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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: ROSS WILSON

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Tuesday, October 24, 2023

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Washington, D.C.

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The interview in the above matter was held in Room 2200, Rayburn House Office

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Building, commencing at 9:35 a.m.

1 Appearances:

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5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

6

7 [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED],

10 [REDACTED]

11 [REDACTED]

12 [REDACTED]

13 [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED]

15 [REDACTED]

16 [REDACTED]

17

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19 For the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE:

20

21 [REDACTED]

22 [REDACTED]

23

24

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1 For ROSS WILSON:

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3 JOHN B. BELLINGER, PARTNER,

4 THOMAS A. PETTIT, SENIOR ASSOCIATE,

5 ARNOLD & PORTER,

6 601 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, NW,

7 WASHINGTON, D.C. 20001-3743

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

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

5 Ambassador Wilson. Ross Wilson.

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

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

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

14 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] from the majority.

15 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] from the majority.

16 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] for the Democratic staff.

17 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] on
18 the minority staff.

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

20 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] for the minority staff.

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

23 Our questions will proceed in rounds. The majority will ask questions first for
24 one hour, then the minority will have an opportunity to ask questions for an equal period
25 of time if they choose. We will alternate back and forth until there are no more

1 questions and the interview is over.

2 Typically, we take a short break at the end of each hour. If you'd like to take a
3 break apart from that, please just let us know and we'll be happy to accommodate.

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

6 Does that make sense, Ambassador?

7 Ambassador Wilson. Uh-huh.

8 The Reporter. Is that a "yes".

9 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

10 [REDACTED]. So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we will do
11 our best to limit the number of people directing questions at you during any given hour to
12 just those people on the staff whose turn it is. Please try and speak clearly so the court
13 reporter can understand and so everyone can hear you.

14 It is important that we don't talk over one another or interrupt each other if we
15 can help it, and that goes for everybody present at today's interview.

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

18 Ambassador Wilson, you're appearing today with private counsel, correct?

19 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

20 [REDACTED]. Can counsel please identify yourselves and state your name for
21 the record?

22 Mr. Bellinger. John Bellinger, Arnold & Porter, counsel for Ambassador Wilson.

23 Mr. Pettit. Tom Pettit, Arnold & Porter, counsel for Ambassador Wilson.

24 [REDACTED]. It's my understanding that agency counsel for the Department is
25 also present today, Ambassador Wilson. You understand that agency counsel

1 represents the State Department and not you personally, correct?

2 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

3 [REDACTED] Could the agency counsel and notetaker please identify
4 yourselves and state your names for the record?

5 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED]

6 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

7 [REDACTED] Thank you.

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

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

16 Ambassador Wilson, this portion of the interview is unclassified. So if a question
17 calls for any information that you know to be classified, please state that for the record,
18 as well as the basis for the classification and the original classification authority.

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

21 In the interest of transparency and open access to the Federal Government, we
22 ask that your asserted basis for classification adhere to the uniform system prescribed by
23 Executive Order 13526.

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

1 Do you understand?

2 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

3 [REDACTED]. You should also understand that although this interview is not
4 under oath, that by law you're required to answer questions from Congress truthfully.

5 Do you understand that?

6 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

7 [REDACTED]. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff at an
8 interview.

9 Do you understand this?

10 Ambassador Wilson. Repeat that.

11 [REDACTED]. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff in an
12 interview.

13 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

14 [REDACTED]. Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be
15 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C.
16 1001.

17 Do you understand this?

18 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

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

21 Ambassador Wilson. I don't believe so.

22 [REDACTED]. Finally, I'd like to make note that the content of what we will
23 discuss here today is confidential. We ask that you not speak about what we discuss in
24 this interview to any outside individuals to preserve the integrity of the chairman's
25 investigation.

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

4 That is the end of the majority's preamble. Is there anything that my colleagues
5 from the minority would like to add?

6 [REDACTED]. Yes, thank you.

7 We note that, notwithstanding any agreement made between the majority, the
8 witness and his counsel, and/or the State Department for this transcribed interview,
9 there is no provision governing or mandating confidentiality of investigations and/or
10 transcribed interviews in the House or committee's rules of the 118th Congress.

11 Thank you.

12 Mr. Bellinger. And I'll simply say that's also my understanding of the rules. But
13 we understand the request.

14 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

15 Okay. The time is now 9:39 -- 9:40 -- and I'll start the clock.

16 Ambassador Wilson, can you please give us a brief overview of you career at the
17 State Department?

18 Mr. Bellinger. And here, as we mentioned, Ambassador Wilson is going to start
19 with a short statement --

20 [REDACTED]. Apologies. Yes.

21 Mr. Bellinger. -- of which we will provide written copies for everybody.

22 Tom, if you can share those.

23 It's a short statement that I think will provide a useful background for your
24 questions.

25 [REDACTED]. Apologies. Thank you so much.

1 And we're going to stop the clock at this time to allow the ambassador to share his
2 statement.

3 Ambassador Wilson. So let me start by mourning the loss of 13 servicemen
4 and -women at Kabul airport on August 26th, 2021. There was the third so-called ramp
5 ceremony to place the remains of fallen soldiers -- heroes -- onto aircraft back home, the
6 third such ceremony that I took part in as Chief of Mission in Kabul. Each of them made
7 a profound impression on me.

8 I think every day about the American military, Foreign Service, and other
9 personnel, allies and Afghans, who lost their lives in service to our country in Afghanistan
10 and about what came from their and America's sacrifices.

11 In October 2019, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia asked if I
12 would be willing to come out of retirement, accept my recall to the Foreign Service as
13 Chief of Mission in Kabul.

14 I sought advice about taking such a challenging assignment from a number of
15 people and visited Washington twice that fall to talk through the matter with senior
16 officials, including with Secretary Pompeo.

17 I concluded that my commitment on joining the Foreign Service was to go when
18 and where I was asked. I arrived in Kabul on January 19th, 2020, for 6 months. That
19 was extended both by the Trump administration and by the Biden administration to 20.

20 My job was to represent and carry out the policies of two Presidents and two
21 administrations in leading our largest diplomatic mission, which at that time numbered
22 well over 4,000 people.

23 The U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed 6 weeks after I arrived, negotiated by
24 Ambassador Khalizad before I came onto duty. It included provisions on
25 counterterrorism, prisoners, intra-Afghan negotiations, a ceasefire, and most importantly,

1 a May 1st, 2021, deadline for the withdrawal of American and other foreign forces.

2 When I met with Secretary Pompeo, he told me that my top priority was to
3 support the implementation of that agreement. The Afghan Government, as you all
4 know, had been excluded from the agreement, was deeply opposed to it and opposed to
5 what it aimed to achieve.

6 Nevertheless, it was my job to press for the release of prisoners by the Afghan
7 Government as required under the accord. I pushed President Ghani and his political
8 opponents to set aside their differences and agree on a strategy for negotiating with the
9 Talibs. I encouraged public support for and involvement on matters relating to peace
10 because that seemed kind of essential for their success. I provided assurances about
11 America's commitment to their country.

12 Secretary Pompeo also asked me to work on what a post-U.S. forces withdrawal
13 mission would look like and what it should do going forward.

14 We began considering shortly after I arrived how to reduce the American footprint
15 and staff and modalities or arrangements to make that possible. We stepped up the
16 disposal of sensitive material that had accelerated some in 2019 following the drawdown
17 of personnel at that time.

18 We reexamined our contingency planning, including for potential evacuation. I
19 asked for reporting that would help us understand how to deal with the Talibs in a
20 potential post-settlement government.

21 It's worth noting that COVID virtually shut down our operations, as I think they did
22 here, for very extended periods. But during those months, and especially when its
23 restrictions relaxed, we were able to prioritize alleviating the Special Immigrant
24 Visa -- SIV -- backlog.

25 Throughout 2020, I kept in close contact with military commanders on force

1 reductions they were directed to carry out and what those reductions meant for the
2 mission.

3 After our Presidential election, President Ghani made clear he hoped for a change
4 in American policy. I cautioned him not to make assumptions.

5 I also urged the new administration to engage early on with the Afghan leadership
6 regarding the way forward. I thought this would make matters easier, implementing the
7 next phase would be easier if we had undertaken those kinds of discussions with the
8 government, whatever direction the President decided to go.

9 On April 14th, 2021, President Biden announced that American forces would
10 withdraw not in -- not by May, but in September. He said that while the U.S. military
11 would be leaving Afghanistan, the United States would not, and that our diplomatic,
12 humanitarian work would continue. And when he visited Kabul the next day, Secretary
13 Blinken reiterated this intention to President Ghani and to me.

14 Knowing the value of having embassies abroad and the assets they provide for
15 protecting American interests, I agreed with that decision.

16 My job then was to ensure that steps necessary to continue our diplomatic
17 presence and support for Afghanistan got taken and that we had realistic and viable
18 contingency plans in place should the risk of staying become too great.

19 Intelligence reporting suggested that the Talibs would likely attack U.S. facilities
20 and personnel after the missed May 1st deadline. So we bolstered our security through
21 drills, tightened access controls at the mission, and we reduced our numbers.

22 Already in 2021, staff in country under my authority had declined by hundreds,
23 already by April. From late April to August, we sent hundreds more out of the country.
24 Separately we expanded and sped up the disposal of sensitive materials.

25 A consular -- a security consular and management team led by our Assistant Chief

1 of Mission worked with the military, led our work with the military on evacuation
2 planning. They met frequently with military staff, visited Bagram and Kabul airports,
3 and consulted closely on numbers, modalities, and related matters.

4 We accelerated SIV work by reallocating staff from other parts of the embassy,
5 bringing in temporary help, and working with Washington to eliminate bottlenecks.

6 Recognizing future uncertainties and to ensure that policymakers had options, we
7 finalized a plan for locking up the embassy, moving most staff out of the country, and
8 leaving a small group at the airport to continue diplomatic and consular efforts.

9 The Talib offensive that began in June and the Afghans' poor response posed
10 serious problems for the government and for our efforts to continue to achieve some
11 kind of a settlement and potentially for the embassy.

12 Rear Admiral Peter Vasely, the new commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, and
13 I jointly pressed President Ghani and his security chiefs to consolidate Afghan forces that
14 were spread all over the country and to adopt a prioritized strategy for their use. We
15 urged Ghani and other leaders to unite and rally Afghan citizens behind the Armed Forces
16 and their country.

17 Backed by intelligence assessments suggesting that the government still had time,
18 we thought that this stiffer defense, more effective leadership, and political unity could
19 bring about a stalemate, or at least a fight sufficient that genuine negotiations on a
20 peaceful transition -- which the Talibs had effectively avoided -- could occur.

21 Unfortunately, Afghan leaders took no effective action.

22 The Talibs' capture of a remote provincial capital on August 6th did not
23 immediately change Afghanistan's outlook, but the fall of nine more over the following
24 5 days did.

25 On August 12th, leadership in Washington and I agreed that the mission should

1 proceed with the plan to relocate to the airport, and work on that began the following
2 day.

3 Early on the 15th, Rear Admiral Vasely and I called Washington to describe the
4 more directly threatening picture that had developed overnight. It included thousands
5 of Talib fighters streaming directly toward Kabul, a flow that contradicted orders that
6 we -- assurances that we had received from the Talibs and orders that we believed had
7 been given for them to stop, by Taliban senior leadership, the expected seizure of two
8 prisons later that day and the release of thousands of inmates -- Talib fighters, ISIS
9 fighters, common criminals -- and the abandonment overnight of checkpoints into and
10 within Kabul's Green Zone that were vital to our security.

11 We had been striving to maintain embassy operations in accord with the direction
12 given to us. This was no longer possible. And at that point, I recommended to
13 Secretary Blinken our immediate evacuation. He agreed, and the White House
14 subsequently approved a noncombatant evacuation.

15 Over about 18 hours and with military support, we moved 1,500 American and
16 third-country national mission staff to the airport, completed the destruction of sensitive
17 materials, and secured our facilities without a casualty, an injury, or an incident of any
18 kind -- something I'm particularly proud of.

19 Most of those people departed the country within 24 to 48 hours. Those who
20 remained turned quickly with our military partners to the task of evacuating others once
21 Kabul airport security got restored.

22 Although President Ghani's -- sorry, not "although."

23 President Ghani's unexpected departure on August 15th, the abrupt collapse of
24 government authority, including at the airport, and the Talibs' arrival, against the
25 backdrop of American withdrawal, produced the scene at the airport.

1 The future looked threatening to tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of
2 thousands of Afghan citizens -- American citizens, Afghans who had worked for us, and
3 others.

4 Fortunately, the massive humanitarian airlift, led and facilitated by our military
5 with mission and State Department support, got some 124,000 people out of Afghanistan
6 in 15 days, an astonishing number.

7 Actions taken by courageous and well-trained and experienced military, Foreign
8 Service, and other American and allied personnel were heroic and extraordinary.

9 I'm particularly proud of the work that more than a hundred Foreign and Civil
10 Service State Department volunteers who came to help, and especially for the
11 contribution made by my predecessor, Ambassador John Bass, who arrived on
12 August 19th.

13 Reporting to me, Ambassador Bass led the day-to-day evacuation work and
14 ensured that it and the military's efforts were coordinated on the ground and produced
15 the desired results. I remain extremely grateful for his service.

16 I oversaw that work and other work that was going on, kept the State Department
17 and other leaders informed about and coordinated with our efforts in Kabul, and
18 attended to the remaining mission staff.

19 Most, if not all, who went to Afghanistan think a lot about the ending of our
20 presence, what resulted from our efforts, and the lives and the country they impacted.
21 They should all be and I think are proud that they answered our country's call to service.

22 Those who supported the humanitarian evacuation should be especially proud of
23 what they achieved. Each one of us has in our heads that 124,000 figure.

24 And we have another number. It's friends, colleagues, people we knew that our
25 predecessors worked with and depended upon, people who supported the United States

1 at a critical time in history.

2 Throughout my time in Afghanistan, I sought effectively to carry out the policies
3 and directions of President Trump and President Biden, and I feel privileged to have done
4 so. I tried my best to make prudent decisions based on our leaders' guidance and the
5 resources and information available to me.

6 I'm sure I'm not alone, and I know that you're included in this and thinking every
7 day about what our country did and was unable to do, and what I did and was unable to
8 do, and, of course, the calamity that is now Afghanistan.

9 Thank you.

10 [REDACTED]: Thank you, Ambassador. Would you like to take a brief
11 moment?

12 Ambassador Wilson. A very brief moment.

13 [REDACTED]: Of course.

14 [Discussion off the record.]

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q Ambassador Wilson, did Secretary Blinken communicate why you were
17 retained as the Chief of Mission Afghanistan would serve the new administration in
18 January 2021?

19 A I recall no such conversation with Secretary Blinken. The Acting Secretary
20 of State for South Asia -- South and Central Asia -- contacted me early in the
21 administration to convey the request that I stay beyond what had been agreed upon was
22 my end date to -- at least to March, if not beyond that.

23 There were subsequent requests by him or by Deputy Secretary McKeon to stay to
24 June. And the last was to stay to what President Biden had announced on April 14, a
25 mid-September or September 11 withdrawal deadline for American forces, to which I

1 agreed, with the stipulation that that would be my last extension.

2 Q Did you communicate with Secretary Blinken about the decision at any point
3 throughout your tenure?

4 A The decision?

5 Q To stay on as Chief of Mission in Afghanistan?

6 A Yes, I spoke with Secretary Blinken about that and a range of other matters
7 in a conversation in, I want to say, late February, mid-, late February. We spoke at other
8 intervals, during the course of the time that he was there, including when he came to
9 Kabul on the 15th. I'll have to leave it at that.

10 Q What was your understanding or belief of why you were the person selected
11 and then retained for that role?

12 A In the conversation I had in October of 2019 the issues that were -- the way
13 this was described to me was that I had experience running U.S. missions, two of them, in
14 Baku, Azerbaijan, and Ankara, Turkiye, the latter being a large, complex mission with lots
15 of things going on, in a place where, among other things, I had an immense amount of
16 interaction with the U.S. military on matters relating to Iraq, issues in 2005 to '08 that, of
17 course, dominated both U.S. foreign policy and what we were trying to do in Turkiye,
18 which included trying to get the Turks on board with and supportive of American policy
19 there.

20 The fact that I had an ambassadorial title was not unimportant, in particular in
21 dealing effectively with the military and with other parts of the U.S. Government. That
22 was mentioned to me as well.

23 Q Was there discussion of nominating a permanent ambassador to Afghanistan
24 at any point?

25 A I think there are two aspects to that.

1 First, it had been known for some time that Ambassador Bass, my predecessor,
2 would be leaving in early January. I was told that work to identify a nominee -- to
3 forward a nominee from the State Department and the White House had been delayed.
4 That was part of the request for me to go out for a period of 6 months.

5 It's my understanding, although I was not involved, that it continued to be
6 delayed. And eventually the Trump administration nominated an individual named
7 William Ruger for the position, I believe, something like September or October of 2020.

8 Q Was there discussion of nominating a permanent ambassador to Afghanistan
9 under the Biden administration?

10 A Not that I'm aware of.

11 Q Once retained by the Biden administration in 2021, to whom did you report
12 to in that role?

13 A The reporting chain in the State Department is an ambassador's report to
14 the regional Assistant Secretary appropriate to their post. So that was the Acting
15 Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia. Obviously, you also report to the
16 Secretary, and there were others involved. But basically the chain is the regional
17 Assistant Secretary to the Secretary of State.

18 Q Thank you.

19 [REDACTED] And that was Dean Thompson, correct?

20 Ambassador Wilson. It was Dean Thompson in -- no. When I went to Kabul, it
21 was Alice Wells. She was succeeded by at least one and possibly two other individuals
22 who were acting, filled the Acting Assistant Secretary role for a significant number of
23 weeks or longer.

24 And by Dean Thompson, at some point I think kind of in the latter part of 2020 -- it
25 was before our election and before the transition that I think that Thompson was in place.

1 You can find -- you'll find that out a better way from others.

2

BY [REDACTED]

3

Q Ambassador, when did you retire from the Department?

4

A I retired in December 2008.

5

Q And when did you depart in your role as Chief of Mission of Afghanistan?

6

A I arrived in Kabul on January 19th. I would have left probably the 17th, just

7

given the flight times, but if not the 17th, thereabouts.

8

Q When did you complete your role as Chief of Mission in Afghanistan?

9

A I departed on the last flight out of the country on --

10

Q And what was the date?

11

A On just very shortly before midnight on October 30th -- I'm sorry,

12

August 30th, 2021.

13

Q Thank you.

14

Ambassador, before proceeding, we want to define a couple of key terms in the

15

interest of clarity and consistency.

16

First, when referencing the term "withdrawal," the majority is referencing the U.S.

17

military retrograde, which was officially announced by President Biden in April 2021.

18

This includes related planning by State Department and other agencies and the

19

decisionmaking processes.

20

Does that make sense?

21

A Yes.

22

Q Second, when referencing the term "evacuation," the majority is referencing

23

the evacuation of U.S. citizens and nationals, civilian personnel and designated persons in

24

August 2021, resulting in the Noncombatant Evacuation Operation initiated on

25

August 16th, 2021, including related planning by State Department and other agencies

1 and decisionmaking processes.

2 Does that make sense?

3 A Yes.

4 Q Ambassador, what was your role in the military withdrawal from Afghanistan
5 in 2021?

6 A The military's withdrawal was essentially directed and carried out through
7 military channels. Strictly speaking, I had no role on -- with respect to military personnel
8 or their deployment or decisions about their departing the country or what the schedule
9 was or any of the other details about how that would unfold.

10 General Austin Miller, who was the commander for most of my time up until, I
11 think, June or early July 2021, briefed me regularly on drawdown planning -- and
12 execution, for that matter -- from the time that drawdowns began.

13 Pursuant to the U.S.-Taliban agreement, we were obligated to get down to
14 approximately 8,600 soldiers by June or July of 2020. Miller was further ordered to
15 draw down further to 4,500, and then to 2,500 later in the year.

16 He kept me informed both of the orders that he was receiving, what he was doing,
17 and we discussed the implications or potential implications for Afghan security and for
18 our mission, of course, as well.

19 Q Given the embassy's interest in Afghanistan and its continued security, as
20 you just mentioned, were you involved in the planning of the withdrawal?

21 A I wasn't involved in the planning of the military retrograde in any normal
22 way that you would want to have that conversation. I was informed about this, some
23 extent consulted about some of those issues.

24 But in reality all those decisions were made by General Miller, his staff of course,
25 and the chain of command above him.

1 Q Can you speak to the State Department's role throughout that, to the best of
2 your ability?

3 A With respect to?

4 Q With respect to planning that ensued, specifically contingency planning that
5 the embassy engaged in as a result of the retrograde.

6 A That's a completely different issue from the military's actual withdrawal.
7 And so the questions that I have been answering were really oriented to what the military
8 was doing, not what we were doing.

9 Q Of course.

10 And now we would like to transition to what the embassy and, more broadly, the
11 State Department was doing throughout that period.

12 A So --

13 Mr. Bellinger. Could you just define "that period"?

14 BY [REDACTED]

15 Q 2021 to the ultimate evacuation in August.

16 A So as I indicated in my opening statement, planning for a future without
17 American forces was, effectively speaking, part of our work in Kabul from the time of the
18 signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement and throughout 2020 and 2021.

19 We undertook in 2020 a relook at our planning. We particularly looked -- at my
20 direction -- at relevant experience elsewhere in the region, in particular Iraq, and how the
21 withdrawal or the drawdown of American forces that was carried out during the Obama
22 administration, how that in practice had worked, what were some of its implications, and
23 what were some of the lessons that we could learn from that.

24 An additional piece relating to Iraq had to do with lessons learned from the
25 closure of our consulate in Basra. And so we tried to study that experience to better

1 inform me and to better inform the security personnel at post and
2 management -- personnel at post -- on closing and how that works, and what needed to
3 be done in advance, and what were the timelines, and how could the timelines be
4 shortened.

5 Our Assistant Chief of Mission worked, kind of led the effort on this. It's a huge
6 embassy with lots of things going on and lots of people.

7 So on my behalf, the Assistant Chief of Mission kind of led our efforts with the
8 consular people, the security people, the management and administrative people on all
9 of those details.

10 The Regional Security Office and management already in 2020, and especially as
11 we got to the end of the year and the beginning of 2021, relooking at the mechanics of
12 both drawdown and potential evacuation.

13 Our consular section paying heightened attention to American citizens, and I think
14 already in that period by late in the year putting out more dire warnings for Americans
15 not to travel to Afghanistan and for those who were in the country to consider leaving.

16 We accelerated destruction of classified material and sensitive material that we
17 had at post. And here the paper that we were most concerned about and took a lot of
18 time was not classified. It was sensitive material relating to people who had applied for
19 the workforce, people who applied for grants and organizations who had applied for
20 grants with us, had applied for Fulbright or other scholarship programs in the country.
21 Drawer upon drawer upon drawer of stuff that sort of had never gotten disposed of got
22 disposed of.

23 That started in 2020, taking advantage of the fact that a lot of our operations were
24 shut down and people had plenty of time on their hands to do this kind of work.

25 When we could after COVID sort of eased enough, we resumed drills, regular drills

1 that were relevant to an emergency or potential attack on our facilities. That sort of
2 thing.

3 The security office and management did drills or simulations of how this would
4 actually work if we had to evacuate to try to inform their efforts.

5 I made a site visit to Bagram and to -- site visits to both Bagram and Kabul airport
6 to kind of see that firsthand.

7 And so there was a lot going on in 2020.

8 In 2021, all of those things -- and in the aftermath of the President's decision -- all
9 of those things really kind of pivoted quite concretely into more specific -- kind of into
10 more specific action, but along those same lines, with the added item that I mentioned,
11 or one added item I mentioned in my statement, drawdowns of personnel.

12 Which for the mission as a whole, given the number of facilities that we had
13 around the country that were staffed by personnel under my authority, that were going
14 to be closed, had to be closed actually as the military drew down because the military
15 provided protection for them, hundreds and hundreds of people were taken out, as I
16 mentioned, from roughly January to the April decision, especially January through March,
17 because up until the President made a decision the date was May 1, but then accelerating
18 quite a bit after that.

19 Q Thank you.

20 And do you recall when those site visits were conducted?

21 A My visits to Bagram and HKAI for this purpose were probably in January or
22 February of 2021. We had a larger and more -- and I went with a team of senior people
23 to kind of do the same thing that I was doing.

24 A more technical team led by the Assistant Chief of Mission with other senior
25 managers and lots of other people went to Bagram and to HKAI a bit later. I believe that

1 might have been in April or the first part of May. I don't know the exact timeframe.

2 Q And you noted "for this purpose." What other purposes did you visit HKAI
3 and Bagram for?

4 A My first visit to Bagram was for a ramp ceremony that I believe took place in
5 February of 2020 or maybe March.

6 I went back one other time, I don't remember when that might have been, at
7 HKAI, at the principal purpose of the visit that I remember, which would have been within
8 the first 6 months, I think, after I arrived, was to see some of the embassy facilities at the
9 airport and kind of understand what was there, what their needs were, to see the people
10 and show them that I was interested in and appreciated what they were doing.

11 Q Thank you.

12 Ambassador, what was your role in the August 2021 evacuation from
13 Afghanistan?

14 A As I indicated earlier, my role started at the beginning in the
15 recommendation that I made to Secretary Blinken on the morning of August 15 that we
16 evacuate immediately.

17 As I think you know, we decamped to the airport. The embassy as a whole, as I
18 indicated, the embassy as a whole relocated to the airport. Those who were leaving
19 left. We set up operations to be able to organize our people effectively to work with
20 and support the broader effort and get it staffed and all of those sorts of things.

21 After the arrival of Ambassador Bass, who, as I indicated, took over the
22 day-to-day, hour-by-hour work to oversee and very specifically carry out the evacuation,
23 my role then shifted to a couple of other purposes, which I had also been trying to do
24 before he arrived, which included keeping leaders in Washington informed and
25 well-coordinated with what we were doing and what was the situation on the ground and

1 what issues we faced, attending to mission business, which in particular meant our locally
2 engaged staff and steps that we needed to effect their evacuation.

3 And overseeing and mentoring the number of consular officers and security
4 officers who remained at the airport with me from the mission and had not departed with
5 others as they prepared for and then began to carry out these operations.

6 So tried to talk with them when they came back from their 12-hour stints at these
7 gates and commiserate with them and make sure they felt that what they were doing is
8 appreciated, and try to understand what they were facing so that I could accurately
9 describe to leaders in Washington what was going on and what some of our challenges
10 were.

11 All of us recognized on the 15th that we -- or before the 15th -- that we would
12 need considerably more consular officers and problem solvers, if you will, than we had at
13 hand.

14 And so work -- there was a great deal of work, some of which I was involved in,
15 some involved the Assistant Chief of Mission, who was the Acting Deputy Chief of Mission
16 at the end, with the Consular Bureau and others in Washington to get reinforcements to
17 come out and to help us.

18 In addition, I was the person -- and really the only person, as far as I know -- to
19 have contacts outside the airport with Afghan political leaders to hear from them what
20 was going on in the city. We no longer had eyes or ears in the city.

21 And so I engaged with several of the Afghan seniors that I had gotten to know well
22 to hear from them how they were doing, what was happening in the city, what they were
23 hearing, and that sort of thing.

24 Q Thank you.

25 When was it first clear to you that an emergency evacuation would likely be

1 necessary?

2 A The sort of critical period is early August that triggers the need to do this.

3 I think it was obvious long before that that there were a substantial number of
4 American citizens, there were SIV recipients and applicants that we hoped to get out of
5 the country, there were lots and lots and lots of other Afghans on whom we had
6 depended one way or another, with whom we had close relations, who we would want to
7 get out.

8 So I think for that reason, planning for a NEO began -- the concrete and specific
9 planning for a NEO began in late April or early May. Brigadier General Sullivan, Marine
10 Brigadier General Sullivan, was directed to lead that effort for the military. He came to
11 Kabul several times in that May, June, July timeframe. A number of relatively senior
12 officers under him were also in Kabul throughout that time, also planning for this
13 potential evacuation, and also engaging closely with our staff.

14 So this was something that we recognized was a possibility that needed to be
15 staffed and prepared for well in advance of August, and we had been working on it. And
16 as I mentioned, there were actions that we took along those lines in 2020 as well.

17 The triggers are pretty specifically -- well, broadly, the flow in events in June and
18 July, but the specific events in December -- in August -- that precipitated the decision on
19 August 12 to exercise this option that we had developed, to put a small group at the
20 airport and get everybody else out of the country, and then the further decision on the
21 15th, not just to be working on that, but to do it and to do it that day, immediately, which
22 we did.

23 Q Thank you.

24 And am I correct in understanding that you were involved in that planning from
25 early May onward?

1 A I was aware of that planning. I consulted several -- I was kept very closely
2 informed by the Assistant Chief of Mission who led that work. I met with General
3 Sullivan a couple of times to hear from him and hear his plans.

4 I was part of interagency discussions that the military arranged, I believe, in kind
5 of mid-August. And then there was another session in very early -- I'm sorry, in
6 mid-July -- and then there was another session in -- at the very beginning of August, I
7 think, where the military kind of walked the interagency through how things would work
8 or were intended to work, what was the plan, and to discuss with the interagency
9 relevant issues that either the military had or that came up in the course of the
10 discussion.

11 Q When did you get involved, if it wasn't in that May timeframe?

12 A It was in that May timeframe.

13 Q May. Okay. Thank you.

14 I'm going to list the names of --

15 A Or April timeframe.

16 Q That's helpful. Thank you for the clarification.

17 I'm going to list the names of a few individuals and ask some questions about
18 them. This is going to be pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal efforts and more
19 specifically the evacuation. I would appreciate if you could answer my questions to the
20 best of your recollection.

21 I'll begin with Ambassador Khalilzad.

22 What was his position at the time of the withdrawal?

23 A Ambassador Khalilzad had been serving since 2019 or late 2018 as the
24 Secretary's Special Representative for Afghan Reconstruction. And he had a title --

25 Q Was that Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation?

1 A Yes. Sorry. Thank you. The word was on the tip of my tongue.

2 Q Thank you.

3 What were his duties in that role?

4 A Ambassador Khalilzad was the negotiator of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and
5 he was responsible for the U.S. Government's interaction with the Talibs on its -- and with
6 others -- on its implementation.

7 He was, in particular, the point person with the Talibs. I had no contact with
8 Talibs of any kind at any time during my tenure in Kabul. Khalilzad did that.

9 Q To the best of your recollection, did those duties appear to change
10 throughout the course of the evacuation?

11 A Ambassador Khalilzad wasn't involved in any meaningful way in the
12 evacuation. He remained in Doha. He was engaged with Taliban senior leaders.

13 As Afghan forces are getting closer to -- or, I'm sorry, Taliban forces are getting
14 closer to Kabul, I believe he had discussions with the Talibs about that.

15 And it was at that time, I'm not sure it was him personally, that we received
16 assurances that the Talibs would not enter Kabul, that they would stop before they
17 arrived, which was extremely important to me because that had a lot to do -- a lot
18 potentially to do with the security and welfare of personnel under my authority.

19 Throughout the 15 days that we were at the airport, Ambassador Khalilzad or his
20 deputy participated in many, maybe not most of the -- most of the interagency
21 discussions, of which there were every day a series that ran roughly from about 5 p.m.
22 Kabul time to 2 a.m. in the morning.

23 Broadly speaking, I think his efforts were to try to support, where needed, the
24 military, our military, in the kind of practical interface arrangements that got made
25 between the U.S. military and the Talibs at Kabul airport, and also to try to try to point a

1 little bit toward the future, an effort that ended up not being particularly successful.

2 Q Thank you.

3 Did you work with him as Chief of Mission?

4 A I worked extensively with Ambassador Khalilzad throughout my time.

5 Q How often did you and Ambassador Khalilzad communicate?

6 A Ambassador Khalilzad came to Kabul not long after I arrived for a short stay.
7 I think he came again in maybe mid-February and was a guest at my apartment for most
8 of the following 6 weeks. So we were in pretty frequent contact, we could say, during
9 that period.

10 Throughout the rest of 2020, he visited Kabul -- well, after COVID restrictions kind
11 of made it possible, he visited Kabul roughly once every 4 to 8 weeks from approximately
12 June to early January.

13 We were on the phone pretty regularly, not daily, and there would be long
14 periods, particularly when he was back in the States, where we weren't in touch. But I
15 was in touch closely with him. An embassy or a mission representative was part of his
16 team and had it as his job to keep me informed of what was going on in the negotiations
17 that took place in 2020 and early '21.

18 That position eventually got -- that role kind of went away eventually. And I was
19 in regular touch with his deputy, Ambassador Molly Phee.

20 Q Thank you.

21 What was your impression of Ambassador Khalilzad?

22 A Ambassador Khalilzad can be an exceptionally capable diplomat. Very
23 creative in his thinking. He could be very persuasive and convincing in presenting the
24 arguments necessary to try to carry out the policies and the directions that he had been
25 given.

1 He is an Afghan, and so he knew everybody. He knew -- and he didn't just know
2 them personally, he knew where they came from, and he knew the history of their
3 relations with one another, the history of the country, the history of America's role in the
4 country, in Afghanistan. That was exceptionally valuable to me as a newcomer who had
5 never served in Afghanistan or had anything to do with it before I came on duty in
6 January 2020.

7 Ambassador Khalilzad is a little bit a force of nature and sometimes not the easiest
8 to work with. I think we collaborated reasonably effectively throughout my time there.

9 Q And just to clarify, he is an Afghan-American, correct?

10 A I believe so. Yes.

11 Q And what was his reputation in the Department?

12 A I'm not sure I can really speak to his reputation in the Department. I had
13 worked with Zal going back quite a number of years. I had known him a long time. He
14 was known to be a very bright guy, sometimes a little difficult to work with.

15 Q What was his role in planning for the withdrawal?

16 A I don't know.

17 Q Did you engage throughout the withdrawal?

18 A With?

19 Q With Ambassador Khalilzad?

20 A No. The only contact after August 15 that I had with Ambassador Khalilzad
21 was through our participation together in interagency meetings.

22 Q By August --

23 Mr. Bellinger. And just to be clear on your defined term, you're asking about his
24 involvement in the military withdrawal?

25 ██████████ Correct.

1 Ambassador Wilson. Oh, I'm sorry.

2 [REDACTED] I'm happy to restate the definition if it's helpful.

3 Ambassador Wilson. I heard the word "withdrawal."

4 So if you will ask the question again and I'll -- I'm sorry.

5 [REDACTED]. No, it's no problem. The terms can get confusing.

6 What was his role in planning for the withdrawal?

7 Ambassador Wilson. The military withdrawal.

8 Mr. Bellinger. Which he had negotiated.

9 Ambassador Wilson. I am not aware of what Ambassador Khalilzad specifically
10 may have done or been involved on the military withdrawal after February 29, 2020, and
11 the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

1 [10:34 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Did you trust Ambassador Khalilzad generally?

4 A Yes.

5 Q And did you trust his conveying of the Taliban's positions to you?

6 A More or less.

7 Q Can you explain why more or less?

8 A Zal is a negotiator who holds his cards quite close to his chest. He valued
9 his role, his personal role. He valued the personal relationships that he had with Mullah
10 Baradar and with some of the other senior Talibs that he negotiated with. His
11 negotiating style was not, you know, everybody needs to know and sharing a lot of
12 information. When he shared information, I had every reason to think I was getting an
13 accurate story.

14 I knew from my previous dealings with him and from others previous dealings
15 with him that that might not be the whole story. He was a touch -- varied regularly with
16 Secretary Pompeo throughout 2020, conversations I was not part of, that had to do with
17 the U.S.-Taliban agreement and its implementation, possibly some of these other issues.
18 That's probably about the best I can do for you.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q I want to go back to my prior question. And we defined the term. Did
21 you engage with Ambassador Khalilzad throughout the military withdrawal?

22 A During the period of the military withdrawal, yes. As I indicated earlier, I
23 was in touch very frequently, all the way from my arrival at Post up until late summer of
24 2021.

25 Q What was his perspective on the military withdrawal?

1 A We never quite had that conversation.

2 Q What was his role in the August 2021 evacuation?

3 A I think I answered that question, that he -- I'm aware that he played a role in
4 trying to essentially secure Kabul from a Taliban onslaught by getting them to agree, and I
5 think General McKenzie may have intervened in this too, getting the Talibs to agree to
6 stop before they entered the city.

7 I'm also aware of discussions -- there were discussions -- and I was part of the
8 discussions -- about a potential transfer of power, proper -- some kind of proper transfer
9 of power, not an armed mob moving into the city, but a proper transfer of power,
10 President Ghani's staff raises with me, I believe on August 13, and I met with him on the
11 13th and the 14th about that.

12 I learned later that there were parallel efforts in Doha that involved Afghan
13 negotiators that were part of the Afghan negotiating team with the Talibs, and may have
14 involved or apparently involved either Ambassador Khalilzad or his deputy. I had no
15 direct visibility on that latter part at the time. I probably have to leave it at that.

16 Q Did he believe an evacuation would be necessary?

17 A Ambassador Khalilzad?

18 Q Uh-huh.

19 A I have no idea. Never had that conversation with him.

20 Q Did he seem prepared for an evacuation to you?

21 A I don't know. I can't answer that question.

22 Q Let's move on to Secretary Blinken. Did you and Secretary Blinken engage
23 throughout 2021?

24 A Yes.

25 Q On what issues?

1 A On really all of the things that we've been discussing: the implementation
2 of the U.S.-Taliban agreement; efforts -- and I should have mentioned this
3 earlier -- efforts that Ambassador Khalilzad was still involved in to try to get genuine
4 negotiations going between the Taliban and the Afghans about the future of our embassy
5 and whether and how it's -- it could continue to operate longer term or what that would
6 take and so forth; and planning for contingencies that, you know, that could arise. And
7 he clearly properly, I think, wanted to be sure that we were -- we had our eye on those, in
8 addition to all the other things we were doing.

9 We undoubtedly talked about other things as well, but those were perhaps most
10 germane to the topic of this discussion.

11 Q Did Secretary Blinken delegate any responsibilities with respect to the
12 Afghanistan withdrawal to Department leaders?

13 A I would not necessarily use the word "delegate" because I don't know
14 exactly what steps he may have taken, you know, bureaucratically in terms of assigning
15 authority. He -- as you know, he was rather thinly supported by
16 confirmed -- Senate-confirmed senior officers or senior personnel for most of the period
17 under discussion during the Biden administration. He asked Deputy Secretary Brian
18 McKeon to -- I believe he asked Deputy Secretary McKeon to kind of be the point person,
19 and basically McKeon was the 7th floor principal with whom I dealt the most and on an
20 ongoing and very frequent basis from early February, whenever he came into office,
21 through to the end.

22 Q How involved was Secretary Blinken on Afghanistan?

23 A I thought he was very involved. The circumstances, the need to make
24 this deci- -- the need to decide and to decide expeditiously about whether the United
25 States was going to go ahead with May 1st or not, and to think through the relevant

1 issues, the pros, the cons, the if we do this, you know, how do we compensate for that.
2 He was very involved in those discussions.

3 The details were more, of course, appropriately, were more in the hands of
4 Deputy Secretary McKeon acting under Secretary Perez, other senior officers at the State
5 Department, and acting secretary for South Asia and, of course, us at Post.

6 Q Did Secretary Blinken defer decisionmaking to the White House?

7 A I didn't have that impression, no, on the things that I just discussed. Of
8 course, there was a decision that only the President could make about the May 1
9 deadline, but he was very engaged on all of these topics. And as the orientation became
10 clearer, as the direction that the President wanted to go became clearer on April 14 and
11 following that, Secretary Biden [sic] and Deputy Secretary McKeon very specifically
12 focused, okay, what do we need to do, what decisions do we need to make, and so forth.

13 Q Did Secretary Blinken defer decisionmaking to the NSC?

14 A I don't believe so.

15 Q Is it fair to say that Secretary Blinken was the ultimate decisionmaking
16 authority in the State Department?

17 A Actually, let me go back. On this issue of the NSC, I think -- the words I
18 would use would be exactly the words I used to the previous question. He was involved
19 in the interagency process to make all -- my impression is that Secretary Blinken was
20 involved in all of the interagency work that was -- discussions that were going on at senior
21 levels. He was informed, well informed, about the details underneath that that others
22 were engaged on.

23 When he came to Kabul on August 15, obviously, he had a meeting with President
24 Ghani. He spent a lot of time with me and with our senior staff to see the lay of the
25 land, understand -- to kind of be able to take away a better understanding of our

1 geography, our personnel, our needs, and how they related to the challenges that we
2 knew were ahead of us, which, of course, were not entirely obvious on August 15. But I
3 think he went away with -- he was interested in, and went away with a clear
4 understanding of the tasks ahead.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Just a couple times you were saying August 15. Did you mean April 15?

7 A Secretary Blinken came to Kabul on April 15.

8 Q Okay. Yeah, you had said August, and I was just trying to clarify.

9 A Oh, sorry. Yes.

10 Q And what was Secretary Blinken's position on the full withdrawal of U.S.
11 troops in Afghanistan prior to President Biden making the decision?

12 A I have no idea.

13 Q You never talked with him about it?

14 A I talked with him about it. He did not express a strong view, other than
15 there's a tough decision to make, and the sentiment, at least, the President had to make
16 that decision.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q Is it fair to say, then, that Secretary Blinken was the ultimate decisionmaking
19 authority in the State Department on matters relating to Afghanistan?

20 A The Secretary of State is the ultimate decisionmaker on all matters at the
21 State Department. And he was very involved on Afghan policy and made key decisions.
22 Brian McKeon was responsible for a lot of the top-line details as well.

23 Q Can you please speak to Secretary Blinken's role on the August 2021
24 evacuation?

25 A So Secretary Blinken was very concerned about the welfare of American

1 Embassy personnel. I spoke with him possibly on the 15th -- probably on the 15th.
2 And that care that he had for people under his responsibility was important to me and
3 something that I conveyed to our staff that remained with me at the airport.

4 Secretary Blinken was concerned about and helped take action -- or helped get
5 action on the matter of getting reinforcements to our staff. And so the large number of
6 additional consular officers, on the order of 100 or so, who supplemented the embassy
7 cadre that we had kept in country owed a lot to him.

8 I expect, although I don't have evidence of this, that he also had a lot to do with
9 the State Department's mobilization of consular officers worldwide to engage in
10 telephone, email, texting, other efforts to try to make affirmative contact with American
11 citizens who were or had been or might be in Afghanistan as we all tried to deal with the
12 problem of American citizens and the ambiguity that always exists or the lack of clarity
13 that always exists about, you know, who's in the country and how many they are, and so
14 forth.

15 And in discussions that I had with him and in interagency discussions, he was very
16 focused on this American citizens problem, frustrated by it, as I think all the rest of us
17 were, and determined to get a better handle on things. And that's the origin of these
18 efforts that utilized people in Bahrain; in Rio de Janeiro; in Beijing, China; in Dushanbe; in
19 Moscow, all kinds of places that helped work the phones and that made a big difference
20 for us in clarifying, as much as one could, this universe of American citizens.

21 Q Thank you.

22 Did he believe an evacuation would be necessary?

23 A Did Secretary Blinken -- I have -- I'm not sure I can answer that question on
24 his behalf. The whole thrust of discussions that we had had in the weeks and months
25 before August 15 were we may have to do a NEO and a large-scale evacuation, not just of

1 American citizens, but of others. And he was part of those conversations. I'm sure
2 that he understands that those conversations and that preparatory work was necessary.
3 And as I mentioned earlier, when I, on the morning of the 15th recommended pulling that
4 trigger, so to speak, right now, without any hesitation he said yes.

5 Q When did he first communicate to you that a NEO may be necessary?

6 A Things didn't really work that way. The decisions -- the recommendation
7 that I made to evacuate on the 15th meant everything else was following more or less
8 immediately or as expeditiously as could be arranged. But, you know, that's probably
9 the best answer that I can give you.

10 Q So prior to that August 15th request that you mentioned, Secretary Blinken
11 never communicated his thoughts on whether an evacuation would be necessary?

12 Mr. Bellinger. Just to be clear, the request came from Ambassador Wilson to
13 Secretary Blinken.

14 [REDACTED]. Correct. Correct. And we'll address the processes
15 surrounding the NEO subsequently. So we'll be sure to get that in the record.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q But just so we understand for the record, you noted that everything
18 followed your August 15th request that you made to the Secretary.

19 My question is: Prior to that, did Secretary Blinken ever opine on the fact that a
20 NEO would be necessary?

21 A My recollection is that words to that effect were spoken in the
22 interagency -- at the top level interagency meetings that we had from mid-July, if not
23 before that, and at the kind of tabletop exercise that the Defense Department hosted, I
24 believe, in early August, which I'm pretty sure Secretary Blinken attended. If he didn't
25 attend that, there had been another one several weeks before. And again, one or the

1 other or both he attended. And words to that effect were -- absolutely came out of his
2 mouth, at least that's my recollection.

3 Q Did words to that effect ever come out of his mouth to you specifically?

4 A To me personally? Not -- in a direct person-to-person conversation, I don't
5 remember. I talked to Secretary Blinken a great deal in early August directly, and I
6 would be lying to you if I tried to describe too much -- in too much detail or remember in
7 too much detail.

8 Q Thank you.

9 At the time of the withdrawal --

10 A It was clear that -- it was clear to me that Secretary Blinken understood that
11 this might well be necessary, that a large-scale humanitarian operation might well be
12 necessary to support the embassy -- following on the embassy's or going along with the
13 embassy's evacuation and given other needs and interests that we had in this
14 country -- in that country.

15 [REDACTED]. Did Secretary Blinken ever push for a NEO to be initiated prior to
16 when you initiated it in mid-August?

17 Ambassador Wilson. Not that I recall.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q At the time of the withdrawal, what was Ambassador Thompson's position?

20 A Ambassador Thompson was Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and
21 Central Asian Affairs.

22 Q What were his duties in that role?

23 A An assistant secretary is responsible for American policy for the -- geographic
24 assistant secretary is responsible for the American policy, its formulation, and its
25 execution in the region for which he or she is responsible. That, broadly speaking, is his

1 role. He was directly in touch with me. He was in touch quite regularly with other
2 ambassadors throughout his region, traveled to the region. He didn't come to Kabul,
3 but I believe he traveled to some of the other countries. The principal advisor to the
4 Secretary on matters pertaining to South and Central Asia. I mean, there's some other
5 duties.

6 But I think the duties of an assistant secretary are probably pretty well defined in
7 the Foreign Affairs Manual and other things that the State Department puts out.

8 Q And am I correct in understanding, based on your prior testimony, that you
9 reported to him?

10 A Ambassadors in the field report to the geographic assistant secretary
11 appropriate for their country.

12 Q What was his role in the withdrawal, the military withdrawal?

13 A So I want to be sure I give you a reasonably clear answer. First, I'm sure his
14 personnel record will indicate exactly when he came on duty, but I believe it was fairly
15 late in 2020. He was aware of, to some extent engaged with me on some of the
16 planning that I -- or provisional planning that I described earlier at alternative staffing
17 models or alternative ways that we could do business.

18 Mr. Bellinger. Well, again, his involvement in the military withdrawal.

19 Ambassador Wilson. During the period of the military withdrawal in 2020, he
20 was involved with me on steps that we needed to be thinking about and working on
21 for -- with an eye to May 1, 2021. And so that included staffing, that included
22 drawdowns, that included destruction of material, all of the items that I mentioned
23 earlier.

24 He had no role, that I'm aware of, other than as an advisor to the Secretary of
25 State on specific issues, military issues, that pertained to the military's withdrawal. I

1 would expect that he advised the Secretary, Secretary Pompeo, on the implications of the
2 drawdowns of military forces that were ordered then, as he would have advised, should
3 have advised, Secretary Blinken after January 2021, and more pointedly after April 14 on
4 those issues. His operational issue on the military retrograde, though, I think was
5 minimal or zero.

6 Q Thank you.

7 [REDACTED]. We have 18 seconds. So we'll stop the time now, and go off
8 the record. Thank you.

9 [Recess.]

1 [11:08 a.m.]

2

EXAMINATION

3

BY [REDACTED]:

4

Q My name is [REDACTED]. I'll be asking questions on behalf of the

5

minority.

6

Before we get started, a couple of level setting points. We want to remind you

7

today that your testimony should be related to firsthand knowledge. So to the extent

8

you're being probed on conversations that you were not personally privy to or to make

9

assumptions or generalizations based on another State employee's perspectives, feelings,

10

prerogative, et cetera, we would ask you from -- we would ask you to refrain from opining

11

on that.

12

In addition, a couple of technical points as related to the definition of

13

"withdrawal." We'd like to enter something a little bit more pointed into the record and

14

ask for you to let us know if that comports with your understanding of the term.

15

As such, from our perspective, the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel was

16

initiated in the February 2020 Doha deal, involved partial troop drawdowns prior to 2021,

17

and was completed by August 31st, 2021, to include the withdrawal of both U.S. military

18

and diplomatic personnel.

19

Do you take issue with that term in any part?

20

A No.

21

Q I'd also like to identify for the record that it is our understanding that U.S.

22

troops and equipment are primarily the domain of the Department of Defense and

23

military leadership.

24

Do you agree with that statement?

25

A Yes.

1 Q Do you have anything else that you'd like to add in terms of it?

2 A No.

3 Q Great.

4 Turning back to your background, we'd like to parse that a bit further. Could you
5 identify for the record any positions you've held at the agency which have direct
6 relevance to your time in Kabul as Charge?

7 A Positions that I held --

8 Q At the agency.

9 Mr. Bellinger. You mean the State Department, I assume?

10 [REDACTED]. Yes. Correct.

11 Ambassador Wilson. Let me -- could you repeat the question? I want to be
12 sure I answer --

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Sure. Maybe I can start it off.

15 A Yes.

16 Q Have you been a Charge at other embassies besides Kabul?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And which embassy would that be?

19 A I was asked in 2014 to come out of retirement to be Charge at Embassy
20 Accra. This was at a period after the explosion of the ISIS problem in the summer of that
21 year, and it was expected there would be a lengthy delay in the confirmation of a
22 successor. As it turned out, that person got confirmed, and I was only in Accra for about
23 a month.

24 I was asked again in 2018 to serve as Charge, long-term Charge in the Republic of
25 Georgia. I was there for approximately 6 months, from November to May of that year.

1 The issue was similar to that in Kabul. A permanent ambassador had gotten
2 complicated and wasn't working out, and they -- the State Department leadership
3 determined that they wanted somebody with my experience to come in and take charge
4 until matters could be sorted out.

5 Q Okay. And how were these positions directly related to your capacity in
6 Kabul?

7 A It was useful to have been a Charge and to come in, not having risen up
8 through the system, but to be lofted into an unfamiliar environment, in a relatively
9 unfamiliar set of issues, especially Georgia, I guess, and figure out how -- what was going
10 to be the most effective role I could play, how best to support the people that were with
11 me, recognizing that I was a little bit of an outsider, and how best to relate to the superior
12 officers above me, both those I reported to, but also the broader leadership, particularly
13 in the State Department where I didn't have preexisting relationships as I had when I
14 went to Turkiye as ambassador in 2005, or when I went to Azerbaijan in 2000.

15 Q Can you identify any specific skills that you developed during these roles that
16 contributed to your success in Kabul? For example, management skills, crisis planning
17 skills.

18 A I think the most -- one of the important things was figuring out how to deal
19 effectively with Washington leadership and Washington ways of doing things that had
20 changed in the period when I was out of government service, and in a situation where I
21 didn't know people and they didn't know me. I had the title, Ambassador. I had the
22 title of -- and the actual in practice title of Chief of Mission. But a lot of the senior
23 people and those who worked for them didn't know who I was. And that was a -- you
24 know, that was a challenge to figure out, you know, how to make that -- how to make
25 that -- how to make that happen.

1 I guess the other thing I would say, a Charge, even a long-term Charge, is still a
2 Charge, temporary. And so priority setting is important, being realistic about what
3 people expect of me and about the roles that I can effectively play all kind of go along
4 with that. It's different than when I was in Turkiye as ambassador where, without
5 question, I felt I was on top of and in charge of all of the important things that were going
6 on. And not just in charge of, but really on top of and engaged on all those things.

7 Kabul, in that respect, was quite different, and the role that I could play on the full
8 range of issues. I had to think about what role I could play and how that would be most
9 effective, where I could intervene properly, recognizing that there's Ambassador Khalilzad
10 and his solar system on one side. There is a combat and command in country.

11 Q I actually want to go ahead. We want to focus on background to keep the
12 record clear.

13 A Yeah. Okay. There's the military. There are all these other pieces that
14 make things complicated.

15 Q Understood. Thank you.

16 I also wanted to ask about dates. So you had just mentioned these positions had
17 occurred in 2014 and 2018. Is that correct?

18 A Yes.

19 Q You had previously testified that you retired in December 2008. Is that
20 correct?

21 A Yes.

22 Q So is it a fair assessment, then, you've been called out of retirement to serve
23 in capacities on multiple occasions?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Could you identify how many times that has occurred?

1 A That occurred -- my return to service took place three times, in 2014, 2018,
2 and 2020.

3 Q Thank you.

4 I'd also like to ask you about your experience as Deputy Executive Secretary of
5 State. Could you explain a little bit what that position entailed and how it might be
6 relevant to your time in Kabul?

7 A The Executive Secretary at the State Department manages the flow of issues
8 to the Secretary, manages the paper, anticipates needs that the Secretary and his top
9 lieutenants might have, with an eye to being sure that they are informed about those
10 things and have an opportunity to play a role as they see fit, and to alert the leadership of
11 the State Department to things that are maybe going on at somewhat lower levels that
12 they need to know and that no one has told them about.

13 Q Great. And would this role have included overseeing the operations center
14 and its crisis management components?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Could you explain a little bit for the record as related to what the operations
17 center is and your involvement in crisis management?

18 A The operations center is the crisis management -- is the crisis focal point for
19 the State Department on a day-to-day basis. That means phone calls and alerting
20 people -- alerts about developments abroad or at our embassies that might directly affect
21 American or State Department interests.

22 The operations center stands up task forces when there is a big problem, as
23 happened on Afghanistan in August 2021. There is a component of the operations
24 center -- or at least when I was there -- a component of the operations center that looks
25 ahead at crisis and contingency planning for the Secretary of State. And in the period

1 after that, later in the nineties, I think, took on a somewhat broader role to work with
2 embassies overseas, not on the emergency action plans because that's more at Post, but
3 on things that people who don't do crises, you know, for a living need to be thinking
4 about as they prepare for or deal with big problems.

5 Q Okay.

6 A I think that's now a separate office at the State Department.

7 Q Fair enough. And so you previously testified that you did indeed retire in
8 December of 2008. What prompted you to come out of retirement for these three
9 additional services?

10 A I was asked to do it.

11 Q Is there anything that personally motivated you?

12 A I joined the foreign service to serve. That's it.

13 Q And can you talk a little bit about what that service means to you?

14 A My entire professional life has been about that. It defines who I am. I
15 believe in that. There's the saying, some know, once a Marine, always a Marine. You
16 get called, off you go. Those are the calls I got, and I was pleased and honored to be
17 able to do it.

18 I will note there were other requests that I got to play various roles, including
19 leading embassies throughout that period that I was not able to do because personal
20 circumstances made it impossible for one reason or another. These times I could, and I
21 was honored to do it.

22 Q Thank you. Well, we thank you very much for your service, Ambassador.

23 At what rank did you ultimately retire?

24 A My foreign service rank was Minister Counselor.

25 Q Is that a senior rank?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Could you identify where that stacks up in terms of how many folks may, in
3 fact, hold that title?

4 A I don't know the current numbers, where it stands in the hierarchy, if that's
5 the right word. If you're promote -- above that level, Career Minister and Career
6 Ambassador. So it's the equivalent of a three-star general in the military. Very senior
7 position, minister counselors fill all kinds of ambassadorships, assistant secretarial
8 positions, others, throughout the State Department and our embassies abroad.

9 Q Is it by extension fair to say that a relatively small number of individuals hold
10 the title because it is so senior?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Have you received any awards for your contributions related to foreign
13 affairs or the foreign service?

14 A I have received a large number of State Department awards for my
15 performance going back to 1980, at least, and a Presidential Meritorious Service Award
16 for my work in Turkiye in 2005 to '8.

17 Q About how many awards have you received?

18 A A dozen or more.

19 Q A dozen or more. Thank you.

20 Have your insights on foreign affairs been published or included in public
21 reporting?

22 A Yes. After retirement, I worked at the Atlantic Council, Washington think
23 tank, that you'll know. Some of the work that I did there was published. I published a
24 few other articles about what we did in Turkiye, and in 2007 and '8 on Iraq, that appeared
25 in the Foreign Service Journal. Other pieces on U.S. policy toward the former Soviet

1 Union and especially the Central Asian Caucasus states.

2 I testified before Congress on U.S. policy in Central Asia probably in about 2012 or
3 so. And I've spoken widely on foreign -- a variety of foreign affairs topics in the
4 Minneapolis area where I live and in a variety of other cities around the country when I've
5 been asked to do so.

6 Q Is it fair to say you're a distinguished and decorated State Department
7 official?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And a distinguished, widely consulted expert in foreign affairs matters?

10 A Yes.

11 Q I'd like to pivot to your experience related to the withdrawal and evacuation
12 specifically. Do you have experience in Afghanistan policy?

13 A No. Let me amend that. I had no experience on Afghanistan of any kind
14 before 2020.

15 Q Okay. While that may or may not be the case, do you have relevant
16 expertise that helped inform your service prior to coming to Kabul?

17 A I think my experience running a very large U.S. mission as well as running
18 others was important. The work that I did in Iraq -- on Iraq while I was in Turkiye that
19 transformed Turkiye from being a big problem for the United States in the 2000 -- in the
20 period immediately after, several years after we went into Iraq in 2003, we converted
21 that into a positive, and got Turkiye on board for our efforts in Iraq, our efforts on Iran,
22 U.S. policy on Syria, a variety of other things. I thought that was a significant
23 achievement that I was proud of. And I assume that that kind of work is why I was
24 asked to go to Kabul.

25 Q Do you have experience in conflict settings?

1 A I have experience dealing with conflicts. So the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict
2 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, all of the issues relating to Iraq and Turkiye's conflict
3 with PKK terrorists that have sought to disrupt Turkish society and governance. And in
4 Georgia, the implications of Russia's invasion, 2008 invasion. That was a big part of
5 what I did there.

6 But serving in a conflict zone, in a war zone, which Afghanistan was, I had never
7 done that before in my career.

8 Q Okay. You had mentioned the PKK. Does it follow that you do indeed
9 have experience with U.S. military presence or relationships in foreign countries?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Okay. How so?

12 A Every embassy has defense attaches and Marine Security Guards. So that's
13 an easy part. In Turkiye, we had a large military office headed by a major general of the
14 Air Force that carried out security assistance and cooperation programs with Turkiye:
15 arms sales, arms transfers, that sort of thing. And in my time, was the point person,
16 together with me and Embassy Baghdad and the U.S. military command in Iraq, on
17 matters pertaining to the PKK, and in particular, pertaining to Turkish air strike -- the
18 interest of Turkiye in carrying out air strikes against the PKK, and then seeing to that
19 those were conducted in an appropriately coordinated fashion with the U.S. military and
20 done in a manner that wasn't overly disruptive of U.S.-Iraqi relations.

21 I worked closely with General Petraeus, with General Odierno, and Ambassador
22 Ryan Crocker on all of the details connected with that.

23 Q Have you ever participated in crisis-related task force while at State?

24 A No.

25 Q Okay. Have you ever worked in a complex evacuation situation like the one

1 in Kabul?

2 A No.

3 Q Therefore, likely not involving a NEO as well?

4 A That's correct.

5 Q Okay. Have you ever contributed to an afteraction review or similar
6 post-crisis review?

7 A No, not that I can recall.

8 Q Okay. I'd like to talk a little bit about specific experience leading U.S.
9 Embassy personnel during crises. Have you ever engaged in interagency planning and
10 policy formation?

11 A Yes, of course.

12 Q To what extent?

13 A To a great extent. Ambassadors overseas are -- usually, absolutely part of
14 the policy formulation process with respect to their country and the issues that pertain on
15 their country, as well as, in many cases, neighboring countries. In my case, I think in
16 particular, Iraq.

17 In the late 1990s, I was the equivalent of a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for
18 the former Soviet Union, and played what I think was an important role for Secretary
19 Albright in the management of American policy, 1997 to 2000, toward Russia, Ukraine,
20 the Central Asian states, other states of the former Soviet Union.

21 As you referred earlier to my role as Deputy Executive Secretary, supporting the
22 development of sound and effective policies, ensuring that they're well informed and that
23 they take into consideration all of the relevant issues, that's what you do in that position.
24 So, yes, I believe I have extensive experience in that area.

25 Q Extensive experience starting in 1990. Is that correct?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Okay. What about developing contingency plans at embassies?

3 A I had little experience in developing contingency plans. My only piece had
4 to do with planning that I was asked to undertake with one other officer at the American
5 Embassy in Prague in the mid-1980s when there were concerns that we -- that that
6 embassy might have to drastically reduce its staff. We were asked to come up with
7 different models and provide some insight of what those different models meant or
8 would look like in terms of capabilities, which we did and provided to the American
9 Ambassador to Czechoslovakia at that time.

10 Q Okay. So to be clear, you had only worked on contingency plans at one
11 point prior because the situation justified it?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Had there been another situation with justified contingency planning, you
14 would have, in fact, done so?

15 A Yes, that's correct.

16 Q Okay. What about leading or convening an Emergency Action Committee
17 at Post?

18 A We had an emerg- -- every post has an Emergency Action Committee. And
19 at this point, I'm not sure I recall a lot of specific interaction with those committees in
20 Baku or Accra. We did have -- I was part of such meetings, at least one or two, while I
21 served in the Republic of Georgia.

22 It is normal -- I think the typical procedure at embassies is that Emergency Action
23 Committees are run by the Deputy Chief of Mission and not the ambassador, and that
24 they are smaller, leaner entities than what we had in Kabul.

25 When COVID hit our embassy, we used the EAC as a more missionwide entity to

1 inform, to coordinate, to plan, to enforce the kinds of things that we had to undertake to
2 protect our population. And it was that larger -- and I chaired some, although not all of
3 those discussions. The -- as we moved into 2021, and especially had frequent meetings
4 of the EAC in the spring and summer of that year, we replicated that because it seemed
5 like, it struck me, as the right way to be sure I was familiar with all of the relevant issues,
6 and that everybody was familiar with what our priorities were, and that everyone was
7 equipped with the information that they needed to convey to their staffs at the various
8 sections of the embassy and any other agencies that were represented at the mission.

9 Q Understood. To what extent do you have experience analyzing intelligence
10 relevant to a specific topic at Post?

11 A I'm not a trained, quote/unquote, intel analyst of the sort that our
12 intelligence agencies will have.

13 Q Do you feel competent reading and reviewing?

14 A But what foreign service reporting officers do is the same thing. We gather
15 information. We try to get insights through the context that we have in a country and
16 put it together into some kind of analytical construct that ends up in the same place.
17 We're also consumers of the reporting, of course, that comes from other sources.

18 Our comparative advantage as -- State Department Foreign Service comparative
19 advantage is we're in the field and we can actually talk to people, which is a little more
20 complicated for analysts who are here.

21 Q Really helpful. Have you conducted security drills or exercises with
22 embassy staff?

23 A Yes.

24 Q About how many times in your career?

25 A Probably 20 or 30 times.

1 Q Okay.

2 A At virtually every post where I served.

3 Q Okay. And oversaw partial or full drawdowns of embassy staff?

4 A No. I was never part of -- I was never at an embassy that underwent a
5 drawdown of -- I mentioned the Czechoslovakia case, but that didn't happen. I was,
6 while I was serving as the de facto Secretary of State for the former Soviet states, part of
7 a -- the closure of the American Embassy at Dushanbe, which was one of the countries
8 that I was directly responsible for.

9 Q Okay. Fair enough. And is it fair to say that all of these experiences
10 dating back to 1990, in fact, informed your skill set and your ability to handle a post such
11 as Kabul?

12 A I believe. I hope so.

13 Q Do you believe that when you were asked to step into this role, that the
14 skills we just discussed were consulted and conferred upon internally by the State
15 Department?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Do you believe that you had the confidence of the State Department
18 stepping into your role in Kabul?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Okay. And to go back to the last round to speak a bit more about your role
21 as Charge. By whom are you contacted about the role?

22 A Acting Assistant Secretary Alice Wells.

23 Q Okay. And did you speak with anyone about the position before you
24 indeed accepted it?

25 A Yes. I went to Washington twice, once in November, and again in

1 December. Met with Ambassador Khalilzad, with Ambassador Phee, his deputy, with
2 several of Secretary Pompeo's lieutenants, so to speak, and with -- ultimately, with
3 Secretary Pompeo himself. I don't recall that there were meetings outside the State
4 Department, but I can't exclude that that might have happened.

5 Q Okay. Is it fair to say you thoroughly thought through taking this position
6 before you indeed accepted it?

7 A Yes.

8 Q And why did you ultimately decide to accept the role?

9 A I felt it was my duty.

10 Q Understood. And what did you understand as a reason for the potential
11 gap in leadership at Embassy Kabul?

12 A The process of identifying a permanent successor to Ambassador Bass had
13 gotten -- was delayed. And at the time, I was told there were reasons to believe it
14 would get fixed shortly and, therefore, a new ambassador would be confirmed and would
15 be able to come to post within 6 months or so. And it was that -- filling that gap is what
16 I agreed to.

17 Q Okay. Did you ever talk to Ambassador Bass about the role?

18 A Yes. I talked to Ambassador Bass immediately after I was initially asked,
19 and at several points later in the -- during the period when I was considering this.

20 Q Did he support you stepping into the role?

21 A Yes.

22 Q How do you know?

23 A I'm sorry?

24 Q What informed your opinion about that?

25 A He told me so. John Bass and I had worked closely together going back to

1 the mid-1990s when he worked in the Office of the Deputy Secretary while I was
2 responsible for the former Soviet states. We had intertwined on Turkiye. He was the
3 person that -- whose confirmation was expected to be delayed, that then was the reason I
4 was asked to go back as Charge in 2014. So effectively, I handed Turkiye off to him.
5 And he had also previously been Ambassador to Georgia.

6 He and I had met at a Chiefs of Mission conference in early 2019, and talked a lot
7 about what he was doing. And it is possible that one of the reasons why I was asked to
8 do this is that he suggested my name, although I have absolutely no evidence to support
9 that.

10 Q Fair enough. Is it fair to say, however, that he had confidence in you to
11 take on this role?

12 A Yes, I believe -- yes, I believe he did.

13 Q Is it fair to say that Secretary Pompeo also had confidence in you taking this
14 role?

15 A Yes, I believe he did.

16 Q What about as to President Trump?

17 A I had no interaction with the President or the White House at any time
18 during my tenure there. So can't speak to that.

19 Q Fair enough. How long did you anticipate being in this role?

20 A The deal was 6 months. I made clear to Secretary Pompeo that, in
21 principle, I could be willing to stay longer if it was needed to do so. But it was a 6-month
22 agreement.

23 Q And how long were you, in fact, in Kabul?

24 A Twenty.

25 Q What did you understand your job responsibilities to be?

1 A Broadly speaking, my responsibilities were to run the embassy and manage it
2 and lead it, and to represent the United States with the Government of Afghanistan and
3 its leadership, and to work with the government and with relevant entities in Washington
4 to deal with the problems and issues that were before us.

5 As I indicated in my opening statement, Secretary Pompeo gave me two pretty
6 specific priorities: support the implementation of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and look
7 ahead -- in terms of the embassy, look ahead to an embassy post -- following the
8 withdrawal of U.S. forces and the kind of role that we could expect to play.

9 Q Did he communicate those directives to you individually?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Okay. Did you agree with those objectives?

12 A They struck me as sound and sensible objectives to have, and I was grateful
13 for the guidance.

14 Q Fair enough. Are there any directives that you would have placed above
15 the two identified for you?

16 A I was walking into a new role. We met in December. I met with Secretary
17 Pompeo in December before I had agreed to do this. It would have been presumptuous
18 of me at that time with Secretary Pompeo to opine on other priorities in U.S.-Afghan
19 relations. So no is my answer to your question.

20 Q Fair enough. Once you were steeped in the issues, did you have any
21 disagreement in terms of those two priorities?

22 A Broadly speaking, no. They were the right things -- high certainly on the list
23 of the things that we needed to focus on, and it was extremely helpful to have direction
24 from Secretary Pompeo of what our -- what ought to be priorities as I said set about my
25 mission.

1 Q Okay. And speaking of steeping yourself in the issues, what specifically did
2 you do to prepare yourself for this role?

3 A Before I agreed to come, I started reading as widely as one could what
4 stuff -- what material was in the public domain. While I had some briefings on the visits
5 that I made to Washington in the fall before I agreed to do this, I still had a security
6 clearance, and so I -- there was a lot of stuff that people could -- material that people
7 could provide for me.

8 I had approximately 10 days of briefings in Washington before I went out
9 with -- obviously, with the State Department and various parts of the State Department,
10 at the Pentagon, at the National Security Council, at a couple of other entities, so that I
11 could get a broad perspective of the problem and -- or the problems that I would likely
12 face, the situation in Afghanistan, what were we doing, what had we been doing, what
13 were we planning to do, looking forward -- it's the normal sort of thing that one does
14 before one goes to post. In my case, because I was coming in from outside, it was a lot
15 of new briefing material -- new briefings on material with which, obviously, I was
16 relatively unfamiliar.

1 [11:44 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Is it fair to say that you spent the requisite and appropriate time preparing
4 yourself for this position?

5 A No.

6 Q Why is that the case?

7 A A career officer -- and even noncareer officers -- get identified for these
8 positions and then go through a long process internal at the State Department, a long
9 process with the White House, and then, of course, a long process here with the United
10 States Senate to come out the other end.

11 That typically is a year, or it was a year. I think it's more now. And obviously
12 you don't know for sure that you're going to be the nominee until the President makes
13 that decision. And you are even less sure of the outcome of the Senate confirmation
14 process.

15 But one is using the time available to get up to speed. That's certainly what I did
16 with respect to Azerbaijan.

17 Turkiye was somewhat more truncated because my predecessor had left post
18 early and unexpectedly, and so there was a rush job. But, even for that, I had probably
19 6 months or close to 6 months to wrap myself around the problem, read the media, read
20 the reporting, read the intel to become familiar with some of the details.

21 Q Notwithstanding the shortened onramp, did you feel empowered to call
22 upon folks well steeped in the issue for support when you did, in fact, have questions?

23 A Yes. Absolutely. For example, among those I spoke with before I went
24 out were experts on Afghanistan at the U.S. Institute of Peace. There were other
25 academic experts that were part of that USIP meeting that was arranged for me. They

1 were individuals I could reach back to for advice and for guidance.

2 And then, when I arrived at post, had a full suite of briefings from each of the
3 various sections -- what they were doing, why, what were the issues that they faced, what
4 were the issues I would face or needed to know about. That was kind of task number
5 one when I arrived at post.

6 Q And what are your thoughts as to why there was a shortened onramp?

7 A Washington -- it was my impression that people did not want to have a long
8 period without an ambassador running the largest mission in the world and engaged at
9 the very highest levels with the Pentagon and, to some extent, other agencies in
10 Washington on Afghan policy.

11 My departure was further expedited after Qasem Soleimani was taken off the
12 scene. I got a call while I was en route to Washington to start this specific process of
13 getting ready to go. I was informed my departure was probably going to be moved
14 up because of potential dangers that might flow for Americans in a country like
15 Afghanistan from neighboring Iran.

16 Q Okay. Is it fair to say, then, that the onramp was shortened by necessity --

17 A Yes.

18 Q -- given dangers, as you just put it?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Okay. What is your assessment as to embassy staff once you arrived? Do
21 you feel that they were well suited to support you and ensuring you were apprised of all
22 issues at the embassy and in their region?

23 A Yes. I was extremely impressed by the staff and their expertise and help to
24 me. But really their expertise. These were people, Foreign Service officers on 1-year
25 tours, they had only been there for 6 months, 6, 7 months. They were really on top of

1 things. And the other agencies and entities also sent their best people to Afghanistan
2 and were extremely helpful to me.

3 Q Okay. And when you say the term "really on top of things," are there any
4 specific examples you could provide for the record in terms of how you knew they were
5 really on top of things?

6 A I asked for a briefing early on -- or a set of briefings early on about the
7 Afghan leadership and the people that I was going to be dealing with, and so had several
8 really very helpful discussions with different segments of the embassy about the people,
9 about where they came from, their pasts, how they had interacted previously, about the
10 outcome of the disputed Presidential election that had taken place in September of 2019,
11 and where things stood now and what the embassy had been doing with Afghan leaders
12 to try to deal with that.

13 It was very helpful because really the very first set of challenges that I had in
14 Turkiye related to the continued conflict between President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah,
15 his principal opponent in that election, and the bitter rivalry that threatened to -- in a
16 context where we were pushing Afghanistan into a negotiating situation, the domestic
17 politics were pointing Afghanistan in the direction of at least two heads, if not three or
18 more, a situation that would have played directly into the Taliban's hands to just divide
19 and conquer the Afghan body, political firmament.

20 Q Okay. Do you recall how large your team was when you arrived in Kabul?

21 A There were well over 4,000 people in Kabul when I got there.

22 Q Okay. And what was the structure of your leadership team in broad
23 strokes?

24 A Kabul is a somewhat unique embassy. Usually embassies have a Deputy
25 Chief of Mission; below that, section chiefs and agency heads. Kabul had long had an

1 Assistant Chief of Mission position, the effect of that being that the DCM served both as
2 an alter ego to the ambassador, but also took on a lot of the, shall we say, substantive
3 work that the embassy was engaged in with Afghanistan.

4 The Assistant Chief of Mission focused more on the management and
5 administrative side of the house -- we referred to the person in that role as the mayor of
6 Kabul -- and making sure that our systems worked, that COVID got responded to in the
7 right ways, that disciplinary action was taken when that was necessary with relevant
8 people, day-to-day involvement on kind of how the embassy functioned and making sure
9 the trains were working properly.

10 Q Okay. Understood.

11 Were there any constraints that you felt you and your team operated under in
12 Kabul?

13 A Well, in Kabul we were in a war zone, so that's a gigantic constraint. We
14 were extremely limited throughout my time in Kabul in just getting out of the -- getting
15 off the compound. Very few officers ever got outside the walls of the embassy.

16 I did regularly because that was my job, and those who went with me obviously
17 had an opportunity to get out into the broader community. But, otherwise, it was very,
18 very, very little that others were able to do, and what little they were able to do, after
19 COVID, it just completely dried up for a very, very long period.

20 We were also, if I remember this correctly, between eight and a half and nine and
21 a half hours removed from Washington. Kabul is -- the clock is half an hour off from
22 everybody else. So coordinating with Washington either had to happen in the middle of
23 my night, or certainly after hours -- well after hours -- or it didn't necessarily happen.

24 A huge security apparatus that we had to have around to guard the perimeter and
25 run the security systems for the embassy, easily 800 people when I arrived. And it

1 wasn't much less when I left. And a life support component to go along with that.

2 In most embassies, every embassy I've ever served in, you go home to your
3 apartment and you make yourself dinner. In Kabul, we had cafeterias, because most
4 people -- I had a kitchen, but most people did not.

5 And so you had both the security component and the life support component to
6 support the security people plus all the rest of us. When I arrived, that was about 1,400
7 people -- a huge investment made in our ability to carry out our operations and
8 effectively represent the United States.

9 Q Thank you.

10 We're going to pivot now to the withdrawal. But before that, thank you very
11 much for this helpful background in conjunction with your opening statement. It really
12 table sets for the next piece of our discussion.

13 With that --

14 Ms. [REDACTED]: Can I do a quick follow-up?

15 Ms. [REDACTED]: Sure. Go ahead.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q I just had one quick follow-up about the staffing situation at Embassy Kabul
18 when you arrived.

19 Were there staffing cuts that were implemented during your tenure as charge
20 there?

21 A Let me put things in a slightly larger context.

22 As some of you would be aware, Embassy Kabul had carried out some large-scale
23 reductions in 2019 that engendered some controversies here, if I remember this
24 correctly. It was before I came on board, but I was briefed about this. Cuts on the
25 order, I believe, 35 to 40 percent of our staff that were achieved by consolidating some of

1 the entities that operated outside the chancery compound, and then just reducing staff,
2 State Department staff, other agency staff to achieve a target.

3 In my time in Afghanistan, we made no further substantive cuts until probably
4 later -- late in the year at least, when entities that were part of the U.S. mission, with an
5 eye to May 1, began drawing down their numbers.

6 As I think is publicly known, we went on ordered departure status in April per my
7 request. We at that --

8 Q April 2020?

9 A April 2021. We evacuated a number of people at that time and subsequent
10 tranches in the latter part of July and another one in the first part of August.

11 I will note there were easily 100 or 120 people who took advantage of the
12 authorized departure that was instituted by the State Department worldwide during
13 COVID for people who felt that they were -- who felt -- who didn't -- who wanted to leave,
14 who wanted to go home, and not be exposed to particular dangers overseas.

15 I encouraged people to do that per the State Department's guidance. People
16 who were over 65, which included me, as well as people with medical conditions or they
17 were afraid, they went home. And most of those people came back or their tours timed
18 out and were replaced by somebody else.

19 Q So that broader trend you just described of staffing reductions over a
20 longtime horizon in 2020 and '21, did that pose constraints for you and your team in
21 accomplishing the task at hand?

22 A Absolutely. There were functions that, when described to me, sounded like
23 they were pretty important, functions and roles that had been zeroed out in 2019. And
24 the effect of that is the remaining people have to pick up more -- have to pick up the
25 work.

1 COVID was obviously a huge problem. Most -- all of those people went
2 somewhere else and theoretically continued their jobs. Some jobs lend themselves to
3 that. An AID budget person could be anywhere. Even an Inspector General staffer
4 could do a lot of their work without being in Kabul all the time.

5 But that posed some serious constraints. We had political officers who attended
6 my meetings, which were virtual, from Oregon, from Texas, from wherever it was that
7 they went under this.

8 As we got further into 2020 or got into 2021 on the cuts in April, yes, of course,
9 they posed serious constraints on our ability to meet with people, deal with people,
10 shortfall in the folks who plan things and help us think through the mechanics of how
11 we're going to do stuff. We had to work with the people that we had, the resources
12 that were available.

13 Q And just last follow-up on this. The cuts you described in 2021 related to
14 COVID, you saw those as a public health necessity to reduce staffing?

15 A The cuts on COVID were 2020, and they were not our cuts. This is
16 authorized departure. The State Department made available to all personnel at posts,
17 whether they were State Department or not, the ability to leave and go -- to have safe
18 haven somewhere else until it was determined either that they had to go back or that
19 they could go back or that they felt comfortable going back.

20 Q Okay. So, to clarify, these cuts were beginning in April 2020?

21 A They began in probably March 2020 and lasted through the summer really.

22 Q Okay. And the cuts that had been put into place in 2019, you saw those as
23 the result of policy decisions to change the footprint and reduce the footprint of the
24 embassy?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Okay.

2 A The cuts in 2019 were permanent, permanent reductions, or certainly in
3 practice, they were permanent reductions in embassy staff. Authorized departure and
4 even the ordered departure reductions that we did in 2021, in principle, were temporary.
5 Their positions were not eliminated or transferred to other uses.

6 Q Okay. Thank you.

7 [Wilson Exhibit No. 2.

8 Was marked for identification.]

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Okay. All right. We may get about halfway on this one, but I'd like to
11 introduce into the record as exhibit No. 2. Exhibit No. 2 is a letter to the Honorable
12 Michael McCaul, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, dated February 10th,
13 2023, from the Department of State. It includes unclassified opening statements of
14 State Department officials from a June 15th, 2022, classified briefing on Afghanistan as
15 held by the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

16 Ambassador, no need to read, but if you want to just flip through to familiarize
17 yourself with the document.

18 A Thank you.

19 [Witness reviewing.]

20 Okay. Thank you.

21 Q Great.

22 A I looked for these online and was unable to find them.

23 Q So is my understanding, correct, that you have not seen this document
24 before today?

25 A No. No. Any of these statements.

1 Q Okay. Great. Thank you.

2 I'd like to call your attention to page number 5. The page numbers are on the
3 top of the pages.

4 A Uh-huh.

5 Q This pertains to Ambassador John Bass' opening statement. If I could draw
6 your attention to the second full paragraph, entitled, "December 2018." I'd like to read
7 a bit of this passage for you.

8 "December 2018 marked a sudden shift into the phase which carried through the
9 end of my tenure as ambassador and beyond. I call this phase 'fight, talk, and prepare
10 to leave.'

11 "It was marked by President Trump's insistence that we prepare to rapidly reduce
12 our military footprint; slash the cost of U.S. government activities inside Afghanistan; and
13 potentially suspend operations at our embassy, despite meaningful progress towards a
14 settlement. Force reductions -- potentially to zero -- did not depend on progress
15 towards a political settlement."

16 Next paragraph reads: "If I had to select one word to characterize this period, it
17 would be: 'uncertainty.'"

18 Do the sentiments conveyed in this passage comport with your understanding of
19 that time period?

20 A Which time period?

21 Q When you arrived in Kabul. Does this comport with your understanding of
22 the time?

23 A I wouldn't have expressed it in quite these terms. It's not dissimilar.

24 Q Did you experience this type of, quote, "uncertainty" that Ambassador Bass
25 conveyed here?

1 A I think when I arrived issues such as the withdrawal of our embassy were not
2 on the table at any time during the balance of the Trump administration. I was told that
3 they were on the agenda, or at least discussed, in 2019. I have no insight into how
4 serious those conversations might have been. Ambassador Bass, I think, expresses his
5 views there.

6 There was uncertainty with respect to the American military force in Afghanistan.
7 We had the clarity that the U.S.-Taliban agreement required a drawdown to 8,600 from
8 about 12,000 or maybe 13,000 when I arrived and that allied forces would comparably
9 reduce, perhaps not the most important detail.

10 The drawdown to 4,500, which is about September 2020, was news and surprising
11 to those of us who were there. The drawdown orders to go to 2,500 were more
12 disconcerting, I think, to me and to others leading various parts of the U.S. Government
13 operation in Afghanistan.

14 And of course there was always the unknown. What was going to happen?
15 Was something going to happen in early 2021? And what about May 1st?

16 And as we -- in the aftermath of our election, there was also uncertainty -- just to
17 hone the last point I made -- in the aftermath of our election, again, there's uncertainty
18 about May 2021, which there was less of, shall we say, before the outcome of our
19 election was known.

20 So, yes, there was a lot of uncertainty with respect to the U.S., the United States
21 and its role in Afghanistan, on top of 1001 uncertainties in Afghanistan itself having to do
22 with its own internal issues.

23 Q Okay. Fair enough.

24 A couple of questions before my time expires.

25 Number one, even though you may not agree with all of the words that the

1 ambassador says here, do you find his assessment of the situation to be reasonable?

2 A I find Ambassador Bass' characterizations to be compelling. I believe they
3 accurately reflected what he saw and what he felt and, broadly speaking, reflect the
4 uncertainties and some of the specific issues and challenges that he faced in his time.
5 Some of those bled over into my tenure, as I just described a moment ago.

6 Q Okay. And we can unpack this further in the next round, but if you could
7 identify the top one or two reasons for such uncertainty, what would you define those
8 as?

9 A The uncertainties in my time had to do with the size of the U.S. military
10 component and the possibility of further drawdowns being ordered.

11 I think the other uncertainty had to do with the U.S.-Taliban agreement and
12 enforcement of its provisions, particularly with respect to Taliban violence and a difficulty
13 knowing or threading through what was going to be U.S. policy with respect to those
14 violations and with respect to what was described to the Afghans and to me as a
15 conditions-based agreement that depended on all of its parts if any one of its parts was
16 going to go forward.

17 [REDACTED]. Okay. Thank you. That concludes our round.

18 [Recess.]

19 [REDACTED]. So we'll go back on the record.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q So, Ambassador, we have a couple of clean-up questions pursuant to your
22 prior round and prior testimony.

23 I'd like to first start with, the U.S. withdrawal was ordered by President Biden on
24 April 14th, 2021, correct?

25 A The fundamental decision that American forces would withdraw by May 1st

1 was made by President Trump based on his weighing of factors and considerations that
2 he felt were important and that his administration felt were important for America's
3 security and other interests. President Biden reviewed that decision and came to the
4 same conclusion.

5 Q And he made his own decision on that issue, correct?

6 A Of course he did.

7 Q Okay. And the full military retrograde occurred on President Biden's
8 orders, correct?

9 A The military retrograde began in March or April of 2020.

10 Q And President Biden, as Commander in Chief, issued those orders on
11 April 14th, 2021, correct?

12 A The completion of the retrograde was ordered by President Biden at the
13 time of his announcement on April 14th.

14 Q Thank you.

15 [REDACTED]. And in your opening statement you referenced, quote, "The Talib
16 offensive that began in June."

17 Would you think it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the Talib offensive
18 in 2021 began in May?

19 Ambassador Wilson. I wouldn't, actually. I think my recollection at the time is
20 that May was relatively quiet in comparison to some of the tenses and more difficult
21 months that had gone before. I say that, in part, because of our expectation and the
22 intel that pointed to the likelihood of attacks against us, which didn't occur after May 1st.

23 But I think I would still say the same about the situation around the country. It
24 really is June 2nd or 3rd or thereabouts when what to my way of thinking amounts to the
25 final Taliban offensive begins. The successful efforts to overrun Afghan forces in

1 districts throughout the country, to secure the surrender of districts throughout the
2 country by provincial leaders and, in some cases, military -- Afghan military personnel,
3 that starts at that point.

4 Before June, the flow of districts was not dramatic. The loss of districts was not
5 as dramatic in number. There was always a certain amount of back and forth. The
6 direction changed from early June.

7 [REDACTED]. And you also said in your opening statement, quote, "The Talibs'
8 capture of a remote provincial capital on August 6th did not immediately change
9 Afghanistan's outlook," end quote.

10 Do you think that it should have changed the outlook? Do you think that the fall
11 of the provincial capital should have been a game changer in your view?

12 Ambassador Wilson. I don't think that, per se, the fall of a provincial capital is a
13 game changer. Provincial capitals had fallen quite a number of times over the span from
14 2000 -- from 2003 or '04 anyway until the time that I arrived.

15 No provincial capitals fell between -- I believe between my arrival on January 19,
16 2020, and August 6 -- not one. There were some -- there were close. There were a
17 number of capitals that were vulnerable. Many of them were surrounded or largely cut
18 off from the countryside around them. But the government forces and the governance
19 in those places remained firm.

20 The first to fall was Zaranj, right on the Iranian border. It was small. It was far
21 away. It wasn't an important trading conduit point. You know, per se, it really wasn't
22 all that important in the cosmic scheme of things. It's when you start to add up the
23 others -- in the north, elsewhere in the south, Kandahar and Helmand, which came a bit
24 later -- that the situation for the Afghan defensive security forces, for the Afghan
25 Government in general, and, therefore, also for us, starts to change.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q Thank you.

3 I'm going to go back to our earlier line of questioning as we were addressing some
4 of the senior Department leaders within the Department and specifically their role in
5 Afghanistan.

6 I'm going to start with Ambassador Carol Perez.

7 At the time of the 2021 withdrawal, what was Ambassador Perez's position in the
8 Department?

9 A Ambassador Perez was the Acting Undersecretary of State for Management.

10 Q Did Ambassador Perez believe the State Department could continue its
11 diplomatic presence in Afghanistan following the military withdrawal?

12 A I can't speak to what her beliefs were. She certainly understood that it was
13 the guidance that we had received to try to make it possible for us to stay and take the
14 steps necessary to support that and, at the same time, to prepare fully for contingencies,
15 including our potential evacuation.

16 Q And let me clarify. By her belief, I certainly intended to focus on her
17 position on that issue. So thank you for the clarification.

18 Was it her position that an evacuation would be necessary?

19 A Again, you're probably asking me a question, because we didn't have that
20 conversation, that I can't accurately answer.

21 She was certainly part of and staff around her were part of internal State
22 Department deliberations about our contingency plans and how to support them as well
23 as the separate plans to stay, and she was likely part of some of the more
24 interagency-focused discussions, not a lot that I was directly involved in, although
25 certainly some.

1 [REDACTED]. You mentioned the guidance that you had received collectively
2 regarding maintaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. Who was that guidance
3 received from?

4 Ambassador Wilson. President Biden expressed that personally and directly in
5 the public remarks that he made in April -- on April 14, 2021.

6 Secretary Blinken, when he came to Kabul on the 15th, the following day,
7 reiterated that guidance -- reiterated that guidance to me and said essentially the same
8 thing to President Ghani.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Did Ambassador Perez at any point communicate to you, in your capacity as
11 Chief of Mission, that continuing the U.S. diplomatic presence was unlikely?

12 A I don't believe so.

13 Q At the time of the 2021 military withdrawal, am I correct in understanding
14 that Mr. McKeon was serving as DMR, Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources?

15 A Yes. Mr. McKeon was in that position.

16 Q Did DMR McKeon believe the State Department could continue its
17 diplomatic presence in Afghanistan following the military withdrawal?

18 A My impression from having a lot of conversations with him is that he
19 believed it was possible and that we should work toward that end pursuant to the
20 instructions that we had and also recognizing the inherent value of having a U.S.
21 diplomatic mission in Kabul to protect our interests there.

22 He was equally focused on the potential that we might have to go in a different
23 direction, including a drastic drawdown or withdrawal from the country altogether.

24 Q Did DMR McKeon consider the U.S. Embassy would collapse?

25 A I'm not sure I know what the word "collapse" means.

1 Q That the U.S. diplomatic presence would cease to exist and Embassy Kabul
2 would no longer be active.

3 Mr. Bellinger. Just to be clear, are you asking did he ever say that? Because of
4 course it's hard for him to speculate what --

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q No, did he ever communicate that to you? In the course of your
7 discussions throughout 2021, did he ever consider or communicate to you directly that
8 the U.S. Embassy could potentially collapse?

9 A Secretary McKeon and I discussed the possibility that we might have
10 to leave, that the measures that we were taking to augment embassy capabilities and
11 replace what we would lose when American forces left wouldn't be sufficient and/or for
12 other reasons the threat environment would become such that we might have to leave
13 altogether.

14 That was certainly one of the pieces on the table, and it was behind the
15 development of the contingency plan I described earlier that involved shuttering the
16 embassy, moving most people out of the country, and aiming to continue diplomatic and
17 consular work out of the airport for a period to be determined.

18 Q Do you recall when you first started having those discussions with DMR
19 McKeon?

20 A No.

21 Q Did he at any point advocate planning for a large-scale evacuation?

22 A The Deputy Secretary certainly was clear enough with me that this is one of
23 the things that we needed to be working on and planning for, yes. He was well aware of
24 the military's work. He was well aware of the fact that General Sullivan and others on
25 his staff were in Kabul to do some of the detailed planning that was necessary for that.

1 And I told him that our people were meeting with them and were part of that effort,
2 supporting that effort.

3 Q And when did he have those discussions with you?

4 A Throughout the period in the aftermath of the President's decision.

5 Q So after April?

6 A And possibly before, but certainly after.

7 Q At the time of the 2021 withdrawal, what was Mr. Derek Chollet's position in
8 the Department?

9 A Mr. Chollet was Counselor of the State Department.

10 Q What was his role in the 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal?

11 A I believe that he was an important adviser to Secretary Blinken. Beyond
12 that, I have virtually no insight into what specific roles he may have played. I dealt -- I
13 did not deal with him in that period. I dealt with the Secretary, with Mr. McKeon, and a
14 few others.

15 Q Thank you.

16 I believe you have mentioned the names of some of these individuals, but I'm
17 going to name a few key military figures.

18 I'll start with General Frank McKenzie.

19 Did you engage with General McKenzie at any point throughout the 2021
20 withdrawal and the ultimate evacuation in August?

21 A I engaged with General McKenzie more or less throughout my time in
22 Afghanistan. He visited several times in -- at least a couple of times in 2020. He came
23 again a couple of times in 2021.

24 He became -- he ordered the or gave the assignment, I believe, to General Sullivan
25 to take charge for the military of the evacuation preparations. He came to Kabul several

1 times in the June-July -- at least twice, I think, in the June-July timeframe as part of our
2 efforts to get the government to get their act together, consolidate their forces,
3 strategize their use, and unify, come together to sort of rally people around the country.
4 He was a strong part of that.

5 In the period -- in the run-up, so to speak, to August 15, he made at least one trip
6 to Doha and worked on this problem of the Taliban forces approaching Kabul and tried to
7 help get a solution where that wouldn't happen.

8 And then I think he played -- continued to play a role after that, which I read about
9 on the papers and don't have direct insight on.

10 Q Thank you.

11 How about General Chris Donahue?

12 A General Donahue was sent to command the airport operation or airport
13 security and those matters. Because he was the senior most officer in the country, he
14 played a big, big role in evacuation operations.

15 Q Did you engage with him in that role?

16 A Yes.

17 Q How about Rear Admiral Peter Vasely?

18 A Admiral Vasely was -- had been designated at some point, probably in early
19 2021, as the successor to General Scott Miller, who had been the longtime commander of
20 American forces in Afghanistan.

21 With Vasely now no longer commander of a large multinational thing but of a
22 renamed -- I've forgotten what the name was -- but a renamed Afghan force that he took
23 command of in early July, if I remember correctly, he came to Kabul -- he arrived 2,
24 3 weeks before that, had meetings and briefings with my staff and then ultimately with
25 me.

1 Q And, finally, General Mark Milley?

2 A So I met with General Milley before I went out to Kabul as part of my
3 consultations to prepare for the assignment. I had -- I believe most, if not all, of my
4 interaction with him would have been as part of interagency discussions. He did not
5 come to Kabul in the time that I was there, I don't think. My memory may fail me,
6 though. And I was certainly in touch with his [REDACTED], who was somebody that I
7 had known previously in my career.

8 Q And who was that?

9 A [REDACTED] -- it might come to me.

10 Q That's okay. We can move on.

11 A Yeah. It's [REDACTED] -- yeah. It'll come to me maybe.

12 Q And who did you engage with at the White House throughout 2021 on
13 Afghanistan?

14 A My principal point of contact at the NSC from January 21st was the position
15 in the same -- it was the Senior Director for South and Central Asia, Sumona Guha, and as
16 had her predecessor, Lisa -- in the Trump administration.

17 [REDACTED]. Curtis?

18 Ambassador Wilson. Yeah. Lisa Curtis, my principal contact at the NSC. The
19 port of call is senior director essentially, like an assistant secretary equivalent with
20 comparable responsibilities at the NSC.

21 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

22 Ambassador, it's our understanding, based on your testimony as well as publicly
23 available information, that you served as Chief of Mission Afghanistan during the Trump
24 administration as well as the Biden administration.

25 Can you please speak to how the potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan

1 was approached during the Presidential transition from President Trump to
2 President Biden?

3 Ambassador Wilson. No. I have no insight on those discussions.

4 [REDACTED]: Did anyone from the transition team reach out to you
5 throughout that period?

6 Ambassador Wilson. I met with the transition team virtually in mid-December, I
7 believe, to answer their questions, to brief them on what was the situation in
8 Afghanistan, talk about some of the main issues ahead.

9 It was an unclassified briefing. Presumably some vague matters related to the
10 number and disposition of U.S. forces in Afghanistan would have been part of that,
11 although I don't recall that. It should have been. But we didn't get into any specifics at
12 that time. They were not in office.

13 [REDACTED]: Would I ask that you clarify whether it was the overall transition
14 team or that portion of it of the State Department?

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q Let's focus on that portion at the State Department specifically, the
17 transition team.

18 A The only transition touch point that I ever had was the one in December, and
19 it went as I described.

20 Q And who was that with?

21 A Derek Chollet, Sumona Guha, and Puneet Talwar.

22 Q Thank you.

23 What was Embassy Kabul's role in preparing information and recommendation on
24 the Afghanistan withdrawal during the Presidential transition period?

25 A If you're referring -- again, the words we use -- if you're referring to the

1 military's withdrawal, the embassy's role probably had two components.

2 One is specific reporting that the defense attache, our political officers, and other
3 parts of the embassy did on political issues and the impact of what had been happening,
4 what was happening, and what was to be expected.

5 That's probably the best answer I can give you.

6 Q Did Embassy Kabul brief incoming Secretary of State Blinken on the potential
7 withdrawal?

8 A I don't believe there was any such formal briefing that Embassy Kabul did of
9 Secretary Blinken on the military withdrawal, on the retrograde, no.

10 Q What information did Embassy Kabul convey to the incoming Secretary?

11 A We, at my direction, we prepared a series of cables that described or
12 assessed different sets of issues internal to Afghanistan and bearing on some of its key
13 neighbors and relations. It had some of the external issues that were important for
14 what Afghanistan did. And those were intended for Secretary Blinken and other senior
15 leaders. I have no personal knowledge of who exactly read what.

16 There were probably eight or ten of these. And it was our efforts to -- I had been
17 through transitions before. It was our effort to try to get people ahead a little bit of the
18 curve on our perspective on some of the key issues, on a set of issues that they had to
19 decide quite quickly after taking office.

20 Q Did Secretary Blinken ever request a briefing from you?

21 A On the military's withdrawal, I don't believe so.

22 Q How about --

23 A He -- I will say he got -- I believe he received a briefing on the withdrawal
24 when he came to Kabul on August 15 from General Miller.

25 Q August 15?

1 A 2021.

2 [REDACTED]: Do you mean April 15?

3 Ambassador Wilson. Yes, of course. Thank you.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Did you ever offer him a briefing on the Afghanistan withdrawal and its
6 ramifications on the U.S. Embassy?

7 A We certainly provided and I certainly provided a great deal of insight on the
8 costs of what was -- what had been happening in the country over the course of my time
9 there, the damage that violent attacks by the Taliban had caused for Afghan's security
10 defense -- Afghan security forces and for public morale and confidence in the future.

11 We had a lot of material that was provided to the State Department that I expect
12 was made available to Secretary Blinken about the implications.

13 The hardware, the nuts and bolts and the plans of the military to withdraw this
14 unit and close this base on such and such a date and that force is going to come out, that
15 wasn't Secretary Blinken's job. That would be the Secretary of Defense. And beyond
16 the most superficial briefing, we -- or certainly I -- would not have particularly been able
17 to do that.

18 There were conversations later, as I think is publicly known, about Bagram and
19 where it went in the sequence. I don't recall discussing that with Secretary Blinken,
20 although I may well have. He certainly was well aware of it by other means, too.

21 Q Thank you.

22 I believe we're on exhibit 3 now. Is that correct?

23 So I'd like to enter exhibit 3 into the record.

24 [Wilson Exhibit No. 3.

25 Was marked for identification.]

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q This is a statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on January 22nd,
3 2021. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan -- provide this to you guys.

4 A Oh, sure. Uh-huh.

5 Q So, according to the statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne, on
6 January 22nd, 2021, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan informed his Afghan
7 counterpart Hamdullah Mohib that the U.S. would review the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban
8 agreement -- i.e., the Doha Agreement -- including to assess whether the Taliban was
9 living up to its commitments.

10 Ambassador, is it correct that an interagency policy review commenced after this?

11 A An interagency -- yes, I believe so. The interagency review on Afghanistan
12 began as soon as the new administration was in office and able to function.

13 Q And this review considered the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan,
14 correct?

15 A This review considered, from my perspective -- and I was not part of all of
16 the meetings, I don't believe -- but it aimed to examine U.S. policy toward Afghanistan,
17 what was in the U.S.-Taliban agreement and what we had committed to, how that was
18 being implemented and issues related to that that were important, and the issues that
19 were relevant to the decision that the President had to make about the May 1 deadline
20 and the directions that he wished for the United -- he might wish for the United States to
21 go.

22 Q Was the State Department involved in that interagency review?

23 A Yes.

24 Q What was your role in that review?

25 A I participated in lots of meetings, dozens certainly, between January 22nd

1 and April 14.

2 Q What was U.S. Embassy Kabul's role in that review?

3 A I think the principal role that we played was focused on helping policymakers
4 understand what would go away if -- when -- if U.S. -- whenever U.S. military forces left
5 and what the impact or implications of that would be for our ability to stay in the country
6 and function effectively and safely.

7 The other side of the coin of that was to identify and work through and obtain
8 assets to compensate for those losses. And that occupied a lot of these meetings and
9 was one of the principal areas that we had input in.

10 I had input from time to time on other issues, but I think that's probably the main
11 one and the biggest one.

12 Q Thank you.

13 And who led that interagency review?

14 A It was run by the National Security Advisor.

15 Q And who led the review on behalf of the State Department?

16 A The majority of the discussions that -- my recollection is that the majority of
17 the discussions that I was included in were led on the State Department side by Deputy
18 Secretary McKeon.

19 Secretary Blinken was, almost certainly, in some of those. As I think I mentioned
20 earlier, McKeon was kind of the point person on Afghanistan in those early months.
21 Undersecretary Perez was likely included in many of those conversations, especially as
22 time went on.

23 Q Thank you.

24 I'm going to go back to sort of U.S. Embassy Kabul's role in that interagency
25 process and discuss some of the various sections within the embassy?

1 I'll start with the Regional Security Office.

2 What was their view or input on what course of action to take throughout that
3 review?

4 A The RSO and his staff were very concerned about the loss of capabilities on
5 which we depended to stay. [REDACTED]

6 [REDACTED]

7 [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED]

9 It was an unbelievably valuable security asset to us and, by extension, to other
10 embassies in and around us. We had to have that. We had to continue that. And so
11 that was one focal point for him.

12 We lacked -- as part of the cuts in staffing that were carried out in 2019, the
13 embassy's medevac capabilities had been flown out of the country, and their personnel,
14 which were large, had also, of course, departed. We had to have a medevac capability.
15 It was both a security issue and of course a life-and-death issue ultimately. And so that
16 was his second one.

17 He was concerned about firepower. The U.S. military didn't specifically defend
18 us, of course. We had our own security. But it was a kind of security blanket out there
19 that we could call on if events arose that we didn't have the capability to deal with. And
20 he identified several of those capabilities that he thought we needed, and that became
21 part of that conversation as well.

22 The RSO, like me, was focused on how to make it possible to stay, in implementing
23 the instructions that we thought we had, and on how to get out. And I think -- I expect
24 that he or the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security would likely say they spent
25 half -- at least half of their time on that latter task.

1 Q And did the RSO believe that the embassy could safely continue its presence
2 after the military completely withdrew from Afghanistan?

3 A I believe he did, yes.

4 Q Okay. What was the political section's views or inputs on what course of
5 action to take throughout that interagency review? Or did they have views or inputs?

6 A The political section's work was really focused on these issues that we spoke
7 of a moment ago having to do with the implications of -- having to do with the
8 implications and what was to happen and what was likely to happen, the mood in the
9 Afghan defensive security forces, the trend lines politically and socially in the provinces,
10 what was happening out in the provinces where we had a lot less insight because of the
11 earlier drawdown of American military forces, we didn't have quite the same texture we
12 had before.

13 They and also I did a lot of work to -- outreach to provincial governors, regional
14 officials, NGO representatives out in the provinces to give us, to give Washington a
15 decent sense of what was going on in the country. It was obviously part of the picture
16 as they faced the decisions that needed to be made.

17 Q Thank you.

18 Ambassador, did the Department engage with the Taliban throughout 2021?

19 A Ambassador Khalilzad engaged with the Taliban on the State Department
20 and the U.S. Government's behalf throughout 2021.

21 Q Did any other officials engage with the Taliban?

22 A To the best of my knowledge, the only people who engaged with the Taliban
23 were Khalilzad and his staff. And I mentioned earlier a couple of interactions that I was
24 told Secretary -- General McKenzie had in the summer and at the end.

25 Q Are you aware of any deals put forward or advanced by the U.S. in 2021 that

1 would put the Taliban in charge of Afghanistan?

2 A No.

3 Q Were you aware of the, quote, "Peace Government Plan" advanced by the
4 U.S. Government to the Afghan Government and the Taliban in 2021?

5 A I'm not aware of any plan that uses those terms.

6 Ambassador Khalilzad put forward ideas in early January 2021 about power
7 sharing. His approach, as he described it to me, was that we needed -- the U.S. -- the
8 Afghan-Taliban negotiations had completely stalled. They weren't going to go anywhere
9 in the trajectory they were on, they were bogged down in theological details, and that we
10 had to find a way to get them to talk about practical things, that that might unlock the
11 door to a settlement.

12 He came in early January with a set of written ideas -- that was his word,
13 ideas -- that he indicated had been -- that weren't State Department or U.S. Government
14 proposals, they were ideas that outside experts had developed of what a power-sharing
15 arrangement might look like.

16 And he elicited reaction to those ideas indicating that he was going to do the same
17 with respect to the Talibs and then kind of see were there areas that were overlap, or
18 similarity at least, that then potentially you could build out a picture of how things might
19 look in a post-settlement government that involved the Taliban and the Afghan
20 Government side going forward.

21 He returned, I believe in March or thereabouts, with a -- he got input from
22 Afghans to those ideas. He returned in about March at some point with a new set of
23 ideas or refinements to what he had earlier provided.

24 I believe he labeled that more clearly now as a U.S. Government proposal, not
25 something, ideas from somewhere else. Asked for reactions to that. And more or less

- 1 tasked the Afghan side with coming up with a written response that, again, this idea, can
- 2 we get things -- start to get down on paper what the future might look like and identify
- 3 areas of overlap and try to build something out.

1 [12:55 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q You had mentioned earlier in your testimony the term, quote, "transfer of
4 power," end quote. I believe it was in reference to some of your activities in
5 August 2021, before August of 2021. Is that in reference to a transfer of power to the
6 Taliban?

7 A What I was referring to was -- it was not before August -- or very, very
8 shortly before August 15. On, I believe, the 13th, the President's two senior staffers, of
9 President Ghani, asked to meet with me. They indicated that President Ghani did not
10 want to see a bloodbath in Kabul, that he was prepared to give up power. And so we're
11 looking, you know, how to do this. And we had some modalities and so forth.

12 In a second meeting, they backtracked from that and said, well, there needed to
13 be a loya jirga, which would take weeks to convene. The Talibs hated loya jirgas. And I
14 told them at that time that that approach was probably not reasonable given the
15 situation that Afghan defenses security forces faced at that moment.

16 I met a third time on middle of the day, I believe, on August 14, and they clearly
17 had progressed in their thinking. I learned later that they had -- that they had
18 empowered one of the representatives or maybe several representatives of theirs in the
19 talk in Doha -- in the talks in Doha to try to pursue this with the Talibs. That's what that
20 was. And it essentially was to provide for -- what the Afghans talked to me about was to
21 provide for some kind of an appropriate transfer of -- their transfer of power from
22 themselves to the Talibs. It was not my idea. It was not the U.S. Government's idea.
23 As far as I know, this wasn't something that Ambassador Khalilzad had promoted. This
24 was described to me as President Ghani's aim to end the conflict and avoid bloodshed in
25 Kabul.

1 [REDACTED]. Ambassador, what was your assessment of whether the Taliban
2 was meeting the conditions of the Doha agreement?

3 Ambassador Wilson. You know, this is -- it's not an entirely cut and dry matter.
4 The issue of violations, it's not an entirely cut and dry matter. If you read the text, it's
5 very artfully written, let's just say, and its terms are kind of complicated. The Talibs had
6 absolutely met their commitment not to attack American forces, personnel, or
7 installations. It's not an unimportant thing to me, and I think also to the American
8 people.

9 Other actions throughout 2020 and 2021 ran, if not counter to the letter, certainly
10 counter to the spirit of the agreement and counter to the way it was described to the
11 Afghans at the time it was signed. And this has to do with violence that -- against
12 Afghans, both Afghan forces and innocent civilians, assassination campaign that was
13 carried out in the latter part of 2020, for example. The matter of prisoners where the
14 Talib demands only incidentally related to what was in the agreement, from my point of
15 view, to negotiate and to negotiate in good faith. They hadn't negotiated in good faith,
16 in my opinion. I was not at the negotiations, so my ability, I guess, directly to address
17 that is open to some question. But the negotiations hadn't produced anything, and it
18 bogged down repeatedly over Talib inflexibility at a time when the Afghan Government
19 and even President Ghani was, you know, willing to try to find ways to break logjams and
20 move on in the discussion.

21 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

22 [REDACTED]. So you had said that the Taliban was living up to its commitment
23 not to attack U.S. Forces. Did the Taliban ever conduct any indirect fire attacks or other
24 attacks against U.S. Forces in 2021?

25 Ambassador Wilson. In 2021? Not that I can recall. Not that I can recall, no.

1 [REDACTED]. You don't recall any indirect fire attacks or other such attacks
2 against U.S. bases?

3 Ambassador Wilson. You know, periodically, things -- you know, they're misfires,
4 or things go a little bit wrong. But I think it was the assessment of our commanders in
5 the field that the Talibs had honored that commitment not to attack our forces or our
6 personnel. And I don't recall any report of substantial action against American forces or
7 even any accidental or coincidental damage that we had suffered at the hands of Talibs,
8 although incidents almost certainly occurred at various points.

9 [REDACTED]. Ambassador, what was your assessment of whether the Taliban
10 was living up to its commitment to cut ties with terrorist groups?

11 Ambassador Wilson. Ah, I omitted that one. Yes, this is another area where we
12 had a lot of concerns that the Talibs had not lived up to their commitments with respect
13 to al-Qaeda in particular. And I should say that the matter of violence and the matter of
14 the counterterrorism commitments that the Taliban had made were the subject of direct
15 negotiations and sort of working groups or committees that were formed in the
16 aftermath of the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement to adjudicate, but as a place to
17 discuss violence and specific incidents to try to unravel, you know, who maybe did this,
18 because ISIS also was very active throughout this period, and to work the matter of
19 al-Qaeda with the Talibs.

20 [REDACTED]. Ambassador, in a TOLONews interview on April 29th, 2021, you
21 were asked if the Taliban was still friends with al-Qaeda, which you answered, quote,
22 Some of the undertakings that the Talibs have made to us to break ties to sever the
23 relationship have been made, others have not. And the case remains to be fully
24 demonstrated in our eyes.

25 Did the Taliban ever break with al-Qaeda?

1 Ambassador Wilson. I stand by the statement that I made.

2 [REDACTED]: Is there an exhibit we're introducing here?

3 [REDACTED]: This is a recording, a statement, I'm not introducing as an
4 exhibit. I can ask, do you remember the statement? But also, if we can go off the
5 record, please, just for a moment.

6 [Discussion off the record.]

7 [REDACTED]: Back on the record.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q Do you recall the TOLONews interview that you participated in on April 29,
10 2021, Ambassador?

11 A I gave a number of interviews to Afghan media outlets. I certainly don't
12 remember their specific dates. I know I talked to TOLO on several occasions.

13 Q Do you recall any statements you made with respect to the Taliban being
14 friends with al-Qaeda, specifically the ones which states: Some of the undertakings that
15 the Talibs have made to us to break ties to sever the relationship have been made, others
16 have not. And the case remains to be fully demonstrated in our eyes?

17 We don't need you to attest to the specific words, but the sentiment.

18 A The sentiment reflects the assessment that I and that others
19 responsible -- directly responsible for these matters for the U.S. Government and with the
20 Taliban head. Certain steps had been taken. Other steps have not. The jury was out.

21 Q Do you believe the Taliban was interested in peace?

22 A I had my doubts.

23 Q Did you believe the Taliban was interested in negotiations rather than
24 seizing the country from the Afghan Government and its people?

25 A I think there are a couple of ways to look at that question. Whatever

1 extent the Talibs thought they could achieve their objectives at the negotiating table,
2 reasonably promptly, and that we would go away, sure. And, sure, they like
3 negotiations. They agreed to go to Doha, after a lot of arm-twisting. And at least at
4 the beginning, the talks didn't seem fruitless. They became so, but that was later.

5 There is an argument that academics and some others, perhaps including you and
6 me, that for the Talibs negotiating was always just a stalling tactic to run out the clock.
7 And what their motivations were, I don't know. Ambassador Khalilzad and Secretary
8 Pompeo who started this process began with the proposition that the Talibs could be
9 negotiated with and that a settlement could be achieved. And the work, then, that I did
10 and that the U.S. mission did was to try to make that successful, make it work, if it could,
11 and also to report, to bear witness to what was happening in the country in that context.
12 And we did that.

13 Q Ambassador, do you believe the Afghan Government had any real
14 negotiating power against the Taliban once President Biden made his April 2021
15 announcement?

16 A The Afghan side lost leverage at every -- at almost every step along the way
17 from February 29, 2020, through the President -- President Biden's announcement.
18 Their job absolutely became harder after July -- August 14.

19 Q April 14th.

20 A April 14th. And their ability to achieve an agreement that was acceptable
21 to, not just Ghani, but other political leaders, and for that matter the Afghan people, got
22 smaller. Realistically, it was already smaller, just to be fair.

23 Q You previously testified -- and please correct me if I'm misstating
24 anything -- that following President Biden winning the Presidential election to the United
25 States, there was uncertainty as to what the next step would be specifically. And you

1 informed the Afghan Government, don't be so sure about that, for lack of better words.

2 A I used somewhat different terms. Ghani hoped that there would be a
3 change. I urged him to be cautious about that. I was in no position to speak for the
4 President-elect or what he might choose to do. I just said, don't -- you know, essentially,
5 don't -- be careful in how you act on that hope or expectation.

6 And, separately, I was very clear and adamant, actually, with the new
7 administration, once people came into office, that they needed to talk directly with the
8 Afghans as soon as possible and hear them out, hear their case, and to the extent we
9 could, kind of make them, not part of the solution, but at least ensure that we had better
10 cooperation, good cooperation from them as we went further along.

11 And I can add here -- I should add here that the Afghan Government believed that
12 communications with the outgoing administration had become more and more and more
13 limited, that their voices were not heard, that -- you know, that they didn't have any
14 much of a realistic chance to have input into the decisions that were being made, like all
15 those troop withdrawals that were carried on in 2020. I wanted an anecdote to that
16 because we needed the Afghan Government's cooperation, whatever it was President
17 Biden decided.

18 Q And on April 14th, 2021, it was clear to the Afghan Government and the
19 Taliban and to Embassy Kabul what the President's position was, correct?

20 A Yes.

21 Q Did you assess the Taliban to be a reliable and trustworthy partner?

22 A No.

23 Q Did you believe the U.S. should've adhered to the Doha agreement or should
24 adhere to the Doha agreement?

25 A I thought that the Doha agreement represented a commitment by the

1 United States. Yes, it was the Trump administration. President Trump was the
2 President, and he gets to make foreign policy. Any President gets to make foreign
3 policy. That was a commitment by the United States. Walking away from reneging on
4 our commitments comes with costs. So that was, I think, one -- one consideration.

5 Abandoning the U.S.-Taliban agreement that among other things itself had several
6 potential consequences: renewed attacks against American personnel and facilities,
7 which the intel that I read pointed to that, and we went on a high alert on May 1st as a
8 result of that. May 1st, 2021, with the passage of that deadline.

9 It would have come with other costs. Those negotiations, somewhat not very
10 successful to date, that'd be the end. The Doha negotiations. The Talibs undertaking,
11 therefore, to enter into negotiations with other Afghans to determine a roadmap for their
12 political future and to negotiate a ceasefire, how in the world would we get back to that
13 or how would they get back to that? Not clear.

14 The undertakings that they made with respect to al-Qaeda. Yes, some of them
15 were not fulfilled. Some had. And what, then, would be our leverage to try to affect
16 that is a tough decision.

17 Q The Doha agreement consisted of two parties, correct, the Taliban and the
18 U.S. Government?

19 A That's correct.

20 Q So you just noted some of the conditions had -- with respect to severing with
21 terrorist organizations, some of the conditions had been fulfilled, some of them hadn't.
22 You also testified that we, the United States, had made a commitment, which we couldn't
23 renege upon.

24 Didn't the Taliban already renege upon its commitment? So what obligated us to
25 commit ourselves when a terrorist organization had not committed themselves to the

1 conditions?

2 [REDACTED]: If that's a question, it sounds a little bit more like a disputation.

3 And if you don't object, I don't object, but that wasn't exactly a question.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q So the contract requires two parties -- or the agreement required two
6 parties to agree. You had noted we didn't want to renege on our obligations. Do you
7 agree that the Taliban had reneged on its obligation?

8 A I didn't say we didn't want to renege. I said reneging on our obligations
9 comes with costs, to be clear. But go ahead. Sorry to interrupt.

10 Q No, I apologize, I interrupted you.

11 I just wanted to confirm, do you agree, though, that the Taliban had not lived up
12 to its commitments?

13 A The Taliban had not fully lived up to its obligations, in my opinion.

14 Q Had that been considered by the administration at any point?

15 A There was a large body of reporting from Embassy Kabul, as well as from
16 other entities that were part of the mission, about issues that had direct bearing on the
17 judgment of to what extent the Taliban had lived up to its commitments.

18 Q What was your recommendation on the decision to remain in the Doha
19 agreement?

20 A I wasn't asked for a formal recommendation. In informal conversations, I
21 told people that I believed and expected that a change in the commitment, the May 1
22 commitment, would likely lead to attacks on us, on American forces, and American
23 facilities, and people needed to bear that in mind.

24 Q What did you assess sustainability of the Afghan Government and military to
25 be without a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan?

1 A It's kind of a, you know, a tough -- a tough set of issues. The Afghan
2 Government certainly had, you know, a wide range of weaknesses and difficulties. We
3 devoted a pretty fair amount of time, as I described, the summer of 2021, in trying to pull
4 those together. Clearly, Afghan confidence had been affected by Taliban attacks on
5 Afghan security forces and Afghan civilians by the stalemate in Doha, which was initially
6 people were excited about this. Afghans were happy when negotiations began. That
7 dissipated over time.

8 And, of course, the undertaking that the United States had made in 2020 to
9 withdraw our forces and the reiteration of that commitment by President Biden, that also
10 affected Afghan confidence. We believed until well into 2021 that the Afghan security
11 forces remained defective when they were well-led and well-motivated, and that was
12 behind the discussions that we had about consolidating their forces, strategizing their
13 uses, and uniting politically. It had to do with their leadership and their motivation to
14 fight.

15 They had a big comparative advantage, it's called the Air Force, but the Talibs
16 couldn't really compete very effectively with that, that I think was a part of that
17 calculation. The uncertainties, of course -- the uncertainties were clear and revolved
18 principally around the sustainability of the Air Force, their comparative advantage, and
19 even more so what would be the impact of the withdrawal of American airpower that,
20 since in the aftermath of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, we no longer offensively went after
21 the Talibs, but we did use our airpower to defend the Afghan forces when they were
22 attacked. And what would be the impact of having that diminished or potentially go
23 away all together.

24 So what we did was we worked on that problem in various aspects. The repair
25 and maintenance of the Air Force, sustaining air security assistance, and the other pieces

1 that I've represented. The outlook wasn't great. We can be honest about that. But
2 we had good reasons to believe that the Afghan security forces could defend the
3 government and significant parts of the country for some time.

4 Q Thank you, Ambassador.

5 [REDACTED]. I think we're out of time. If we can go off the record.

6 [Recess.]

1 [2:06 p.m.]

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

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Thanks so much. And thanks again for being here.

5 I wanted to talk a little bit about some of the things in your opening statement.
6 And you noted in your statement that Secretary Pompeo laid out that your top priority
7 was to support the Doha deals implementation.

8 If you can just maybe give us a little bit of an overview on how you went about to
9 support the agreement's implementation.

10 A A large part of what the mission and I had to do was to support Ambassador
11 Khalilzad, his visits to Kabul, his meetings with Afghan principals. And, in effect, also
12 through our reporting, he -- and then, you know, to follow up with the people that he had
13 met with. We particularly -- a very time-consuming piece was the release of Afghan
14 prisoner -- or Taliban prisoners, consumed several people in what we call the peace and
15 reconciliation section of the embassy to kind of bird dog that.

16 And at the working level, while I worked on President Ghani with -- frankly, with
17 mixed success, it was important that we present a united front on that deeply emotional
18 and morally challenging problem. So we did. It was almost always -- the key
19 conversations were Khalilzad, General Miller, and me to try to get them into the right
20 place.

21 The rest of the work I think revolved largely around Ghani, the political opposition,
22 getting set up for the talks, getting them to form a negotiating team to go to Doha,
23 getting agreement on the Doha piece. There was a last-minute hiccup about having to
24 do with prisoners that nearly derailed things. And then a whole set of work that we
25 began in that period, in the aftermath of the agreement and on forward, of support to

1 the Afghan Government to stand up a capacity effectively to do this.

2 So the ministry of peace -- that might not have been the exact name -- they had
3 no people, they had no staff, they had no expertise, they had nothing. So we helped
4 them to do that. We wanted to promote dialogue around the country on these things,
5 so we had to try to make that happen. There were other kind of steps like that
6 supporting the peace process and what Zal was trying to do.

7 Q You also mentioned in your opening statement the Afghan Government was
8 excluded from the deal. Was that correct?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And you said in opening statement that the Afghan Government deeply
11 disliked the deal. Is that correct?

12 A That's correct.

13 Q You also said in your opening that the Afghan Government opposed the deal.
14 Is that correct?

15 A It certainly opposed what the agreement was attempting to do, which was
16 to bring about a negotiated settlement with the Talibs that logically was going to result in
17 at least some Taliban rule in the country's future governance and, of course, also the
18 withdrawal of American forces, that they would say they -- whatever we wanted to do
19 was fine, but in reality, they wanted American forces to stay.

20 Q So in your experience as a diplomat, which I think from the experience that
21 we've talked about earlier today is significant, when an agreement is negotiated and a key
22 party opposes it, dislikes it, and is excluded from it, what are the chances, in your
23 experience, of it being successful?

24 A I don't know of a comparable instance to this one to kind of compare things
25 to. The assessment of Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador Khalilzad, who'd been

1 working on this with the Talibs and with the Afghan Government for a year and a half
2 before I got there, was that this was a doable deal and that the Afghans would come
3 around.

4 Q You spent a lot of time with the Afghans, with President Ghani. Did you
5 think it was a doable deal?

6 A I thought it was a very, very big swallow.

7 Q Okay.

8 [REDACTED]. Can you explain why you felt like it was a big swallow.

9 Ambassador Wilson. This actually gets at one of the tensions that arises in this
10 agreement. We're trying to get the Talibs to the table. We're trying to get them to
11 negotiate, try to do what they were obligated to do on prisoners, and do the CT stuff and
12 the other provisions that were important to us. And it's a package deal, of course, for
13 them as it in principal was for us.

14 And if our partner in Afghanistan opposes this major objective of the President of
15 the United States, you sort of have -- you have a problem. And that set up a dynamic
16 throughout 2020 where pressure was put where pressure could be put, which was on the
17 Afghan Government. Less pressure was put on the Taliban because we lacked that kind
18 of leverage over them, or to the extent we had that kind of leverage, we weren't willing
19 to use it, or we'd given it away in the context of the accord.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q Can you repeat that? We had given away our leverage in the context --

22 A We had surrendered some of our leverage through the signing of that
23 agreement.

24 Q Because?

25 A Commitments that are contained in there that we undertook to make -- with

1 respect to troop withdrawal, U.S. and U.N. sanctions. There are a couple of other
2 provisions at the end of the text; I don't remember what they are. But things that we
3 undertook to do that most of those never got done, of course.

4 Q And Did you ever convey these concerns to anyone?

5 A Yes, of course.

6 Q And --

7 A It was -- I think this was -- let me put it this way. What I've described to
8 you was reflected in reporting that we did from the time I arrived and, in almost all
9 likelihood, before that all the way through the end.

10 Q And when you say reporting, you mean front channel --

11 A Embassy cable traffic, yeah. The reporting on the meetings that we had,
12 that Khalilzad had or that -- with me, or the meetings that I had that other -- a few other
13 visitors that we got to Kabul had with President Ghani.

14 Q And what was the response to some of the front channel reporting back
15 from Secretary Pompeo in Washington?

16 A Probably the best way to describe it would be the words "thank you." I
17 mean, I got acknowledgments that what we sent in had been received and appreciated.

18 Q But no indication that there would be any adjustment based on the
19 assessment of our Charge who leads our efforts in Kabul?

20 A Secretary Pompeo made a couple of efforts, that I'm aware of and vaguely
21 recollect, to take the problem up, particularly the problem of violence up with the
22 Taliban. And they didn't have a whole lot of impact, but that meant something to me.

23 Q When you said violence with the Taliban, are you talking about violence that
24 the Taliban was engaging in that affected other Afghans?

25 A This is attacks on Afghan security forces and on Afghan civilians. And

1 destruction of infrastructure and other stuff that we and other Western donors had
2 provided over a longer period of time that improved the lives of Afghans, the Talibs were
3 destroying.

4 Q And to be clear just so we can level this out a little bit, specifically in the
5 agreement, in the February 2020 agreement, there were no conditions that required the
6 Taliban to not engage in violence against Afghans?

7 A No, that's not correct. There were provisions in the agreement that talked
8 about -- and I forgotten what the wording is now. It's -- these are public doc -- what I'm
9 talking about probably isn't a public document. But there are provisions that talk about
10 Kabul and provincial capitals. And there were few, if any, attacks on provincial capitals
11 until about September, about the time that the negotiations started. And I think that
12 was a Taliban tactic. You know, do a little bit, then a little bit, see what they get away
13 with, and then, you know, press on.

14 [REDACTED]: I apologize. Could we go off the record for a moment? I need
15 to speak to the two of you outside.

16 [Discussion off the record.]

17 [REDACTED]: Your committee and other committees have the agreement, but as
18 you may remember, there are classified annexes. And while the ambassador did not get
19 into classified information, that line of questioning, if you want to pursue it further and it
20 involves the annex, it needs to be in the --

21 [REDACTED]: I'm done with that line of questioning.

22 [REDACTED]: Okay. Sorry.

23 [REDACTED]: No apology needed. Thank you, Ken.

24 We're resuming the clock.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q So you also mentioned in your opening statements and a little bit now the
2 issue to prisoners and that it was your job to press for the release of prisoners as required
3 under the accord. You talked about it being -- just now said it was morally challenging.
4 Can you tell us a little bit more about why you thought it was morally challenging?

5 A A significant share of these prisoners were people who had served their
6 terms, the terms for which they were sentenced by an Afghan court but had not been
7 released. There were others who were virtually at the end of their term. There were
8 other individuals who were, you know, in the intervening years, they were really old.
9 They weren't going to go back in to fight, whatever else was going to happen. Those
10 were relatively easy.

11 And it often happens in negotiating -- in trying to get negotiations, to start it, you
12 have some confidence-building measures or measures to get the other side onboard.
13 Prisoner release as often come more at the end, but in this particular case, the thought
14 was up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners at the beginning to get things started.

15 Some of these were more complicated. They were guilty of -- individuals who
16 were guilty of attacks on Americans, responsible for the truck bombing of the German
17 Embassy that took place in 2017, other really heinous crimes. And, you know, that was
18 really hard. It was hard for our allies because some of them had attacked -- had killed
19 Australians and I think some others. Very, very difficult.

20 Q Was it --

21 A And the Talibs were insistent that up to 5,000 didn't mean 4,999, it meant
22 5,000. And they gave a list to us, to Ambassador Khalilzad's team. This 5,000, not
23 those other people. We want the people on our list to be released. And that added to
24 the complication. And it was one area where what the Talibs were asking for was not
25 what was in the agreement. Up to 5,000 doesn't mean 5,000; it means somewhere

1 between zero and 5,000.

2 Q And it was in the agreement that the United States would make the Afghans
3 release -- these were Afghan prisoners, not prisoners that were in the custody of the
4 United States.

5 A Yeah. You know, the agreement that Ambassador Khalilzad negotiated on
6 behalf of the Trump administration was to -- was that we would bring -- essentially, that
7 we would bring about the release of these prisoners. The influence was, yes, it was our
8 job to get the Afghan side onboard, but the Afghans and the Islamic Republic of
9 Afghanistan wasn't party to the agreement. They were not mentioned in the
10 agreement. There's no word anywhere in the agreement about the Government of
11 Afghanistan or the Islamic Republic or anything else.

12 Q So from an operational standpoint, how did you guys go about making the
13 Afghan Government release their prisoners?

14 A We worked on the problem. We began with easy cases, frankly. That
15 wasn't so hard. A complication that arose immediately was the President in Afghanistan
16 doesn't actually have the power to pardon or the same kind of power to pardon that
17 exists in the United States or in other -- some other Western societies. And so there
18 were some hurdles to overcome with that.

19 As time went on and the cases and the individuals became more sensitive, that
20 proved harder, and we tried harder and harder and harder. A final set of conversations
21 took place in early August, I believe, or very late July in which the Afghans were
22 essentially told that if you release the rest of the prisoners on the list, negotiations will
23 begin promptly or reasonably promptly. And if you don't, the Talibs have told us that
24 more wide-ranging violence will result from that.

25 Mr. Bellinger. That was August of which year?

1 Ambassador Wilson. August of 2020. And very difficult conversations with
2 President Ghani. More difficult conversations because the expanded circle was
3 broadening, including Dr. Abdullah and President Karzai, maybe some others. And the
4 upshot of that was President Ghani's decision to call a loya jirga that met in -- or maybe
5 the second week or so of August, if I remember this correctly -- to, effectively speaking,
6 share the responsibility for these earliest releases more broadly, share the decision -- in a
7 way this wasn't a bad thing because it kind of shared responsibility for peacemaking,
8 which had been an objective of ours, and involved not just a small circle of male warlords
9 or wannabes, but a somewhat broader circle of people from the Afghan elite. And that
10 resulted in the decision to release remaining prisoners.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q You mentioned a little bit earlier that there was a hiccup, the prisoner
13 release. Can you maybe tell us a little bit more about that?

14 A I think I need to do that in the classified setting. So hold that question.

15 Q Okay. Could you tell us a little bit more about some of the fallout related
16 to prisoner release component of the deal?

17 A Embassy reporting in that period focused on the morale of Afghan security
18 forces personnel and the impact on them as they saw these releases taking place. These
19 were individuals who had been involved in the capture of some of these bad guys or in
20 their trial and conviction for the offenses that they'd committed. They were not happy.

21 We heard by, I want to say, maybe -- by the fall of 2020, we heard -- we were
22 receiving reports that Talibs who had been released earlier in the process had gone back
23 into the fight. And they -- it's my recollection that each one of them had to sign a piece
24 of paper saying they're not going to go back in to fight. Okay. But also contrary to
25 what I recall being told were assurances given to us that that would not happen.

1 concern? Did the Germans, for example, express concern?

2 A I'm not aware of what else may be in the public domain, to be perfectly
3 honest. And I think I'd rather answer the question in a separate settlement.

4 Q Okay. So we'll turn away -- thank you.

5 Change topics a little bit. You can go to page 10 of exhibit No. 2. This is an
6 opening statement. It shouldn't be too long, but --

7 A This was the letter from Mr. McCaul or letter to Mr. McCaul?

8 Q Yeah.

9 A And page 10?

10 Q Yeah. I just wanted to go back to something we were talking about earlier
11 on the impact of the withdrawal of troop announcements. To be clear, that was the first
12 element of the Doha deal was we would reduce troops, and then later on we got into the
13 discussion about prisoners.

14 But on page 10, just want to read the opening -- a line from Ambassador Molly
15 Phee's opening statement.

16 "In mid-July," she says, "we met the 135-day deadline to draw down to 8,600
17 troops."

18 A Where?

19 Q Sorry.

20 A It's page 10?

21 [REDACTED]. Page 10, the last paragraph. It's about midway through the last
22 paragraph.

23 Ambassador Wilson. Oh, okay. In mid-July. Sure. Okay.

24 [REDACTED]. Okay.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q "We met the 135-day deadline to draw down to 8,600 troops. The Trump
2 administration then decided unilaterally to withdraw the 4,500 troops by September."

3 Would you agree with the characteristic that that was a unilateral withdrawal?

4 A Yes.

5 Q And then earlier you said the decision to go to 2,500 was disconcerting, you
6 guys were disconcerted by that decision. Could you talk a little bit more about why it
7 was disconcerting?

8 A I think there were two issues that we talked about in the leadership team in
9 Kabul. One was this further reduction was also done unilaterally, including without any
10 consultation or prior notification of the Afghan Government, as far as I know. And
11 second, this is getting to be a pretty low number in terms of the capabilities that
12 American military power could bring to bear if and when it's needed. It was General
13 Miller's view that that was adequate or that's what he -- I should say, General Miller told
14 me that he believed that number was adequate. But it was also a low number and was
15 arrived at without reference to the U.S.-Taliban agreement or consultation with the
16 Afghan side.

17 Q Okay. Thanks.

18 And then I just wanted to, lastly, just touch on something that you also mentioned
19 in the opening statement. You said Secretary Pompeo, again, asked you to support the
20 agreement's implementation. And the month which you said, most significantly, was
21 the May 1st, 2021, deadline for the withdrawal of American and other foreign forces. Is
22 that correct?

23 A I think the way I put it in my opening statement was to separate those
24 thoughts. The U.S.-Taliban agreement included several major pieces, including -- and I
25 think I said most significantly or most importantly -- the commitment to withdraw

1 American forces by May 1st, 2021 --

2 Q Okay.

3 A -- period. New paragraph: Secretary Pompeo asked me to support the
4 implementation of that agreement.

5 Q Thank you for that clarification.

6 When you were planning for the May 2021 withdrawal, did Secretary Pompeo or
7 anyone at the State Department have a plan, for example, to address issues related to
8 SIVs?

9 A No.

10 Q And as far as you could tell --

11 A I should say, not that I'm aware of.

12 Q Not that you're aware of.

13 A Not that I'm aware of.

14 Q And just to be clear, you were the Charge at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul at
15 that time?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Okay.

18 [REDACTED]: Theoretically given that, would you have been apprised if there
19 was, in fact, a plan.

20 Ambassador Wilson. Likely. I think so.

21 [REDACTED]: Why do you say likely.

22 Ambassador Wilson. If there had been a plan, surely it would have been -- its
23 preparation would have involved some of our consular staff and maybe some of the
24 senior managers who'd been at Post longer than me, and I would have heard about it.
25 But I hesitate to be too equivocal.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q Was there any plan provided to you on -- by Secretary Pompeo with the
3 administration on how you should handle locally employed staff?

4 A No.

5 Q Okay.

6 A We had no guidance from Washington on that.

7 Q And was there a plan on how to deal with the issue of Afghan allies who had
8 supported our efforts throughout the 20 years?

9 A Again, not to my knowledge.

10 Q And what about preparations for any kind of large-scale withdrawal? Had
11 Secretary Pompeo directed you to deal with allies or partners in preparation for a
12 May 2021 withdrawal? And by that I mean in terms of relocation efforts.

13 A Relocation of?

14 Q Afghan or Afghan allies.

15 A I'm not aware of anything specifically on that element. We -- Ambassador
16 Khalilzad and I both understood our instructions on supporting the implementation of the
17 agreement, to include -- we understood our instructions to include close consultation
18 with our allies on matters related to this, as we consulted with them closely on everything
19 that had to do with our security and our presence -- our collective presence in
20 Afghanistan. And both he and I -- every trip that he made or almost every trip that he
21 made to Afghanistan, that Khalilzad made to Afghanistan, he met with the NATO and
22 partner countries -- partner country ambassadors, the Finns and some of the others,
23 South Koreans who were not strictly speaking allies, NATO allies. And I met with them
24 equally regularly.

25 The issue of a broader set of Afghans that we were interested in beyond our own

1 nationals came up, but it would be wrong to characterize that setting as one that was a
2 policymaking one. It was sharing information and coordinating it.

3 Q So to be clear, that was mostly related to what was going on with the
4 negotiations, but nothing related to evacuation or withdrawal -- like withdrawal from
5 personnel?

6 A Yeah. It was not until much later about evacuations.

7 Q Okay. Thank you.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q Just to close this out, Ambassador. So we've spoken about multiple
10 incremental withdrawals of U.S. troops from Afghanistan as ordered by President Trump.
11 Is it fair to say that the U.S. withdrawal was initiated by President Trump?

12 A I have no insight as to exactly what was the process that produced that
13 decision. The President's the Commander in Chief, so I would expect that he was the
14 originator of those orders, but that's -- I don't know.

15 Q Would you agree that the withdrawal was initiated under the
16 administration --

17 A Yes.

18 Q -- directed by President Trump?

19 A Yes, of course. Yes.

20 Q Okay. And that the withdrawal began prior to April 2021?

21 A Yes.

22 Q And that it was the Trump administration's intent to ultimately reduce U.S.
23 troops to zero?

24 A Yes. The Trump administration had committed the United States to that on
25 February 29, 2020.

1 Q Great. So given that a full U.S. troop withdrawal was set in motion in 2020,
2 I'd like to get a sense of preparations that were going on during the same year regarding
3 the impacts of the withdrawal.

4 Did you see any of these ongoing troop withdrawals as potentially destabilizing for
5 the U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan?

6 A This is a topic that I talked a fair bit about with General Miller. He -- and I
7 believe our own security personnel echoed this -- believed that the drawdown from over
8 12,000 to 8,600 to 4,500 to 2,500 didn't have in and of itself a major significant impact on
9 embassy security. Going to zero, obviously, had bigger implications. Ultimately, that
10 decision wasn't made before January 21st.

11 Q Okay. And to be clear, did you ever meet with President Trump regarding
12 planning for the withdrawal?

13 A I never met with President Trump, period.

14 Q Okay. So ever in your time in Kabul?

15 A Ever in my life.

16 Q In your life. Fair enough.

17 Given the destabilization risks you just discussed, what preparations and
18 contingency planning were underway during the Trump administration to prepare for the
19 withdrawal, to your best recollection?

20 A Sure. So this is something that we focused -- we focused a fair bit of time
21 on. And, you know, I referenced in my opening statement Secretary Pompeo's
22 admonition to me to kind of figure out the future size and role of our embassy. So
23 we -- one way to protect ourselves was to reduce our numbers. COVID had taught us
24 that more functions than we had previously imagined could be done effectively or
25 reasonably effectively out of the country. So is there a way to reduce our numbers by

1 having people out of the country more? Or maybe they come in, you know, for 3-month
2 stints and somebody goes out, you've lowered your in-country component.

3 I think I mentioned earlier we looked at the experience in Basra, how you close.
4 There were people on our staff who had been very involved in that and had a lot of
5 expertise and insight, and gave us plenty to -- gave our security people, really, plenty to
6 think about in parsing apart the steps that one has to go through if you're going to close a
7 post, like lock it up, as eventually became necessary. And we were able to use that then
8 to accelerate the timelines for destroying excess vehicles, to destroying excess munitions
9 that we had, and otherwise minimizing our holdings of stuff that had to be destroyed.
10 We did a lot of other destruction of sensitive materials: job applications, scholarship
11 applications. I think I mentioned that earlier.

12 The consular section used the fact that they were closed -- it's a worldwide
13 directive from the State Department for consulates to close and stop accepting, stop
14 seeing people to protect our personnel. They used the lull that represented to go
15 through existing SIV applications and look for things that were wrong or goofy, contacted
16 the people -- not they were wrong, like there was some problem with the applicants or
17 problem with the application. You're missing these documents. This isn't right. The
18 dates, you know, something was wrong with it. And that was important -- became
19 important later. It was what people could do in the cosmic scheme of 18,000
20 applications that probably didn't make a big dent, but it made a dent. It was effective
21 utilization of our people.

22 Late in 2020, there was more work on that SIV issue to prepare when the closure
23 rule ended roughly at the end of the year to be able to get out of the gates quickly to
24 interview the backlog of SIV applicants that we had that had already been approved
25 through the Washington process, which we had not been able effectively to do and that

1 sort of thing.

2 Our security officer -- again, once we got through COVID -- was able to resume
3 having normal exercises, have more in-person planning with his staff to figure out
4 potential evacuation, not to mention a thousand and one other contingencies that in
5 some respects were somewhat more immediate, it could be right now, rocket fire or
6 drones, which became an increase in preoccupation of our security team. Those kinds
7 of things are what we were doing.

1 [2:42 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Okay. Very helpful overview.

4 I want to ask these following questions very specifically related to the 2020
5 timeframe, so during the Trump administration itself.

6 A Uh-huh.

7 Q So the overview you just provided in terms of withdrawal planning, did that
8 occur primarily in 2020 or in 2021?

9 A What I just described to you was primarily in 2020, some of those exercises
10 that were carried over.

11 Q Continued into 2021?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Okay. I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 5.

14 [Wilson Exhibit No. 5.

15 Was marked for identification.]

16 [REDACTED]. Exhibit No. 5 is an excerpt of a draft transcribed interview
17 transcript of Daniel B. Smith, dated Thursday, August 31st, 2023. No need to review in
18 full, but if you want to quickly peruse both pages to familiarize yourself with the
19 document.

20 Mr. Bellinger. And just a question. Is this entire transcript public or this
21 excerpt is just being made public right now?

22 [REDACTED]. It is not being made public. This is a draft transcript --

23 Mr. Bellinger. Draft transcript.

24 [REDACTED]. -- that has yet to be finalized. That's correct.

25 Mr. Bellinger. I got it now. Thank you.

1 [REDACTED]. And to be even more precise, this was a transcribed interview
2 conducted by the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Ambassador, do you know who Ambassador Smith is?

5 A Yes. I've known him for a long time.

6 Q What is his professional reputation?

7 A He's one of the most outstanding officers of our generation -- my
8 generation.

9 Q What informs that opinion?

10 A He performed in an exemplary manner in very senior positions with lots of
11 responsibility in a difficult and challenging environment.

12 His role as -- the job he had as Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research is
13 one that asks a lot of the person that's in that position. There's a lot of sensitive
14 coordination to do with others. You've got all kinds of very, very sensitive material
15 that's coming through.

16 He did a super job, super enough that he became Acting Deputy Secretary of State
17 for a period, I believe was considered for another position later that ultimately I think he
18 decided he wasn't going to take.

19 But he is just one of the most outstanding people, as I say, of my generation in the
20 Foreign Service.

21 Q Fantastic. So it therefore follows that you would have no reason to take
22 issue with his credibility or professional judgment?

23 A No.

24 Q Great.

25 I'd like to call your attention to page number 124, so second page in the stack.

1 A Yes.

2 Q Line number three, "Q" references question.

3 "So I want to pivot back a little. We spoke previously with you about some of the
4 gaps you saw in both the Trump and Biden administrations with respect to
5 planning" -- planning refers to withdrawal planning -- "but I want to unpack a little bit the
6 transition between the two administrations."

7 Continuing on line nine. Again, a question.

8 "Over the course of your review -- interviews, document review -- did you identify
9 planning documents that had transpired under the Trump administration related to the
10 withdrawal?"

11 Ambassador Smith answers on line 12.

12 "We looked at everything that was available to us. What we didn't -- we didn't
13 find a -- I mean, there were plans that were going on, as we discussed, about the
14 evacuation of the embassy itself and various contingencies. What we didn't find was a
15 comprehensive plan for what it would mean to withdraw the military and what might
16 follow from that."

17 Line 17 continues as a question.

18 "And you testified previously that your review found that the previous
19 administration's interagency process was -- I believe you used the term 'not robust' -- and
20 that decisions were made in narrow channels. Does that assessment extend to the
21 production of plans and documents as well, that the process was not robust and that it
22 was not fairly narrow in terms of who was involved?"

23 Ambassador Smith answers on line 23.

24 "Yes, certainly in terms of the absence of a robust interagency process, which one
25 would've expected in this environment."

1 Do you agree with Ambassador Smith's overall assessment as related to planning
2 documents for the withdrawal?

3 A Yes. What he -- the way he is characterizing things more or less accurately
4 reflects my understanding and what I saw -- or didn't see -- in terms of coming from
5 Washington.

6 Q And could you talk to us a little bit about the interagency process -- or lack
7 thereof -- at this time?

8 A I mentioned earlier that Ambassador Khalilzad kept his cards close to his
9 chest. Everything that he did and was involved in was in a very, very narrow channel,
10 not always accessible to me.

11 I think it's publicly known that National Security Advisor Bolton complained that
12 he wasn't allowed as National Security Advisor to see the draft agreement, the NSC
13 largely cut out of Afghan decisionmaking.

14 So I think Ambassador Smith's characterization -- "not robust" -- is quite accurate.

15 Q Did you ever see a written plan as related to the withdrawal in 2020?

16 A No.

17 Q Were you aware if one existed?

18 A No.

19 Q About how many meetings related to a plan for the withdrawal did you
20 participate in in 2020?

21 Mr. Bellinger. And by "withdrawal," we're referring to the retrograde.

22 [REDACTED]. That's correct.

23 Ambassador Wilson. I participated in many meetings related to the military
24 withdrawal. They were largely, if not almost exclusively, with General Miller and some
25 of his senior people.

1 As I indicated earlier, on the U.S. mission side, had a number of meetings and
2 discussions about experiences elsewhere, what lessons we needed to learn from that as
3 people relooked at our -- at the planning documents that we had had and contingency
4 plans and emergency procedures we had in place for long before I arrived.

5 And I recall urging people, "You need to work on this." May 1st, 2021,
6 wasn't -- pretty soon, wasn't that far away.

7 I would add COVID was a significant factor for our ability to do everything that we
8 needed to -- or would have liked to have done -- in that period.

9 I'll leave it at that.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Fair enough.

12 Were you aware of any contingency planning or discussions during the Trump
13 administration to handle a precipitous deterioration of the security situation in the
14 country?

15 A No.

16 Q To prepare for a drawdown or scaling back of the U.S. Embassy there?

17 A As I indicated earlier, we had discussions internally and at the U.S. Mission
18 about that, and to some extent with the U.S. military, on the ramifications or issues we
19 needed to understand. If there were discussions of that sort in Washington, I'm not
20 aware of them.

21 Q Okay. So to be clear, those conversations happened at the mission itself?

22 A The conversations that I'm aware of, yes.

23 Q Okay. And did you lead those conversations?

24 A Many. Maybe not -- probably the majority.

25 Q Okay. Are you aware of any contingency planning to prepare for a

1 large-scale evacuation of Americans and our Afghan allies during this time?

2 A Not in 2020, no. That happened later.

3 Q Okay. I'd like to talk a bit now about the transition of administrations.

4 How many transitions from an outgoing to an incoming administration have you
5 participated in in your career?

6 A A lot. Jimmy Carter was President of the United States when I joined the
7 Foreign Service, so you can do the math.

8 Q Fair enough. So fair to say several?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Okay. And what do these transition processes generally include?

11 A The parts that I saw as a State Department Foreign Service officer and in
12 more senior positions had to do with informing the incoming team about issues that they
13 needed to know about, some kind of a status report on where those stood and upcoming
14 decisions or events that would drive decisions that people needed to focus on,
15 familiarization with their respective roles and the entities that they were going to take
16 charge of, whether it was the bureau for this or, for that matter, a political appointee or
17 an outside ambassadorial appointee at a post overseas.

18 And we did some of those things. We did our part of those things from Kabul in
19 December and January, early February 2021.

20 Q Okay. Great.

21 And just to back out a little bit, why are these transition processes important, in
22 your experience?

23 A Well, there's the matter of continuity in government. Presidencies,
24 administrations come and go. The United States is still the United States. And there's
25 a lot that we do in foreign affairs that's either classified, or it may not be classified, but it's

1 not in the public domain. People don't know.

2 And so it's important to orient incoming appointees, including career appointees,
3 what it is they're getting into, what are the issues before the United States with respect
4 to a given country or entity, and especially what decisions they're going need to focus on
5 in the near future because of a big international summit that's going to take place or
6 some other calendar event that forces decisions.

7 Q Thank you.

8 So given your experience in several transitions, how would you describe the
9 transition from the Trump administration to the Biden administration with respect to
10 Afghanistan policy?

11 A I have to give a pretty limited answer there because I wasn't in Washington
12 at all during that period. And so I know virtually nothing about what the Bureau of
13 South Asian Affairs and/or other entities of the State Department may have provided to
14 the transition team, meetings that they might have had. That's all opaque.

15 The part that I know about is a meeting that I had, that I described earlier, with
16 the team led by Derek Chollet in December.

17 Q Okay. Fair enough. So just to be clear, that was a virtual meeting that
18 was initiated by the incoming administration. Is that correct?

19 A That's correct.

20 Q Okay. So at no point did you have any meetings or conversations with the
21 outgoing administration related to Afghanistan policy?

22 A I definitely had conversations with -- either with Dean Thompson or it might
23 have been one of his predecessors -- it probably was one of his predecessors -- in that
24 period between our election and January 21st.

25 So those discussions absolutely continued. But transition related, specifically

1 transition related, other than I met with these people that I want you to know, no.

2 Q Okay. Fair enough.

3 I'd like to turn to the Biden administration in 2021 and policy review and
4 withdrawal planning.

5 What was your understanding of the Biden administration's review of Afghanistan
6 policy in early 2021?

7 A So I think I answered this largely earlier, but just kind of the high points have
8 to do with the situation in Afghanistan, the U.S.-Taliban agreement and the parts of that
9 agreement that were not made public, the implementation of that agreement, and then a
10 whole range of issues that flowed from or that would flow from the withdrawal of
11 American forces from Afghanistan.

12 Q Okay. What impact did you observe, if any, of President Biden's
13 announcement in April 2021 that he would complete the withdrawal of U.S. troops from
14 Afghanistan on withdrawal planning?

15 A So President Ghani expressed appreciation for both the role that America
16 had played in Afghanistan over the previous 20 years and the sacrifices that American
17 servicemen and others had made.

18 He also expressed a certain amount of thanks for clarity as to the way forward,
19 because up until that point there was a question mark for him and for others about
20 May 1st.

21 Q Okay.

22 A He told us that Afghanistan would now work to make its own way and will
23 make its own decisions, which we took to be a little bit of a declaration of independence,
24 that the advice and counsel of the United States to him and to his Armed Forces about
25 how they should do their business was maybe a little less welcome going forward.

1 He asked for continued support for the Afghan security forces, and in particular
2 for the Air Force.

3 Those were the three points that he reiterated to us in the period following
4 President Biden's announcement.

5 Q Okay. And at this juncture, did the number of meetings related to the
6 withdrawal increase as compared to 2020?

7 A I'm sorry. The number of meetings --

8 Q Related to the withdrawal. The thrust of the question is, were plans
9 related to the withdrawal becoming more concrete in 2021?

10 A After the President's announcement, what were somewhat hypothetical
11 questions about we do this, we do that, what'll happen, what are the implications, so on,
12 so forth, those were no longer hypothetical. We had a date, we had a plan, and now
13 we're going to work along those lines.

14 And I would note, before the President's announcement, in principle, American
15 forces were leaving on May 1st. And the military had an extremely difficult time doing
16 that in the period really after kind of mid-March. But that was the commitment that we
17 had made.

18 So in the aftermath, the conversation turned to the more practical one of, exactly
19 how do we get the reinforcements for embassy security that we need to be able to stay?
20 How do we compensate for other capacities that our being in Afghanistan provided for
21 us? How do we continue to protect ourselves from threats that might emanate from
22 Afghanistan? How do we do security assistance?

23 The Afghan defense and security forces still existed on April 14st. How do we
24 continue to deliver that in a world where our forces are drawing down and drawing down
25 and drawing down, and especially after they've left?

1 And how do we do -- how do we accelerate SIVs? That conversation, that was
2 maybe the most important conversation, that really got accelerated even in March, well
3 before this decision, but needless to say it was a further impetus.

4 And there's one other element that I'm not remembering right now. Of course,
5 the evacuation piece and concrete planning for not just hypothetical, not just the stuff
6 that people do because it's their job to do it, but the actual pulling together of plans for
7 the embassy's evacuation and for a NEO, which led to General Sullivan's appointment and
8 coming to Kabul and all of the work that I described separately.

9 Q Okay. And you had previously testified, as well as Ambassador Smith did,
10 that there was minimal interagency process in 2020.

11 In the beginning of 2021, did you see an uptick in interagency dialogue as related
12 to the withdrawal?

13 A All of the meetings that I was part of, from late January or early February,
14 included all of the relevant interagency players.

15 Q Okay. And who would those players be, to clarify?

16 A Obviously, State, Defense, Homeland Security, the relevant intelligence
17 agencies, the NSC itself, of course. There are probably a few others.

18 Q How often did these meetings occur?

19 A Initially, they were probably once or twice a week in the period from shortly
20 after the Biden administration took office until not long before the President's
21 announcement or about that time. After that, they were several times a week.

22 Q Okay. And you personally --

23 A Many times a week, I can say, and more and more as we got further into the
24 summer.

25 Q And you personally attended the majority of these meetings. Is that

1 correct?

2 A I attended the -- I attended all the meetings that we were invited to
3 participate in, which I believe was the majority. There were probably some that were
4 either at a higher level or for one reason or another we weren't part of.

5 Q Thank you.

6 [REDACTED]. Thanks.

7 So in the last couple of minutes that we have remaining I wanted to talk a little bit
8 more about SIVs and SIV processing. I'm going go to go about it in a little bit of an
9 interesting way.

10 Are you familiar with the Department's after-action review of Afghanistan?

11 Ambassador Wilson. I've read the unclassified summary of that report.

12 [REDACTED]. Okay. We'll discuss in more detail later I think a little bit about
13 your participation in the review.

14 But this is exhibit -- I want to produce exhibit --

15 [REDACTED]. This will be exhibit 6.

16 [Wilson Exhibit No. 6.

17 Was marked for identification.]

18 Ambassador Wilson. This is the summary that was issued?

19 [REDACTED]. This is the unclassified version.

20 Ambassador Wilson. Yes.

21 [REDACTED]. Yeah. So this is exhibit 6, entitled "After Action Review on
22 Afghanistan, January 2020 -- August 2021," dated at the bottom March 2022. This is a
23 publicly available copy and an unclassified excerpt from the after-action review itself.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q So if you could turn to page 11, I'd like to ask you about some of the findings.

1 There's a section in there that says: "When the Trump administration left office,
2 key questions remained unanswered about how the United States would meet the
3 May 2021 deadline for a full military withdrawal, how the United States could maintain a
4 diplomatic presence in Kabul after that withdrawal, and what might happen to those
5 eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program as well as other at-risk Afghans."

6 Do you agree with that finding?

7 A Generally, yes.

8 Q How did you go about in 2021 seeking to address these issues? And let's
9 be specific, sorry, to the Special Immigrant Visa program.

10 A Sorry. I want to be sure I'm answering the right question.

11 Q If I could reframe it. Essentially, there was an identified backlog of SIVs in
12 2021.

13 What did you do in -- what did the administration do or direct you to do to
14 address the significant backlog?

15 A In 2021?

16 Q Correct.

17 A So there were several steps that got taken over the course of a number of
18 months in 2021 to address big problems.

19 One is -- one was in Washington, and it involved increasing -- it's my
20 understanding that the State Department significantly increased the office in the Bureau
21 of South Asian Affairs that is kind of the coordinating entity for the processing of SIV
22 applications, which office had been understaffed for years.

23 A second piece that I think was important in this, and it came out in these various
24 interagency meetings that we've discussed, is that the problem of SIVs got put on the
25 plate of very senior people at other agencies.

1 The State Department is the clearing entity, but every application depended on a
2 letter from a supervisor and a statement of employment from that agency, among other
3 things.

4 Those two needs were never prioritized by other departments, as far as I could
5 tell.

6 The biggest single problem was the Pentagon. The military -- military personnel
7 hired Afghans, especially in the early days, not informal exactly, but there weren't the
8 most formal arrangements always made.

9 And maybe to make it a sharper point, it's my understanding the Defense
10 Department had no focal point where someone could go to find out where Colonel Bock
11 (ph) in Kandahar can be found to provide a letter, a supervisor's letter, or even the
12 simpler task of providing a statement or some kind of certification that you worked.

13 So Afghans who are trying to apply for this, they run into a brick wall almost
14 immediately. Those early interagency meetings -- and they put this more on the agenda
15 of some of the -- of the other departments that employed people in this category in a way
16 that I think was somewhat helpful.

17 The second big set of activity that emerged from these, from the Biden
18 administration's efforts -- and the NSC drove this process, and I'm deeply grateful to
19 them, all of us should be -- was to get rid of some of the bottlenecks in Kabul that were
20 part of the way that we had to do this because that was either State Department or
21 usually DHS procedures we had to go through.

22 So they eliminated the in-person interview. Check. They simplified and
23 centralized the medical exam. The way it worked before, you had your in-person
24 interview. If you passed that, then go out the door, talk to your doctor, and get this
25 form filled out. We centralized that. Everybody came in batches to get medical exams

1 that we organized.

2 Biometrics, that was part of the in-person interview. We'll do that at the airport.

3 Thank you very much.

4 We ultimately got rid of visas. Used e-visas. This seemed brilliant. Without
5 all the paper and the grommets and the ribbons. It was a huge package that people
6 would take with them when they got accepted. Just get an e-visa, simplified.

7 And then the last was consolidating or centralizing the travel. At the end of the
8 whole process, Afghans were told: God bless you, here's your visa, make your travel
9 arrangements, have a nice life. And that worked fine in 2020 and years before, in part
10 because the flow wasn't very good.

11 By organizing our own charter aircraft and filling those aircraft and presenting at
12 the airport a manifest, these people are good to go. They don't have visas, and maybe
13 they don't have e-visas. They're good to go.

14 We went from maybe 50 a month in early 2000s, before COVID, to hundreds every
15 day. I mean, this is a tremendous achievement. And it took an enormous amount of
16 arm-twisting by the NSC of particularly the Department of Homeland Security, which
17 has -- of course, they have absolutely critical responsibilities, but to speed up and simplify
18 these things so we could get more.

19 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

20 We're over time. So we'll stop there.

21 Ambassador Wilson. Sorry to give a long answer.

22 [REDACTED]. No, no.

23 Ambassador Wilson. It's important. This was really important.

24 [REDACTED]. Thank you. We can go off the record.

25 [Recess.]

1 [3:17 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q So, Ambassador, I want to revert to a statement you made in your testimony
4 earlier. And please feel free to correct me if I'm misstating anything or you'd like to
5 clarify.

6 You stated something to the effect of the Afghan military being at an advantage
7 due to its Air Force or sort of the air power it had in Afghanistan.

8 Is that a correct recollection?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Did you contemplate that the Afghan Air Force would be negatively
11 impacted by the loss of U.S. troop support, advisers, logistics, and contractors in 2021?

12 A Yes. This was a preoccupation of General Miller that he expressed in
13 conversations with me about how we were going to be able to continue our logistical
14 support for the Afghan Air Force as U.S. forces drew down and contractors went away.

15 It was also a preoccupation of President Ghani. This was issue number one that
16 he raised when he was -- after he was informed of the President's decision. He raised it
17 with every visitor that we had in the period that followed, and I think was deeply, deeply
18 concerned about the ability of the Afghan Air Force to operate effectively for long without
19 maintenance and repair capabilities that our contractors provided.

20 The answer that he received pretty consistently was: We're working on it, we're
21 working on it, we're working on it. And we were working on it. Not we, the U.S.
22 Mission was not directly involved with this, but the military was working on alternative
23 arraignments, some at Kabul Airport, at HKIA, and arrangements also elsewhere, to which
24 aircraft -- Afghan aircraft could be sent for more substantial work than could be done by a
25 more -- a somewhat limited capability at Kabul airport.

1 They were very concerned about it and made us concerned about it, and including
2 with respect to the morale and the coherence, long-term coherence of the Afghan
3 defensive security forces. And it was for that reason that I flagged that earlier in talking
4 about the long-term outlook and the pluses, but also the concerns that we had.

5 Q Was that issue ever resolved prior to the Taliban takeover?

6 A It was getting resolved, let's put it that way, or somewhat resolved. The
7 offshore capability came on stream in late July, I believe. And we -- or the military -- ran
8 at least one -- one -- I don't know if it was a test run or an actual run, but one sending an
9 aircraft out to have this work done, that it required my intervention because it -- anything
10 leaving Afghanistan in that manner had to go over Pakistan and that meant getting -- and
11 it's a military aircraft. So it's kind of complicated to get flight authorization for it. And
12 we worked that through. And I believe that first trip didn't have any further problems.
13 That then was a template, but it was a little late.

14 Q By offshoring, am I correct in understanding that these planes, if they had
15 any issues, would be sent to Pakistan?

16 A No. They would be sent through Pakistan to another offshore destination.
17 This was not any issue. This is major -- where there were major maintenance repair
18 issues that could not be performed locally in Kabul.

19 Q So was the Afghan Air Force and the Afghan military writ large significantly
20 weakened or very hampered by the U.S. withdrawal in 2021?

21 A That's a somewhat bigger issue than what we just described, right?

22 Q So let's focus it specifically on this, because it sounds like this added
23 additional processes.

24 A On the Air Force side, yes, the degradation of the U.S. Air Force took away
25 their comparative advantage against the Talibs, that the Talibs had no particularly

1 effective defense against.

2 That's why the Afghan leadership was concerned about it. That's why we were
3 concerned about it. That's why work was going on to try to address this.

4 And if it had succeeded, if it succeeded earlier it might have made a difference.
5 But it absolutely had a negative effective I believe on the morale in the Afghan Air Force
6 and by extension in the Afghan security forces generally.

7 Q And its functionality, correct?

8 A Yes.

9 Q Following President Biden's withdrawal order, what comprehensive plans
10 were in place to support the Afghan military?

11 A So we talked earlier about the policy review that the administration began
12 shortly after taking office. It included a slice that had to do with our security assistance
13 and cooperation with the Afghans. It included what we were just talking about, the Air
14 Force, as well as other matters, how we would continue to provide other material, how
15 we would continue to pay -- to provide funding to pay salaries of soldiers, the mechanics
16 of what it is that we do, and how that would be staffed in country.

17 Would that be at the embassy? Or under the embassy? Would that be under
18 another military person not -- a military person not part of the overall U.S. mission?
19 Where would that be? How would all that be done?

20 Yes. So there was a lot of work that went on to try to suss those topics out and
21 come to common agreement about it. I would say the majority of those specific issues
22 were outside my remit as U.S. Chief of Mission. Those were military matters. And so I
23 can't get into a lot of detail about how they -- exactly how they got resolved.

24 But those were the kind of issues, and the conversations about them were quite
25 serious because the stakes were obvious.

1 Q When were those plans finalized?

2 A Nothing's ever final in government.

3 [Laughter.]

4 People continued to work on those problems all the way up to -- all the way up
5 basically to about the 13th or 14th of August. I referred to the matter of repair and
6 maintenance, aircraft being flown abroad to be serviced. That work went on, and
7 people were working hard on it.

8 Q So let me reframe the question.

9 When were those plans established?

10 A Right away you get into something that gets beyond by remit. I don't
11 know, you know, when any -- when decisions on virtually all of the issues except those
12 that pertained to us were made or who made those decisions.

13 They were all problems being worked, first and foremost by the U.S. military
14 commanders in Kabul with their superiors in Washington and then up the chain of
15 command to the top.

16 Q Did you ever see these plans, a physical plan?

17 A I saw a number of plans that had to do with the evacuation and how that
18 would be done and staged. I had, as I think my remarks have suggested, fairly extensive
19 briefings on this problem of support to the Afghan Air Force and how we would continue
20 to provide other security assistance to the Afghans going forward.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q Ambassador Wilson, when did you first get the impression the situation on
23 the ground in Afghanistan was deteriorating and the Taliban was making significant
24 military gains?

25 A In some significant measure the situation started to deteriorate in

1 September 2020 in the immediate aftermath of the opening of negotiations in Doha
2 when the Talib attacks, wide-ranging attacks by the Talibs on Lashkar Gah, the capital of
3 Helmand, and Kandahar city began.

4 The Afghans performed pretty well. They had pretty strong American air
5 support. But the problems that became more substantial later that had to do with the
6 leadership of the force and the morale of the fighters, but especially the leadership,
7 started to become much more apparent to us.

8 At about the same time, President Ghani began changing his corps commanders
9 and division commanders at a rapid tempo. More often than not, the newly appointed
10 person was quite a bit less competent than the person that he replaced. And just -- and
11 you had this churn that became a bigger and bigger factor throughout the latter part of
12 2020 and even more so in 2021.

13 The Defense Minister was out of the country on extended medical leave due to
14 injuries he suffered in a terrorist attack some number of years earlier. That caused
15 some further command and leadership problems for the Afghan military.

16 All that said, that kind of situation -- repeated large-scale Talib attacks that, while
17 not always successful, tied up lots of troops, cost Afghanistan a lot, added to leadership
18 churn because the Afghan soldiers hadn't been successful, so Ghani fired the
19 commanders, and a lack of a Defense Minister -- that kind of status quo lasted more or
20 less, in my recollection, to June, when, as we discussed earlier, what I regard as the
21 beginning of the final and successful Taliban offensive, district by district by district -- I've
22 forgotten the number now, but it's a very big number, like 200 districts that were taken
23 between the first of June and the end of July -- that we began to be a lot more concerned
24 about the outlook of the Afghan defensive security forces and therefore the outlook for
25 the country.

1 Q How did you -- what was your reaction to the rapid Taliban gains in June and
2 July '21?

3 A Admiral Vasely -- as I indicated in my opening statement, Admiral Vasely and
4 I took this up directly with President Ghani and his senior commanders over and over and
5 over: You must consolidate your forces. They were spread out, and they were trying
6 to defend 34 provincial capitals, not to mention a number of other targets around the
7 country. They couldn't do that anymore. They needed to consolidate and defend the
8 most vital assets that they had.

9 They needed to strategize or prioritize the use of those forces, which in June and
10 much of July were being used not to defend strategically important targets, but because a
11 provincial governor asked for it or President Ghani decided it. It wasn't a military plan.
12 It was reactive and therefore deeply destructive for the country.

13 We urged, and I worked especially hard on this, on Ghani and other political
14 leaders, Karzai, Abdullah, others, to rally together, to rally all the major leaders together
15 and rally the Afghan citizens who -- the overwhelmingly majority of whom did not like the
16 Talibs and did not want to see a return of the Talibs to power, to come together behind
17 the Afghan security forces.

18 And we did that in part because we thought the Afghans still had a reasonable
19 chance to defend their country if they took the necessary steps to do so.

20 Q Can you explain what the Emergency Action Committee is and what its
21 takeaways were in the summer of 2021?

22 A Every embassy has an Emergency Action Committee. It's a vehicle that a
23 post uses and post management uses to coordinate across section lines and maybe
24 especially across agency lines on issues related to a potential emergency, which might be
25 an earthquake or COVID or something of a security nature that's at issue here.

1 The Emergency Action Committee met regularly, although I would not say
2 especially really frequently. In the first part of the year, 2021, we increased those kind
3 of get-togethers in the spring, including to get on the table some of the issues relating to
4 NEO preparation, other contingency planning, shared assessment of what the situation
5 was that we were concerned about for the Armed Forces in Afghanistan generally.

6 But in this period that you've referred to, June, July, those meetings became if
7 not -- they were least weekly, if not a couple of times a week, to take stock, share
8 information, and share information with our staffs about the situation and share
9 information for our section chiefs and agency heads to share with their staffs about what
10 we were doing and what it was that the rank and file, so to speak, needed to know for the
11 period ahead.

12 Q How long did you believe the Afghan military could successfully hold off the
13 Taliban in the absence of the U.S. military?

14 A In my recollection, the intel was pointed to quite a bit later in the year than
15 August 15th. You know, intel is always kind of uncertain and it gets written in a way that
16 that leaves plenty of questions. The intel became increasingly negative about the
17 Afghan Government's prospects, especially as we got to late July.

18 But I think my read of it, and I don't think I was the only one in this category, was
19 that they had time to -- some amount of time, weeks, months, possibly even into early
20 into the new year, if they took steps to consolidate their forces and better prioritize their
21 use and provide -- ensure that good, competent leaders were in positions and they didn't
22 get moved around all the time, which made them newly incompetent wherever it was
23 that they went, and that they rallied their people around their country more effectively.

24 ██████████. So, Ambassador, just so I'm understanding correctly, is it your
25 testimony that it wasn't a matter if the Afghan Government would fall in the hands of the

1 Taliban, but a matter of when?

2 Ambassador Wilson. No. I think that we -- the way I understood the
3 intelligence reports was that the Afghan Government still had time to get its act together
4 and to defend itself.

5 And in the absence of getting its act together and defending itself, yes, its
6 sustainability and survivability, looking very much further out in the future along the lines
7 of what I described, had an awful lot of question marks beside it.

8 The intel was never definitive in saying here's a date or here's a timeline. It was
9 there's a set of uncertainties there that I think all of us in positions of responsibility were
10 trying to cope with.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q What was the Regional Security Office's assessment of the situation?

13 A I believe it was comparable to mine. I derived a lot of my views about
14 where we stood and where embassy security stood and the viability of the embassy stood
15 from him.

16 Q Did the political section disagree?

17 A The issue -- to the extent that the issue was the embassy's ability to continue
18 to operate effectively, that wasn't really the political section's call. That would then be
19 the RSO and the management counselor and post management. The political section's
20 input had to do more with the broader political situation and the government.

21 Yes, there were concerns among some of our officers about where things were
22 headed. This is an emotional time. I had officers in tears in my office who, you know,
23 whose friends, whose colleagues, military people that they worked with, others that they
24 worked with, under threat, facing problems. They were emotional about that and they
25 were deeply concerned about the future of people they cared about.

1 Q Was the embassy comfortable with using HKIA as sort of its lifeline?

2 A HKIA had one huge advantage, which is it's a 5-minute helicopter ride at
3 most from our landing zone to HKIA. And that made it important and interesting to us.

4 I think we and the entire Western diplomatic corps, for that matter the entire
5 diplomatic corps, believed that keeping HKIA open and operational, commercially
6 operational, was an essential underpinning for their ability to continue to stay in the
7 country.

8 We had an Air Force that we could ultimately call upon to get us out. That
9 wasn't the case with respect to the others. And so for that reason HKIA was very, very
10 important to us. They also, I should say, could get there readily and easily more so than
11 any other airfield that was available.

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q Ambassador, I want to go back to the point about sort of the Afghan military,
14 I have a follow-up question. And I'm going to recount a couple takeaways. And again,
15 please feel free to correct me if I'm misstating anything.

16 The first takeaway was that the Afghan military, based on your prior testimony,
17 was indeed hindered by the loss of U.S. contractor support. That being said, there were
18 efforts underway, but that, according to my understanding, that's what you had stated.

19 The second point was that the Taliban, but for not attacking the U.S. or U.S.
20 forces, was not adhering to provisions of the Doha Agreement, which included inflicting
21 violence upon the Afghan population.

22 You pointed to the loss of morale within the Afghan military as an issue.
23 Considering these points that I just recounted, do you think that the U.S. Government set
24 up the Afghan military for failure?

25 A I think that the decision that was made in 2020, that American forces would

1 withdraw, and its reiteration or modification in April 2021, those things weakened the
2 Afghan Air Force, there's no doubt about that -- the Afghan military. But the
3 fundamental decision was made in January, February 2020.

4 Q Is it fair to say that the Afghan people and the Afghan military did not fight
5 for their country taking all this into account?

6 A A lot of Afghan people fought for their country and fought right up to the
7 very end. And a lot of Afghan people assisted us on August 15, 16 securing airfield in
8 spite of everything else and have put their lives on the line. So I don't like quite the way
9 that you phrased it.

10 Afghans needed to have done more to save their country. That is absolutely
11 correct. And I mentioned in my testimony all of us carry around in our minds things that
12 we might have done differently or that we failed to do.

13 And I include in that us, Afghan leaders, who failed to take steps when they could
14 have effectively or more effectively either salvaged their situation or made for a better
15 future for the people of Afghanistan after our departure.

16 Q Thank you.

17 [REDACTED]. Did officials at U.S. Embassy Kabul express serious concerns to
18 embassy leadership regarding the planned withdrawal, the situation in Afghanistan, and
19 the way it was being -- the policies were being implemented?

20 Mr. Bellinger. Could you restate that? Did who express concern to whom?

21 [REDACTED]. Did officials at U.S. Embassy Kabul express serious concerns to
22 embassy leadership regarding the planned withdrawal and --

23 Mr. Bellinger. The planned military withdrawal.

24 [REDACTED]. The military withdrawal and other State Department planning
25 and policies and embassy operations and the way that all of that was being implemented.

1 Ambassador Wilson. There's a lot packed in there.
2 Everybody in the embassy was concerned about what was happening in
3 Afghanistan. And I hate to repeat myself, but they were concerned going all the way
4 back to the day I arrived, including for reasons not having to do with the decision to
5 withdraw American forces that was made in 2020.

6 It's a war zone. People are nervous in a war zone. And as they watched -- as
7 people watched events unfold, they expressed concerns about where -- of course, I heard
8 concerns from people about where things are headed.

9 And maybe I'll leave it at that for now.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Ambassador Wilson, are you familiar with the July 2021 Dissent Channel
12 cable sent by your staff at U.S. Embassy Kabul?

13 A Yes.

14 Q When did you first become aware of the dissent cable?

15 A I first learned that it had been received in the State Department probably in
16 late maybe -- somewhere near the end of July from a senior official there. It might have
17 been Dean Thompson, but it could have been somebody else.

18 Q And this was July 2021, correct?

19 A July 2021. Yes. I'm sorry.

20 Q Did you have an opportunity to read it?

21 A I read it some number of days after that, yes.

22 Q What was your reaction?

23 A I thought that the authors had done a good job of stating their case.

24 The Dissent Channel is a valued institution in the State Department and important.
25 In my entire professional career we've had this as an outgrowth of differences of view

1 over the Vietnam war.

2 I respected them for doing this. I believed, and I told a couple of the officers
3 later, maybe quite a bit later, that what they have done reflected well on them and on
4 the Foreign Service.

5 Q Were the issues raised in the dissent cable brought to you by your staff
6 beforehand?

7 A No. Not in that form, no.

8 Q Why did embassy staff resort to a Dissent Channel or rely upon a Dissent
9 Channel to communicate their concerns with Department's Afghanistan policy?

10 A As I said earlier, this was an emotional and difficult time. Many of our
11 officers, maybe most of our substantive staff, had friends, colleagues, people they've
12 worked with, people they had relationships with, that they -- this is a huge emotional toll
13 for their Afghan friends, and therefore a huge emotional toll on them.

14 They were deeply concerned about -- I think they expressed in the cable deep
15 concerns about the decisions that had been made and felt they needed to express them.
16 There was a vehicle to do it. And as I said, I respect that.

17 Q Do you believe it was because embassy leadership wasn't appropriately
18 addressing their concerns?

19 A I don't believe that that was the reason why they wrote that message. I
20 read the message, I wouldn't say hurriedly, but I read it once in probably early August by
21 the time I saw it.

22 And what I remember, they weren't taking issue principally or really at all with
23 embassy policy, what we were doing. They were taking issue with the decisions that the
24 President had made and where they were leaving the United States and our interests in
25 Afghanistan and their friends in Afghanistan. And, again, I respect that.

1 I should note, actually, just to be clear about something, I became aware that a
2 cable was in preparation at some point earlier, probably in early June maybe -- or early
3 July rather.

4 I made a point of not trying to find out a lot about that effort because I thought
5 doing so would be inappropriate. It would be seen as trying to censor or muzzle or do
6 something else.

7 And it was only weeks later that I was informed by the State Department that, in
8 fact, this message had come in.

1 [3:47 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q And how did you become aware that the cable was in process or progress?

4 A My two deputies informed me about this. They shared with me an early
5 draft that someone had done that, at least in my recollection, bore little resemblance to
6 what ultimately was transmitted.

7 Q Were they fearful of reprisal by embassy leadership or by leadership in the
8 Department?

9 A I don't believe so.

10 Q Were they concerned that embassy leadership wouldn't communicate their
11 concerns with Department leadership?

12 A You'd have to ask them that question.

13 Q What actions did you take after reading the dissent cable?

14 A I'll be honest; I didn't really take any actions that I wasn't already taking.
15 Matters had moved on significantly in the couple of weeks, as I'm sure it was at
16 least 10 or 12 days after they sent that cable before I read it, and I think it was longer.
17 Matters had moved on.

18 We were working on a number of fronts to try to stabilize Afghanistan's outlook at
19 that point. We were still trying, although we had not made headway, on this matter of
20 consolidating forces and providing better leadership and political unity, and we hadn't
21 given up on that. We were deep into planning for evacuation of our people and with
22 the military for evacuation of others.

23 The task was to stay focused on those things that would help to protect American
24 interests and protect, as much as we could, people that we cared about.

25 Q After receiving the cable and after it was, from my understanding, more

1 broadly shared with the designated recipients pursuant to the FAM, did you have any
2 discussions with Secretary Blinken or other Department leaders regarding its contents?

3 A No. I received some kind of a communication -- I'm not sure who from;
4 possibly from the director of policy planning -- that an answer either had been or was
5 being prepared back to the authors of that message. And that was -- it was a process
6 conversation, not a substantive conversation.

7 Q Other than the processes that were already in place, as you just testified, did
8 you make any recommendations to the Department on how to address the concerns of
9 your staff?

10 A Broadly speaking, I think we were working on the kinds of things we needed
11 to be working on to address the issues that the staff had raised, which had to do with
12 trying to do everything we could to ensure against a collapse of the system and to protect
13 both ourselves and people we cared about in the country if those efforts were not
14 successful.

15 And I used more elegant words to describe earlier -- or, I don't know if they were
16 more elegant, but there were more words -- to describe the things that we were doing.
17 Those were the right things to be doing, and we continued doing them.

18 Q Thank you.

19 Ambassador, is it true that you weren't at Embassy Kabul in late June and early
20 July 2021?

21 A Yes, it is true.

22 So the White House invited, at my recommendation, President Ghani and
23 Abdullah Abdullah to come to meet with President Biden. That meeting was, I believe,
24 June 25th.

25 The State Department and the White House invited me to take part in that

1 meeting and to be in Washington for a couple of days before it to brief people on issues
2 pertaining directly to the visit and how to handle that and, also, consultations on the
3 broader situation, including many of the issues that you've raised here.

4 That meeting was on the 25th. The following week, I took a week off and
5 returned back to Kabul on July 4th.

6 This was the third break I had in 20 months, and I needed it. And I will say I
7 needed it in part because we knew, a blind man could see, that the situation was going to
8 be difficult for the remainder of my time in Afghanistan, which at that point was to the
9 middle of September, and I wanted -- frankly, I needed -- that break in order to feel that I
10 could perform at the level that was required for my position.

11 Q Did that break delay decisions at Embassy Kabul until mid-July 2021?

12 A No. Absolutely not. The DCM, who became charge, was fully empowered
13 to act on everything. Every post where I served as chief of mission, I was absolutely
14 clear about that. There was no holdup on any contingency planning of any kind because
15 I wasn't there.

16 Q Just so I'm understanding temporally, did this break happen while the
17 provincial capitals started falling in Afghanistan and the Taliban started making gains?

18 A It's kind of in the -- it's in the middle of that period, yes, absolutely.

19 Q Ambassador Wilson, can you please speak to what worst-case scenarios the
20 Department had planned for pursuant to the withdrawal?

21 A I don't want to speak to things that I don't know.

22 In the, I believe, two tabletop exercises that took place in probably July -- or
23 maybe it was earlier, actually June -- and early August, there was a segment, I believe,
24 that referred -- I'm not sure it was labeled the "worst case," but it might have been -- to
25 try to start to think through those pieces and what those problems might be.

1 I don't remember the details of that conversation -- of those meetings, for that
2 matter. Unfortunately, all my notes were shredded before I left Kabul, for sort of
3 obvious reasons.

4 And so I can't really speak very much to what went into that box, either provided
5 by the military as part of the preparatory materials for those discussions or was put in
6 that box by participants in the meeting.

7 Q Given the implications of those scenarios to the U.S. diplomatic mission in
8 Afghanistan, do you remember if there was any planning for a Taliban takeover?

9 A The part that I know with the State Department was some planning that I
10 stimulated, probably in May or possibly June, but it could have been earlier, to think
11 through the security, political, and practical issues of the embassy remaining in Kabul
12 following a transfer of power -- either some kind of a coalition government -- I don't know
13 that this is that specific, but a transfer to a government that had a large and possibly
14 preponderant Taliban role, is probably the way to express that.

15 The State Department established a small team to work on this. I met with them
16 once. My DCM met with them a number of other times. And that's the kind of -- we
17 eventually were pushed by other events and other things that took up my time, that
18 that's sort of where I lost that particular trail.

19 That's the one piece that I can directly speak to.

20 [REDACTED]. Who was on that State Department team?

21 Ambassador Wilson. I don't know. I don't remember.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q Ambassador, I imagine I know the answer to this question, but are you
24 familiar with what a noncombatant evacuation, or a NEO, is?

25 A Yes.

1 Q In the course of the withdrawal planning, when did the possibility of a NEO
2 come up?

3 A Probably more or less at the outset.

4 Q Okay. What date range possibly?

5 A I believe the planners -- which is really when concrete planning got
6 underway -- arrived either the latter part of April or certainly the early part of May.

7 Mr. Bellinger. Of?

8 Ambassador Wilson. Of 2021. And these are CENTCOM officers under the
9 command of General Sullivan, who came a little bit later, probably later in May or in
10 possibly June.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q How likely did you believe a NEO to be?

13 A I believed it was likely that we would be needing to evacuate -- I think
14 everybody, actually, believed that we would need to evacuate significant numbers of
15 people: American citizens, SIVers sort of trapped in the pipeline depending on what
16 happened at the airport, other Afghans of interest to us that we might want to get out,
17 third-country diplomats, third-country nationals to whom we had certainly a moral
18 obligation.

19 And so, I mean, that was part of -- immediately, at the outset of the sort of
20 concrete talks about this that began when planners arrived and started meeting with our
21 people -- and I think there had been earlier -- I believe there had been earlier exchanges,
22 you know, electronic exchanges, of the nature of the problem.

23 Mr. Bellinger. Just to go back, when you say how likely did you think a NEO was,
24 could you say when you thought --

25 [REDACTED]. That was going to be my followup --

1 Mr. Bellinger. Yeah, at what point at which you were thinking that.

2 [REDACTED]: That was going to be my followup question specifically.

3 Mr. Bellinger. Yeah.

4 [REDACTED]: At what point in time did you view a NEO to be likely?

5 Ambassador Wilson. I'll, in part, repeat what I said. In late April or May, when
6 we started this conversation, we thought that there was a significant likelihood that a
7 NEO might be needed.

8 [REDACTED]: But when? When did you think it would be needed?

9 Ambassador Wilson. In the future.

10 [REDACTED]: At what point in the future?

11 Ambassador Wilson. In the future. I don't know that there was a timeline or a
12 date that anybody had in mind.

13 [REDACTED]: After the military --

14 Mr. Bellinger. I guess -- and let the record show the he said might be needed,
15 not would be needed, that a NEO might be needed.

16 Ambassador Wilson. Yes. Yes.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q Did you ever see or participate in the formulation of a NEO plan?

19 A My staff was the primary interlocutor with the military in developing the
20 plans that came about. This was my assistant chief of mission, the head of our security
21 office and some of his top people, the management consular and several of his, the
22 consular section of course, probably a couple of other entities, to work on this.

23 The assistant chief of mission briefed me regularly on the conversations that
24 they'd had and where they were and what the military was doing. As I think I
25 mentioned earlier, they undertook site surveys at HKIA to kind of understand the

1 geography that the military had in mind, the various gates that we all came to know
2 about, for example, and site visits to consider alternatives as well.

3 And General Sullivan came in May, I think, at some point, visiting for a week here
4 or a week there, and then came to the country to stay a little bit later.

5 Q Ambassador, I'd like to introduce exhibit 7 into the record.

6 [Wilson Exhibit No. 7.

7 Was marked for identification.]

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q This is Joint Publication 3-68. I can represent that this document is
10 unclassified, publicly available.

11 This was the version of the JP 3-68, in fact, at the time of the withdrawal. A
12 revised draft was submitted by the Department of Defense on May 26, 2022.

13 Ambassador, have you seen this document before?

14 A I saw it only when I received the copy that you provided to Mr. Bellinger.

15 Q Thank you.

16 I'll ask you to please turn, first, to page romanette 1.

17 Mr. Bellinger. X? One?

18 [REDACTED]: Page 1.

19 Mr. Bellinger. Just page 1?

20 [REDACTED]: It's "I."

21 Mr. Bellinger. Oh, little "I." Yep. Little "I."

22 [REDACTED]: Little "I," yeah.

23 Mr. Bellinger. Yeah.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q So it says here that "this publication provides doctrine to plan and conduct

1 joint noncombatant evacuation and repatriation operations" and that it was "prepared
2 under the direction of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

3 Does this comport with your understanding of this document?

4 A It comports with the words on the paper.

5 Q Okay. Fair enough.

6 And if you could please turn to romanette 9. I'll give you an opportunity to take
7 a look at it.

8 I'd like to direct you to the "Overview" section, and I'm going to read a part of the
9 overview into the record.

10 Quote, "During NEOs, the chief of mission (COM), neither the geographic
11 combatant commander (GCC) nor the subordinate joint force commander (JFC), is the
12 senior United States Government authority for the evacuation and, as such, is ultimately
13 responsible for the successful completion of the NEO and the safety of the evacuees."

14 Ambassador Wilson, that would be you, correct, in Afghanistan?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Were you aware throughout the course of the withdrawal and the ultimate
17 evacuation that you, as chief of mission, not the officials in the DOD, were the ultimate
18 authority responsible for the successful completion of the NEO?

19 A Well, first of all, as I suggested, I had never seen this document. This is a
20 JCS document that I think is oriented to soldiers who have to carry out a NEO, so they get
21 the instructions that are contained in pages and pages and pages after that introductory
22 piece.

23 The role of a chief of mission and the role of military personnel that governs how
24 we approach this and how I approached it is that contained in the State Department-DOD
25 memorandum of understanding about NEOs. And I don't know if that's a publicly

1 available document; perhaps [REDACTED] does. But that would be -- that's the guidance that,
2 kind of, I have.

3 So that's answer number one.

4 Answer number two, I believe that it was the responsibility of the chief of mission
5 to call for an evacuation, to recommend an evacuation, which I did with Secretary Blinken
6 on August 15th.

7 In the conduct of the evacuation, the military and the civilian components have
8 different roles to play. The military has the soldiers, they have the airplanes, they have
9 the people to run the airport. In the case of Kabul, they had or could arrange for food,
10 shelter, water, other things that -- and I think this does come through. The military does
11 whatever the civilians can't do under the peculiar circumstances that pertain.

12 The role of the embassy, then, is the care and the feeding, to the extent that that
13 can be done with embassy resources, or, alternatively, to ensure that the military
14 understands they need to take those tasks on, as well as the screening of personnel to
15 ensure that it's American citizens that we're taking or permanent residents or locally
16 engaged staff or people with visas or people who meet other criteria.

17 I think, third, Afghanistan is a unique place. First of all, an absolutely
18 unprecedented number of people that -- the pictures alone are convincing enough -- an
19 unprecedented number of people who were trying to get out and want to get out.

20 Second, it's a sort of unique place because for 20 years you had an American
21 embassy headed by a chief of mission and a combatant command that was not headed by
22 the -- had no accountability of any way, shape, or form to the chief of mission.

23 In my time and, I think, also in my predecessor's time and, I assume, a number of
24 my predecessors, we worked hard on that problem to ensure that we provided, as much
25 as we could, one message to people, that we acted like we were one government, and

1 that we acted that way with respect to Washington.

2 The people who carried out this evacuation were combatant command personnel,
3 who were not going to take orders from me. It doesn't work that way.

4 And I absolutely accept a level of responsibility for what happened there and what
5 went wrong, but I'll come back to maybe the second thing I said: This is a shared
6 responsibility. That's the nature of this beast. And I'm proud of what I did, I'm proud
7 of what State Department and military and other agency personnel did to effect the
8 evacuation of 124,000 people, which is unprecedented in its size and scale in history.

9 Q Ambassador, I'd like to point you next to page romanette 11, at the bottom,
10 "Authorities and Relationships." So I'm going to read this into the record as well, and
11 then I'll have a couple followup questions.

12 "Within the HN" -- which I imagine means "host nation" -- "the COM, although not
13 in the military chain of command, is the lead federal official for protection and evacuation
14 of all US noncombatant evacuees, including DOD dependents. Within the HN, the COM,
15 although not in the military chain of command, is the lead federal official for protection
16 and evacuation of all US noncombatant evacuees, including DOD dependents. The JFC
17 will ensure that DOD actions relating to the evacuation of DOD dependents, DOD civilian
18 employees and their families are consistent with the direction of the COM or principal
19 officer of DOS."

20 Ambassador Wilson, I'm going to ask you again: Were you aware you, as chief of
21 mission, not officials from the DOD, were the ultimate authority responsible for the
22 evacuation?

23 A I'll repeat part of the answer I gave you.

24 I believe that what I did, how I approached things, and how I managed the
25 problems we faced, and how I related to military commanders on the scene was fully

1 consistent with the terms of the memorandum of understanding between the State
2 Department and the Defense Department about how these operations will be conducted.

3 Q Do you believe that --

4 Mr. Bellinger. I'm just going to interject on one thing, just because this
5 document is internally inconsistent, since it says, at ix, "US policy is contained in a
6 memorandum of agreement between the DOD and the DOS," and that memorandum of
7 agreement, which this document says is the policy, contradicts what this guidance says.

8 So I just want to be clear on what this document actually says.

9 [REDACTED]. And thank you for flagging that. We have the MOA on hand.
10 We're happy to bring it in once we're on break, just to ensure that it's clear for the
11 record.

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q The reason I asked this was, do you believe, then, did the Joint Chiefs then
14 make an error in this publication?

15 A I'm not going to castigate the Joint Chiefs. I'm also -- I would want to know
16 with whom at the State Department and the interagency was this cleared and developed.

17 Q So I want to go back to my earlier --

18 A And, in particular, with whom it was cleared at the State Department and
19 the interagency, when this guidance is being applied to me and to my mission. That
20 seems inappropriate to me.

21 Q Was this ever communicated to you by the Secretary of State?

22 A What?

23 Q This delineation of responsibilities.

24 A No.

25 Q Was this ever communicated to you by --

1 A I have seen the State-DOD MOU, although it was a while ago. I know
2 what's required and what's the responsibility of an ambassador to call a NEO and what, in
3 more normal circumstances, might be the primary lead operational responsibility of an
4 ambassador to evacuate people from a country.

5 This wasn't that circumstance. This wasn't Israel right now, where our embassy, I
6 doubt with any substantial military support, is arranging for American citizens to evacuate
7 who wish to get out of Israel and can't because there's no commercial air to do so.

8 That's not what we had in Kabul. We had dire threats from ISIS that terrified
9 everybody from only a few days after we arrived until we left. We had Talibs all over, all
10 around us. There was gunfire constantly. There were constant explosions.

11 This was a situation where the military had to take the lead on a whole lot of
12 things that it might not in many, maybe most, other evacuations. And the Israel
13 example would be my exhibit 1.

14 Q Thank you.

15 I want to just go back to my earlier question, which sort of preceded the entering
16 of the exhibit, specifically about the NEO plans and whether you had seen this.

17 The reason I entered this exhibit and why I asked you these questions was that,
18 based on my understanding, it sounded like it was the assistant chief of mission and the
19 deputy chief of mission who were involved in that process.

20 Did you take any role in the formulation of those plans, as the chief of mission on
21 the ground and the ultimate authority?

22 Mr. Bellinger. Can I just -- again, there's a premise there that is inaccurate.

23 ██████████. The ultimate authority within the embassy, not ultimate
24 authority within --

25 Mr. Bellinger. Well, right. Okay. Ultimate authority within the embassy.

1 ██████████. Embassy.

2 Mr. Bellinger. Yes.

3 Ambassador Wilson. Ambassadors, and especially in a place like Afghanistan,
4 have 1,001 things to do. Working through, over many hours and days and weeks and
5 months, the details of how anything is going to be accomplished is not an effective use of
6 an ambassador's time.

7 That's why I assigned that responsibility to the number-three officer in the
8 embassy, who briefed me regularly on what -- who briefed me regularly on where
9 conversations stood, what was happening, what was being talked about.

10 That's why I met with General Sullivan and was briefed by him directly on the plan
11 as it existed at the point when he briefed me. And I believe there was another meeting
12 a little bit later.

13 That's why the interagency got in the act later, closer to the end of July, or at
14 some point in July, a couple of different tabletop type of exercises, because there needed
15 to be a lot of eyes to look at that picture.

16 But it would've been idiotic for the Secretary of State or for me to spend weeks on
17 this, when I had a lot of other -- day after day after day after day, when I had 1,000 other
18 things to do that I could do that others couldn't.

19 The people who -- and I've never been involved in an evacuation. Where's the
20 expertise? Well, that was the assistant chief of mission. That was the management
21 consular, and especially the RSO and the consular general. They had experience. And
22 they could draw back to the right people in Washington, the State Department, where
23 they needed information about how to do these things or what issues. There's guidance
24 that the State Department provides to these things. It would've been a ludicrous use of
25 my time to have involved myself in the day-to-day task of developing this.

1 It was absolutely my responsibility to be briefed on the plan and the planning as it
2 existed, which I was. I agreed with what General Sullivan had developed. It seemed
3 sound. And I had some questions; he had some questions of me. I respected that.

4 And, as the matter got elevated, there were other senior people, far more senior
5 than I was, that got involved. And that's -- notwithstanding the tragedies that occurred
6 at Kabul Airport, that was the right process.

7 ██████████: Thank you, Ambassador.

8 Ambassador Wilson. I'm sorry if I --

9 ██████████: No. No apologies necessary.
10 If we could go off the record. Thank you.

11 [Recess.]

12 ██████████: So we can go back on the record. Starting the clock again.

13 Mr. Bellinger. Oh, my goodness.

14 ██████████: Ambassador Wilson, as I said at the beginning of the interview, I'm
15 ██████████. I work for Ranking Member Meeks as the ██████████ of the
16 committee.

17 And I just want to reiterate again, I know this has been a long day for you, and
18 we're still going, but we really do appreciate your appearance here voluntarily. I know
19 you traveled a significant distance to come here. So thank you --

20 Ambassador Wilson. Thank you.

21 ██████████: -- for that service and for your cooperation with congressional
22 oversight.

23 BY ██████████:

24 Q I want to quickly go back to the very end of our last minority round of
25 questioning. My colleague had gone over a finding in the after-action review with you

1 on page 11. I don't know if you still have that exhibit.

2 And you had gone into quite an impassioned explanation of steps that you and
3 others during the Biden administration in 2021 took to really increase capacity to process
4 SIVs.

5 A Uh-huh.

6 Q You mentioned a few other things that you were taking that were responsive
7 to some of the urgent challenges that you faced at the start of the Biden administration.

8 So, since we were a bit rushed at the end of the round, I want to, first, give you a
9 chance to say anything more in response to that line of questioning that you didn't get on
10 the record previously. And I can refresh your recollection --

11 A Off the top of my head, I -- that was so long ago, I don't remember.

12 Q Okay. Well, then --

13 A But it may be better to -- if you have further questions on the SIV issue --

14 Q Okay.

15 A -- I'm happy to try to answer those.

16 Q Well, I do have further questions on the SIV simply related to another finding
17 in the after-action review.

18 A Uh-huh.

19 Q If you could turn to page 13.

20 [REDACTED]. Exhibit 6.

21 Ambassador Wilson. Six? Here. Page? Oh, that document. Sorry.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q Yes.

24 A Here. Page 6, right?

25 Q Page 13 --

1 A Thirteen.

2 Q -- of exhibit 6. And I want to start at the top of the page, the paragraph
3 numbered number 13. I'll read it into the record.

4 It says, "At the time the Trump administration signed the agreement with the
5 Taliban in February 2020, there was a significant backlog in the Afghan SIV process. That
6 administration made no senior-level or interagency effort to address the backlog or
7 consider options for other at-risk Afghans despite its commitment to a military
8 withdrawal."

9 Continuing in paragraph 14, it begins, "When the Biden Administration came into
10 office, senior administration officials within the interagency took steps to accelerate the
11 SIV process." We'll stop there.

12 Given your earlier testimony about steps that were taken in 2021 to improve SIV
13 processing, do you agree with this finding that I just read from page 13?

14 A So, those two paragraphs?

15 Q Uh-huh.

16 A Yes. There was, when I came on duty in January 2020, a significant backlog
17 in the SIV process -- around 18,000, I believe, is the number I recall. And I'm not aware
18 of any action that had taken place either before or after, in the course of the Trump
19 administration, to try to accelerate the processing and deal with the backlog prior to a
20 potential withdrawal.

21 Absolutely, the Biden administration National Security Council drove a process to
22 fundamentally change the procedures, especially in Kabul, but also in Washington, and
23 added staff to alleviate that backlog.

24 Q Okay.

25 And then just a quick followup on that. You mentioned that you recalled a

1 backlog at the start of your tenure in Kabul in January 2020 of about 18,000 SIV cases.

2 Can you place that in context for us? You know, historically, is that a significant
3 backlog, in your understanding, for the SIV program?

4 A It's a really big number; I can say that for sure. The only other SIV program
5 that I ever had anything at all to do with was that regarding Iraq and the efforts that were
6 made probably in 2008 to try to deal with that backlog, reflecting, kind of, the same set of
7 issues we're discussing here. I don't remember the numbers, whether they were
8 comparable or not.

9 Q Okay. But it's fair to say that you were concerned by that 18,000-case
10 backlog in January 2020 when you learned of it?

11 A Yes.

12 Q And that no steps were taken to address that backlog until January 2021?

13 A Correct.

14 Q Okay.

15 You also mentioned in your prior testimony -- as you were explaining steps that
16 had been taken in 2021, you referred to efforts to consolidate and organize the travel of
17 SIV-holders out of Afghanistan. Were you referring to Operation Allies Refuge?

18 A I think that's what we called it, yes. I believe that's the correct term.

19 Q Okay. So what is your understanding of Operation Allies Refuge, what it
20 entailed?

21 A I hesitate to describe everything that went under that initiative, but the
22 piece that I spoke about earlier had to do with air travel out of the country.

23 Rather than -- we knew that many SIV recipients stayed in the country for a while,
24 maybe quite a while actually, after they got their visa. It was insurance. They could
25 leave later.

1 We knew that getting tickets, making arrangements for the family, while juggling
2 everything else -- very complicated and a restraining point for many people in taking
3 advantage of this.

4 Meanwhile, we have increased -- because of the other steps I mentioned, we have
5 drastically increased the throughput, the number of people per week or certainly per
6 month that are coming out of the system with their documents, whether they're paper or
7 whatever that is, and how can we dramatically accelerate that?

8 So Operation Allies Refuge, I think, was announced in late June, I think, and, you
9 know, reflected an effort to just consolidate that travel. We'll have charter flights. We
10 started running charter flights in July at some point. We were moving up to two flights a
11 day. And on August 14, when, I would note, the airport was still operating in a perfectly
12 normal manner, I believe we got two flights out.

13 And the intention was to keep that going, two a day, which strained our capacities
14 to support it, but what we were aiming to try to do.

15 Q So is it your belief that these flights that occurred under Operation Allies
16 Refuge from approximately mid-July up until August 14th were generally successful in
17 achieving the objectives that had informed the standing-up of the program in the first
18 place?

19 A Those efforts were extremely important in providing for travel out of
20 Afghanistan of thousands of people, the principal SIV-holder and their families.

21 Q Okay.

22 Did you ever hear concerns from anyone that these evacuation flights under
23 Operation Allies Refuge could negatively impact perceptions of the Afghan Government's
24 stability?

25 A I didn't hear concerns about Allies Refuge per se. We did hear concerns

1 from -- I heard from President Ghani complaints about people who he understood had
2 been contacted by somebody in the American Embassy, you know: We want to be able
3 to get you out, or would you like to get out, or, you know, how can we help you?

4 I can't exclude that those kinds of phone calls might've happened. I wasn't
5 particularly driven by President Ghani's concerns on this.

6 We were concerned, very concerned, about anything that looked like a rush to the
7 exits, as something that would -- particularly by security-sector personnel, as something
8 that would further undermine the security sector and Afghanistan, as a whole, in ways
9 that would be both unhelpful for Afghanistan and potentially dangerous for us.

10 Q Okay.

11 So, given your testimony that you were concerned about anything that appeared
12 to be a, quote, "rush to the exits," is it your assessment that the Operation Allies Refuge
13 flights were conducted in an orderly fashion to avoid such a perception?

14 A Yes.

15 Q And do you know whether there was a strong demand from Afghans for
16 seats on these Operation Allies Refuge flights?

17 A Yes, there was, including because, you know, essentially, the hassle of
18 arranging your travel had kind of been offloaded.

19 I do recall, in the first several flights, there were somewhat more empty seats than
20 we wanted and that we thought was appropriate. And so our consular section took
21 some steps to try to mitigate against that, that may have included overbooking, to be
22 sure that, you know, we could handle that.

23 And I'm also aware that these flights also got used in that period, particularly
24 when there were empty seats -- because there were empty seats, is a better way to put
25 it -- for American citizens and families that we found out about either at the airport or we

1 found out by some other means, get them out of the country on the same basis.

2 Q Okay. And any idea why Afghans weren't availing themselves of seats on
3 these planes?

4 A I think there'd be several reasons.

5 One of them was, you know, they had personal arrangements that they had to tie
6 up and that sort of thing. Maybe they needed to finish matters with their extended
7 families. Immediate families get to travel as part of an SIV; your grandparents, your
8 parents, your siblings don't.

9 I think there had been a longstanding problem -- and this wasn't unique to the
10 summer or even 2021 or even 2020, for that matter -- of people getting these SIVs and
11 then they had an insurance ticket to get out at some later point. The visas had to be
12 used within a certain period of time, I think 6 months, if I remember this correctly. You
13 know, "We'll go later."

14 And, to me at least, that said something about what Afghan citizens, who
15 presumably knew more about the texture of their society and the anxiety among people
16 about the future, that there was something there that maybe we needed to be cognizant
17 of at least. They were confident enough in the country's immediate outlook that they
18 chose to stay.

19 Q Okay. So it's your testimony that these flights in mid-July and the fact that
20 some of the seats were not ultimately taken by Afghans, that that suggested that Afghans
21 were waiting and watching and didn't necessarily feel an imminent need to leave.

22 A Yeah. It was certainly an indicator that Afghans were waiting. Yes.

23 Q Okay. Thank you.

24 That's all I've got on that subject.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Great. I'd like to turn back to the NEO.

2 You previously testified that in April 2021 you thought there might be a need for a
3 NEO. Is that correct?

4 A In that period, yes.

5 Q Okay. Well, what were the factors that led to standing up the NEO in
6 mid-August 2021?

7 A The NEO was triggered by my recommendation to Secretary Blinken that we
8 evacuate immediately. That set in motion everything that followed, including the NEO.

9 Q So what informed your thought that a NEO was imminent and needed to
10 happen immediately?

11 A The pieces that I described in my opening statement get at this: a huge
12 Talib force entering or likely to enter Kabul within hours, if not days, and a Talib force that
13 seemed perhaps not to be entirely under the control of Taliban senior leadership, which
14 poses a different problem and makes it worse.

15 The matter of our expectation that the Talibs would seize Parwan and
16 Pul-e-Charkhi prisons near Kabul that housed thousands of Taliban fighters, who hadn't
17 been released in 2020, as well as many hundreds of ISIS fighters who were taken during
18 fighting, I think it was early in 2019, and common criminals.

19 To the extent the Talibs already had a command-and-control problem, these
20 prisoners fresh out of jail add to that and added to our worry about that. The ISIS
21 fighters, I don't think that needs much comment. But all of that increases the image and
22 the possibility of uncontrolled violence, uncontrolled by anybody from the other side. It
23 was an armed -- it could become an armed mob.

24 And then, third, the effective disintegration of the Green Zone that the day before
25 had been operating just fine. Everybody walked off the job. And so crowds of people,

1 cars, trucks, were streaming through on the roads that still existed through the Green
2 Zone without any stops or checks or questions of any kind. That would be called a truck
3 bomb waiting to happen.

4 That triggered our evacuation, my request that we evacuate. And, as I tried to
5 suggest, the rest of what happens directly followed from that.

6 As far as I am concerned, when I -- I didn't use the words "NEO" with
7 Secretary Blinken, but as far as I'm concerned, the word "evacuation" included our whole
8 evacuation, the whole kit and caboodle. And, in fact, that's what people set about to
9 work on --

10 Q Uh-huh.

11 A -- to begin the concrete implementation, basically as soon as we got to the
12 airport. Admiral Vasely, General Sullivan, General Donahue, I think even that first day,
13 first evening, we had a discussion about what was the plan for the next day, and it was a
14 large-scale humanitarian evacuation, a NEO.

15 Q Okay.

16 Is it, in summary, fair to say that a NEO was necessary due to the precipitous
17 change in the situation on the ground?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Okay.

20 And you just testified that you notified the Secretary that a NEO or an evacuation
21 was necessary. Is that correct?

22 A I recommended this to the Secretary, and he agreed.

23 Q Does it therefore follow that State has a role in calling a NEO; however, DOD
24 has the role of, like, operationalizing the NEO itself?

25 A Broadly speaking, yes. I was responsible for that recommendation, and I

1 fully accept that. I felt, as I tried to indicate earlier, I was responsible for the pieces that
2 we were capable of carrying out and that what remained of the U.S. mission was capable
3 of carrying out and, in particular, the screening responsibilities, but everything else
4 needed to be managed by people who had the assets to do it. That would be the
5 military.

6 As the senior civilian representative, as the President's personal representative in
7 Afghanistan, I had no power to tell a general or a major or a private to do anything and
8 expect -- I couldn't give orders. I couldn't arrange for airplanes. I couldn't arrange for
9 food. The military had to do that.

10 And so the management -- maybe that's another word we can use -- the
11 management of the NEO fell to the military, you know, with a strong supporting role from
12 the mission, including as our resources were augmented by Washington in the couple of
13 days that followed.

14 Q In your assessment, did DOD understand that its role was to operationalize
15 or manage the NEO?

16 A There was -- yes. Everybody set about the task. There was no discussion
17 among us, you know, who's in charge or who is going to run this thing, or any delay in
18 getting on with it. This had been discussed for days among the interagency prior to the
19 15th. We all went about the job. And I'll reiterate again how grateful I am for what
20 the military did.

21 Q Understood. Thank you.

22 I'd like to refer you back to exhibit No. 7 in the binder right in front of you.

23 A Yep.

24 Q It's the Joint Publication, "Noncombatant Evacuation Operations."

25 A One thing, if I can just add to what I said before.

1 Q Sure. Please.

2 A We worked -- the military personnel, military leaders, and our leadership
3 team -- me, the assistant chief of mission, John Bass and his senior people -- worked
4 extraordinarily closely and cooperatively with the military. I never saw any frictions. I
5 never saw or heard reports of divisions or arguments or anything of the sort. Everybody
6 was focused on the task.

7 Q Thank you.

8 Referring to exhibit No. 7, on --

9 Mr. Bellinger. Page?

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q -- the title page, there is a bunch of seals. Do you see the seals there?

12 A Yes, I do.

13 Q Do you see the State Department seal?

14 A No.

15 Q What seals are on this title page?

16 A The various armed services.

17 Q If I could call your attention to the next page, the preface, i, who is the
18 signatory on this page?

19 A The Director of the Joint Staff.

20 Q And who is that person?

21 A Lieutenant General Mayville.

22 Q Is this individual a representative of the Department of Defense?

23 A He's a representative of the Joint Staff.

24 Q Okay. And do you see the State Department as a signatory on this
25 document?

1 A No.

2 Q We spoke briefly in the last round about a memorandum of understanding.
3 Is that correct?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Understanding that you're not an attorney, what is a general understanding
6 you have related to the memorandum of understanding?

7 A It sets down on paper a mutual understanding on whatever the issues are at
8 hand -- in this case, what a NEO is, how it's to be conducted, and the various roles people
9 have to play.

10 Q Who are the parties involved in the memorandum of understanding
11 referenced?

12 A State Department and the Defense Department.

13 Q And I believe your counsel previously mentioned off the record that exhibit
14 No. 7 was not incorporated by reference into the memorandum of understanding. Is
15 that correct?

16 A That's correct.

17 Q How do you know that to be the case?

18 A I think from, first of all, the way this appears here, first. And, second, I
19 think the guidance that's provided here to military personnel differs from the terms that
20 the State Department and the Defense Department agreed on and the way these things
21 are done.

22 Q Have you read the memorandum of understanding?

23 A I have seen the memorandum. It's been some time.

24 Q When is the last time you reviewed it?

25 A I can't answer that question. I don't know.

1 Q Okay.

2 And final question on this: Exhibit No. 7, the NEO document drafted by the DOD,
3 was this document ever referenced by the DOD to you in your interagency discussions
4 related to the NEO?

5 A I don't believe so, no.

6 Q Did any individual representing the Department of Defense ever cite this
7 document in your discussions related to the NEO?

8 A I don't believe so, no.

9 Q Can you say that with a fair amount of certainty?

10 A I would say a high degree of certainty.

11 There was a lot discussed in these two tabletop-type exercises. I can't exclude
12 that somehow this was referred to or there was a slide in the DOD presentation.

13 You know, if I've seen Joint Staff documents -- and there were undoubtedly some
14 of those that were part of that briefing, because these were Joint Staff-led
15 exercises -- they would've had exactly this same cover piece that's here with the seals of
16 the various services and the seal of the Joint Chiefs.

17 Q Okay. Understood.

18 What was your understanding of why Ambassador John Bass was deployed to
19 Kabul during the NEO?

20 A On or about August 17, I took a call from Deputy Secretary of State Sherman.
21 She told me -- she expressed gratitude for what we were doing, which was helpful. She
22 told me that reinforcements were arriving that day and over the next couple of days.
23 And I was already aware that additional consular staff was going to arrive that day, and I
24 think even some on the 16th, to fill out our personnel.

25 She then went on to say that there was a feeling that we needed more help and

1 asked me, how would I feel about Ambassador John Bass coming out to Kabul to work for
2 me and help us on the scene to deal with this situation.

3 My response was, "Yes, please." We needed more hands. We needed more
4 senior and experienced hands. Ambassador Bass, in addition to other things, is a
5 management officer who, more or less by definition, knows a lot more than some of the
6 other senior managers that we had available to us about how to do things like this -- the
7 logistics and planning, detailed planning, about movements of people and so forth.

8 Probably no senior officer in the Foreign Service had a better feel for Afghanistan.
9 He'd been there for 2 years. He knew the people. He knew the geography of the
10 country, and he especially knew the geography of the airport. There was nobody better,
11 actually, that could've been identified to assist us.

12 He had worked as Ambassador in Afghanistan and as Ambassador in Turkiye
13 extraordinarily well and effectively with the military, which counts for a lot in the
14 situation we were facing here. He had a personal relationship with General Donahue,
15 the senior-most officer and therefore the commander, for all intents and purposes, of
16 what was going on at Kabul Airport. He filled a giant need that we had.

17 And I should add, with Bass came at least five or six other senior managers -- a
18 former assistant chief of mission in Kabul who must've been involved in contingency
19 planning when he was in that role, as well as a couple of other senior consular officers
20 and a couple of other, sort of, problem-solvers, including one who is Afghan-American
21 and speaks fluent Farsi, that just filled out our portfolio tremendously.

22 John made an immense contribution to what we were aiming to try to achieve
23 here.

24 We had asked for -- we'd made clear at the time of evacuation that we needed
25 more people, more consular people.

1 Q Uh-huh.

2 A And so the folks that were coming and that Deputy Secretary Sherman
3 referred to were, in part, that. She went well beyond that, and it was absolutely the
4 right call, and I greatly appreciated it.

1 [4:56 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]: Understood.

3 Is it common practice in complex crises such as this for an additional ambassador
4 and his or her staff to come out and support the mission?

5 Ambassador Wilson. It's common in crises like this to send additional senior staff
6 to help effectively manage a situation.

7 In this particular case, Ambassador Bass was available because he wasn't in some
8 other high priority job and had all of the expertise that we needed. Other senior people
9 who might have been available wouldn't have had that. It was a brilliant choice.

10 I should add, there was no -- I believe I said this earlier. John worked for me.
11 Wendy was very -- Wendy Sherman was very specific. I'm the Chief of Mission. John
12 Bass will work for you -- for me.

13 That's the relationship that we had. It was the first thing we talked about when I
14 met with him the morning after he arrived. And as I said, the partnership was absolutely
15 essential for the astounding success that we had in getting the people out that we did.

16 BY [REDACTED]

17 Q Real quick follow-up. You mentioned a former Assistant Chief of Mission
18 that came out along with Ambassador Bass. Was that James DeHart?

19 A Jim DeHart, yes.

20 Q And you mentioned a senior consular officer with a lot of expertise who also
21 came out to augment the work. Was that Jayne Howell?

22 A Yeah, Jayne was one.

23 Q And you mentioned a Farsi speaker with a lot of experience who came out.
24 Was that Mustafa Popal?

25 A Yes.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q Thank you.

3 One final question on this. Did you find that your coordination with Ambassador
4 Bass was successful as the NEO ensued?

5 A Yes. I think our coordination or interaction is sort of the textbook of what
6 you want to try to do in this situation.

7 We spoke frequently, all day, most days, to -- on what was happening, where
8 John -- and John consulted with me. If he felt he needed my guidance, he got it.
9 Sometimes he got guidance that he hadn't asked for. It was very interactive, is probably
10 the right word, and it enabled me to focus on some other things.

11 That division of labor made it possible for John to do what he needed to do in
12 terms of the mechanics of the evacuation and our role in making it happen and crucial for
13 me in the tasks that I had, in particular to keep Secretary Blinken, other principals in
14 Washington informed about the status, what were the upcoming issues, what did they
15 need to know.

16 Q Thank you.

17 And on that piece, it sounds like you were in frequent coordination and
18 consultation with Washington. Is that correct?

19 A I was in consultation with Washington from roughly 4 o'clock in the
20 afternoon until about 2 a.m. every day for most of that period.

21 Q So it was constant?

22 A Yes.

23 Q When you had concerns, did you raise them to Washington?

24 A Yes, of course.

25 Q Did you feel that you were heard?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Did you feel that there was responsiveness to those concerns?

3 A There was a lot of responsiveness when we made requests, yes.

4 Q Okay. And then can you briefly describe your interactions with the State
5 Department team on the ground during the NEO?

6 A So there are a couple of pieces I can speak to.

7 I went to the various gates, or most of the gates, both the ones that everybody
8 knows about, and then there were several less known gates that we used for American
9 citizens, for certain other groups, for our locally engaged staff.

10 And I went there in part to kind of see so that when I talked to Washington I could
11 give them a little bit of on-the-scene sense of what was happening and how things were
12 working, but also to buck them up. They were operating under gunfire. It was
13 terrifying. Military people are trained for that. We're not.

14 Some of them didn't just try. We had one officer who was an ex-Green Beret.
15 He worked 40 hours on a particular problem set with no sleep.

16 They needed to see me, and I tried to fill that need. I met most days in
17 the -- particularly in the afternoon at the time that the shifts changed. People worked
18 12-hour shifts. The departing shifts left at, I don't know, 4 in the morning, or something
19 like that, or 3 in the morning. So I talked to people before they went out.

20 But I talked to them when they came back. How did it go? How are you
21 feeling? What do you need? And I hoped that that provided a measure of support and
22 solace.

23 I will note that our Foreign Service personnel were spread in two different
24 locations. I was at what we refer to as the Kabul air compound, an embassy facility on
25 the south side of the tarmac, with all of the people who had come from the mission in

1 Kabul, plus probably a third, maybe more, of the TDY personnel who had been sent in by
2 the State Department to help us.

3 Because there wasn't capacity for the rest -- or in part because there wasn't
4 capacity for the rest -- they stayed in facilities on the north side of the airport, which is
5 where Ambassador Bass opted to put himself to facilitate the hour-by-hour work that he
6 and Jim DeHart and others on his senior staff needed to do with the military
7 commanders. So they were housed adjacent to the tactical operations center that the
8 military ran.

9 Q Is it fair to say you had a comprehensive understanding of what was
10 happening on the ground in Kabul?

11 A I believe I did. On Kabul, meaning at the airport?

12 Q Correct.

13 A Yes, I believe that I did.

14 Q And in your assessment, do you feel that folks on the ground felt
15 empowered to raise any concerns or issues with you directly?

16 A I believe so. I hope so.

17 Q Do you feel that you were responsive to any concerns that were raised to
18 you directly?

19 A I was responsive to requests that were made to me. We did everything we
20 could to support our people.

21 Q Is it therefore fair to say that you provided the support that was needed on
22 the ground in a time of distress?

23 A I provided the support that I could.

24 Q Understood. Thank you very much.

25 I'd like to speak a little bit further about what was happening on the ground at the

1 airport.

2 State Department officials have testified to our committee that the efforts of the
3 Department and its personnel on the ground were dedicated, entrepreneurial, and
4 admirable under challenging circumstances.

5 We have also heard that their views and support were taken into consideration,
6 the cooperation of the military and coordination with the Department were strong, and
7 preparation was sufficient.

8 Do you agree with this overall assessment?

9 A Yes, and I'm glad to hear it from them too.

10 Q I'd like to draw your attention back to the after-action review, exhibit 6.

11 If I could draw your attention to page number 4. The page is entitled "Executive
12 Summary and Introduction."

13 The last sentence in the second paragraph reads: "Overall, the Department's
14 personnel responded with great agility, determination, and dedication, while taking on
15 roles and responsibilities both domestically and overseas that few had ever anticipated."

16 Does this assessment comport with your understanding of the situation on the
17 ground?

18 A Yes, and I'm very proud of what our people did.

19 Q Would you care to share more of that with the record?

20 A It's difficult to describe.

21 Q Understood. Thank you so much.

22 I'd also like to draw your attention to page --

23 Mr. Bellinger. Hold on, hold on just a minute.

24 [REDACTED] Sure.

25 Mr. Bellinger. Do you want to take a break?

1 ██████████. We're also happy to take a brief recess whenever it's needed. So
2 please just let us know.

3 Ambassador Wilson. Let me take a stab.

4 ██████████. Sure.

5 Ambassador Wilson. I mentioned the ex-Green Beret, the fellow who had been
6 the Acting Political Counselor, and the Public Affairs Officer, both of whom had recent
7 consular commissions, which is why they were with us, are typical of the heroic work that
8 people did.

9 The PAO spent a lot of time on the first -- during the first few days that we were at
10 the airport outside the wire trying to make contact with Afghans who had been referred
11 to us in the "Niagara Falls" of requests that we got from Afghans and many, many others
12 to evacuate this person or that group.

13 To say that they were dangerous circumstances is an understatement. To say
14 that he wasn't really authorized to do that would be an understatement. He did it
15 anyway and told me about it later, which is absolutely the right thing, the telling me later
16 part.

17 And as a result, we were able to get, I think -- the one that I recall was clearly a
18 group of Afghan women, who, if I remember this right, were wearing white. There was
19 white around. And that was one of several means for him to find them.

20 The head of the political section headed up our effort to get our local staff out, the
21 American mission locally hired staff out of the country, and took it upon himself to
22 engage with the senior personnel among our local ranks to get them organized toward
23 getting them into buses and convoys that could come into the embassy airfield -- or come
24 into the airfield.

25 And then, when there were delays with that because of other groups and other

1 priorities that had to be accommodated, was absolutely tenacious in making sure that
2 neither I, nor Ambassador Bass, nor Jim DeHart forgot about them, and we got them out.

3 There are lots of other stories like that, and the book that came out, "Secret
4 Gate," I think does a pretty good job of capturing that. There were a number of these
5 gates. And people did this. They were all volunteers. Nobody drafted them. The
6 military goes where they tell you.

7 When we left Kabul -- or were leaving Kabul, it's actually before we left Kabul, the
8 embassy -- we asked people: Are you willing to do this? Are you willing to stay? Our
9 consular officers and those who had more or less current consular commissions. Are
10 you willing to stay?

11 Some -- a lot of them said yes. Some of them said: I don't think I can do it.
12 Some of them, and some of the TDYers that came, worked for a few days and said: I
13 can't -- I just -- I can't take it.

14 All of them, including those who felt they had to leave, volunteered in
15 unprecedented circumstances, great danger, for which they weren't prepared.

16 [REDACTED]: I just want to clarify for the record. I think it's a subsidy to the
17 ambassador's point. PAO is the acronym for Public Affairs Officer.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q On the points we were just discussing, I wanted to read into the record one
20 line from your opening statement that I think accurately summarizes what you just
21 shared. It's on page 3. And it reads: "Actions taken by courageous, well-trained, and
22 experienced military, Foreign Service, other American, and allied personnel were heroic
23 and extraordinary. I am proud of the more than 100 State Foreign and Civil Service
24 volunteers who came to help, and especially the contribution made by my predecessor in
25 Kabul, Ambassador John Bass, who arrived on August 19."

1 I think that's really well said and provides a helpful footnote.

2 A Thank you.

3 Q Thank you.

4 We'd like to ask you a couple of questions about the after-action review. Would
5 you like to take a moment first?

6 A No, that's fine. Go ahead.

7 Q Okay.

8 Were you involved in the researching or drafting of the after-action report?

9 A No.

10 Q Were you interviewed for it?

11 A No.

12 Q Did you want to be interviewed for it?

13 A I would have if I had been asked. I wasn't asked. I found out about the
14 after-action review, I think, when it was nearly done.

15 Q Okay. Fair enough.

16 And do you know the individual who drafted the after-action review?

17 A I know Dan Smith. I do not know others who were involved in the report.

18 Q What is the professional reputation of Dan Smith?

19 A He's one of most outstanding officers of my generation in the Foreign
20 Service.

21 Q Okay. And you previously testified that you have, in fact, reviewed the
22 after-action review unclassified portion. Is that correct?

23 A That's correct.

24 Q Do you take any issue with its finding?

25 [REDACTED]. I'm sorry, you said you had reviewed the summary, which is

1 different than the unclassified portions of the full --

2 [REDACTED]: Helpful clarification. Thanks, [REDACTED].

3 Ambassador Wilson. What I read was, I believe, in excess of 40 or 50 pages
4 of -- that I think was the entire after-action report, including the recommendations at the
5 end.

6 [REDACTED]: Okay. Fair enough.

7 Ambassador Wilson. The unclassified version that was -- that became --

8 [REDACTED]: Excuse me. You reviewed, I believe, a summary that the
9 Department issued in about that length, but because the original is -- remains classified --

10 Ambassador Wilson. Yeah.

11 [REDACTED]: -- you could not have read, quote, the entire --

12 Ambassador Wilson. Yes, I have never read the entire report.

13 [REDACTED]: Right. I was referring to the unclassified portion of the
14 after-action review. But regardless, perhaps a better question is, do you have any
15 reason to doubt the validity of the drafter, Ambassador Smith's findings, based on your
16 experience and his professional reputation?

17 Ambassador Wilson. No. I think it's an excellent report.

18 [REDACTED]: Okay.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q I just want to ask a follow-up, again, about your experience after the
21 withdrawal had concluded.

22 When did you leave Kabul?

23 A On August 30, 2021.

24 Q And were you on the last American military flight out of the country?

25 A Yes, on the last flight, General Donahue's flight.

1 Q And when did you officially conclude your tenure with the Department as
2 charge?

3 A My service with the State Department formally ended at the end of
4 September, but I, other than answering a number of inquiries that came on, was
5 otherwise not part of any decisionmaking nor deliberations or anything else from
6 August 30.

7 Q Okay. And in that period, as you were -- I'm trying to think what the
8 opposite of onboarding is.

9 Mr. Bellinger. Transitioning?

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Transitioning.

12 Did you debrief the experiences you had in Kabul with anyone at the Department?

13 A No. When -- perhaps a longer answer is appropriate. When I arrived in
14 Doha --

15 Q From Kabul?

16 A -- from Kabul, the small number of us from Embassy Kabul were taken off for
17 COVID testing, and mine was positive.

18 So I was quarantined, brought back to the United States, could not go to the State
19 Department for at least another week after that, and so I went home. And there was no
20 formal debriefing then or at any other time.

21 Q Okay. Did you hear of any concerns during or after your tenure in Kabul,
22 during the evacuation, about the Department's available support toward employees who
23 had served as part of the Noncombatant Evacuation Operation team?

24 A I've heard a lot about it in the aftermath from individuals who felt and I
25 know have complained directly to Secretary Blinken about the lack of -- what they've

1 regarded as the lack of emotional and other support from --

2 Mr. Bellinger. From? Lack of support from.

3 Ambassador Wilson. From the State Department. From the U.S. Government.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q And so I believe your testimony is that you understood these concerns from
6 other people who relayed them to you. Is it your understanding that they also relayed
7 them to individuals at the State Department?

8 A Yes, that's correct.

9 Q And do you have any sense of the response?

10 A I think the State Department has tried to be as responsive as they can and
11 worked on this problem quite a bit.

12 It's not unhelpful that Ambassador Bass has moved on to become Under Secretary
13 for Management at the State Department where he is in a position to work on this
14 problem and identify resources, change rules or regulations, procedures where it's
15 necessary to do so, intervene on behalf of specific people in specific situations, another
16 reason why I'm grateful for what he's done and what he's doing.

17 Q And do you have any knowledge of steps that Ambassador Bass in his new
18 role as Under Secretary for Management has taken in this regard?

19 A My recollections here are limited and superficial. I have heard about steps,
20 some of them recommended in the AAR, some of them just in response to complaints
21 that were made. Ambassador Bass or others at the State Department, I think, can give
22 you a better recounting of that than I could from memory.

23 Q Fair enough. But as a general matter, do you have confidence in
24 Ambassador Bass' ability to receive and respond constructively to the concerns of
25 personnel?

1 A I have absolute confidence in John's dedication to working on this problem
2 and to finding the resources, to the extent that resources are what's necessary, to help
3 people who are suffering from post-traumatic stress.

4 I would note that in meetings immediately after everybody got back, in the course
5 of September, I heard about this from others, and I heard about it from John actually
6 myself with respect to me, he made the point repeatedly, there are resources available
7 for people that need it. And he pointed to something that must have happened earlier
8 in his career that he couldn't deal with, and he finally reached out and got help.

9 I don't know if that story is true or not. But he used that as a way to say there's
10 no shame in asking. Ask. Talk to your supervisors. Talk to State Department
11 counselors. Talk to others who can help you.

12 Q Thank you.

13 ██████████: We just wanted to with our last little bit of time, this will be our
14 concluding round absent any follow-up question, we wanted to offer you the opportunity
15 to affirmatively share any final thoughts or share with us things that maybe we haven't
16 asked you that would be helpful to include in the record today.

17 Mr. Bellinger. Can we take a quick break? I just would like to.

18 ██████████: Sure. We can go off the record. Thank you.

19 [Recess.]

20 BY ██████████:

21 Q We can go back on the record. Thank you.

22 I'll go ahead and ask again, and it's okay if your answer is no, but we wanted to
23 provide you with an opportunity to affirmatively share anything you'd like to with this
24 committee.

25 A I think the only thing I'd add, and I believe this comes from what I've said

1 previously, is Foreign Service personnel take seriously the obligations that they have.
2 No obligation is more important to us than the welfare of our staff and of American
3 citizens overseas.

4 A lot of people did a lot of very, very good work on behalf of American citizens.
5 Together, we got 124,000 people out, out of the country, and responded creatively and
6 tenaciously in a set of circumstances that no one could have predicted.

7 Worked well with the military. There were no problems that impeded in any
8 way what we were engaged in. I can imagine circumstances where those things might
9 not have worked out that way.

10 We owe -- I owe -- an enormous debt of gratitude to General Donahue and his
11 people. We couldn't have done this, obviously, we couldn't have done this. And I
12 think the American people owe a big debt of gratitude to those who carried out these
13 activities -- all of them.

14 Q Thank you for sharing.

15 I'd be remiss to not point out that at the beginning of this TI you testified that you
16 had signed up for 6 months and ended up serving for 20 months. That's a huge
17 accomplishment.

18 A Thank you.

19 Q We thank you for your service.

20 A Thank you.

21 Q On behalf of Ranking Member Meeks and the minority staff, thank you so
22 much for your voluntary appearance here today. It is obviously an emotional
23 undertaking to speak with us. So we thank you for your very informed and constructive
24 opinions and feedback and assessment of the withdrawal and the evacuation.

25 A Thank you very much.

1 Q Thank you.

2 That concludes our round. We can go off the record.

3 [Recess.]

4 [REDACTED]: So back on the record.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q So, Ambassador Bass -- Ambassador Wilson, I apologize -- Ambassador
7 Wilson, was there a contingency plan in place for a NEO prior to the August 2021
8 emergency evacuation?

9 A There were contingencies that had been developed long before I arrived in
10 Kabul for a potential evacuation. Those were further developed in 2020, further refined
11 in 2021. And they're reflected in the planning work that General Sullivan, his staff and
12 our staff, did in the spring and the first part of the summer.

13 Q Was the plan -- was it a written plan?

14 A What I saw were slides that laid out how things would work -- laid out the
15 geography, how things would work. I believe it referred to manpower issues. There
16 were some other items in it. So, yes, it was written down in a piece of paper.

17 At that point, I think it was, as all military plans probably are, it was still in
18 development and was developed up until the moment that the trigger was pulled.

19 Q And was that the plan that you relied upon in the August 2021 evacuation?

20 A I believe that's the plan that the military and our people set about to execute
21 at the start of the evacuation. There were some, of course, pretty -- like any plan, there
22 are some pretty substantial adjustments that you make as you go forward.

23 Q To what extent did NEO planning account for worst-case scenarios?

24 A I believe that General Sullivan's plans included some assumptions -- or
25 actually I'm sure that in the briefing that I received from General Sullivan it included some

1 assumptions about what would be the situation. And that it also -- it almost certainly
2 included some references of things that could go wrong, some worst-case scenarios or
3 possibilities.

4 It's fair to say that there needed to have been more in that category, and it was
5 owing to the dedication of military and U.S. mission personnel that we were able to
6 overcome that and achieve what we did.

7 Q Did the State Department ever put together a specific plan for conducting a
8 NEO with the Taliban in control of most of Afghanistan and everything in Kabul outside of
9 HKAI?

10 A I'm not aware of anything like that that the State Department did.

11 Q Was it something that you ever considered?

12 A To the extent that we considered the broader issue, it was embedded in the
13 work that General Sullivan, his team, and our people did in the spring and summer of
14 2021.

15 Q Can you speak to the rehearsal of concept or ROC drills that were conducted
16 in 2021?

17 A I can speak to those little in part because I don't remember much, if any, of
18 the detail of what happened in those discussions. We all participated. I spoke. I was
19 asked to intervene or did intervene at a number of occasions.

20 There were serious -- it was a serious discussion. It turned up a number of items
21 and issues that were more open-ended or uncertain than a good plan provides, and
22 especially that first ROC drill -- because one went by a different -- one was ROC and
23 another thing had a different name, if I remember this right.

24 But it turned up -- it helped -- it should have helped the military. I believe it
25 helped our people as well in refining their thinking and reminding them of things that

1 they needed to either take into account or better take into account than what had been
2 presented in the first place.

3 Q Do you recall who was present, including any top State Department officials?

4 A I am quite certain that Deputy Secretary McKeon was part of one of these
5 and maybe both; probably both. Under Secretary Perez may have been. Assistant
6 Secretary Thompson may have been; probably was.

7 My strong recollection is that there was one of these meetings of that sort.
8 Secretary Blinken was part of the interagency group deliberating on this. But I'd be hard
9 pressed to give you specifics or go beyond what I just said. I just don't remember.

10 Q Can you speak to the Department's specific efforts to secure lily pads outside
11 Afghanistan in 2021 before August 15th?

12 A No. I can't. I have little visibility in that.

13 Q Ambassador Wilson, was there resistance within the Department or within
14 the embassy to discuss a NEO or using the term NEO?

15 A No. It was part of our planning in the group that was charged with this.
16 The issue came up in some of our Emergency Action Committee.

17 There was sensitivity -- and maybe this is a good point to get into this -- about our
18 taking actions and making announcements or having information get out that would be
19 perceived as the United States is rushing for the exits, and what would be the implications
20 of that.

21 And this concerned me well before the summer of 2021. And there are a
22 number of issues here that I want to try to highlight.

23 One is the matter of security of personnel. Word gets out that the U.S.
24 Government is rushing for the exits, what happens, what follows from that?

25 The military, General Miller, even in 2020, was deeply concerned that the

1 commitment that we had made, that President Trump had made, to withdraw American
2 forces, and the execution of that withdrawal throughout the year, 8,600, 4,500, 2,500,
3 and the same sentiment later I heard from him in 2021 following President Biden's
4 announcement, concern about endangering the retrograde, the military's retrograde, a
5 dangerous -- the most dangerous and difficult things -- one of the most difficult things
6 that the military does.

7 I did not want loose language being floated around outside of our classified
8 settings about our plans that might result in endangerment of that retrograde, green on
9 blue incidents, which had occurred a number of times over the course of the period that
10 we were in Afghanistan. It was a real concern of mine.

11 I think a second concern had to do with embassy security, and it's kind of the
12 mirror image of the same thing, either for our ongoing presence or something that might
13 endanger our evacuation.

14 As I noted earlier, we have an important commitment to American citizens and to
15 our Afghan friends and partners. I had a special obligation to the people who worked
16 for me, a couple thousand, even in the -- certainly in the spring of 2021, and their welfare,
17 and they not be or feel that they were under risk.

18 I was skiddish about things getting out that would undermine further the Afghan
19 security forces and morale there and therefore their effectiveness and lead to -- add to
20 other aggravations and concerns that we had about their reliability to protect us.
21 Because they were an essential part of protecting American forces and our embassy and
22 other Western -- other embassies in Kabul.

23 I was concerned about leaks. And so, yes, I wanted those conversations about
24 our contingency plans to be in a classified setting, among those who needed to be part of
25 those conversations, with input from others. A lot of this did get discussed in our EAC

1 meetings, but there were pieces of it that we discussed in much smaller group meetings.

2 I didn't want to set off a stampede that put at risk something that I think is
3 intrinsically valuable, which is to have a U.S. mission, to protect American citizens, to
4 process SIVs, to collect information, both the way the State Department collects
5 information and the way that other entities collect information.

6 All of that relies on the platform that the embassy provides. We -- embassies
7 provide -- were the vehicle by which we provided security assistance to the Afghans, a
8 part of the vehicle. The military did a lot of that directly, but so were we. They were
9 the vehicle by which we provided humanitarian assistance to Afghans in need about
10 whom Americans cared. We were the vehicle to influence developments in that
11 country.

12 I didn't want there to be a rush to the exits, a precipitous move that I knew would
13 be a one-way trip once we had to do that. There wouldn't be going back. You'll know
14 this, but many, not everybody does.

15 For a decade we had no diplomatic representation, no official U.S. Government
16 representation of any kind in Afghanistan, in the 1990s, and I think American security
17 suffered from that. We know what happened. We know what happened when we
18 didn't have eyes and ears. We know what happened when we had no influence. Zero.

19 And so, yes, I wanted us to be careful about how we talked about our contingency
20 plans, all of our contingency plans, and to keep that within a circle of people who were
21 responsible for that and who needed to know the details.

22 Everybody in the mission, I think, was well aware that there was planning going
23 on. But I felt strongly that we had to be careful how we talked about it and especially
24 careful about how we articulated it both in public and in more private settings with
25 Afghans.

1 And, frankly, with our staff also, because there were several instances throughout
2 2020 and '21 where internal embassy deliberations or internal embassy notices or written
3 stuff that went out to people was provided to the media and would have reverberated
4 right back around to the retrograde, endangerment of what we were doing,
5 endangerment of an evacuation if and when we felt we needed to call it.

6 Q Thank you.

7 Why was a NEO not declared until the Taliban had entered Kabul?

8 A I declared -- I recommended to Secretary Blinken that we evacuate when it
9 was clear that the circumstances were dangerous and likely irreversible, too dangerous
10 for the embassy to remain. And from that directly flowed all the rest of it.

11 ██████████. What did you consider too dangerous to remain?

12 Ambassador Wilson. As I tried to describe earlier, and I won't go through the
13 details, we faced a risk of finding ourselves surrounded by an uncontrolled mob and
14 unable to continue the operations that we, until the day before, we had been carrying out
15 unhindered.

16 Too many people were at risk both at the embassy as well as American citizens
17 and other people we cared about. And that was part of that -- in my mind, that was
18 behind my recommendations to the Secretary, and it's why we moved immediately after
19 our evacuation, the embassy's evacuation to the airport, to proceed with the broader
20 evacuation NEO, the massive humanitarian airlift that we carried out.

21 BY ██████████:

22 Q Did anyone recommend initiating a NEO before August 15th?

23 A No, not to my knowledge.

24 Q So no one told you that they thought that an evacuation should start earlier?

25 A No one told me that we needed to begin a NEO operation.

1 Q What about an evacuation at the embassy?

2 A No one told me that we needed to evacuate the embassy.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Just no one at the State Department or no one more broadly within the
5 administration, including other agency equities?

6 A No one at the State Department, no one in the interagency used words like
7 that with me.

8 Q Ambassador Wilson, we're going to be playing a clip, which unfortunately
9 there's not a transcription of it. But for purposes of the record, this will be transcribed.
10 This is an August 25th, 2021, CBS interview you did.

11 Do you recall that interview?

12 A This is with -- this is CBS?

13 Q Correct.

14 A Yeah. Sure.

15 [Recording played.]

16 Norah O'Donnell: "The question has been raised, why didn't the U.S. get out
17 Americans and our Afghani friends before the Taliban were able to take control of Kabul?
18 You warned about this in a cable. Were you ignored?"

19 Ambassador Wilson: "We put out repeated warnings every 3 weeks to
20 Americans, going back to, I think, March or April, each one in stronger terms: Leave
21 now. Leave immediately.

22 "Never in my 40 years of working, since I began working at the State Department,
23 have I seen such strong -- such strong language used.

24 "People chose not to leave. That's their business. That's their right. We
25 regret now that many may find themselves in a position that they would rather not be in,

1 and we are determined to try to help them."

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q So I'll just repeat that quote -- or actually, in the interest of sort of ensuring I
4 stay true to the record, I won't. But would you like me to repeat that language or --

5 A There's no need on my behalf.

6 Q Ambassador, when did you -- you state here that you issued in serious terms
7 warnings for Americans to leave Afghanistan.

8 To the best of your recollection, when did you really say, urge them, "Get out, get
9 out now," not consider making a plan, not make plans in the future, but immediately
10 state, "Get out, get out now"?

11 A Let me say two things.

12 First of all, I regret everything about that interview. What I said was the wrong
13 way to have responded to that question. I was criticized by a number of people over
14 what I said, blaming the victim, and it was absolutely right. And I am sorry that I did
15 that. I won't make excuses.

16 On your point, there is a record of what exactly the embassy put out, and I think
17 that's probably the best way to answer your question, rather than for me to rely on my
18 recollection.

19 But maybe, to use a few words from that statement, which are correct, these
20 were among the most alarming "get out now" warnings that I have ever seen. And -- I
21 mean, I'll leave it at that.

22 We strongly, in the strongest way that we could, were urging American citizens
23 not to come to Afghanistan, and if they were there to leave immediately. And I'm quite
24 sure we used the word "immediately." When that was, I -- the record would show.

25 Q Thank you, Ambassador.

1 "Leave now, leave immediately"?

2 A This message in March doesn't have those words.

3 Q Okay.

4 A I would also note this is a State Department notice. We contribute to
5 these. The State Department has the pen and puts them out.

6 Q Okay. So I don't want to belabor the point. The reason I entered this is
7 just to sort of get a better understanding of when were these urgent warnings issued by
8 the Department.

9 The next one is April 27th, 2021. It's going to be exhibit 9.

10 [Wilson Exhibit No. 9.

11 Was marked for identification.]

12 [REDACTED]. So this is an April 27th, 2021, "Security Alert," which the
13 language that I interpreted or that I read initially was: "U.S. citizens wishing to depart
14 Afghanistan should leave as soon as possible on available commercial flights."

15 Again, I don't -- when I read this, nowhere do I see the urgent and dire language
16 of, "Leave now, leave immediately."

17 Can you speak to why these warnings -- because my understanding was that
18 warnings were issued consecutively warning American citizens to leave, but the language
19 that I read here is "consider" and "urging," et cetera. So can you speak a bit more to
20 that?

21 Ambassador Wilson. Again, this is April, we're some distance away from the
22 deteriorations in the summer.

23 The occasion that prompted the release of this particular notice is the ordered
24 departure status that Kabul was put on. And our procedures are that when we take
25 steps like this with respect to official Americans, we have to tell the public that we're

1 doing it and say something about why.

2 And this is the aftermath of the Pan Am -- the Lockerbie bombing, when
3 information -- threat information was made available to the U.S. Government and not
4 relayed to travelers.

5 So this statement says that the State Department has ordered the departure of
6 our people. It's intended in the way that the State Department words things to convey
7 to Americans: We're leaving; there ought to be some conclusions you draw for yourself.
8 And the rest of what follows is largely the boilerplate that goes into messages like this.

9 The specific language -- where did I see it? The specific language is different
10 from the one that was before, right? "As soon as possible" is different from "should
11 consider departing."

12 [REDACTED]: Ambassador, if I were to represent to you that August 7th,
13 2021, was the first time that the U.S. Embassy or State Department, given that they're
14 ultimately the ones that put this out, issued a public alert directly telling Americans to
15 leave, would you have reason to disagree?

16 Ambassador Wilson. I had believed that we did that earlier. You may prove me
17 wrong.

18 The embassy did put out other notices to American citizens directly through the
19 Smart Traveler system, but I will defer to what it is that you found. I believed that we
20 had done that earlier, and I may be mistaken.

21 [REDACTED]: So I just want to clarify the record that the question is about the
22 Department of State and yet the answer is about the embassy, and there is a distinction
23 in this messaging.

24 [REDACTED]: So the reason I ask is that on the header it states U.S. Embassy
25 in Afghanistan "Security Alert."

1 [REDACTED]: I understand. I'm just saying you've been asking about
2 Department of State-issued notices, which are -- that's true, but the embassy has its own
3 alert system, embassy warden messages, and I want to be clear that the witness
4 understands which thing you're asking about. That's all.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q So is this issued -- it states here, "Security Alert -- U.S. Embassy Kabul." Is
7 this issued by the embassy, or is this issued by the State Department? Just for purposes
8 of the record. This is the next.

9 A So I think the right answer is both. These messages are issued by the State
10 Department, and they appear on the State Department website I believe, and they were
11 issued by the embassy, and they appear on the embassy website.

12 This one, it's worth noting, it isn't on -- there's no State Department indications
13 here. It would have been -- I'm not sure I can elaborate.

14 Q We feel comfortable moving on from this. We've made our point. And
15 you've already addressed the video. So we're happy to move on to the next subject.

16 A We believe, and our consular staff believes, that they were doing everything
17 we could to urge people to leave and to leave as promptly as possible. And I think we
18 discharged our duties and our consular staff discharged their duties effectively, together
19 with the Consular Bureau at the State Department that ultimately bears responsibility for
20 this.

21 Q Ambassador, did you ever inform or the embassy more broadly inform the
22 Afghan Government that the U.S. Embassy was being shuttered? And if so, when?

23 A I did not. I regarded -- well, let me -- I can actually back up from this, come
24 at it in a somewhat different way.

25 On August 15, I made the decision not to inform the government. I did that for

1 reasons of operational security. They would find out anyway. I would have had to call
2 them at 9:30 in the morning, before we really even started this or started organizing
3 ourselves to carry it out.

4 It struck me as operational security that we keep that information either at the
5 embassy within our channels or convey it to allied embassies that in part depended upon
6 us for -- or could have depended upon us for getting their people out.

7 I believe that in the aftermath of the meetings that we had and the discussions
8 that I've referred to that took place on August 12, that resulted in the decision that we
9 would move to the airport, and that therefore the embassy should begin preparations to
10 execute that at a date -- not distant date, but a date to be determined -- that at some
11 point in the couple of days after that, that the government was informed by an official in
12 Washington.

13 I don't have information on that that I can share with you, but -- and including
14 because I don't know exactly what got said. But, again, this is a matter of operational
15 security, which was my priority, frankly.

1 [6:14 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Ambassador, once the embassy was shuttered, were locally employed staff
4 sent home rather than to HKIA?

5 A In August, as had been the case for a long time, relatively few of our local
6 staff came to work in the embassy on a daily basis or on an ongoing basis. Those who
7 could work from home largely continued to work from home, a practice that had begun
8 under COVID. For security and other reasons, including some of the issues we've
9 discussed here, it seemed prudent and was prudent for them to come elsewhere. So it
10 wasn't a matter of sending people home. They were home.

11 Those who came to work on the morning of 15th were told to leave and that we
12 would be in touch with them about their evacuation from the country, which we did later.

13 Q Am I correct in understanding that the Department waited until August 18th,
14 3 days after the fall of Kabul, to send LE staff a memo asking them to head to HKIA?

15 A On or about the 18th, the State Department, on our behalf, did send some
16 communication -- if I saw the words, I don't remember it, but I might have -- reiterating
17 our commitment to get people out and telling them to come to the airport on the 18th.

18 That message was not adequately coordinated with the folks in Kabul. We were
19 not ready to deal with them. Those who came had to deal with these throngs that were
20 at all the gates. The gates were dangerous -- a very dangerous, actually, place to be.

21 And a few got in, maybe even several dozen actually -- I saw some of them and
22 some of our staff saw them in the airfield -- and got out early.

23 Probably the majority of them went home. They weren't happy about what had
24 happened. I wasn't happy about what had happened. And we had some regrouping to
25 do, then, on how to proceed properly and in a way that would get them out.

1 Q By "what had happened," do you mean the fall of Kabul to the Taliban or
2 what specific -- or the shuttering of the embassy?

3 A No. What had happened in advising them to come to the airport at a
4 specific time where we would try to help them. That's the piece that we were sorry
5 about, because it had been mismanaged.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q Ambassador Wilson, do you know why Bagram was closed in July of '21?

8 A So the decisions on Bagram were made by the military, by General Miller
9 and the command authorities above him. I was not involved in that decision. I was
10 not asked my views about that decision.

11 I was informed some time after it had been made by General Miller, who I think
12 broadly explained -- or, I came away with the impression that the issues had to do with
13 force protection, with an extremely large perimeter that required a level of Afghan
14 support to maintain, about which General Miller apparently decided he wasn't
15 100 percent confident in.

16 It was his decision. He acknowledged that -- or, there was some
17 acknowledgment that, okay, now we're going to work on HKIA for the future.

18 Bagram had two important parts to it. One was, where would contractor
19 support for the Afghan Air Force be carried out? Historically that had been at Bagram,
20 and they had the facilities, and there was room for the people that were needed, et
21 cetera, et cetera. And the other was its potential use as a NEO site.

22 In part because it was interesting as a NEO site, I had gone early in the year and
23 then the assistant chief of mission and a large team in May, I think. And we found the
24 facilities to be quite impressive. They had lots and lots of space, good facilities for
25 people. We thought that this could work, in and of itself.

1 I know that our security personnel expressed some concern about the distance
2 from the embassy. The airport's a 5-minute helicopter ride. Bagram is 30 minutes
3 away. And, therefore, for him and for others and ultimately for me, too, there were
4 issues of our ability to get all of our people out, if that was the destination we had to go
5 to.

6 And I think General Miller concluded -- and he told me this -- that HKIA made a lot
7 of sense for the Air Force work that could realistically continue to be done in-country by
8 contractors; that he planned to move a portion of those contractors or get a portion of
9 those contractors to HKIA and get them in facilities where they could carry out that
10 work -- and, in fact, that happened well prior to the closure of Bagram -- and that it could
11 be a good and suitable and secure place from which to do a NEO.

12 In any case, the decision about Bagram was not in my channel. I had nothing to
13 do with it. And I'll leave it at that.

14 Q Ambassador Wilson, on July 27th of this year, Command Sergeant Major
15 Jake Smith testified to this committee that, in the first half of 2021, an Embassy Kabul site
16 survey team came to Bagram and he told them that a NEO should be conducted through
17 Bagram, not HKIA.

18 Are you aware of this?

19 A I am aware of what he said, yes.

20 Ultimately, decisions about where a NEO was going to be conducted were
21 somewhat above his level. General Miller, while he was in country, had views. His
22 successor, Admiral Vasely, had views.

23 Brigadier General Sullivan, who was charged with the responsibility to do this and
24 it's his job to do NEOs, presumably agreed with this decision that his commanders had
25 made. One way or another, that's what he had to work with and what he did work with.

1 Q Was there any specific person who chose HKIA as the site for the NEO?

2 A By default, one ends up having to point to General Miller and his superiors
3 who made the final decisions about the closure of facilities where we had American
4 personnel. That was the last one left. Where else were we going to do it? There
5 wasn't another place where we had forces, that was proximate -- well, it was the only
6 place, period. There's no need to talk about any other issues.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q Ambassador, what was the State Department's opinion on that, given the
9 magnitude of the evacuation and, sort of, the consular functions that are implicated
10 here? Did the State Department provide an input in this decision?

11 A I have no idea.

12 Q Did you provide an input in this decision?

13 A I've already indicated I had nothing to do with this decision. I was informed
14 about it after the fact.

15 Q Did anyone from the DOD request your opinion on this issue?

16 A No.

17 Q Did anyone from State Department here in D.C. request your opinion on this
18 issue?

19 A No.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q Thank you, Ambassador.

22 Did you ever raise concerns about the prisons at Bagram before Bagram was
23 closed?

24 A Not that I recall.

25 Q Did you raise concerns about the prisons at Bagram prior to August 15th?

1 A I am quite sure that I didn't personally.

2 There was embassy reporting. One of the offices that we had that was staffed by
3 the INL Bureau at the State Department -- "INL" stands for International Law and --
4 Mr. Bellinger. Narcotics and Law Enforcement.

5 Ambassador Wilson. Yeah. Yeah. There you go. Narcotics and Law
6 Enforcement.

7 They had an office in Kabul that had a longstanding relationship with the Afghan
8 justice system and specifically on prisons. So I'm quite sure there's some reporting from
9 them in this period on conditions at the prison and regarding personnel there in whom
10 we would be interested or who, one way or another, represented potential threats to us.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q Did you ever make a proposal to secure the prisons at Bagram in August '21?

13 A No. That would've been a monumental task that exceeded even the force
14 that General Miller still had at the end of 2020.

15 Q When did you learn that there was a risk of the Taliban taking Bagram and
16 freeing the prisoners there?

17 A I think that the -- General Miller and the rest of us understood that Bagram
18 would be at considerable risk after the departure of American forces. If it was a big task
19 to defend for a modest American force and Afghan security -- with a lot of
20 firepower -- and Afghan security personnel in whom we have decreasing confidence,
21 they're not going to be able -- a smaller Afghan force, by itself, is going to have a lot of
22 difficulty.

23 For all of the bases that we returned to Afghan control, there were efforts -- and
24 the military can speak to this better than me -- to try to work with the Afghans on that
25 transition, to ensure that they kind of had what they needed to take over control, and,

1 within the extent of our resources, to provide further help to them after the actual
2 handover so that they had a fair chance to start out over the first number of weeks or
3 longer properly supported by us.

4 We also had -- I had, and I think General Miller had as well -- discussions with
5 President Ghani and with security-sector leaders about their need to get a grip on these
6 facilities and to ensure that the Afghan Government properly supported them and
7 prioritized them in the scheme of things that they had to worry about. The air bases
8 were probably the biggest issue, but the other smaller facilities were one as well. And
9 Bagram, as a principal air base, would've been high on that list.

10 Q In hindsight, do you wish that you had asked for an evacuation, for a NEO,
11 sooner?

12 A I'm comfortable with the conclusion that I came to when I came to it, on
13 August 15th. That was the point where we could no longer safely stay there, and that
14 was the point -- after that point, our ability to get our people out started to look a lot
15 more problematic.

16 I made the point in my opening statement that we got 1,500 people out without a
17 single casualty, not even a twisted ankle. And if you have been to Kabul, the landing
18 strip was a disused soccer field that was basically clods of dirt that you had to walk
19 through. It's pretty easy to get a twisted ankle in it. None of that happened.

20 If we had waited further, we would've complicated our ability to get out. If we
21 had left earlier, several thousand SIV applicants that we got out in whatever the number
22 of days that you want to talk about would not have been able to leave the country. We
23 would not have been able to provide support to American citizens trying to get out. Our
24 eyes and ears about what was happening around us would've been drastically degraded.

25 So I will repeat: I am comfortable with the recommendation that I made and

1 with the time that I made it. Hindsight is 20/20. I had to deal with the situation I had,
2 and I'm satisfied I made the right decisions.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Ambassador, you previously spoke to the delineation of responsibilities
5 between yourself and Ambassador Bass.

6 A Uh-huh.

7 Q This may seem redundant, but I'd appreciate if you'd just elaborate on some
8 of these points.

9 Did Department leadership ask that you share some of your responsibilities with
10 Ambassador Bass?

11 A No.

12 Q Did Department leadership ask that you transfer some of your
13 responsibilities to Ambassador Bass?

14 A No.

15 Q Did Department leadership communicate concern about your ability to lead
16 the evacuation on behalf of the Department?

17 A No.

18 Q Ambassador Wilson, what was the chain of command at HKIA?

19 A The --

20 Mr. Bellinger. Just to be clear, over State Department officials or over military
21 officials, all officials?

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q Within the State Department, the chain of command.

24 A The chain of command was that I was chief of mission and responsible for all
25 the personnel and the activities of people in Afghanistan there under chief-of-mission

1 authority from the State Department, from AID, and from the other agencies that
2 remained at post after August 15.

3 The assistant chief of mission served as the number-two of the mission. And
4 underneath that were all the other people.

5 Q Thank you.

6 Ambassador, I'd like to enter exhibit 10 into the record. This is an article titled
7 "The Final Days" in the Atlantic.

8 [Wilson Exhibit No. 10.

9 Was marked for identification.]

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q There are no page numbers on here, so I have this tab, let the record reflect,
12 and specifically the section I'll be referencing.

13 So, as noted, this is an article published in The Atlantic. It was published on
14 August 29, 2023, so a couple months ago.

15 Under the section titled "August 16th," there's a statement here:

16 "The familiar voice of Wendy Sherman, the No. 2 at the department, came on the
17 line. 'I have a mission for you. You must take it, and you need to leave today.'
18 Sherman then told him: 'I'm calling to ask you to go back to Kabul to lead the
19 evacuation effort.'"

20 "Ambassador Wilson was shattered by the experience of the past week and wasn't
21 'able to function at the level that was necessary' to complete the job on his own.
22 Sherman needed Bass to help manage the exodus."

23 Can you please --

24 [REDACTED]: So we had this come up once before. Does that purport to be a
25 quote from an internal phone call from a senior official to another senior Department

1 official? Because if it is, that's an unauthorized disclosure of information.

2 And even a former officer, I will instruct, the Department does not comment on
3 unauthorized disclosures of information, whether eavesdropping of telephone calls or our
4 records.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q So let me reframe the question.

7 Ambassador, was there any indication by the Department in D.C. that they
8 believed you needed help or assistance in Afghanistan?

9 A We had asked for help and assistance. We were getting help and
10 assistance. And thank goodness for the help that was provided.

11 I described earlier my conversation with Deputy Secretary Sherman in which she
12 referred to reinforcements. Her words to me were: "We think you could use some
13 help. And how would you feel about Ambassador Bass returning to Kabul to work for
14 you" -- me -- "and under [me] as chief of mission to help with the evacuation?"

15 Q So I want to go back to my prior question. Did Department leadership ask
16 that you share some of your responsibilities as chief of mission with Ambassador Bass?

17 A The Department made no request for me to share any responsibilities with
18 Ambassador Bass, and I did not.

19 Q Did you consider assisting with the evacuation one of your responsibilities?

20 A Of course.

21 I had a whole embassy full of people carrying out activities for which I was
22 responsible, that I'd had before and that I remained with once we got to the airport. It
23 didn't mean that I did everybody's job. I had people working for me who were experts.
24 I had people working for me who took burdens off of my shoulders that enabled me to do
25 other things. But my responsibility vis-à-vis the evacuation didn't change at all after

1 John arrived.

2 Q So where were you located during the NEO in HKIA, physically,
3 geographically?

4 A As I think I already mentioned in one of the earlier rounds, I was located at a
5 embassy facility on the south side of the tarmac. That had been the plan that we had
6 developed back some time earlier that it was decided we would execute -- it was decided
7 on August 12 we would execute and that that's where the embassy would be and that's
8 where I would live, I would work. There were hardened, secure facilities in a safe place
9 with good security around us and excellent communications that were provided by the
10 host entity that ran those facilities.

11 Ambassador Bass and some of the TDY personnel who came stayed, lived, and
12 worked on the north primarily -- "worked" is the wrong word, because they worked at the
13 gates. But they lived on the north side of the airport facility in military-provided
14 quarters.

15 And for Bass, that facilitated the day-by-day and hour-by-hour and
16 middle-of-the-night coordination that he had to do with senior military commanders that
17 he was responsible for, that DeHart and other senior staff that had come in to help us,
18 that they had to do with the military. That was the right place for Ambassador Bass to
19 be.

20 Because we were in different places, we talked by phone multiple times every
21 single day. I went over to the north side of the compound every couple of days.

22 I remained responsible for the evacuation. And I'm grateful for the help that
23 John provided in the mission's ability to execute it.

24 Q Who was with you in this south-side facility from the Department?

25 A The deputy chief of mission, all of the remaining Embassy Kabul staff, and

1 probably a third or so of the TDYers that came in the days after August 15th, depending
2 on the availability of bed space and the other things that they needed, you know,
3 basically to live.

4 Q Was anyone else who wasn't with the Department with you in that facility?

5 A The host entity that used that facility.

6 Mr. Bellinger. Can I just ask -- because you're obviously perplexed by this, but, I
7 mean, it seems clear to me, you know, they were not co-Ambassadors. We had
8 someone who had been Ambassador but who was working for Ross Wilson to do an
9 extremely specialized function of getting 124,000 people out over 1 week.

10 But you're perplexed by this, that it's somehow sharing responsibility. It seems
11 that -- so it's worth drilling down a little bit more. What's the perplexity?

12 [REDACTED]. So I'm happy to go into it. I was hoping to -- it might be
13 beneficial to go into it in the next round, given --

14 Mr. Bellinger. Okay.

15 [REDACTED]. -- that it might take a bit longer, if that works. But we do have
16 an exhibit that we can enter --

17 Mr. Bellinger. Okay.

18 [REDACTED]. -- specifically, a transcribed interview that we conducted of a
19 consular officer on the ground by the name of Sam Aronson.

20 And I'm happy to -- you know, we can put a pause on our time now and come
21 back --

22 Mr. Bellinger. Well, we can go in whatever order you want. I think it actually is
23 worth trying to clarify this, because, I will tell you, it's clear to me and it's clear to the
24 Ambassador, but I think you remain puzzled.

25 [REDACTED]. We're just trying to have a better understanding --

1 Mr. Bellinger. Yep. Understood.

2 ██████████: -- of the situation.

3 ██████████: So I think we talked about this -- I'm sorry; on the record -- once
4 before.

5 I will be clear: John Bass, at that time, was an ambassador as an honorific title
6 left over from a prior position. He did not hold an ambassadorial appointment. He
7 had not been confirmed for any ambassadorial title by the Senate at that time.

8 And, therefore, there was only one legal charge on the ground, which was
9 Ambassador Wilson, who, I might add, is referred to as "Ambassador Wilson," even at
10 that time, as a matter of tradition and an honorific title because he had not been
11 nominated to be the Ambassador to Afghanistan.

12 And I have always felt that there has been tremendous confusion because of the
13 use of these titles. We only had one chief of mission --

14 ██████████: So --

15 ██████████: -- and it was not John Bass.

16 ██████████: -- I just want to contend that, in terms of legal authorities and,
17 sort of, legal titles, we in no way are asserting that --

18 ██████████: Okay.

19 ██████████: -- Ambassador Bass was the Ambassador to Afghanistan. We
20 want to have a better understanding of, on the ground, what were some of the practical
21 realities and the chain of command and the delineation of responsibilities.

22 And that is always our contention. So, if there's any confusion, I apologize; we
23 take responsibility for that. But that is not our contention, that you were, legally
24 speaking and in terms of formally speaking, co-Ambassadors in Afghanistan.

25 Mr. Bellinger. And I think we'd like to clear up, either now or next -- because

1 you've asked about the shared responsibilities -- that it was not a shared responsibility.
2 It was a responsibility that Ambassador Bass was doing.

3 Ambassador Wilson. Assisting me in carrying out.

4 There was no -- notwithstanding what some of the staff, maybe especially staff
5 that had come in from somewhere else -- I don't think there was -- among people who
6 were experienced in how we do things, I really do not believe and certainly was not aware
7 while I was there that there was any question that I was chief of mission, that John was
8 there in a supporting role to help all of us carry out an absolutely overwhelming task that
9 required an immense amount of time to work through complex details of moving people
10 and liaison with outside groups and other embassies that wanted to get their people in,
11 that involved complex discussions with the military to orchestrate these things.

12 This is unbelievably time-consuming work. John worked just as much as I did, 20
13 hours a day. You could not combine that role with 8 hours on the phone or in a
14 videoconference with Washington from 4 o'clock to 2:00 in the morning, because at 2:30
15 in the morning you'd be woken up about some question about another group.

16 This was the right thing. And I am extremely grateful to Secretary Sherman for
17 not only providing reinforcements in general but someone who was so expert and so
18 proficient and so respectful of me and my prerogatives as chief of mission, which he
19 absolutely understood. They were the first words out of his mouth when I met with him
20 on arrival.

21 I just don't think there was a question here, and will reiterate for the 50th time
22 how grateful I am to Ambassador Bass for what he did.

23 [REDACTED]. Thank you, Ambassador.

24 And we're out of time here, so we can stop the clock, and we can go off the
25 record.

1 [Discussion off the record.]

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

3 A couple of followup questions for you, Ambassador.

4 I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 11.

5 [Wilson Exhibit No. 11.

6 Was marked for identification.]

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q Exhibit No. 11 is a travel advisory issued by the Department of State. At
9 the top, it reads, "Security Alert - January 17, 2021."

10 Do you agree with that?

11 A Yes.

12 Q I'd like to draw your attention to the third sentence under the subsection
13 entitled "Event."

14 It reads, "The Embassy reminds U.S. citizens that the Travel Advisory for
15 Afghanistan is Level 4 - Do Not Travel due to crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping,
16 armed conflict, and COVID-19. U.S. citizens already in Afghanistan should consider
17 departing."

18 Do you contest that that's written in front of you?

19 A What you read is accurate, yes.

20 Q And the majority had previously stated in exhibit 8, which was a travel
21 advisory, March 18, 2021, that that was the first instance of a Level 4 advisory. Do you
22 contend with that testimony -- with that question?

23 A I think you've accurately described the previous -- I believe you've accurately
24 described the previous notice.

25 Q Thank you. Do you contest that January 17, 2021, predates March 18,

1 2021?

2 A Yes.

3 Q Okay. Thank you.

4 And I'd also like to draw your attention to the word "reminds," "the Embassy
5 reminds." Given the context of this sentence, is it possible that a Level 4 travel advisory
6 existed prior to January 17, 2021?

7 A I believe it did, yes.

8 Q I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 12.

9 [Wilson Exhibit No. 12.

10 Was marked for identification.]

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q Exhibit No. 12 is a document issued by the U.S. Department of State Bureau
13 of Consular Affairs entitled "Informing U.S. Citizen Travelers: Consular Safety and
14 Security Messaging."

15 Do you contest with the title of this document?

16 A You've accurately characterized it.

17 Q I'd like to draw your attention to the red box at the bottom of the first page.
18 There's a red circle that's entitled "Do not travel." I'd like to read it into the record.

19 It says, "Level 4 - Do Not Travel: This is the highest advisory level due to greater
20 likelihood of life-threatening risks. During an emergency, the U.S. government may
21 have very limited ability to provide assistance. The Department of State advises that
22 U.S. citizens not travel to the country or leave as soon as it is safe to do so. The
23 Department of State provides additional advice for travelers in these areas in the Travel
24 Advisory. Conditions in any country may change at this time."

25 Do you agree that this is the highest level of advisory on a range from 1 to 4?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Would you agree that it is unambiguous as to the instructions issued related
3 to a Level 4 - Do Not Travel advisory?

4 A Yes. It's very direct.

5 Q Thank you.

6 That concludes our questions.

7 [REDACTED]: We'll go off the record.

8 [Discussion off the record.]

9 [REDACTED] Back on the record.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q So, Ambassador, I'd like to correct the prior statement. We in no way
12 stated this is the first warning. I can't speak to every universe of warnings that has
13 existed in Afghanistan since the Taliban have occupied the space. Unfortunately, I wish I
14 could. My limiting it to March was actually pertaining to the interview which you spoke
15 on, and you noted March or April.

16 So let the record reflect, given that the minority's addressed it now, I think it
17 would only be responsible to go through the rest of the alerts, the security alerts, to
18 ensure that we have an accurate reflection of the events.

19 A Thank you.

20 Q So exhibit 8, which reflected the March 18, 2021, security alert. Exhibit 9
21 reflected the April 27, 2021, security alert.

22 So, now, exhibit 13 is going to be the May 27, 2021, alert.

23 [Wilson Exhibit No. 13.

24 Was marked for identification.]

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q I'll give you an opportunity to look at this.

2 Ambassador, in the May 27, 2021, alert, the language we interpret as reflecting
3 back on warnings to leave Afghanistan -- "leave now, leave immediately" -- "make
4 plans" -- I just quoted -- "make plans to depart Afghanistan by commercial airlines."
5 Here, we see the language "make plans."

6 Did you contemplate that making plans could extend to July, August, September,
7 October, November, December? Where, here, does it say, you must leave Afghanistan
8 now?

9 A I'm unaware of this statement. I don't recall seeing it at the time.

10 Skimming through the substance of it, I think the purpose of this message was not
11 really about warnings to Americans in any respect. It was to advise Americans in
12 Afghanistan that, if their passport was out of date, we could still help them and we
13 wanted to help them. Because we believed -- and I do recall this piece -- that there was
14 a significant number of American citizens and Afghan-Americans in the country without
15 currently valid passports, and we wanted to be able to help them.

16 Q Okay.

17 So I'm going to enter as exhibit 14 -- I'm going to backtrack a week, unfortunately;
18 I entered May 27th first -- the May 15th security alert.

19 [Wilson Exhibit No. 14.

20 Was marked for identification.]

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q I'll give you an opportunity to take a look at this.

23 A Isn't this the same? You just gave us this.

24 Q May 27th and then May 15th.

25 A Okay.

1 Q Here, the language in the second paragraph in the May 15th alert says,
2 "Commercial flight options from Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) remain
3 available and the U.S. Embassy strongly suggests that U.S. citizens make plans to leave
4 Afghanistan as soon as possible."

5 A Again, is "making plans" the same thing as instructing immediate departure?

6 A The words have a different meaning. In the way that these warnings are
7 put out, this is pretty stark language, and especially when you consider how many there
8 were over this period of time.

9 I I recalled the -- and it's reflected in the interview for which I have already
10 expressed regret -- I recalled at that time that we had put out the strongest warnings that
11 we could possibly put out to people to get out of the country. And if I mischaracterized
12 that in an interview on August-whatever-it-was with CBS, then I accept all responsibility
13 for having misstated the facts.

14 Q And that is not our intention. And we acknowledge, of course, that, you
15 know, we have already discussed the interview. It's to discuss the point of when these
16 warnings were issued and what those warnings were. And it's a followup just to correct
17 the record as to what the minority reflected as to the warnings.

18 A With a layperson, obviously the State Department has certain obligations in how it
19 communicates messages. But my question here is: To a layperson, have we stated,
20 "leave now, leave immediately"?

21 A And I'm happy to move on from this point. There were other alerts on June 3rd,
22 on July 20th, and August 7th, but --

23 A There probably is no post in the entire plethora of Foreign Service posts in
24 the world who put out so many notices over such a short period of time.

25 A And that's part of the problem. Because you put out a whole bunch of notices,

1 "The sky is falling," pretty soon people ignore them. And that is a problem we had,
2 notwithstanding the poor way that I reflected that in an interview. It's a problem the
3 posts have all around the world.

4 Last week, I got inquiries about, "Oh, is it going to be safe for me to travel to
5 Israel?" And I looked on the website. It says you should reconsider traveling; don't.
6 And the travelers who didn't, they don't like that. "But we know better." Well, fine.

7 You know, we do the best we can, and the language is the language that we use.
8 And it goes through about 800 people who clear it before it goes out.

9 Q Ambassador, we previously spoke to -- prior to the changing of rounds with
10 the minority, we spoke as to the delineation of responsibilities between yourself and
11 Ambassador Bass, you as chief of mission and Ambassador Bass as an ambassador coming
12 in after the fact to assist with the evacuation at Deputy Secretary Sherman's request --

13 A He was a senior officer of the State Department who came in to assist with
14 the evacuation. The fact that he was my predecessor as Ambassador is irrelevant and
15 immaterial.

16 Q Of course. And I speak to him as "Ambassador" given his title, not
17 specifically in the role.

18 A Thank you for doing that.

19 Q But I want -- you had asked or inquired about, sort of, you know, what is this
20 that we're asking about here? And what I'm trying to better understand was whether
21 the delineation of responsibilities was understood by those on the ground.

22 So I'm going to be entering in an exhibit 15.

23 [Wilson Exhibit No. 15.

24 Was marked for identification.]

25 BY [REDACTED] :

1 Q I'd point you to page 22, starting at line 25.

2 Before I begin, I will note that this is a not-yet-final transcript from an interview
3 that the House Foreign Affairs Committee did with Mr. Sam Aronson. Mr. Aronson was
4 a POL-ECON Foreign Service officer who volunteered to assist with the Afghanistan
5 evacuation.

6 You'll see here on page 22, starting at line 25, the majority asks: "What is the
7 role of a chief of mission typically?"

8 To which he responds, starting at line 7, quote: "So, regardless of whether it's
9 the charge d'affaires or an accredited ambassador, they are still the chief of mission.
10 And the chief of mission's role in an overseas environment is overseeing all
11 executive-branch activities in that country, which includes the protection of American
12 citizens."

13 I then ask: "Was it your experience that Ambassador Wilson exercised that role
14 throughout the evacuation?"

15 To which he responds: "No, it was not. My experience was that Ambassador
16 John Bass exercised that role."

17 To which the majority follows up with, quote: "So, as chief of mission, he was
18 not the lead on the evacuation?"

19 To which he responds: "I can't speak to what was listed on paper in a formal
20 sense, but, from my experience during the 9 or so days that I was there, Ambassador John
21 Bass exercised the role as the chief of mission."

22 [REDACTED]. Sorry. What page are you on?

23 [REDACTED]. I started on page 22, line 25, and moved to page 23.

24 Mr. Bellinger. And just for my own background, I'm reading on page 11, this
25 individual arrived on or about August 18th or 19th. So --

1 [REDACTED] Correct.

2 Mr. Bellinger. -- he did not see Ambassador Wilson. He had been in country for
3 about 2 days. And he was opining on who had responsibility?

4 [REDACTED] My understanding was that the TDYers came in later. That's
5 why I didn't clarify the date. But happy to reflect that in the record. He was part of
6 the volunteer group that was asked after Kabul fell to come volunteer and assist with the
7 evacuation.

8 Mr. Bellinger. And do you think he's a credible witness as to who's actually
9 responsible based on 2 days on the ground at the airport?

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q So the reason we asked this was: Was there any confusion on the ground
12 as to the delineation of responsibilities? And if there was, how was this communicated
13 to both the TDYers as well as embassy staff?

14 A I don't believe that there was any confusion about who was the chief of
15 mission and what my role was. I don't believe there was substantial confusion about
16 Ambassador Bass's role and his relationship to me.

17 What individual officers -- and Sam Aronson is the hero who's described quite
18 eloquently in "The Secret Gate," a book I commend. Flew into Afghanistan; went to
19 work on the gates. He got his directions possibly from Bass, more likely from -- you
20 mentioned Jayne Howell. There were a couple of other senior managers, as well as our
21 consul general, who gave instructions to people -- where to go, what their tasks were
22 going to be.

23 It's not unreasonable that Mr. Aronson saw Ambassador Bass as the guy that was
24 in charge of what he was doing. Ambassador Bass was operationally in charge of that
25 part of what we were doing, and it was a big part and a very visible part. And it

1 involved, among other things, Ambassador Bass making frequent visits out to the various
2 gates so that he and his people could better work with the military as the days unfolded.

3 Mr. Aronson, who I believe has an outstanding reputation, didn't see anything else
4 that was going on in the mission. He wasn't part of the daily 6 to 8 hours that I spent on
5 the phone with Washington, informing the Secretary of State, the National Security
6 Advisor, other senior officials of what was going on, of what our problems were and
7 where we needed help.

8 He was not part of the evacuation, I don't believe, of our locally engaged staff,
9 which took an immense amount of work to pull that together.

10 He was not overseeing the work that Mustafa Popal, who was mentioned earlier,
11 led for a period on the future of Kabul Airport after we left, which was one of the
12 principal tasks we assigned to him to help me with.

13 He was not engaged with Tom West, who came out in that period to try have a
14 conversation with the Taliban about the way forward. He was not responsible for the
15 visit of Bill Burns during that same period for kind of the same purpose.

16 I had a lot of other responsibilities, and not every person at the airport and not
17 every person before we went to the airport knew a whole lot about all those other things.
18 All those other roles are integral to what a chief of mission does. And to the extent that
19 I was the operational guy in charge of the day-to-day and hour-to-hour progress of the
20 evacuation, I would've been derelict in the other duties that I had to others on the
21 mission and to what Washington needed and wanted.

22

BY [REDACTED]

23 Q Could you elaborate on the visit of Ambassador Tom West and what he did
24 and your work together? Or, I shouldn't say "Ambassador" -- of Tom West.

25 A Mr. West came to Kabul at some point, I believe, after Ambassador Bass. I

1 no longer remember enough to very accurately characterize his role. Of course, he was
2 a deputy to Ambassador Khalilzad. He had a relationships with a number of the senior
3 Afghans who were in Doha.

4 And I'm aware, too, he had at least one meeting with a Talib figure -- I don't
5 remember who it was -- I believe at the airport terminal. He may -- was almost
6 certainly, actually, probably part of the meeting that Mr. Burns had as well.

7 Q And what was your -- how did you work together with Mr. West during his
8 time on the ground?

9 A Mr. West was in the country under my authority as chief of mission, and so
10 coordinated with me on what he was there to do and how he intended to do it and how
11 we, the remaining mission staff, what we needed to do to support that, to make it
12 happen.

13 I was not involved in the substance of that discussion. I wasn't part of that
14 discussion. A decision had been made eons earlier that American ambassadors are not
15 dealing with the Taliban, are not going to confer that recognition. That was a role for
16 West. It was a role for Ambassador Khalilzad as well.

17 But it was absolutely my role to oversee his work in my country and to ensure that
18 the mission supported him logistically in terms of security arrangements and in every
19 other way so that he could do his job.

20 Q And could you speak to Mr. Burns's visit, Director Burns?

21 A I don't think that would be appropriate for me to do so. We
22 supported -- the U.S. mission supported Ambassador Burns's visit in a manner analogous
23 to that for any other visitor.

24 Q And you mentioned that Mr. Burns was present at a meeting with Mr. West.
25 Is there anything at the unclassified level that you can speak to about, you know, his

1 meetings or activities?

2 A No.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Let's pivot to another topic.

5 Ambassador, are you aware of the security understandings with the Taliban at
6 HKIA?

7 A General Donahue and Admiral Vasely described to me what were their
8 intentions with the Taliban before they initiated contact, and we discussed that. They
9 described to me the results of those conversations.

10 Donahue or Vasely were in touch with me prior to many -- I hesitate to say "most,"
11 because I don't know -- but many of the other interactions that they had, which were
12 usually by phone -- I think there were a few that were face-to-face -- to work out
13 appropriate deconfliction around the perimeter of the airport and to work out problems
14 that arose.

15 So I was informed about that, and that was the right thing to do. And I think that
16 reflects the way that we work together. This was a matter of military necessity that's
17 common when combatants kind of come up against each other, but it also had to do with
18 political and other issues that weren't really in the military's purview. And General
19 Donahue, I think for that reason, among others, took the time to consult with me about
20 these conversations before and after.

21 Q Ambassador, are you aware if the Taliban turned away American passport
22 holders?

23 A The Talibs were very difficult to deal with. That's in their nature. And
24 access into the airfield was difficult to secure for everybody.

25 One of the principal things that General Donahue did -- and this is another reason

1 why he consulted with me about this -- was to negotiate special arrangements for
2 American citizens, not at Abbey Gate, East Gate, North Gate, or a couple of the other
3 lesser-known gates that were kind of known, but at other gates that nobody knew about
4 and that were more secure and more securable, where the Talibs would feel comfortable,
5 where we would feel comfortable, we thought it would work for our Americans.

6 It often happened that -- not "often" -- it happened that the Talibs turned away
7 American passport holders. And the most common reason that I heard about was
8 Americans with 50 other people -- like, not maybe an immediate family; like, maybe an
9 extended family and maybe friends and coworkers and other people -- and that the
10 Talibs, who understood, I believe, from what General Donahue conveyed, American
11 citizens and their families -- and I expect that that included their immediate families -- let
12 them through and got agreement from senior Talibs, yes, that's what we will do.

13 In practice, two things happened. One is, the Talibs on the scene didn't get that
14 instruction or didn't understand it or weren't very smart. These were illiterate fighters
15 who were now put in the role of access control. And the other things that happened is
16 that the Talibs would turn away -- did turn away these, you know, gigantic families that
17 showed up.

18 And then we had to rubber (ph) back, try to figure out another way and another
19 time and another place to get them in, with admonitions, "This is for immediate family."
20 And it's a matter not just of getting them through the Taliban. That's, like, our law and
21 our practice when it comes to immigration to the United States or travel to the United
22 States.

23 Q Thank you.

24 Were you aware of the Taliban inflicting violence on Americans?

25 A No. No. There were occasional complaints that our officers who dealt

1 with American citizens who had come through these gates -- that the Talibs had been
2 abusive, difficult. But any kind of serious attack, nobody ever informed me about that.

3 Q So I would like to enter into the record exhibit --

4 The Reporter. Oh, it would be 16.

5 [REDACTED]: Sorry, as I try to find this in my pile of documents here.

6 [Wilson Exhibit No. 16.

7 Was marked for identification.]

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q Okay. This is the not-yet-final transcript from Ms. Jayne Howell, just a
10 snippet of the transcript.

11 Ambassador, I imagine I know the answer to this question, but are you familiar
12 with who Ms. Howell is?

13 A Yes.

14 Q And she was the consular lead on the ground, correct?

15 A She was a consular lead on the ground -- manager, senior manager, that
16 Ambassador Bass and others had encouraged to come.

17 Q If I could direct you to page 60, line 13, here, the minority asks Ms. Howell:
18 "What were some of the most significant challenges posed by these large crowds upon
19 your initial arrival?"

20 To which Ms. Howell responded: "I mean, the main one was always the
21 stampede, that if there was not appropriate crowd control in place, that people were
22 being crushed or pushed up against the walls. But, then, in addition to the just
23 mechanics of the large number of people and the risk of crushing, there was violence
24 within the crowd. The Taliban periodically would start either, at the very minimum,
25 beating people with sticks, and in the worst cases they were using live bullets and

1 shooting at people in the crowd if they felt that the crowd was out of control. So it
2 could be very violent in the crowd as well."

3 Ambassador, I'm going to ask the question again and now a bit differently. Do
4 you have reason to deny that Americans and Afghans were being beaten by the Taliban?

5 Mr. Bellinger. Can I just interrupt? It doesn't say anything about Americans at
6 all here. So I just want to be clear about that. She's just talking about "large number
7 of people" and crowds.

8 [REDACTED]. I will send a followup text. It's not in this. But we were
9 talking about Americans previously.

10 But let me just focus on, sort of, given that this is not in the --

11 Mr. Bellinger. So is the question, is the Ambassador aware that the Talibs were
12 beating Afghans?

13 [REDACTED]. Are you aware that Americans were not getting beaten by the
14 Taliban?

15 Mr. Bellinger. That's a double negative. Do you want to --

1 [7:15 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q So can you say with certainty that Americans were not getting beaten by the
4 Taliban?

5 A Of course I can't say that. I answered your question earlier, which I recall
6 is, are you aware of Americans being beaten by Talibs. And I am not aware. I did not
7 hear reports of that. I did, as I indicated, hear reports of abuse and difficulty that the
8 Talibs presented -- the Talib figures at these various access points presented to American
9 families who were trying to access the airport.

10 The Talibs absolutely -- the Talibs were absolutely engaged in using sticks and
11 beating people from the -- essentially, from the time or shortly after we got to the
12 airport. The Talibs used live gunfire to control crowds. In general, from the reporting
13 that I had and from what I saw when I went to these gates, it was crowd control. It was
14 not firing at people with the intent of shooting them. It was to scare them away, don't
15 go that direction, we need for you to go that direction, to people who didn't follow other
16 instructions that might have been conveyed. That's part of the reason why I referred
17 earlier to constant gunfire that our people had to endure at these gates and especially if
18 they went out of the gates in any significant way.

19 In general, I didn't read every single word of this couple of pages, but it comports
20 a hundred percent what I see -- appears to comport a hundred percent with what I recall,
21 to some extent observing myself when I went to these gates, but also what I heard from
22 the officers that I spoke with who had worked on the line, including before she arrived,
23 which I think was about the 18th or 19th.

24 Q Were the Haqqanis providing security at HKIA?

25 A I am not aware that we ever had granularity as to what brand of Taliban was

1 responsible for the airport area common.

2 Q Ambassador, how did the Department determine which Afghan populations
3 were eligible for evacuation and what documentation was acceptable to be evacuated?

4 A So, you know, one obvious category is -- are American citizens, that's easy
5 enough, and permanent resident aliens with that sort of document. Our people in the
6 military were instructed really at the outset that American passport holders, to the extent
7 it was possible to do so, should be expedited to the front of the line, check to be sure that
8 just waving a passport, you know, that it's the person who actually is the person in
9 question, and move them on through. I will say the President was very specific that our
10 top priority was American citizens.

11 SIV people, SIV visa holders were a top priority for us. They had a harder time
12 getting through. The special arrangements that I referred to that we were able to
13 negotiate with the Talibs, General Donahue was able to negotiate with the Talibs for
14 American citizens at special gates, they would not agree to that for non-American citizens
15 and non-third country nationals. There was some special effort for them as well.

16 But having said that, the instructions that were conveyed -- that were conveyed to
17 people, I believe, were if you've got a Special Immigrant Visa or an e-visa and you got
18 through the Talibs, you know, we would try to -- we would try to work with you. There
19 was other guidance that got provided in various forms of other categories of people we
20 wanted to try to support.

21 Obviously, our local staff was a big priority for us. The journalists and others in
22 the country with nongovernmental organizations, human rights organizations, other
23 organizations that we were with was a priority for us. Judges, prosecutors, a priority.
24 The Lincoln Learning Center, the American Center staffs sort of falling into the category of
25 quasi-embassy employees, although they weren't. Contractors. So, you know, there

1 were a lot of populations in which we were very interested. It was always complicated
2 getting them in.

3 Q Thank you, Ambassador.

4 I have one follow-up question on that subject. Who was responsible for
5 determining which Afghan populations were eligible for evacuation?

6 A Well, the categories that I just described to you were discussed in
7 interagency meetings that took place -- that took place in the runup to August I would say
8 is fair to say. So the guidance that I asked be disseminated to our consular staff
9 reflected the results of those interagency negotiations or the results of those meetings.

10 In reality, consular officers -- and this was also part of the instructions that I
11 conveyed and that I asked to be conveyed -- needed to use their judgment. And I think
12 the path that most people took was to err on the side of letting people in. If there was a
13 compelling case that somebody had worked for us -- they didn't have an SIV, okay, they
14 were in the pipeline. If there was a compelling case that got made by somebody who
15 looked like they probably had been and were able somehow to demonstrate that, fine.
16 Similarly, people made compelling cases about having worked for the American University
17 in Afghanistan, or having worked for an NGO, or having worked for, you know, The New
18 York Times or BBC or somebody else. We would accommodate them, and let them
19 come through.

20 For all these categories, including American citizen families, maybe the
21 documentation was kind of missing, the case was unclear, or it was an extended family
22 that had gotten through the Taliban, there was appropriate screening, are all of these
23 people actually related, talk to us about how you're actually related to one another, try to
24 assure ourselves that people were not -- maybe had not bought their way into a group, or
25 that they wouldn't present potential security challenges or risks for us. We were putting

1 a lot of them on U.S. Air Force planes, and we had to have categories and some
2 assessment of people before we put both a lot of other Afghans and ourselves at further
3 risk.

4 Q Thank you, Ambassador.

5 [REDACTED]: I'm going to defer to my colleague.

6 [REDACTED]: So I'm going to enter in another exhibit, 17. I know it's a very
7 big document, but we're actually only going to one page.

8 Ambassador Wilson. I'll have a lot of airport reading. This is airplane reading.

9 [REDACTED]: You can't take it with you.

10 Ambassador Wilson. I can't take it with me. Fine.

11 [REDACTED]: I'll bring it up to the page that's tabbed there.

12 [Wilson Exhibit No. 17.

13 Was marked for identification.]

14 [REDACTED]: The top of the document is secret, so wanted to clarify why this is
15 in an unclassified setting.

16 [REDACTED]: This was obtained through FOIA. It's FOIA and available online.

17 [REDACTED]: Is there a declass marking on it?

18 [REDACTED]: There's not. So I'm not questioning you that you got it through
19 FOIA, but an incorrect FOIA release of a classified document doesn't declassify it.

20 [REDACTED]: I believe this is the Department of Defense's Abbey Gate
21 investigation that was FOIAed and went through declassification review.

22 [REDACTED]: Yeah, yeah. Not to personalize this, but I actually acted for the
23 Department in that regard, and the material I saw that we cleared on had a
24 declassification marking on it. So I'm confused. I just -- I think you need to be cautious
25 with this transcript and this questioning.

1 [REDACTED]: There's stamps on these pages saying approved for release.

2 [REDACTED]: So right there -- where on that page does it say approved for
3 release?

4 [REDACTED]: Most of the --

5 [REDACTED]: And I might add, approved for release is not a declassification
6 marking. You cited the executive order. Under the executive order, those are
7 supposed to be stricken and the word "declassified" stamped on it.

8 [REDACTED]: We can't speak to why the DOD didn't do that. But this was --

9 [REDACTED]: No, no, no. I can't speak to why they didn't either. My point is
10 that if they released it in FOIA, that did not declassify it, the simple release of it. And
11 therefore, I would like the witness and you guys to be thoughtful about what goes into a
12 record that is currently labeled unclassified.

13 It's not State Department record. I get that. But the same executive order
14 applies to them that applies to us.

15 [REDACTED]: Again, unfortunately, the DOD would be, I assume, the original
16 classification authority on this, so we can't speak to why it was publicly released by them,
17 but ultimately that's how we sourced these documents.

18 [REDACTED]: Right. Well, the fact that you sourced documents that are
19 illegally released does not declassify them. That's all.

20 [REDACTED]: We appreciate that. I unfortunately can't opine further other
21 than the fact that it's publicly obtained and that the DOD released these documents.

22 [REDACTED]: Again, I accept that, neither that it was public nor the DOD
23 released it, effectively declassifies it under the existing executive order on classification.

24 Ambassador Wilson. Perhaps if you want to ask a specific question, set this
25 aside.

1 [REDACTED]. Can we go off the record?

2 [Discussion off the record.]

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Did General Miller ever get pushback from Embassy Kabul related to his
5 desire to draw down and prepare for a NEO?

6 A Did General Miller get pushback from the embassy -- please restate the
7 question.

8 Q Did General Miller get pushback from the embassy when he was pushing to
9 get a NEO going sooner?

10 A General Miller did not at any time with me or as far as I know with the
11 mission, but prior to his departure from the country in early July, urge, request, or
12 suggest that we needed promptly to carry out a NEO.

13 Q Did the embassy ever raise concerns about DOD encroaching on the
14 embassy's authorities when pushing for the embassy to perhaps close its operations?

15 A Again, could we restate this to be sure I know what question I'm answering.
16 Did the embassy -- sorry.

17 Q Did anyone at the embassy view the Department's push for the embassy to
18 close, did anyone at the embassy view those Defense Department efforts as a power
19 grab?

20 A I think the right answer to that question is that the issue of the American
21 Embassy in Kabul remaining and remaining in operations was primarily a Department of
22 State function. But, you know, where there was pushback along the lines that
23 you're -- beyond that, I don't know how to answer the question, at least as you've
24 phrased it.

25 Q Did Rear Admiral Vasely provide assessments weeks ahead of the fall of

1 Kabul that the Afghan Government was in a downward spiral and likely not recoverable?

2 A Admiral Vasely began participating in our frequent Emergency Action
3 Committee meetings sometime by early July, not before that, and along with the RSO,
4 with our regional security officer, expressed his assessment of the situation in the country
5 in general and the situation as it pertained to the embassy regularly.

6 He was also a member of a much smaller security planning group that I set up in
7 probably late May or early June, where there was some of the same assessment going on,
8 but a lot of planning and coordination as to what -- who was planning what and some of
9 the details of that between the embassy and the military command.

10 So we valued his participation. We valued the views that he expressed. I
11 attached a high value and great deal of respect for him, but high value to what he had to
12 say. I had him in those meetings for a reason and took very seriously his assessment of
13 the flow of events.

14 Q Can you describe the evacuation from the embassy? Was there any chaos
15 during the evacuation? Was there ever any fear that the embassy itself might be in
16 danger or overrun during that time period?

17 A On the morning of the 15th, after Secretary Blinken had approved my
18 recommendation to evacuate, the relevant parts of the embassy that had to carry out and
19 support that operation started their work. And within probably an hour, alerts were
20 going out to different groups of the population to move themselves to the airport -- to
21 the helicopter landing zone for movement to the airport.

22 I'm not aware, and I was out around the compound during that period, of anybody
23 acting in any way other than professionally in response to a crisis situation and getting
24 themselves in order and to that location. Later in the sequence of events that day,
25 there was a flag ceremony that I was asked to come down to the embassy courtyard.

1 And there were -- the senior security officer reported to me that there had been reports
2 of firing, gunfire in the vicinity of the embassy and gunmen reportedly seen on the vacant
3 floors of a building adjacent to the embassy compound and with a direct line of sight to
4 where I was going to get the flag.

5 I did not hear, when I got down there, gunfire. Our ceremony, which was
6 extremely brief, the flag had already been lowered, was handed to me, I went back in.
7 But all orderly. And as I say, I did not hear reports. But I heard subsequently from
8 others that there was more than a little bit of gunfire and that, basically, the moment that
9 the last set of people left shortly before dawn on the 16, that looters were coming over
10 some of the walls to try to see what they could get.

11 I don't think it was a chaotic situation. It was a war zone. We had lots of drills.
12 People understood there was risk when they took that assignment and agreed to
13 volunteer to go there and reacted in a professional manner to the instructions that were
14 provided.

15 Q Had security arrangements been worked out with the Turks or any other
16 groups about -- and those arrangements, had they been finalized by August 15th related
17 to protection of HKIA?

18 A No. Those arrangements I don't believe were really finalized in the way
19 that -- in the way that we had hoped when discussions with the Turks, about which I'm
20 somewhat informed but was not directly involved in, like we had hopes for them to be
21 able to take control.

22 After we got to the airport, as I mentioned earlier, Mustafa Popal sort of led that
23 effort, and subsequently it was taken over by our defense attache who remained to the
24 very end to try to facilitate a deal with the Turks, with the Qataris who were also very
25 interested. I think we were kind of agnostic who we wanted -- we wanted, if at all

1 possible, for an outside player with which the Talibs had a relationship, as both the
2 Qataris and the Turks did, to take control of Kabul airport such that we could continue
3 evacuation operations after the departure of American forces, so that they would run the
4 airport in a manner that commercial airlines or at least commercially owned charter
5 airplanes would be willing and feel safe to come into Kabul for a variety of reasons, but
6 including to get our people out.

7 And that's where the conversation ended. On the last set of conversations that I
8 had with Washington on the 30th, this was still part of the discussion and part of the mix.
9 It had to be taken over, of course, by other people because we were out of business.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Ambassador, I think we're coming to a close. It's almost 8 p.m. So I just
12 want to give you an opportunity -- we've asked you many questions here today. Is there
13 anything that you'd like to say as a closing to the embassy staff, to the U.S. service
14 members, to our Afghan allies? We want to give you an opportunity to provide a sort of
15 closing statement.

16 A I'll say a couple things. One, to just go back to the remarks I made about
17 not rushing to the exits and the value of embassies overseas. All of us there felt that we
18 were performing vital functions for the United States, and we were performing vital
19 functions for the United States. And I wanted those functions to continue for as long as
20 it was safe to do so. I agreed wholeheartedly with the decisions that Secretary Blinken
21 and I believe also the President had made that we should stay as long as it was safe to do
22 so.

23 And I think the issues that I mentioned earlier about maintaining our
24 representation and the loss of our representation and what that -- the damage that that
25 did to our country, I didn't want to see that repeated, unless we absolutely had to. And

1 I know there were several military and other figures conveying the message that we
2 needed to think about leaving sooner rather than later. And I absolutely got that.

3 I had the same -- I had many of the same thoughts. A lot of our staff had the
4 same thoughts. We had a job to do. We were sent there to do a job, and as long as it
5 was safe to do it, we were gonna continue. And those last set of SIVers, the couple
6 hundred or several hundred that got out on the 14th, they're grateful that we didn't leave
7 on the morning of the 14th or the 13th or the -- and you just work your way back. We
8 were still carrying out essential missions.

9 Had we been able to stay, obviously, there would have been complicated issues
10 about how we deal with the Taliban and issues related to recognition and so forth. And
11 I absolutely get that.

12 I regret that we don't have an embassy now, because we don't know what's going
13 on there. And we have absolutely no way to help people who helped us, to say nothing
14 of anybody else. I think that's a mistake. I understand why that happened. I brought
15 it about. But I think it's a big loss. A big loss. And it's a big loss for Afghanistan and
16 our interests there.

17 I think I've already spoken a lot about the people who did just spectacular work.
18 And I should say it wasn't just -- like, my primary gratitude is for those that came and
19 helped, number one, the people that came and put their lives on the line. But I have to
20 add, too, hundreds of people around the world were part of these phone operations to
21 make contact with Americans. We went back in the list of everybody that had
22 registered for some long period of time and called every one of them, are you in
23 Afghanistan? We had phone numbers and some of them were U.S. Are you in
24 Afghanistan? No. Wonderful. Have a nice life.

25 Yes, I am in Afghanistan. Do you want to leave? Yes, I want to leave. Have

1 you gone to the airport? Have you tried? If not, why? If you have tried and can't,
2 let's help you figure out a way that you can get to the airport.

3 And I will tell you that a lot of that work was not just by consular officers in China
4 or Bahrain or Latin America, other places. It was other members of our mission who
5 had other roles in Afghanistan, my hosts during my stay who did a lot of that. And
6 where people really couldn't make it happen, they made it happen, through people who
7 had worked for them and worked with them and worked with us, with our mission.

8 We didn't do enough, and that's something, you know, I have to live with. I'm
9 very proud of what we did. And thank you for your interest in our closing chapter in
10 Afghanistan. I hope that whatever you and the committee do will include recognition of
11 the sacrifices people made.

12 Q Thank you, Ambassador.

13 We appreciate you testifying before us today. And I have some closing remarks
14 I'd like to make on behalf of the committee. But before I do my diligence, I just have a
15 couple questions about your preparation for today.

16 Briefly want to touch upon how did you first learn of the committee's interest in
17 conducting a transcribed interview?

18 A I received an email I think possibly from you to this effect in August at some
19 point, I believe.

20 Q Thank you.

21 And what kind of preparations did you undertake for this interview?

22 A I prepared the statement that you -- formal statement that you have. As
23 you can see, I tried to figure out how to take various topics apart and remind myself of
24 what some of the facts were, where I could. I consulted with Mr. Bellinger, with a
25 couple of other colleagues who were not involved in Afghanistan in the period when I

1 was there. I did, and it's important to acknowledge this, I contacted the Assistant Chief
2 of Mission with respect to the timelines and some of the dates to be sure that I didn't
3 mischaracterize what some of the key dates in particular were.

4 Beyond that, you know, I worked hard -- I should say I reviewed some of the
5 material. I reviewed the AAR. I reviewed the State OIG report, the unclassified reports
6 that came out, reread some of the other material to remind myself what were some of
7 the issues.

8 Q Ambassador, I just want to say thank you for appearing today and also for
9 staying for what is now almost 12 hours to speak with us. I know Chairman McCaul
10 appreciates it. Committee staff appreciates it. We do recognize the service -- the
11 sacrifice and service that you made in Afghanistan.

12 And just, on behalf of all of us, thank you for coming today and answering these
13 very difficult questions. I know it's not easy, and for traveling to Washington.

14 A Thank you.

15 [REDACTED]. That's all we have. Thank you.

16 [REDACTED]. We can stay on the record. We have no further questions. I'll just
17 add, on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks, our deep thanks to you for spending time with
18 us today. You have many more noble forms of service that you've performed in your
19 career than staying until 8 p.m., but I nevertheless want to acknowledge this one. Thank
20 you for your engagement and your frankness, your details, and your cooperation with this
21 committee. We appreciate it.

22 Ambassador Wilson. Thank you very much.

23 [REDACTED]. We can go off the record.

24 [Whereupon, at 7:46 p.m., the interview was adjourned.]

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 232 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded.



Witness Name

1/5/2023

Date

**Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of
Ross Wilson dated 10/24/2023**

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel errata, (4) private counsel (as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
Universal		Replace “HKAI” with “HKIA”	
Universal		Replace “Accra” with “Ankara”	
9	24	Replace “Khalizad” with “Khalilzad”	
15	17	Replace “would serve” with “and would serve”	
25	11	Replace “names” with “times”	
31	15-16	Replace “He was a touch -- varied regularly with Secretary Pompeo” with “He was in touch regularly with Secretary Pompeo...”	
32	10-11	Replace “President Ghani’s staff raises with me, I believe on August 13, and I met with him on the 13th and the 14th about that.” with “President Ghani’s staff raised this with me, I believe, on August 13, and I met with them on the 13th and 14th about that.”	
33	4	Replace “negotiations going between the Taliban and the Afghans about the future of our embassy...” with “negotiations going between the Taliban and the Afghans; the future of our embassy...”	
41	10	Replace “we would ask you to refrain from” with “we ask that you refrain from”	
42	25	Replace “November to May of that year” with “November to May 2019.”	
44	10	Replace “There is a combat and command in country” with “There is a combatant command in country.”	
44	16	Replace “you had mentioned these” with “you mentioned these”	
44	22	Replace “then, you’ve” with “that you’ve”	
46	22	Replace “you service” with “your service”	
49	15	Replace “And in my time, was the point person...” with “And in my time, he was the point person...”	
49	18-19	Replace “...and then seeing to that those were conducted...” with “...and then seeing to it that those strikes were conducted...”	
50	5	Replace “afteraction review” with “after action review”	
52	13	Replace “reviewing?” with “reviewing intelligence?”	
52	20	Replace “...analysts who are here.” with “...analysts who are in Washington.”	
53	6	Replace “...de factor Secretary of State” with “...de facto deputy assistant Secretary of State...”	
55	16	Strike “as to”	

Page	Line	Change	Reason
56	24	Replace “aught” with “ought”	
60	14	Replace “Turkey” with “Afghanistan”	
61	18	Replace “it was very, very, very little that others were able to do, and what little” with “...very, very little that others were able to do outside the embassy compound, and what little...”	
65	11	Strike “as”	
66	21	Replace “understanding of” with “understanding that”	
86	10-11	Replace “And so we're looking, you know, how to do this. And we had some modalities and so forth.” with “And so they were looking, you know, how to do this, the modalities as so forth.”	
86	19-20	Replace “That's what that was. And it essentially was to provide for -- what the Afghans” with “That’s what their idea was – it was essentially to provide for – what the Afghans”	
94	11	Replace “forces remained defective when” with “forces remained effective when”	
96	12	Replace “through our reporting, he -- and then, you know, to follow up” with “through our reporting and, you know, to follow up”	
97	1	Replace “a capacity effectively to do this” with “a capacity to negotiate effectively.”	
97	17	Replace “rule” with “role”	
100	9-10	Replace “But there are provisions that talk about Kabul and provincial capitals.” with “But there are provisions that talk about attacks on Kabul and provincial capitals.”	
101	18	Replace “them” with “the prisoners the Taliban wanted released”	
102	7	Replace “influence” with “inference”	
102	11	Delete “or anything else.”	
103	1	Replace “And” with “We had”	
103	4-5	Replace “that met in --- or maybe the second week” with “that met in --- the first or maybe the second week”	
103	6	Replace “earliest” with “toughest”	
105	3	Replace “settlement” with “setting”	
107	18	Replace “Theoretically given that, would you have been” with “Given that, would you theoretically have been”	
107	21	Replace “likely.” with “likely?”	
110	9-10	Replace “Ultimately, that decision wasn't made before January 21st.” to “Ultimately, that decision to go to zero wasn’t made before January 21st.”	

Page	Line	Change	Reason
110	20	Replace "So this is something that we focused" with "So this is something that we, at post, focused"	
111	3	Replace "how you close." to "about how you close a post."	
111	12-13	Replace "The consular section used the fact that they were closed -- it's a worldwide directive" with "The Consular section used the fact that they were closed. There was a worldwide directive"	
111	14	Replace "They" with "Our consular staff"	
111	15-17	Replace "goofy, contacted the people -- not they were wrong, like there was some problem with the applicants or problem with the application." with "goofy. They contacted applicants and others to take up the problems and to advise them."	
111	22	Replace "when the closure" with "when the consular closure"	
113	22	Replace "is not being made public" with "is not public"	
117	15	Replace "No" with "No, I am not aware of discussions in Washington about how to handle a precipitous deterioration of security in Afghanistan."	
119	22-24	Replace "I definitely had conversations with -- either with Dean Thompson or it might have been one of his predecessors -- it probably was one of his predecessors in that period between our election and January 21st." with "I definitely had conversations with Dean Thompson in the period between our election and January 21st."	
121	15	Replace "And the military had an extremely" with "And the military would have had an extremely"	
121	20-21	Replace "How do we compensate for other capacities that our being in Afghanistan provided for us?" with "How do we compensate for the departure of military capabilities on which we depended?"	
121	19	Replace "reenforcements" with "reinforcements"	
125	10-11	Replace "where Colonel Bock (ph) in Kandahar can be found to provide a letter," with "where a colonel or captain who served in Kandahar years before can be found to provide a letter"	
125	14	Replace "Those early interagency meetings -- and they put this more on the agenda of some of the" with "Those early interagency meetings put this problem more on the agenda"	
126	2	Replace "We'll do that at the airport" with "We'll do this instead at the airport."	

Page	Line	Change	Reason
126	5	Replace “It was a huge package that people” with “The old procedures produced a huge package of forms that people”	
126	8	Replace “whole” with “old”	
126	11-12	Replace “By organizing our own charter aircraft and filling those aircraft and presenting at the airport a manifest, these people are good to go.” with “By organizing our own charter aircraft and filling those aircraft and presenting at the airport a manifest of travelers, these people are good to go.”	
126	14	Replace “We went from maybe 50 a month” with “We went from maybe 50 people a month in early 2000s”	
128	24	Replace “U.S.” with “Afghan”	
129	5	Replace “But it absolutely had a negative effective” with “But the lack of a clear plan absolutely had a negative”	
129	23	Replace “got resolved.” with “got addressed.”	
130	17	Replace “evacuation” with “withdrawal”	
133	1-2	Replace “regularly, although I would not say especially really frequently.” to “regularly in late 2020”	
142	12	Replace “charge” with “chargé”	
144	25	Replace “followup” with “follow-up”	
145	2	Replace “followup” with “follow-up”	
149	2	Replace “The people” with “The military people”	
163	11	Replace “there is a bunch” with “there are a bunch”	
164	5	Replace “a general” with “the general”	
170	12	Replace “them” with “our officers in the field”	
171	3-4	Replace “Because there wasn't capacity for the rest -- or in part because there wasn't capacity for the rest -- they stayed in facilities...” with “Because there wasn't capacity, or in part because there wasn't capacity, at the Kabul air compound, other TDYers stayed in facilities...”	
173	23	Replace “that could come into the embassy airfield -- or come into the airfield” with “that could come into the airfield.”	
174	1	Replace “to be accommodated, was absolutely tenacious” with “to be accommodated, he was absolutely tenacious”	
174	7-10	Replace “When we left Kabul -- or were leaving Kabul, it's actually before we left Kabul, the embassy -- we asked people: Are you willing to do this? Are you willing to stay? Our consular officers and those who had more or less current consular commissions. Are you willing to stay?” to “When we were evacuating the	

Page	Line	Change	Reason
		embassy and considering who among our consular personnel and those with consular commissions could stay to help at the airport, we posed questions of our staff. Are you willing to do this? Are you willing to stay?"	
174	16	Replace "subsidy" with "subtlety"	
175	24	Replace "finding" with "findings"	
175	10-15	Ambassador Wilson answered he was not interviewed for the Afghanistan AAR. In his comments, he states several days later his memory was refreshed, and he remembered was interviewed by Ambassador Dan Smith in February 2022.	
177	19	Replace "after that, and so I went home." to "... after that, and so I left Washington and went home."	
179	14	Replace "question" with "questions"	
180	7	Replace "Worked well with the military" with "We worked well with the military."	
180	11	Replace "We couldn't have done this, obviously, we couldn't have done this." with "We couldn't have done this, obviously, we couldn't have done this without their efforts."	
184	12	Replace "the same thing for our ongoing..." with "... the same thing, a green on blue incident, for our ongoing"	
184	18	Replace "skiddish" with "skittish"	
185	8-9	Replace "They were the vehicle" with "We were the vehicle"	
191	2	Replace "And this is the aftermath of the Pan Am" with "This policy came in the aftermath of the Pan Am"	
191	3	Replace "available to the U.S. Government and not" with "available to U.S. Government personnel and not"	
194	9	Replace "come elsewhere" with "work elsewhere"	
194	15	Replace "On our about the" with "It's my recollection that on our about..."	
195	11-12	Replace "I was informed some time after it had been made by General Miller, who I think broadly explained or, I came away with the impression that the issues had to do with" with "I was informed some time after it had been made by General Miller or his superiors. Miller broadly explained that the issues had to do with..."	
195	25	Replace "in and of itself." with "...in and of itself for a potential evacuation."	
196	1	Replace "the distance" with "Bagram's distance"	
196	2	Replace "The airport's" with "HKIA is"	
197	4	Add "military" before "personnel"	

Page	Line	Change	Reason
197	4	Replace “That was the last one left.” with “HKIA was the last one left.”	
199	17	Replace “And if you have been to Kabul, the landing strip” with “And if you have been to Kabul, our helicopter landing strip”	
213	9	Replace “charge” with “chargé”	
216	14	Replace “American ambassadors are not” with “American ambassadors to Afghanistan are not”	
218	18	Replace “rubber” with “double”	
218	19	Replace “another place to get them in” with “another place to get the affected American family in”	
220	8	Replace “I will send a followup text” with “I will ask a follow-up question.”	
222	13	Replace “we were able to negotiate with the Talibs, General Donahue was able to negotiate with the Talibs for American citizens at special gates, they would not agree to that for non-American citizens and non-third country nationals” with “...we were able to negotiate, General Donahue was able to negotiate for American citizens at special gates, the Talibs would not accept those who were not American citizens or third-country nationals.”	
227	3	Replace “by early July, not before that” with “by early July, if not before that”	
228	8	Replace “others that there was more” with “others later that there was more”	
228	9	Replace “left shortly” with “left the embassy shortly”	
229	24	Replace “and the loss of our representation and what” with “and the loss of our representation during the 1990s and what”	
230	5	Replace “gonna” with “going to”	