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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: NED PRICE

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Tuesday, December 12, 2023

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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 10:00 a.m.

1 Appearances:

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5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

6

7 [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED],

9 SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

10 [REDACTED]

11 [REDACTED],

12 SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

13 [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED]

15 [REDACTED]

16 [REDACTED]

17 [REDACTED]

18

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20 For the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE:

21

22 [REDACTED],

23 OFFICE OF THE LEGAL ADVISOR

24 [REDACTED]

25 [REDACTED]

1 [REDACTED]. This is a transcribed interview of Mr. Ned Price. Chairman
2 McCaul has requested this interview as part of the committee's investigation of the
3 Afghanistan withdrawal.

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

5 Mr. Price. Ned Price. Full name is Edward Price.

6 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

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

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

13 I'll now ask committee staff present for the majority and minority to introduce
14 themselves as well.

15 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] from the majority.

16 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] for the majority.

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

19 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] for the minority.

20 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] for the [inaudible].

21 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

22 I'd like to now go over the ground rules and guidelines that we will follow during
23 today's interview.

24 Our questioning will proceed in rounds. The majority will ask questions first for 1
25 hour, then the minority will have an opportunity to ask questions for an equal period of

1 time, if they choose. We will alternate back and forth until there are no more questions
2 and the interview is over.

3 Typically, we take a short break at the end of each hour, but if you would like to
4 take a break apart from that, please just let us know. We'd be happy to accommodate.

5 As you can see, there is an official court reporter taking down everything we say to
6 make a written record, so we ask that you give verbal responses to all questions.

7 Does that make sense?

8 Mr. Price. It does.

9 [REDACTED]. So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we will do
10 our best to limit the number of people directing questions at you during any given hour to
11 just those people on the staff whose turn it is.

12 Please try and speak clearly so the court reporter can understand and so everyone
13 can hear you. It is important that we don't talk over one another or interrupt each
14 other.

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

17 It's my understanding that you are appearing today with agency counsel. Is that
18 correct?

19 Mr. Price. That is correct.

20 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

21 Mr. Price, you understand that agency counsel represents the State Department
22 and not you personally, correct?

23 Mr. Price. I do.

24 [REDACTED]. Could agency counsel and the notetaker please identify
25 yourselves and state your names for the record.

1 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED], agency counsel.

2 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for
3 Legislative Affairs.

4 [REDACTED]: Thank you.

5 We want you to answer our questions in the most complete and truthful manner
6 as possible, so we'll take our time. If you have any questions or if you do not
7 understand one of our questions, please just let us know. Our questions will cover a
8 wide range of topics, so if you need clarification at any point just say so.

9 If you do not know the answer to a question or do not remember, it's best not to
10 guess. Please give us your best recollection. If there are things you don't know or
11 can't remember just say so and please inform us who, to the best of your knowledge,
12 might be able to provide a more complete answer to the questions.

13 Mr. Price, this interview is unclassified. So if a question calls for information that
14 you know to be classified, please state that for the record as well as the basis for the
15 classification and the original classification authority, to the best of your abilities.

16 If you are uncertain of the classification, please consult with your counsel. We'd
17 be happy to go off the record to afford you the opportunity to do so.

18 In the interests of transparency and open access to the Federal Government, we
19 ask that your asserted basis for classification adhere to the uniform system prescribed by
20 Executive Order 13526.

21 Once you identify the requisite classification, please respond with as much
22 unclassified information as possible.

23 Do you understand?

24 Mr. Price. I do.

25 [REDACTED]: Thank you.

1 You should also understand that although this interview is not under oath, that by
2 law you are required to answer questions from Congress truthfully.

3 Do you understand?

4 Mr. Price. I do.

5 ██████████. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff in an
6 interview.

7 Do you understand?

8 Mr. Price. I do.

9 ██████████. Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be
10 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C.
11 Section 1001.

12 Do you understand this?

13 Mr. Price. I do.

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

16 Mr. Price. There is not.

17 ██████████. Finally, I'd like to make note that the content of what we discuss
18 here today is confidential, as per Chairman McCaul's terms. We ask that you not speak
19 about what we discuss in this interview to any outside individuals to preserve the
20 integrity of our investigation.

21 For the same reason, the marked exhibits that we will use today will remain with
22 the court reporter so they can go in the official transcript, and any copies of those
23 exhibits will be returned to us when we wrap up.

24 That is the end of the majority's preamble.

25 Is there anything my colleagues in the minority would like to add?

1 Mr. Price, what is your current position at the State Department?

2 A Currently, I'm the Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State.

3 Q And when did you assume that position?

4 A I assumed that position formally on May 1st of this year, 2023.

5 Q And whom do you report to in that role?

6 A I suppose I report to the chief of staff, Suzy George, yes.

7 Q And how many people report to you as senior advisor to the Secretary?

8 A It's a small team that works directly for the Secretary. I wouldn't say I have
9 direct reports in this current role.

10 Q Thank you.

11 As senior advisor to the Secretary, what are your major duties and
12 responsibilities?

13 A As the title suggests, it is to be an advisor to the Secretary on a day-to-day
14 basis, based on what he is encountering on any given day, but also to help oversee
15 implementation of some of our key priorities across several lines of work.

16 Q To what extent has and/or does your work as senior advisor involve
17 Afghanistan or issues pertaining to Afghanistan?

18 A Only tangentially, to the extent that it has come up in the Secretary's
19 day-to-day.

20 Q Has it involved advising the Department on its response to the Foreign
21 Affairs Committee's investigation of the Afghanistan withdrawal?

22 A It has not really, no.

23 Q What was your position throughout 2021, including the withdrawal and
24 emergency evacuation?

25 A Starting in January of 2021, I was the spokesperson for the Department of

1 State.

2 Q Can you please describe your previous role as Department spokesperson?

3 A As the Department spokesperson, I was charged with representing the
4 Department in the public domain really, and that consisted of several things.

5 One is conducting daily press briefings. That was sort of the marquee elements
6 of the job. Obviously, there were other engagements with reporters and journalists on
7 a daily basis that weren't in front of the podium.

8 There were several behind-the-scenes functions, including coordinating messaging
9 and communication across the Department, both at Main State but also with embassies
10 and posts around the world; and then coordinating with the interagency to, to the best of
11 our ability, facilitate consistency of message.

12 Q Thank you.

13 So is it fair to say that, as spokesperson, you spoke on behalf of the State
14 Department in your official capacity?

15 A That's fair to say.

16 Q When did you first discuss the position with the new Biden administration,
17 so the incoming administration at the time?

18 A The first formal discussion, my recollection was sometime in December of
19 2020. It was after the election. I was involved in the transition. And I received a call
20 from then Secretary-designate Blinken, who at the time had been nominated for the role,
21 asking me if I would be interested in the job.

22 Q Do you recall when that conversation happened?

23 A My best recollection is mid-December, but I couldn't be any more granular
24 than that.

25 Q And you stated you worked on the transition during that period. Can you

1 speak to your role on the transition team?

2 A My role in the transition team was to work with the policy experts that were
3 a part of the main transition team as opposed to the agency landing team or teams
4 on -- primarily on messaging issues, and to help them think through how the transition
5 would position itself publicly vis-a-vis any given issue, but then to help them think
6 through the big issues that we knew the new administration would confront after January
7 20th of 2021.

8 Q And as part of those issues, was Afghanistan one of the relevant concerns?

9 A It was an issue that was discussed on a few occasions, yes.

10 Q Thank you.

11 Once you assumed the role of spokesperson, how did you engage with the various
12 offices and individuals within the Department that assisted you?

13 A There was a formal process that I started essentially on I guess it was day
14 two that I was there, January 21st, to help me get up to speed on the issues that I knew
15 would be front and center for the new administration.

16 So we -- my team helped me organize backgrounders with the various bureaus.
17 They would send their press and public diplomacy team members. Sometimes they
18 would send their desk officers or subject matter experts to brief me on any given issue.

19 And then as the -- as I became more familiar and as operations ramped up, I
20 would be briefed on a daily basis, typically before any daily press briefing, usually by,
21 again, the press and public diplomacy leads on -- within any given bureau.

22 And so it's called guidance collection. It would usually last -- ideally, it would last
23 60 to 90 minutes, sometimes longer, sometimes shorter. And the press and public
24 diplomacy leads, typically they would brief me on issues of the day.

25 Q Thank you.

1 And how did you work with the Department senior leadership?

2 A There was regular interaction with the Department leadership. It typically
3 began with the Secretary's morning meeting. It was a meeting that the Secretary would
4 typically chair.

5 It would involve the top leadership, the Deputy Secretary once confirmed, the
6 Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources once confirmed, all of the Under
7 Secretaries, representatives from key offices.

8 But then, of course, there was back-and-forth throughout the day over email,
9 phone calls, in-person interactions, to make sure that I had the appropriate guidance on
10 any given issue.

11 Q Thank you.

12 And how frequently did you typically engage with Secretary Blinken as
13 spokesperson?

14 A Typically, on a daily basis.

15 Q And how about with Deputy Secretary Sherman?

16 A Typically, on a daily basis.

17 Q And DMR McKeon?

18 A Typically, on a daily basis.

19 Q Thank you.

20 Can you speak to the senior leadership team meetings you were a part of as
21 spokesperson? You mentioned the daily briefings. Were there any other meetings?

22 A Of course. So the daily meeting was the daily occurrence. That
23 would -- the full leadership team would gather really to go around the table and around
24 the room to provide relevant updates, based on developments, based on priorities, based
25 on what was upcoming.

1 Of course, there were regular ad hoc meetings, based on what was happening on
2 any given day, what we expected to happen, what we were preparing for. Those, of
3 course, didn't take place on any regular cadence but as needed.

4 Q Thank you.

5 And were you generally a part of the Department's senior-level discussions in
6 decision-making processes?

7 A So I would distinguish decision-making processes versus high-level
8 discussions. To be clear, in my role as spokesperson, I only infrequently attended
9 decisional meetings, interagency decisional meetings, Deputies Committees, Principals
10 Committees.

11 But I was a part of regular update meetings, and internally, insofar as internal
12 meetings were decisional, I was included in a number of those.

13 Q Did you ever provide input on policy and strategy, or was your role strictly
14 limited to communications?

15 A My primary role was communications and messaging.

16 Q And your -- was there a secondary role in any capacity?

17 A No. My role was as Department spokesperson.

18 Of course, as someone who was regularly included in meetings, I would offer an
19 opinion that would be considered. And often that opinion was predicated on the
20 concerns that were germane to me, but it was and is an inclusive process where the
21 Secretary or the senior in the room asks all of those in attendance typically for their
22 views.

23 Q Thank you.

24 And you noted that you partook in the interagency process as well. Can you
25 speak to your engagement on interagency issues with other departments and agencies?

1 A Again, I would say it was not a regular occurrence. If there was an issue
2 that was dominating the news, dominating the headlines, or that we expected to be
3 prominent in the public domain, I would occasionally sit in on interagency discussions, not
4 as someone who offered his views but really primarily to absorb the substance.

5 Q Thank you.

6 A And how frequently did you engage with Admiral John Kirby in his capacity as the
7 press secretary at the Department of Defense?

8 A I engaged with Admiral Kirby regularly, perhaps not quite daily. If you
9 include email messages, perhaps daily. But regularly.

10 Q Were there other key officials whom you engaged with closely from other
11 executive branch departments and agencies?

12 A One of the, as I mentioned before, one of the primary functions of the
13 Department spokesperson is to the best of our ability ensure coordination between and
14 among different departments and agencies.

15 So it was a regular occurrence that I would engage with my counterparts and
16 equivalents at other departments and agencies, at the NSC, at the White House, with
17 foreign governments. It was part and parcel of the job.

18 Q So you noted the NSC and the White House. Can you speak to your
19 engagement with both the NSC and the White House?

20 A It was really, as I mentioned before, I've worked in -- I performed a similar
21 function across a couple of administrations.

22 I was the NSC spokesperson in the Obama administration, and during that
23 time -- and I took that to my current role -- I understood that coordination is a necessary
24 function of the job, to make sure that we are consistent, to ensure that we have the best,
25 most accurate information available to us, and to see to it that that information is

1 deployed in the same way across departments and agencies.

2 Q And how frequently do you engage with White House press secretaries?

3 A With the press secretary, meaning Jen Psaki at the beginning of the
4 administration and Karine Jean-Pierre more recently, fairly infrequently. The NSC tends
5 to be the focal point for engagement on the part of the State Department spokesperson.

6 The broader White House communications office, I would also engage the press
7 secretary occasionally as well, but I would say fairly infrequently.

8 Q And how about with Admiral John Kirby in his capacity as the National
9 Security Council's coordinator for strategic communications?

10 A As I recall, Admiral Kirby moved over there -- I don't recall precisely
11 when -- but it was nearing the end of my tenure, probably 6 months or so before my
12 tenure as spokesperson came to an end. But during that time, nearly daily.

13 Q Thank you.

14 Whom did you report to as Department spokesperson?

15 A I suppose, on paper, I reported to the Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs.

16 Q And in practice?

17 A Suzy George, the chief of staff, I would say was who I went to with
18 managerial issues or challenges that I thought were suited for someone in that role.

19 Q Thank you.

20 And to what extent were you personally given direction by Secretary Blinken?

21 A To the extent that he's the Secretary of State and he provides his opinion
22 and ultimately his guidance on issues across the waterfront.

23 It was always helpful for me to be in meetings with him, because I knew that he
24 was a constant presence in interagency discussions. He had and has a good sense of
25 where the President is on any given issue. And I found his guidance helpful in that

1 regard as I considered messaging and communications.

2 Q Thank you.

3 And how many people reported to you overall as Department spokesperson?

4 A So I suppose directly, probably four.

5 The much more arduous part of the job was providing guidance and direction to
6 the much larger cast of characters across the bureaus within the Department, and each
7 bureau has a press and public diplomacy office; but then to, in turn, to posts around the
8 world. And I couldn't quite quantify that.

9 But the technical answer is probably much closer to four.

10 Q Thank you.

11 Who were your direct reports?

12 A So there's a deputy spokesperson. There's a principal deputy
13 spokesperson. At the time, her name was Jalina Porter. There was a deputy
14 spokesperson. His name is J.T. Ice.

15 There was an executive -- I think the title was executive -- or special assistant,
16 [REDACTED]. I'm sorry. Actually, [REDACTED] later took over that role. When I first
17 started, it was an individual named [REDACTED] whose last name is escaping me. And then
18 someone else took over for [REDACTED]. And then [REDACTED] later took over that role.

19 Q Thank you.

20 And this is a broader question, so please feel free to take your time. But what
21 was your involvement in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, including communication
22 aspects relating to the Department's equities?

23 A It was really a function of my role at the Department as engaging with the
24 press, helping to coordinate messaging and communications across the Department and
25 within the interagency.

1 So, again, it was largely confined to how we would speak about it, how we would
2 message it publicly in that regard.

3 Q And when did you first become involved with work relating to the
4 Afghanistan withdrawal?

5 A Well, if you're defining withdrawal is the military retrograde, I suppose I
6 became aware of it much earlier than it was a real core function of my role. I was aware
7 of it months before the withdrawal, as you're defining it, first began.

8 In the early weeks and certainly months of the administration, I would hear
9 updates from the key personnel about the contingency planning, interagency discussions
10 that were ongoing regarding that withdrawal process.

11 But I was not directly involved in those conversations. It was primarily in the
12 form of readouts in the senior-level meetings that I was attending.

13 Q And when did you become directly involved?

14 A Well, I wouldn't say I became directly involved in the withdrawal process. I
15 certainly, in July and August of 2021, as the cadence of activity increased, attended a
16 number of meetings. I, as appropriate, participated in those meetings, offering my
17 thoughts, again, as I recall, primarily if not exclusively on messaging and communications
18 issues vis-a-vis what was at the time contingency planning, what developed into the
19 withdrawal, and what then developed into the evacuation.

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

22 A I was not really -- I was not directly involved, as I recall, in the planning
23 process, if you're defining the planning process as the operational process that
24 culminated in the U.S. military withdrawal and the U.S. military-facilitated evacuation.

25 Of course, there are planning elements, there are contingency elements that take

1 place on the comms side. There's a unit within the broader office that is responsible for
2 contingency planning, for thinking through and considering crisis communications. I
3 spoke with them quite frequently as July and August approached.

4 But, again, I was not a part of the -- certainly the interagency discussions about
5 the withdrawal and later the evacuation.

6 Q And you noted as sort of we, being the majority, defined withdrawal in your
7 response. How would you have defined the withdrawal if you had an opportunity to do
8 so?

9 A I think your definition of withdrawal, as I heard it, is essentially how I might
10 think about it. The process that was set in motion with the President's April
11 announcement, April of 2021 announcement, that took place gradually over the course of
12 many weeks and then the pace of which accelerated in July and August.

13 Insofar as evacuation, as I recall hearing you define the constituencies involved in
14 that, of course, American citizens, third-country nationals, partners who had worked with
15 us, SIV and SIV-eligible individuals, and of course our embassy personnel, official USG
16 personnel who were in Afghanistan at the time. That was really the scope of the
17 evacuation.

18 Q Thank you.

19 How would you generally obtain information that you relied on in formulating
20 messaging and making public statements on behalf of the Department regarding
21 Afghanistan in your capacity as the spokesperson?

22 A So typically the most relevant information would, again, arrive during the
23 so-called guidance collection, when I would be briefed by individuals from the relevant
24 bureaus.

25 In the case of Afghanistan, there were -- there was a small team from SCA, the

1 Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, who would brief me. The Special
2 Representative also had a team, and they occasionally would brief me, more so on the
3 diplomatic front than the operational front on the ground in Afghanistan at the time.

4 And then a number of other bureaus, as you might imagine, were involved in
5 various aspects, especially as July and August approached.

6 Our Bureau of Consular Affairs would brief me, typically on issues pertaining to
7 American citizens, to SIV -- SIV applicants and individuals who had qualified for SIVs.

8 Our Bureau of PRM on refugee-related issues and humanitarian issues.

9 And a number of others as it pertained to how other countries and other regions
10 were implicated and involved in the process.

11 Q Thank you.

12 And as part of those briefings, would you receive written documents from the
13 relevant bureaus as well, such as briefing memos or the like?

14 A Typically, each bureau as they brief or before they brief would send up
15 messaging points each day, what they would recommend we say vis-a-vis any issue.

16 That would go into what was an iPad. It used to be a large book, but became an
17 iPad during the last administration. And I would refer to those.

18 Sometimes during the course of our discussions -- often during the course of our
19 discussions I would ask questions. I would seek more information. I would seek clarity
20 as to why something was phrased a certain way, why something was included, why
21 something was omitted.

22 So it was an interactive process that ultimately culminated in the messaging points
23 that I would either seek to internalize and relay, to the best of my ability, at the podium;
24 or, especially when it was quite dense, when there were quite a number of details, refer
25 to explicitly and deploy in that fashion.

1 Q Thank you.

2 Moving on to the emergency evacuation.

3 Can you speak to your involvement in the August 2021 emergency evacuation
4 from Afghanistan?

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

8 Q Thank you.

9 Were you involved in planning for the possibility of an emergency evacuation
10 throughout 2021, including related communications aspects?

11 A I wouldn't say I was involved in the planning for it. I was involved in
12 planning for the communications and public-facing aspects once the prospect became
13 more of a realistic prospect.

14 Q And when did it become more of a realistic prospect?

15 A Well, I should say that I became involved as it neared. So certainly, I was
16 engaged in these conversations in August of 2021.

17 Q And like with the withdrawal, can you speak to how you received
18 information with respect to the evacuation specifically, namely formulating messaging
19 and making public statements? Was it the same?

20 A The process was the same. I would say the only functional difference was
21 that there was a task force formed in August of -- well, there was a task force formed
22 prior, but the task force, individuals on the task force, became much more engaged with
23 me day-to-day.

24 And oftentimes, it was individuals who were seconded to the task force who were
25 briefing me on day-to-day, oftentimes hour-by-hour or minute-to-minute developments

1 rather than -- sometimes rather than individuals who were based in the relevant bureaus.

2 Q And do you recall who those individuals were that were briefing you on sort
3 of a day-to-day basis from the task force?

4 A I recall a few names. My understanding is that these were all working-level
5 individuals, individuals who certainly were at the -- below the DAS level who were
6 seconded to the task force.

7 Q Thank you.

8 Was there a senior leader at the Department exercising overall responsibility for
9 the Department's equities in planning for the withdrawal and a potential emergency
10 evacuation?

11 A Well, I think the Secretary of State himself has said that -- he is the Secretary
12 of State. He, of course, is ultimately responsible for everything the Department does.

13 Day-to-day, there were a number of individuals who were involved in this. Brian
14 McKeon tended to be the Department's point person when it came to the contingency
15 planning and contingency operations that were initiated in the early days and weeks of
16 the administration.

17 Brian, as I recall, was most involved in the interagency discussions. He would be
18 involved in the tabletop exercises. He would be involved in the contingency planning
19 discussions that took place at the White House, at the Department, with the Department
20 of Defense, with other interagency partners.

21 Q Thank you.

22 Who were the other senior leaders at the Department most involved in matters
23 relating to withdrawal and what were their roles?

24 A In terms of the withdrawal, of course, our embassy in Kabul was regularly
25 engaged in these discussions, including with their U.S. military counterparts.

1 Ross Wilson, who was in charge of the embassy at the time, was, of course, very
2 involved in these matters. Dean Thompson, who was in charge of the relevant bureau,
3 SCA, at the time, was engaged in these as well. The Deputy Secretary, Wendy Sherman,
4 was involved. The Acting UM, Acting Under Secretary for Management, Carol Perez,
5 was involved at the time as well.

6 But in some ways it is, especially as the planning intensified, everyone was
7 involved in some way -- or I shouldn't say everyone, but many people were involved in
8 some way.

9 Q Thank you. That's helpful.

10 I'll start with Ambassador Wilson. As you mentioned, he was leading the
11 embassy, Embassy Kabul, at the time.

12 How often did you engage with Ambassador Wilson?

13 A Quite rarely. Typically, especially as July and August approached -- the
14 embassy had begun a drawdown earlier in the year. It was a relatively small set of
15 personnel, especially when you consider the fact that -- I don't quite know if it was the
16 majority but I would suspect as much -- the majority of the personnel based there were
17 security personnel. The number of people who were engaged on a policy basis were
18 quite small.

19 I didn't want to burden him or his team when I knew that I could almost always
20 get the answers I needed from SCA or other relevant bureaus at Main State. I recall a
21 couple times where I would reach out to the embassy and he would be added to the
22 chain or he would respond, but it was not my standard approach.

23 Q Is it fair to say then that information from Ambassador Wilson would flow
24 through the SCA bureau, which was led by Dean Thompson at the time, and then he
25 would then communicate the information to you? Is that how the information typically

1 flowed or --

2 A That is one manner in which it typically flowed. Of course, given the broad
3 set of issues that Ross and his team were dealing with, sometimes they extended well
4 beyond SCA, to include CA, to include PRM, to include issues relevant to the work that
5 Brian McKeon was engaging on at the time. But certainly that was one relevant channel
6 from the embassy to SCA to me.

7 Q Thank you.

8 And did you engage with Counselor Derek Chollet at any point throughout this
9 period?

10 A I did. And, of course, I should have mentioned the counselor as someone
11 who was engaged on Afghanistan as well.

12 Q And how about Ambassador Khalilzad, who was serving as the Special
13 Representative?

14 A Yes. And, of course, I should have mentioned him as well. Yes.

15 Q And how often did you engage with him?

16 A I would engage with his team essentially every day.

17 You know, the Department is organized in such a way that every bureau,
18 every -- not every, but many teams have people whose role it is, is to focus on
19 communications and messaging.

20 And so, again, rather than go directly to Zal, who often was traveling, who often
21 was halfway around the world, I would go to senior individuals on his team and also to
22 the individuals who were responsible for press and messaging on his team.

23 Q Thank you.

24 Now, in terms of the evacuation, were there any additional officials that you
25 engaged with?

1 A I would say all of those individuals. I don't know, at least I wouldn't make a
2 distinction in terms of my interlocutors when we moved from a focus on withdrawal to a
3 focus on evacuation.

4 I suppose certainly Rena Bitter became much more of a regular interlocutor for
5 me and many others as we moved into the -- moved into August, and certainly into late
6 August, Rena Bitter being the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs.

7 Salman Ahmed, he became more engaged in Afghanistan matters as -- I forget the
8 exact timeframe, but certainly as August approached.

9 But, by and large, it was a -- Toria Nuland, the Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

10 But certainly it was a very similar cast of characters.

11 Q And how about Ambassador John Bass?

12 A Yes. But as I -- so -- yes. Certainly during the evacuation -- and, yes, thank
13 you for that prompt -- John became a primary interlocutor during that time.

14 Here too I couldn't begin to imagine the pressure he was under because he was,
15 judging by the emails that I would be copied on from him, awake at all hours, working
16 around the clock, just doing extraordinary, extraordinary work to ensure as effective a
17 flow as possible of individuals onto planes departing Afghanistan.

18 So here too it was not my inclination to go to him directly when I thought an
19 answer could be secured from someone else, whether that was from CA, from SCA, from
20 another bureau, from Derek, from Toria, Brian. The list goes on.

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

22 A I did.

23 Q Thank you.

24 ██████████. You mentioned Mr. Ahmed. What led to him becoming a more
25 prominent part of the Afghanistan response as the evacuation took place?

1 Mr. Price. Salman is someone who is deeply experienced in diplomacy, but also
2 in difficult negotiations. He, in 2016, spent a number of weeks, as I recall, when we
3 were both on the NSC staff at the time, in Geneva working with the Russians on Syria, for
4 example.

5 That's just one example of the real tough, hard-nosed negotiations that he had
6 been a part of. He had spent much of his career at the U.N., later at USUN, our mission
7 to the U.N.

8 And so, as I recall, as Zal and his team were stretched, given the regular
9 engagements with the Taliban in Doha, part of the team in Doha, part of the team back in
10 Washington, it was decided that someone like Salman, with his experience, would be a
11 resource for the team.

12 ██████████. And was there -- you mentioned that the team was stretched. Was
13 there a particular gap or area that Salman was covering down on?

14 Mr. Price. I was using that term broadly. Stretched in the sense that there was
15 a very active cadence of discussions with the Taliban, based in a location where the time
16 difference made it difficult to get a good night's sleep, let alone the pace of events and
17 the imperative that they convey messages sometimes in real time to the Taliban, given
18 what was going on.

19 I say the Taliban, but, of course, the Qataris too were an important interlocutor of
20 theirs, sometimes even more important than the Taliban, perhaps.

21 BY ██████████:

22 Q This is a good segue to my next question.

23 To what extent did you engage and coordinate with foreign governments
24 regarding the Afghanistan withdrawal?

25 A I don't recall coordination on my part with foreign governments on the

1 messaging and communications aspect.

2 Now, I had a habit of regularly speaking with, for example, EU counterparts,
3 British counterparts. And I have to imagine, even if I don't recall, that I provided them
4 with our messaging, with what we were seeing.

5 That was certainly the case prior to the withdrawal -- prior to the evacuation,
6 because there was an international element to this as well.

7 There was a, as you know, a NATO meeting in March and April. It was the
8 unanimous decision of the NAC that they would welcome, that they would also pursue a
9 similar withdrawal as that laid out by the United States. This was coordinated
10 exquisitely with them. They welcomed the decision that we put forward. They, in
11 turn, followed suit.

12 I was -- again, this was not me doing the work, but I was there with the Secretary
13 in Brussels for those trips. I'm sure on the sidelines of those discussions I had
14 discussions with various NATO counterparts on our messaging, especially as we issued
15 joint public statements like the NAC statement that came out of that meeting in April of
16 2021.

17 Q Thank you. That's helpful.

18 Did you coordinate with the Government of Afghanistan at any point or engage
19 with them?

20 A I don't recall coordination with the Government of Afghanistan. I traveled
21 with the Secretary to Kabul in April of 2021. But I don't recall having a discussion with
22 my equivalent or functional equivalent in the Government of Afghanistan at that time.

23 Q Did you coordinate with governments, other governments in Central Asia, in
24 the Middle East, such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Qatar?

25 A So at this moment, I don't recall my communications with those

1 governments. But what I can say is there was intensive coordination on the part of the
2 broader Department and certainly on the part of the interagency with those governments
3 on the preparations for and on the withdrawal itself.

4 It often is the case that when there is that level of engagement with countries
5 around the world there are, when demarches go out, when guidance goes out from the
6 State Department to be relayed to a foreign interlocutor, that messaging points are
7 included for the situational awareness and for the benefit of our partners.

8 Again, sitting here today, I don't recall specifically, I can't recall specifically an
9 instance of that. But I am extraordinarily confident that in the engagements at all levels,
10 from the most senior to the working level, that there were discussions about our public
11 messaging and communications on this.

12 Q Thank you.

13 And did you at any point coordinate with the governments of Russia, China, or
14 Iran?

15 A Me personally? No.

16 Q Are you aware if anyone else did?

17 A So, of course, Russia and China had the ability -- well, certainly all three had
18 the ability to play a constructive role when it came to stability in Afghanistan.

19 There was at the time -- and the format, the name of the format escapes me -- but
20 an engagement with the Russians and the Chinese on Afghanistan that we took part in.
21 But, again, I was not a part of that, and so it's not something for me to speak to.

22 Q Of course. We only want you to speak to your firsthand account.

23 A Yeah.

24 Q Thank you for that clarification.

25 To what extent did you engage and coordinate with the United Nations?

1 A Personally, I do not recall engagement with my equivalent or functional
2 equivalent at the United Nations. We would correspond occasionally. It may well be
3 that we had a discussion about the work I was doing on this front, but I don't recall
4 specifically.

5 Q Thank you.

6 And you noted engagement with our NATO counterparts. To what extent did
7 you engage and coordinate with our NATO counterparts, aside from the meeting that you
8 mentioned for the March-April?

9 A Well, so I should say that if the question is how much did I personally do this,
10 that's a different question versus how much the Department did.

11 And just to spend a second on the broader question, there was extraordinary
12 coordination with our NATO allies across every aspect of this process.

13 The Secretary went to Brussels his first trip across the Atlantic in March of 2021
14 precisely to coordinate with our NATO allies and to do what could be described as a
15 listening session with them, to hear their thoughts and their considerations vis-a-vis
16 Afghanistan and a couple other issues as well.

17 Those were captured. Those were internalized by the Department and the
18 broader interagency.

19 But I say that because, as I mentioned at the outset, there is a broad public affairs
20 messaging/communications apparatus within the Department, within Main State, and
21 within virtually every post around the world. And so it is their role to coordinate with
22 their counterparts in the host country government.

23 Now, sometimes I would do the same. I'm confident that I had discussions on
24 the sidelines of our engagements in Brussels those two times in March and April,
25 subsequent trips there as well.

1 I would sometimes go to the EU's mission here in Washington to brief the full
2 complements of our EU interlocutors. I would have one-off conversations.

3 Again, I think the challenge I have is that sometimes those one-off conversations
4 are difficult to recall with any specificity a few years later.

5 Q And to what extent did you or, more broadly, the Department engage
6 and/or coordinate with the Taliban?

7 A So, again, the question is going to be very different if the question is about
8 me personally versus the Department.

9 Personally, I didn't have any engagement with the Taliban. Of course, the
10 Department did have practical engagement with the Taliban in pursuit of what were our
11 interests at the time.

12 Q So in speaking on engagement with the Taliban, was it through an
13 interlocutor, a specific individual within the Department? And who would that
14 individual have been?

15 A I'm sorry, when --

16 Q So when you would speak and communicate on behalf of the U.S.'
17 engagement with the Taliban, for example, on the Doha Agreement or their compliance
18 with that agreement, who would you receive that information from?

19 A That tended to be from Zal's team.

20 Q And who on Zal's team was your main point of contact?

21 A As I recall, these were working-level individuals, individuals who were with
22 him in Doha, but then also back at the State Department.

23 Q Thank you.

24 Now, sort of rewinding a bit. When you assumed the position of spokesperson
25 in January of 2021, where did things stand with respect to the potential withdrawal from

1 Afghanistan?

2 A As I recall, there was -- well, we inherited a set of facts. We inherited, as
3 you alluded to before, the Doha Agreement, which stipulated a deadline for the
4 withdrawal of U.S. military forces but absolutely no plan for fulfilling that withdrawal.
5 So we had a deadline confronting us and a decision to make about how to position
6 ourselves vis-a-vis that deadline.

7 There was a policy review that was announced publicly in the early days of the
8 administration. There was an interagency process that considered all of the relevant
9 variables and considerations as May became closer and closer.

10 Ultimately, as you know, as we've discussed before, the President came to a
11 decision. He made his decision public in mid-April, as I recall. And we began to
12 operationally execute against the goal that the President set forward at the time.

13 That said, knowing that we inherited a deadline from the previous administration,
14 there was always contingency planning ongoing. And I should stipulate that I was not a
15 part of that contingency planning. I would hear readouts. I would hear reflections, see
16 reflections of it in the senior-level engagements that I was a part of. But that started
17 from the earliest days of the administration.

18 Q Thank you.

19 I'm just going to walk through the various steps. I appreciate the chronology and
20 apologize for any redundancies. But I want to go back to the sort of the inheriting of the
21 deadline.

22 You also inherited conditions as part of that agreement as well, correct?

23 A That's right.

24 Q So what was your perspective on former President Trump's policy and
25 approach to Afghanistan, having received all that information, the briefing and materials

1 and, of course, being privy to sort of his policies?

2 A You're asking for my personal opinion as opposed to my judgment as the
3 Department spokesperson?

4 Q Let's start with sort of your personal opinion, given your prior experiences
5 on the NSC as well as various roles.

6 [REDACTED]. His prior NSC experience was as a spokesperson.

7 [REDACTED]. So to the extent you feel comfortable sharing your personal
8 opinion, please feel free to do so. If not, we can also move to your official opinion.

9 Mr. Price. Any concerns?

10 [REDACTED]. No. As long as you're comfortable.

11 Mr. Price. My personal opinion is essentially what I believe I said publicly from
12 the podium. It's not a deal that this administration would have struck with the Taliban.

13 I think personally it was an erratic policy. It was a policy that wasn't moored to
14 national interests. I think it, unfortunately, was moored to something else. And it was
15 a policy that left the incoming administration with no good options.

16 So when we came into office, I think the challenge we faced was, do you hew to
17 the agreement that the previous administration stuck? Do you hew to the deadline that
18 they set without any plan for fulfilling that deadline that was handed over? Or do you
19 risk what had been at that point a 20-year war escalating even further, with American
20 troops once again having a target on their back, potentially additional American troops
21 having to go into what would have once again become an active combat zone? Or do
22 you end the war and undertake that withdrawal and later the evacuation?

23 So, personally, I think it was a very challenging situation to inherit.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q And officially?

1 A Officially, I think it was a very challenging situation to inherit.

2 Again, it was -- I suppose because I said it, it was the official policy of the U.S.
3 Government, that it was not a decision that -- it was not an agreement with the Taliban
4 that this administration would have struck.

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

7 A Well, first, the looming question was the very capital Q question we've been
8 discussing: What would the incoming and at the time new administration do in the
9 context of the deadline that the previous administration had set for us?

10 And we had wide contours because, again, there was not a plan that was on the
11 shelf. There was nothing that we inherited that spoke to how the U.S. military, how the
12 Department of State, how any other Department or agency would execute against a fairly
13 rigid set of requirements set out in the U.S. Doha Agreement of 2020.

14 So I don't recall the Secretary ever saying, we need to get out, we need to stay. I
15 recall the Secretary taking part in a number of policy discussions with the interagency
16 regarding the considerations at play, putting -- that ultimately culminated in the decision
17 the President announced in April.

18 Q Thank you.

19 What guidance did the Secretary provide you regarding the Department's
20 messaging on Afghanistan?

21 A The Secretary is not one to be ideological or set in terms of the messaging.
22 The messaging should -- I think it's always a good rule of thumb -- it should reflect what
23 we're seeking and what we're doing and what we aspire to do.

24 You know, his guidance that he set out, in fact, on his day one at that very
25 morning meeting that I mentioned was that -- and this was really his only rigid

1 guidance -- was that we should be operating on our toes, not on our heels, that we should
2 be out there speaking to the American public, to global audiences, knowing that when
3 you're operating on your toes, sometimes inadvertently you might fall flat on your face.

4 But his message that first meeting was that we need to be out there, we need to
5 be doing this work, even and in spite of the risks that come with being proactive, being
6 affirmative, and being out there. And if someone inadvertently gets too far in front of
7 his skis, as the Department, as the Secretary personally, I'll be there to back that person
8 up.

9 Q Thank you.

10 And what guidance, if any, did you receive from others in the executive branch
11 outside the Department regarding the Department's messaging on Afghanistan?

12 A Again, I don't think -- I don't recall hearing rigid guidance as to what
13 we -- the sort of left and right balance.

14 The guidance was based on the current moment and what we were trying to do,
15 what we were trying to pursue, what we hoped to see. And the guidance hewed, as I
16 recall, hewed very closely to that.

1 [10:59 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

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

6 A There were discussions with the Taliban. You know, as the spring
7 approached and as May neared, there were discussions with the Taliban about that May
8 1 deadline, regarding any flexibility that we might be afforded in terms of that
9 withdrawal.

10 Knowing that, again, our overriding concern was that, if May 1 approached and as
11 May 1 approached, that American soldiers, were they still there, could have a target on
12 their back once again if that withdrawal had not started.

13 So there was engagement with the Taliban on a whole host of practical issues.
14 As the deadline approached, you know, that May 1 fixture, I think, became more and
15 more of a topic of discussion with them. At least, I gather it was.

16 Q Thank you.

17 And you've mentioned this deadline multiple times, this May 1 deadline. In
18 addition to the deadline, was there also discussions regarding the conditions that were
19 attached to the deadline during this period?

20 A Look, everyone was quite familiar with the U.S. Doha Agreement and what it
21 stipulated in terms of the conditions on the Taliban and the conditions on the
22 U.S. Government, the conditions, in turn, on the now former Government of Afghanistan.
23 So, to the extent we were discussing the U.S.-Taliban agreement, you know, there was a
24 clear-eyed approach to it.

25 Q Thank you.

1 the policy review?

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

9 Q Thank you.

10 And we're nearing the end of the majority's first round, so I'll stop the clock here
11 and go off the record.

12 [Recess.]

13 [REDACTED]. All right. We can go back on the record.

14 Thank you very much for your voluntary testimony today.

15 EXAMINATION

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Before we get started, just to level-set two quick notes.

18 First, we want to ensure that you're testifying as to your firsthand knowledge and
19 not as to what other people may have said in meetings, et cetera. That would fall under
20 hearsay.

21 In addition, we take a bit of a different tack with the terms "withdrawal" and
22 "evacuation."

23 The term "withdrawal," we understand it to describe the retrograde of U.S.
24 troops, equipment, and personnel from Afghanistan. As such, the withdrawal of U.S.
25 military personnel was initiated in the February 2020 Doha deal, involved partial troop

1 drawdowns prior to 2021, and was completed by August 31, 2021. It ultimately
2 included the drawdown of all U.S. embassy personnel in Afghanistan in addition to a
3 military withdrawal.

4 Do you take any issue --

5 A I do not.

6 Q -- with this terminology?

7 We also understand the withdrawal to be the U.S. troops and equipment are
8 primarily the domain of DOD and military leadership. Do you agree?

9 A I do.

10 Q As to the term "evacuation," we understand this to describe the removal of
11 American citizens and their eligible family members, lawful permanent residents and their
12 eligible family members, SIVs and their eligible family members, and certain other Afghan
13 allies.

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

16 Do you have any issues with this terminology?

17 A I do not.

18 Q Okay. Great.

19 We also wanted to ask you, do you have any prior experience to State that would
20 underpin your skill set as a spokesperson?

21 A So I started my career, both in government and professional career, at the
22 Central Intelligence Agency. I spent about 8 years as an analyst at the Central
23 Intelligence Agency before I then moved on to become the spokesperson at the Central
24 Intelligence Agency.

25 I mention those 8 years as an analyst because I think the skill set involved in being

1 a spokesperson is not entirely irrelevant to the skill set involved in analysis and briefing
2 and the other requirements of that job.

3 I was a spokesperson to the CIA. I was a director on the strategic messaging
4 team at the NSC for a year, in 2014. And then from 2015 until January of 2017, I was the
5 spokesperson at the NSC and a senior director on that team and a specialist to the
6 President.

7 I worked broadly in comms and messaging during the 2017 to January 2021
8 period, both directly and in some ways indirectly, before I became the spokesperson at
9 the Department in January of 2021.

10 Q Thank you.

11 How many years of your career have been devoted to comms-related work?

12 A I suppose I started in the comms lane in 2013, so a little over a decade.

13 Q Okay. And what percentage of that was in a role as a spokesperson for an
14 entity?

15 A As a spokesperson for an entity, I -- well, so basically all of my time in
16 government, when I was a director, I was considered an assistant press secretary and
17 functioned as a spokesperson for the NSC.

18 And then during the years of 2017 to January of 2021, I was director of policy and
19 communications at a nonprofit organization, and I functioned as a spokesperson there.

20 And ever since my time at State, starting in January 2021.

21 Q Okay. So is it fair to say most of your career has involved communications
22 and also being a spokesperson?

23 A That's correct.

24 Q Okay.

25 Have you received any awards for your contributions related to foreign policy or

1 national security?

2 A I have. I've received a number of exceptional performance awards from
3 the CIA.

4 The NSC tends not to sort of do the -- because we're all sort of -- and I should say,
5 when I was at the NSC, I was a detailee from the CIA, so I was always a CIA officer. And
6 so, during that time, I believe I also did, you know, receive promotions and
7 commendations.

8 And then at State, I've received commendations, I suppose, as well.

9 Q Okay.

10 Have your insights on foreign affairs or national security been published or
11 included in public reporting?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Could you characterize that a bit further?

14 A So, as I just outlined, the vast majority of my career has been in government.
15 And so, during my time in government, I don't have the ability to express my own
16 opinions, typically, and so I have not, you know, written or penned anything under my
17 own name.

18 When I was out of government from 2017 to 2021, you know, I wrote a number of
19 op-eds, essays, online pieces; I was retained by NBC News to be a foreign affairs and
20 national security analyst.

21 And, then, if you take the more expansive view and include my words in terms of
22 reporting and journalism, you know, it would be difficult to quantify the number of
23 quotes that have been incorporated into the reporting during my official tenure as a
24 spokesperson.

25 Q Okay. Fair to say you're a distinguished national security official?

1 A I will let other people make that judgment.

2 Q Fair to say you feel qualified in the lane of national security?

3 A Yes.

4 Q What about foreign affairs?

5 A Yes.

6 Q What about reporting and press?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Great.

9 Turning to your role as spokesperson for State, what did you understand your job
10 responsibilities or mandate to be when you entered into that role?

11 A I understood my mandate, first and foremost, to represent the women and
12 men of the Department on a daily basis, to be the voice of the Department, to represent
13 their work and, in turn, the work that they were doing to pursue American interests and
14 our values around the world.

15 And so, in some ways, it was responding to the tactical questions of developments
16 in certain countries, but then, also, explaining to the American public and to the rest of
17 the world how the Department but also the U.S. Government more broadly was -- what
18 goals we were pursuing, how we were pursuing them, why we were pursuing them.

19 That's on the public side. I think as I explained to your colleagues a moment ago,
20 there is an aspect of the job that is much more behind the scenes and that involves
21 coordination and making sure that information is flowing within the Department,
22 information is flowing between and among departments and agencies, that we have the
23 best information available to us, knowing that world events are spinning quite quickly on
24 any given day, and that we're prepared to answer questions from journalists, from the
25 press, and from the public.

1 Q Who communicated these responsibilities to you?

2 A Certainly I understood it to be a priority of the Secretary that the
3 Department of State was engaged, that we were proactive, that we were affirmative in
4 explaining to the world and sharing information to the world.

5 I think it -- the job I took on in January 2021 was not a job where -- I don't recall
6 inheriting a job description, as it were, but I think I had a good sense of what the
7 Secretary expected of me, what the Secretary expected of the Department going from
8 our time working together in the Obama administration, in between administrations, and
9 on the transition as well.

10 Q Okay.

11 Did you agree with these general responsibilities and values set forth by the
12 Secretary?

13 A I did.

14 Q Okay.

15 Were there specific topics you developed messaging on -- oh, sorry, excuse me.

16 Were the specific topics you developed messaging on fixed or dynamic?

17 A Dynamic.

18 Q Can you explain why?

19 A You know, with few exceptions, our press corps and journalists much more
20 broadly are going to be focused on the issue du jour. So, on any given day, it could be
21 something near or far, simple or complex. It tended to be more complex than not.
22 But, you know, during my time in the job, I can't even count the number of countries and
23 issues that I had to speak to.

24 Now, of course, the institutional prerogatives of the Department, how the
25 Department operates, the people within the Department, those tended to be more fixed.

1 But reporters, by their very nature, are going to be much more interested in the dynamic.

2 Q And why is that the case?

3 A The news industry is based on what's new, and they're always going to be
4 chasing headlines and the latest developments. I can tell you, it is very difficult to get a
5 reporter interested in the great work we're doing at the Department to cultivate our
6 workforce, for example.

7 Q Fair enough.

8 Do you agree with the sentiment that comms work is driven by policy and
9 real-time policy developments?

10 A I do.

11 Q Okay.

12 How did your job responsibilities play out in reality once you began in January
13 2021?

14 A Well, I tried to hew to those guiding principles and, I think, by and large, was
15 able to do that. And I say "I"; you know, this is a team sport. I described to your
16 colleagues how I might've been at the tip of the spear, but there's a large enterprise both
17 at the State Department in Washington and in embassies and posts around the world
18 who are also engaged in this.

19 So, while the pace of events and developments around the world may have
20 dominated days, nights, weekends, you know, I tried to keep those North Stars in mind.

21 Q Okay.

22 You also spoke a little bit about a formal process you initiated in January
23 2021 -- on January 21, 2021, so the day after inauguration.

24 A Yes.

25 Q You said there were backgrounders, briefings getting you up to speed on

1 issues.

2 Can you talk a little bit about why you initiated this process, why it was important
3 at that time?

4 A Sure.

5 So I think it's perhaps -- the situation, context I was entering into is relevant to
6 this.

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

9 Q Why was that the case?

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

12 Q Do you agree with that position?

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

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

16 A They're important because we're public officials, we're public servants, and
17 we have a responsibility to serve the public. And if we're not communicating to the
18 public what we're doing, why we're doing it, with whom we're doing it, we're failing in
19 that core mission.

20 On top of that, it's in our -- to be honest, we're self-interested in it, as well. Our
21 policies, our priorities aren't going to have legitimacy with the American public, but also
22 publics around the world, if we're not out there explaining and offering information and
23 context and answering the hard questions.

24 My job would've been so much easier if I could've, you know, sat in my office all
25 day and not faced a reporter's question from the podium, but that would've been, at least

1 in my opinion, a failure in terms of what's expected of me.

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

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

9 Q Thank you.

10 Pivoting back to this formal process we were discussing, could you describe it a bit
11 in further detail for the record?

12 A Sure. And I assume the process you mean is the process that, once I got
13 past that initial phase, the sort of daily preparation?

14 Q Yes.

15 A Or do you mean --

16 Q Let me be more specific. I want you to share about the process by which
17 you were informed of policy to then make statements on behalf of the State Department.

18 A Sure.

19 So, every day, before the daily press briefing, I would carve out up to 2 hours of
20 my schedule -- I hoped it would be less than 2 hours, but typically 2 hours of my
21 schedule -- to hear from, by and large, the career experts who were working on any given
22 issue.

23 As I mentioned to your colleagues, oftentimes these experts would be from the
24 relevant bureaus' press and public diplomacy teams. Sometimes we would pull in desk
25 officers, subject-matter experts, people who were deployed.

1 And I should say, this was all virtual. And so we could bring in people from the
2 field, we could bring in the relevant experts as necessary from around the world.
3 Because I would want to hear directly from them their guidance on what we were doing,
4 why we were doing it, what we sought to achieve.

5 And so, typically, they would give me a very short briefing. I would ask
6 questions; we would engage. And this process would go on for, you know, up to 2 hours
7 or so until I felt that I had what I needed to face the questions that I expected to receive
8 from reporters.

9 Q Fair to say that this process was rigorous?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Included healthy debate?

12 A Yes. I wanted to hear not only -- for me, what was most important and
13 most helpful, actually, was not hearing our team, you know, read the messaging points,
14 because I had that on a sheet of paper. For me, what was most helpful was to hear the
15 basis for the policy -- why we were doing what we were doing, how we were doing it,
16 some texture behind it as well.

17 And there were many times where, you know, I or someone else would say, "Well,
18 you know, is that the best way to describe it? Is there anything more we can say?"
19 Almost always I would try and eke out more from the team, knowing that I would be
20 faced with questions that would call for a number of details.

21 Q Okay. And did this process include the interagency?

22 A Typically, no. And I don't recall an instance where we had an individual not
23 from the State Department who was on guidance collection.

24 Q How did you select these career experts who informed your knowledge
25 related to press briefings or making statements on behalf of State?

1 A I left that to the bureaus. And the individuals they had placed in these
2 positions were the ones who briefed me on any given day.

3 Q Did anyone express concern about the process you instituted on January 21?

4 A No. And, in fact, I would be surprised if they did, because it was largely the
5 process that had been instituted by prior administrations.

6 I knew that, before press briefings were ceased, there was a process like this. I
7 knew that during the Obama administration this is what my then-White House
8 counterpart, Jen Psaki, did when she was at the podium, what John Kirby did when he
9 was at the podium.

10 And, you know, I had experienced something similar when I was at the White
11 House briefing the White House press secretary. Obviously, it's a different context,
12 different environment, but the intent, at least, is similar.

13 Q Okay.

14 And is my understanding correct that your testimony is you, in effect, reported to
15 Secretary Blinken and Ms. Suzy George? Is that correct?

16 A In effect, yes.

17 Q Okay.

18 What is the professional reputation of Secretary Blinken?

19 A He's -- my sense is that people respect him immensely. He is someone who
20 has spent decades in service to the country, someone who has deep experience with the
21 State Department, entering the State Department in 1993, I think, as a senior advisor and
22 was in the Office of European and Canadian Affairs, after having distinguished himself in
23 the White House before that.

24 He has, obviously, put in a number of years in this broader complex. He
25 distinguished himself on the SFRC as staff director.

1 And I came to know him for the first time when he was Deputy National Security
2 Advisor in 2014 before he moved over to become Deputy Secretary of State and to spend
3 several more years in the State Department.

4 But I came to know him when he was Deputy National Security Advisor. He had
5 a tremendous reputation at the White House, not only among the principals there but
6 also people who were, you know, at my level, as someone who was intelligent,
7 perceptive, but also, on a human level, kind, affable, pleasant, someone who you wanted
8 to work with and ultimately for.

9 Q Thank you. Does his reputation comport with your experience and
10 interactions with him?

11 A It does.

12 Q Could you explain a bit more?

13 A I couldn't ask for a better boss, and especially when someone quite literally
14 has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

15 He is someone who, as I mentioned, knows a thing or two about my line of work.
16 He was a journalist early in his career. He has spent a number of hours before television
17 cameras, both in government and out of government. And I think he knows the
18 demands, knows the appetite on the part of the public and on the part of reporters for
19 information, and someone who also recognizes the stakes.

20 And so it was important for me, during that first staff meeting, as I recounted to
21 your colleagues, when some of the first words out of his mouth were an encouragement
22 for the Department and for me to really lean forward in how we communicated with the
23 American people and people around the world, to see us engaged, to see us active, but
24 also, recognizing the dynamism of world events, you know, being someone who could be
25 counted on to have people's backs if they came under fire, unfairly or fairly.

1 And that is, you know, precisely what I've seen during my 3-plus years at the
2 Department, most of that time as spokesperson but, more recently, working directly for
3 him.

4 Q What is Ms. George's professional reputation?

5 A She is widely regarded as a tremendous manager of people.

6 I first came to know Suzy George around that same timeframe, 2014. She was
7 the chief of staff at the NSC at the time. I think it is fair to say I probably wouldn't have
8 been able to endure that high-pressure situation were it not for Suzy's counsel and advice
9 during those years, whether professional or, you know, later personal.

10 We worked closely together from the period of 2017 to 2021. She was engaged
11 in the organization that several of us founded coming out of the White House. And
12 then, you know, I've worked with her ever since.

13 Q Okay. So fair to say that her professional reputation comports with your
14 experiences with Ms. George as a supervisor?

15 A Absolutely.

16 Q Great.

17 How did your role as spokesperson differ from other policy or programmatic roles
18 in the Department?

19 A My role as spokesperson didn't require me -- and, in fact, made it
20 impossible, just given the pace of business that I was faced with all day, every day -- to be
21 involved in the, you know, operational details of a given decision or a given process.

22 I saw my role as to be aware of what was going on at the Department; to be
23 cognizant of the issues that the Department was facing, our senior leadership was facing;
24 to be familiar with the policy processes, the considerations of certainly the policy that we
25 were pursuing, because, ultimately, you know, that is what I needed to be in a position to

1 relay and ultimately to answer questions about.

2 But, as I described to your colleagues, you know, I only infrequently, you know,
3 attended deliberative interagency meetings, just because, you know, I was very focused
4 on the messaging, communications, coordination that went along and are part and parcel
5 of this job -- of my old job.

6 Q Okay. And that's because, as you previously testified, your primary role
7 was communications. Is that correct?

8 A That's correct.

9 Q Okay.

10 However, you did, at times, sit in on meetings. When you sat in on meetings,
11 was the objective of you sitting in to develop policy?

12 A The objective of having me sit in?

13 Q Correct. What was the objective?

14 A The objective was a couple things. One, I needed to be familiar with the
15 issues at play. And --

16 Q And why did you need to be familiar?

17 A Because I needed to be able to explain it to the American people and to
18 people around the world, oftentimes through the conduit of reporters but not always.

19 And so it was important for me to be cited on all of the major issues and
20 considerations, but it's also true that, you know, there were times where, as we're talking
21 about policy development, there is a public element that goes along with it -- how we're
22 going to roll something out, how we're going to talk about it publicly once it's unveiled or
23 once it has come into fruition. So there was some of that as well.

24 Q Okay.

25 Is it fair to say that your work as spokesperson was distinct from policymaking?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Fair to say that your work as spokesperson was distinct from policy
3 implementation processes?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Is there a distinct relationship between policymaking and communications
6 functions in a national security agency normally, in your experience?

7 A Is there a distinction between the two?

8 Q Yes.

9 A Yes.

10 Q Why?

11 A It's a different skill set. Typically, when you are developing policy, you
12 want -- and, obviously, you go up the ladder in terms of deliberations -- but, you know,
13 you want the subject-matter experts who are there. I don't consider myself a
14 subject-matter expert on most of the issues I'm talking about.

15 My role is to understand the broad contours, to understand our motivations, our
16 interests, our values, our considerations, the tradeoffs, and to have a generalized
17 knowledge.

18 When I was an analyst at the CIA, my role was to be, you know, 5 miles deep and 2
19 inches wide. As the Department spokesperson, it's the reverse, to be 5 miles wide and
20 not, in most cases, quite deep on many of the issues.

21 Q Okay.

22 And you previously testified to a task force that was set up in August of 2021
23 related to Afghanistan. Is that correct?

24 A That's right.

25 Q And so this task force, as you testified, was comprised of individuals,

1 subject-matter experts, who were seconded to brief you on Afghanistan policy. Is that
2 correct?

3 A That's correct.

4 Q Without naming them, where were these individuals seconded from?

5 A As I recall, there were individuals from the relevant bureaus, so SCA, CA.

6 There were crisis -- we had a crisis comms team, people who weren't necessarily
7 steeped in the given issue but had a sense for how to roll out processes and how to
8 streamline processes in the event of a challenge or potential crisis.

9 But, again, the people who were briefing me on the substance were, as I recall,
10 almost all or perhaps even all career experts on the given matters.

11 Q Okay. Was it your decision to set up this task force?

12 A It was not. This is something that happens -- a decision that's made -- I
13 actually don't know, statutorily, who decides to set up the task force. But it's a process
14 that the Department follows when an issue becomes much more involved.

15 Q Okay. Thank you.

16 And speaking to the Afghanistan withdrawal and evacuation specifically, it is my
17 understanding that your office did not have interaction with the Afghan Government.

18 A I don't recall any interaction on the part of my office with the Afghan
19 Government.

20 Q What about your office as related to the Taliban?

21 A No.

22 Q What about your office as to interagency planning processes to implement a
23 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?

24 A So my direct office was not engaged in the planning process that culminated
25 in the U.S. withdrawal that ended at the end of August 2021.

1 We -- and I mean "we" collectively, as public affairs specialists and communicators
2 within the Department -- did feed into an interagency process certainly as decision points
3 became closer, whether it was the decision in April regarding Afghanistan or into August
4 of that year.

5 Q So the role was communications.

6 A That's right.

7 Q Was your office involved in screening or issuing Special Immigrant Visas for
8 Afghan applicants before, during, or after the withdrawal?

9 A No.

10 Q Was your office involved in implementing the U.S. Refugee Admissions
11 Program before, during, or after the withdrawal?

12 A No.

13 Q Was your office involved in preparing for a U.S. embassy presence in Kabul
14 post-withdrawal?

15 A No.

16 Q Was your office involved in ensuring the security of U.S. personnel in Kabul
17 before, during, or after the withdrawal?

18 A No.

19 Q How did the request you received to appear for this transcribed interview
20 today strike you?

21 A I suppose I was a bit confused.

22 Q Why were you confused?

23 A Because, as has been intimated, I was not someone who was engaged in the
24 decision-making processes regarding the issues that are in question here.

25 Q Okay. Do you know why your testimony has been sought for a

1 congressional investigation into the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?

2 A I don't.

3 Q Okay.

4 During your tenure, did you have any concerns about the Department's internal
5 process to develop and finalize press statements or press guidance?

6 A Comprehensively, no. You know, it was a process that, as a matter of
7 course, worked quite well.

8 Now, I say that with the caveat that the world is dynamic, as you've already
9 alluded to, and sometimes events can move very quickly. And the
10 Department -- sometimes it is a challenge for processes within -- well, let me just say, you
11 know, there were times where, you know, I wanted to be in a position to say something
12 as soon as possible, and, you know, the dynamic nature of these events can make that
13 occasionally more difficult.

14 But, by and large, no. It's a process that has been honed and refined over the
15 course of successive administrations. It's not a process that I instituted or this
16 administration instituted; it's a process that is engrained in the DNA of the State
17 Department.

18 Q Fair to say that you therefore had confidence that the press statements and
19 press guidance released by the Department during your tenure were accurate?

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

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

1 A The press statements that emanate ultimately from the spokesperson's
2 name or the Secretary's name are not written by the spokesperson or the Secretary.
3 They are drafted by the subject-matter experts in any given bureau.

4 Not only are they drafted by subject-matter experts, they are then coordinated
5 and cleared extensively throughout the building. So something that is drafted by SCA
6 could be seen by CA, by PRM, by L, and then ultimately others on the 7th Floor, before it
7 would then come to my desk.

8 So, by the time something came to me, there was typically a -- you know, almost
9 without exception, unless there was a -- almost without exception, you know, a
10 thoroughly vetted statement that had been drafted in the first instance by people who
11 knew these issues best.

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

13 A Yes.

14 Q A very rigorous process?

15 A That's fair to say.

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

18 A They did, yes.

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

22 A Yes.

23 Q What informs that opinion?

24 A My recollection of that year.

25 When we came into office, I faced, we faced, regular questions about the May 1

1 deadline, about the policy process that was ongoing at the time regarding that May 1
2 deadline.

3 We answered -- while maintaining space for that deliberative process -- those
4 questions to the best of our ability. The President's address to the American public and
5 to the world in mid-April of 2021 announced our policy.

6 Certainly, thereafter, I spoke -- you know, every day I was in Washington at the
7 podium, but then also, you know, constantly back and forth, email, texts, phone calls with
8 reporters, answering their questions, again, to the best of my ability, as did my colleagues
9 at the Department of Defense, the White House, other departments and agencies who
10 were engaged in this.

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

13 A I do -- I did.

14 Q What about on behalf of the interagency?

15 A Yes.

16 Q What informs that opinion?

17 A That opinion is informed by the fact that I was installed in that role in the
18 first instance. It's a role that, yes, you're speaking on behalf of the Department, you're
19 speaking on behalf of the Secretary, but you're often the voice of U.S. foreign policy.

20 And I recall instances where I received compliments or kudos from, you know,
21 senior officials within the Department, from senior officials throughout the
22 administration on the way in which I was answering questions.

23 Q Okay.

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

1 A That's correct.

2 Q Is it fair to say that the withdrawal began with the Doha deal in February
3 2020 and that was, in fact, why you were apprised of such issues when you began in the
4 role?

5 A That's fair. I don't have the graph in front of me, but, as I recall, when the
6 Obama administration left office in 2017, I think there were 8,600 U.S. forces in
7 Afghanistan. By the time the Trump administration left office, there were 2,500 U.S.
8 forces left in Afghanistan.

9 I recall an order -- or, at least, what I understand was an order from President
10 Trump in, I believe it was, December of 2020 to take that number down to zero, for
11 reasons that aren't known to me firsthand certainly.

12 I understand that we inherited 2,500 troops, we inherited a Taliban that was in
13 the strongest position it had been in some 20 years, and a very challenging dynamic.

14 Q Very helpful context. Thank you.

15 Upon concluding your tenure as spokesperson, did you debrief on that tenure
16 with any Department officials?

17 A I wouldn't say there was a formal debriefing process. I will say, after, you
18 know, every briefing, there was a formal, sort of, review where I'd discuss with
19 colleagues, you know, where we needed more information, where I thought people
20 would take their questions. But there wasn't a -- as I was leaving the position, there
21 wasn't a formal review process of that sort.

22 Q Are you aware of what the State Department's after-action report is related
23 to Afghanistan?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Were you interviewed for it?

1 A I was not.

2 Q Did you review it, the unclassified portion, at any time?

3 A I actually only reviewed it after it was made public.

4 Q Understood. Thank you.

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

8 A You know, I'll just say that, of the issues that I confronted during my time as
9 spokesperson, this was, of course, the most challenging.

10 Ending a 20-year military engagement in a country halfway around the world was
11 never going to be easy, but, even in the midst of that challenge, as a public servant, you
12 know, I have never seen more extraordinary bravery and courage and determination and
13 grit and talent than what we witnessed certainly during the latter half of August. I recall
14 the burden on me personally, but that is nothing compared to what my colleagues from
15 the Department of State and from our partners in the U.S. military were doing on the
16 ground.

17 And the fact that, in the space of -- well, let me back up. The fact that, in the
18 space of just a couple days, we could relocate our entire embassy from the compound to
19 what was then Hamid Karzai International Airport using prepositioned assets, all of the
20 logistics that went in that direction, and in the case of 2 short weeks we could facilitate
21 the evacuation of 124,000 of our fellow citizens, of their family members, third-country
22 nationals, diplomatic partners, SIV recipients, SIV-eligible individuals, it's something that I
23 didn't think could have been possible.

24 And the fact that they were able to do that in what was an extraordinarily
25 challenging security context, a security context that was punctuated, of course, by Abbey

1 Gate and the sacrifice that those 13 servicemembers made at Abbey Gate, what they
2 were able to accomplish that was enabled by the U.S. military and the bravery of
3 Department of State, I think it is, to use that word again, nothing short of extraordinary.

4 [REDACTED]. Thank you for that.

5 Reserving our right for followup after the majority's round, we want to thank you
6 for your testimony on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks and the minority staff. Thank
7 you very much for your voluntary testimony here today.

8 Mr. Price. Thanks.

9 [REDACTED]. That concludes our round.

10 [Recess.]

11 [REDACTED]. Well, the time is now 12:34. We'll go back on the record.

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q So I just wanted to address some topics before proceeding with our
14 questions.

15 So, first of all, in terms of mention of, sort of, firsthand account, as we've noted,
16 we want your firsthand account. Given that this is a voluntary transcribed interview and
17 not a deposition, the Rules of Evidence do not apply in the same manner, such as hearsay,
18 which was mentioned by my minority colleagues.

19 If you have any questions, I'm happy to give you a moment to speak with counsel
20 from the State Department, but I'm sure they'll likely say the same thing.

21 Additionally, in terms of selecting you as a witness, I'd like to represent on behalf
22 of the chairman, who I was just with, each of our witnesses were chosen very specifically
23 and intentionally. These were negotiated with State Department, and that requires an
24 ongoing process that was negotiated with H and L.

25 So there is a purpose and an intent to each of our witnesses. And if there are

1 any issues, we're happy to address it at the principal level.

2 Thank you.

3 So, moving back to the interagency process, I believe when we last spoke, you
4 noted that that process started around mid-January and concluded up until, sort of, the
5 President's announcement in April of 2021?

6 A I suppose it depends on how you define the process. If you're speaking to
7 the review --

8 Q Correct.

9 A -- that's alluded to in exhibit A that you passed, my recollection is, very
10 shortly after the inauguration.

11 Q Thank you. And let me refine: the interagency policy review of the Doha
12 Agreement.

13 A Uh-huh.

14 Q So, getting back to the interagency policy review, can you speak to how this
15 review was conducted?

16 A I can't.

17 Q Were you privy to any of the meetings that surrounded the review? Did
18 you partake in any of the discussions? Did you witness any of the discussions?

19 A As I alluded to before, I don't recall taking part in any of the formal
20 discussions. I was privy to reflections of those discussions in various meetings, but I did
21 not take part in the -- I don't recall taking part in any of the formal review process
22 meetings.

23 Q Can you please speak to the reflections of those meetings?

24 A I recall instances from January until April when we would be, you know,
25 updated in terms of the process, where it was, what the -- sometimes what the -- where

1 people thought it might be going.

2 But, again, this was all -- it's difficult for me to sort of pinpoint any single update,
3 because it was, you know, often relayed in passing in the context of a broader meeting,
4 and it was not a -- it tended not to be a comprehensive readout of, you know, a DC or PC
5 or meeting with the President on Afghanistan.

6 Q So, from January to April, other than, sort of, informal discussions, you
7 received no information as to where the Department was at on the interagency policy
8 review?

9 A No, I wouldn't say that. I was referring to the fact that I didn't take part, as
10 I recall, in those direct policy review meetings.

11 I knew, you know, where the Department was in terms of our interagency
12 position. I had a sense of what we were doing on the ground, of the contingency
13 planning and broader planning that was ongoing.

14 But I think my comment is that I don't recall a specific, sort of, comprehensive
15 update on the policy review process as it was ongoing. As you said, it was more
16 informal, on the margins of broader meetings, and periodic.

17 Q Okay.

18 So how about we break down, sort of, the various components. Let's start with
19 some discussions surrounding conditionality. Can you speak to that, given that I imagine
20 this was part of, sort of, the ongoing discussions and questions that you likely faced as the
21 spokesperson for the Department of State?

22 A Of course, it was a part of the discussions, as I understand it at least. But,
23 again, you know, I don't recall having a conversation about conditionality vis-à-vis what
24 was in the ongoing review process. Was it mentioned in passing at some point?
25 Almost certainly, yes, but I don't recall a specific conversation about conditionality.

1 Q Okay.

2 So what was the State Department's role in the interagency policy review?

3 A To represent, of course, the prerogatives of the Department, but then, based
4 on the considered advice and judgment of our diplomats on the ground, of our experts
5 within the Department, to represent a viewpoint within those discussions.

6 Q And can you please walk us through your involvement in that review, if any
7 at all, whether it be on the receiving end, whether it be providing communications
8 guidance, et cetera?

9 A The communications guidance during that process was actually fairly
10 straightforward. We tend not to speak about deliberative processes as they're ongoing.

11 So I recall being asked any number of times for an update on our ongoing
12 Afghanistan review process, and I recall my answer was pretty straightforward: It's an
13 ongoing process, I'm not going to speak about an ongoing process, and essentially leaving
14 at that.

15 Q And to what extent did you engage and coordinate with other entities in the
16 interagency regarding Afghanistan during this period?

17 A It was -- as with any issue that came up in the context of, you know, daily
18 press briefings or our broader engagement with the press and the public, it's an issue that
19 required coordination both within the building and within the interagency.

20 Q Can you please speak to the Department's coordination with the
21 Department of Defense during this period?

22 [REDACTED]: Just to be clear, his spokesperson coordination with DOD --

23 [REDACTED]: Correct.

24 [REDACTED]: -- as opposed to -- yeah.

25 Mr. Price. I recall a few conversations with John Kirby, a few conversations with

1 others over at the Department of Defense. To be honest, I don't quite recall what the
2 specific topics of those discussions were. But, you know, I recall being in contact with
3 him regarding coordination.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q So these were a few communications over the span of 3 months?

6 A That's right.

7 Q Okay. So the regular conversations you previously spoke of, these were
8 not pertaining to Afghanistan, with John Kirby?

9 A No. Of course, I mean, just about every issue under the sun DOD is
10 somehow involved in. Sometimes it was Afghanistan -- I should say, may have been
11 Afghanistan, because, again, it's difficult for me to recall specific conversations with him.

12 But, you know, whether it was Afghanistan, whether it was Yemen, whether it was
13 Iran -- you know, go across the waterfront on the issues that we would have to address
14 every day -- DOD had an equity, of course.

15 Q So let's focus on Afghanistan. When did your regular conversations with
16 John Kirby regarding Afghanistan begin?

17 A Certainly, there were conversations as April approached. You know, as the
18 May 1 deadline approached, as we approached the point where the President would
19 announce his decision publicly, the cadence of those conversations increased.

20 To be clear, though, it oftentimes wasn't just me to John Kirby. It was
21 sometimes, I recall, in the context of, you know, a larger secure video-teleconference
22 involving others from the Department, others from DOD, beyond just me and Kirby.

23 Q Okay.

24 And so, with respect to the interagency policy review, how did coordination take
25 place with the White House and National Security Council?

1 A The same way it does across any other issue. There's a standing daily call
2 with not only the White House but other relevant departments and agencies. There is
3 ad-hoc coordination during the day. Some of that I would conduct; some of that I
4 wouldn't.

5 Just generically, on -- and the same was true in the Obama administration, where I
6 also served on the other side of the equation -- press guidance would be developed, as I
7 mentioned to your colleagues a moment ago, by the substantive experts. Typically, that
8 guidance is not only coordinated within the Department, within the building, but, on
9 issues where there's an interagency equity -- and, of course, Afghanistan would be among
10 them -- it's sent over to DOD and/or to the White House, typically "and" to the White
11 House. And by "White House," I mean the NSC in this case.

12 So a lot of that would take place, you know, outside of my direct vision, and the
13 guidance, the messaging points would arrive at my desk having already been coordinated
14 or cleared internally and within the interagency.

15 Q What were those messaging points?

16 A You know, it's difficult for me to sort of trace the evolution of them, but, you
17 know, as I said a moment ago, for much of that period, the messaging feat, you know, on
18 the record, publicly, wasn't all that difficult because it was an ongoing deliberative
19 process, and we tend not to speak to those processes, certainly not from the podium.

20 Q So was there any evolution within that 3-month timeframe as to what the
21 messaging was, or was it continuously, "This is an ongoing deliberative process"?

22 A I am sure there was some nuance that was injected over time as we got
23 closer and closer, but I honestly -- I can't recall.

24 Q Did Secretary Blinken communicate anything to you directly during that
25 interagency policy review?

1 A Did he communicate --

2 Q Regarding Afghanistan and the Doha Agreement?

3 A -- anything to me personally --

4 Q Correct.

5 A -- just to me? Or --

6 Q To you or your team?

7 A Just to me and my team? Or are you speaking to, you know, broader
8 settings where the Secretary would have voiced his opinion or perspective on something?

9 Q So I'd like to first focus on you and your team, given that you are, sort of, the
10 face of the State Department, you're the ones who were communicating with the public
11 on behalf of the Department. So did Secretary Blinken communicate anything to you
12 regarding messaging?

13 A So, whether the issue was Afghanistan or any other substantive -- any other,
14 sort of, foreign affairs issue, I don't recall ever having gone to the Secretary to say, what is
15 your perspective on X issue? Because we have, you know, a building perspective. And
16 that perspective would come up to me through the normal course of business, typically.
17 I can't say with any certainty there weren't exceptions, but I'm having a difficult time
18 thinking of one.

19 I would go to the Secretary, on the other hand, if it were something, you know,
20 that wouldn't be produced by the building, something that were unique to him,
21 something that wouldn't be appropriate, for whatever reason, for the building to
22 produce. But Afghanistan was not of that nature.

23 Q You had noted previously that, in practice, you reported, in many instances,
24 to Secretary Blinken's chief of staff, Ms. Suzy George.

25 A Uh-huh.

1 Q Did Ms. George communicate anything to you during this interagency policy
2 review regarding Afghanistan?

3 A Not that I recall.

4 Q What were the major issues and questions the State Department had to
5 address during the review?

6 A This is probably a better question for those who were involved in the review.

7 Q You noted previously that you were privy to exchanges with the White
8 House as well as indirect informal communications.

9 To the best of your ability, as a spokesperson for the Department of State, as an
10 individual that the American public looks to in communicating the Department's
11 perspective, what were the major issues and questions the Department addressed during
12 that review?

1 [12:47 p.m.]

2 Mr. Price. You know, again you are asking someone who wasn't a part of that
3 formal process. So my answer is going to be grounded in second, third hand reflections
4 of that. But as its core simply, it was a decision as to May 1 and what our principally
5 military engagement in Afghanistan would or would not be going forward after May 1.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q Just so I understand correctly, beyond this May 1, the deadline that you have
8 noted, you had no impressions or personal understandings or awareness of what the
9 major issues and questions the Department was addressing during that review?

10 A No, of course that is not the case. I mean, as with any issue as complex as
11 Afghanistan, there are a number of issues that are implicated. The U.S. military
12 involvement was the core question that the President and the administration faced.
13 There were a number of subordinate issues that really would fall into place in some ways,
14 based on our military presence or not, what our diplomatic presence would look like, our
15 SIV program, what that would look like, you know, our engagement with the region, what
16 that would look like. But again, the fundamental question was what would our military
17 presence look like after May 1, and certainly later in that year.

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

20 A I can do so with the caveat that, again, I was not part of the formal process.
21 But I will just -- to put it very simply, as I understood it, as someone who was not present
22 for those meetings, but as I understood it, the fundamental decision was do you seek to
23 blow past the deadline that was negotiated by the previous administration with the force
24 of some 2,500 U.S. servicemembers, confronting a Taliban that had not been as strong in
25 some 20 years, confronting the specter that those 2,500 forces would come under direct

1 fire from a Taliban force of, you know, what some several hundred -- well, tens of
2 thousands certainly to put it conservatively, come under fire, face harm. Potentially
3 require that the U.S. Government make the difficult decision not only to prolong the war,
4 but also to intensify it with additional servicemembers going in to safeguard the
5 servicemembers who are were already on the ground, or do you follow through with the
6 contours of what the previous administration had negotiated and began the military
7 withdrawal.

8 Q So I want to get back to the question of conditionality so the terms of the
9 agreement. So thank you for your response, but can you please address sort of the
10 conditions that the Taliban violated. Was that factored into this discussion or into this
11 assessment?

12 A Again, I am not the person to ask about this. I have impressions and my
13 impressions were that the process was inclusive, it was comprehensive, it was deliberate,
14 but as for the details of that process, the questions like that are probably best directed at
15 people who were directly in that process.

16 [REDACTED]. As the State Department's spokesperson, were you briefed on
17 what the review had concluded about the Taliban violating the Doha agreement?

18 Mr. Price. I recall, because I was asked this question, you know, from the
19 podium, and I recall asking the experts, well, you know, what is our view, institutional
20 view of the Taliban's compliance or not with U.S.-Taliban agreement. And the way I
21 recall it being briefed to me, and in turn describing it publicly is uneven, uneven adherent
22 to the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

23 [REDACTED]. And then as the State Department's spokesperson, were you ever
24 briefed on whether the fact that the Taliban was violating at least parts of the Doha
25 agreement, were you briefed on whether that was factored into the decision to

1 go-to-zero?

2 Mr. Price. I -- if you are asking if I asked for, or ever received a formal briefing on
3 that very subject, the answer is no, at least I don't recall that. With that said, I recall
4 having a number of conversations around the fact that in some ways, Taliban adherence
5 was immaterial. What was material was the fact that our forces, after May 1, would
6 come under fire from a much larger adversarial force and that we would be putting
7 servicemembers at risk, you would be risking prolonging what was already America's
8 longest war, you would be risking the introduction of additional servicemembers to
9 protect those servicemembers. And so in that sense whether the Taliban fulfilled all of
10 their commitments under the U.S.-Taliban deal or none of their commitments under the
11 U.S.-Taliban deal the fact that they believed that they had reached an agreement with the
12 previous administration, that the United States would withdraw its forces beginning the
13 withdrawal process as of May 1, that was the most relevant fact.

14 [REDACTED]. So I would like to introduce exhibit 2, next.

15 [Price Exhibit No. 2

16 was marked for identification.]

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q This is a transcript of a State Department press briefing you provided on
19 February 3, 2021.

20 A Uh-huh.

21 Q This is an excerpt for the transcript, apologies. I would like to direct your
22 attention to what is marked as page 18 at the bottom right-hand corner, beginning with
23 the second question from the bottom. Here you are asked, "Okay. I am wondering if
24 the Secretary has now seen that full agreement because he said several times he had to
25 review what was actually in it. Is there anything in it that surprised him that he

1 disagrees with? And Zal is still on the job. What exactly are his marching orders? Is
2 he trying to salvage what's there or are we starting from scratch again? Where are you
3 seeing it?"

4 Then you were asked, "and could you also comment on the Taliban's rejection of
5 Kirby's comments from the Pentagon last week?" To which you responded, "Uh-Huh.
6 Well, so I think it is worth starting with just a broad survey and a recap of where the
7 President is. And as you have heard the President say, he is committed to bringing a
8 responsible end of the so-called forever wars, these wars that have gone on for nearly
9 two decades. And the Biden administration plans to support an ongoing peace process
10 between the Islamic Republic, aimed at achieving a just and durable political settlement
11 and a permanent and comprehensive cease fire. We are doing that because we believe
12 it is the best way to achieve our objectives. We have committed to supporting the
13 Democratic -- the diplomatic processes underway.

14 "When it comes to U.S.-Taliban agreement, we are reviewing what has been
15 negotiating -- negotiated including that agreement. The review including assessment of
16 the whether the Taliban are fulfilling their commitment to cut ties with terrorist groups,
17 reduce violence, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government
18 and other stakeholders. At this time, no decisions about our force posture has been
19 made. And we are committed, as I said, to supporting the diplomatic process and we
20 are committed to ensuring that Afghanistan never again provides a base for terrorist
21 attacks against the United States, our partners or our interests."

22 So this goes back to February 3, 2021. This was during that interagency review
23 period you were previously discussing, correct?

24 So you have noted multiple assessments, additional factors such as ties to terrorist
25 groups, reducing violence, to engaging in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan

1 Government. It fair to understand these are some of the conditions that we have been
2 discussing in the last --

3 A It is fair to describe those as the stipulations that were in the U.S.-Taliban
4 agreement, yes.

5 Q So when was this U.S. Government assessment completed?

6 A I couldn't say. I don't know.

7 Q Does the assessment exist in the form of a written report in any manner?

8 A I don't know.

9 Q What was the assessment of the Taliban's commitments to cut ties with
10 terrorist groups?

11 A I couldn't speak to the context of the formal assessment. I can speak to my
12 knowledge predicated on conversations on discussions over the course of months. But I
13 think the word uneven applies here as well when you talk about the terrorist landscape
14 that exists in Afghanistan. Of course, al Qaeda is what we were primarily concerned
15 with in October of 2001 when we went in. It has evolved to incorporate ISIS-K and other
16 groups. I think you have to look individually at each of those relationships. The
17 Taliban relationship with al Qaeda is far different than it is with ISIS-K. If you want a
18 sense of whether the Taliban had fulfilled its commitment to restrict al Qaeda's activities
19 in Afghanistan, I think you only need look at what the Biden administration did in July
20 of 2022 by taking out Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul.

21 [REDACTED]. By that, you are saying that the Taliban was continuing in many
22 ways to host al Qaeda, including top al Qaeda leaders.

23 Mr. Price. It is certainly accurate that they continued to host al Qaeda into at
24 least 2022.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q What was the assessment of the Taliban's commitment to reduce violence?

2 A Again, there was a period, where I think during this period, it was uneven, I
3 think, again, is the right word. The Taliban had made a commitment not to attack U.S.
4 servicemembers, that was our primary concern, NATO, provincial capitals. I think during
5 this period, by this period I mean up until May 1, I think the adherence to that had been
6 effective in at least some areas.

7 Q And by uneven, you mean they weren't in full compliance with the term,
8 correct?

9 A Again, I am not -- these are questions that are going to be better put to
10 military analysts, put to people who were, you know, directly involved in that deliberative
11 process. This is based on my recollection and, you know, at the very -- at best
12 secondhand accounts of the considerations at the time.

13 Q So as spokesperson, the nature of compliance did no one in the Department
14 ever communicate to you whether they believed, or whether the Department believed
15 the Taliban was in or not in compliance this term?

16 A It is not a question of in or out. As with all things in foreign policy, there is
17 nuance and complexity. The Taliban's compliance with the agreement, I think, is best
18 described as uneven.

19 Q What was the assessment of the Taliban's commitments to engage in
20 meaningful negotiations with the Afghan Government and other stakeholders?

21 A I couldn't say, thinking back or recollecting if there was an assessment there.
22 I think, certainly, the fact that the Taliban encroached militarily rather than engaged in
23 well-meaning diplomacy may speak to something of a verdict there. But I couldn't say if
24 there was a formal assessment on that front.

25 Q Thank you.

1 which to figure out how to manage that. We came into office in late January, May 1 was
2 just a few months away. The -- as I understand it, the Department leadership made the
3 decision that continuity in the SRAR office would be important so as not to have to bring
4 in someone without that knowledge and without familiarity with what the previous
5 administration had negotiated and purportedly, why they are negotiated it with only a
6 couple months to go until that May 1 deadline.

7 Q Can you speak to what the State Department believed was Ambassador
8 Khalizad's distinguished work as you have noted here on Afghanistan?

9 A So, I think it is a function -- let me start by saying I think continuity, the
10 judgment was that continuity was important in this arena. Now there is no question
11 that Zal had tremendous experience in Afghanistan. It is a country with which he is
12 intimately familiar, and this goes back to, at least as far as I know, perhaps before, but the
13 George W. Bush administration. And so, decades of experience with Afghanistan.

14 Q So the reason I ask is because you state here, there are a small handful of
15 officials both in this building and ambassadorial posts around the world who the
16 Secretary of State remains because of the distinguished work they have done, because of
17 the continuity we need in key areas. So am I correct in understanding that Ambassador
18 Khalizad was asked to stay on not because of the distinguished work that you mentioned
19 here, but because of the continuity, or is it both? And if it is both, can you please speak
20 to the distinguished work that you mention?

21 A I think that question is better directed to someone who made the decision to
22 keep him on precisely why that decision was made. I was left with the impression that
23 continuity was paramount in this arena because we were dealing with such a compressed
24 timeframe in which to make a pretty momentous decision.

25 Q But you are the one who delivered this information, correct?

1 Taliban continue to refrain from targeting American servicemembers, and NATO
2 servicemembers, provincial capitals, to cut ties with terrorist groups. Of course from a
3 U.S. national security interest all of those things would be to our advantage.

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

7 A So again, I think that is a question that is better directed at someone who is
8 intimately familiar with that review and who was involved in that review. I will just
9 restate the point that I have conveyed previously in that in some ways, what mattered
10 most was the way the Taliban chose to interpret the agreement that the last
11 administration struck with them. And if they were to have made the decision to resume
12 pursuing U.S. servicemembers, official Americans on the ground, NATO forces, that was,
13 in some ways, dispositive, or close to it. We had lost thousands of American
14 servicemembers in Afghanistan. The specter of finding ourselves in a position where
15 our servicemembers were coming under fire, having to reinforce those servicemembers is
16 not something that this administration took lightly.

17 I think there is another relevant data point here, and that is that we certainly
18 understood the desire to have an ongoing -- we certainly understood the utility that could
19 come with having a longer presence on the ground that went past May 1, military, like,
20 for our purposes, diplomatic. There was an effort to determine whether the Taliban
21 would go along with an arrangement where we stayed on the ground longer without our
22 forces coming under direct threat. My understanding is that it was the conclusion of
23 those diplomatic efforts that that type of arrangement was impossible.

24 So it boils down to a simple choice, do you blow past that May 1 deadline and
25 potentially have American servicemembers become targets, and unfortunately, in some

1 ways, easier targets as the Taliban was making advances and the ANDSF was ceding
2 ground, potentially having to reinforce them, potentially having to medevac injured
3 servicemembers, or worse yet, sending some home in body bags as we had done for
4 20 years, or do you make the decision to withdraw militarily from Afghanistan.

5 Q Despite the conditionality that we have been discussing.

6 A Again, it is, in some ways, that was immaterial. And you can tell just from
7 moving the particular context -- you can imagine a scenario where an agreement had
8 been struck, again, we weren't the ones that negotiated this agreement, but we were the
9 ones that inherited it. And so, you could have gone to, in this case, the Taliban, and said
10 we know you -- we know the United States struck this deal with you but they have a veto,
11 and it was our distinct impression that they would have used their veto had we decided
12 to remain militarily engaged.

13 Q So I am going to come back to that, but I will move to the next exhibit. This
14 is exhibit 5.

15 [Price Exhibit No. 5
16 was marked for identification.]

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q This is an excerpt of a CNN article titled, Biden Overruled Blinken and
19 Austin's attempts to Extend U.S. Presence in Afghanistan, new Woodward/Costa book
20 says. The article is dated December 14, 2021, and makes reference to the book titled
21 "Peril." So I just want to preface again you have noted to sort of the limitations in your
22 responses given your role. But as Department spokesperson, you have also testified
23 previously that you received and reinstated your daily briefings in the interest of
24 transparency to the American public, as well as your engagement with the regional
25 bureaus, with leadership on the 7th Floor, as well as others who were involved sort of

1 stakeholders within the Department, a very unique role. And that you have also
2 accompanied the Secretary of State on various trips, which I believe also included this
3 NATO trip, if I am not mistaken?

4 A That is correct.

5 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

6 [REDACTED]. I just want to note before we get too much further, I believe this
7 article purports to contain information from senior Department officials that was not
8 authorized to be released. And so, you need to be very careful about -- I don't know
9 what the question is going to be, but go ahead, but I am going have a problem if he's
10 verifying any information by answering.

11 [REDACTED]. We are happy to address that once we sort of ask the question.

12 [REDACTED]. He needs to read it, too.

13 [REDACTED]. Of course, we will be happy to give you an opportunity to
14 review. Our focus will be on the second page and first full paragraph.

15 Mr. Price. I am sorry, the second page, what paragraph?

16 [REDACTED]. The first full paragraph.

17 Mr. Price. Starting Woodward and Costa?

18 [REDACTED]. Correct.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q So the article states Woodward and Costa write that Biden's Secretary of
21 State, Anthony Blinken, and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, both pushed for a slower
22 withdrawal. After a March meeting of NATO ministers, Blinken changed his
23 recommendation about removing all U.S. troops. It then quotes the book referencing
24 that meeting stating, "previously he had been foursquare with Biden for a full withdrawal.
25 His new recommendation was to extend the mission with U.S. troops for a while to see if

1 it could yield a political settlement by time for negotiation. Blinken told Biden on the
2 call from Brussels he is hearing from the other NATO ministers in quadraphonic sound, or
3 surround sound, that the U.S. should leverage its departure to gain concrete steps toward
4 a political settlement, according to the book. Mr. Price, did Secretary Blinken get
5 pushback from NATO ministers in March 2021 relating to U.S. plans to go to zero?

6 [REDACTED]. So that question on a standalone basis, without reference to this,
7 would be fine, but would be in a classified setting. That question in the context of what
8 you read into the record, any response to it would implicate potentially an answer that
9 could be subject to executive branch confidentiality interests because of the direct
10 communications with the President. So if you would like to rephrase the question
11 without reference to this exhibit in a classified setting, I don't have an objection to you
12 discussing what you may have been briefed on out of those NATO meetings.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q So I am happy to ask the question outside of the exhibit. The reason I ask it
15 in this setting because I would no way want to get into classified material in an
16 unclassified space, is that in that first round, majority's first round when you mentioned
17 your engagement with NATO in your I believe your I believe you said March or April, you
18 noted that they were completely on the same -- I apologize for my reframing or
19 paraphrasing. Feel free to correct me if I am misstating it, but you noted that they were
20 essentially completely on the same page as we were sort of on seeing things from the
21 same perspective. Am I misremembering that?

22 A I may not have been clear, as clear as I should have been. I don't know
23 where the responsibility is. There were two meetings in Brussels. This is referring to
24 the first meeting in Brussels --

25 [REDACTED]. I would you prefer not to reference this at all. You referenced the

1 executive order on classification. That executive order contains a specific provision on
2 foreign government information, and a presumption that it will be classified as harmful,
3 release of it as harmful to the national security of the United States. Any discussions the
4 Secretary had at that time constitute foreign government information under the
5 executive order, and therefore, any discussion of them, which I would allow, has to be in
6 a classified setting.

7 [REDACTED]. Thank you, [REDACTED].

8 And I have one follow-up question, if we can address it in this setting. I am
9 happy to move on.

10 Mr. Price. Can I just stipulate that -- can I ask him a question off the record?

11 [REDACTED]. Of course. Let me set the clock.

12 [Discussion off the record.]

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Let me focus on Secretary Blinken then and the events that ensued
15 thereafter. After this timeframe, did Secretary Blinken favor a more conditional
16 withdrawal plan?

17 A Look, I am not going to convey, you know, private conversations, or the
18 contents of discussions with the Secretary. It is fair to say that the Secretary is the
19 Nation's top diplomat. The President entrusts him to meet with, to hear from, to listen
20 to, and to report back, based on his discussions with counterparts and world leaders
21 around the globe. That is true on every issue. It is especially true on issues where we
22 need to maintain that allied unity.

23 Leaving aside this, just to clarify, there were two meetings in Brussels that were
24 operative to what we are talking about. The first, as I recall, was in mid- to late March;
25 the second was a couple weeks later in April. The first meeting was before the President

1 had made his decision. And the Secretary went there with the express purpose of
2 sharing updates, insights, considerations that were at play in the context of what was in
3 an ongoing policy review, but really to listen to our NATO counterparts and to be able to
4 report back.

5 Fast forward a few weeks, the second meeting in Brussels was -- it started, I think,
6 the day before the President made his address to the Nation and that was to present the
7 findings essentially concurrent with the President's public announcement. And that is
8 the meeting at which the unanimous statement emanated from the NAC, it wasn't from
9 the first meeting.

10 Q Thank you for the helpful clarification. I'm happy to move on to sort of the
11 next exhibit.

12 I would like to enter exhibit 6 into the record. This is an excerpt of a transcript of
13 a March 9, 2021, State Department press briefing.

14 [Price Exhibit No. 6
15 was marked for identification.]

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q I would like to direct your attention to what is marked as page 19, starting
18 with the final question near the bottom. You were asked the following: "I have one
19 more on Afghanistan, if I can. Do you have any update on Ambassador Khalizad's travel
20 or meetings in the region? Where is he now? Is he coming back?" To which you
21 respond, "So today he is in Doha meeting with negotiating partners to encourage process
22 in Afghan peace negotiations. As we spoke about at some length yesterday, we are
23 working closely with Afghan parties to encourage progress on a political settlement and a
24 comprehensive ceasefire. We are also working diplomatically to mobilize regional and
25 international support for peace.

1 "And that broader point I would make and to underscore what I said yesterday is
2 that Ambassador Khalizad's trip it is really a continuation of American diplomacy in the
3 region. There is a broad and longstanding consensus that there is no military solution to
4 this conflict, and that the political solution and the political solution Ambassador Khalizad
5 is there to support, it must, of course, be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. We know this
6 will be a difficult road but that is precisely why we are there to support this Afghan-led,
7 Afghan-owned process."

8 Did the State Department and more broadly the Biden administration believe that
9 the Taliban was truly interested in a political solution?

10 A It is the role of diplomats to test the proposition. I think it is fair to say that
11 there wasn't trust between the United States -- at least this administration and the
12 Taliban. I think that is part of the reason why we made the point repeatedly that the
13 U.S.-Taliban agreement that was negotiated by the prior administration isn't one that this
14 administration would have negotiated because, by and large, it seems to be predicated
15 on trust.

16 The Biden administration, the current administration, didn't trust the Taliban, but
17 you don't always, in fact, you rarely negotiate with parties that you trust. You are
18 testing the proposition as to whether something like a political resolution that would
19 have peacefully ended a longstanding civil war would have been in the offing.

20 Q You state here more than a dozen other times between March and early
21 August 2021, that there was no military solution in Afghanistan. Would you agree that
22 the Taliban believed there was a military solution?

23 A I was offering our perspective that there couldn't be, shouldn't be a military
24 solution. That is the role of the Department of State. It is what we seek to do as a
25 country around the world is to resolve conflicts through diplomacy and negotiations.

1 Now, I think one can argue as to whether there ultimately was a military solution here.
2 Of course, it is inarguable that the Taliban marched on provincial capitals, marched on
3 Kabul and they essentially marched into a vacuum. Is it the outcome we wanted to see?
4 Of course not.

5 [REDACTED]. Well, do you consider what the Taliban did in 2021 the execution
6 of a military solution?

7 Mr. Price. Again, I think one can have differences of opinion what the term
8 "military solution," because ultimately the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan wasn't
9 militarily toppled. The government fled and fell.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q But thousands of Afghan soldiers were killed throughout 2021, correct?

12 A Of course. And I am not denying that. And I am not denying the point
13 that this is not the outcome anyone sought to see or at least anyone in the United States
14 sought to see.

15 Q Does the State Department trust the Taliban's claims that they weren't
16 interested in a military solution? And by "they," being the Taliban.

17 A I think my prior point stands, we didn't inherently trust the Taliban about
18 anything, it is why we wouldn't have negotiated the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

19 Q Was there any consideration of the fact that the Taliban was using these
20 negotiations to stall U.S. forces and U.S. contractors began to leave?

21 A Look, the -- without, you know, speaking to these deliberations, I can tell you
22 that policy deliberations of this sort take into account all sorts of considerations. I think
23 the operative point here is the point that I made. In the agreement, in the
24 outcome -- let's see here, well, I guess it was the point that I was making in the prior
25 briefing what we wanted to see was a negotiated solution between the parties. That

1 would have been the optimal outcome from our perspective. It would have been the
2 optimal outcome from, I think, it is fair to say the Afghan people who would have been
3 spared violence and could have had their voices heard in a more inclusive process that
4 informed, structured their governing body.

5 That ultimately is not what happened. But, you know, whether it is this
6 challenge or anything, our predisposition, as I think should be the case of any Department
7 of State, is to put it colloquially, to get caught trying. If there is the ability to end the
8 civil war, to forge or facilitate a political agreement, to do everything we can to exhaust
9 every opportunity to do that. And I think that is the case -- it is the case of what we did
10 here. We exhausted every viable opportunity to help support a political agreement
11 between the parties. As I said here, it had to be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, couldn't
12 dictate what that agreement would be, what it would look like. We had to put the
13 parties in a position to see if an agreement could be reached between them. Ultimately
14 we got our answer. It's not the answer the United States wanted, it's not the answer
15 that I think most Afghans would have wanted. But the point I was making before is that
16 the Taliban, like it or not, and we certainly did not, had a veto over just about everything.

17 Q So I am happy you bring up the point of the Afghan-owned and Afghan-led,
18 as I believe you said this many more times between March 2021 and early August, 2021.
19 Did the U.S. and by the U.S., I mean the State Department and more broadly the
20 administration ever push the Afghan Government to accept a power-sharing agreement
21 where the new government would be dominated by the Taliban?

22 A These were decisions that were for the Afghan Government to make. And I
23 think the fact that there was basically an impasse that culminated in the Taliban taking
24 power suggests that we weren't imposing anything on the Islamic Republic, these were
25 decisions for them.

1 Q Can you please describe the quote, "transitional peace government plan"
2 that was being advanced by the U.S. Government in early March, 2021?

3 A Look, it was -- and I don't know how much of this I can say. And again, this
4 was one of the areas where I was not directly involved in authoring or producing anything
5 of the sort. But the broader point is that, of course we were putting ideas forward to
6 facilitate and ultimately secure a just and durable peace between the parties in
7 Afghanistan that would have ended, you know, decades of bloody civil war. Ideas were
8 shared between and among the parties. Ultimately, the Taliban had vetoed those
9 efforts.

10 Q And so, by a civil war, the parties in Afghanistan, you are referencing to the
11 recognized government of Afghanistan, so a sovereign, and the Taliban, a terrorist
12 organization, correct?

13 A As a -- I don't know if you are making a distinction between an FTO and an
14 SDGT, but certainly an insurgent movement.

15 Q Correct. Thank you, that is helpful.

16 [REDACTED]. So we are now talking about what the U.S. attempted to impose
17 on the parties, but in terms of what we presented to them. Did we ever present a plan
18 for a power-government which would be dominated by the Taliban?

19 Mr. Price. I don't think that is for me to say. Those questions are probably
20 better directed at those who were involved in that diplomacy, engaged in those talks, or
21 helping to helm them from the Department. I wasn't doing that. What I can say is,
22 essentially, what I have already recounted that we were sharing ideas with the parties
23 that could culminate and adjust enduring peace, putting an end to a civil war that had
24 cost far too many lives, and that had resulted in far too many U.S. casualties as well.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q What course of action did Secretary Blinken urge the President to take at the
2 conclusion of the interagency review?

3 A I imagine this is not something I should get into. This goes -- without
4 referencing anything, I will just say that some of what has been reported publicly is not
5 accurate.

6 Q So I would like to introduce as exhibit 7, an excerpt from the not-yet-final
7 transcript of Ambassador Khalizad's transcribed interview conducted on November 8,
8 2023.

9 [Price Exhibit No. 7
10 was marked for identification.]

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q I apologize in advance for any typos reflected in the transcript. This is still
13 in draft form. Would you please draw your attention to what is marked as page 156,
14 line 4?

15 [REDACTED]: I would actually like you to understand what it is whatever it is you
16 have handed him.

17 [REDACTED]: Of course.

18 [REDACTED]: So he can see the context of whatever is -- the before and after. I
19 mean, his answers to the questions.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q So looking at line 4, starting from line 4, the majority asks, "So Ambassador, I
22 would like to go to sort of the next question." And if you move to line 8 that is where
23 the question is outlined. "Specifically about the decision to remain in the Doha
24 agreement. You noted previously sort of these distinctions between conditionality, the
25 three different options that were presented, and that from my understanding, you and

1 Secretary Blinken recommended a conditional approach or a conditionality approach."

2 Ambassador Khalizad responds, "Right, that's my judgment." To which the
3 majority states, "That's your judgment based on your firsthand account and
4 interpretation."

5 To which he responds, "Yeah."

6 To which the majority asks, "What was the ultimate decision made by President
7 Biden? It was not conditionality, correct?"

8 To which he responds, "It was not conditionality with regard to the withdrawal.
9 Only I think it's possible that a definition would have been made if the Talibs had said" -- a
10 definition, not a decision -- "would have been made if the Talibs had said you should stay
11 until we reach a political agreement."

12 Were you aware then-Ambassador Khalizad and Secretary Blinken made
13 this recommendation?

14 A Again, I don't think it is for me to speak to recommendations that the
15 Secretary would have made to the President. I will just make the broader point that we
16 talked earlier about dynamic context in dynamic situations. And broadly speaking,
17 without regard to this, the Secretary's advice to the President is going to be predicated to
18 facts on the ground, events, our diplomacy. And so, it is certainly possible that the
19 Secretary, on any given decision, whether it is this or anything else, had a going-in
20 inclination, but then based on dynamic events, dynamic diplomacy, came to a different
21 conclusion, and that advice evolves over time based on the facts on the ground,
22 diplomacy around the world.

23 Q Thank you. And we are out the time for the majority's round. Stop the
24 clock and go off the record.

25 [Discussion off the record.]

1 [Recess.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Welcome again. My name is [REDACTED], I am [REDACTED] on
4 the Democratic side of the committee. We are going to endeavor to be quick. We
5 know that it could potentially be a long day otherwise, and we want to be respectful of
6 your time and I appreciate your testimony here today.

7 I just have two issues to touch on. First of all, we asked you at the beginning of
8 our last round, to speak to the extent that you could to your firsthand knowledge of facts
9 and issues, and to encourage you not to rely on hearsay. Are you aware that that there
10 is colloquial definition of the term "hearsay"?

11 A I am aware of the colloquial definition, yes.

12 Q I just wanted to remind you similar to what we did at the very beginning of
13 the interview with respect to confidentiality you're here voluntarily, you are here for a
14 transcribed interview, there are no rules, certainly no rules of evidence that would apply
15 in this context, so how you answer the question is up to you, as you see fit. I want you
16 to be clear that our intent here is to get as clean a record as possible, and to make sure
17 that we are getting facts and appropriate nuance and appropriate context, and that is the
18 basis for the statement that we made at the beginning of our previous round and for
19 following up on that. Is that clear?

20 A Yes, it is.

21 [REDACTED]: Great. Anything to add on that?

22 [REDACTED]: No.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q I also just want to step back quite a bit and just level-set, you had said when
25 we were questioning previously in the minority's round, you testified essentially about

1 your confidence and accuracy of the Department's press statements and press guidance.

2 Is that correct?

3 A That's correct.

4 Q -- the spokesperson. And you had also testified, I believe, to the rigor of
5 the process that was undertaken during your tenure to produce such press statements
6 and guidance. Is that correct?

7 A That is correct.

8 Q Okay. So is it fair to say that you stand by the words of any such press
9 statement or press guidance that are being shown to you today from your tenure as
10 spokesperson?

11 A It is fair to say that these transcripts reflect the process that was in place at
12 the time, the rigorous process that was in place at the time, and the rigorous process that
13 remains in place now.

14 Q Okay. Is it fair to say that essentially these statements that you issued or
15 formulated or delivered from the podium essentially speak for themselves?

16 A I think that is fair.

17 Q Okay. And is it fair to say that you have already made yourself available to
18 and answered questions from the media contemporaneously to when these statements
19 were released?

20 A That is very fair.

21 [REDACTED] Okay. I don't have any further questions. I will turn to my
22 colleague.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q And it is also fair to say that the rigorous process was spurred by you in fact.
25 Is that right?

1 A That is right.

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

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

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

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

12 [REDACTED]. We have nothing further. That concludes our round. Thank
13 you.

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q Mr. Price, on April 14, 2021, President Biden announced the U.S. would
16 unconditionally withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. When did you first
17 learn that would be the President's course of action?

18 A My recollection is that I learned a few days prior.

19 Q How did you learn of it?

20 A I recall most vividly learning in an interagency meeting, whether I was
21 informed of that decision prior to that meeting or during that meeting, I couldn't say.
22 But I recall processing it during that interagency meeting.

23 Q And what did you think of it?

24 A That is a question of my personal opinion, I suppose.

25 Q Only to the extent you are comfortable sharing, if not, I am happy to move

1 onto the next question.

2 A As I came to understand the facts, and I think the core point has stuck with
3 me which is perhaps why I am reiterating it so many times here today, is that I came to
4 understand that we were in essentially a straitjacket with no good options. And the
5 least bad option seemed to be a military withdrawal. Knowing that if that withdrawal
6 didn't commence pursuant to the U.S.-Taliban agreement on May 1, our forces would
7 have come under hostile fire once again. I certainly understand and support the desire
8 to wind down the post 9/11 wars that have resulted in far too many American lives.

9 Q Thank you.

10 I would like to now introduce exhibit 8, this is an excerpt of a State Department
11 press briefing you held on April 1, 2021.

12 [Price Exhibit No. 8
13 was marked for identification.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q I would like to direct your attention to what is marked page 17, the first
16 question on that page. Here you are asked, "On Afghanistan, Ambassador Khalizad has
17 been in the region meeting with, as I understand it, the Afghan Government, as well as
18 the Taliban. I wonder if you had any readouts of those meetings, and can you provide
19 any further detail on the meeting between these groups in Turkiye and will the Secretary
20 have any participation in that meeting?"

21 If you look at the next paragraph as part of your response you state, "Special
22 Representative Khalizad recently travel to Turkiye, as you also alluded to, to meet with
23 Turkish counterparts in an upcoming international conference on Afghanistan's peace
24 process to be held in Istanbul in the coming days. Building on recent international
25 gatherings and supporting the peace process, the Istanbul conference is meant to help

1 Afghan negotiators to make progress in negotiation and will complement peace talks
2 currently ongoing in Doha.

3 "During his visit, Ambassador Khalizad and Turkish officials agreed that an
4 Afghan-led, Afghan-owned gathering to support that high-level attendance from the
5 international community provides the best means to accelerate that peace process.
6 They also agreed to urge the Afghan parties to prepare constructive participation in that
7 conference.

8 The Taliban refused to go to this Istanbul conference after the President
9 announced his go-to-zero order on April 14, 2021, correct?

10 A That is my recollection.

11 Q You describe that conference as, "the best means to accelerate that peace
12 process." What did you think about the state of the peace process when the Taliban
13 walked away from the conference?

14 A I don't recall specifically what my thoughts were on the state of the peace
15 process. I think it is fair to say as I did in this press briefing in April of 2021, our goal was
16 to accelerate that process. I think the point I was conveying in speaking to what was to
17 have been an international gathering in Istanbul was the fact that the United States has
18 leveraged and we have influence, in many ways, certainly had more leverage and
19 influence with the Islamic Republic than with the Taliban, but our guiding philosophy is
20 that when we come to challenges with partners and allies at our side, that is a force
21 multiplier in terms of the influence and leverage that we bring to any challenge. And so,
22 if a number of countries had showed up and impressed upon both parties the need to
23 accelerate progress for the just and durable resolution, that would have been decidedly a
24 very good thing.

1 [1:47 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]. So my question -- I introduced this exhibit, the April 1st
3 announcement, to sort of lay the foundation for what ended up being this conference.
4 But the question I'm asking you now is not about April 1. It's about after President
5 Biden's Go-to-Zero announcement.

6 And, specifically, were you briefed by anyone within -- in the Department,
7 whether it be the regional bureau or 7th Floor leadership, as to what this meant for the
8 peace process, given that the Taliban walked away from the conference?

9 Mr. Price. I don't recall being briefed on this. But I think, of course, I think it's
10 fair to say this was a setback, not a step in the right direction towards a negotiated
11 agreement between the two parties.

12 [REDACTED]. I just want to be clear. I think her question was, were you briefed
13 on the impact of the President's April 14th announcement, not on the Taliban refusal.

14 Mr. Price. I see. Sorry. Could you repeat the question?

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q Correct. It's about the nexus between the President's April's 14th, 2021,
17 announcement and the fact that the Taliban then did not participate in this conference,
18 and specifically about the impact of that, i.e., the announcement, on their refusal to
19 participate.

20 A Oh. I don't recall being briefed on whether there was a direct causal
21 relationship or correlated. I don't recall any specific briefing to that.

22 Q Did it become clear to you as a spokesperson, or, more broadly, Department
23 leadership, that the Taliban was no longer interested in going along with the peace
24 process once President Biden made it official that all U.S. troops would be leaving?

25 A What I recall is that engagement continued after April 14th. That

1 engagement continued between and among the parties.

2 But I couldn't, having not been there on the ground, I can't speak with any
3 firsthand familiarity of the dynamics, if the dynamics may have changed after April 14th.

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

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

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

12 A That certainly didn't point to -- it wasn't a good sign for the potential for a
13 negotiated outcome.

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

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

20 Q Thank you.

21 At the time of the President's decision to withdraw unconditionally in April of
22 2021, what was the Department's position on continued embassy presence, diplomatic
23 presence in Afghanistan following the military's departure?

24 A My recollection is that we intended to maintain a diplomatic presence in
25 Afghanistan after the U.S. military withdrawal.

1 Q And I believe you mentioned this visit previously, but am I correct in
2 understanding Secretary Blinken visited Afghanistan in April 2021, correct?

3 A That's correct, yes.

4 Q Were you part of that trip?

5 A I was.

6 Q Were you involved in preparation, planning, or any other aspects of that
7 trip?

8 A I was involved in the execution. I was, I am sure, to some extent involved
9 in the planning. I don't recall specifically what I did vis-à-vis that planning, but it was
10 standard for me to be involved in that sort of trip planning.

11 Q Can you please detail the trip, to the best of your knowledge?

12 A We traveled directly from Brussels -- this was the second trip to Brussels -- in
13 April of 2021. I want to say it would have been April 14th or 15th. We traveled from
14 Brussels to Kabul. We left much of our team in Brussels, had a smaller package landing
15 in Kabul.

16 We, as I recall, went to the embassy. We were briefed by Ross Wilson. We
17 were briefed by other senior officials at the embassy on the security situation, on the
18 operational footprint, on other relevant issues.

19 We then went from the embassy to the palace, where we met with
20 representatives of the Islamic Republic, namely Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah and
21 their teams.

22 I can't recall specifically if we had a separate meeting with Abdullah Abdullah or if
23 he was in the larger meeting, but met with him in addition to the President.

24 And we then met with representatives of civil society.

25 Q And what were your key takeaways from this trip?

1 didn't seem to mind. Do you think things have changed that much that they now are so
2 eager to be a part of the international community that they will change their ways?"

3 To which you respond, "The consequence of being a pariah, of lacking any
4 international legitimacy, is, I think in our minds, the inability to have any durability to that
5 sort of movement.

6 "If the Taliban wants to be part of Afghanistan's future, they're not going to be
7 able to do so if they do not respect the rights of women and girls, if they do not sever ties
8 with al-Qaida or other terrorist groups.

9 "So it is not only consistent with our values and with our interests that the Taliban
10 do this, but if the Taliban think they have a future in Afghanistan, it's also in their
11 interest."

12 Did the State Department more broadly, or its leadership more specifically,
13 genuinely believe it was in the Taliban's interest to respect the rights of women and girls
14 and to sever ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups?

15 A I recall a number of briefings, because I asked these very questions of our
16 team. It was the considered judgment of the team, including the team on the ground,
17 that the Taliban sought international legitimacy. They previously had been in power in
18 Afghanistan during a time in which they largely lacked international legitimacy, and they,
19 of course, recall how that ended.

20 And so I asked the team over and over again, because I too wondered about that
21 judgment. But this was the judgment of the team, that the Taliban sought legitimacy,
22 not as a virtue, not because it is in their nature to be do-gooders, far from it.

23 It's about self-preservation, is the answer that I was -- that was conveyed to me.
24 Legitimacy would give them, as I said here, greater degrees of durability. It would cause
25 other countries to recognize them diplomatically. It would put an end to the

1 international isolation or the international isolation they had suffered during their
2 previous time in power.

3 And in some ways it would be a boon to, again, that self-preservation, because if
4 economic ties increased with the rest of the world, assistance flowed through the
5 government, not only to the people, as it does now with our humanitarian programs, that
6 in itself would also potentially work to the Taliban's favor.

7 [REDACTED]. So let's say the Taliban desired international legitimacy. What
8 was the assessment on whether they desired it enough to change their ways on
9 supporting terrorist groups like al-Qaeda or to change their ways on respecting the rights
10 of women and girls?

11 Mr. Price. Again, there was no trust, there was no inherent trust between the
12 Biden administration and the Taliban. We didn't take their word for anything. It was
13 about our own interests and what we judged to be the interests of the people of
14 Afghanistan -- all of the people of Afghanistan, including women, girls, and
15 minorities -- and also consistent with our values.

16 So I can't speak today to any -- to where exactly that judgment was as to how
17 likely it would have been that the Taliban would have fundamentally changed their world
18 view were they to have gone into a power-sharing arrangement with representatives of
19 the Islamic Republic or other entities. I couldn't speak to that.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q Hasn't the Taliban consistently shown that they didn't believe it was in their
22 interest to do so?

23 A So you're asking me that question in 2023, and I made this answer in 2021.

24 Q Let me reframe. Hadn't the Taliban shown -- so I'm asking you in terms of
25 in 2021. Throughout the Taliban's history, in its existence it has never been a proponent

1 of women's rights. It has never been a proponent of respecting religious and ethnic
2 minorities.

3 So my question is, throughout history, as you noted, the Taliban's word meant
4 very little to the U.S. Government. So looking at the evidence and the data before us,
5 not through the eyes of the United States but through the eyes of the actors who pursued
6 these actions, hadn't the Taliban shown that it was not in their interest to do so?

7 A I think there was ample historical record that reflected upon the Taliban's
8 view of women, of girls, of minorities.

9 At the time, and this wasn't dispositive in our minds, but a couple things were also
10 relevant. A couple decades had passed. Relevant. Not dispositive, but not
11 irrelevant.

12 Number two, the Taliban were making public statements and private statements
13 that suggested that they would entertain a power-sharing agreement where these values
14 could be preserved.

15 Again, we didn't trust their public statements. We didn't trust their private
16 statements. But it would have been a dereliction of the role and responsibility of the
17 Department of State if we squandered an opportunity to test the proposition as to
18 whether the Taliban were serious about what they were telling the rest of the world they
19 were serious about.

20 Q And fast-forwarding to now, now that we've tested that proposition, am I
21 correct in understanding that the Taliban has banned girls from school beyond the sixth
22 grade?

23 A That's my understanding.

24 Q Am I also correct in understanding that women are barred from public
25 spaces, including parks, and most forms of employment?

1 A That's my understanding.

2 Q And am I correct in understanding that the Taliban doesn't respect the basic
3 and fundamental rights of the Afghan people?

4 A I would agree with that.

5 Q Do you still take the position that the consequence of being a pariah
6 incentivized the Taliban to, quote, "respect the rights of women and girls"?

7 A Where do you see that that's my position?

8 Q You were asked, "What makes you so convinced the Taliban fear being a
9 pariah?" To which you respond, "If the Taliban wants to be part of Afghanistan's future,
10 they're not going to be able to do so if they do not respect the rights of women and girls."

11 A The "pariah" comes from the question you were asked, and the "respect the rights
12 of women and girls" comes from your response.

13 A I think what is clear is that the Taliban remains a pariah. At the same time,
14 and as a function of their pariah status, or the other way around, they, of course, are not
15 respecting the rights of women and girls.

16 A I think what you have relayed is an indictment of the Taliban, and I don't think
17 anyone in the administration is going to argue with the indictment that you've put
18 forward.

19 Q So thank you for that helpful answer, but that wasn't sort of -- my question
20 was, do you still take the position that the consequence of being a pariah, which we both
21 agree the Taliban is now, incentivized the Taliban to respect the rights of women and
22 girls, yes or no?

23 A So you're asking me if I take the position. This was the position of the
24 Department of State. It was the considered judgment of the experts, career, largely,
25 experts within the Department of State, that the Taliban considered their international

1 reputation and their legitimacy, and that there was the possibility that we could use the
2 leverage that the United States had and that the rest of the world had to midwife -- help
3 midwife a power-sharing agreement, some form of future Afghan Government where
4 there would be a durable peace and where the rights of women, girls, other minorities
5 would be respected. Of course, that proved not to be possible.

6 Q Thank you.

7 Let's transition a bit to the withdrawal and the planning that ensued with respect
8 to that.

9 When did you first get the impression as spokesperson that the situation on the
10 ground in Afghanistan was deteriorating and that the Taliban was making significant
11 territorial gains?

12 A I recall it most vividly in June, certainly July. What I was aware of or what I
13 was closely following earlier than that I don't have as clear a recollection of.

14 Q What was your impression of the Afghan Government and its military during
15 that period?

16 A I was familiar with the quantitative assessments that had been produced by
17 elements of our government, including the intelligence community, the assessments that
18 pitted, so to speak colloquially, apples to apples, Taliban versus ANDSF, in terms of their
19 capabilities, their manpower.

20 And to see the Taliban encroach upon provincial capitals over the course of a
21 couple months, I think that is something that was a surprise to many of us.

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

24 A I'm not the one to speak to actions that we took.

25 What I can say, I think I already have said, is that there was contingency planning

1 underway. This is contingency planning that was already months in the making at this
2 point. And I know that events on the ground were factored into policy deliberations,
3 tabletop exercises, the considerations that were at play in senior meetings.

4 Q So let me reframe that question. What messaging did the Department
5 engage in in response to the rapid territorial gains?

6 A Broadly, I think the messaging is some of the messaging you start to see
7 introduced as of April or so, condemning the levels of violence, making the
8 point -- explaining at least what we were -- what we sought to do vis-à-vis the Taliban, to
9 work with the Islamic Republic, to work with other countries in the region, to use that
10 collective leverage and influence to help facilitate a just and durable peace, spoke to that.

11 I think that those were the primary messages.

12 Q Did the Department soften language used to discuss the deteriorating
13 conditions on the ground?

14 A Not that I'm aware of, no.

15 Q And you previously noted I believe in our first round with respect to your
16 engagement with SRAR Khalilzad, Ambassador Khalilzad, that you worked with members
17 of his team. Is that correct?

18 A That's correct.

19 Q How did you coordinate with either SRAR Khalilzad or members of his team
20 on communications relating to negotiations with the Taliban and the Afghan Government
21 during this period?

22 A They would update me as to progress or lack thereof. But, again, in almost
23 all cases I was not the one writing the messaging guidance in the first instance. This
24 would come from the experts.

25 And so, in the case of the Ambassador and his team, it would either come from

1 the team on the ground in Doha, it would come from their team back at Washington, or
2 from the press office in -- within SCA.

3 So primarily when I was speaking with them it would be for my own edification,
4 for my own background knowledge, to get a sense of what was happening, so I can
5 square in my own mind what we were doing and how we were attempting to do it.

6 But the messaging guidance, at least the first draft, always, to the best of my
7 recollection, emanated from one of those offices.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q And when it came to the briefings that the SRAR's team was giving you, did
10 they ever brief you on what they believed the Taliban's intentions were?

11 A As I said before, what I recall very vividly, because I asked this question
12 many, many times, about our leverage, about the Taliban's own perceptions and its own
13 desire for legitimacy, and what I remember the team telling me, that this was material to
14 the Taliban and it was a piece of leverage.

15 Now, I think reasonable people can agree or disagree as to how much leverage the
16 United States had over the Taliban at any given point. But I recall very vividly that Zal
17 and his team were of the mindset that we had leverage, owing to a number of things,
18 including the Taliban's quest for international legitimacy.

19 And, of course, it was our intent and objective to use every ounce of leverage we
20 had to help facilitate a just and durable peace.

21 Q Did you get briefed by anyone that disagreed with the SRAR team's
22 assessments on that front?

23 A Not that I recall.

24 Q So you don't remember any disagreement like that?

25 A I don't recall it. And my sense is that I probably would because -- my sense

1 is that I probably would.

2 [Price Exhibit No. 10
3 was marked for identification.]

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q I'd like to introduce exhibit 10 next. This is an excerpt of a transcript from
6 an August 10th, 2021, press briefing you held.

7 If you could please direct your attention to the second question in what is marked
8 as page 7.

9 Here you are asked, quote, "Ned, if they haven't adhered to the whole thing, do
10 you have any recourse? Well, first of all, do you think that they are following their
11 commitments, or are they in violation of that agreement? What's happening right now
12 on the ground?"

13 And by "they," the question was referring to the Taliban, correct?

14 A It seems to be.

15 Q And "to the whole thing," they're referring to the Doha Agreement, correct?

16 A It seems to be.

17 Q The Q&A then proceeds and you're asked, quote, "But the main question is:
18 Are they violating the February 2020 agreement?" To which you respond, quote,
19 "Certainly the levels of violence do not appear consistent with what the Taliban pledged
20 in that agreement. Let me make another point, though: There is another important
21 element to that deal that is important for two reasons, and that, of course, is the
22 provision that they not target U.S. or coalition forces. The Taliban had not done so.
23 That part of the" --

24 On the next page, page 8, in the last paragraph you state, "The President places
25 great priority -- the greatest priority -- on the safety, the security, the well-being of our

1 servicemembers. The idea that a force of a couple thousand U.S. military
2 servicemembers either would have been able to remain in Afghanistan with the status
3 quo, or frankly that a force of that size would have been able to stand in the way of what
4 we are seeing now -- both of those propositions are hollow."

5 What was your basis for coming to this conclusion?

6 A Let me just read the phrase you skipped over.

7 Q Of course. Please go ahead.

8 [Reviewing.]

9 A I think a couple things undergirded this assertion.

10 Number one is that the previous administration negotiated an agreement with the
11 Taliban that called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces and for that process to start on May
12 1.

13 And so were that not to be the case, as I said just above that in the part you didn't
14 read, it reads, I'm quoting from the transcript, "And so the fact that an important element
15 of the U.S.-Taliban agreement has been upheld suggests that, contrary to some
16 speculation, what happens in Doha does have an impact on the ground in Afghanistan.
17 It does suggest that there is room for diplomatic progress to be made."

18 And I think this goes back to our last exchange. I previously described the
19 Taliban's adherence to the U.S. Doha Agreement as uneven. I think that that
20 modify -- that adjective applies here as well.

21 But this wasn't just based on analysis or conjecture. It was based, as I
22 understood it, on diplomacy with the Taliban. Because, again, as I understood it, the
23 possibility of going beyond that May 1 deadline without beginning this phase of the U.S.
24 military withdrawal in earnest, we determined, based on discussions, direct discussions
25 with the Taliban, that they would not continue to uphold their agreement not to target

1 U.S. servicemembers and coalition forces.

2 And, again, that really made the question a binary. Do you begin that
3 withdrawal process in May, as is stipulated under the U.S.-Taliban agreement, or do you
4 blow past that deadline, have U.S. forces come under fire, send in reinforcements, have
5 those forces come under fire, and get back in the same escalatory cycle that has plagued
6 our engagement, not just in Afghanistan but in other theaters over the course of some 20
7 years?

8 Q Thank you for that.

9 And I want to go back to two points, because the question you were asked is
10 whether they are violating the agreement. And the agreement, which you've noted you
11 inherited from the prior administration, was based on multiple assurances from both
12 sides, the U.S.' side for withdrawing by May and the Taliban's side for various assertions,
13 one of those being their stopping violence or not targeting U.S. coalition forces, which
14 you previously noted when we asked you was also uneven, correct?

15 A Correct.

16 Q Okay. So I want to go back to the assessments that you made in this
17 transcript.

18 Were these based on assessments by military commanders?

19 A "These" being what, the fact that --

20 Q The fact that a couple thousand U.S. military servicemembers either would
21 have been able to remain in Afghanistan with the status quo, or, frankly, that a force of
22 that size would have been able to stand in the way of what we are seeing now, doubting
23 those two propositions.

24 A It's my understanding that that was the judgment of the U.S. military.

25 Q Were you aware that General McKenzie and General Miller had assessed

1 that 2,500 troops were sufficient to repel Taliban attacks?

2 A I don't recall whether I was aware of that assessment specifically. But,
3 again, I think there's a very cautionary tale if you look at the track record that we endured
4 starting in July and August 2021, when a Taliban force completely overpowered the
5 ANDSF and took -- marched on Kabul with seemingly very little resistance.

6 And so whether a force of 2,500 U.S. servicemembers could have protected the
7 capital or could have ensured an enduring U.S. stay in Afghanistan, I think that allayed the
8 most important question -- or one of the most important questions -- and that is, would
9 our forces continue to come under fire, hostile fire, from the Taliban? Would we
10 continue to lose servicemembers, to have servicemembers come home in body bags, to
11 lose limbs? And that was an unacceptable risk.

12 Q But, as you noted, the Taliban were still targeting U.S. coalition forces,
13 correct, through indirect -- my understanding is that they were doing so through indirect
14 fire, that they hadn't ceased all attacks on U.S. forces.

15 A That's a better question for the military, for others who were more involved
16 in these discussions.

17 But, again, I think the broad term "uneven" applies to most if not all aspects of the
18 U.S.-Taliban agreement in terms of the Taliban adherence.

19 Q The reason we're asking you -- and this goes back to our initial purpose of
20 why you were called in for this transcribed interview -- is that what the American public
21 hears and sees are the responses you provide.

22 The response that you provided here is that the Taliban is not targeting U.S.
23 coalition -- the U.S. or coalition forces. So that's why I'm following up with a question of
24 whether you were privy to information that they were, indeed, targeting U.S. or coalition
25 forces.

1 It sounds like, based on your prior answers, you said uneven adherence, so you
2 were aware of something, I'm not sure the extent of which.

3 A No, I'm saying broadly the Taliban adherence to the U.S.-Taliban agreement
4 was uneven.

5 As to what the Taliban was doing in terms of its tactical encroachments or its
6 potential fire on U.S. positions, that's a better question for U.S. military advisers and
7 others.

8 Q As part of the interagency process, did you ever become aware that General
9 McKenzie and General Miller assessed or any other members of the military assessed that
10 2,500 troops were sufficient to repel the Taliban?

11 A Again, I think there's a very cautionary tale in terms of what actually played
12 out.

13 ██████████. So in this statement, you say here that the idea that a force of a
14 couple thousand U.S. military servicemembers either would have been able to remain in
15 Afghanistan with the status quo, or, frankly, that a force of that size would have been
16 able to stand in the way of what we are seeing now, both of those propositions are
17 hollow.

18 You said this on August 10th. And so by August 10th provincial capitals were
19 being taken over by the Taliban. They were moving towards Kabul.

20 Were you briefed that 2,500 -- if 2,500 U.S. servicemembers had remained in
21 Afghanistan the Taliban would have been able to do that, take provincial capitals and
22 move towards Kabul? Because that's what you say here.

23 Mr. Price. Sorry. Say that again. Was I briefed that --

24 ██████████. So you're saying here that 2,500 U.S. servicemembers in
25 Afghanistan would not have been --

1 Mr. Price. I'm sorry, where is "here"? Where are you looking?

2 [REDACTED]. Page 8 in the last paragraph.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Page 8, last paragraph.

5 You say that 2,500 U.S. troops wouldn't have been able to maintain the status
6 quo, but also wouldn't have been able to stop what we're seeing now, "now" being
7 August 10th when the Taliban is taking provincial capitals and moving towards Kabul.
8 That's what you said.

9 Had you been briefed that 2,500 -- if 2,500 U.S. troops had remained in
10 Afghanistan the Taliban would have been able to take provincial capitals, move towards
11 Kabul, as they were on August 10th?

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

18 I don't recall if and when I had been briefed on military assessments, but my
19 understanding was that it was the military conclusion that a force of this size could
20 potentially just leave our forces as potential targets once again.

21 Q But with respect, what you're also saying here, though, is you're saying that
22 2,500 U.S. troops would not have been able to stop what you were seeing on August
23 10th, which is provincial capitals falling and the Taliban moving towards Kabul.

24 And so what I'm asking you is what the basis of that specific claim that you made
25 was.

1 A Well, again, I would be interested to know how many forces we had in
2 Afghanistan on August 10th, because, again, we had a pretty sizable contingent there still
3 at that time.

4 But, again, I couldn't speak to any military assessments. I think that's better
5 directed to the military.

6 Q So I think we had a pretty small U.S. troop presence by August 10th. We
7 had closed all of our bases, including Bagram, a month prior. So we just had a small U.S.
8 troop contingent protecting the embassy.

9 [REDACTED]. Just for the record, are you testifying, are we having a debate, or
10 are you trying to elicit factual information from the witness?

11 [REDACTED]. I think the aim here -- and we're happy to move on. And I just
12 want to make something very clear, and I think it may get lost in the back-and-forth.

13 We're trying to understand the basis for these statements, and that's why we
14 bring forward the statement that was made by General McKenzie and General Miller, to
15 assess whether you had this information when making this assertion or if you didn't.

16 And you say you don't -- you're not aware.

17 [REDACTED]. I also want to note, you have not introduced into the record these
18 so-called statements from these two generals. You say that. Repel from where?
19 Repel who?

20 I mean, on August 10th, whatever we had there was not stopping what you've
21 described, which is the taking of provincial capitals.

22 So if you have some statement from two generals that you'd like to read into the
23 record as opposed to some summary of yours, I'd be delighted to see it so the witness can
24 see it.

25 [REDACTED]. So a lot of information in the course of our investigation doesn't

1 just come through documentary evidence. It comes through conversations that we've
2 had with individuals, whether it be private -- and we're happy -- I'm happy to move on.
3 But if you have nothing else to add to the basis --

4 Mr. Price. Well, to that, can I ask one question?

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Yes.

7 A When did they make these statements? It was their judgment in -- over
8 the summer? It was their judgment more recently?

9 Q This was aligned with the timing of when the military was there. This is
10 based on guidance that they provided. But if you are not personally aware --

11 A Well --

12 Q -- we don't want to address it further.

13 A No, but the only point I would make is that, unfortunately -- and this is
14 always the case -- we're dealing in imperfect information. And I think we saw just how
15 imperfect a lot of the information that emanated from various parts of the U.S.
16 Government was.

17 Whether these statements are part of that canon that proved not to be accurate, I
18 couldn't say. But I think we also have to remember that many of the assessments we
19 saw did not hold true.

20 Q Thank you.

21 [Price Exhibit No. 11

22 was marked for identification.]

23 [REDACTED]. I'm going to transition a bit now to another exhibit. This is
24 exhibit 11 that we're entering into the record, an excerpt of a State Department press
25 briefing you held on June 22nd, 2021. I apologize for jumping around a bit in time.

1 course, importantly, in the form of its armed forces -- 300,000 trained soldiers, an air
2 force, heavy equipment, continuing support from the United States. There are other
3 countries in the region that can exert influence and leverage over the Taliban."

4 You continue, "We are -- this is part of why we are continuing to galvanize
5 international attention, international support to the diplomacy. We have, the United
6 States has important sources of leverage too. That includes both carrots and sticks. I
7 don't think it's prudent for us to preview what we might do, but the fact is that we will
8 not hesitate -- if we think it will be in the interests of the people of Afghanistan, if we
9 think it is an appropriate recourse -- to use any and all tools at our disposal."

10 And you continue, "The one tool we have taken off the table, of course, is the
11 reintroduction of U.S. servicemembers, because this President, in the priority he
12 attaches -- that he attaches to the safety, security of American citizens, including of
13 course our servicemembers. We have concluded that the United States will no longer
14 use our servicemembers as sources of leverage in negotiation, something that has not
15 borne fruit previously. Beyond that, though, we have any number of sources of leverage
16 and will be prepared to use them if it's appropriate."

17 So it's our understanding that, give or take, you repeated this 300,000 figure with
18 respect to the Afghan forces at least nine times throughout August 2021, including saying
19 there was over or more than 300,000 at least four times.

20 What was your basis for this 300,000 figure, more or about?

21 A As I've said before, I don't make up facts and figures out of thin air. These
22 figures are provided to me -- were provided to me -- by the career experts in the
23 Department.

24 I can't speculate as to precisely where this figure came from, but what I can say is
25 that, going back to that issue of coordination, when there's a DOD equity in a fact or

1 figure or an assessment, our teams will work closely with their counterparts at the
2 Department of Defense.

3 It may well be that the Department of Defense provided this figure. It may well
4 be that our team had this figure from another source. I couldn't say. But it was the
5 figure that was provided to me by the experts.

6 Q And why did you continue to repeat this number into August 2021 when the
7 Afghan military had taken thousands of casualties? Are you aware if that was factored
8 into the number that was provided to you?

9 A I don't know. I don't know. The broader point is that -- well, I don't know
10 if they factored that, casualties, into the figure.

11 Q And you mentioned the other sources of leverage and provide us guidance
12 as to what those other sources of leverage could look like but for the use of our sort of
13 military force, the U.S. forces.

14 Those other sources of leverage ultimately proved unsuccessful, though, correct?

15 A They ultimate -- we ultimately -- the international community ultimately was
16 not able to help facilitate a durable peace agreement between the parties.

17 Q Thank you.

18 [Price Exhibit No. 13
19 was marked for identification.]

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q I'd like to introduce exhibit 13 next. This is an excerpt of a study published
22 by the Countering Terrorism Center at West Point in January 2021 titled "Afghanistan's
23 Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment." The author was Jonathan
24 Schroden.

25 Are you aware of who Jonathan Schroden is?

1 A I see his bio here. I'm not familiar with him.

2 Q I believe and our understanding -- and please feel free to correct me if you
3 have a different understanding -- is that he was a former strategic adviser to CENTCOM
4 and a current research director for the Afghanistan War Commission.

5 Did you read the study at the time or at any time before August 2021?

6 A I don't recall having seen this. I'd say that I read a lot in that job, my
7 current job, but I don't have a specific recollection of this.

8 Q Thank you.

9 And we'll focus on sort of the information here and not necessarily this specific
10 article.

11 So I'd like to direct your attention to what is marked page 20 in the top left-hand
12 corner. Please refer to the bold text box.

13 The study states, quote, "A key question for the future of Afghanistan is if the
14 United States withdraws the remainder of its forces from the country, would
15 Afghanistan's security forces or the Taliban be stronger militarily?"

16 "According to a net assessment conducted by the author across five factors -- size,
17 material resources, external support, force employment and cohesion -- the Taliban
18 would have a slight military advantage if the United States withdraws the remainder of its
19 troops from Afghanistan, which would then likely grow in a compounding fashion."

20 I'd like to direct your attention to the next page, marked as page 21, and please
21 refer to the bolded ANDSF subsection in the top left.

22 The last sentence of that paragraph on the left-hand column states, quote, "All
23 told then, the ANDSF are likely fielding a fighting force in the vicinity of 180,000 combat
24 personnel each day."

25 So you previously stated --

1 A Sorry, where do you see that?

2 Q In the last sentence on that paragraph. So ANDSF on page 21, the left-hand
3 column, if you look at the last sentence, it states, "All told then, the ANDSF are likely
4 fielding a fighting force in the vicinity of 180,000 combat personnel each day."

5 A I see that. I also see earlier in the paragraph where the tally is more
6 comprehensive, and it includes MOD, SOF, MOI. And the author writes, "This gives us a
7 total of 288,702 security force personnel, or 82 percent of total authorized end-strength."

8 Q Correct. And that would include local police, et cetera, right, in terms of
9 that larger number, the 300-something thousand?

10 A It looks like he's including MOD, special operations, and MOI, which would
11 seem to include local police, but it's hard to say. It's just a quick --

12 Q So when sharing the 300,000 number to the public, the 300,000 trained
13 soldiers, did you account for nuances between, for example, local police, here the MOD,
14 special operations, et cetera, as it says here, "which includes a variety of police forces
15 numbered at 103,224," given the inherent distinctions between local police and
16 combat-trained soldiers?

17 [REDACTED]. I just want to note for the record that I don't see the word "local"
18 in here anywhere. That's a characterization of a police force that has a certain
19 connotation which is not found in the article.

20 [REDACTED]. So let me strike "local police" and replace with "police forces."

21 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q Now, was that nuance pointed out to you at any point before presenting this
24 300,000 number to the American public?

25 A In that role as spokesperson, you find yourself relying on the expertise of

1 career subject matter experts across every issue set. Now, that doesn't mean that you
2 don't ask questions, don't probe, don't ask for more. I certainly did.

3 But I don't recall being provided with a precise breakdown of that 300,000 figure.
4 And I think it would be a fairly granular detail to break down a figure like that for my
5 purposes. There are experts within the Department for whom that would be much
6 more relevant. But even here, the figure of 288,702 includes MOD, SOF, special
7 operations, and MOI, Ministry of Interior, as this author writes.

8 Q Let's focus on the macro then, specifically the conclusion that we shared at
9 the beginning of reviewing this exhibit, namely that the study concluded the Taliban
10 would have an advantage over the Afghan military if the U.S. withdrew its troops and that
11 this advantage would then grow in a compounding fashion.

12 Were you aware of this conclusion or were you at any point briefed on this
13 assessment?

14 A I read a lot, both in terms of products that were passed to me, in terms of
15 products I found in my own review of outside literature. I don't recall seeing this in
16 particular.

17 I also am acutely aware, perhaps more so than most, that not everything you read
18 in the public realm is authoritative or 100 percent accurate.

19 I tend to bias directly what I heard from experts within the government who had
20 access to all information available to the U.S. Government -- unclassified, classified,
21 analytic, fact-based, historical -- and I just can't speak to any one particular survey.

22 Q Thank you.

23 [Price Exhibit No. 14
24 was marked for identification.]

25 Q I'd like to introduce exhibit 13 -- 14 -- next. This is a transcript of the

1 speech that Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, John Sopko
2 gave on March 10th, 2021.

3 And we'll be focusing on specific language that he provided with respect to the
4 exhibit 12, the statement you made regarding the 300,000 and the contractor support
5 and various forms of leverage support provided to the Afghan military.

6 Have you ever listened to or read this speech?

7 A I may have. I probably knew about it at the time. It's not ringing a bell in
8 this moment.

9 Q If you could please direct your attention to page 3, and it's going to be the
10 last paragraph.

11 And here SIGAR states, quote, "As I previously noted, while almost all of the
12 attention to date has been on the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition military forces, an
13 equally serious threat to Afghan stability is largely being ignored. And that is the
14 provision of last year's U.S.-Taliban agreement that stipulates that in addition to the
15 departure of troops, all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors,
16 trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel also must leave the country by May
17 1st.

18 "Should this come to pass, SIGAR and many others believe this may be more
19 devastating to the effectiveness of the Afghan security forces -- and the survival of the
20 Afghan state as we know it -- than the withdrawal of our remaining military forces."

21 Next paragraph, on page 4, SIGAR continues, quote, "Why? Because the Afghan
22 government relies on these foreign contractors and trainers to function."

23 And if you go down to the fourth full paragraph, it states, quote, "Again, why does
24 SIGAR and other experts view this as a serious threat to Afghanistan's stability? Namely,
25 because contractors currently provide 100 percent of the maintenance for Afghan Air

1 Force UH-60 helicopters and C-130 cargo aircraft, and a significant portion for Afghan
2 light combat support aircraft. And, TAAC-Air's bleak assessment is that no Afghan
3 airframe can be sustained as combat effective for more than a few months in the absence
4 of contractor support."

5 And on the final paragraph on page 4, SIGAR states, "But even if U.S. financial
6 assistance continues, the lack of enough experienced and trained Afghan personnel,
7 combined with the absence of U.S. military and contract support in Afghanistan, would
8 negatively impact the Afghan security forces, threaten the Afghan state, and imperil our
9 own national security interests should Afghanistan further destabilize."

10 Were you aware of these problems, Mr. Price, including the DOD's assessment
11 that no Afghan airframe could be sustained as combat effective for more than a few
12 months without contractor support?

13 A So let me just stipulate that this is John Sopko.

14 Q Correct.

15 A He is the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction. He operates
16 with a degree of independence and autonomy and a broad interpretation of his mandate
17 that I think there may be some in DOD who see it as their role, as opposed to his, to make
18 these kinds of assessments.

19 I think, just as a general matter, those individuals at DOD would be the ones to
20 listen to when it comes to their assessments.

21 Having said all that, I don't recall being aware of this at the time.

22 Q Let's focus on the specific assessment of the Afghan military being
23 completely reliant on U.S. contractor support. Do you have any reason to refute that
24 statement?

25 A That's a question that is for military planners.

1 Q So the reason I ask this is that in exhibit 12 you state --

2 A Remind me what exhibit 12 was again.

3 Q That was your -- an excerpt of a State Department briefing you held on
4 August 11th, 2021.

5 You state, "Well, there are any number of forms of leverage that the -- our
6 partners in this effort have. I've mentioned, both today and yesterday, the leverage that
7 the Government of Afghanistan has in the form -- in many ways, but, of course,
8 importantly, in the form of its armed forces -- 300,000 trained soldiers, an air force, heavy
9 equipment, continuing support from the United States."

10 So all of these -- the soldiers, the continuing support from the United States, the
11 heavy equipment, et cetera -- they rely upon contractor support. So the reason I asked
12 this was, were you aware of the issue of contractor support regarding -- with respect to
13 the Afghan military?

14 A Sorry. And you are asking that in the context of my statement, "We have
15 concluded that the United States will no longer use our servicemembers as a source of
16 leverage in negotiation"?

17 Q No, no, no. The statement which you said --

18 [REDACTED]. If you will indulge me, I just want to finish this.

19 [REDACTED]. We'd also welcome if you'd include [REDACTED] introducing [REDACTED]
20 into the record when you're finished.

21 [REDACTED]. Of course. We'll do so at the end. Thank you.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q So the reason I -- the statement you provided sort of in the first paragraph
24 that we quoted, namely, the 300,000 trained soldiers, referring to the ANDSF, an air
25 force, heavy equipment, continued support from the United States.

1 A Yes.

2 Q That statement, combined with the purported issues of contractor support
3 as outlined in the SIGAR report.

4 My question is whether you were aware of issues pertaining to contract support,
5 contractor support of the Afghan military.

6 A Number one, again, this is coming from John Sopko, whose role was and is
7 independent of broader DOD to some extent, and about reconstruction and not about
8 force projection or Afghan military capabilities.

9 Having stipulated that, I was reliant on experts within the Department of State
10 who, in turn, would liaise with the Department of Defense to provide me with the facts
11 and figures and knowledge that I needed to speak to these issues at play.

12 It looks like you all cut off the transcript as I was speaking to sources of leverage,
13 but John Sopko does refer to another one of them. "Almost 80 percent of Afghanistan's
14 \$11 billion," he writes, "in public expenditures in 2018 -- the most recent year figures are
15 available for -- was covered by international donors."

16 And typically, I recall, when speaking about sources of leverage, would make the
17 point that the President made the decision not to have U.S. servicemembers remain in
18 harm's way at potentially even elevated figures, but we would still use all the tools,
19 carrots and sticks at our disposal to push things and guide things in the direction
20 consistent with the interests of the Afghan people, the interests of the region, consistent
21 with our own interests as well.

22 Sopko does also write, "U.S. forces in Afghanistan" -- and he's writing this in March
23 of 2010 -- excuse me, March 10th, 2021 -- "now stand at 2,500, the lowest level since
24 2001, and a 98 percent reduction from their peak" -- that 2,500 figure being the number
25 the Biden administration inherited on day one of this administration -- before he then

1 goes on to discussing the other issues.

2 Q Of course. Thank you.

3 [REDACTED]. So we are out of time.

4 [REDACTED] Could you introduce your other colleague?

5 [REDACTED]. Yes.

6 [REDACTED]. I am [REDACTED]. I am [REDACTED]

7 [REDACTED] for the committee.

8 [REDACTED]. We'll stop the clock and go off the record. Thank you.

9 [Recess.]

1 [2:52 p.m.]

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

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q I wanted to do a couple of followups based on the majority's prior round.

5 We introduced the sentiment earlier in the TI, but to reiterate it, do you agree
6 with the sentiment that U.S. troops and equipment are primarily the domain of DOD and
7 military leadership?

8 A I do.

9 Q Would it therefore follow that U.S. troops and equipment are not the
10 primary domain of the State Department?

11 A It would.

12 Q When you were the spokesperson, under that role, were you charged with
13 the mandate of contracting for military support to the Afghan military?

14 A I was not.

15 Q Were you involved in negotiations related to contracting for support for the
16 Afghan military?

17 A I was not.

18 Q Would that have been in your purview?

19 A It would not have been.

20 Q Why wouldn't it have been?

21 A It would've been quite far from my purview overseeing communications and
22 messaging, not operations, logistics, military issues.

23 Q Would it have been in your purview as spokesperson for the State
24 Department to analyze or track intelligence regarding violence on the battlefield?

25 A It would not.

1 Q Whose responsibility would that have been?

2 A A couple.

3 The intelligence community would obviously have a role in that. DOD has
4 intelligence units and, also, its -- other units within DOD would have a role in that, as well,
5 but it would not have been mine.

6 Within the State Department, we also have an intelligence branch. I was not a
7 part of that office, and it was far from my remit at the time.

8 Q Thank you.

9 What about assessing the strength of the ANDSF? Would that have fallen within
10 your purview as spokesperson for the Department of State?

11 A It would not.

12 Q Who would've been in charge of that?

13 A The military, as I recall, did their quarterly assessments of strength of the
14 ANDSF. The intelligence community would produce its assessments.

15 I&R, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, at the State Department was
16 probably the closest thing to me, but, again, separated by bureaus and many layers of
17 function from my role as spokesperson.

18 Q And if you could summarize very briefly for the record, what was your job as
19 spokesperson for the State Department?

20 A My role was to speak publicly on behalf of the Department, on behalf of the
21 Secretary, regarding our foreign policy and national security, coordinating that messaging
22 and that work within the Department and across the interagency.

23 Q Thank you.

24 [REDACTED]?

25 [REDACTED]. Yeah. Thanks.

1 I'm going to introduce a document in the record as --

2 [REDACTED]. Exhibit 15.

3 [REDACTED]. Thanks.

4 [Price Exhibit No. 15
5 was marked for identification.]

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q This is a document from the Congressional Research Service dated
8 September 17, 2021, entitled "U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in
9 Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions."

10 Are you familiar with the Congressional Research Service?

11 A I am.

12 Q Okay. So, if you turn to -- go ahead.

13 [REDACTED]. What is your assessment of CRS? Is it a credible source?

14 Mr. Price. Very.

15 [REDACTED]. What informs that opinion?

16 Mr. Price. It's informed by years of myself resorting to CRS reports when I want
17 to try to get smart on any particular issue.

18 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

19 [REDACTED]. They're going to love to hear that.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q So I have a couple of passages that I wanted to review.

22 On page 7, I'm just going to read: "Throughout 2020" -- this is the third
23 paragraph, second full paragraph.

24 "Throughout 2020, U.S. officials stated that the Taliban were not in full
25 compliance with the agreement, U.S. force levels continued to drop, reaching 8,600 one

1 month ahead of the mid-July 2020 deadline in the U.S.-Taliban accord. Confusion about
2 the United States' future military posture grew in October 2020 due to contradictory
3 visions expressed by senior Trump Administration officials, including President Trump's
4 tweet that, 'We should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women
5 serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!'"

6 Do you agree that that's what that paragraph says?

7 A I do.

8 Q Further, it says, "On November 17, 2020, then-Acting Secretary of Defense
9 Christopher Miller announced, 'we will implement President Trump's orders to continue
10 our repositioning of forces' from Afghanistan, and that 2,500 U.S. forces would remain in
11 Afghanistan by January 15, 2021. Acting Secretary Miller characterized the drawdown
12 (announced alongside a similar reduction of U.S. forces from Iraq) as 'consistent with our
13 established plans and strategic objectives,' and said it 'does not equate to a change in U.S.
14 policy or objectives.' On January 15, 2021, Acting Secretary Miller confirmed that the
15 number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan had reached 2,500."

16 Do you agree that that's what that said?

17 A I do.

18 Q On the next page, the second paragraph down: "Some observers contend
19 that the Biden Administration could have chosen to ignore the agreement" -- this is
20 referring to the Doha Agreement -- "and retained a small force in the country comprising
21 several thousand troops in order to facilitate an intra-Afghan peace agreement.
22 According to this view, the cost of retaining such a force would have been small
23 compared to the security risks associated with the Afghan government's collapse. By
24 contrast, President Biden argued that retaining such a force would not have been
25 feasible; the small number of U.S. troops would not have been sufficient to deter Taliban

1 forces and a re-escalation of U.S. forces and military capabilities into Afghanistan would
2 ultimately have been required. Still others contend that even assuming a minimal
3 footprint could have been feasible, doing so would not have been worth risking further
4 U.S. resources and lives."

5 Do you agree that that's what this paragraph says?

6 A Yeah.

7 Q Okay. Thanks.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q And I just want to step back again a little bit. You've been asked quite a bit
10 today to speak to the policy basis for various press statements and other communications
11 products that were put out under your tenure, correct?

12 A Correct.

13 Q But your testimony today is that you were not the, quote, "policy person"
14 developing or implementing or making decisions about what those policies would be,
15 correct?

16 A That's right.

17 Q And you've been asked today quite a bit to characterize or offer your
18 recollection of policy meetings in the Department or the interagency and policy processes
19 you observed. Is that correct?

20 A That's correct.

21 Q And, nevertheless, it's your testimony that you were in an observer role in
22 those meetings and you were not offering your views with respect to finalizing
23 policymaking decisions?

24 A That's correct.

25 Q So -- here's the stepping-back part -- based on the observations that you

1 were able to make in these policy processes and policy meetings, some of which you've
2 recalled today on record, would you characterize those policy processes as thorough?

3 A I would.

4 Q Would you characterize them as rigorous?

5 A I would.

6 Q Would you characterize them as fact-driven?

7 A I would.

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

9 A Yes.

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

12 A Yes.

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

16 A That's correct.

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

19 A That's correct.

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

21 A Yes, I did.

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

25 A Absolutely. The messaging element tends to be a tool by which to

1 pressure-test the policy, and when there are challenges in the messaging realm,
2 sometimes it can point to challenges in the policy realm.

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

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

12 A Yes, I do.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q I have just one more question.

15 In regard to Afghanistan specifically, you had previously testified that there were
16 no press briefings under the Trump administration. Is that correct?

17 A If I said that, it was a mistake. There were no press briefings in the final
18 year-plus, is my recollection, of the Trump administration -- daily press briefings, I should
19 say, by the State Department spokesperson.

20 Q So daily press briefings.

21 Would it therefore follow that there were no briefings related to Afghanistan
22 during that time period, daily press briefings, and that, in fact, when you came into your
23 role as spokesperson in January of 2021, that is when press briefings related to
24 Afghanistan became more regular, in an effort to be transparent with Americans and the
25 world as to Afghanistan policy at that time?

1 A That's about right.

2 Q Okay.

3 If you could direct your attention to what is marked as page 11, the bottom half of
4 the page.

5 A Uh-huh.

6 Q Oh, I'm sorry, the top half of the page.

7 A Uh-huh.

8 Q Here, you are asked by a reporter, quote, "It's -- it -- this is nuts what you
9 guys keep saying. The Secretary himself said they say that they want
10 international -- they want their leaders to be able to travel, they don't want sanctions.
11 There's nothing that has happened, that they have done on the ground over the course of
12 the last several months -- since April, since this was announced -- to suggest that they, in
13 fact, do want what you guys hope that they want."

14 The, quote, "they" being referenced here is the Taliban, correct?

15 A That's my understanding.

16 Q And the "that they do want what you guys hope that they want," this refers
17 to the international legitimacy that we were talking about previously, correct?

18 A I don't know if that's a reference to international legitimacy or a durable
19 peace that could be arrived at subsequently.

20 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

21 You were then asked by the reporter, on that same page, quote, "Is there? Can
22 you name one thing?"

23 To which you respond, quote, "The Taliban continue to engage in Doha. There
24 has been progress in Doha."

25 The reporter then states, "Ned, you know what? If I had a room at the Four

1 Seasons in Doha and was negotiating on -- I would say whatever, but that doesn't matter,
2 what happens in Doha."

3 You responded, "It absolutely does."

4 And the reporter states, "No. What matters is the atrocities that you even said
5 are being committed on the ground right now and are getting worse every day."

6 Mr. Price, why did the State Department continue to believe into August 2021 that
7 the Taliban's presence and what appear to be fruitless talks in Doha was an indication of
8 its willingness to engage?

9 A I'm just skimming the rest of this.

10 Q Of course. Please feel free to do so.

11 A Yeah.

12 And I should stipulate again that this is probably a better question for the
13 negotiating team. I understand you've already spoken to Zal and perhaps others who
14 worked with him. I'm sure they all can give you chapter and verse as to the considered
15 judgment that they had as they were engaging in Doha with the Taliban.

16 And my understanding, again, is that it was their belief that they should remain
17 there and continue to do that. It was not just, I should also add, not just a State
18 Department team that was engaged with the Taliban. At certain points, including in
19 August, there was a senior U.S. military official who was engaged with the Taliban as well.
20 So this is not a State Department conclusion. It was a U.S. Government-wide
21 assessment, at least is my understanding, given the perch I sat at at the time.

22 I think it goes back to the broader point I was making. It doesn't indicate any
23 degree of trust of the Taliban. I think what it indicates is our dogged pursuit of what
24 would undeniably have been in the interest of the Afghan people, of the region, and of
25 the United States of America.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q This is a transcript of a State Department press briefing you held on August
3 4, 2021.

4 So I'd like to direct your attention to what is marked page 13 in the bottom
5 right-hand corner, starting at the second question on the page.

6 Here, you are asked by a reporter, quote: "As we all know. But this is -- this
7 line that you guys keep saying is just -- it's just, it -- nobody believes it except for -- I'm -- I
8 doubt that you actually believe it, but whatever. It's your job. You have to get up
9 there and say it every day. But I -- I just -- you have to acknowledge at some point that
10 the Taliban has shown no interest in a just and durable solution that -- or international
11 recognition, apart from the fact that a bunch of -- a couple guys, a dozen or so, are
12 negotiating -- quote/unquote, 'negotiating' -- in Doha, isn't that correct? There's
13 nothing on the ground to suggest that they -- that they're actually interested --"

14 And then you respond, "Elements of that, of that negotiation, have translated to
15 conditions on the ground."

16 "There have been ceasefires. There was the U.S.-Taliban agreement which, of
17 course, stipulated that the Taliban could not attack and would not attack American
18 forces. That has not transpired since the U.S.-Taliban agreement went into effect."

19 Why did you view the Taliban's refrain from attack as indication of their interest in
20 a genuine political settlement rather than the Taliban biding their time for the U.S.
21 military to go down to zero?

22 A I was pointing to that element, not as necessarily reflective as to what would
23 happen prospectively, but to make the point that, looking back on the course of nearly 2
24 years, the Taliban had engaged in diplomacy that had meant something.

25 And we can all argue as to how much the U.S.-Taliban agreement was actually

1 worth, as to their adherence to that. But, to go back to the term "uneven," there were
2 elements that -- their behavior did change in some ways after the U.S.-Taliban agreement
3 went into force.

4 I was using that broader point to hold out at least the possibility that the past
5 could be prologue in terms of what we might find in Doha going forward.

6 Q That's ultimately what happened, though, isn't it, in terms of Afghanistan?
7 The Taliban did bide their time and wait, until we were working -- we were close to
8 withdrawing all of our forces, to take over the country?

9 A Look, I don't have a perfect crystal ball. I can't look into their mindset at
10 every point along the way. I think it may be reasonable to come to that conclusion. I
11 don't think anyone can be certain. I think the way the U.S.-Taliban agreement was
12 structured did open that door.

13 Q So I'd like to now introduce as exhibit 18 an excerpt of an August 17, 2021,
14 press briefing you held.

15 [Price Exhibit No. 18
16 was marked for identification.]

17 [REDACTED]. And, I'm sorry, this is 18?

18 [REDACTED]. Yes, this is exhibit 18.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q This is 2 days after the Taliban toppled the Afghan Government and seized
21 Kabul, correct?

22 A Yes.

23 Q So, if you could please direct your attention to what is marked as page 24 in
24 the bottom right-hand corner.

25 Here, you were asked, about midway through the page, quote: "Wait, there is

1 an assumption in the question that -- you answered it positively -- I just want to make
2 sure that it's correct. Do you believe that the Taliban has taken power by force, at the
3 barrel of a gun?"

4 To which you respond, "There has not been a formal transfer of power. Of
5 course, it's a fluid dynamic. There are ongoing discussions between Afghan leaders
6 following --"

7 You were then, I believe, interrupted and asked, "So the -- but the question was,
8 you -- you said you would never recognize or deal with a government that had seized
9 power by -- at the barrel of a gun. You're not prepared to make that statement yet, that
10 the Taliban has seized power at the barrel of a gun, right?"

11 To which you respond, "We are taking stock of what has transpired. There
12 continues to be dialogue between Afghans, between representatives of the Taliban and
13 representatives of the Islamic Republic."

14 A Uh-huh.

15 Q Now that the State Department has had an opportunity to take stock years
16 later to assess what transpired in Afghanistan, are you ready and willing to admit that
17 now, that they took power by force or, as quoted here, "at the barrel of a gun," by the
18 reporter?

19 A You're asking what would seem to be an obvious question but is a question
20 that also implicates a number of very complex issues. Chief among those issues is
21 conferring legitimacy or recognition on the Taliban. That's not something that the
22 United States Government has done; it's not something that we plan to do as long as the
23 Taliban continues to engage in some of the practices that you yourself have highlighted.

24 So I think I was making that point, as I recall, for two reasons. Number one, as I
25 said, there was an ongoing process and a dialogue. However skeptical anyone could've

1 been of the prospects for a power-sharing resolution to emerge from that dialogue, it was
2 still ongoing.

3 But -- and my colleague from L will appreciate this -- our lawyers at the
4 Department want us to be very careful in terms of how we talked about conferring
5 legitimacy on an entity that doesn't have that legitimacy.

6 And so, when I said there has not been a formal transfer of power, that was more
7 a reflection of the fact that we do not recognize the Taliban, we do not consider them to
8 be the formal Government of Afghanistan. And that remains true today.

9 Q Thank you.

10 ██████████: I couldn't have said it better myself. Thank you.

11 BY ██████████:

12 Q So let's transition to the topic of the noncombatant evacuation, or NEO for
13 short.

14 I imagine I know the answer to this question, but are you familiar with what a NEO
15 is, Mr. Price?

16 A I am.

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

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

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

22 A There's contingency planning across every -- virtually every country in which
23 the United States is involved. In most cases, that sort of resides within the embassy and
24 it only rarely reaches decision-makers in Washington.

25 So the first time I heard of a NEO in the context of Afghanistan, I don't recall

1 specifically. I imagine it was sometime in the early part of the administration, given the
2 active contingency planning that was ongoing.

3 Of course, it was, you know, really in August when there was a concerted, regular
4 discussion of NEO activation when I recall being regularly a part of those discussions.

5 Q So let's focus on the time period after the "go to zero" announcement was
6 made, when there was a definitive decision that the U.S. military would be drawn down
7 to zero.

8 Based on your briefings and participation or engagement in interagency meetings,
9 briefings by bureaus and offices within the Department as well as other agencies, how
10 likely was the possibility of a NEO viewed, first, within the State Department?

11 A I think you'd have to stipulate on what particular day and by whom.

12 And on that second question, again, I am not -- I was not the operative person to
13 consult on a NEO. I may have been present for a conversation, but I was not interjecting
14 to say, we should initiate it now, or we should wait, or we should do this, that, or the
15 other. That was not my role.

16 Q Of course. And we certainly understand that's not the role of the
17 spokesperson, but let me sort of refine that question.

18 When, based on your communications and briefings that you received, did it seem
19 likely that a NEO would be necessary?

20 A I can say, 2 years later, it was a very dynamic period in August of 2021. I
21 recall even as late as August 14, 2021, of being under the impression that we sought to
22 keep a diplomatic presence in Kabul.

23 Of course, things continued to be dynamic, and over the course of 48 hours the
24 situation on the ground changed markedly.

25 But when I first heard that we would be executing a NEO? I don't recall precisely

1 when I heard that for the first time.

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

4 A Look, it's not a term that you want to throw around loosely. And, you
5 know, one, as just a general practice, we tend to not speak publicly about contingency
6 plannings. We plan for all sorts of contingencies across every single country in which we
7 operate around the world.

8 Number two, there was a desire, I think a very sound desire, not to, for lack of a
9 better word, to spook the government in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic, more so than
10 was already necessary, not to undermine the government of the Islamic Republic more so
11 than the Taliban was, itself, already doing.

12 So it would only stand to reason that I'm not going to go out there and say that,
13 you know, among the things we're considering is a noncombatant evacuation operation.
14 It wouldn't have been in our interest to do that.

15 Q Fair. Thank you.

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

18 A Well, it was my role not to support the evacuation itself. I should rephrase
19 that. It was not my role to support the evacuation itself; it was my role to speak about
20 what we were doing, how we were doing it, both broadly and, you know, the very, sort
21 of, targeted questions: Who is eligible for evacuation? What should people do?
22 What should the American-citizen community do? What about LPRs? What about
23 family members? What about SIV recipients, SIV applicants, SIV-eligible individuals?

24 So a number of audiences, a number of considerations. And it was my role to
25 convey the appropriate messaging in various forums and fora to those audiences.

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

3 A Look, the people on the ground were -- and I think I referred to John Bass in
4 this context earlier -- they were up around the clock. They were, you know, running
5 around the HKIA compound. It was the last thing I wanted to do, to place an additional
6 burden on them for them to brief me, when I knew that there were individuals at the
7 Department who had that connectivity, who had, you know, just gotten off the phone
8 with them, who had digested all the SITREPs, who could then brief me.

9 So, just as I explained in other contexts, the context here was exactly the same. I
10 would turn to -- if we're talking to the period when the task force had already been
11 established, I would turn to a task force rep. I would turn to an SCA rep. I would turn
12 to a CA rep. If there were high-level, you know, policy questions, I would look to
13 7th Floor colleagues. But, again, I relied on the experts to provide me the information
14 that I felt I needed.

15 Q Thank you.

16 And how did you learn of the August 26, 2021, terrorist attack at Abbey Gate?

17 A I referenced the Secretary's morning meeting earlier today. And we were
18 in the Secretary's conference room. It was probably 20 minutes into the meeting,
19 someone slipped a note into the door. I think it was the first time I had seen someone
20 do that during the Secretary's morning meeting.

21 I recall at least -- I can't be certain, but my recollection is that the note was slipped
22 to Suzy George. I saw her, sort of, face sink, and she read aloud that there had been a
23 suicide bombing at the airport.

24 Q And how did you respond to that from a communications standpoint? So
25 what was your process in responding to that information?

1 A We were in constant communication with the Department of Defense.

2 You know, the initial report we heard, I think, was -- and this may have been in the
3 initial note -- that, you know, four servicemembers were killed. And, you know, even
4 hearing that was a shock to the system.

5 But I was in touch with counterparts; others within the Department were in touch
6 with DOD. We were getting a steady stream of information.

7 At one point, I recall hearing, you know, very soberly from DOD, "No one say
8 anything else. The numbers that have been reported aren't accurate, and unfortunately
9 they are much larger."

10 Q Thank you.

11 We talked about Ambassador Bass and, sort of, his role in the evacuation. He
12 was sent to Afghanistan around mid- to late August 2021, correct?

13 A That's my recollection.

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

17 A That's not my understanding. Again, I was not a decision-maker in the
18 notion of sending John Bass to Afghanistan, but what I recall from the time, what I have
19 gleaned since, it was a reflection of the mission broadening and changing.

20 And Ross Wilson was serving as our senior diplomatic representative on the
21 ground, engaging with the Islamic Republic, engaging with the diplomatic community that
22 was also on the ground. That work was still necessary, especially vis-à-vis diplomatic
23 partners on the ground, the diplomatic community in Kabul, leading the mission itself, the
24 people on the ground.

25 But this was a massive undertaking, the evacuation effort, and it was additive to

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

5 Q Thank you for that.

6 [REDACTED]. I'd like to enter exhibit 19.

7 [Price Exhibit No. 19
8 was marked for identification.]

9 [REDACTED]. This is an excerpt of a transcript of a State Department press
10 briefing that you held on August 27, 2021.

11 [REDACTED]. Thanks, [REDACTED].

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q So I'd like to direct your attention to the top of what is marked page 19.

14 A Uh-huh.

15 Q So you were asked -- it's the first question: "My second question has to do
16 with security around the airport. Yesterday, General McKenzie said that the Defense
17 Department is sharing versions of information with the Taliban and there is some
18 coordination on security. Does that coordination extend to members of the Haqqani
19 Network, who are also providing security?"

20 To which you responded, "No, it does not. The Taliban and the Haqqani Network
21 are separate entities."

22 A Uh-huh.

23 Q I'd also like to direct your attention next to page 20, so that would just be
24 the next page, and to the first question there.

25 Here, you are asked: "-- on what you just said regarding the Haqqani Network?"

1 There are members of the Haqqani family who are in prominent positions now within the
2 Taliban. So you're not in any way coordinating with the Haqqani Network and
3 (inaudible)?"

4 To which you responded, "The Haqqani Network is a designated foreign terrorist
5 organization. We are not coordinating with the Haqqani Network."

6 A Uh-huh.

7 Q So, Mr. Price, it appears you made two main arguments here: one, that the
8 Taliban and the Haqqanis were separate entities; and, two, that the U.S. did not
9 coordinate with Haqqanis, only with the Taliban.

10 Do you still stand by both those arguments?

11 [REDACTED]. I just want to be clear. What he said was they don't coordinate
12 with the Haqqani Network.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Haqqani Network.

15 A So, on the second question, do we coordinate with the Haqqani Network,
16 what I said remains the case. The Haqqani Network is a foreign terrorist organization.
17 I'm familiar with Haqqani Network from my time in the Department, also my time at the
18 CIA, where I focused as an analyst on terrorism and counterterrorism.

19 The point I made in response to the first question is that there's a way to
20 analytically make a distinction between these two organizations, precisely because we
21 consider the Haqqani Network to be an FTO and we don't consider the Taliban to be an
22 FTO. The fact that we are able to levy a set of tools, statutory tools, against one entity
23 but not the other suggests that there can be an analytic distinction.

24 That doesn't mean that they're not related, that there's not overlap between
25 them. And I think it's also the case that, around this time, the linkages probably also

1 increased, somewhat, as the de facto governing authority of Afghanistan -- some of the
2 individuals who came onto that team were more prominently affiliated with the Haqqani
3 Network than with the Taliban.

4 I acknowledge, in that first answer, I could've been more nuanced. I could've
5 said, "The Taliban and the Haqqani Network are separate but related entities." I think
6 that is a very accurate way to characterize it.

7 Q And during the evacuation, did the U.S. ever work with any members of the
8 Taliban who were also affiliated with the Haqqani Network?

9 A My understanding is that, because of the FTO label attached to the Haqqani
10 Network, that we were scrupulous, to the best of our ability, not to engage with Haqqani
11 Network in some of the ways in which we engaged with the Taliban.

12 But I was not on the ground, so I was not steeped in those operations. So that's
13 a question that might be better posed to someone who was on the ground who engaged
14 in that contact or set those limits.

15 Q Okay.

16 So this is going to be exhibit 20.

17 [Price Exhibit No. 20
18 was marked for identification.]

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q This is a transcript of a CNN interview with National Security Advisor Jake
21 Sullivan. It's dated August 22, 2021.

22 And if you could direct your attention to what is marked page 6 in the bottom
23 right-hand corner.

24 A Uh-huh.

25 Q Beginning midway down, Mr. Sullivan is asked the following: "The U.S. is

1 talking coordinating with the Taliban. The Haqqani Network, which is a powerful
2 hard-line ally of the Taliban affiliated with al Qaeda, is also involved in negotiations and
3 security in Kabul. Its leader was designated as a terrorist a decade ago. Is the
4 U.S. talking -- is the U.S. coordinating with the Haqqani Network?"

5 To which Mr. Sullivan responds, "We're engaging through military channels with
6 the Taliban. The Taliban, obviously, to a considerable extent are integrated with the
7 Haqqani Network. Our effort is with the Taliban military commanders currently in
8 charge of security in Kabul, because they need to understand that Americans and those
9 who have worked with us need safe passage to the airport. And if that passage is
10 disrupted or operations are interfered with, the United States will deliver a swift and
11 forceful response."

12 Did you agree with Jake Sullivan's description of the Haqqani --

13 A I think his description of the relationship is just as I said. And I think it
14 became even more apparent as the Taliban -- which, around this time, as I recall,
15 announced the de facto governing coalition of Afghanistan, and prominent Haqqani
16 Network members were and are a part of that.

17 So, whether you say they are separate but aligned, separate but integrated,
18 separate but overlapping, separate but marbled, I think all of those terms apply.

19 Q Gotcha. And it sounded like maybe -- you admitted that you maybe
20 could've been a little bit better with your language?

21 A I could've added a modifier there to infuse some of that nuance.

22 Q And were leaders of the Haqqani/Taliban in positions of control not just
23 inside Kabul but also right outside Kabul Airport in August 2021?

24 A I couldn't speak to where Haqqani-proper members were located or what
25 their positioning was in relation to Taliban members.

1 We -- and by "we," in this case, the U.S. military -- as Jake said, engaged with the
2 Taliban because, strangely, we had similar goals: to see this evacuation operation
3 completed as quickly as possible and, from our vantage point, as effectively as possible.
4 The Taliban shared that goal with us. I don't know to what extent prominent members
5 of the Haqqani Network did at the time.

6 Q And were you briefed at the time about who the members of the Taliban
7 were that the U.S. military was working with?

8 A Not in any detail. I don't recall whether I was, you know, featured in some
9 briefing, "These are our interlocutors." I don't have that recollection. I don't have that
10 recollection.

11 Q Okay. But were you briefed, like, in a specific way, that none of the Taliban
12 interlocutors were members of the Haqqani Network?

13 A It was my impression -- and, you know, it still is -- that, to the best of our
14 ability, the FTO designation that applied to the Haqqani Network but not the Taliban was
15 a limiting feature and a limiting factor on our engagements with the Taliban.

16 Now, I never want to be categorical. It is, in areas as complex as this, unwise to
17 be categorical. But it's my understanding that was our approach, to engage with the
18 Taliban.

19 Q And can we talk a little bit about the Haqqani Network and its relationship
20 with ISIS-K? What is your understanding, if any, of the strategic or tactical relationships
21 that existed between the Haqqani Network and ISIS-K in Afghanistan prior to August
22 2021?

23 A It's a complex relationship. I think it is perhaps a bit more nuanced than
24 the relationship between the Taliban and ISIS-K. But, to our prior discussion, the
25 Haqqani Network is aligned with the Taliban.

1 A I don't know what this report is.

2 You're asking if I read a U.N. Security Council report of the Analytical Support and
3 Sanctions Monitoring Team that was submitted to the Security Council Committee, that
4 was submitted on May 27, 2020, many months before the inauguration of the Biden
5 administration?

6 Q Yes.

7 A I don't recall reading this at the time.

8 Q Okay. Do you recall reading any of the U.N. Sanctions Monitoring Team
9 reports on Afghanistan?

10 A In my role as spokesperson?

11 Q Yes.

12 A Offhand, no. But many things were sent to me in the course of any given
13 day, and I can't be, again, exhaustive in recalling what I may have read.

14 But I don't recall reading this at the time, especially since it came out more than a
15 year before the timeframe in question.

16 Q Okay.

17 Let's go to bullet point 73. It's on what's marked page 19, so that'll be the final
18 page there.

19 The report states -- so this is bullet point 73. It's right at the top.

20 The report states, "Member States have commented that most attacks claimed by
21 ISIL-K demonstrated some degree of 'involvement, facilitation, or the provision of
22 technical assistance' by the Haqqani Network. Furthermore, they have stated that ISIL-K
23 'lacked the capability to launch complex attacks in Kabul on its own' while taking
24 responsibility for operations that had, in all likelihood, been carried out by the Haqqani
25 Network. Notably, the tactical autonomy of the Haqqani Network in pursuing Taliban

1 goals enables them to support operations, which undermined the control and credibility
2 of the Government of Afghanistan. Likewise, operations resulting in civilian casualties
3 allow Taliban deniability whereas ISIL-K is willing to claim responsibility to demonstrate
4 capability and relevance."

5 I'd also like to just direct you to the footnote at the bottom. It's footnote 35. It
6 says, "The Monitoring Team has previously viewed communication intercepts following
7 ISIL-K claimed attacks that were identified as traceable to known members of the Haqqani
8 Network."

9 A Uh-huh.

10 Q Do you recall being briefed in any way at the State Department about these
11 sorts of relationships between the Haqqani Network and ISIS-K?

12 A Today, I don't recall receiving any such briefing. I can't be certain whether I
13 did or not.

14 Q Throughout 2021, as a spokesperson, did the State Department consider it a
15 fact that some of the attacks for which ISIS-K claimed responsibility may have been in
16 some way facilitated by the Haqqani Network?

17 A I don't know that I would've spoken to that at all. I'm not sure I considered
18 that.

19 Q Were any of these factors that we've discussed here -- the relationship
20 between the Haqqani Network and ISIS-K -- were those factors taken into account when
21 the U.S. was relying upon the Taliban to provide security outside of HKIA?

22 [REDACTED]. So that is an exact question that he wouldn't have had -- you're not
23 asking if he was briefed on or was expected to respond as spokesperson to that issue.
24 That's an operational question on something that he's repeatedly said he wasn't involved
25 in.

1 ██████████. Sure. It'd be a question, then, about whether he was briefed on
2 whether this was taken into account at all, these relationships between the Haqqani
3 Network and ISIS-K.

4 Mr. Price. That's a better question for those who were involved in the
5 evacuation.

6 I recall very clearly hearing dispatches from General McKenzie and the team on
7 the ground that they were receiving cooperation from the Taliban. But, you know, it
8 wasn't my place to question what General McKenzie was saying, what the team on the
9 ground was saying.

10 I don't recall ever hearing any of them speak of the Haqqani Network nexus in this
11 context. I would only be -- I would only be conjecturing if I were to offer an opinion.

12 ██████████. I would also note that you've heard prior testimony that perimeter
13 security at HKIA was exclusively in the hands of the Department of Defense. And so that
14 question, which seems not unreasonable, should be directed to the Department of
15 Defense.

16 BY ██████████:

17 Q So we're going to transition topics to post-withdrawal.

18 Were you involved, in any capacity, in efforts to communicate with American
19 citizens and Afghans trying to escape Afghanistan after August 30, 2021?

20 A In communications? Yes.

21 Q Can you --

22 ██████████. Wait. The question was, were you involved in communications
23 to --

24 Mr. Price. Oh.

25 ██████████. -- Americans, meaning left behind?

1 [REDACTED]. Correct.

2 Mr. Price. I -- in terms of the Department of State issuing clear messages and, in
3 some cases, guidance to those Americans, I think the answer is yes.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Can you elaborate on that?

6 A Well, I think as has been stipulated, during the course of those 2 weeks in
7 August, the NEO brought to safety 124,000 individuals, some 6,000 American citizens, as I
8 recall.

9 But our message to those who remained who either -- who may have wished to
10 leave or later decided that they wished to leave was simple: that our obligation to
11 American citizens, just like our obligations to our Afghan partners, didn't expire on August
12 30th, and we remained committed to American citizens and to our Afghan partners into
13 perpetuity.

14 And I think if you reflect on the track record since then, you will have seen that we
15 made good on that pledge. Americans who later decided that they wished to leave have
16 come home. In some cases, Americans who left, who went back, who then decided
17 again that they wished to leave, have been able to do so in many cases with our support.

18 Q And were you ever briefed on the number of Americans who were left
19 behind?

20 A The number of Americans who remained was a function of, really, our
21 Consular Affairs Bureau. They were the ones who were in touch with the
22 American-citizen community, who were emailing, texting, calling the American-citizen
23 community every single day to determine basic facts -- who these individuals were, where
24 they were, what their intentions were, if they wished to leave, and if so, the disposition of
25 their travel documents.

1 So those figures would come up through our system based on that outreach, that
2 number-crunching, that data, recognizing that both during those 2 weeks and in the
3 weeks after it was a dynamic data set. Americans were deciding in real-time whether
4 they wanted to stay, whether they wanted to leave, whether they could leave. And so
5 those numbers fluctuated quite a bit, in many cases, over the course of a day. The
6 numbers were always nothing more than a singular snapshot in time.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q And with the final departure of U.S. troops on or around August 30, August
9 31, 2021, how many Americans -- well, based on what you were briefed, how many
10 Americans who wanted to leave but were not able to leave were left behind in
11 Afghanistan?

12 A I don't recall the exact figure. But, again, any figure would have only been
13 valid for that snapshot in time, because Americans continued to leave, of course, after
14 August 30th, after August 31st, September 1st, but -- and this, you know, I think, nuance
15 is sometimes lost -- but that number could also rise with the success of our
16 USG-facilitated operations.

17 As Americans saw their fellow Americans traveling overland in some cases or
18 leaving on USG-facilitated flights, some Americans who told our Consular Affairs
19 representatives that, "no, I'm not interested in leaving now" changed their minds, raised
20 their hands. In some cases, Americans who had never identified themselves to the
21 Department of State as having been in Afghanistan notified us of their presence, and for
22 the first time they were reflected in our tallies.

23 So, with each departing flight, with each departing overland caravan, numbers
24 might have dipped momentarily before going back up as Americans changed their mind
25 and came to different conclusions on a real-time basis.

1 Q I definitely understand all of that nuance. It's well-taken. But a specific
2 number of Americans who wanted to leave but were not able to by the time that U.S.
3 troops departed -- it would seem like that would be a number that the State Department
4 would be aware of, given the dramatic change in the situation with all the U.S. troops
5 gone.

6 So, whether it was August 30th, August 31st, early September, were you briefed
7 on a specific number?

8 A I was briefed on figures, but if you're asking me what that figure was on
9 August 30th or August 31st or September 1st of 2021, today, on December 12th of 2023, I
10 don't recall the specific figure that was available to us at the time.

11 But, yes, you're correct that these data sets were updated on a real-time basis.
12 And our Consular Affairs representatives were in regular communication with Americans
13 to help them, to provide assistance, to help them think through decisions, and, ultimately,
14 if they opted to leave, to provide them with what they needed to do so.

15 Q Very helpful.

16 Are you able to give an estimate, then, from that timeframe?

17 A Even with the estimates, I would hate to offer a recollection because there
18 were different data sets. There were numbers of Americans in Afghanistan. There
19 were numbers of Americans who were there who wished to leave. There were numbers
20 of Americans there who wished to leave, who were ready to leave, meaning they had
21 travel documents available to them. So, again, it is, I think, a bit too stark to ask for a
22 single figure.

23 [REDACTED]. I would also note that that information is information that belongs
24 to the Department and belonged to the Department at the time. It was not his personal
25 observation. And so you should probably direct that exact question to the Department.

1 [2:55 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]. And we'd be happy to do so.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q And I think we've asked many questions today, so I just have a few more. I
5 briefly wanted to touch upon your preparation for this interview.

6 How did you first learn of the committee's interest in conducting a transcribed
7 interview?

8 A I think I actually first learned through the chairman's press release.

9 Q And I believe you may have touched upon this with my minority colleagues,
10 but for the sake of our closing out, what was your reaction?

11 A As I said before, a bit puzzled.

12 Q And why was that?

13 A My understanding is that this is an oversight investigation into the
14 decision-making and policy processes, and, as I've said in any number of ways, my role
15 was not in either of those lanes. It was in communications and messaging.

16 Q And what kind of preparations did you take for this interview?

17 A I spoke with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. They gave me a broad sense of what to expect.
18 But I didn't do anything beyond that, really.

19 Q Were any officials or individuals from outside of the Department involved in
20 your preparation?

21 A From outside of the Department? No.

22 [REDACTED]. So we certainly appreciate you answering our questions today.
23 I know some were more difficult than others.

24 I imagine it's getting late. I want to offer you the opportunity to provide any
25 closing remarks, if you have any.

1 Mr. Price. No. I think I availed myself of that opportunity to your colleagues
2 earlier.

3 I would just make the broad point that, you know, as in all ventures in
4 government, I think what you saw in the case of this decision and this process was a
5 collection of good people with the best of intentions making the best of circumstances
6 that were on the ground and the information that was available to them at the time.

7 I understand that there are certain elements that individuals might wish to
8 quibble with, but, again, having played a role in this and having been a part of it, at least
9 from my lane, you know, the determination and the grit and the creativity and bravery, in
10 many cases, that culminated in our country's largest airlift and an enduring commitment
11 to our Afghan partners who served alongside us over the course of 20 years in executing
12 on a decision that, frankly, had been made by at least two of his predecessors to wind
13 down and to end this forever war, you know, is a -- it's a feat that obviously came at some
14 cost, but it was, however -- I was, you know, humbled to play some role in the process
15 and to be a part of it.

16 ██████████. Well, thank you on behalf of Chairman McCaul for appearing
17 voluntarily today and answering our questions. I know he and we certainly appreciate
18 the Department's and your engagement with us on this important issue.

19 Mr. Price. Thanks very much.

20 ██████████. Thank you.

21 We can go off the record.

22 ██████████. Nothing further from us. Thanks again.

23 Mr. Price. Thank you.

24 [Whereupon, at 3:38 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 134 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded.



Witness Name

2/22/24

Date

Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of Ned Price
dated 12/12/2023

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel , (4) private counsel (as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
2	7	Change to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	
2	8	Change to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	
2	11	Change to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	
6	13	Change "I'm the investigator for the majority." to "I'm an investigator for the majority."	
21	4	Change "Acting UM" to "Acting M"	
32	13	Change "balance" to "bounds"	
33	18	Change "was" to "were"	
37	3	Change "to the CIA" to "for the CIA"	
37	5	Change "specialist" to "Special Assistant"	
48	19	Change "cited" to "sighted"	
57	15 & 16	Change "So, first of all, in terms of mention of, sort of, firsthand account, as we've noted, we want your firsthand account." to "So, first of all, in terms of the mention of, sort of, firsthand account, as we've noted, we want your firsthand account."	
65	19	Change "agreements" to "agreement's"	
66	21	"Change adherent" to "adherence"	
71	14	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
71	21	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
72	8	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
72	18	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
73	2	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
73	6	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
77	2	Insert internal quotations around 'in quadrasonic sound'	
77	4	Add a quotation mark after the word "book"	
79	19	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
80	2	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	

80	4	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
83	16 to 18	Change "So we are now talking about what the U.S. attempted to impose on the parties, but in terms of what we presented to them. Did we ever present a plan for a power government which would be dominated by the Taliban?" to "So we are now not talking about what the U.S. attempted to impose on the parties, but in terms of what we presented to them. Did we ever present a plan for a power-sharing government which would be dominated by the Taliban?"	
84	7	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
85	2	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
85	12	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
87	24	Change "by you in fact" to "by you, in fact"	
88	6	Change "and that was, in fact, a priority" to "it was a priority"	
89	16	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
89	22	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
90	3	Change "Khalizad" to "Khalilzad"	
94	4	Revise to "CEO"	
94	4	Change "CE" to "CEO"	
121	4	Change "I wanted to do a couple of followups" to "I have a couple of follow-up questions"	
121	5	Strike "We introduced the sentiment earlier in the TI, but to reiterate it"	
121	12	Strike "under that role,"	
122	15	Change "I&R" to "INR"	
143	22	Revise "Haqqani/Taliban" to "Haqqani Taliban"	