, if we were not able to reach the American citizen, there were efforts
13 to reach family members or others that the American citizen had said we could be in
14 contact with.

15 Q So, to be clear for the record, the Department used the STEP program, public
16 messaging, outreach to family members of American citizens, as part of its toolkit to
17 evacuate individuals from Afghanistan. Is that correct?

18 A We used as many different channels as we could. My recollection is we
19 were engaging, as American citizens had allowed us to, with family members, but you
20 would want to double-check that particular aspect.

21 Q Okay. And you previously testified about some AMCITS who wanted to
22 leave the country and then didn't want to leave the country. Is that correct?

23 A I would characterize them as Americans who wanted to leave but did not
24 feel safe enough or comfortable enough moving from wherever they were to the airport
25 under the circumstances.

1 Q So is it fair to say that, between August 15th and 31st, there was an ebb and
2 flow of individuals who wanted to leave the country and then didn't want to leave the
3 country?

4 A I can't speak for the period between August 15th and on or about the 19th.
5 I would say, after that, that's, broadly speaking, a fair characterization, although I think
6 it's maybe a better characterization to say there was an ebb and flow of Americans who
7 were ready to make the effort to get themselves to the airport.

8 They wanted -- they consistently wanted to leave. Whether they felt safe
9 enough to move through the city or get themselves to the city and try to approach the
10 airport, that ebbed and flowed.

11 Q So what we're speaking about here, is it fair to say people make their own
12 individualized calculations about their safety, their family's safety, their wellness, et
13 cetera, that could, in part, relate to their willingness or desire to leave the country?

14 A Yes. That's -- that's accurate. And, you know, I can recall at least a couple
15 of subsets of Americans or lawful permanent residents who had returned to Kabul in the
16 days immediately preceding the collapse of the government, despite our travel warnings
17 that were quite explicit and recommending Americans -- warning Americans not to travel
18 to the country.

19 Q Okay. The AAR characterized Consular Affairs' efforts to reach out to
20 AMCITS as commendable and entrepreneurial, despite the limited information.

21 Given your experience on the ground, do you agree with that sentiment?

22 A Yes.

23 Q I'd like to draw your attention back to the AAR. That's exhibit No. 9, page
24 19, section 10.

25 Section 10 is entitled "Support for U.S. Citizens and Other Vulnerable Populations

1 in a Crisis." The first bullet point reads, "The AAR found that official warnings to private
2 U.S. citizens throughout the review period were clear about the dangers of remaining in
3 Afghanistan. Most who remained were Afghan Americans who had made their own
4 calculations about the risks involved or had compelling reasons to remain
5 notwithstanding the inherent dangers. This is the case in many crisis situations. What
6 was unique in the evacuation of Afghanistan, however, was the effort to identify and
7 reach out directly to these U.S. citizens repeatedly. Going forward, the Department
8 must consider if it will follow this model and, if so, what are the privacy and resource
9 implications."

10 Do you agree with this overall assessment?

11 A It's consistent with my recollection of our experience in that period. I can't
12 speak to the frequency of communications or efforts in the preceding period before
13 mid-August.

14 Q Okay. And, in terms of the outreach to American citizens, you previously
15 testified that you served in other crises, including an evacuation in Lebanon.

16 Compared to that crisis situation, can you testify as to the efforts made to reach
17 out to American citizens in the Afghanistan NEO?

18 A So, just to clarify, with regard to Lebanon, I was not on the ground. I was
19 on -- serving in the Operations Center in Washington.

20 I don't recall specifically our communications with American citizens at the time,
21 but the -- the frequency and the individualized outreach on a persistent basis over
22 multiple days, in my experience, is quite unusual.

23 Q Would you agree with the sentiment that the outreach for the NEO we're
24 discussing here today was, in fact, unprecedented?

25 A I think, prospectively, in terms of the duration and the volume, one might

1 characterize it as unprecedented. But, in the absence of like comparators, I would -- I
2 would hesitate to make that kind of a blanket assessment.

3 Q Would you agree that it was extraordinary?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Okay.

6 Did you receive requests from executive branch officials or agencies flagging
7 individuals inside Afghanistan and requesting State's assistance with getting them
8 processed and evacuated from Kabul?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Could you describe the nature and number of these requests?

11 A They were, to the best of my recollection, fairly extensive, persistent, and
12 sometimes impassioned.

13 Q Could you describe further what you mean by extensive?

14 A In some cases, we would hear from multiple entities or multiple individuals
15 within another portion of the executive branch.

16 I'm sorry; did your question transcend the executive branch, or was it limited to
17 the executive branch?

18 Q Limited to the executive branch.

19 A Okay. We'd get multiple inquiries about the same person. We'd get
20 inquiries or advocacy on their behalf, on a rolling basis, as their individual circumstances
21 changed for understandable reasons but -- so extensive in number and scope and
22 intensity.

23 Q Did you receive requests from Members of Congress flagging individuals
24 inside Afghanistan and requesting State's assistance with evacuating them?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Can you describe the nature and number of these requests?

2 A Again, extensive, persistent, and quite impassioned at times on -- many of
3 those inquiries came from Members. Some came from staff as well.

4 Q Can you put a ballpark number on how many outreaches you received?

5 A Personally?

6 Q Yes.

7 A I don't remember specifically, but it was at least dozens.

8 Q Did you receive requests from non-USG groups flagging individuals inside
9 Afghanistan and requesting State's assistance with evacuating them?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Can you describe the nature and number of those requests?

12 A Again, extensive, persistent, often impassioned.

13 Q How did you work on these special priority cases?

14 A We attempted first, to the best of our ability, to understand whether the
15 individuals being put forward to us fit into one of those categories that I believe I
16 mentioned earlier in my testimony.

17 We sought to understand how many people we were talking about. We sought
18 to understand a bit more about where they were located, whether they were part of a
19 larger group. And then we sought to understand some of the practical considerations
20 about how difficult or, comparatively, a little less difficult it would be for them to enter
21 safely in a certain period of time. And sometimes we were able to facilitate that entry,
22 and other times we were not.

23 Q What impact did attending to these special priority cases have on your
24 overall bandwidth and ability to accomplish your duties?

25 A So there was a zero-sum dynamic between time spent responding directly or

1 engaging directly with people outside of the environment back here in the U.S. and the
2 time available to creatively problem-solve and try to figure out best path forward for the
3 dynamics of that hour or 6 hours or 12-hour period.

4 Q Did you find this distracting to your duties related to evacuating AMCITS?

5 A I don't know that I could separate out any individual component. It isn't as
6 if we had a very clear straightforward approach with our American citizen caseload and
7 over here this part was complicated. It was all extremely complicated and fraught.

8 Q You repeated the word "impassioned" related to these requests. What
9 impact did that have on you?

10 A It increased my already quite high sense of obligation to do the best we
11 could in the circumstances. It was quite distracting in hearing about some of the
12 interactions that my colleagues were being subjected to where -- for understandable
13 reasons, but nonetheless people who were advocating on behalf of an individual were
14 casting aspersions on their patriotism, their professionalism, their commitment, their care
15 if they were not willing to effect the departure of that particular individual.

16 Q Thank you.

17 Were you aware of any evacuation efforts by private groups that were organized
18 independently of the Department?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Can you describe what such efforts included?

21 A So they -- my recollection is they ran the gamut from groups that were
22 attempting to collect good information, actionable information about where a group of
23 individuals might be or create a group that could move themselves and then
24 communicate with us about when and where they might present themselves all the way
25 up the spectrum to groups that I recall being in contact with the Department or the State

1 reps on the ground or the U.S. military, asserting that they had their own capabilities and
2 weapons and were prepared to arrive in country and go out and conduct their own
3 independent rescue operations.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Can you tell us a little bit more about some of those groups that asserted
6 they had their own capabilities?

7 A I don't remember the specifics beyond that sort of characterization. You
8 know, I can recall a few conversations about learning that there was a group X or group Y
9 that was seeking entry and asserting that they would be fine to self-protect and move
10 around and --

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q What impact did these private efforts have on the overall USG effort to
13 evacuate AMCITS, those in the SIV pipeline and other Afghans at risk?

14 A I think, during the NEO, it -- I would say the impact was primarily in, as I
15 recall, duplicating advocacy and creating greater challenges for the consular professionals
16 offshore who were trying to keep track of individual American citizens and their
17 whereabouts, you know, as they would be receiving in some cases dozens of inquiries
18 about the same person in a given period of time. That created additional caseload work
19 to try to work through without necessarily contributing new information.

20 Q Okay. How would you respond to the assessment we've heard from some
21 that the NEO was essentially an evacuation of the well-connected?

22 A I think, in my recollection, that's a pretty profound oversimplification.
23 Many of the American citizens that we enabled to leave were not people of prominence
24 or even of means in some cases.

25 The -- I would say, you know, within the larger pool of Afghans who we sought to

1 help, people who had prior professional relationships with the Embassy or the U.S.
2 Government on -- prospectively, that put them at greater risk. If they were
3 implementing partners known to us, they were in a position to -- to self-organize in some
4 cases, which made them -- made their entry easier to -- to facilitate.

5 Q Thank you. And when did you officially conclude your tenure in Kabul?

6 A During -- with regard to the NEO?

7 Q Yes.

8 A I departed, to the best of my recollection, the morning of August 30th.

9 Q Okay. And then, when you arrived back in Washington, did you continue
10 any duties related to the NEO specifically?

11 A So the NEO had concluded by the time that I arrived back in Washington.

12 Q Was there any back briefing that you conducted or exit interviews, et
13 cetera?

14 A So I, as I think I mentioned earlier in my testimony, within a few days of
15 returning started work to organize the -- what became the Office of the Coordinator for
16 Afghan Relocation Efforts.

17 Q And were you involved in researching or drafting the AAR?

18 A I was not.

19 Q Were you interviewed for it?

20 A Yes.

21 Q Do you feel that the content of your interview was well-reflected in the AAR
22 as a drafted document?

23 A I can't say that I have read it with that lens in mind, but I don't recall, in
24 reading it, that there was anything that struck me as being a distortion or counterfactual
25 or inaccurate.

1 Q Okay. And I wanted to read one final passage from majority's exhibit 12,
2 the draft transcript of Jane Howell.

3 Who is Jayne Howell?

4 A Jayne Howell is a career Foreign Service officer who is a senior consular
5 officer.

6 Q And did you work with her directly during the NEO in Kabul?

7 A I did. She was one of the senior consular managers who came in to support
8 the effort.

9 Q And how would you characterize her efforts during the NEO?

10 A Unparalleled in her commitment to doing everything possible to achieve our
11 mission.

12 Q What informs that opinion?

13 A On what basis do I make that opinion --

14 Q Yes.

15 A -- is that the question?

16 Constant interaction with Ms. Howell throughout those 12 days.

17 Q Hardworking?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Qualified?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And do you recall her specific position during the NEO?

22 A So she was one of two senior consular managers within our evacuation team
23 of TDYers. And she and the other consular manager essentially took 12-hour stints to
24 oversee and coordinate the work of the consular teams who were out at the entry gates
25 and also supporting the Marines at the -- at the NEO Processing Center where they were

1 manifesting flights.

2 Q Okay. Thank you.

3 Referring to page 108, starting on line number 3, this is Ms. Howell testifying: "If
4 someone had told me there's 5 Americans left or there's 5,000 Americans left, it would
5 not have made a difference in what we did, because there was nothing left on the table,
6 nothing. There was nothing."

7 She continues on line 6, "And I'm sorry, I'm not shouting at you. I feel like I'm
8 shouting at you. I am -- I cannot describe to you the level of commitment of the people
9 on the ground from every part of our government. It was like this clock ticking. It was
10 like it was over my head. The plane is going to take off, and I want to take everyone
11 who wants to go on it with me, and every person did that. And so, at some point I
12 started feeling like I don't -- the number doesn't change anything for me. I have to leave
13 on that day, and there's not one plane that didn't take off, there's not one empty seat,
14 there's not one Marine, member of the Army, State Department employee who didn't
15 throw everything we had at getting every one of those people."

16 Does her recollection of this time during the NEO comport with your recollection?

17 A Her characterization of that common singular focus across all of the
18 elements of the U.S. Government or on the ground is -- is very accurate, in my
19 experience.

20 Q Is it also your experience that you did everything you could during that time
21 to evacuate as many people as possible from Afghanistan?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Could you tell us why?

24 A Why I come to that conclusion?

25 Q Uh-huh. For example, you stated you were working over 20 hours per day

1 for 12 days.

2 A Yeah. So, again, our -- I've -- in my career in government, I have never seen
3 elements of the U.S. Government work together with such singular purpose and focus
4 and lack of concern for who's getting credit or who's doing what on -- people were
5 relentless in problem-solving and in supporting each other and in trying to do the very
6 best we could with the time we had available to us.

7 Q Thank you. One final question. We'd like to provide you with an
8 opportunity to affirmatively share any information with the committee or perhaps touch
9 upon topics neither the majority or the minority has asked of you.

10 A I don't think I have anything else to offer today.

11 [REDACTED]. Thank you. Reserving our right to ask followup questions after
12 the majority's round, we'd like to thank you on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks and the
13 minority staff for your voluntary participation in today's interview and for your service to
14 the American people. Thank you very much.

15 That concludes our round.

16 Under Secretary Bass. Thank you.

17 [Recess.]

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q Thank you, sir. And the issue of American citizens, it's something that the
20 chairman is very passionate about, so I hope you'll indulge me as I drill down just a little
21 bit more on it.

22 So did every American citizen who wanted to get out of Afghanistan get out by
23 August 31st?

24 A As I think I've previously noted, there were Americans who wanted to leave
25 but didn't feel safe in getting themselves to the airport before August 30th.

1 Q And, in that category of the Americans who wanted to get out but weren't
2 able to because of feelings of not being safe because of the Taliban, what was that
3 number of American citizens?

4 A I don't have a specific number for you. I'm not sure we had one at the
5 time.

6 Q So you're not sure if that was a number that was being specifically tracked at
7 the time?

8 A We had a number of people who had expressed interest in leaving and with
9 whom we were in this constant dialogue.

10 I don't know that, on the morning of August 30th, we knew precisely at that point
11 in time how many of that group of folks who had expressed they wanted to leave had not
12 successfully entered the airport at that point.

13 Q Are you able to give me a ballpark on what that number was?

14 A I don't recall.

15 Q Was it -- do you think it was in the hundreds?

16 A Prospectively, it was in the hundreds, yeah.

17 Q Were there American citizens who tried and failed to get out due to Taliban
18 threats or Taliban violence?

19 A I recall instances in which we received reports of Americans being subjected
20 to Taliban violence, either because they -- their documentation was not recognized or
21 they were part of families who were not all American citizens.

22 And I recall my consular colleagues indicating to me that there were people who
23 were no longer comfortable or prepared to try to get themselves to the airport, but how
24 many of them at the end of the day remained in Kabul as opposed to how many of them
25 subsequently decided to give it a shot I don't know.

1 Q Are you able to give us some detail on how you were tracking American
2 citizens and how you were tracking your effort to get American citizens out of
3 Afghanistan?

4 A So that effort was -- in terms of the overarching collection of information
5 about American citizens, that -- that effort was undertaken in Washington as the central
6 hub.

7 Our effort on the ground was to try to ensure that we were being as creative as
8 possible to facilitate entry for those Americans, facilitate safe passage to the extent
9 something approximating that was possible, and then to support them once they were
10 able to enter the airport.

11 I think -- I recall that there were instances in which Americans with a particular
12 need may have been getting some direct support and interaction from our consular team
13 on the ground, but that would not have, as I recall, been, you know, the case for every
14 American. So long way of saying our team on the ground was not the repository for the
15 statistics on how many Americans at a given point in time were seeking to depart or
16 ready to depart and were in motion, prospectively.

17 Q Thank you. That's very helpful.

18 Are you able to elaborate more on the violence that was inflicted on American
19 citizens by the Taliban? Can you go into a little bit more detail about what you learned
20 about that during your time on the ground?

21 A So, again, what I can recall are reports of Americans being beaten because
22 the Talibs at a particular checkpoint would not recognize their documents, told them to
23 go away; Americans who were beaten when they presented themselves with other
24 members of their family at a Taliban checkpoint and the Talibs said, "Okay, you can go
25 ahead, but everybody else has to move away," and in the course of either an argument or

1 an effort to prevent that physical separation of a family unit, American citizens or family
2 members were beaten.

3 I can recall reports of lawful permanent residents being beaten because in
4 the -- they were -- they did not have a U.S. passport.

5 Q Can you go a little bit further about the LPRs and the situation that they
6 faced, in terms of Taliban violence?

7 A So, as citizens of Afghanistan with an Afghan passport, they would not
8 appear as someone necessarily with a claim to residency in the United States. They
9 weren't Americans, as it was characterized to me, based on some of that feedback in the
10 encounters.

11 So, while we recognize them as residents of the United States with a legal
12 pathway to the U.S., because they did not have a passport, for at least a period of that
13 time, they were unable to gain access through some of our efforts to enable Americans
14 and LPRs to enter.

15 Q What was your feeling at the time about the Taliban's violence against
16 American citizens?

17 A I recall being deeply disturbed by it.

18 Q Would you have described then or now the Taliban's behavior as
19 businesslike or professional?

20 A I don't think one can -- I don't think there's one term that can apply to all of
21 the U.S. Government individuals on the ground's interactions with the Taliban in that
22 period.

23 And that's before you consider the differences between interactions that may
24 have been had between U.S. mil representatives and representatives of the Taliban and
25 then what was actually happening with individual Talibs on checkpoints around the city.

1 I mean --

2 Q So how would you characterize the Taliban's actions?

3 A In that period?

4 Q Yes, sir.

5 A I recall seeing a degree of cooperation from the Taliban when they thought it
6 was in their interest, broadly speaking, because it was enabling the departure of people
7 that we said needed to be able to leave before we would leave.

8 I also saw, to your point, or heard about, didn't see personally but heard of plenty
9 of instances in which individual members of the Taliban behaved brutally towards their
10 fellow Afghans and towards others.

11 Q And what were your thoughts when you got on the plane on August 30th,
12 your thoughts about those Americans that had been left behind, whether they were left
13 behind because of their fear of the Taliban or otherwise? What were your thoughts
14 about the Americans who were still stuck in Afghanistan?

15 A So I don't recall precisely what I was thinking on that particular day, but I felt
16 a strong commitment, as did other members of my team, to continue the effort to help
17 our fellow citizens to depart the country. And that's, in part, why I came back
18 immediately and began to set up the office that became the Office of the Coordinator.

19 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q Before we transition to the next sort of subsection, I just had a followup
22 question.

23 So it's our understanding, both in the course of the investigation as well as just
24 speaking with these groups, that a number of veteran-led groups were leading private
25 evacuation efforts and continue to do so today.

1 During the NEO, did you appreciate and find these efforts helpful in getting Afghan
2 allies out?

3 A So, as I noted earlier in my testimony, efforts by private organizations to
4 validate locations of individuals or to enable them to self-organize and present
5 themselves for entry at a time and place that was predictable, that was helpful.

6 In contrast, efforts that envisioned efforts beyond the perimeter of the airport
7 complex that would have involved private American citizens physically moving back and
8 forth I understood from my military counterparts to be quite concerning, dangerous, and
9 a distraction from the overall effort.

10 Q Thank you.

11 Under Secretary Bass, can you please take us through the sequence of events
12 leading up to the Abbey Gate terrorist attack, including the preceding day?

13 A Could you be a bit more specific with regard to what you mean by "sequence
14 of events"?

15 Q Of course. It would be helpful to us to understand seemingly the threat
16 assessment in the days preceding the attack and the general security situation on the
17 ground outside of HKIA.

18 A Okay. So, first, as a point of context, there were a range of threats
19 throughout the entire period that I was on the ground for the NEO that included
20 prospective suicide vest attacks, prospective suicide vehicle-borne IED attacks,
21 prospective indirect fire attacks, direct fire attacks.

22 I mean, pretty much the whole spectrum was in the mix for the analysts
23 who -- that were assessing and evaluating the threat information that was available to
24 them.

25 And, when I say the "analysts," I'm referring to the U.S. military analysts on the

1 ground, who I recall being the main conduit to the larger community of analysts and
2 collectors who were supporting that threat analysis.

3 The State Department did not have an independent collection capability. We
4 didn't have an independent set of analysts on the ground. We weren't making our own
5 independent judgments about threat information. We didn't receive threat information
6 exclusively in that period.

7 I relied on our U.S. military counterparts to tell us what they were seeing in terms
8 of the threat environment and how we should potentially adjust operations.

9 In the -- my recollection is that, in the days preceding the Abbey Gate bombing,
10 there were persistent threat streams surrounding ISIS-K suicide vest attacks, and there
11 were a couple of occasions when they seemed to be coalescing in ways that concerned us
12 sufficiently to warn American citizens not to approach the airport. So that was a
13 constant dynamic that we were contending with.

14 Abbey Gate, as I think you're probably aware by now, was the main access conduit
15 to a facility that the British Government was using to screen candidates. And, as a
16 derivative, through their screening efforts, that was a means of entry for a not
17 insignificant number of American citizens on -- as well as citizens of other allied and
18 partner nations.

19 And my recollection is that, as we evaluated the overall threat environment and
20 how to start consolidating that the British Government representatives on the ground
21 made a very strong appeal that we keep that gate open to allow them to continue their
22 screening efforts as long as possible. And our military commanders agreed to do that.

23 So that's the period preceding the terrible events on the 26th.

24 Q Do you recall which military commanders were involved in that
25 decisionmaking?

1 A I believe it was a combination of General Donahue and Admiral Vasely.

2 Q Thank you. And I know it's a very difficult subject to address, but can you
3 please speak to what happened on the day of the attack?

4 A In terms of what I experienced?

5 Q In terms of sort of the sequence of events from your perspective.

6 A It's a little bit difficult for me to recall precisely order, but my recollection is,
7 for whatever period of time it was prior to the attack, we were continuing to take
8 advantage of that gate, to the best of our ability.

9 We had folks coming in through other access points, including the main entrance,
10 which was kind of our managed entry for cohorts from other governments, from some of
11 the implementing partners and other civil society organizations.

12 And then we had a separate effort underway to bring in additional American
13 citizens at the far end of the airport, to the best of my recollection.

14 So all of that was underway. Attack happened. We all heard it. Immediately
15 went into a shelter-in-place period to try to determine what had happened and whether
16 we had casualties or not. It was communicated to me pretty quickly that there were
17 casualties.

18 We -- I recall seeking to understand where our State Department personnel who
19 may have been collocated were at that point in time; somewhere in there, got word that
20 the DS professionals, Diplomatic Security professionals and consular managers had
21 decided that the environment around that gate at that time was sufficiently insecure,
22 from the perspective of the security of individual consular officers, just from the crowds.

23 Because Afghans knew the clock was ticking. So as -- we saw this throughout.
24 As we got closer to the end, there was more desperation at those identified entry gates.
25 And so, because of those factors, they had pulled the consular officers away from the

1 immediate gate area.

2 So, once I knew that the State Department personnel were, to the best of our
3 understanding, all secure, communicated that with Ambassador Wilson, clarified that that
4 gate would be closed for a period of time, and turned my attention to the other efforts
5 we had underway to continue to bring people in in other places.

6 Q And, just so I'm understanding correctly, DS had made sort of
7 independent -- an independent assessment at that point that, for various factors in
8 addition to threat assessments but also just generally the visible situation on the ground,
9 it was time to pull consular officers back. Is that correct?

10 A Yeah. So they -- at each of those public entry gates on every day, the
11 security -- our Diplomatic Security professionals had delegated authority to make
12 judgments about whether the environment in the immediate area around the gate was
13 sufficiently secure to have Department professionals, consular professionals present in an
14 area for which they had not been trained to operate in, on.

15 Because the nature of the crowding around those gates whenever they opened, it
16 could be quite volatile, particularly as we in many instances would go out -- "we," U.S.
17 military representatives or representatives of other governments, would go out into the
18 crowd to pull people in and selectively allow people entry. That would create quite a bit
19 of emotion, as one would expect, in the crowd.

20 And so, on various days at various points, our Diplomatic Security professionals
21 would conclude that the immediate gate area was too insecure and pull the consular
22 professionals back a couple hundred meters. And so I believe that's what happened
23 that day in and around Abbey Gate, coincident to what then occurred.

24 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

25 What were the considerations on whether to end the NEO after the attack?

1 A I'm sorry? Are you asking if we --

2 Q If there were considerations to end the NEO.

3 A If there was a conversation about ending at that point?

4 Q Correct.

5 A I don't recall a conversation along those lines. It's possible there was one,
6 but I think all of us on the ground felt it was important to continue the effort as long as
7 possible and as long as we could do so.

8 And I personally felt the best way to honor those Marines and other
9 servicemembers was to continue the effort and do every bit as much as we could in that
10 period.

11 Q Thank you.

12 [REDACTED]. So I'd like to transition to the retaliatory strike taken by the U.S.
13 against ISIS-K thereafter. I'd like to enter 13 into the record.

14 [Bass Majority Exhibit No. 13.

15 was marked for identification.]

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q This is an excerpt from the not yet final interview transcript of Consular
18 Officer Sam Aronson conducted on September 15th, 2023.

19 Under Secretary Bass, are you aware who Mr. Sam Aronson is?

20 A Yes.

21 Q He was one of the TDYers, correct, that volunteered?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And it's our understanding he also served at one point as an aide in some
24 capacity to Mr. Jim DeHart. Is that correct?

25 A That is correct.

1 Q If you could please direct your attention to the page marked 145 in the top
2 right-hand corner, line 15 specifically.

3 So here, Mr. Aronson is asked, "So page 240 further states, back inside the JOC,
4 Sam joined" --

5 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. 240 what?

6 [REDACTED]. I was going to clarify. So this exhibit is with reference to his
7 book "The Secret Gate," in which he was featured.

8 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. So this is an interview of another individual, asking him
9 questions about a book.

10 [REDACTED]. So this is a question about a representation in the book "The
11 Secret Gate," and then he follows up to clarify that statement.

12 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Okay.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q So page 240 further states, quote, "Back inside the JOC, Sam joined Bass,
15 DeHart, and other State Department officials for a sensitive mission briefing by Rear
16 Admiral Peter Vasely, who was the highest-ranking U.S. military officer still in Afghanistan.

17 [REDACTED]

18 [REDACTED]

19 [REDACTED]."

20 He is then asked, "Is that an accurate summation of what happened"; to which
21 Mr. Aronson responds, "Yes." He's then asked, "Do you know around what time that
22 briefing was"; to which he responds, "That briefing was [REDACTED] e

23 [REDACTED]" He is then asked, "And that would be [REDACTED]

24 [REDACTED]"; to which he responds, "Yes." He is then asked, "Are you able to

25 provide any more details about that meeting?" He then states, "Yes, recognizing we're

1 in an unclassified space. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
2 [REDACTED]
3 [REDACTED]
4 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
5 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
6 [REDACTED]
7 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
8 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
9 [REDACTED]
10 [REDACTED]
11 [REDACTED]"

12 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. Just a minute.

1 [4:43 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]: We can also go off the record to give you time to consult, if
3 that's helpful.

4 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. No, but let's go off the record. Sorry.

5 [Discussion off the record.]

6 [REDACTED]: Go back on the record.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q Under Secretary Bass, did Rear Admiral Vasely provide updates to you about
9 the retaliatory strike being carried out by ISIS-K?

10 A So what I can say in this setting is that I remained in close contact with senior
11 military commanders on the ground regarding the overall threat environment and
12 regarding any prospective U.S. military action in the aftermath of the Abbey Gate
13 bombing.

14 Q Can you speak to whether this excerpt was making reference to the U.S.
15 strike, air strike in Nangarhar carried out on August 27th against the terrorists whom the
16 U.S. military leader revealed was ISIS-K bomb maker Kabir Aidi and another ISIS-K
17 facilitator.

18 Ms. Sachsman Grooms. I don't think he'll be able to speak to that.

19 [REDACTED]: Again, I feel we're very close to a line. I'm not sure this is supposed
20 to be in a classified setting.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q Do you have any more information you can share about the strike in this
23 space?

24 A I do not.

25 Q Were you ever briefed on or before August 26th about possible ISIS-K targets

1 in Kabul or, more broadly, in Afghanistan?

2 A When you say "before August 26th," are you referring to the period of the
3 NEO?

4 Q Correct.

5 A I don't recall.

6 Q Can you speak to why the U.S. military did not carry out any strikes against
7 ISIS-K until after the Abbey Gate bombing?

8 A I don't recall.

9 Q Were you aware that U.S. military leaders asked the Taliban to search in a
10 raid specific ISIS-K locations in Afghanistan during the NEO?

11 A I don't remember.

12 Q Were you briefed on the Taliban's denial of those requests?

13 A Again, I don't remember.

14 Q Did you at any point learn that the Taliban refused these requests or at the
15 very least learned about the requests that were made?

16 A I don't remember.

17 Q Can you briefly walk us through the sequence of events after the bombing,
18 through your departure, understanding that we've already addressed sort of the hours
19 and the day after the bombing itself?

20 A Is there a specific aspect that you're interested in, in those 4 days or --

21 Q I think we just want to better understand sort of from your perspective what
22 the experience was on the ground at that point in terms of getting out eligible
23 populations, the sentiment outside of the gates, and just the general ability for the State
24 Department to conduct the evacuation.

25 A Sure. So, on or about August 27, with the closure of Abbey Gate the

1 preceding day -- and I can't remember whether it reopened briefly. I think it maybe
2 reopened to enable the U.K. to move a cohort that they had already identified that were
3 at the -- their screening location, as well as their personnel, back to the main airport
4 complex.

5 But, with the closure of Abbey Gate in that 26-27 period, most of the other allied
6 and partner nations concluded their portions of the noncombatant evacuation on the
7 27th and then began to reduce and remove their cohorts from the airport.

8 Throughout the 27th, 28th, 29th, and overnight into the early hours of the 30th,
9 we continued to bring in cohorts of priority populations, including local staff members
10 and families of local staff members at the Embassy, some cohorts from, to the best of my
11 recollection, implementing partners and others who had been in a queue for the main
12 airport entrance, as well as additional cohorts of American citizens and their family
13 members.

14 We paused for a couple of hours on the afternoon of the 27th for a ramp
15 ceremony for our fallen, but, otherwise, our work continued. Spent some time in that
16 period fielding and addressing advocacy requests from a range of people in the executive,
17 legislative branches, and private American citizens.

18 We ran our final effort to bring American citizens and LPRs and others in, in that
19 period of darkness, 29 into 30. And I think we concluded that aspect somewhere
20 between 4 and 5 a.m. and then finished cleaning up our space and destroying equipment
21 and consolidating at the terminal for departure later on the morning of the 30th.

22 Q And the date by which we had provided assurances to the Taliban that we
23 would be out was the 31st, correct?

24 A Yes.

25 Q August 31st? Can you speak to why the U.S. left on the 30th rather than

1 the 31st?

2 A My recollection is that as the -- as we got closer to the final deadline, we
3 needed to, we, the U.S. Government on the ground, had fewer and fewer people. The
4 U.S. military had to begin reducing its complement, which meant there were fewer
5 people for force protection, which meant consolidating into a smaller space within the
6 airport.

7 My recollection is that we left a bit early in terms of not being right up against the
8 last minute to be a bit unpredictable in terms of when we were departing for force
9 protection reasons.

10 Q Thank you. That's helpful.

11 Under Secretary Bass, I briefly want to touch on your preparation for this
12 interview.

13 How did you first learn of the committee's interest in conducting a transcribed
14 interview?

15 A My recollection is that I either learned from -- a letter from the committee or
16 from communications from the committee to counsel at the Department.

17 Q And what was your reaction?

18 A I've always been a strong believer in appropriate oversight and was prepared
19 to support that.

20 Q Thank you.

21 And what kind of preparations did you take for this interview?

22 A I consulted with counsel at the Department and with private counsel.

23 Q Were any officials or individuals from outside the Department involved in
24 your preparations, in addition to counsel, of course?

25 A No.

1 Q We greatly appreciate you answering our questions today. It feels like we
2 have a lot more to ask, but I think we covered significant amounts. And we understand
3 it's getting late.

4 Do you have any closing remarks?

5 A I do not.

6 ██████████. Well, on behalf of Chairman McCaul and the majority, as well as
7 staff, thank you very much for appearing today and answering our questions
8 transparently, with candor.

9 I know the chairman has great respect for you personally, as do staff. So thank
10 you for your efforts, your heroic efforts in Afghanistan, as well as today. Thanks.

11 Go off the record.

12 [Whereupon, at 4:54 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 157 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded, *subject to errata submitted on February 2, 2024*



Witness Name *John R. Bass*

February 27, 2024

Date

**Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of
John Bass dated 01/22/2024**

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel errata, (4) private counsel
(as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
8	14	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
8	21	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
9	10	Change “at” to “as”	
11	8	Change “was an Annie” to “was Annie”	
11	16	Change “outward-facing work with the embassy” to “outward-facing work of the embassy”	
13	3	Change “charge” to “chargé”	
13	8	Change “probably with chief” to “probably with the chief”	
14	9	Change “Thank you and who do you report to in this role?” to “Thank you. And who do you report to in this role?”	
14	18	Change “for Management Resources” to “for Management and Resources”	
15	6 &7	Change “We are going to rewind a bit, if you will indulge, us and delve into the various positions that you have held.” to “We are going to rewind a bit, if you will indulge us, and delve into the various positions that you have held.”	
16	9	Change “jointly solve problems but failing not to” to “jointly solve problems but failing that, to”	
16	18	Change “wide cross section Afghans” to “wide cross section of Afghans”	
17	8	Change “rule the law” to “rule of law”	
19	17	Change “advanced planning” to “advance planning”	
19	17	Change “seniors” to “senior officials”	
19	17	Change “receives advanced planning” to “oversees advance planning”	
19	18	Change “that oversee” to “and oversees”	
22	7	Change “Khalilizad's” to “Khalilzad’s”	
23	13	Change “Khalilizad's” to “Khalilzad’s”	
23	19	Change “Khalilizad's” to “Khalilzad’s”	
25	14	Change “dynamics what we were dealing with in a country” to “dynamics that we were dealing with in the country”	
25	20	Change “Khalilizad's” to “Khalilzad’s”	
25	23	Change “collectively compromise” to “collectively comprised”	
26	14	Change “and so they” to “and so I”	

Page	Line	Change	Reason
28	7	Change “counterpart” to “counterparts”	
28	9	Change “?” to “would be.”	
28	9	Change “?” to “.” At the end of “would be”	
29	2	Change “charge” to “chargé”	
29	4	Change “charge” to “chargé”	
29	13	Change “charge” to “chargé”	
46	1	Change “reduction in consolidation” to “reduction and consolidation”	
57	4	Change “we left off of” to “we left off on”	
60	11	Delete “in”	
69	16	Change “at some removed” to “at some remove”	
69	18	Change “example, for performing any” to “example, or performing any”	
70	24	Change “detail” to “daily”	
72	6	Change “indepth” to “in depth”	
73	12	Change “charge” to “chargé”	
73	12	Change “CHIEF OF MISSION” to “Chief of Mission”	
73	20	Change “charge” to “chargé”	
74	5	Change “responsible in this manner” to “responsible – in this manner”	
76	20	Change “ambassador” to “ambassadors”	
76	20	Change “charges” to “chargés”	
83	2	Strike “that sentence include the Department of State – or”	
85	24	Change “intent of direction” to “intent of the direction”	
92	19	Change “our ability to negotiate with the Taliban” to “perception of what the Afghan government understood”	
97	16	Delete extra “that”	
98	25	Change “situation in terms of your prior work experience” to “situation as a result of your prior work experience”	
103	24	Change “?” to “21 to 23 hours.”	
107	4	Change “and not those who were” to “and not just those who were”	
112	13	Change “marines” to “Marines”	
112	16	Change “marines” to “Marines”	
114	8	Change “marines” to “Marines”	
117	22	Change “or did not have been a direct link” to “or did not have a direct link”	
135	23	Change “did attending” to “did tending”	
140	18	Change “Government or on” to “Government on”	
147	25	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	

Page	Line	Change	Reason
148	6	Change “precisely order” to “precisely the order”	
149	3	Add “I” before “communicated”	
149	13	Add “,” after “consular professionals”	
149	14	Delete “, on”	
153	9	Change “being carried out by ISIS-K” to “being carried out against ISIS-K?”	
153	20	Change “classified” to “unclassified”	
155	5	Change “27-26 period” to “August 26-27 period”	
155	19	Change “29 into 30” to “August 29 into August 30”	