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4 COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,

5 U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

6 WASHINGTON, D.C.

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11 INTERVIEW OF: SAMUEL ARONSON

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Friday, September 15, 2023

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Washington, D.C.

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The interview in the above matter was held in room 5480, O'Neill House Office

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Building, commencing at 8:59 a.m.

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Appearances:

For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED], SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

[REDACTED], SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

1 [REDACTED]. It is now 8:59 a.m. Eastern Time on September 15th of 2023,
2 and this is a transcribed interview of Mr. Sam Aronson.

3 House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul has requested this
4 interview as part of the committee's investigation of the Afghanistan withdrawal.

5 Can the witness please state his name for the record?

6 Mr. Aronson. My full name is Samuel Leonard Aronson.

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

10 My name is [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] on Chairman McCaul's staff on the
11 House Foreign Affairs Committee.

12 I now welcome committee staff from both the majority and minority to introduce
13 themselves before going over some ground rules.

14 [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED]. I am [REDACTED] for the
15 Oversight and Accountability Subcommittee for the majority.

16 [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] for the majority staff,
17 House Foreign Affairs.

18 [REDACTED] Hi. I'm [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] on the Democratic
19 staff side of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

20 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED], [REDACTED] for
21 the minority.

22 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED], the [REDACTED] for the House Foreign Affairs
23 Committee Democratic staff.

24 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]. I am [REDACTED] for the Oversight
25 Subcommittee for the minority.

1 [REDACTED] [REDACTED], [REDACTED] for the minority.

2 [REDACTED]: Thank you.

3 So I'll go over a few ground rules for today's interview, which will hopefully aid our
4 discussion.

5 Our questioning will proceed in rounds. The majority will ask questions first for 1
6 hour, and then the minority will have an opportunity to ask questions for an equal period
7 of time if they choose. We will alternate back and forth until there are no more
8 questions and the interview is over.

9 We'll take a short break at the end of each hour, but if you'd like to take a break
10 apart from that, please just let us know and we'd be happy to accommodate. We will
11 also be taking a lunch break midday, so please let us know when you'd like to do so and
12 we'd be happy to accommodate.

13 As you can see, there's an official court reporter transcribing the interview for a
14 written record, so we ask that you give verbal responses to all questions.

15 Does that all make sense?

16 Mr. Aronson. Yes.

17 [REDACTED]: So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we'll do our
18 best to limit the number of people to those people on the staff whose turn it is.

19 We ask that you please speak clearly so the court reporter can understand and so
20 everyone can hear you. We will do our best to do the same. If you can't hear us or
21 don't understand a question, please just say so and we'd be happy to repeat.

22 The court reporter unfortunately cannot record nonverbal responses, such as
23 shaking your head, so please answer each question with an audible, verbal response.
24 Additionally, it's important for the record that we don't speak over one another or
25 interrupt each other.

1 Witnesses who appear before the committee have the opportunity to appear and
2 freely consult with counsel if they so choose. It is my understanding that you chose to
3 appear here today without counsel. Is that correct?

4 Mr. Aronson. That is correct.

5 ██████████. Thank you.

6 We want you to answer our questions in the most complete and truthful manner
7 as possible, so please take your time.

8 If you have any questions or if you do not understand one of our questions, please
9 let us know. Our questions will cover a wide range of topics, so if you need clarification
10 at any point, we'd be happy to do so.

11 If you don't know the answer to a question or do not remember, please give us
12 your best recollection, and share with us who, to the best of your knowledge, might be
13 able to provide a more complete answer to that question.

14 Additionally, it's okay if you tell us you learned information from someone else.
15 We just ask that you communicate how you came to know the information.

16 Mr. Aronson, this interview is unclassified, so if a question calls for any
17 information that you know to be classified, please state that for the record, as well as the
18 reason for the classification, to the best of your abilities. Once you've clarified that, to
19 the extent possible, please respond with as much unclassified information as you are able
20 to. If we need to have a classified session later, we can arrange for that.

21 Although this interview is not under oath, by law, you are required to answer
22 questions from Congress truthfully. Do you understand this?

23 Mr. Aronson. Yes, I do.

24 ██████████. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff in an
25 interview. Do you understand this?

1 Mr. Aronson. Yes.

2 ██████████: Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be
3 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C.
4 1001. Do you understand this?

5 Mr. Aronson. Yes.

6 ██████████: Is there any reason you are unable to provide truthful answers
7 to today's questions?

8 Mr. Aronson. No.

9 ██████████: Finally, I'd like to make note that the content of what we discuss
10 here today is confidential. We ask that you do not speak about what we discuss in this
11 interview to any outside individuals to preserve the integrity of our investigation.

12 Do you understand this?

13 Mr. Aronson. Yes.

14 ██████████: For the same reason, the marked exhibits that we will use today
15 will remain with the court reporter so that they can go in the official transcript.

16 That is all the majority has to say on this topic. Is there anything my colleagues
17 from the minority would like to add?

18 ██████████: Yes. We'd like to note that, notwithstanding any agreement
19 made between the majority and the witness for this transcribed interview, there is no
20 provision governing or mandating confidentiality of investigations and/or transcribed
21 interviews in the House or committee's rules for the 118th Congress.

22 Thank you.

23 ██████████: The clock now reads 9:04.

24 And it's my understanding that you'd like to proceed with an opening statement.

25 Is that correct?

1 Mr. Aronson. That is correct.

2 ██████████: I'll now give you an opportunity to do so.

3 Mr. Aronson. Thank you.

4 Good morning. My name is Samuel Aronson, and I was a State Department
5 diplomat in Kabul from August 20th until August 29th, 2021. I served as both a consular
6 officer and aide to the State Department's head of evacuation, Ambassador John Bass.

7 My experience in Afghanistan became well-known as the basis of Mitchell
8 Zuckoff's recent book, "The Secret Gate: A True Story of Courage and Sacrifice During
9 the Collapse of Afghanistan."

10 Though I am now a former government official, I served in the State Department
11 under three administrations, each one with a different tragedy that led to headlines and
12 congressional inquiries.

13 In September 2012, I was just beginning my career with the State Department's
14 Bureau of Diplomatic Security when militants overran the U.S. Special Mission compound
15 in Benghazi, Libya. Several years later, I rose from analyst to special agent and
16 underwent intensive high-threat training based on lessons learned from that tragedy.

17 I was assigned to the West African nation Niger, where I led the security office for
18 some time. On October 4, 2017, a U.S. Special Forces detachment came under attack
19 not far from where I was meeting with local officials. Four families that day were
20 tragically added to the Gold Star community nobody wants to be a member of.

21 I once again witnessed tragedy 4 years later at Hamid Karzai International Airport,
22 when 13 brave heroes were murdered by a suicide bomber at Abbey Gate. Another 170
23 Afghans were killed, and many more were wounded.

24 Ultimate blame for the Abbey Gate attack lies with the ISIS terrorists who
25 destroyed so many families in the name of an evil agenda. But I recognize we are here

1 today to discuss ways our government could have and should have done better.

2 In my opinion, we can be proud that in under 2 weeks America and our allies
3 rescued 124,000 Afghans and Americans who would have been left at the hands of the
4 Taliban. Brave people from the State Department, military, and intelligence community
5 went to extraordinary lengths, at great risk to themselves, to save these lives. In a world
6 with too many wolves, these were the sheepdogs who protected those who needed our
7 help so desperately.

8 Like any large organization, there are State Department officials I would trust with
9 my child's life while there are others who I would not trust to tell me the time. Speaking
10 only to the former, I'd like to express my admiration for Ambassador John Bass, Deputy
11 James DeHart, and Mustafa Popal. These senior diplomats demonstrated exceptional
12 leadership and creative adaptability in the tragic conclusion of our Nation's 20-year,
13 trillion-dollar, generation-defining war.

14 But even sending in the best of the Foreign Service that August could only remedy
15 so much. Let me be clear: I cannot call this evacuation a success.

16 More than 200 people were murdered or wounded, and thousands more, like me,
17 struggle with invisible scars and moral injuries. I live with memories of women and men
18 walking through razor wire, slicing up their bodies, for a chance that I would allow them
19 into the airport. I remember giving a horrible choice to a young mother whose husband
20 got stopped by the Taliban: Get on the plane and never see your husband again, or exit
21 the airport and lose your only chance at freedom.

22 I cannot call this evacuation a success because I had to replace my diplomatic
23 tools with those meant for soldiers in war. Instead of a pen, I carried flashbang
24 grenades as a last resort to divert potential attackers; and instead of a notepad, I wore
25 night-vision goggles to secretly rescue a women's rights activist under the cover of

1 darkness.

2 I recall, that night, feeling equal parts concerned that I'd either be discovered by
3 the Taliban, taken hostage by ISIS, or reprimanded by a State Department bureaucracy
4 that favors coloring within the lines.

5 I cannot call this evacuation a success after sitting next to Gold Star father [REDACTED]
6 [REDACTED] and hearing him describe how much his [REDACTED], loved being a Marine;
7 or going to shake wounded Marine [REDACTED]' hand, only to realize [REDACTED] can
8 never again give a typical handshake.

9 And, lastly, I cannot call this evacuation a success after attending the engagement
10 party of [REDACTED], an Afghan interpreter who risked [REDACTED] life for me and now resides in
11 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] wants to join the U.S. military but cannot do so until [REDACTED] gets [REDACTED] green
12 card, and [REDACTED] cannot get a green card until Congress passes the Afghan Adjustment Act.

13 There is plenty of accountability for this committee to consider. Holding
14 accountable those who erred is necessary, but vindictiveness would be an insult to those
15 of us who were on the ground.

16 I urge Congress to do three things.

17 One, use your legislative power to better prepare our national security community
18 for future global crises. That includes fully funding the State Department and, for the
19 Senate, confirming our ambassadors and military leadership without delay.

20 Two: Pass the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2023 to protect those who served
21 alongside our diplomats and military. They need these visas, for it was their acts that
22 prevented so many more lives from being lost.

23 And three: Pass the Afghan Adjustment Act to provide a pathway to citizenship
24 for those members of our community who fled the Taliban 2 years ago. Twenty years of
25 collective sacrifice and bloodshed cannot be for naught.

1 Then, in February 2017, I went to Niger in West Africa, where I was assigned as the
2 assistant regional security officer, but 6 weeks after I arrived, my boss was sent home
3 back to the U.S., and I was placed in charge of the Regional Security Office, as the head of
4 the office, for about 9 or 10 months.

5 I served in Niger until the end of 2018. I then internally changed careers in early
6 2019 and became a Foreign Service officer, the political cone. And after completing
7 political and economic training and consular training, I went to Abuja, Nigeria, where I
8 served first as a vice consul and then as staff aide to the U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria.

9 I left Nigeria in July, on July 12, 2021, and I was scheduled to take about 5 weeks
10 or so of mandatory home leave, which is required for Foreign Service officers between
11 assignments.

12 While I was on home leave was when Afghanistan was falling apart, when it was
13 entering, you know, the international news cycles. So I had just arrived in Washington,
14 D.C., and had about 2 weeks left of home leave, roughly, on August 15, 2021, when I saw
15 those images of the C-17 aircraft taking off with bodies falling down.

16 I decided to send an email to some people I knew in State Department leadership
17 on or about August 17, 2021, saying that I was available to assist. Despite being on
18 leave, I was volunteering myself to go work at State Department headquarters to answer
19 phones or answer emails or do anything that could help out the ongoing crisis.

20 Later that same day, at around 1 o'clock p.m. on August 17th, I received a phone
21 call from the executive director of the NEA/SCA Executive Bureau, which is the Middle
22 East and South and Central Asia, and she asked if I could be on an airplane to Doha that
23 same evening.

24 By the time I was able to coordinate this with my human resources supervisory
25 chain, it was too late to get on the airplane that night. Because, in order to land in

1 Qatar, the Qataris required a COVID test, and with the 9 o'clock p.m. flight that night, I
2 couldn't get the COVID test results in time. So, instead, I departed on August 18th on
3 the Qatar Airways flight to Doha.

4 It was at some point in the morning of August 18th where I found out I would
5 likely be going to Hamid Karzai International Airport instead of Doha. It was really a
6 fluid, fast-moving situation. So, at one point, I was told to book a hotel in Doha; then, a
7 couple hours later, they told me to cancel that hotel. So it really wasn't until I was on
8 my way in an Uber to Dulles Airport at about 5 o'clock p.m. that evening that I knew for
9 certain that I was manifested for a military flight to Kabul.

10 So we arrived at some point on August 19th in Doha. State Department officials
11 on that commercial airplane were myself, James DeHart, and then a midlevel consular
12 officer who was assigned for 2 years -- her assignment at that point was attached to the
13 FBI's Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell. And then there was two
14 communications -- essentially IT professionals, who were also coming to help set up
15 secure communications equipment.

16 I could keep going, but --

17 Q Thank you. Yes. I'm going to backtrack --

18 A Okay.

19 Q -- some of the questions and sort of delve into that. Thank you for that
20 thorough accounting.

21 So are we correct in understanding that you proactively volunteered for the role
22 and it wasn't that you heard through a public announcement or anything of that sort?

23 A That is correct. I received a WhatsApp message from a colleague who was
24 serving as a vice consul in Monterrey, Mexico, who told me that his consulate was
25 soliciting names for people to be sent into probably -- most likely to Doha at that point.

1 And, according to what my colleague told me, that was a request from Consular
2 Affairs Bureau, to find Foreign Service officers at large consular sections who could go and
3 join this Afghanistan operation.

4 So the theme of that was: take bodies, essentially, away from large offices that
5 wouldn't necessarily miss three or four people, as opposed to a smaller embassy, where
6 the entire consular section might only be three people.

7 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

8 Was there a public announcement made within the Department at HST or just
9 more generally?

10 A There was not, to my knowledge. There was certainly nothing that I ever
11 received, so I can't -- there was certainly not a Department-wide notice or anything that
12 was ever proactively sent to me.

13 On the contrary, I proactively reached out to three separate sections of the State
14 Department.

15 So I reached out to the Bureau of Consular Affairs' executive leadership and
16 volunteered my services.

17 I reached out to the Bureau of European Affairs as well. I'm not sure what
18 exactly they were looking for, but another colleague of mine, who was in the same text
19 group as my friend from Monterrey, told me that she had received an email from the
20 Bureau of European Affairs' leadership soliciting names for people.

21 Q Uh-huh.

22 A I, third, reached out to a former colleague of mine who is the chief of staff
23 under the Under Secretary for Management, and I figured, because he's a high-ranking
24 official, he might be able to get my name to the appropriate people so that they could see
25 I was volunteering.

1 And it was ultimately that third individual who got my name to Rachna Korhonen,
2 who's now the U.S. Ambassador to Mali but at the time was the executive director of
3 NEA/SCA.

4 Q So it sounds like this was very much word of mouth.

5 A Absolutely.

6 Q Is it possible, given how this information was communicated, that there are
7 others who would have wanted to volunteer that didn't necessarily hear about this
8 opportunity?

9 A Yes, absolutely.

10 Q Were you presented with any roadblocks to volunteering or face any
11 resistance?

12 A I faced significant resistance from the Bureau of Global Talent Management,
13 formerly known as the Bureau of Human Resources.

14 So, while I was on home leave, my supervisor is what's called my "career
15 development officer." So this is a Foreign Service officer who does an assignment in the
16 Career Development and Assignments Office. For entry-level Foreign Service officers
17 like me, they have tremendous power. I can't overstate how tremendous their power is,
18 compared to midlevel and senior-level officials.

19 So, despite having over 2 more weeks of home leave remaining -- and, just to be
20 clear, I had met the mandatory minimum requirement for home leave, which is 20
21 business days. I had already exceeded that. I was not due to begin training until
22 September -- on or about September 7th, whatever the Monday after Labor Day is -- or,
23 excuse me, the Tuesday after Labor Day in that case.

24 So, when I notified my career development officer that I was approved by
25 NEA/SCA leadership to do this, I got an immediate "no" in an email response. And I sent

1 an urgent email to the entire email distribution group for all the entry-level Career
2 Development and Assignments officers saying: Can a CDO, a career development
3 officer, please call me ASAP? This is an urgent request. I need to discuss something.

4 I finally received a video call probably about an hour, maybe an hour and a half,
5 later. And my career development officer said that she raised it to her boss, and they
6 decided to make a blanket ruling that no entry-level officers were going to be allowed to
7 participate in the overseas aspect of the evacuation. So that's not necessarily Kabul, but
8 that includes Kabul, Doha, Kuwait, all of the "lily pad" operations. That was the ruling of
9 the career development officer.

10 I forwarded that -- or I had written that out and sent it to the NEA/SCA Executive
11 Office, and about 2 hours or so, maybe 2-1/2 hours later, I received an email from my
12 career development officer saying essentially -- I'm paraphrasing here -- the CDO office
13 has agreed to allow a one-time exception for you, as long as you promise to be back and
14 in training for the start of your language training on September 6th or 7th or whatever
15 that date was.

16 Q Thank you for that.

17 So I have a couple followup questions.

18 You said "entry-level" Foreign Service officer, but you had been with the Office of
19 Diplomatic Security in 2012, correct? How many years were you with DS, again?

20 A As an analyst, it was probably about 2. And then, as an agent, it was about
21 almost 5. So, I mean, I guess you could say I had about 7 or so years.

22 Q So almost a decade at that point. Was that factored in at all? Or was it
23 simply because you joined the Foreign Service at a later point that your Diplomatic
24 Security background didn't seem to impact the assessment?

25 A So I can't speak to what went into the decision-making on the

1 career-development-officer side. I certainly put in all of my correspondence to everyone
2 at the State Department when I was volunteering my services and fighting the
3 bureaucracy to be able to go. I made very clear that I was a high-threat-ops-certified
4 Diplomatic Security agent; I was certified in advanced interrogations. You know, I had a
5 tremendous, kind of, resume of experience and certifications that would've made me
6 what I believed to be a very strong fit to go to Kabul or even Doha in that case.

7 So, again, just to answer your question, I can't speak to what their rationale was,
8 but I would imagine that certainly would not have hurt my case.

9 Q Thank you.

10 And you had mentioned earlier that there was an airplane scheduled for you -- I
11 believe it was on August 17th -- to Doha but that you missed it due to HR reasons.
12 Apologies if I'm misstating anything. But was that in reference to this issue with the
13 career development?

14 A That's correct. Yeah. So, actually, my flight was booked; I received my
15 ticket. Everything, from a logistical standpoint, was in place. All the financing was in
16 place from the Executive Bureau. But because of the Career Development Office in HR,
17 now called GTM, that's the reason why I was unable to take that flight.

18 Q So is it fair to say that if you hadn't volunteered proactively, if you hadn't
19 pushed back against your initial rejection, you never would've been at HKIA?

20 A Correct.

21 Q Can you speak a bit more as to why you volunteered?

22 A I felt a sense of duty. Just personally, I don't like long vacations and home
23 leave. You know, home leave is congressionally mandated in the Foreign Service Act,
24 but for those Foreign Service officers who don't have extensive family ties or own a
25 residence, it's a financial burden and it's -- you know, you're not given any sort of funding

1 during that time period. So you need to find a place to live, pay for it for a month, you
2 know, cover all your own expenses.

3 And, in my case, I had already gone on vacation, I had gone to the beach and saw
4 friends, I had seen family. I had nothing left to do -- or, nothing else that I wanted to do
5 personally. So, when I saw what a mess this appeared to me -- and, you know, this was
6 my own impression of what I saw on CNN and news outlets. It looked like an absolute
7 mess at HKIA, and I believed that I would be helpful, not hurtful, to the mission.

8 Q Thank you.

9 And you had noted that, based on your understanding, the Department had
10 reached out to, sort of, larger embassies, particularly their consular sections, and asked
11 for volunteers. What is your understanding of how consular officers were selected to
12 go?

13 A So my understanding, based on conversations with Foreign Service officers
14 who were not selected to go despite having volunteered for it, is that the decisions were
15 made by the chief of consular at the respective embassy or consulate. And I'm not sure
16 what the decision-making factor was on that front.

17 I will add, though: My experience at HKIA, seeing the consular officers who were
18 sent from these large embassies, my personal perspective, my personal belief was these
19 were, you know, not fully -- like, I can't speak for every single person who was there, but
20 there were at least several, at least four, if not more than that, who were, in my
21 perspective, not the correct choice to send there.

22 Q By "not correct choice," do you mean they were not equipped for the
23 situation at hand?

24 A Correct. I believe they did not have the skills. They did not have the soft
25 skills, such as adaptability, resilience; the experience serving in a dangerous or high-threat

1 overseas environment. And when it came to really high-risk and high-threat scenarios,
2 such as the Abbey Gate bombing, from my perspective, they were not emotionally
3 equipped to handle the stress that came with that.

4 Q So did the selection process seem random or ad hoc to you?

5 A I'm not sure if I can say that it was random, but it seemed ad hoc. And it
6 seemed like the decisions -- my personal belief, based on who I saw among these
7 consular officers who were sent from large overseas embassies -- so this is different than
8 consular officers who were specifically selected from headquarters-based assignments.
9 Of the officers who were sent from overseas embassies, I believe that there is a likelihood
10 that consular chiefs sent individuals out of their respective countries because they were a
11 burden to those consular sections.

12 Q So they didn't send their best consular officers.

13 A Correct. In my perspective, they did not send their best. In fact, they may
14 have sent their worst.

15 Q Is it possible that others faced the same challenges that you did when you
16 volunteered then?

17 A Absolutely, yes.

18 Q Am I correct in understanding that it was your initial understanding you'd be
19 going to Doha?

20 A Correct.

21 Q Why was that, again?

22 A I received an email saying that I would be going to Doha to assist efforts at Al
23 Udeid Air Base in Doha.

24 Q Can you speak to what caused the move from Doha to Kabul?

25 A Unfortunately, I don't think I have that information. I'm not sure what

1 went into that decision.

2 Q Okay. When did you learn that you wouldn't be staying in Doha but instead
3 going to Kabul?

4 A It was at some point on August 18th, probably in the early afternoon.

5 Q How did you come to learn you were not -- now going to Kabul?

6 A You mean not going --

7 Q That you were now going to Kabul?

8 A Oh. I originally in the morning of the 18th was told to book a hotel for
9 Doha. And I booked the hotel; it was a Marriott property. And then probably about 2
10 hours later, maybe less, I was sent another -- it wasn't an email; it was a chat ping on our
11 Microsoft Teams, telling me to go ahead and cancel that hotel, because it looked
12 like -- well, let me sort of rephrase that.

13 I knew at that time, I was told that I'd be on the same airplane as Jim
14 DeHart -- James DeHart. And he had apparently made clear that he wanted to go
15 directly to Kabul, which was a decision that Ambassador John Bass had made the night
16 prior when he went through essentially the same situation.

17 So, because DeHart wanted to go directly to Kabul and because I, for whatever
18 reason, was determined by State Department officials that I would also be going to Kabul,
19 they decided to instead send us directly there and manifest us immediately for a plane.

20 Q Thank you for that helpful explanation. Who communicated that news to
21 you, again?

22 A To the best of my recollection, it was a -- it was someone within the
23 NEA/SCA Executive Office, but I can't say who it was. I don't mean I'm not willing to. I
24 mean I don't remember who it was.

25 Q That's no problem. Thank you.

1 When did you arrive in Kabul?

2 A I landed in Kabul at about 5 o'clock a.m. on August 20th.

3 Q And that's 5 days after the fall, correct?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Do you wish you had the opportunity to arrive sooner?

6 A Absolutely.

7 Q Do you believe that you and the other officers could've gotten more done
8 and got more Afghan allies and American citizens out if you had been able to arrive
9 sooner?

10 A Yes, without a doubt. I think having me or any competent -- or, having any
11 extra competent officials on the ground even 1 minute sooner would have provided at
12 least 1 minute or more of the successful ability to evacuate people.

13 Q What circumstances held you back from going sooner?

14 A Well, for one, I didn't even request to go until August 17th, until the morning
15 of August 17th. For two, it was the career development officer who had initially
16 rejected me from going. Three was the required COVID test, which, just to be clear, was
17 the Qatari Government's requirement, not the State Department's requirement.

18 And I'd like to add one additional point there. I was told to travel on my personal
19 tourist passport for this work to Kabul, because diplomatic officials require a visa to enter
20 through Qatar. And there had been no -- I can't state for a fact there had been no time
21 to negotiate some sort of agreement, but I can state factually that there was no
22 agreement in place to allow American diplomatic officials to arrive in Doha without a
23 diplomatic visa. So, instead, we were told to travel on our personal passports.

24 Q Thank you.

25 I have a couple followup questions.

1 You stated one of the reasons was you not requesting until August 17th. That's
2 because the Department never notified you of this opportunity until you proactively
3 reached out, correct?

4 A Correct. You know, this is in 20/20 hindsight, but if I had received a,
5 maybe, email message saying the Department is soliciting names of individuals to be sent
6 overseas to assist with this, I almost certainly would have responded affirmatively to that.

7 Q Thank you.

8 And another followup: In terms of "no agreement," are we correct in
9 understanding that there had been no formal arrangement that you are aware of
10 between the U.S. Government and the Government of Qatar to ensure that there was a
11 seamless diplomatic transition in country, in terms of having the visas already certified?

12 A I actually don't think that's the case. I'm not sure the extent of the
13 conversations, but I would like to note that, when we arrived in Doha, there were Qatari
14 Government officials waiting for us holding a sign, and they brought us into the VIP
15 section of the airport and had us sit there while they processed our immigration
16 paperwork.

17 Q Uh-huh.

18 A So I believe there was some sort of arrangement in place. But I don't have
19 additional details just beyond having -- going to that, what I would call a very lavish and
20 fancy waiting area, served San Pellegrino water and whatnot, while they processed our
21 immigration paperwork.

22 Q So there are certain protections that come with using a diplomatic passport,
23 correct, from my understanding?

24 A Not necessarily. Just to be clear, I'm not an expert on privileges and
25 immunities, but --

1 Q Uh-huh.

2 A -- generally speaking, you would have to be accredited to a foreign country
3 in order to receive privileges and immunities that are commensurate with your diplomatic
4 title.

5 That being said, there are -- going through customs and immigration at an airport,
6 there are protections with a diplomatic passport.

7 Q Did you have your P's and I's accredited?

8 A No.

9 Q So you were traveling without your P's and I's being accredited.

10 A Right. I traveled as a -- as far as my passport was concerned, I was a
11 personal tourist individual going to Qatar. I received a personal tourist stamp in my
12 personal passport arriving in Doha.

13 Q Thank you.

14 So I'm going to list the names of some individuals and ask some questions. We
15 believe these individuals were involved in the Afghanistan evacuation. I'd appreciate if
16 you can answer my questions to the best of your recollection.

17 I'm going to start with Ambassador Ross Wilson. What was his position at the
18 time of the withdrawal?

19 A Ambassador Wilson was the chief of mission at U.S. Embassy Kabul. And
20 when the embassy was evacuated and moved to Hamid Karzai International Airport, to
21 the best of my knowledge, he was still the chief of mission.

22 I'd like to add to that, he was, to the best of my knowledge, not the accredited
23 Ambassador to Afghanistan. Instead, he was the charge d'affaires to Afghanistan. And
24 there is an important distinction there.

25 Q What is the role of a chief of mission typically?

1 A Can you be more specific?

2 Q Yes, of course. So, as the charge, are they responsible for all embassy
3 operations and the protection of American civilians, et cetera? So what is specifically
4 their role within the hierarchy of the --

5 A Yeah.

6 Q -- embassy?

7 A So, regardless of whether it's the charge d'affaires or an accredited
8 ambassador, they are still the chief of mission. And the chief of mission's role in an
9 overseas environment is overseeing all executive-branch activities in that country, which
10 includes the protection of American citizens.

11 Q Was it your experience that Ambassador Wilson exercised that role
12 throughout the evacuation?

13 A No, it was not. My experience was that Ambassador John Bass exercised
14 that role.

15 Q So, as chief of mission, he was not the lead on the evacuation?

16 A I can't speak to what was listed on paper in a formal sense, but, from my
17 experience during the 9 or so days that I was there, Ambassador John Bass exercised the
18 role as the chief of mission.

19 Q So, in practice, he was acting -- sort of serving the capacity of the chief of
20 mission?

21 A Correct. John Bass.

22 Q John Bass was.

23 A Yes.

24 Q Okay.

25 And are you aware of what CDA Wilson was ultimately responsible for?

1 A From my vantage point, it seemed like Ambassador Wilson was still the face
2 of the United States in Afghanistan. So what I mean by that is, he was involved in photo
3 opportunities, showing him out at the gates interacting with U.S. servicemembers,
4 interacting with evacuees and State Department officials, in order to assert on social
5 media platforms like Twitter that the U.S. was still in control and still had a chief of
6 mission who was in charge and capable.

7 Q Do you know why he was doing that, beyond just presenting himself?

8 A To the best of my knowledge, when John Bass was sent in to run the
9 evacuation, it created a tricky -- it created a situation whereby there was a different
10 ambassador who was, in all practicality, leading this evacuation, yet there was still an
11 accredited chief of mission who was, technically speaking and publicly speaking, in control
12 of this.

13 The optics, in my perspective, would have looked embarrassing and -- the optics
14 would not have looked great if, when John Bass arrived, Ambassador Wilson was sent
15 home. So, in order to maintain the appearance that there was, you know, unity and
16 harmony and proper decision-making, Ambassador Wilson was the public face of this
17 evacuation while, behind the scenes, you know, behind the curtain was John Bass actually
18 leading the evacuation.

19 Q So did you report to Ambassador Wilson at all?

20 A No. I reported to Ambassador Bass. Although, I suppose, you know, if
21 Ambassador Wilson was technically still the chief of mission, then, from a purely
22 hierarchical paper standpoint, he would have technically been the one in charge.

23 Q Do you know what some of his duties were during the evacuation, if any?

24 A I believe Ambassador Wilson had some involvement with discussions with
25 the Taliban, although I would like to note that Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad in Doha was

1 managing the negotiations, and, at the time, Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom West, who's
2 now the Special Representative for Afghanistan, was also managing Taliban negotiations.

3 And, on top of that, I'd also like to add that former Deputy Secretary Wendy
4 Sherman sent in her chief of staff, Mustafa Popal, who himself was Afghan by heritage
5 and speaks Dari, to assist with those negotiations.

6 So, I mean, essentially, my perspective on this was, State Department leadership
7 sent in the correct officials to get the job done, but they were not able to necessarily
8 remove the incorrect officials who were already in place.

9 Q Thank you.

10 Can you speak a bit more as to what your impression of Ambassador Wilson was?

11 A I had a very small amount of interaction with Ambassador Wilson during
12 those 9 days. I think I saw Ambassador Wilson two times, possibly a third time, during
13 the entire 9 days.

14 So, from those very limited interactions I had, he seemed overwhelmed. His
15 physical health did not seem great. His emotional health also did not seem great. And
16 I did not get the vibe that he was a strong leader, or, at least at the time I was there, I do
17 not believe he was exhibiting strong leadership.

18 Q Was he there throughout the duration of the evacuation?

19 A That is correct. He, to my knowledge, was on the final airplane out on
20 August 30th.

21 Q Do you know if he worked with Mr. DeHart or Ambassador Bass?

22 A I believe they certainly corresponded, to the best of my knowledge, at least
23 several times per day. But that correspondence was almost never in person, despite us
24 all being located on the same airport.

25 Q Thank you.

1 Next, I'd like to discuss Ambassador John Bass. And apologies if this is
2 redundant, but for purposes of the record, I'd like to clarify some points.

3 To the best of your knowledge, what was Ambassador Bass's role in the
4 evacuation?

5 A To my knowledge, Ambassador Bass was the overall lead for the State
6 Department on the evacuation.

7 Q Do you recall when he arrived?

8 A He arrived prior to my arrival, but, from what I was told, he arrived on
9 August 19th.

10 Q This was also after Kabul had fallen to the Taliban, correct?

11 A Correct.

12 Q As the lead on the evacuation, what were his duties, to the best of your
13 recollection?

14 A His duties were coordinating essentially all of the State Department
15 functions of the evacuation and coordinating with U.S. military leadership, coordinating
16 with third-country allies' leadership -- so there were, you know, a number of other
17 countries, I think probably other 30 other countries, operating on the ground at that
18 point -- coordinating to some extent with Taliban leadership; and overseeing essentially
19 every single move and every single decision that the State Department made on the
20 ground during from August 19th, when he arrived, until he left, I believe, on August 30th.

21 Q As lead, did you view him as making the decisions on the ground then?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Did you work with Ambassador Bass?

24 A Significantly, yes.

25 Q Would you say you reported to him?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Do you know who he reported to?

3 A I believe he reported directly to Secretary Blinken.

4 Q So not to CDA Wilson, correct?

5 A Correct. To the best of my knowledge, he did not report to Ross Wilson.

6 Q Can you speak to why Ambassador Bass was asked to go to Afghanistan?

7 A He never told me personally why. I can tell you my belief of why he was
8 sent, if that would be helpful.

9 Q Of course.

10 A Okay. So my belief is that Ambassador Bass had previously been the U.S.
11 Ambassador to Afghanistan until, I believe, 2020 and was widely regarded, both within
12 the Afghanistan community but also the larger U.S. national security community and the
13 White House probably as well, as a very strong leader, a very diligent thinker, someone
14 who's able to handle tremendous stress and still be resilient, and someone who's able to
15 show compassion while still making difficult decisions.

16 Q Was this an understanding that was commonly held by others on the ground
17 as well?

18 A I believe so, yes.

19 Q So there was already a chief of mission on the ground in Ambassador Ross
20 Wilson -- titled "Ambassador," but he was serving as the CDA, as you noted. Did it seem
21 unusual to you, given your prior experiences both in DS and as an FSO, that a second
22 ambassador would be sent in in a senior role?

23 A Yes. My experience from almost a decade in the State Department was,
24 any time someone of equal rank was sent in to help the head of a section or the head of
25 an embassy, it was because the Department no longer had confidence in the incumbent

1 of that position.

2 Q Thank you.

3 A And just to be clear, I have seen that done at a lower level at another
4 embassy. So I base my determination on that experience, where the regional security
5 officer in Niger lost the confidence of the embassy. Another regional security officer
6 was sent in to, quote/unquote, "assist" the regional security officer, and then that
7 incumbent individual was sent home. And, in my case, the second individual was then
8 also sent home.

9 Q So am I understanding correctly that your belief and your understanding of
10 what was going on is informed by nearly a decade with the U.S. Department of State?

11 A Correct.

12 Q Okay.

13 Now moving on to Mr. DeHart. What was Mr. DeHart's role in Afghanistan?

14 A DeHart's role was as the deputy lead of the evacuation.

15 He had previously served as the assistant chief of mission in Kabul when
16 Ambassador Bass was the Ambassador to Kabul, so the two of them had a preexisting
17 relationship, not just personally but professionally. And I can't speak directly to why
18 DeHart was selected to go in, but my personal belief was that, because the two of them
19 worked very well together previously, it made sense to send them both in to continue
20 working well together.

21 Q Assistant chief of mission, that's not a position that's typically present at
22 every embassy, correct?

23 A Correct. I believe there are only two embassies in the world where the
24 position exists. One was Afghanistan. I believe it also exists in Iraq.

25 Q Why those two places, you think?

1 A I believe, in those two places, they're two of our -- or, they were two of our
2 largest missions anywhere in the world. And, essentially, the delineation of duties, as I
3 understand it, is: The deputy chief of mission, which at a normal embassy serves
4 somewhat as the chief operating officer, in Afghanistan and Iraq had more of an external
5 diplomatic role, whereas the assistant chief of mission served, then, as the chief operating
6 officer.

7 Q Thank you. So is it fair to say that Mr. DeHart was Ambassador Bass's
8 second in command?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And Mr. DeHart arrived when you arrived in Afghanistan, correct? That
11 was August 20th, if I'm not mistaken.

12 A Correct. We were on the same flight from Dulles, arrived in Doha at the
13 same time, and took the same C-17 aircraft to HKIA.

14 Q Can you speak a bit more to his duties as a second in command?

15 A Yeah. So DeHart's duties, as I saw them, were coordinating the deluge of
16 requests for evacuation assistance that were coming in from Department officials,
17 Members of Congress, notable individuals, which I believe includes even the Pope, and
18 then notable nongovernmental organizations and aid-type organizations, such as the
19 National Endowment for Democracy, et cetera.

20 Q Did Mr. DeHart report to Charge Wilson?

21 A No. To my understanding, Mr. DeHart -- not just my understanding -- to
22 what I personally was a member of, he reported to Ambassador Bass.

23 Q Did Mr. DeHart work with Charge Wilson?

24 A To the best of my knowledge, they may have communicated via telephone
25 and email, but they did not regularly see each other face-to-face.

1 Q What was your impression of Mr. DeHart?

2 A I believe Jim DeHart has significant experience in Afghanistan spanning
3 almost 20 years. He is a strong leader. He's a diligent thinker. He shows
4 compassion. He has very similar qualities to Ambassador Bass.

5 Q Based on your years of experience at the Department in both the capacity of
6 an RSO and an FSO, is it fair to say that if Ambassador Bass and Mr. DeHart had an
7 opportunity to go to Afghanistan earlier, the events that transpired could have been
8 prevented or proceeded differently?

9 A From my perspective, yes, it would've been tremendously useful to have
10 both of those individuals on the ground earlier, if possible.

11 Q Next, Ms. Jayne Howell. What was Ms. Howell's role in Afghanistan?

12 A Jayne Howell shared responsibility with another consular official named Jean
13 Akres, and they were in charge of the day-to-day consular operations of the evacuation.
14 So Jayne Howell managed all the consular officers from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. each day,
15 and Jean Akres managed consular officers from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m.

16 Q Do you recall when she arrived in Afghanistan?

17 A She arrived very slightly before I did. So it could've been on the -- I believe
18 it could've been August 19th, but I'm not certain, because, to my -- to the best of my
19 recollection, she arrived before I did.

20 Q Is it fair to say she was consular team lead?

21 A When you say "team lead," do you mean for one of the two shifts, or do you
22 mean overall?

23 Q Overall. Or did she share that responsibility with Jean Akres?

24 A Yeah, I believe she shared that responsibility. I don't think Jayne Howell
25 outranked Jean from that operational standpoint.

1 Q They were co-leads --

2 A Correct.

3 Q -- based on your understanding. Do you know who she reported to?

4 A She had a number of bosses there. So let me sort of explain what I mean
5 by that.

6 There was a gentleman by the name of Greg Floyd who was the head of consular
7 affairs during the evacuation in Kabul, and I believe he had been evacuated from the
8 embassy itself. So she, in some respects, reported to Greg Floyd.

9 In other respects, she reported to the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, who
10 I know from experience she was in regular contact with throughout the day.

11 And then, from a third standpoint, she reported to Jim DeHart, who, then, her
12 skip-level would've been John Bass.

13 Q When you say "in some respects," is it in terms of formalities or in practice?
14 Can you speak a bit more as to that?

15 A Yeah.

16 In practice, I would say she had tremendous autonomy to make staffing decisions
17 and to make decisions about individual cases that were brought to her attention of
18 whether to allow someone in or not allow them in.

19 But I would say, broader scale, in terms of general categories of individuals who
20 we were authorized to allow in on a given day, to the best of my knowledge, she did not
21 make those decisions. To the best of my knowledge, those decisions came from
22 leadership at the State Department.

23 Q And by the "leadership of the State Department," you mean D.C., correct?

24 A Correct.

25 Q Can you speak a bit more as to who Mr. Greg Floyd was, then?

1 A So Greg Floyd was a Senior Foreign Service officer, was a consular officer.
2 He worked not out of the JOC but, rather, out of the remaining presence of U.S. Embassy
3 Kabul, which was located about a mile and a half away, still on the airport grounds.

4 I had pretty little interaction with him throughout my time there, but he did send
5 emails and WhatsApp messages, I would say, maybe once a day, if not a little bit more.

6 Q And that was despite your serving as a consular officer on the ground,
7 correct?

8 A Correct.

9 Q Can you speak to how Mr. Floyd and Ms. Howell's roles were different?

10 A I can't speak much to Mr. Floyd's role because I, to this day, don't really
11 know much of what he was doing. But I viewed my boss to be Jayne Howell.

12 Q So are we correct in understanding that Mr. Floyd, who was the consular
13 section chief at Embassy Kabul, was not leading the consular officers on the ground?

14 A Correct.

15 Q And are we correct in understanding that it was Ms. Howell and Ms. Akres
16 who were making the consular decisions on the ground?

17 A Correct.

18 Q Can you speak to why Ms. Howell was asked to go to Afghanistan?

19 A Unfortunately, I don't have that information. My belief, looking back on it,
20 is, Jayne Howell is a well-respected Senior Foreign Service officer with a deep background
21 in consular affairs. She was the consul general, so in charge of consular operations, for
22 all of Turkiye. So I believe she was, in my opinion, the correct choice of someone to
23 send there.

24 Q And she was sent after Kabul had fallen, as well, correct?

25 A To the best of my knowledge, yes.

1 Q Or, she arrived after Kabul had fallen.

2 A Correct.

3 Q Is it, based on your almost decade of experience -- and I cite back to this
4 decade of experience because it's my understanding that this informs your assessments.
5 Is it typical to send a consular team lead when you have a consular section chief to an
6 embassy?

7 A It's certainly not typical, no. I would say, from my experience, the only
8 time that would occur is for a crisis as large as Afghanistan.

9 Q So it was to fill a vacuum that wasn't being filled by Mr. Floyd, correct?

10 A Correct.

11 Q So what were identified to you as the most important priorities for the U.S.
12 mission?

13 A The number one -- sorry, let me clarify. Are you asking the overall
14 mission's priorities at that point, or the consular priorities?

15 Q Let's do both. We'll start with the overall mission and then the consular
16 priorities.

17 A Okay. I think they overlap. I think they're one and the same. But the
18 overall priority, from the moment I arrived until the moment I left, was getting to safety
19 and getting on airplanes out of Afghanistan American citizens and green card holders.

20 Q Uh-huh. And you noted, those are overlapping priorities for both consular
21 functions as well as the overall mission, correct?

22 A That is correct. Diplomatic functions at that point had largely ceased. The
23 only ongoing diplomatic stream that I'm aware of was coordinating with the Taliban in
24 order to facilitate the entry of those U.S. citizens and green card holders.

25 Q Who identified those priorities to you?

1 A I don't believe those priorities were ever overtly stated to myself or any
2 other consular officers, but those of us who, I mean, for lack of a better word, can read
3 the room were aware that that's what the priorities were.

4 Q Were those priorities identified at any point in time throughout the course
5 of the evacuation?

6 A Sorry. I'm thinking here.

7 Q Take your time.

8 A So, yes and no.

9 John Bass and Jim DeHart, every day, briefed all staff at 6:00 in the morning and at
10 6:00 in the evening. And they explained what they were working on, what their
11 discussions with Washington leadership entailed. So, for instance, if they had spoken to
12 the President, if they had spoken to the Secretary of State, if they had spoken to the
13 Secretary of Defense, they, to the best of their ability to what they could tell us, they
14 explained, you know, what essentially the overarching goals were, what we were doing
15 well, what we should adjust.

16 And so I believe, based on those conversations -- or, based on those briefings
17 twice a day, it was clear what the -- at least, it was clear to me what the priorities were.

18 Q Thank you.

19 Shifting gears slightly, what kind of preparation did you receive before arriving in
20 Kabul?

21 A The only preparation, if you'd even call it that, was, at Al Udeid Air Base in
22 Doha, the assistant regional security officer fitted us for body armor and Kevlar helmets.

23 Q Were you given any direction or guidance before reaching Kabul?

24 A No.

25 Q Did anyone from the Department make reference to any plans, such as

1 emergency evacuation plans, to reference?

2 A No.

3 Q Did they provide guidance on who could be evacuated?

4 A Before arriving?

5 Q Yes.

6 A No.

7 Q Did anyone from the Department communicate a timeline pursuant to which
8 you and other officers were going to operate?

9 A Well, we knew that we had until August 31st, based on public reporting.
10 I'm not certain if that was in any internal correspondence, but I believe it was widely
11 acknowledged or accepted by those of us on the ground that the final date was August
12 31st.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Did you find it unusual that you weren't briefed in any specific way before
15 arriving in the obviously chaotic situation at Kabul airport?

16 A Yeah, that was certainly atypical. And just to give, sort of, why I believe,
17 based on my experience, that's atypical: When I left Niger in 2018, I had been accepted
18 for somewhat of a similar experience. I was supposed to go to northeast Syria for about
19 60 days, temporary duty, to support diplomatic operations in northeast Syria.

20 And while that ultimately got stopped also by the career development officer at
21 that time for quite a similar reason -- because it would've overlapped with my home
22 leave -- the plan that was in place when my tickets were booked and my tactical gear was
23 about to get FedEx'ed over to Syria was: I would fly into Kuwait, spend 3 days in mission
24 briefings and preparation and rehearsal, and then fly from Kuwait to Syria.

25 So, traditionally, the norm prior to going into a, quote/unquote, "combat

- 1 environment" is to attend at least some mission briefings, preparations, and rehearsals
- 2 before entering the chaos.

1

2 [10:00 a.m.]

3 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q You noted that you understood that there was an August 31st date that you
6 were all operating under?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Based on your understanding, who set that date?

9 A Based on my understanding, that was a date determined -- you know, my
10 understanding is the President had set that date.

11 Q Did anyone push back on that timeline when you were on the ground?

12 A No. In fact, the timeline was actually following -- Abbey Gate was pushed
13 out by a day.

14 Q Did anyone express grievances with that timeline?

15 A Yeah, I think there was certainly some discontent among some people on
16 the ground that we didn't have more time to try to rescue people and do as much as we
17 could. I think there was certainly frustration, at least among myself. You know, when I
18 was told I was leaving very late at night on the 28th, I think it got delayed until early
19 morning on the 29th, but I was not happy to be leaving.

20 Q Do you believe that extending the timeline would have positively benefited
21 the evacuation?

22 A Yeah, I mean, that's a tricky question. From a purely evacuation
23 standpoint, absolutely yes; however, there could have been ramifications given our
24 arrangement with the Taliban that we would be leaving on the 31st. I mean, from an
25 operational standpoint, yes, that would have been tremendously helpful to have even 5

1 more minutes, even 30 more minutes. But whether the Taliban would have accepted
2 that, and if they didn't accept that, whether that would've led to violence or attacks
3 against us, you know, there is a risk that by extending it, I believe, could have also put our
4 personnel in additional harm's way.

5 Q So am I correct in understanding that we were dependent on the Taliban's
6 permission in that instance, which you didn't believe or which others didn't believe we
7 would get?

8 A Yeah. I mean, from my perspective, from my vantage point, we were
9 dependent on the Taliban insofar that we decided to be dependent on the Taliban.
10 Based on everything that I saw and overheard and witnessed, I'm not so sure that we
11 would have necessarily faced violence had we said we need an extra 24 hours or we need
12 an extra 48 hours. But I believe the decision was made by leadership in our
13 administration and, you know, possibly State Department leadership, that the safest
14 option was to leave when we predetermined we would leave.

15 Q Thank you.

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

18 A Upon arrival, it was absolutely chaotic. And I understand that the word
19 "chaos" is now, you know, somewhat of a loaded term in political circles at this point, but
20 I just want to describe a little bit about what it was like upon arrival.

21 So I was on a C-17 airplane with a team of 82nd Airborne soldiers and seven
22 special operators from Swedish Special Forces, which I'm not sure of how that was
23 arranged, but it was nonetheless. The pilots performed a combat landing at HKIA, which
24 is a rapid descent in order to try to essentially fool heat-seeking missiles. And when we
25 landed, there's nobody meeting us plane side to tell us where to go. So we wondered

1 over to -- when I say we, I mean the five State Department officials on that plane
2 wandered over to the passenger terminal, wandered up past a bunch of evacuees who
3 were waiting to be put on flights, and saw two State Department officers wearing body
4 armor in the passenger terminal. And we introduced ourselves and asked them where
5 we should go. They described, okay, go down this stairwell, past I would say 300 pounds
6 of trash, food waste, and possibly human waste, to then walk over to the Joint Operation
7 Center.

8 So we made our way to the Joint Operation Center, and I passed probably about
9 500 or so Afghans and people awaiting evacuation. Walked into the Joint Operation
10 Center, it was before 6 a.m. at that point, so the night shift was still out at their gates and
11 their assignments and the day shift had not yet arrived. So it was quite empty from a
12 State Department standpoint in the JOC. I introduced myself to Jean Akres, who I knew
13 previously because I attended a 1-week training course with her 2 years prior. And she
14 and Jayne Howell, who was also there, had -- to the best of my knowledge, had no idea
15 that I was -- they were not expecting me. I don't believe it was communicated to them
16 that I'd be arriving. I believe that miscommunication was because I was not sent by
17 Consular Affairs. So I was not sent to do consular duties. I was sent by the regional
18 bureau, which regional bureaus typically handle political and economic duties.

19 So they told me to speak -- to go find Ambassador Bass and speak to Jim DeHart,
20 who I, you know, spent the last 12 hours traveling with, to figure out what they should do
21 with me. So I sent went and spoke to Bass and DeHart, told them a little bit about my
22 background. Said, I'm happy to go where you need me. They said for now they need
23 me to do consular work, but they would be back in touch if they needed me for more,
24 what I'll call, diplomatic duties.

25 Q In your professional opinion as a former DS agent and FSO, what do you

1 believe were the biggest factors leading to the chaos at HKIA?

2 A I mean, chaos often comes when something happens that you don't
3 anticipate, right? So in this situation, I believe we did not anticipate having to evacuate
4 the U.S. Embassy in Kabul so quickly. We also did not anticipate the chaos that had
5 previously happened at the south gate at HKIA, which led to thousands of Afghans and
6 possibly others entering our airport and needing to be corralled and vetted. So those
7 are two big points.

8 Three, I believe when you're facing a serious risk of attack from hostile actors who
9 are outside your secure zone, absent proper -- absent near-perfect leadership, it's
10 incredibly difficult to not turn an environment into chaos.

11 Q Please correct me if I'm misstating this, but you previously testified that
12 before arriving in Kabul, you hadn't seen any plans, emergency evacuation plans, et
13 cetera, correct?

14 A That's correct.

15 Q Is it possible that the absence of those plans, at least are publicly
16 understood, contributed to that chaos as well?

17 A So I can't state that there were no plans. All I can articulate is that I was
18 not given any plans or briefed on any plans. But -- so I don't want to kind of speculate
19 on a hypothetical.

20 Q Do you recall if others had received a plan or discussed referencing a plan?

21 A It was certainly not discussed anywhere in my presence.

22 Q How about at those daily meetings? I believe you said there were two
23 meetings per day.

24 A Correct.

25 Q Were plans discussed at that point?

1 A So just so I understand the question, what do you mean by plans at that
2 point?

3 Q So emergency evacuation plans, not necessarily strategy, but plans that had
4 been in place that had been drafted by the Department.

5 A Oh. No. At those meetings, to the best of my recollection, there was
6 never a reference to previously drafted evacuation or withdrawal plans.

7 Q So my next line of questioning will be taking longer than 25 seconds, so I'm
8 going to stop the time here.

9 ██████████: If we could go off the record.

10 [Recess.]

11 ██████████: We're back on the record.

12 ██████████: And just to reintroduce myself, I'm ██████████. I'm ██████████
13 ██████████ Democratic staff side of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

14 Mr. Aronson. Great.

15 ██████████: And I, on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks, want to also extend the
16 welcome to you and appreciation for your willingness to testify. Welcome to our
17 interview today.

18 I just want to start with a quick point before we get into questioning. We, as I
19 said, really appreciate your willingness to share insight here today. I want to remind you
20 that we are interested in your firsthand knowledge of events. So if you didn't have
21 firsthand knowledge, you don't need to feel compelled to speculate or to guess as to the
22 answer to any particular question that we ask. And if you do not know or do not recall
23 something about which we've asked, you can feel free to say so. And please also tell us
24 if you don't understand or disagree with the premise of any of our questions so that we
25 can ensure it for the record.

1 Mr. Aronson. Great. Thank you for those clarifications.

2 EXAMINATION

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q So with that, I just want to go back to the beginning and make sure we have
5 a sense of your background and your kind of career trajectory. You said your total years
6 of service at the State Department were how many? Around 10?

7 A No. I think -- so with --

8 Q Maybe that was my majority counsel?

9 A Yeah, I think it's more like nine.

10 Q Nine years?

11 A Yeah. It might have been nine and a half.

12 Q Nine and a half years of total service at the State Department.

13 A So I'm going to do the math here, so I don't mess it up. Like one and a half
14 plus seven and a half, equals nine. And if you throw in a State Department internship,
15 around nine and a half.

16 Q Fair enough. And how many years of those were spent in DS as a DS
17 agents?

18 A Almost five.

19 Q Okay. And when you were in DS, were you in civil service?

20 A No. Foreign service.

21 Q You were foreign service?

22 A Correct.

23 Q Did you take a test specific to DS -- service in DS, you were a member of the
24 Foreign Service Diplomatic Security?

25 A That is correct.

1 Q Okay. And then when you switched into other roles that were outside of
2 DS, you were still a Foreign Service officer?

3 A Correct.

4 Q Okay. What did you have to do to switch from Diplomatic Security Service
5 to the service that you were in?

6 A Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you. I had to do every step of the Foreign
7 Service officer process except for the initial written test. So I had to do the essays and I
8 had to sit for the oral assessment. I needed to have my -- you know, the security
9 clearance and medical clearance that I already had, and I needed to have language ability,
10 which I had tested at.

11 Q So, essentially, you had to almost start back at the beginning to get into the
12 Foreign Service as a non-diplomat security agent?

13 A Very much so. In fact, I took a 25 percent pay cut to do that.

14 Q Okay. And what cone were you when you joined the Foreign Service?

15 A As an officer?

16 Q Yes.

17 A Political.

18 Q A political cone. And what year did you join the Foreign Service as a
19 political coned officer?

20 A 2019.

21 Q 2019. And what rank did you enter at in that foreign service?

22 A I was the same rank and step as I left DS as, which was a FS-4, step 4.
23 However, while I was going through initial orientation as a political officer, the promotion
24 results came out and I had just been promoted to FS-3 as a diplomatic security special
25 agent. But because I was in orientation starting from scratch, I wasn't able to actually

1 accept that promotion.

2 Q Okay. So you were a diplomatic security agent for the first 5 years of your
3 service at the State Department. You then essentially started from scratch, except for
4 the written test, and went through a process to then enter the Foreign Service as a
5 political coned officer in 2019. And your rank at that point in 2019 was FS-4, step 4.

6 A Correct.

7 Q Okay. And what was your rank when you left the Foreign Service in 2022?

8 A FS-4, step 6.

9 Q Okay. And those two steps, were those the results of merit-based
10 promotions or --

11 A No. Those were automatic step increases based on time of service.

12 Q Okay. So were you ever promoted based on merit during your time in the
13 foreign service as a political coned officer?

14 A I was not employed long enough to have been eligible for a look at
15 promotion.

16 Q You were not employed long enough to be eligible for promotion?

17 A That is correct.

18 Q Okay. So is it fair to say then that your experience in the Foreign Service as
19 a political officer was still fairly junior if you hadn't reached a time in service requirement
20 in order to be eligible for a promotion?

21 A Yes. In fact, I was positive that I was fairly junior both as a diplomatic
22 security agent and as a political officer.

23 Q Okay. Did you win any awards during your time in the Department?

24 A I did, yes.

25 Q Can you tell us about them?

1 A Yes. I received three or four times the Meritorious Honor Award. I
2 received four times the Superior Honor Award, which is a pretty rare award to receive. I
3 received the Director of National Intelligence's Meritorious Unit Citation for an operation
4 that I actually can't speak much to in this setting. And then I was a member of the group
5 award -- of the Group Heroism Award for the team that was in Kabul.

6 Q For your service in Kabul. What were the years -- other than the award you
7 received for group heroism for your service in Kabul, what were the years of the awards
8 that you received? Do you recall them?

9 A Yeah. My first award was in 2017, which is a Superior Honor Award for the
10 tactical actions I took when a convoy I was in came under a hostile checkpoint in northern
11 Niger. Then in 2018, I received a Meritorious Honor Award. In 2018, I also received
12 the National Intelligence Meritorious Citation. In 2020, I received another Superior
13 Honor Award and a Meritorious Honor Award. In 2021, I received two Superior Honor
14 awards. And then the heroism award came in 2022, but it was for actions in 2021.

15 Q Okay.

16 A To the best of my recollection.

17 Q Okay. So roughly speaking, you received awards during your tenure as a
18 diplomatic security agent and then pretty much on a similar pace as a Foreign Service
19 officer political cone?

20 A Yes. In my experience, I received a disproportionately large number of
21 awards for someone who was so junior at the State Department.

22 Q That's your opinion?

23 A That's my opinion.

24 Q Had you ever been in a position in either the Diplomatic Security Service or
25 the Foreign Service where you were in a position to recommend awards to employees?

1 A Yes, absolutely.

2 Q Did you manage employees?

3 A Yes.

4 Q And were your recommendations accepted for their awards?

5 A Not a hundred percent of the time, but I would say certainly more than
6 50 percent of the time, yes.

7 Q Okay.

8 A I also sat on the Joint Awards Committee at one of my embassies. So I also,
9 you know, helped vote on decisions for who at that embassy would receive awards.

10 Q Okay. And just for context, do you have any sense of how many
11 meritorious honors -- or meritorious honor awards a bureau gives out on an annual basis?

12 A A bureau? Probably many, at least in the mid-hundreds, probably.
13 Meritorious is, from my experience, a somewhat low category of award where the
14 threshold is not particularly challenging to meet, in my opinion.

15 Q And the Superior Honor Award, roughly, how many of those does a bureau
16 give out on average during a year?

17 A You know, I can't speak directly to it. I would say superior is certainly more
18 rare for people to receive, but --

19 Q Would it be more than 10?

20 A Oh, certainly. But, you know, again --

21 Q More than 20?

22 A Absolutely, yeah. I would say at each embassy, at a mid-sized embassy in a
23 given year, there's probably three to five superior honor awards given out. At a large
24 embassy, there's probably 10 to 15 superior honor awards given out.

25 Q So it's fair to say for context for the record that, in any given year, for

1 Foreign Service officers, there are hundreds of both meritorious honor awards and
2 superior honor awards given?

3 A Yes, absolutely. In an organization of 50,000 people, I would say yes.

4 Q Yeah and during your time in Kabul, just so we understand, were you
5 responsible for any diplomatic security-related duties?

6 A Absolutely not, no.

7 Q You were only responsible for duties that Foreign Service officers
8 performed?

9 A Absolutely, yes.

10 Q So is it fair to say that your most relevant experience for your time in Kabul
11 was from 2019 onward in the department when you joined as a Foreign Service officer?

12 A Yes.

13 Q So you had roughly 2 years, two and a half years of relevant experience
14 when you got to Kabul?

15 A Correct.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Do you have any experience in the Afghanistan policy?

18 A No.

19 Q In general, what percentage of your career has focused on Afghanistan
20 policy of the region and its people? Would it follow that it would also be zero?

21 A Aside from the 9 or 10 days was on the ground, none.

22 Q Okay. What about experience related to the region more broadly?

23 A I have no experience in South and Central Asia.

24 Q Okay. Have you ever participated in a crisis-related task force at State?

25 A So the word "task force" has a specific nuance at the State Department. If

1 the question is whether I was part of the task force based at Main State, at headquarters,
2 no.

3 Q Have you participated in another task force at State?

4 A I would -- I mean -- no, I have not participated in a State Department task
5 force, but I have been an on-the-ground element during multiple crisis situations for
6 which there was a task force set up at the State Department.

7 Q I see. But you were not a member of a task force itself?

8 A To the best of my knowledge, no.

9 Q Okay. Have you ever served in a crisis or conflict zone?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Could you identify for the record what those instances were?

12 A Sure. The crisis -- I mean, I suppose it's somewhat subjective to call
13 something a crisis or a conflict zone, but I served two full-length assignments and two
14 high-threat posts, which was Niger and then Nigeria. And then I spent the nine or so
15 days in Afghanistan.

16 Q Okay. So just maybe to be more specific, have you ever worked in a
17 complex evacuation outside of the one in Kabul?

18 A Again, I would say that's somewhat subjective, but nevertheless, I led the
19 evacuation of American citizens during the initial months of COVID-19 from Nigeria.
20 And just to be a little more in-depth about that, there was a consular section of 10
21 officers, including consular chief, a deputy, two supervisors, and the remaining vice
22 consuls, in addition to about 20 local staff. When the first flight out of Abuja was
23 offered in the early days of COVID-19, I believe that was on or about March 20th of 2020.
24 The other nine officers from the consular section departed on that very first flight, leaving
25 me as the sole consular officer to manage operations in Abuja for the foreseeable future

1 and several months. So I led several of the complex -- what I would call complex
2 evacuations of American citizens.

3 Q Have you ever worked in a NEO before?

4 A No.

5 Q No. So could you clarify what specifically in your professional background
6 informed your ability to succeed and participate in the evacuation in Kabul?

7 A It's my highly subjective opinion, but I was certified in an advanced training
8 course as a diplomatic security agent that focused on NEOs and focused on crisis
9 operations in conflict zones, including large-scale evacuations of Americans. And then I
10 believe there are soft scales that many diplomats on the ground in Kabul had, including,
11 you know, humbly I would say, I also probably have some of those soft skills.

12 Q Okay. But you also had just testified that you never had served in a NEO.
13 Is that correct?

14 A Correct.

15 Q Okay.

16 [REDACTED]. I think that's -- I think we're turning it to [REDACTED]

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q So I want to touch on a couple of things that we talked about in the previous
19 round. You talked a bit about your experience getting the assignment to go to
20 Afghanistan, and I wanted to delve in that a little bit more.

21 You -- prior to being selected, you were on home leave. Is that correct?

22 A Correct.

23 Q And when you're on home leave, do you have access -- did you have access
24 to your work emails?

25 A I did, yes.

1 Q And so if there was a Department notice, you would have been able to see
2 that --

3 A Yes.

4 Q -- on your -- okay. And you said that it could not be any different notice?

5 A Yeah. But I think I said that -- I'm not saying that none was sent, but I did
6 not see any.

7 Q Okay.

8 A It was certainly not sent to me.

9 Q Okay. Understand. So I want to introduce the book -- part of the book
10 anyway. This is Mitchell Zuckoff, "The Secret Gate: A True Story of Courage and
11 Sacrifice During the Collapse of Afghanistan."

12 [REDACTED]. This will be exhibit 1 for the record.

13 [REDACTED]. Staple issues, so --

14 Mr. Aronson. No problem.

15 [REDACTED]. -- apologies.

16 [Aronson Exhibit No. 1

17 Was marked for identification.]

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q So in the book, it talks about the fascinating engagement about how you got
20 into this and some of the thinking that was had. And it talks about a text exchange that
21 happened with a group called The Squad.

22 Do you want to tell us a little bit about The Squad? Your squad which is different
23 than our squad?

24 A Certainly. My squad, the one sector that is called The Squad on my phone,
25 is four Foreign Service officers from my A-100 orientation class, with me being the fourth.

1 Q Okay. And in the book it says you learned about the opportunity to
2 volunteer from the text exchange with The Squad. Is that correct?

3 A Correct.

4 Q Okay. And I believe later on in the day, the book says that you asked in a
5 group chat, How do I volunteer? Is that correct?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And what did you learn from the text exchange?

8 A So my colleague who was posted in Monterrey, Mexico, told me to send an
9 email to an email alias that -- I'm paraphrasing the alias, but it was something like CA
10 special assistance. And then later on that day, another member of The Squad who was
11 in that text message group had provided me the information for the EUR
12 Bureau's -- again, it was an email alias, something like EUR staffers.

13 Q And the EUR Bureau is what?

14 A Oh, sorry. European Affairs.

15 Q Okay. And do you know why they said to email the EUR Bureau?

16 A She had received -- to the best of my recollection, she had somehow, this
17 member of the text message group had somehow been informed that the EUR Bureau
18 was soliciting names to assist in the evacuation overseas or at headquarters. I'm not
19 certain actually. So anyway, both of them, I believe, had been informed of something
20 that they could do to volunteer.

21 Q Okay. And then, so did you take any more steps with The Squad or others
22 in that text exchange to figure out how you could also volunteer?

23 A Yes. The context of me asking that information was so that I could
24 email -- so they provided those State Department email addresses to me via WhatsApp,
25 so that I could then go on my laptop, which allows you to enter a portal to access your

1 State Department desktop even though you're on a personal laptop. So I entered the
2 State Department portal and pulled up my email and emailed both of those email aliases.

3 Q And was it your understanding that your colleagues who were texting with
4 The Squad, they learned of that information from a Department notice? Or are you
5 aware how they learned about it?

6 A I don't believe that they learned about it through a Department notice. My
7 colleague who was in Monterrey, I believe, received an email or a verbal notification from
8 his consular chief in Monterrey. And the colleague who received the -- who received
9 the European Affairs email address -- I'm not certain the circumstances how she received
10 it.

11 Q Okay.

12 [REDACTED]. What is your basis for believing that this individual had not
13 received an email from State asking for volunteers?

14 Mr. Aronson. I mean, if we wanted to pause real quick, I still have the text
15 messaging on my phone.

16 [REDACTED]. You can just explain.

17 Mr. Aronson. I don't have the -- I can't recall. That's why I'm offering that.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q So what informs the basis that you're testifying that no email
20 correspondence was sent calling for volunteers?

21 A No, I didn't say no email correspondence. I said no Department notice.

22 Q No Department notice. So could you clarify what's the difference between
23 the email or the Department notice?

24 A Yeah. So my recollection of this was that someone in the European Affairs
25 Bureau who was personally friends with the member of this, quote/unquote, squad who's

1 in my text message group had sent an email to colleagues who she trusted essentially
2 saying if you are interested in helping, please get in touch with us ASAP.

3 Q I see. So just so I'm understanding, your testimony is that you believe
4 there was a narrow email sent to a specific group of individuals calling for volunteers in
5 Kabul?

6 A I believe there were many of those emails sent.

7 Q Okay.

8 A I can attest only to the one that I believe my friend in The Squad received.

9 Q Understood. That's very helpful.

10 And so you had previously testified that Jayne Howell was your direct supervisor.
11 Is that correct?

12 A For much of the evacuation, yes.

13 Q Okay. And you testified as to her character. I believe you said she's very
14 knowledgeable in consular affairs, you trust her credibility, responsibility, et cetera. Is
15 that correct?

16 A Absolutely. Jayne Howell is someone I would gladly work with again in the
17 future.

18 Q That's great to hear.

19 [REDACTED]. I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 2.

20 [Aronson Exhibit No. 2

21 Was marked for identification.]

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q Exhibit No. 2 is a trans- -- a portion of the transcript between the committee
24 and Jayne Howell, dated Friday, July 28th, 2023.

25 And if I could call your attention to the bottom of page 7, to line 23.

1 A Can I just have a minute to read through this page?

2 Q Yes, of course. Yeah. If you want to read through line 23 on to page 8.

3 A Okay. Okay.

4 Q So if we could start on line 23 of page 7. A "Q" represents the question.

5 The question was asked of Ms. Howell: When did you first learn of the opportunity to
6 assist with the evacuation?

7 Ms. Howell responds, moving to line 24: I don't think I could recall the exact
8 date, but it -- I know that I departed on August the 17th, so a day or two prior to that
9 there was a call for volunteers, and I volunteered.

10 Continuing on page 8, line 2. The question reads: How did you learn of it?

11 Ms. Howell responded on line 3: There was an email sent to consular officers
12 worldwide seeking volunteers to travel.

13 Do you dispute that that's what Ms. Howell's testimony is?

14 A That that was what her testimony is? No, certainly not.

15 Q Okay. So her testimony reads that there was, in fact, an email sent to
16 consular officers worldwide.

17 You previously testified as to Ms. Howell's credibility. Is that correct?

18 A Correct.

19 Q Do you have any reason to dispute her testimony regarding an email having
20 been sent to consular officers worldwide?

21 A No, certainly not.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q And for context, can you give us a sense, how many consular officers are
24 worldwide in the State Department at any given time?

25 A I believe there's something like 2,000 consular officers. You know, I'd just

1 like to point out, because I think there's a nuance here that might be lost. An email is
2 not a Department notice.

3 Q Thank you for the clarification. But my question previously, so it's your
4 testimony that the email that Jayne Howell testified to presumably could have reached as
5 many as 2,000 employees at the Department when it was sent?

6 A Absolutely, yes.

7 Q Thank you.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q So just going back, you said The Squad sent these two email addresses to
10 you. Do you recall then how you volunteered?

11 A Yes. Yeah.

12 Q What did you do?

13 A I believe I testified to this like an hour ago, but I'm happy to go through it
14 again. So I sent an email to the CA staffers or CA special assistant's email address
15 volunteering myself. And I would point you to a section of "The Secret Gate," which I
16 think actually quotes part of that email verbatim. Then I also sent an email to the EUR,
17 European Affairs staffers also volunteering myself to assist. And then thirdly, I sent an
18 email to a trusted senior colleague who's in the senior foreign service rank of minister
19 counselor who I knew worked under a high-ranking under secretary. And I said, I'd
20 really like to help out with this. Can you think of any way that I can get involved to help?

21 Q And so after you sent the email to those three entities, what happened?

22 A To the best of my recollection, I received a response from Consular Affairs
23 staffers saying thank you for your interest. We will add you to a roster of interested
24 individuals. I believe I received a very similar response from the EUR email address that
25 said something -- I'm paraphrasing here, but something like thank you very much for your

1 interest. We will add you to a roster of individuals in case we need to send more
2 individuals to assist with the evacuation. And then, thirdly, while I did not receive an
3 email response from that trusted senior minister counselor, he forwarded my email and
4 put me on cc to the NEA/SCA executive director saying he recommends me for this if they
5 need help. And then that was probably about 11 o'clock in the morning on August 17th.
6 And about an hour and a half later, I got a phone call from Rachna Korhonen.

7 Q Okay. I just wanted to -- in the book it says you emailed the State
8 Department bureau that oversees passports. And then it says: A reply arrived
9 20 minutes later, along with a request for more information. With it came an
10 encouraging note: The Department, quote, "may still be looking for people to go to
11 Doha and possibly a few other locations to help with our effort there."

12 So I just wanted to understand the tick-tock.

13 A Yeah. And I would say in this instance the book's accuracy is better than
14 my own recollection at this point. So I'm confident that if the book writes it like that,
15 that's based on both written correspondence and text correspondence that better aligns
16 with, you know, kind of verbatim details.

17 Q Okay. Thanks. Thanks for that clarification.

18 So let's then -- we'll attest, I guess -- I don't know if that's the right word,
19 but -- that 20 minutes after you sent the email, you heard back from the State
20 Department saying there's a potential chance that you might be going to Doha and
21 possibly a few other locations?

22 A So if I'm recalling the gist of that email I got back from the CA special
23 assistants, it was more along the lines of can you -- they sent a blank -- it wasn't a form,
24 but it was essentially a form saying can you fill out your rank, your language as you speak,
25 your experience, why you think you would be a good fit for this, and we will add this to a

1 list of individuals as we might be needing additional people to assist overseas.

2 Q Okay.

3 A And it may have included Doha.

4 Q Okay. I just want to be clear of what the quote in the book, which you just
5 testified was a more accurate representation of what occurred says, which was it came
6 with an encouraging note: The Department may still be looking for people to go to
7 Doha and possibly a few other locations to help with our effort there, end quote.

8 A Yeah. I'd like to amend that previous statement that I just made. I don't
9 believe that is inaccurate. I believe it to be accurate, but I believe that it's missing the
10 nuance that I just shared, which is, yes, they may be looking for additional people.
11 Please provide your information of why you think you would be a good fit, and we will
12 add you to a roster of names in case we need people with your skill set. We may be
13 back in touch.

14 Q Understood. Thank you.

15 And then it -- sort of to go on, and I think you testified to this, and the book also
16 talked about this. It says you -- you said you emailed your mentor to get your name on
17 the list and the mentor weighed in. Do you recall with whom the mentor weighed in?

18 A Yes. Like I said, he forwarded the email to Rachna Korhonen.

19 Q Okay. And so at what point following the engagement of your mentor and
20 the email correspondence did you think that this was actually going to happen, that you'd
21 be selected?

22 A Well, I was essentially selected at about 1 o'clock or 1:30 p.m. when I got
23 that phone call from Ms. Korhonen asking if I could be on an airplane that night. And, in
24 fact, I believe there's a follow-up email -- or, like, the email was sent just before the call or
25 just after the call. I believe it was before the call, but I'm not certain. But it said

1 something along the same lines of are you able to travel tonight? And that was, you
2 know, my first indication that something was likely possible to get me involved in these
3 efforts.

4 And then as I sort of testified to the majority side earlier, there was a lot of back
5 and forth, what I'll refer to as whiplash in terms of, okay, your tickets are booked. Oh,
6 wait, human resources is now saying you can't go. Okay, wait, now they're saying you
7 can go. Go ahead and book a hotel. Okay, wait, actually, don't book the hotel.
8 Cancel that hotel. So there was a lot of whiplash.

9 But I would say that my initial indication that I was going to be traveling for this
10 evacuation was approximately 1 o'clock p.m. on August 17th.

11 Q Okay. Thank you.

12 And then just wanted to really review one other quick element of this. You
13 testified earlier and I just could -- maybe you can repeat it again. At what point did you
14 have a sense you were going to Kabul?

15 A So the sense is kind of different than the confirmation. So I want to just
16 make that distinction clear. I believe I had a sense, to the best of my recollection, either
17 late at night on the 17th or early in the morning on the 18th. But it was -- so I recall
18 calling my -- I called a close friend of mine who has no involvement in the State
19 Department, the night of the 17th at about 9:30 p.m. And I was under the impression
20 still that I was going to Doha. However, when I reread everything the following
21 morning, I saw the references to Kabul.

22 So there is also some whiplash there. Part of it, probably my own excitement
23 and being overwhelmed. I believe I was notified, to some extent, that Kabul was a likely
24 spot for me at some point in the night on the 17th, but I don't believe I comprehended
25 that point until middayish on the 18th.

1 Q Okay. Thank you.

2 BY [REDACTED]

3 Q I just had one quick followup. The exchange you had with my colleague
4 about the email response that you got back that said, okay, we'll put you on a list of
5 volunteers, you know, we may deploy you, or I'm probably not saying it completely
6 accurately. But you mentioned that that email asked for information about employees'
7 skills and background. Is that correct?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And what did you understand the purpose of asking about their skills and
10 background to be?

11 A I believe they were trying to make a list of certain skill sets so that -- I mean,
12 this is my own speculation, but I believe that people in leadership positions who make
13 staffing determinations would then ask for people with certain skills. So, for instance, if
14 an employee were a Dari speaker, I'd imagine they'd be in high demand.

15 So I imagine the skills that were listed and the experience that were listed would
16 play some sort of role in making staffing decisions about those who were coming from
17 Washington, D.C.

18 Q Okay. So then based on that email response that you got, is it fair to say
19 that the Department was looking for qualified individuals to send to Kabul?

20 A I don't think I can speak on behalf of the Department, but I would say the
21 Consular Affairs leadership was looking for qualified individuals.

22 Q And that they had a mechanism, a series of questions that they posed to
23 potential TDYers or people who would be deployed to ascertain their qualifications?

24 A That is my understanding, yes.

25 Q Great. Okay.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q And I just quickly want to clarify for the record, in fairness to Ms. Howell, she
3 actually did testify that there were two calls for volunteers, and she had responded to the
4 second call.

5 So I want to go ahead and turn to a different topic. Okay. Are you aware what
6 percentage of volunteers showed up in Kabul as compared to folks who were assigned to
7 go to Kabul for the evacuation?

8 A I have no indication one way or the other.

9 Q Okay. You had previously testified that your belief was many missions had
10 sent the worst of their consular officers to Kabul. Is that correct?

11 A It's a bit of a paraphrasing of what I said, but, I mean, I believe that many
12 of -- scratch that. I believe that some of the consular officers who I had served alongside
13 who were sent from large overseas consular sections were not the best choices of who to
14 send.

15 Q Okay. And you're not aware of what percentage of consular officers on the
16 ground were volunteers versus people who were sent. Is that correct?

17 A Oh, to clarify, I don't believe anybody was sent against their wishes. I
18 believe every single person who was on the ground in Kabul had volunteered.

19 Q I see. Okay. I don't think I had understood that point, so thank you for
20 clarifying.

21 In terms of the consular officers on the ground, how many hours a day were they
22 working?

23 A Shifts were 12 hours. So there were some outliers at given times due to
24 requests and needs. There was one time that I requested to work longer hours. But
25 generally speaking, consular officers were scheduled to work 12-hour shifts.

1 Q Okay. And was anyone sent home as a result of poor behavior or poor
2 judgment by Ms. Howell?

3 A Poor behavior, no. Poor judgment, that's a bit subjective, so it's hard for
4 me to speak to. But what I will say is that, yes, consular officers were sent home
5 for -- I'm not certain if it was their decision that they weren't a good fit or if it was Ms.
6 Howell's or someone else in leadership's decision that they weren't a good fit. But, yes,
7 there were consular officers who were sent home.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q So your belief is that Ms. Howell and others in the management chain took
10 steps if someone was not, in their view, a good fit to remove that person from service in
11 Kabul?

12 A Yes.

13 Q And were those individuals who were sent home -- well, let me back up.
14 You had firsthand knowledge of some individuals who were sent home under those
15 circumstances?

16 A Yes.

17 Q And do you have any knowledge of whether those individuals' slots were
18 then filled with a new consular officer?

19 A Yes, I believe they were.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q And how many consular officers were on the ground during the evacuation?

22 A You know, it fluctuated on a daily basis, but it was somewhere between 34
23 and 40 maybe at any given time. I certainly don't think higher than 40 and certainly not
24 less than 30.

25 Q Okay. So between 30 and 40 individuals. In your firsthand knowledge,

1 how many of those individuals left during the evacuation?

2 A You mean left before August 28th, let's say? Because August 28th was the
3 first real kind of retrograde of consular officers.

4 Q The more specific question, I'm referring to the individuals who went home
5 due to a poor fit that was determined by themselves or Ms. Howell.

6 A Gosh. Only one comes to mind who went home for being a poor fit.

7 Q Okay.

8 A However, there were at least four sent home on or about August 22nd who I
9 do not believe are poor fits but were sent home regardless.

10 Q Okay. So it's your testimony that you're personally aware of one individual
11 out of 35 or 40 who left due to a poor fit, either on their own volition or Ms. Howell
12 asking them to depart?

13 A At least one, yes.

14 Q Okay. Fair enough. Are you aware of what the After Action Review is?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Were you interviewed for the AAR?

17 A No.

18 Q Okay. Were you asked to be interviewed for the AAR?

19 A No, absolutely not. And, in fact, I would've loved to have been interviewed
20 for it, but I was not given the opportunity.

21 Q Understood. Have you read the unclassified version of the AAR?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Do you dispute the findings of the AAR?

24 A No. I agree with the findings.

25 Q What percentage of certainty would you agree with the AAR findings?

1 A You know, I don't have that in front of me, but if I can recall what my
2 sentiment was after reading the AAR or the -- sorry, the unclassified summary that was
3 publicly released, I found it to be very compelling and accurate.

4 Q Okay. And are you personally aware of who Dan Smith is?

5 A Yes.

6 Q Are you aware that he drafted the AAR?

7 A Yes.

8 Q What's his professional reputation, in your opinion?

9 A Dan Smith has a phenom- -- or had -- I think he's since retired, but had a
10 phenomenal reputation at the State Department. He was a career ambassador, I
11 believe, which is the highest ranking official -- the highest rank attainable as a career
12 official. And it's incredibly rare. I think there's only about three State Department
13 people who are named -- who rise to career ambassador per year. He was the head of
14 the Foreign Service Institute for some time. I met him probably twice in my life, and
15 have nothing negative to say about him; in fact, all positive things.

16 Q Okay. Would you have any reason, therefore, to dispute his ability to
17 conduct the AAR and draft it in a way that is objective and fair?

18 A I have no reason to think he would not draft it in a way that was objective
19 and fair. In fact, I am, you know, confident based on what I know of Dan Smith that he
20 would do his best to draft a fair and accurate AAR based on the information that he
21 received to go into that AAR.

22 Q Are you aware of how many individuals were interviewed as part of the
23 AAR?

24 A I believe, if I recall, at least a hundred.

25 Q It's about 150, so I think we can meet in the middle there.

1 on the FBI task force to bring to safety a group of Afghan women whose husbands had
2 received SIVs and were already in the United States.

3 That was actually -- while she had organized this, it was actually me and a young
4 Afghan interpreter who I requested assistance from who brought in that group.

5 So I remember reading the summary and thinking, huh, okay, that's not exactly
6 how I would have worded that went down because I was actually the one who did it and
7 not that consular officer. So I just wanted to put that on the record.

8 Q Okay. Fair enough.

9 I'd like to read into the record on page 6 the blue box entitled, Consular Officers at
10 HKIA. I will read it in part beginning with: Consular officers responded heroically to
11 extraordinary challenges while on the ground at HKIA. Under relentlessly hostile and
12 threatening circumstances, they assisted thousands of panicked U.S. citizens and at-risk
13 Afghans in navigating a path to safety, drawing on their experience and judgment to make
14 often wrenching decisions about who can enter HKIA to be evacuated and whom to turn
15 away. The AAR team found the account of their experiences both uplifting and
16 heartbreaking.

17 I wanted to read that into the record and also note with it that it's your testimony
18 out of the 35 to 40 individuals who were working on the ground in a consular function,
19 only one departed, in your firsthand knowledge, related to lack of good fit. And also
20 emphasize the fact that 150 people were interviewed in relation to the AAR. And it's
21 also your testimony that you found the findings of the AAR to be credible as well as
22 reliable, and also in terms of Dan Smith's judgment and character related to his
23 reputation at the Department.

24 A Yes. Absolutely. And I just want to make clear, because I want to make
25 sure I didn't misspeak earlier when the majority side was interviewing me.

1 While there were a small handful of consular officers who I believe were not a
2 good fit for that environment, the overwhelming majority of those consular officers on
3 the ground were tremendously hardworking, brave, knowledgeable, compassionate,
4 experienced professionals.

5 So while I spoke specifically to a small handful who were not, in my opinion, a
6 good fit for that assignment, I just want to be clear that I am not denigrating the 30-plus
7 or even, you know -- there were many who were rotated out -- so even 40-plus consular
8 officers who I would gladly work with again in the future and who I would -- when I gave
9 my opening remarks and I spoke to those who I would trust with my child's life, most
10 of -- almost all of the individuals on the ground who were consular officers I would trust
11 with my child's life. I just want to be clear about that.

12 Q Thank you very much for that clarification.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q So I want to switch topics here. I just want to revisit some of your earlier
15 testimony and also make sure we're clear. So, essentially, when you arrived in Kabul,
16 that was for service in a noncombatant evacuation operation, the NEO, correct?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And is it fair to say that NEOs are not common events?

19 A That is very fair to say. They're rare events.

20 Q Particularly a NEO where potentially tens of thousands of people will be
21 evacuated over a short time, right. That's unusual?

22 A Correct, I'd say that's probably one in a generation.

23 Q Okay. And was it your understanding that the individuals who had been
24 assigned to Embassy Kabul for a regular tour prior to any NEO beginning, that some of
25 those individuals remained in Kabul at the time that you arrived there?

1 A At the time I arrived, yes. If I had to estimate quickly off the top of my
2 head, it was fewer than 25 in an embassy that I think has hundreds of staff generally
3 before it was evacuated.

4 Q Okay. So this rump embassy Kabul staff group, what were some of the
5 activities and duties they were responsible for performing?

6 A So it was a small enough number that I can actually speak specifically to it.
7 So from executive leadership from that embassy, it was CDA Ross Wilson. It was the
8 assistant chief of missions Scott Weinhold. It was -- they left the deputy regional
9 security on the ground named Ben Sides, Benjamin Sides. They sent home the senior
10 RSO. So Ben Sides was acting. They left the GSO, general services officer, on the
11 ground. They left -- they had sent home the management officer. They left two public
12 affairs professionals. They left two political officers. They left Greg Floyd to lead the
13 consular team. They left about five -- about five consular officers under him, who were
14 subsequently sent home on August 22nd. And the remaining individuals were part of
15 the Diplomatic Security team.

16 Q Okay. And did you have a sense of the activities these individuals were
17 performing?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Were they related to the NEO?

20 A Yes. I mean, my belief or my perspective is that every single activity that
21 was happening during the latter half of August was related to that NEO.

22 Q What's the basis for that belief?

23 A For -- speaking to these individuals. I mean, I suppose when you say
24 related to the NEO, do you mean -- can you elaborate?

25 Q Yes. I'm happy to clarify. I guess what I'm trying to get at is that the

1 Embassy Kabul staff who were retained in Kabul, did you work with them on a firsthand
2 basis?

3 A Yes.

4 Q Okay. And were they colocated with you?

5 A Some.

6 Q Some were. And were some of them performing duties that they had
7 performed previously prior to the NEO beginning?

8 A That's difficult to answer. The duties were the same, yes, but the context
9 surrounding those duties had changed.

10 Q So they had duties that they performed prior to August 15th, 2021. They
11 continued to perform those duties as Embassy Kabul assigned staff, but your testimony is
12 that the context in which they were performing those duties changed?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Okay. But to your knowledge, they still reported through their normal
15 Embassy Kabul reporting chain up to CDA Wilson?

16 A So yes. I want to be -- I want to be a little bit more clear on that point. So
17 the individuals who worked out of the section of the airport that's called the Katgirl (ph),
18 also called ramp 7, they I believe reported to Scott Weinhold, who was --

19 Q Who reported to CDA Wilson?

20 A To the best of my knowledge, yes, he reported to CDA Wilson.

21 Q So there was a contingent of roughly 25 or less staffers who continued to
22 work under and report through Weinhold to Wilson?

23 A Yes, but they also reported to Ambassador Bass. So, you know, when I
24 testified earlier that there were two ambassadors there --

25 Q Uh-huh.

1 A -- there were moments that I observed where it was unclear which of those
2 two ambassadors was in charge.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Okay. We can spend a little more time on that later, but your testimony
5 here was that the NEO was an unusual event.

6 Let's talk about Ambassador Bass being deployed to work in the context of the
7 NEO. Did Ambassador Bass ever tell you why he was sent out?

8 A Not to my recollection off the top of my head right now, no.

9 Q Did he ever tell you that it was because Ambassador Wilson's performance
10 was inferior?

11 A No, absolutely not. No. And just to be clear, that is not something that
12 would lightly be said by any senior State Department official and certainly not something
13 they would share to their subordinates.

14 Q To your knowledge, does Ambassador Bass have Afghanistan experience?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Can you describe what you understand it to be?

17 A Yes. Ambassador Bass was the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan for, I
18 believe, at least 2 years, ending at some point, I believe, in 2020.

19 Q Okay. So was it useful to have his expertise on the ground during the
20 unusual NEO experience?

21 A It was incredibly useful, yes.

22 Q Was he, to your knowledge, working full-time?

23 A My experience, watching Ambassador Bass and being his staff aide for a
24 period of the evacuation, was that he worked incredibly long hours. He slept on a mesh
25 cot -- no mattress -- on a mesh cot in his office, using an MRE, a military ration, as his

1 pillow. He did that to free up a bed so that one of us lower-ranking officials could have a
2 mattress with a sheet to sleep on.

3 Q So, in these extenuating circumstances, was it reasonable to deploy a senior
4 official from Washington like Ambassador Bass to contribute to the mission?

5 A In this particular instance, it was incredibly useful, from my perspective.

6 Q Okay.

7 And would you say the same of Jayne Howell, who I believe you also testified
8 previously had duties that seemed to run in parallel with Greg Floyd's duties?

9 A Yes. It was incredibly useful to have Jayne Howell and Jean Akres there.
10 And I believe both were tremendous selections for that.

11 Q And they're both senior Foreign Service officers with a lot of consular
12 experience, in your knowledge?

13 A Yes. My understanding is Jayne Howell was already in the Senior Foreign
14 Service -- because Senior Foreign Service is an actual career designation.

15 Q Uh-huh.

16 A What I learned about 2 weeks ago was that Jean Akres was just promoted
17 into the Senior Foreign Service, as well, the first week of September.

18 Q Okay.

19 So I want to go back to -- and we'll use later question rounds to get into this in
20 more detail. But when you landed on the ground in Kabul, what did you understand
21 your mission to be?

22 A When I -- like, when the airplane wheels touched the ground?

23 Q Sure.

24 A Okay. I did not have a firm understanding of what my mission would be. I
25 thought there was a -- I thought that I would be doing political officer work.

1 It wasn't until about 45 minutes later, when I spoke to Ambassador Bass and
2 James DeHart, where they requested that I do consular officer work, and they asked me if
3 I still had an active consular commission, and I told them, yes, I do -- or, I did. So, at that
4 point, I was asked to do consular officer work.

5 BY ██████████:

6 Q Were you briefed upon your arrival in Kabul by anyone?

7 A No. But when there was the first shift hand-over after my arrival -- so I
8 arrived around 5:00 a.m.

9 Q Okay.

10 A The shift hand-over was just after 6:00 a.m.

11 Q I see.

12 A So my first briefing was at, let's call it 6:05 in the morning, about an hour and
13 5 minutes after I landed.

14 ██████████: And at what time did you learn that you would be doing consular
15 duties?

16 Mr. Aronson. About 5:45 a.m.

17 ██████████: Okay.

18 BY ██████████:

19 Q At that 6 o'clock meeting, were you given instructions about what you
20 should be doing that day?

21 A At the tail end of that meeting, I was given instructions by Jayne Howell with
22 what I would be doing that morning. It changed -- if I recall, I had a different assignment
23 for the afternoon.

24 Q Were those instructions clear to you?

25 A Yes, absolutely.

1 Q Okay.

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q And you testified initially that you didn't know what your mission was when
4 the wheels touched the ground in Kabul. At what point did you have a mission that was
5 clear to you?

6 A When you say -- well, the mission was clear to me early that morning,
7 certainly before 7:00 in the morning.

8 Q And what did you understand that mission to be?

9 A For that particular day -- well, are you asking about the overall mission for
10 why I was sent there or what duties I would be doing that day?

11 Q So I appreciate the need for clarification. Why don't I ask you both?
12 Did you have a sense of what your objectives were, as a State Department
13 employee, that you should be pursuing and performing on the ground?

14 A Yes, absolutely. It was clear to me that day that the mission that I would be
15 doing for the foreseeable future was working with the U.S. Marines at the various gates
16 or at the passenger terminal for me to safely vet individuals and families to determine
17 whether they met the qualifications to be evacuated out of Afghanistan.

18 Q Okay. And that mission, that became clear to you within an hour of arrival
19 in Kabul?

20 A Yeah. Yes.

21 Q Okay.

22 I think -- so the last topic we just wanted to unpack and make sure we
23 understand -- so I believe you testified earlier that you got confirmation that you would
24 be going to Kabul -- you maybe had a sense of it on the night of the 17th, but you
25 understood it fully or it felt confirmed to you midday on the 18th. Is that correct?

1 A That's correct, yeah.

2 Q Okay. And, then, when did you get on the plane?

3 A It was a 9 o'clock flight out of -- or, I believe it was 9:10 -- out of Dulles. It's
4 the Qatar Airways flight. There's two of them in the evening. One's at 6:00 p.m.; one's
5 at 9:00-ish p.m. I was on that plane.

6 Q Okay. So, before you got on the plane, you had a confirmed sense that you
7 were ultimately going to be working in Kabul.

8 A Yes.

9 Q Okay.

10 And your time in Doha and your time in Kabul, are these considered short-term
11 tours of duty?

12 A Yes. It was -- we call it the acronym "TDY."

13 Q TDY.

14 A Yeah.

15 Q And, in fact, would you have considered your time in Doha as maybe even
16 just a layover?

17 A Oh, absolutely. It was squarely just a layover.

18 Q So not even a tour of duty, but just passing through.

19 A Correct.

20 Q Okay. Have you done TDYs before to other places?

21 A Yes.

22 Q And, in those cases, were you accredited as a diplomatic agent to those
23 places where you were a TDYer?

24 A No. And, to the best of my knowledge, it's actually not possible under the
25 Vienna Conventions to accredit a temporary duty official.

1 Q Since you mentioned it, in a minute and a half left, we can introduce the
2 Vienna Convention as an exhibit.

3 Is that exhibit 4?

4 [REDACTED]: Exhibit 4.

5 [REDACTED]: Exhibit 4.

6 [Aronson Exhibit No. 4

7 Was marked for identification.]

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q If you could take a very quick look, and while you are doing so, I will just ask:
10 So your testimony, then, is that TDYers are not allowed to be accredited as diplomats
11 under an international convention?

12 A To the best of my knowledge --

13 Q To the best of your knowledge.

14 A -- yes.

15 Q And you can check that -- you can take the exhibit and peek at it.

16 And, passing through Doha, you weren't even a TDYer. And you passed through
17 Doha using your personal passport?

18 A Yes, which, just to be clear, is unusual, but I don't think there's anything
19 fundamentally unlawful or untoward about it.

20 Q Unusual, but not unlawful. Okay. Who told you to travel on a personal
21 passport?

22 A The executive leadership of the NEA/SCA Bureau.

23 Q Okay. And because you were on a personal passport -- you had testified
24 previously that diplomatic passports allow you to access a faster route through customs
25 and immigration. But you also testified that you were in the VIP lounge. Were you

1 delayed at all, in your time in Doha, traveling on your personal passport?

2 A I was delayed for an unrelated reason -- my bag got lost -- but not because of
3 the passport, to the best of my knowledge.

4 Q So your testimony is that there was no distinction in the practical impact of
5 traveling through Doha on your personal versus diplomatic passport?

6 A Correct, no fundamental distinction from an immigration or customs
7 standpoint.

8 Q Thanks.

9 That's all.

10 [REDACTED]: We can go off the record. Thank you.

11 [Recess.]

12 [REDACTED]: Back on the record.

13 So I have a couple followup questions, but I just wanted to first state for the
14 record that the transcript of Ms. Jayne Howell has not yet underwent review by agency
15 counsel, the U.S. Department of State, or the witness herself.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q So I have a couple followup questions for you.

18 Specifically, can you speak to, what are the functions of a DS agent?

19 A So Diplomatic Security special agents do three primary duties. One is
20 protection of dignitaries. Two is criminal investigations. And three is security
21 management to secure our embassies and consulates overseas.

22 Q Given the security issues and threat in Kabul, do you feel like your
23 experience as a DS agent helped you serve in a consular capacity in Kabul?

24 A Yes. I attribute the majority, if not all, of the people I rescued through the
25 secretive gate that the book is about --

1 Q Uh-huh.

2 A -- I attribute that to my training and experience as a Diplomatic Security
3 agent.

4 Q Thank you.

5 And you noted that you served as a consular officer while at HKIA. Did you serve
6 in any other capacity other than a consular officer while there?

7 A Yes. I was the -- after the Abbey Gate bombing, I became the aide to
8 Ambassador John Bass.

9 Q And why do you think you were selected for that role?

10 A You know, I can't really speak to what the decision-making process was, but I
11 do know that Jim DeHart hand-selected me for it of the 38 consular officers who were
12 there.

13 Q So he personally selected you himself, Mr. DeHart did?

14 A Yes. In fact, there -- so there was a staff aide to the Ambassador who was
15 assigned and accredited to U.S. Embassy Kabul, and she remained on the ground until the
16 last flight that I -- she and I were on the same flight out of there. She had been the aide.
17 And then, after the Abbey Gate bombing, she was -- I don't want to use the word
18 "removed," but she was no longer the aide --

19 Q Uh-huh.

20 A -- and I was then selected to become the aide.

21 Q Did you receive any feedback on your performance while at HKIA from either
22 Mr. DeHart or others on the ground?

23 A Do you mean did I receive the feedback while I was there or did I receive
24 feedback after the fact?

25 Q Let's start at while you were there, and then we can move to after the fact,

1 in terms of your performance.

2 A Yes. To my knowledge, Bass and DeHart where very happy with my
3 performance. In fact, at one point, they led a round of applause for something that I
4 had done.

5 Then, after the fact, I received a commendation letter from Mr. DeHart that was
6 placed in my personnel file that -- I think I have the letter somewhere; I would be happy
7 to share it. But I also believe "The Secret Gate" uses direct quotes from that letter.

8 Q And and do you still have a relationship with Mr. DeHart?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Can you speak to that relationship?

11 A We don't speak frequently anymore, but we email to catch up on life every,
12 say, 3 months, just to stay in touch. I know he's heading to Vancouver to be the consul
13 general. You know, he knows that I work at a private company now. So we stay in
14 touch about things.

15 Q And did he know about the book, "The Secret Gate"?

16 A Yes. In fact, he was interviewed fairly extensively for the book.

17 Q So he corroborated.

18 A Correct.

19 Q Thank you.

20 So I wanted to jump back to the point of your awards. First, it's my
21 understanding, as a former State attorney, that those awards are typically looked to for
22 promotions. Is that correct?

23 A It certainly plays a role, generally, in promotion decisions.

24 Q Which award are you most proud of, and why?

25 A I'm sorry. This shouldn't be such a difficult question for me to answer.

1 The National Intelligence Meritorious Citation was particularly meaningful to me,
2 because, similar to what went down at HKIA, in the sense that I did something outside of
3 my general job duties, the award from the Director of National Intelligence was for
4 something very similar, in the sense that it was something that generally is not part of the
5 purview of Diplomatic Security agents, but it was an incredibly important mission that we
6 did in Niger during an incredibly dicey, tricky time. And a lot of lives, in my opinion,
7 were saved, and a lot of bad people who wanted to do harm to Americans were
8 accounted for.

9 Q That's incredible, and you should be proud of that.

10 A Thank you.

11 Q And you testified previously that a NEO is a rarity, that it doesn't happen
12 often. If I'm misstating or paraphrasing, please feel free to correct me, but the basic gist
13 being that it's not something that happens often.

14 A Correct.

15 Q So, based on that, is it fair to say that not many within the Department have
16 experiences with NEOs?

17 A Correct.

18 Q So I believe, previously, in your prior testimony, you had noted -- so it was
19 about 10 years in total, about 10 -- you said 9 years -- with DS and Foreign Service.

20 A Yes.

21 Q So, despite what my minority colleagues described as a more junior role,
22 it's -- many people in the Department don't have experience with NEOs more broadly,
23 correct?

24 A That's correct.

25 Q Okay. Thank you.

1 So I wanted to transition a bit and focus on HKIA specifically. You touched upon
2 this briefly in your prior testimony, but can you sort of speak to what the layout of HKIA
3 was like? Because there were two different operations, just from my understanding. I
4 would love to hear a bit more about what that structure looked like.

5 A Yeah. I wish we had a map. It would be, kind of, easier to point out all
6 the -- in any case.

7 So the passenger terminal on the north side of the airport, on the military part of
8 the airport, that's where the Marines and State Department processed families for
9 evacuation onto the tarmac next to it.

10 About 150 meters away is the Joint Operations Center, called the JOC, J-O-C. The
11 JOC was previously in place as part of the military side of HKIA, so there was already
12 classified communication systems in there, already the ability to hook up feeds to ISR,
13 overhead drones, and other sort of technical capabilities, as well as physical capabilities
14 such as desks, a small rocket bunker, and razor wire. The majority of military leadership
15 and State Department leadership worked out of that JOC. And that's centrally located in
16 the north of the airport, so kind of north-center.

17 On the southwest part of the airport, there was something called Ramp 7, also
18 called the KAK. I believe that's K-A-K. I'd like to kind of speak a bit carefully about the
19 KAK because I recognize we're in an unclassified setting. At the KAK was where I slept
20 and where about 25 of my colleagues also slept.

21 One of the rooms of the KAK, which was the MWR room, which is the morale and
22 welfare and recreation room, was where the remaining U.S. Embassy Kabul personnel
23 who were evacuated from the embassy and were still doing, generally speaking, their
24 duties of those roles -- they were located in the MWR room. So they set up computers,
25 they set up telephones, they set up desks.

1 And just for some sort of color on this, the pool table, the billiards table in the
2 middle was, like, a desk.

3 Q Uh-huh.

4 A You know, so this was -- I was inside that MWR room at least twice a day,
5 if -- let's call it twice a day. And, like, it was clear, this was a highly functional
6 environment, despite the craziness of, you know, turning a pool table and a bar and
7 a -- you know, this was a room that, 2 months prior, was used for fun and for hanging out
8 with other colleagues, and now, all of a sudden, this was, you know, sort of a quasi
9 secondary nerve center of the evacuation.

10 Q Uh-huh.

11 Can you speak to how far apart the JOC, the Joint Operations Center, and the KAK
12 were?

13 A So in physical distance or in driving distance? Because those are two
14 things. If you were to draw a straight line --

15 Q Uh-huh.

16 A -- it's probably three-quarters of a mile.

17 Q Uh-huh.

18 A The only way to drive there, though, was you had to, from the north, go all
19 the way east, go south, then go west. So it was about a 12- to 15-minute drive.

20 Q Was there a lot of back-and-forth between the two centers?

21 A No. In fact, it was quite the opposite. There was very little flexibility for
22 there to be movements between the two, due to staffing restrictions on the security
23 team.

24 Q Uh-huh.

25 A So I recall, there was one instance, on or about August 21st, my first day

1 working at Abbey Gate, I left my backpack in one of the vehicles that our security team
2 had hotwired to take as our own. And I had asked if I could leave my stuff in there, and
3 they said sure, it's an armored vehicle, that's fine. Then, when it came time to leave
4 Abbey Gate, like, 8 hours, 9 hours later, that car was gone, because a different team, not
5 related to the State Department, had stolen that car from us. So I lost my backpack that
6 had all my clothes, had some medication in it, had various other things.

7 So I had to kind of raise a fuss with our Diplomatic Security team to try to track
8 down that backpack. And I was given the choice: If I wanted to wait around -- if I
9 wanted to get my backpack back, I'd have to spend the night at the JOC instead
10 of -- because they were unable to make a separate vehicle movement from the JOC to the
11 KAK just for me.

12 So I was put in a little bit of an uncomfortable spot, although I just want to be, like,
13 super-clear, I understand, I mean, there was a limited number of Diplomatic Security
14 personnel, and I understand that, like, making a movement from one end of the airport to
15 the other, for security purposes, required generally, like, at least three cars with a lot of
16 armed individuals. So I do understand that.

17 But just to sort of give some color, even for something like "I need my
18 medication," they were not really able to make an exception for me because of that.

19 Q Can you describe the -- obviously, understanding that we're in an
20 unclassified setting -- to the best of your ability, can you describe the activities of the Joint
21 Operations Center?

22 A Yes.

23 So there's two -- there's a large hangar, like an airplane hangar essentially. Two
24 sets of doors, one on either side. To get into the JOC area, you have to go past a Marine
25 who is standing guard who would check for ID. So I carried my State Department badge

1 around my neck, typically tucked it behind my body armor.

2 When you walked in, the immediate section, which was about one-quarter of the
3 JOC, was three desks, then some couches, a television that was able to play CNN or other
4 news stations. There was an office on the ground floor where General Farrell Sullivan
5 sat, and there was an office about 15 yards away where another Defense official sat.

6 Then, if you were to walk back, was the military portion of the JOC. So there was
7 probably about 15 to 20 desks, as well as a large wall with at least 6 or more television
8 monitors that mostly played ISR footage.

9 And there was spiral staircases on either end that went up to a second floor with a
10 catwalk. On one end was where Ambassador Bass and Jim DeHart were working out of.
11 On the other end was a conference room with secure videoconferencing capabilities.

12 Q When serving as an aide, did you work out of the JOC as well?

13 A Yes. And I worked out of Ambassador Bass's office on the second floor.

14 Q Okay.

15 And where was Ambassador Wilson based?

16 A He was certainly not at the JOC. My understanding is, Ambassador Wilson
17 was meant to work out of the KAK.

18 Q Uh-huh.

19 A However, I never saw with my own eyes Ambassador Wilson at the KAK.

20 Q Why were Ambassador Bass and Ambassador Wilson located at two
21 different centers?

22 A You know, I don't have that information. I could speculate, but I don't think
23 it would be useful.

24 Q No. Thank you.

25 So you previously testified -- and please feel free to correct me if I'm incorrectly

1 paraphrasing or misstating -- that, in practice, Ambassador John Bass was sort of leading
2 the evacuation.

3 A Correct.

4 Q Was that well-understood by the personnel on the ground as well?

5 A I can't speak for every person on the ground, but from those who I spoke to
6 and those whose conversations I heard, et cetera, I believe it was quite well-known that
7 Ambassador Bass was leading the evacuation and operations on the ground.

8 Q In your capacity as an aide, do you believe Ambassador Wilson was left out
9 of decision-making, or at least decision-making you witnessed?

10 A From the decision-making that I witnessed, Ambassador Wilson was not
11 involved.

12 Q Are you aware of whether Ambassador Wilson was involved in senior-level
13 discussions about the evacuation with military leaders on the ground?

14 A To what I saw personally, those decisions and those conversations were
15 handled by Ambassador Bass.

16 Q Do you know if Ambassador Wilson was ill during the evacuation?

17 A My understanding from what I saw and heard from colleagues with direct
18 knowledge but also saw with my own eyes, yes, Ambassador Wilson was ill for at least the
19 latter part of the evacuation.

20 Q Did he have COVID during that period?

21 A I was told that he had COVID. I'm not a doctor, so I can't diagnosis it, but I
22 was told that he had COVID.

23 Q By those with firsthand knowledge?

24 A By those who took part in the COVID test.

25 Q Okay. And by "taking part in the COVID test," can you elaborate?

1 A So, when we arrived in Doha, in order to transit through Al Udeid Air Base,
2 we were required by the military to all take rapid COVID tests in order to get on the plane
3 back home to the U.S.

4 I was not on the same plane as Ambassador Wilson, but I was told by someone
5 who took part in the operation -- I hate to use the word "operation," but -- someone who
6 took part in Ambassador Wilson's COVID test that he tested positive for COVID and was
7 immediately placed into a quarantine tent, and in order to get Ambassador Wilson home
8 to the U.S., they had to ensure there was a COVID test that was showing negative.

9 Q Okay. Thank you.

10 So you noted that, in order to get between the KAK and the JOC, you had to drive
11 there, correct?

12 A Correct. About 12 to 15 minutes.

13 Q Okay. And it was difficult to obtain the necessary transportation given the
14 security concerns and the lack of availability, correct?

15 A Correct. In order to arrange vehicle movements that crossed the tarmac,
16 there had to be at least some coordination with those combat controllers who were
17 allowing aircraft to take off and land.

18 Q Uh-huh.

19 A So it was complex to do any vehicle movements from the north side of the
20 airport to the south side going past the tarmac.

21 Q In addition to the complexity, were there any issues with transportation?

22 A Well, there were no vehicles assigned to anybody on the ground. So the
23 only way that personnel from any agency or any element of the U.S. Government or any
24 third-country governments -- the only ability for them to get around was to break into
25 vehicles and hotwire them.

1 Q Do you know anyone who had to hotwire cars, personally?

2 A Yes. I hotwired buses, actually.

3 Q Do you believe that this made it difficult to conduct the evacuation?

4 A Yes. That was certainly an added complication to the evacuation, given
5 that, not only did you have to break through bulletproof windows or somehow break
6 open the doors, but you then had to use a screwdriver or pull down the bottom of
7 the -- underneath the steering column to use the wires to place wires together.

8 But, in addition to that, the issue was that the vehicles you had one morning were
9 likely not the vehicles you had later that day, because there was a finite number of
10 vehicles and we were all -- or many elements of the response had to steal vehicles from
11 one another.

12 Q Were there any other things you believe the airport was lacking that
13 would've been helpful for an action of this size?

14 A I mean, food is probably one thing.

15 There was at least one long-term period where the water went out on compound.
16 So we were using toilet facilities that didn't flush for quite some time, for at least 24
17 hours. That was a bit uncomfortable.

18 There was a lot of trash, because there was no mechanism to get rid of the trash.
19 So that piled up quite a bit.

20 Those are three, sort of, facilities-related things that come to mind.

21 Q To the best of your recollection -- I know you already testified as to the
22 number of consular officers, or estimated the number of consular officers -- do you recall
23 how many State Department employees were present at HKIA?

24 A I never counted, but the number of security personnel was roughly
25 equivalent to the number of consular personnel. So, if we call that -- it was probably a

1 little less, actually. Sorry.

2 So, if we call consular and security 60, and then you add those from HKIA who
3 were evacuated and stayed on the ground, that makes it about 70. So I would say under
4 75.

5 Q By "security," do you mean Diplomatic Security?

6 A Yes.

7 Q Okay.

8 A The majority of the Diplomatic Security personnel at that point were
9 contractors from a company called Triple Canopy. And they probably outnumbered the
10 actual Foreign Service special agents by about three to one.

11 Q Three to one.

12 What was your impression of the DS officers?

13 A Similar --

14 Q Meaning the contractors.

15 A Oh. There's a distinction between the contractors and the agents in terms
16 of my assessment of them. I'll speak to both, if you don't mind.

17 Q Yeah, of course.

18 A So, for the agents, at least in the -- yeah, for the agents, similar to my
19 perspective on the consular officers, by and large, they were tremendously brave and
20 accommodating, and they, you know, inspired confidence.

21 Q Uh-huh.

22 A There was a small handful who were people who I would not ever want to
23 work with again, and there was that same small handful of people who I did not trust with
24 my safety.

25 In terms of the contractors, I would trust every single one of those individuals with

1 my safety. They were very frustrated by that point in the evacuation. They were not
2 happy with how the evacuation was going. And they also all knew that their
3 employment was about to come to an end, so they knew it was a matter of days before
4 they'd be looking for a paycheck. So there was a lot of tension between the agents and
5 the contractors at that point.

6 But, overall, I would trust almost every single one of those security personnel with
7 my life.

8 Q Thank you.

9 So the CENTCOM after-action report states, quote, "Consular staff did not have
10 sufficient manning to supervise all processing at the gates, which often led to Department
11 of Defense personnel at the gates making on-the-spot calls concerning paperwork."

12 Can you speak to this for us or elaborate on why this was being said?

13 A So I have never been in a situation to make staffing decisions for a NEO
14 before. So I'd like to get that out just kind of up front.

15 Q Of course.

16 A In my assessment, it was not a matter of having too few consular officers. I
17 actually don't think that was the problem. I think it was a matter of how resources were
18 used.

19 But I think what kind of overarches that theme was that the security at the gates
20 was managed by the Marines --

21 Q Uh-huh.

22 A -- or 82nd Airborne in a few cases. The consular officers could only vet
23 families and make decisions when the gates were open and the Marines were securing
24 those pathways for us to receive families to vet.

25 For every single day of the 9 days that I was on the ground, at least one and in

1 some cases all of the gates were closed for the full 24 hours of a given day.

2 So, with that in mind, it's not a matter of having 34 consular officers if the gates
3 are not open to bring people in. You could have 500 consular officers, and that wouldn't
4 make a difference.

5 But I believe, if you were to use 20/20 hindsight and map out 34 consular officers
6 on an airport map, I believe that I would be able to -- again, in complete 20/20 hindsight,
7 which I think is kind of unfair to use, but -- I believe I could find a way to use those 34
8 officers in a way that would've probably been slightly more efficient than what was done.

9 Q Were consular officers responsible for screening all documentation? Or did
10 the Marines screen documentation prior to the consular officers?

11 A So I believe, per policy, consular officers were responsible. In practice,
12 however, the Marines made the best out of the situation they had. So, if there was no
13 consular officers present at a particular time, it is my understanding that they used their
14 own judgment to allow people in accordingly.

15 Q Did Marines receive any guidance or any how-to, given these practical
16 realities, from consular officers or other State Department folks?

17 A I don't have that information, unfortunately.

18 Q Who determined what documentation was acceptable to be let into the
19 gates?

20 A I don't know who determined it. I can tell you that nobody -- so I want to
21 make a distinction. There were people who had valid travel documents, and there were
22 people who didn't.

23 Q Uh-huh.

24 A In the case of the latter, sometimes it was because they had burned their
25 documents because they were afraid of the Taliban or -- it could've been for a number of

1 reasons.

2 In the latter instance, there was no policy -- there simply is no policy for making
3 that sort of determination. So, as consular officers, as commissioned consuls or vice
4 consuls of the U.S. Government, we have the ability -- or I should say "had," because I'm
5 no longer in the government -- we had the ability to make judgment calls based on
6 whether we believed it was likely that they were telling the truth and would have
7 qualified if they had the correct travel document.

8 Q Uh-huh. Thank you.

9 What responsibilities did consular officers have during the evacuation, aside from
10 processing evacuees?

11 A My situation was a little bit different, but the actual guidelines given to
12 consular officers, if they were to follow those guidelines, was: Aside from processing,
13 hand out bottles of water. Take care of unaccompanied minors. Like, essentially
14 babysit unaccompanied minors until they could get processed and put onto airplanes in a
15 safe manner.

16 Q Uh-huh.

17 A I think that's about it. That's all I can think of.

18 Q Thank you.

19 So, at this point, I want to -- I believe my minority colleagues entered in excerpts
20 from the book "The Secret Gate." I have the book here, and I'm going to be citing to
21 specific pages in this book.

22 [Aronson Exhibit No. 5

23 Was marked for identification.]

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q Unfortunately, I only have one copy of this, but I'm going to be reading the

1 excerpts out loud.

2 A That's fine. I've read it probably 15 times.

3 [REDACTED]. I'd like to just clarify for the record that it would be most
4 appropriate, if we're examining a document, for all parties in the room to have access to
5 it. So if you could --

6 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

7 Can we go off the record, please?

8 [REDACTED]. No. Actually, I'd like to stay on the record. This is a recurring
9 issue.

10 [REDACTED]. This is for you all, just FYI, before --

11 [REDACTED]. Oh, okay. You said you had one copy, so --

12 [REDACTED]. Yes. And we have an electronic copy for him and a paper copy
13 for you all.

14 [REDACTED]. Okay. Great.

15 [REDACTED]. So that's why I wanted to go off the record.

16 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

17 [REDACTED]. And --

18 [REDACTED]. Can we stop the clock?

19 [REDACTED]. -- can we stop the clock, please, and go off the record?

20 [Discussion off the record.]

21 [REDACTED]. Can we go back on the record?

22 I'd like to correct for the record that a book and the copy of the exhibit was
23 provided to the minority.

24 [REDACTED]. With our intervention.

25 [REDACTED]. It was not upon intervention. It was provided. It was already

1 planned. Which is why I asked the witness --

2 [REDACTED]: Are you starting the clock?

3 [REDACTED]: Which is why I asked the witness if he needed a copy of the
4 book and why my colleague pulled out an electronic copy.

5 Now I would like to read the excerpt. If we can please go to page 212.

6 Would the minority like to move to page 212?

7 [REDACTED]: We would love to. Thank you.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q For the record, Mr. Aronson, this book is written about your experience in
10 Kabul and, more specifically, HKIA, correct?

11 A That's correct.

12 Q So, on page 212 -- and if you'd like to look at the electronic copy, please do
13 let us know.

14 A I'm okay without a copy for now.

15 Q It states, quote, "Unlike Sam, many of the 30 to 40 members of the State
16 Department team still in Kabul had never been close to an airport gate. Focused on the
17 logistics of coordinating vehicle convoys with thousands of evacuees who entered
18 through the main gate, a.k.a. South Gate, they spent the week shuttling between their
19 quarters, the JOC, and in some cases the passenger terminal."

20 Can you please elaborate on this?

21 A Yeah.

22 There was -- I don't know the exact number, but there were certainly State
23 Department officials who, either by choosing or by assignment, were assigned to the real
24 interior of the airport, so the passenger terminal.

25 Being out at the gates was a little bit dodgier, was a little bit more unsafe. And I

1 certainly don't fault any individual, consular or not, for making the determination for
2 themselves and their family that they were uncomfortable being out, you know, closer to
3 gunfire and more unsafe conditions.

4 But, to answer your question exactly, there were a number of State Department
5 officials who focused their time and efforts on the passenger terminal and tasks that
6 were, from a physical-safety standpoint, probably safer.

7 Q Can you speak a bit more to the vetting of the book? Did this go through a
8 review process?

9 A With whom?

10 Q Just more broadly with State Department folks. Did the State Department
11 have to approve the book, or did anyone at the Department have to sign off on it?

12 A Nobody in the Department had to sign off on the book because it was not
13 written by a government official.

14 Q Uh-huh.

15 A Those of us who spoke on the record to the author of the book were all
16 granted permission by, at the time, State Department spokesperson Ned Price and his
17 office, as well as the legal ethics and conflicts office.

18 Q Thank you.

19 How many consular officers do you believe actually worked at the gates?

20 A So we've been using the number 34, which I believe at any given time there
21 was approximately 34. But if you were to add all the consular officers who came and
22 went between, say, August 16th and August 30th, I believe that number is probably closer
23 to 45, let's call it.

24 So, of those 45, in my best estimation, from my own experience that I observed
25 and witnessed, it was probably around 30 of the 45 who did work out at at least one of

1 the gates.

2 Q Why had many of them not been close to an airport gate? I believe you
3 touched upon this. But was it by choice, or was it --

4 A I can't speak to whether it was by choice or by assignment.

5 Q Okay.

6 And I believe we touched upon this briefly, but to get a bit more into the specifics,
7 is it correct that a number of consular officials that served at the embassy were sent
8 home partway through the evacuation, perhaps on or about August 21?

9 A Yes, that is correct. At least four State Department -- or, at least four
10 consular officers who had been evacuated from the embassy on the 15th were sent home
11 on or about the night of the 21st. It could've been the 22nd, but it was between the
12 21st and the 22nd.

13 Q Is it correct that some of these officers were sent home despite wanting to
14 stay?

15 A That is what all four of the four who I spoke to told me, yes.

16 Q Why were they sent home?

17 A What they explained to me was that State Department or consular
18 leadership -- I'm not sure if it was consular leadership or overall Department
19 leadership -- thought that they had -- I'm paraphrasing, but -- been through enough
20 already and wanted to send in, quote/unquote, "fresh" officers.

21 Q And these individuals had experienced the evacuation through that point,
22 correct?

23 A Yes.

24 One particular consular officer who was sent home in that group had been TDY'ed
25 from Islamabad on or about July 1st to supplement SIV processing at U.S. Embassy Kabul,

1 so for the month of July and the first part of August was part of the consular section in
2 Kabul.

3 When the embassy was evacuated on the 15th, the consular section had hundreds
4 of passports, both American and Afghan passports, that were awaiting having a visa foil
5 or other document printed in the passport. The embassy, when they were destroying
6 everything for security and safety purposes, had to make a determination on what to do
7 with these several hundred passports.

8 Q Uh-huh.

9 A According to what this officer told me directly, he placed these several
10 hundred passports in a garbage bag, brought it along with him on the Chinook aircraft,
11 and when they arrived at HKIA later that day, he still had the garbage bag full of several
12 hundred passports.

13 They were at Camp Alvarado, which is the section of the airport on the northwest.
14 And he, along with another colleague, made the determination -- which I'm not going to
15 speculate on whether that was the right decision or the wrong decision -- made the
16 determination, when they believed that the airport was getting overrun, to burn that bag
17 of passports.

18 Q Thank you.

19 Can you speak to the plan starting August 23 through August 24 to get Embassy
20 Kabul FSOs out?

21 A FSOs are local embassy staff.

22 Q I believe they were Foreign Service officers, but if I'm mistaken, please feel
23 free to correct me.

24 A "To get FSOs out." Can you be more specific? I think you might be
25 referring to local embassy staff.

1 Q Oh. Then LE staff.

2 A Okay.

3 A plan was put together around August 23rd to use the Ministry of Interior
4 building that was about a kilometer west of the western part of HKIA, which the Taliban
5 had controlled -- or was in control of.

6 The plan was to send a notification to American citizens who were still located in
7 Afghanistan and expressed a desire to be evacuated -- to send them a notification with
8 instructions to appear at a very specific time at the Ministry of Interior building to be
9 vetted by the Taliban.

10 And if their documents or their American-citizen status was confirmed, they and
11 their family, immediate family, would then be walked over from the Ministry of Interior to
12 Camp Alvarado on the northwest side of the airport, where 82nd Airborne and State
13 Department would, for lack of a better word, take custody of them --

14 Q Uh-huh.

15 A -- do our own vetting to make sure that these individuals and their families
16 met the requirement, and then put them on buses to bring them to get manifested for
17 flights.

18 Q Okay. And LE staff, those are staff that are employed by the embassy that
19 are from the host country?

20 A Sorry. I'm mixing up two things right now. I apologize. I was talking
21 about an American citizen --

22 Q Okay.

23 A -- and you're talking about the local embassy staff. I apologize. Let me
24 start -- I should start over.

25 Q Okay. That's okay.

1 A Okay. So the plan for the local embassy staff.

2 There were hundreds of local embassy staff, and with their family members, that
3 made it well over a thousand individuals who needed to be evacuated to the U.S. There
4 was no safe way or no practical way to get them through the gates. Because the gates
5 were so packed with people, there was no way to get them into the front.

6 So a political officer, who was one of those two political officers who I mentioned,
7 had remained at the embassy after the evacuation, coordinated a plan along with a
8 management officer and some other folks to hire approximately 60 coach buses from
9 various vendors around the city, pay them in cash, and create staging points around Kabul
10 and the outskirts of the city.

11 Each bus fit around 50 to 55 individuals, and then there was storage for their
12 luggage underneath the bus. Each bus was given a bus captain, who was a local
13 embassy staff member, who us, as the Americans, believed was sufficiently bilingual and
14 trustworthy to have a manifest of who was supposed to go on that bus and determine
15 that each person getting on that bus was supposed to go on that bus.

16 So, starting on or about the 24th, I believe, those buses started coming through
17 the secret gate -- also called Liberty Gate, also called Glory Gate -- on the northwest side
18 of the airport where, one by one, the buses came through. State Department or
19 consular officials then had to vet, make sure that everyone on the bus was supposed to
20 be there, and then bring them to get manifested on a flight.

21 Q Okay.

22 ██████████ Do you know why it took until that time period to start to put
23 together and implement the plan to get the local embassy staff out?

24 Mr. Aronson. I don't know. I was not directly involved in the planning of that.
25 So I was only read into that program after it was already in motion.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q Do you know who determined which populations were eligible for
3 evacuation and what documentation would be acceptable?

4 A I don't know who made that decision. I can only tell you who told me each
5 day -- or, who told us each day who was allowed in on a given day.

6 Q Was it Ms. Howell?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Can you describe the priority order for the evacuation?

9 A Yes.

10 So what never changed was that American citizens and green card holders were
11 always the top priority. We were told in no uncertain terms: Drop what you're doing
12 if you see an American citizen with an American passport. They are the number-one
13 priority no matter what.

14 After that was SIV holders, which is those who have already been approved for an
15 SIV and have an SIV visa foil printed in their passport.

16 After that was supposed to be -- and I'll explain why this was supposed to be -- SIV
17 applicants who had been approved for the SIV but had not yet had it printed in their
18 passport.

19 And after that -- sorry. On the same level as that one was Afghans who had an
20 American visa foil in their passport, already printed, for any other visa category, whether
21 it was temporary business/pleasure, whether it was a student visa, whether it was an
22 employment visa, whatever. That was on the same level as the SIV.

23 Q Uh-huh.

24 A So below that was, as I said, the SIVs that were approved but not printed.

25 And below that, which was only on very specific days, was vulnerable, also known

1 as at-risk, Afghans.

2 Q Thank you. That's very helpful.

3 Were SIV applicants and at-risk Afghans pulled off the qualified evacuee list at any
4 point?

5 A SIVs whose visas had been printed and placed in their passport were never
6 pulled off that list.

7 SIVs who were supposedly or allegedly approved but had not yet received the visa
8 foil were at some points taken off that list. And at-risk Afghans were on multiple
9 occasions taken off that list.

10 Q Okay.

11 I want to enter exhibit 6 into the record, please.

12 [Aronson Exhibit No. 6

13 Was marked for identification.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q And I want to direct you to page 2.

16 So, for the record, these are remarks by President Biden on evacuations in
17 Afghanistan on August 20, 2021.

18 It states here, "The United States stands by its commitment that we've made to
19 these people, and it includes other vulnerable Afghans, such as women leaders and
20 journalists."

21 Am I correct in understanding that, throughout various points in the evacuation,
22 at-risk Afghans -- who I would imagine fall under the category of vulnerable
23 Afghans -- were taken off the priority list?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Who made this decision?

1 A I don't know who made the decision. I can only tell you how it was relayed
2 to me.

3 Q Do you know if it was made in Afghanistan or in Washington?

4 A I don't.

5 Q Okay. Do you believe, based on what you saw on the ground and based on
6 what your orders were, that it was inconsistent with the statement that was issued on
7 August 20th?

8 A Yes -- well, on August 20th, I believe we were still allowing in vulnerable
9 Afghans.

10 Q Did our commitment persist throughout the entire evacuation?

11 A No.

12 Q Okay. Thank you.

13 How often did the priority list change, to the best of your recollection?

14 A Almost daily. In fact, there may have been a day where it changed twice in
15 one day.

16 Q And you previously testified that there may have been points where Marines
17 were reviewing the documents at the gates, correct?

18 A Yes.

19 Q How was this communicated -- or was this communicated, to the best of
20 your recollection, to the Marines?

21 A To my knowledge, it was not relayed -- not relayed to the Marines.

22 Q Was there confusion at any point, whether it be consular officers or Marines,
23 based on your firsthand account, on what the requirements or guidance was?

24 A There was confusion at most points, from my experience, as to what the
25 actual requirements were.

1 Q Okay.

2 I'd like to point you back to exhibit 5, the book "The Secret Gate," which I'm happy
3 to pull up electronically if that would be helpful for you.

4 A No, that's okay.

5 Q Okay. Page 148. It states that you learned that at-risk Afghans had been
6 restored as qualified evacuees for outgoing flights on August 25th.

7 Is this accurate?

8 A To the best of my recollection, yes.

9 Q Do you recall what the reason for the shift in guidelines was?

10 A Yes.

11 So, generally speaking, to provide a little bit of context for why at-risk Afghans
12 were at times removed and at times added back in, it was a logistical issue.

13 So there was a finite number of aircraft taking off and arriving. At some points,
14 there were ground stoppages or there were stoppages from even allowing flights to
15 arrive. So there were days or even parts of a day where there might be 40 transport
16 aircraft on the tarmac, and there were other days where there was 2 or 3.

17 So, based on logistical issues -- which is literally, are there airplanes to have these
18 individuals leave the country? -- people in decision-making roles had to cap, kind of, who
19 was coming in. Because there was a finite amount of land on the airport, the passenger
20 terminal could only fit inside, at any given time, to my best estimation, certainly less than
21 200 people.

22 So, because of those constraints, from what I saw and what I experienced, that's
23 why those decisions were made.

24 [REDACTED]. And were there also similar periods of time where SIVs -- who you
25 say had been approved but maybe hadn't received all their full documentation -- where

1 they were pulled off the qualified list as well?

2 Mr. Aronson. There was a period of time, yeah -- yes. Let me explain that.

3 So SIVs who were approved for their visa were sent an email from the State

4 Department -- I'm not sure who in the State Department -- that said, and I'm

5 paraphrasing: Your application for a Special Immigrant Visa has been approved.

6 Please present this letter to a consular officer at the airport gates, and they will allow you

7 in.

8 In today's day of cell phones and pictures and that kind of thing, that letter was

9 sent around on WhatsApp to many, many thousands, if not more, people in the country.

10 It was circulating widely in the country. Folks either kept it on their phone or printed

11 out this document.

12 And we realized, after a certain period of time, that many of these individuals who

13 were presenting this letter had not actually received this letter. The letter had no name

14 on it, had no ID number or anything. So anybody could have presented this letter.

15 And when we realized this was circulating on WhatsApp and other -- you know,

16 Signal, whatever other text-messaging platforms, those in charge realized we had to stop

17 using that as confirmation that somebody had an SIV, because, clearly, it was not -- it was

18 no longer confirmation that somebody had an SIV.

1

2 [12:18 p.m.]

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q And that decision to send out that sort of form blank visa SIV communication
5 from the State Department and then that then getting spread around to many people in
6 the crowd and who were trying to get in, what impact did that have on your ability more
7 broadly to target getting actual SIVs out?

8 A Well, it was supposed to be the sole mechanism with which to confirm
9 someone had an SIV, and it very soon thereafter became the least reliable mechanism to
10 confirm that somebody had an approved SIV.

11 Q So it presented challenges with successfully getting SIVs out?

12 A Yes.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Who sent these letters?

15 A I'm not sure.

16 Q Do you know which bur- -- it would have been Consular Affairs?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And there's no identification marker, I mean, no number, no sort of PIN,
19 nothing?

20 A Correct.

21 Q Okay. How frequently were the rules on acceptable documentation
22 changed?

23 A I don't believe the rules on what would be acceptable for any given category
24 changed, aside from that SIV issue. But by virtue of a category no longer being
25 allowable, I suppose you could say that the documentation for that category no longer

1 became something we could consider.

2 Q That makes sense.

3 If evacuees didn't have the appropriate identification, what happened to them?

4 A So if it was among the categories that was allowable for us to bring in that
5 day, a consular officer would use their best judgment, based on their training and
6 experience, to determine whether they overcome the burden to prove that they met
7 those qualifications.

8 Q I want to refer back to "The Secret Gate," which, as I noted, was entered in
9 as exhibit 5. I'd like to point you to page 86, which I will read into the record the
10 passage specifically.

11 On page 86, it states: Sam trusted his gut and hoped if he somehow sent an
12 unqualified person onto a C-17, officials from the Department of Homeland Security
13 would conduct a more thorough review and reverse the decision when the person
14 landed.

15 Is this an accurate summary?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Were you ever told what the DHS review process was in Doha and beyond?

18 A Only after the fact.

19 Q Did other consular officers have the authority to make ad hoc decisions like
20 that as well?

21 A Yes.

22 Q If I could point you next to exhibit 5, page 231, also in the book "Secret
23 Gate," it states: The SIV system had grown even more muddied after the State
24 Department issued electronic versions of the visas without individual names or document
25 numbers. Afghans copied them as screenshots for relatives and friends. Unauthorized

1 copies flooded the city.

2 Is this the SIV form documents that you were just mentioning?

3 A Yes. And I would just make a clarification on what's in the book. It was
4 not the visa itself. It was the approval letter for the visa.

5 Q Okay.

6 [REDACTED]: Which page?

7 [REDACTED]: Page 231.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q And you previously testified that you don't know who at the State
10 Department made the decision to issue these documents?

11 A Correct. I believe I have a screenshot of it on my phone, so I can take a
12 look after this round. I believe it was signed U.S. Embassy Kabul Consular Section.

13 Q Thank you.

14 Based on your experience on the ground, what were the biggest challenges for
15 state military coordination and Consular Affairs -- and more specifically, Consular Affairs,
16 for any coordination?

17 A So at a high level, I believe the information flowed from the State
18 Department to military leadership. So I believe the bottleneck or the gap was on the
19 military side, to the best of my knowledge.

20 You know, with only 35 consular officers, it was pretty easy to share information
21 with all of us. With several thousand troops, I'd imagine that was a more -- was more of
22 a challenge.

23 Q And am I correct in understanding based on your prior testimony, that in
24 terms of sort of changing guidance as to who the eligible populations or what the eligible
25 populations were, it's your understanding that this wasn't always communicated to the

1 Marines?

2 A That is correct. Every time the guidance was changed for us as consular
3 officers, Jayne Howell and Jean Akres added a caveat or an addendum to what they told
4 us, which was, when in doubt, use your best judgment.

5 I interpreted that statement to then -- I interpreted that statement as my opening
6 to then on occasion bring in people who might not have necessarily met the letter of the
7 rules that day but met the broader spirit of what we were trying to accomplish in this
8 NEO.

9 Q Did Marines ever express or other servicemembers express any frustration
10 to you?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Can you speak to that?

13 A So I -- from my perspective, I think I had a good relationship with the
14 Marines I worked with at each gate. In my experience as a diplomat for whether you
15 want to call it 9 years or 9 and a half years or 10 years, I've always found it that building
16 personal relationships is absolutely necessary in order to try and get done what you need
17 to get done.

18 So the Marines that I worked with, in particular, I believe felt comfortable sharing
19 with me their frustration that there were gaps in State Department coverage at gates.
20 There were times that the State Department was sending people back outside, and the
21 Marines were understand -- or did not understand why those decisions were made.

22 And then on that similar topic, the State Department officials, consular officers
23 seemingly had information on who to approve or not approve, and that was not being
24 shared widely to the Marines.

25 Q Do you have any reason to doubt their grievances or the veracity of their

1 frustrations?

2 A No, no reason at all to doubt that.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q So we're going to just switch gears a little bit in the 5 or so minutes we have
5 left.

6 So we're going to talk about the Secret Gate, also known as Liberty Gate or Glory
7 Gate. Are you able to just describe a little bit more what that gate was?

8 A Yeah. On the northwest side of the -- northwest corner outside the airport,
9 so from Camp Alvarado, which is a well-known section on the northwest, there was a
10 gate, like a wire -- a metal wire gate that then led to a service road, that went over a small
11 bridge, that went over a creek and went north about 150 -- no, probably more than
12 that -- probably like 300, 400 -- 300 or 400 meters, ultimately touching a major west-east
13 thoroughfare known as Tajikan Road. Tajikan Road is also known as Russian Road.

14 The entrance or the -- I should say the turnoff from Tajikan Road onto that small
15 service road that led into Camp Alvarado was not easily recognizable to those who did not
16 know it was there. So as a result, the presence at that secretive gate was kept very
17 minimal in order to keep that element of not necessarily surprise, but that element of
18 keeping it not well-known.

19 Q Gotcha. The book states on page 147 that, quote: Glory Gate's creators
20 were CIA paramilitary operatives and members of the Army's elite Delta Force. Its
21 armed guards were members of the CIA trained Afghan paramilitary force, known as the
22 Zero Units.

23 Is that accurate?

24 A I have no reason to doubt that anything in that section is inaccurate, but in
25 keeping with the unclassified environment we're in, I will keep my phrasing to that, if that

1 makes sense.

2 Q Okay. When did you first arrive at Glory Gate?

3 A I first arrived at around 6:15 in the morning on the day of the Abbey Gate
4 bombing.

5 Q Gotcha. And are you able to just talk about what roles the different groups
6 were playing there at the gate?

7 A Yes. So when I arrived, from -- American officials, there were anywhere
8 from one to four American officials from non-State Department agencies. And they
9 were in control of an Afghan paramilitary force from the National Directorate of Security,
10 NDS. And of the NDS operators on the ground, at any given time there were
11 somewhere between 10 and 20 of them.

12 Q Okay. And what were your interactions with these groups at the gate?

13 A With NDS or with the American officials?

14 Q With both.

15 A So with the American officials, I had to coordinate with them in order
16 to -- they ran the gate. It was theirs. They owned it. I mean, they owned it to the
17 extent that anyone can own a gate.

18 So in order for me to accomplish what my official duties were that day, which was
19 to get buses in, and then my unofficial duties later on that day, which was to bring
20 families in on foot, I had to gain their permission and also their tactical support, because I
21 needed them to provide tactical cover for me in order for me to safely bring families in on
22 foot.

23 Q And are you able to discuss the special interest cases that this gate was
24 facilitating?

25 A Yes. So the media reporting has made -- has made it public that this gate

1 was used primarily to bring in intelligence assets who had done service on behalf of or for
2 the United States.

3 [Aronson Exhibit No. 7
4 Was marked for identification.]

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Gotcha. I'm really quickly going to enter exhibit 7 into the record. It
7 reflects an article that was published in The Atlantic on April 11, 2023, titled "Screw the
8 Rules."

9 Mr. Aronson, this article is about you and your experience during the Afghanistan
10 evacuation. Is that right?

11 A That's correct.

12 Q And I'm pointing you to page 6 of the exhibit. I'm going to read a passage.

13 "Sam faced a terrible choice: follow the State Department's shifting, confusing,
14 infuriating policies about whom he could save, or follow his conscience and risk his life
15 and career to rescue as many imperiled people as he could."

16 Is this a reference to your experiences at Glory Gate?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Are you able to elaborate a bit more on what this passage is referring to?

19 A So when I saw that the American operators at Glory Gate were bringing in
20 their high-value assets on foot, I had this idea that I could do the same. So I spoke to
21 the two security contractors who were with me from Diplomatic Security, and they were
22 on board as long as I did not cross Tajikan Road. So that put me in a little bit of a
23 conundrum, and I had to figure out if I couldn't cross the road who could, and it couldn't
24 have been an American.

25 I had befriended a young Afghan [REDACTED] who was [REDACTED] years old at the time a couple

1 days earlier named [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] went by the name [REDACTED] when [REDACTED] was doing these
2 evacuations for us in order to protect [REDACTED] identity from the Taliban and any other
3 attackers.

4 I texted [REDACTED], or [REDACTED], that morning and asked [REDACTED] if [REDACTED] be willing to help me
5 out with something, but I couldn't tell [REDACTED] over text. So I -- [REDACTED] came out to the gate.
6 We discussed a plan. With each family that we brought to a gas station called the
7 Panjshir Pumping Station that was across Tajikan Road and about a hundred meters or so
8 to the east, [REDACTED] ran across the street, found the families based on a description that I'd
9 given, and ran them back across Tajikan Road South, where we then took custody of
10 those families as soon as they stepped foot beyond Tajikan Road.

11 [REDACTED]. And I think that's a good place to stop, because we ran just a little
12 bit over there.

13 [REDACTED]. We're off the record.

14 [Recess.]

15 [REDACTED]. We'll go ahead and get back on the record.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Thank you very much. I know it's been a long morning. We're hoping to
18 keep our round relatively short.

19 With that said, I wanted to touch back upon the issue of staffing considerations in
20 Kabul. So I believe you had testified that there weren't -- there wasn't a dearth of
21 consular officers but, rather, the issue, from your perspective, was how such resources
22 were used. Is that correct?

23 A Yeah, that's my assessment. And, you know, with the caveat that I think
24 it's really easy to look at anything in hindsight and figure out ways that we could have
25 done better. Like, I probably, you know, could look at my commute to get to this

1 building today and I probably could have done that better.

2 So I just -- you know, to be -- to be fair and balanced, there -- in my perspective,
3 there were ways that officers could have been used better, but with the contextual
4 understanding that this was a chaotic once-in-a-generation sized NEO.

5 Q And is it correct that you could only vet individuals if the gates were open?

6 A We could only vet individuals from the gates if the gates were open,
7 generally speaking. There were exceptions, but yes.

8 Q Okay. And who controlled the gates?

9 A The U.S. military.

10 Q Okay. And you previously testified that you -- you trusted their judgment.
11 You felt that they were acting in safe and appropriate ways. Is that correct?

12 A Yes.

13 Q I even think you went as far as to say you would trust most of them with
14 your life. Is that accurate?

15 A I think I was referring to our security team and our cons -- our State
16 Department officers. But yes, there was -- there was no member of the U.S. military
17 who I have any reason to not fully trust.

18 Q Okay. And -- but why were the gates closed at times?

19 A For security. For force protection.

20 Q Okay. And who would have made those decisions about the security?

21 A It was the U.S. military certainly, but in particular it depended who the
22 commanding officer at a particular gate was. I don't believe those decisions rose to, you
23 know, General Sullivan or Donahue or Admiral Vasely. It was probably -- or from my
24 experience, it was more a major or a lieutenant colonel.

25 Q Okay. And were these decisions, to your knowledge, made in consultation

1 with Consular Affairs, the team?

2 A To my knowledge, no. These were force protection decisions and Consular
3 Affairs would not have any role. It would actually have been inappropriate, in my
4 opinion, if those decisions were made due to input from Consular Affairs.

5 Q Okay. And could you perhaps clarify so I understand a little bit better.
6 When you were saying resources weren't being used as efficiently as they could have
7 been, what did you mean by that?

8 A So there were times and circumstances where an Afghan family or an
9 American family who came in from a gate was vetted on three separate occasions by
10 three different teams of consular officers before getting on the airplane. And in doing
11 so, that meant that at any one of those checkpoints if that family or that individual did
12 not overcome their burden to prove that they were eligible to be on a flight, the consular
13 officer who was vetting them at that particular instance could have and in many cases did
14 make the determination to send that family back out.

15 So it's almost like going into a nightclub and having three separate bouncers check
16 your ID. If any of those bouncers are having a bad day or are not paying full attention,
17 there's a chance they might read your date of birth wrong and send you back out.

18 So using that analogy back to HKIA, having up to three vetting points to get from,
19 you know, outside the airport into ultimately a C-17 airplane, there were instances that
20 were numerous in nature where that occurred.

21 Q Okay. So is it correct then that when you were referencing the resource
22 issue, it wasn't necessarily because the gates were closed? That wasn't the issue?

23 A If the gates were closed, generally speaking, we wouldn't keep consular
24 officers there very long. You know, there were occasions where I was sent out to a gate
25 to see if I could convince the military to open it to some capacity. I never succeeded in

1 that. So after trying for, say, 1 hour, I was then sent back to the Joint Operations Center
2 to then go to a new assignment.

3 Q Okay. So when the gates were closed and you weren't processing visas or
4 other information, were you redistributed to other tasks?

5 A Yes.

6 Q So you weren't sitting there idly. Is that correct?

7 A Generally speaking, no. The only time I was sitting idly was if I really
8 physically or emotionally needed a break for 30 minutes or an hour.

9 Q Okay. Understood.

10 [REDACTED]. We wanted to introduce exhibit No. 8. This is a partial transcript
11 of the interview of James DeHart dated Friday, June 16th, 2023.

12 [Aronson Exhibit No. 8

13 Was marked for identification.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q And if I could direct your attention to page 43, if you want to perhaps give it
16 a quick scan.

17 A Okay.

18 Q Actually, I'd also like to turn your attention to page 42, if you could quickly
19 skim the latter portion of page 42 as well.

20 A Okay.

21 Q Great. And just for foundational purposes, I want to reestablish, so you
22 previously testified that you worked closely with Mr. DeHart. Is that correct?

23 A For -- not every day, but most days, yeah.

24 Q And how did you find his character to be?

25 A Very credible, very -- he's very intelligent. He's very deliberate. He's a

1 strong leader.

2 Q Okay. And did he offer guidance to the consular team on the ground?

3 A Yes.

4 Q How did you find that guidance to be?

5 A Clear.

6 Q Clear. And you had previously testified that guidance was changing at
7 times. Is that correct?

8 A Which guidance specifically?

9 Q Generally about when to let folks in, how to process folks, et cetera.

10 A So, generally speaking, the guidance of who to let in was shared by Jayne
11 Howell and Jean Akres. I cannot recall if Mr. DeHart ever directly shared the guidance
12 with the team.

13 Q Okay. Fair enough. And you previously testified that at times the gates
14 were open, at times the gates were closed, and that was based on the military's decision.
15 Is that correct?

16 A At times the gates -- sorry, let me just make sure I understand this. That
17 the decision to close gates was made by the military?

18 Q Yes, that's correct.

19 A Yes, that's my understanding.

20 Q Okay. Great. If I could draw your attention to line 11 on page 42. Line
21 11 reads -- it starts with Q, which means question: Could you describe any situations
22 which informed your opinion that folks were adapting on the ground?

23 Turning to line 13, Mr. DeHart answers: We -- the guidance for who we could let
24 into the airport did change more than once. And so, initially, at the start of the
25 evacuation, the guidance was that we should not leave women and children outside the

1 gate. If they had made it all the way through the crowd and they had gotten all the way
2 to the gate, we should let them in from a humanitarian perspective.

3 Do you agree that that's written on the page?

4 A Yes.

5 Q And if we could turn to line 23 of page 42. Excuse me, line 21 -- line 18.

6 Line 18 at page 42: And as more people came into the airport, the population in
7 the airport grew, and this was the result of some different factors, including the lack of lily
8 pads, different countries for aircraft to travel to.

9 Continuing on line 21: And as the situation within the airport got more difficult,
10 the guidance raised the bar on who we could allow into the airport.

11 Continuing on line 23, Mr. DeHart says: And it changed more than once. And
12 that was, you know, that was very -- that was difficult also for consular officers, you know,
13 to -- to realize that they turned away somebody that now could be admitted or
14 had -- turning to page 43, line 1 -- admitted somebody that now could be turned away.
15 On a human level, that's quite frustrating, but it was required because of the
16 circumstances and we were dealing with a dynamic situation, that the circumstances
17 were constantly changing.

18 Do you agree with Mr. DeHart's characterization about the changing guidance?

19 A I do. I wholeheartedly agree with that.

20 Q What informs that opinion?

21 A My direct experience at the gates, my direct experience at the passenger
22 terminal, my interactions with hundreds, many hundreds of Afghans and American
23 citizens, and my interactions with other State Department staff and U.S. military staff.

24 Q Okay. And I'd also like to point you to -- turning to line 12 of page 43, the
25 question was asked: Did you feel that the changing guidance was appropriate?

1 Mr. DeHart answers on line 13: Generally, yes. I was very concerned, among
2 others, about the situation within the airport as numbers just kept climbing of people
3 who were still in the airport. And personally, I had concerns about the supply of food
4 and water and asked a member of our team to look into that.

5 Continuing on line 17: So, I mean, let me put it this way. I understood the
6 reasons why the guidance changed at every step.

7 Do you also agree with this characterization made by Mr. DeHart?

8 A So I don't think I understood at every step, because just the kind of layers of
9 removal I was from whoever ultimately made that decision, but at most steps. I don't
10 want to say all, but at most times the guidance changed, I did understand it, given the
11 context.

12 Q Fair enough.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Okay. My colleague pledged that we would not keep you long in this
15 round, so we'll try to be efficient. I think there's just two other topics we wanted to
16 revisit.

17 The first is you mentioned in the prior hour of testimony to our majority
18 colleagues a consular commission, and I want to unpack that and make sure we're clear
19 on the record. What is a consular commission?

20 A So a consular commission is when the Secretary of State commissions an
21 individual to conduct the duties of a consul of the United States, which means I suppose
22 three main things.

23 One is visas. The second is U.S. documentation, such as making U.S. passport
24 determinations and determining whether someone qualifies for a consular report of birth
25 abroad, which is essentially granting U.S. citizenship to an American who is born overseas.

1 And third is the protection of American citizens who are in situations overseas, such as
2 being arrested; death, so repatriating the deceased remains of someone. And I'm
3 missing one there. Arrested, death. I'll stick with those two, because that's all I can
4 come up with.

5 Q And is it your understanding that a consular commission and the ability of
6 the Secretary of State to confer a consular commission on somebody, that that's a
7 designation and a process that's rooted in law?

8 A Yes. As far as I know, it's rooted in the Immigration and Nationality Act as
9 well as the Foreign Service Act.

10 Q Okay. And can consular -- commissioned consular officers, then, once
11 they've received a commission, are they then able to make decisions and take actions
12 officially in their official capacity that other U.S. Government officials who've not received
13 such a commission cannot take?

14 A Yes.

15 Q And those are some of the actions that you just described from memory
16 previously?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Okay. So those actions couldn't be performed by another State
19 Department official if that person didn't have a consular commission?

20 A Correct.

21 Q It couldn't be performed by a marine if the marine didn't have a consular
22 commission?

23 A Legally speaking, correct.

24 Q Legally speaking, correct.

25 And how long does a consular commission last when you're conferred one?

1 A To the best of my knowledge and recollection, it lasts until 5 years after your
2 last time using said commission.

3 Q Okay.

4 A So, for instance, if someone like Jayne Howell serves 30 years in a consular
5 capacity, she never has to be retrained; but if someone does their first assignment
6 overseas as a consular officer and then doesn't do another one for 10 years or 5 to 7
7 years, they would have to be recommissioned.

8 Q Okay. And you testified earlier that you had received a consular
9 commission, correct?

10 A Correct.

11 Q When did you receive it?

12 A I received it actually in 2018, when I was still with Diplomatic Security.

13 Q Okay. And as a part of receiving that consular commission, did you receive
14 training on exercising the duties of a commissioned consular officer?

15 A I did, yes.

16 Q Did you feel that training was sufficient to carry out your duties?

17 A Yes. Well, which duties?

18 Q Consular officer duty, the commissioned consular officer duties.

19 A Yes.

20 Q Generally?

21 A Generally, yes.

22 Q Yeah. I'm referring to 2018, when you received the commission.

23 So is it fair to say then that you -- well, let me step back. To your knowledge, did
24 everyone operating on the consular team during the NEO have an active consular
25 commission?

1 A To my knowledge, no.

2 Q Can you say more about cases --

3 A So of the -- we keep saying 34 or 35 people on the consular team -- there
4 were several who came from civil service positions, working at Consular Affairs Bureau in
5 Washington, D.C. To my knowledge, generally speaking, civil service consular staff do
6 not receive a consular commission, although I'm certain -- or I'm guessing that in many
7 cases or in some cases they do receive a consular commission.

8 But there were at least three individuals who were civil service staff of Consular
9 Affairs Bureau who, to my knowledge, have never served overseas before.

10 Q Okay. But since I think we began the day by us encouraging you to not let
11 us goad you into making guesses, you don't know one way or the other whether some of
12 those individuals had a consular commission or you know as a matter of fact that they did
13 not?

14 A I don't know one way or the other.

15 Q Okay. So it's possible that they may have had consular commissions?

16 A Absolutely, yes.

17 Q And the discretion or the capacity to confer a consular commission rests with
18 the Secretary of State?

19 A Absolutely, yes.

20 Q And so you just don't have knowledge if the Secretary of State exercised
21 such?

22 A No part of our duties as consular officials in Afghanistan required a consular
23 commission, to my knowledge. We were not issuing visas. We were not issuing
24 passports. We were not issuing birth certificates.

25 So while the training as a commissioned consul was useful in guiding our

1 decision-making process, there was no requirement, to the best of my knowledge, that an
2 official had a consular commission in order to make those determinations.

3 Q So let me broaden then, based on your testimony. I think my question was
4 actually just to establish that you didn't know one way or the other whether these
5 individuals had commissions or not.

6 A Correct.

7 Q But you certainly testified that you had a commission. And I believe you
8 testified that the commission was, to your understanding, maybe the reason why you
9 were assigned consular duties as opposed to political duties when you got there. Was
10 that a correct characterization?

11 A Yes. In fact, not maybe. The question was directly asked by Mr. DeHart,
12 do you still have a consular commission? I said, yes, I think I do. And he said, okay,
13 great, we need you to do consular work.

14 Q So is it fair then for us to infer that there's some utility to having
15 commissioned consular officers be the ones to do the work that was required of consular
16 staff at the NEO?

17 A Absolutely. I agree with that.

18 Q And as you sort of raised the broader issue of, you know, people may have
19 relevant experience but not necessarily a formal commission, is it your testimony that
20 having familiarity with and experience in consular systems and processes and consular
21 law was useful and required to do the duties that you all were assigned to do in Kabul?

22 A Useful, yes. Required? I didn't make the requirements, so I can't speak to
23 that. But certainly useful.

24 Q Useful.

25 So let me unpack what that specialized knowledge is, since you have the

1 experience and the commission as a consular officer.

2 Have you seen -- have you been trained on travel documents and how to
3 determine if they're valid?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Have you been trained on the universe of documents and the number of
6 documents that would be required to admit somebody into the United States or grant a
7 visa?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And let me pivot to what the majority asked you about. They pulled up a
10 page -- I'm sorry, I don't recall it -- in the book telling a story about how you had to trust
11 your gut because you were making decisions on the ground as a consular officer about
12 processing.

13 A Yes.

14 Q About whether to let somebody in, whether they had sufficient
15 documentation, whether visa requirements were satisfied.

16 I believe, if I'm characterizing correctly, the excerpt in the book referred to how
17 you had to make the best decision you could and then trust your gut that if there was
18 insufficient information or if you missed anything, DHS would catch it on the other end.
19 Is that a fair summary?

20 A Essentially. Essentially, yes.

21 Q So do consular officers generally have discretion to make their best
22 judgments when they are reviewing documents and making consular-related actions or
23 decisions?

24 A In a regular embassy or consulate environment, discretion, if I had to
25 estimate a percentage, is somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of a visa determination.

1 Q Okay. So having discretion to make a decision, potentially with imperfect
2 information, but to make your best effort as a consular officer is widespread?

3 A It's part of the job. It's very widespread, yes.

4 Q Okay.

5 [REDACTED] And that's because you're trained on how to make that discretion
6 in a sound way. Is that correct?

7 Mr. Aronson. I would say there's limits to the 6-week course that trains you as a
8 consular officer, but the State Department hires Foreign Service officers whose judgment
9 they trust or whose judgment they are inclined to trust. When you add that to the
10 6-week consular commission course, those two together makes me think that most, if
11 not -- I certainly wouldn't say all, but most consular officers have the correct judgment or
12 have sufficiently refined judgment to make those sorts of decisions.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q But at any rate, you testified earlier and I think the book says that you had to
15 trust your gut in making some of those decisions, processing decisions in Kabul?

16 A Absolutely.

17 Q And you just testified now that 80 to 90 percent of consular work at
18 embassies around the world is essentially trusting one's gut?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Is that accurate?

21 A That's accurate.

22 Q So is it fair to say that the situation with respect to decision-making and
23 needing to trust your gut in Kabul is not materially or significantly different from what
24 consular officers face elsewhere?

25 A Sorry. I can't say that it's not materially different, because in a normal

1 embassy and consulate setting, you have many more pieces of information to shape your
2 judgment and, frankly, you're not having bullets flying over your head or flying next to
3 your ear.

4 So materially, it might be materially different, but I have no reason not to trust,
5 generally speaking, the judgment of a consular officer from an embassy setting to then be
6 placed in HKIA under these circumstances and use their same refined judgment to make
7 the best gut decision they can.

8 Q And, in fact, that's what you did, right?

9 A Correct.

10 Q You have trusted your gut previously as a consular officer in situations that
11 were not Kabul?

12 A Correct.

13 Q And you trusted it again in Kabul?

14 A Correct. And I've been right on those and I've been wrong on those.

15 Q Okay. You told another anecdote to our majority colleagues, and I'm sorry
16 that we can't capture everything the first time through and all the details, so maybe you
17 can just give us a quick summary of it again. But it related to what you had personally
18 witnessed with respect to a bag of passports. Can you just give us the quick rundown on
19 that?

20 A So I made clear that I did not personally witness that.

21 Q I'm sorry. Thank you. That's why I'm asking you to clarify it.

22 A No problem. So the consular officer who told me that he burned this bag
23 of passports -- so I did not witness it. This is what he told me he did several days prior.

24 Q Okay. And can you describe what else he recounted to you about how he
25 ended up at the point where he was making -- where he was burning the passports?

1 A Yes. So to the best of my recollection of how he recounted it, which was
2 on two separate occasions several months apart, he -- when they left Embassy Kabul, they
3 took the passports with them, because the assumption was that the Taliban or someone
4 else would soon enter the embassy and make it their own building. So to protect the
5 privacy information of these individuals, they collected the passports, placed them in a
6 garbage bag. He brought them with him on the Chinook helicopter. They landed at
7 HKIA. They landed at Camp Alvarado, which is on the northwest side of HKIA.

8 And this was the same day that the South Gate was essentially free-flowing and
9 thousands of individuals made their way through South Gate, many of them onto the
10 tarmac, onto the runway, many of them clinging onto that famous aircraft video.

11 When he had the passports with him at Camp Alvarado, he was concerned, along
12 with the colleagues who he was with, that because the airport had just been overrun,
13 they were concerned that bad people could have taken these passports. So making a
14 gut decision -- which was a decision I would never want to be in, it's absolutely a difficult
15 decision -- they decided to place the bag of passports in a 55-gallon oil drum and light it
16 on fire.

17 Q And just to be clear, did you have any sense from what your colleague
18 relayed to you about that series of events how many passports were in the bag? Were
19 they Afghan passports and American passports or --

20 A From what he relayed, it was Afghan and American. And from what he
21 relayed, it was several hundred, in the low hundreds.

22 Q Okay. And the concern, if I'm understanding you correctly, that your
23 colleague had that he relayed to you was that the Taliban would overrun the airport. If
24 those passports came into the possession of the Taliban, those individuals would be at
25 risk?

1 A Correct.

2 Q So the reason for burning the passports you understood from your colleague
3 to be to minimize risk to hundreds of individuals?

4 A Correct. It was a life safety decision.

5 Q A life safety decision. Okay.

6 As a Diplomatic Security agent, had you ever had any familiarity with or training in
7 procedures and protocols that are necessary when an embassy shuts down?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And did that include training or experience with respect to document
10 retention and document destruction?

11 A Destruction, yes. Retention, no.

12 Q Okay. And did you have any experience or training on that as a Foreign
13 Service officer later in your career?

14 Granted, you were a political cone officer, it's a slightly different set of activities
15 you're undertaking --

16 A Yeah.

17 Q -- but just for clarity.

18 A No. The only -- the only training I had was in embassy -- or document
19 destruction for when you're evacuating an embassy, which it's required per the Foreign
20 Affairs Manual that at least twice a year the embassy does a document destruction drill.

21 Q Okay. So is it fair to say then that employees in the Department have some
22 sense or some familiarity or some opportunity to become familiar with emergency
23 procedures, including document destruction, should it become necessary?

24 A Yes. Any Foreign Service officer who spent at least 12 months overseas
25 has -- should have gone through at least two document destruction drills.

1 Q Okay. I think just the last question then. You testified earlier about the
2 discretion and the judgment that commissioned consular officers and consular officers
3 generally have to exercise 80 to 90 percent of the time in their regular job.

4 Would you say that the Department -- that employees at the Department
5 generally have to exercise their best discretion and judgment in the course of carrying out
6 their duties?

7 A Yes, on a daily basis.

8 Q And do you feel that the Department gives reasonable latitude to employees
9 to do so?

10 A It's hard for me to make an assertion based on the institution.

11 Q But in your experience.

12 A In my experience, overwhelmingly, but not 100 percent of the time, yes.

13 [REDACTED]: I don't have anything further.

14 [REDACTED]: I think that concludes our round. Thank you. We can go off the
15 record.

16 [Recess.]

17 [REDACTED]: Back on the record.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q So you had mentioned that, in your assessment, there were a number of
20 consular officers who did not seem fit for the job. Are you able to provide more details
21 about why you thought that about these specific people?

22 A Yeah. It's a small number, just to be extremely clear. But the one in
23 particular that I think the minority side referenced as possibly the one who was
24 sent -- who was sent home, because I think it sounds like -- well, the one that I believe is
25 being referenced, she arrived, I'm not sure from where, in the morning. I have it in

1 here. I believe it was on the 24th. Well, it actually doesn't matter what date, but it
2 was around the 24th.

3 Q Sure.

4 A And it was clear that this individual was completely out of her element
5 emotionally. So when I first saw her in the morning, I saw this individual woman in her
6 mid-fifties sitting on the floor of the JOC where people were trying to walk and
7 some -- and sometimes had to walk quickly in order to relay information to each other,
8 sitting on the floor with her legs crossed and her eyes closed meditating, which I thought,
9 okay, that's a bit unusual, but it's not my place to judge how people deal with stress.

10 And then my understanding from what I heard from a consular supervisor was
11 that this individual was not comfortable leading the JOC. So the decision was
12 made -- I'm not sure if it was her decision or if it was leadership's decision -- that she
13 would leave on the next available flight for personnel, which they thought would be that
14 night, but it ended up not being until the next afternoon.

15 So that following day -- and I don't know what happened with her the rest of the
16 day because I was out at the gates. So the following day, I was -- I had been at Abbey
17 Gate for 2 days and I had put together what, in my perspective, was a really efficient
18 processing plan that made the most of our resources there.

19 But that following day when I wanted to go back to Abbey Gate, I was instead
20 pulled aside by Ms. Howell and asked if I could bring this struggling consular officer to
21 East Gate, which we suspected was closed by the military, but they wanted me to go
22 there and see if we could convince the military -- the marines there to open the gate.

23 And I said, well, what do you need me there for? And she said, well, this
24 consular officer is really having a tough time. She's going to be leaving in a couple
25 hours. We just want to find a place to put her for the time being.

1 So that was one example of an individual who I thought was not particularly
2 effective and who probably shouldn't have been there. But, you know, to be fair, in any
3 group of 40 people there's bound to be one who struggles.

4 Others, when the Abbey Gate attack was ongoing, after the bomb went off and in
5 the immediate 60 minutes after the bomb went off and we believed there were follow-on
6 attacks, two individuals who had flown in earlier that day from U.S. Consulate Lagos,
7 Nigeria, were sitting on the couch. One of them, I don't recall if she was listening to
8 music but was certainly not paying attention; and the other was on her phone playing
9 Candy Crush, which I saw. And the rocket alarm was sounding, saying, incoming,
10 incoming, incoming, take cover, take cover, take cover.

11 So we were all throwing on our bulletproof vests and our helmets to go huddle in
12 the corner of the JOC. And I looked over and saw these two people were still sitting on
13 the couch, from my assessment, completely shell-shocked. So I went over and I grabbed
14 them and said, Hey, helmets on, helmets on, let's go. And I helped them get their
15 helmets on, you know, for their safety.

16 So, clearly, you know, my assessment of those two individuals was that they also
17 were not strong fits. And on top of that, I mean, I want to be delicate in my words here,
18 because it's not my place to judge someone's physical well-being. However, there was a
19 consular officer who was well over 300 pounds, potentially pushing 350 pounds, from my
20 judgment. And this person, in the extreme heat and weather conditions of Afghanistan,
21 in addition to having to wear a 25-pound bulletproof vest and helmet and stay on their
22 feet the entire day, this individual physically was not able to do so.

23 So, you know, while this is someone who I'd gladly work behind a desk with and
24 gladly work on email with, I don't necessarily think that individual was the right choice for
25 such harsh, physical conditions. And there was one or two others, but I hope that gets

1 the gist of what I'm trying to say.

2 Q Got you. What was the one or two others that you're able to touch on
3 briefly?

4 A So the large individual who I mentioned was, you know, 300-something
5 pounds was a civil service person. So he was one of the people who I referenced I'm not
6 certain if they have a consular commission.

7 But another civil service person who, again, was a fantastically nice, competent,
8 intelligent individual, but was deaf. And, again, trying to be delicate and sympathetic to,
9 you know, our colleagues who have disabilities, in an environment where you have to be
10 able to hear gunfire or rocket attack warnings or anything for a life safety requirement to
11 have to make an immediate decision based on something you hear, this individual
12 struggled with hearing, in fact, was not really able to hear very well and additionally had
13 trouble speaking. It was difficult to understand this individual because of -- or
14 potentially because of his hearing impairment.

15 So, again, while this is someone I would love to work with behind a desk, on email,
16 on whatever, I don't know if that was the most appropriate choice for a combat
17 environment.

18 Q Thank you.

19 Are you able to talk about what the security situation was like outside the airport,
20 as you perceived it?

21 A Is there a specific gate you want me to speak to?

22 Q Sure. You can talk about Abbey Gate.

23 A Yeah. Okay. So outside of Abbey Gate -- Abbey Gate became our only
24 viable gate for much of the evacuation, starting on or about August 22nd, 2021. The
25 other -- South Gate was closed, East Gate was closed, North Gate was closed, all by the

1 military, just to be clear. And Abbey Gate was our one gate that we could still process
2 people, thanks to the marines at that gate who created a semblance of order in what was
3 otherwise a very chaotic situation.

4 So it was routine to hear gunfire exchange between -- or from the Taliban
5 generally firing warning shots. The very first -- so I went outside the gate on August 21st
6 and August 22nd. I processed people outside Abbey Gate not far from where the
7 explosion ended up taking place a few days later.

8 And the marines had a good sense of order at that point. But beyond that was a
9 British military checkpoint, where I believe they fired warning shots from time to time.
10 And even in that initial area managed by the marines, it was not infrequent to hear stun
11 grenades or have smoke grenades to try to gain the attention of individuals and corral
12 them.

13 Q Was it your sense that the State Department believed the airport was
14 vulnerable to a terrorist attack?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Did you get briefed on that?

17 A I did. The entire group was briefed on it somewhat regularly in
18 generalities. However, the specifics were generally -- at least from what I heard, were
19 not shared in those daily twice-a-day briefings.

20 I got my information from speaking directly to the J2 element, the intelligence
21 element in the military side of the JOC. I kept up very frequent communication with the
22 J2, because I wanted to know what I was getting involved in. And then additionally,
23 being out at Glory Gate, I had a very direct line to those members in the intelligence
24 community who directly gather intelligence and interpret it.

25 Q Can you tell me just a little bit about what the J2 informed you of?

1 A Yeah. There was multiple threat streams that were ongoing throughout
2 the 9 days I was there. I think the most -- I don't want to say the most credible, because
3 that's not really for me to assess. The one that I was the most concerned about and that
4 it seemed like the J2 was most concerned about was the threat of a vehicle-borne IED by
5 ISIS-K at one of our gates.

6 In this case, because of the layout of the airport and the fact that there was no
7 real way to get close to any gate except for Abbey Gate or if ISIS-K had been surveilling
8 Glory Gate, tactically speaking, from my assessment as a former Diplomatic Security agent
9 with training in counter-threat measures, Glory Gate would have been a phenomenal
10 gate for them to hit. Abbey Gate, obviously, was a phenomenal gate for them to hit,
11 unfortunately.

12 Q Did you interact at all with the Taliban?

13 A Not -- not verbally, no. I was close to them, but I did not interact with
14 them.

15 Q Do you know if anyone on the consular team was?

16 A From consular? No, I don't believe so.

17 Q What did you observe of the Taliban when you saw them?

18 A So I observed them at Glory Gate quite closely. One instance, which I
19 believe is referenced in "The Secret Gate," was a green pickup truck with about six
20 Taliban members pulled up in front on Tajikan Road. And there was a small crowd.
21 There was a market stall or a small outdoor market across the street from Glory Gate.
22 And there was a small crowd. It wasn't like -- they weren't gathering to get into the
23 airport. These were city dwellers, you know, Kabul members of society who were just
24 watching, which made us super uncomfortable, because you don't know who's watching.
25 You don't know what their intentions are.

1 But at one point the Taliban truck pulled up. Six people in the truck dismounted,
2 started beating people in the crowd. There was a brief exchange of gunfire between the
3 Taliban and what I believe was the Afghan National Army but could have been the NDS,
4 but it was Afghan official forces. And then the Taliban six members got back in their
5 truck and drove off. It was very bizarre, from my assessment.

6 Q Do you know what the security understandings were with the Taliban?

7 A It changed. So from the conversations that I was invol- -- so I was not
8 involved in conversations with the Taliban, just to be clear. I was involved in
9 conversations with Zal Khalilzad's team in Doha, and we were on a small text message
10 group together that had Zal's chief of staff, another senior staffer, Jayne Howell, myself,
11 and one of the political officers in Kabul, and one other official in Kabul. So I think it was
12 about six of us in that group.

13 And so I was getting regular updates from Zal's conversations with -- I'm blanking
14 on the Taliban negotiator's name now, but I believe he was the number two for the
15 Taliban.

16 So the understanding was that they would facilitate, to the extent capable, the
17 entry of American citizens. They were not comfortable, generally speaking, with us
18 allowing in vulnerable Afghans, but that did not necessarily stop them at most times from
19 us doing that. They just expressed that this was not something they wanted.

20 But in terms of allowing in American citizens, they were doing what I perceived to
21 be their best to relay that information from Taliban leadership in Doha down to your
22 rank-and-file Taliban fighters in Kabul.

23 Q So this is exhibit 5, the book. Around page 124, the book discussed an
24 event on August 23rd, stating, quote: U.S. officials had quietly negotiated a deal with
25 the Taliban. American citizens, green card holders, and their families were told to

1 gather at the former headquarters of the Afghan Ministry of the Interior. After a
2 screening by the Taliban, the evacuees would be allowed to walk down a closed-off road
3 toward the airport's Camp Alvarado entrance, where they'd be searched by members of
4 the 82nd Airborne and screened by Sam and other State Department officials. They'd
5 then be bussed to the passenger terminal for flights out.

6 Did this go as planned?

7 A Not exactly. The end result was largely what the agreement was, which
8 was we received in the low hundreds of -- or low to mid hundreds of American citizens
9 and their immediate family members.

10 However, the agreement with the Taliban, as I was briefed on this mission, was
11 that the Taliban would screen families and allow them to walk down this -- it was almost
12 like a service road, walk down the service road from the Ministry of Interior directly to
13 Camp Alvarado.

14 In practice, the Taliban held on to all of these individuals, and to this day I don't
15 know who was turned away. I know that some were turned away, because that came to
16 my attention.

17 And then in a large group, about 12 or more hours after they arrived at the
18 Ministry of Interior, the Taliban then walked them over to Alvarado. And this went on
19 for 2 or 3 days.

1

2 [1:38 p.m.]

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q So you had observed that, from your experiences, sometimes the Taliban
5 would turn people away, sometimes the Taliban wouldn't exactly follow through on what
6 it had promised to do?

7 A So I couldn't see -- when I was in the watchtower -- I was in a -- I spent a lot
8 of my days at Alvarado in a watchtower overlooking the Ministry of Interior. And I had
9 binoculars, but I couldn't see -- I couldn't quite see, from my vantage point, what was
10 going on. It was only from self-reporting American citizens who were turned away, or
11 beaten by the Taliban and turned away, who then relayed that back to the State
12 Department task force, who then relayed back to us on ground.

13 Additionally, individuals who did make it -- American citizens who did make it
14 through and were placed on airplanes -- I can think of one particular family that I spoke
15 to. And the young child, who was about 12 years old -- they lived in Charlottesville,
16 Virginia -- and he had a bloody gash on him, and he told me that the Taliban whipped
17 him.

18 Q So you kind of had -- you were receiving, through these various channels,
19 instances of where the Taliban would, like, treat Americans in some sort of rough fashion.

20 A Yes.

21 Q So I'm going to turn to the Abbey Gate attack.

22 Are you able to, kind of, walk us through briefly what your experiences were
23 leading up to that on August 26th?

24 A So, on August 26th, I spent my whole day at Glory Gate. And in the
25 mid-afternoon, the gentleman who was running the gate for the intelligence community

1 let me know that they were tracking what they perceived or what they believed to be an
2 imminent VBIED -- vehicle-borne improvised explosive device -- that ISIS-K was planning
3 to explode at the airport in the coming hours. They didn't state a specific time, but it
4 was largely anticipated, if this attack went as we were anticipating it to go, that it
5 would've been in the next, you know, 3 to 5 hours, essentially.

6 And in keeping with this being an unclassified environment, I don't want to go into
7 the method of intelligence that they had, but it was a method that, based on prior
8 experience, I believed to be a highly credible method of intelligence collection, if that
9 makes sense.

10 Q Okay.

11 A So I relayed that information to another Foreign Service officer who was on
12 the ground with us at around -- sometime around 4:00 p.m. that day, saying, there's an
13 active vehicle-borne ID threat on our gate.

14 And I sent a voice memo, because it was easier than typing, and I'm paraphrasing
15 here, but saying something like, "We might have to run really quick. Like, we're doing
16 this for as long as we can, but once we're told that this" -- they were essentially tracking
17 the vehicle, to the best of my knowledge, or the person in the vehicle. So, if they
18 gathered the intelligence that that individual was approaching the airport, I was told by
19 the intelligence community individuals at that gate that they would tell us to run.

20 Then, at about 4:20-or-so p.m., military members from a special mission unit
21 pulled up an armored personnel carrier at the edge of Glory Gate, just shy of Tajikan
22 Road, and parked it sideways, which was a defensive measure in order to stop a vehicle
23 from going onto that service road towards us, which was, in my opinion, a good defensive
24 measure.

25 Then, at about 4:40 p.m., they said basically: We have to go. We're shutting

1 down this gate. The threat is too high at this point. We think this is coming
2 imminently. Time to leave.

3 So my security team and I made our way back to the JOC, back inside the airport
4 to the JOC. I got into the JOC, because I remember checking my watch, at 5:08 p.m.
5 And then, what felt like a couple minutes later, because I had just sat down on a couch,
6 but it turns out it was a little bit more, it was more like 20 minutes later or 18 minutes or
7 something, I heard a booming voice, a loud voice of a male, a military member, on the
8 military side of the JOC, saying, "Attention in the JOC. Unconfirmed reports of explosion
9 at Abbey Gate." And I'll never forget those words.

10 So I jumped to my feet, and, you know, after a couple of seconds of, sort of, shock,
11 I walked over to the military side of the JOC and I watched on television monitors drone
12 footage from above, which, in my assessment, based on my training and experience, was
13 the aftermath of a large explosion. There were bodies that appeared to be on their side,
14 bodies that appeared to be crawling.

15 So things started to really spin into motion at that point. Updates were coming
16 quite regularly on the military side. The majority of the State Department officials
17 stayed on the State Department side and, in my assessment, were shell-shocked, as most
18 anybody would be.

19 Then, a couple minutes later, there was a follow-on report of a second explosion,
20 which they believed happened near the Baron Hotel. So that was ongoing. It turns out
21 that might not -- based on the after-action report, that might not have been accurate.
22 But we believed there was a second explosion.

23 Then there was a follow-on report, a few minutes after that, of a grenade thrown
24 over the wall. That was also, it turns out -- I believe the reports after the fact seemed to
25 indicate that was not accurate.

1 And then, about 15 minutes after that, maybe less than 15 minutes, there were
2 reports of a fixed enemy drone above Camp Alvarado that they believed would be
3 dropping explosives. That also very quickly, within about 60 seconds, turned out be not
4 accurate. It turned out it was actually one of our drones.

5 And then, about 10 minutes or so after that, the rocket alarm sounded. And our
6 C-RAM system, which is our counter-rocket and -mortar system, picked up the heat
7 signature of what we believed would be a rocket attack on our airport. And that was
8 when the C-RAM system activated the automatic alarm, which is when we all started
9 huddling.

10 Jayne Howell walked around to everyone and said: Text your families, text your
11 families, text your families.

12 And that was -- I was texting with my colleague who was at Camp Alvarado at that
13 point, because I was worried that they were going to be attacked with that, what we
14 thought was an enemy drone. I was also texting with Zal Khalilzad's staff in Doha,
15 keeping them apprised.

16 Simultaneously, Ambassador Bass and Jim DeHart were upstairs in the
17 Ambassador's office on a secure video call with the President and with the National
18 Security Council, and then Diplomatic Security was focused on getting accountability of all
19 State Department personnel.

20 I want to go back to one point that I missed. At about 2:30 that afternoon, a
21 radio call on our handheld radios went out from the JOC, from the Diplomatic Security at
22 the JOC, that said, "All consular officers at Abbey Gate, please return to the JOC
23 immediately due to a threat."

24 So I don't know if any State Department officers were currently at Abbey Gate at
25 that point, but I can tell you, that radio call was heard by at least 60 people. I mean,

1 essentially, it should've been heard by every single State Department official on the
2 ground, because we all carry a radio.

3 So that was at 2:30. I'm sorry for that aside.

4 Going back to where we were, about 6:15 p.m., after all of those follow-on attacks
5 that we were tracking, we texted our families. And I think CNN was probably among the
6 first to break the story of the explosion right around that time. Because I gave my wife a
7 heads-up that -- excuse me. I gave my wife a heads-up to expect to see something on
8 the news but that I was okay and, to my knowledge, everyone from the State Department
9 was okay.

10 So it was a difficult couple of hours. I believe the rocket alarm sounded again
11 about an hour or so after that, which again turned out to be a false alarm.

12 And I heard from -- I could hear cars speeding by outside the JOC. It was a very
13 flimsy airport hangar with very thin aluminum siding. So I would regularly hear vehicles
14 speeding by with horns blaring to try and get people out of the road. And, at one point,
15 I remember hearing what I think was a Marine, but I don't know who it was, screaming,
16 "Get the fuck out of the way. Get the fuck out of the way." Pardon my language, but
17 that's a direct quote.

18 So the casualties were all brought to -- there was a hospital near the passenger
19 terminal where medical personnel were doing everything they could on everyone.

20 And then I went back to the KAK at around 8 o'clock or 8:30 p.m. that night. And
21 the night shift was delayed, obviously. Normally they would arrive at 6:00 p.m.
22 Because the attack happened at 5:36, they held them all at the KAK and didn't bring them
23 until about 8:30 p.m.

24 Q Gotcha. And that's obviously a tough and tragic situation to be involved in,
25 so I'm sorry that I kind of had to bring --

1 A No, that's okay.

2 Q -- you through it again.

3 So are you able to give any more detail on where the warning method that you
4 received about telling consular officers at Abbey Gate to return, you know, to move away
5 from the gate -- do you know specifically where that warning came from?

6 A No, I don't. I mean, are you asking, like, who --

7 Q Yeah.

8 A -- made the radio call?

9 Q Yes.

10 A It was a male voice. I believe, just based on how it was worded, it sounded
11 like it came from a Diplomatic Security official, but I don't know who actually said it.

12 Q And do you have insight into, you know, what the origin of that warning was,
13 like, why they were making that warning?

14 A I do not. But that information largely corresponds with what I was told less
15 than 30 minutes later by the intelligence community officials at Glory Gate. So, from my
16 understanding, it was the same threat stream.

17 Q And did the intelligence community officials give you any granularity about
18 the threat?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Can you speak to that?

21 A It might be a little bit difficult in this setting, but essentially -- I mean, what I
22 can say in this setting is: We were expecting a vehicle-borne IED. We believed it was
23 ISIS-K. We knew that it was -- or the intelligence suggested it was coming to a gate, and
24 based on the configuration of the other gates, they narrowed it down. Basically, Abbey
25 Gate was by far the most likely scenario. However, we were operating -- I don't want to

1 say "undetected," because there were people watching us. So it could've really been
2 one of those two.

3 Q Gotcha.

4 A But just, in all practicality, from a terrorist's standpoint, it doesn't make
5 sense to hit a gate where there's four people. It makes sense to hit a gate where there's
6 4,000 people.

7 Q Were the Marines at Abbey Gate -- are you aware whether the Marines at
8 Abbey Gate -- what their operations were when the bomb went off?

9 A I'm not aware of that.

10 I do want to say one thing about the threat information. Because what was
11 notably absent from that threat information -- there was no description of what the
12 attacker was wearing. There was no description of a backpack. There was no
13 description of the age of the individual or who, if anyone, was accompanying the
14 individual.

15 So I understand -- or, I have seen public testimony that states otherwise, and I
16 don't want to dispute what that Marine's individual experience was, but, from my direct
17 interactions with CIA -- I'm just going to say it on the record here -- my direct interactions
18 with CIA and hearing directly from them what the intelligence stream was, there was no
19 indication of that description.

20 Q What was the situation like in the attack's aftermath? Specifically, what
21 were things like on August 27th?

22 A So, on the night of August 26th, after the dayshift, which was my shift, went
23 back to the KAK, the nightshift was told -- so embassy leadership held a call, a secure
24 video call, with Washington, D.C., leadership. I'm not sure if that included the call with
25 POTUS, but it was roughly at the same time as the call with POTUS. And the decision

1 was made to continue processing individuals who were inside the airport.

2 So the nightshift of consular officers, the night of the Abbey Gate bombing,
3 continued to process individuals onto airplanes for evacuation. And while there was a
4 brief ground stop due to the bombing, planes started taking off, my best approximation,
5 by 7:00 p.m.

6 Q Gotcha. And by --

7 A And you asked about the 27th. Sorry, I didn't answer your question.

8 Q No, that's okay. Keep going.

9 A So, the 27th, I came from the KAK to the JOC at 7:00 a.m. -- or, sorry, 6:00
10 a.m., and Jayne Howell told me that Ambassador Bass and Jim DeHart requested that I
11 staff them that day.

12 We were told overnight -- or I woke up to an email -- sorry, a WhatsApp message
13 from Scott Weinhold, who was the assistant chief of mission, that said: Be ready on
14 30 minutes' notice to get out, to leave. So you're only bringing what you can physically
15 carry, no suitcases, just what you can carry in, like, a backpack or in your hands. And be
16 ready to leave on 30 minutes' notice, because it's incredibly fluid, we're expecting more
17 attacks. But keep doing what you're doing.

18 I also woke up that morning to an email from Secretary Blinken that was sent to
19 those of us who were still in Kabul, just the 70 or 75 of us, saying that his thoughts were
20 with us and that he would support us, you know, with our reintegration back to normalcy
21 when we got home.

22 So, on the 27th, I was staffing Ambassador Bass up in the executive office. And
23 all of the gates were closed. Obviously, Abbey Gate was our last viable gate, and that
24 was no longer a viable gate, so everything was closed. There were no State Department
25 personnel at any gates throughout that day, to the best of my understanding, my

1 knowledge.

2 So we were focused on the remaining high-profile civil-society groups that were
3 still waiting to be evacuated. And the general sentiment -- I'm paraphrasing -- was that
4 most of these would not get in, but that if an opportunity presented itself, we would do
5 our best to call them and get them in.

6 So I was tasked by Jim DeHart to keep track of -- he had a whiteboard, a dry-erase
7 board in his office -- with the remaining groups, which I think were Rockefeller
8 Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy. I believe there was a New York Times
9 group. I believe there was -- there were a couple others. But I was tasked with
10 essentially calling these people and keeping in touch with them and making sure they had
11 my contact information, but telling them that -- essentially telling them, it's not looking
12 likely that you're going to get into the airport.

13 So, normally, my shift was over at 6:00 p.m., but because I no longer worked for
14 Consular Affairs, that rule no longer applied. And so I told -- I don't even think I asked;
15 I'm pretty sure I just told Bass that I'd be working late. I wanted to work until the end of
16 the evacuation.

17 So, just after 6:00 p.m. that evening -- and this is all in the book, but -- Mustafa
18 Popal told me that he heard I was bringing people through on foot without permission
19 through a secretive gate the day before. And after realizing that he wasn't asking me
20 that to get me in trouble, he was instead asking me that because he wanted to use it, I
21 told him the details.

22 And there was one particular woman, a single mother with her kid, who was just
23 lingering in my mind because it was bothering me all day that I couldn't do anything
24 about it. So he and I agreed that we'd grab one or two trusted security guys from
25 Diplomatic Security and go out to that gate that night in the darkness and try to get her

1 in.

2 And then Mustafa had a family of six -- six people? Eight people? I think it was
3 a big family. It might've been eight people, or seven people -- that he was trying to get
4 in.

5 So we grabbed two -- or, we grabbed one contractor and went out there. And
6 that contractor then grabbed another -- left us out there, at my request, and went back to
7 the JOC and grabbed a second contractor who he trusted. And we sort of did this whole
8 thing without really asking for permission, which is the general theme of the book, "The
9 Secret Gate." And we got them in successfully. It was a little touch-and-go for a while.

10 But we returned to the JOC at, like, 9:30 p.m. And I told Ambassador Bass and I
11 told Jim DeHart what we had done, and that was when they did that round of applause
12 for us.

13 Q Very nice.

14 On the 27th, were you privy to any discussions about whether to end the NEO
15 immediately?

16 A Yes.

17 So the plan was for the -- the discussion was when to stop the NEO. And the
18 decision was made, the NEO was officially over at 6:00 a.m. on the 28th. That was the
19 decision that was made.

20 In reality, what ended up happening was, a small, core group of State Department
21 officials remained behind until, I think, the end of the 29th. So there was about
22 24 hours of unofficial NEO, if that makes sense, beyond the official end date of the NEO,
23 which was 6:00 a.m. on the 28th.

24 Q And the reason for moving the end of the NEO up, it sounds like, it was your
25 understanding, that was because of the Abbey Gate attack and further threats to the

1 airport?

2 A Yes. Based on the discussions I was privy to, the decision was made based
3 on the Abbey Gate attack, the fact that all of the gates had closed, the fact that there
4 was -- a side story to that.

5 There was a misunderstanding with the Taliban, and they became upset us with us
6 because two Taliban members were shot and they believed it was U.S. soldiers who shot
7 them. And a quick assessment of that situation, we determined it was not U.S. soldiers
8 who shot the two Taliban members.

9 So our relationship with the Taliban was deteriorating. Abbey Gate was no
10 longer viable, and that was the final remaining gate. And we were bracing for additional
11 attacks that we believed were coming based on intelligence that was available at that
12 time.

13 Q When you were working on that day, helping staff Bass, were you aware of
14 how many Americans remained in Afghanistan who were trying to get out? Is that a
15 number that was being tracked?

16 A That was a number that was being tracked. It's not one that I can recall off
17 the top of my head.

18 But the issue that we faced throughout the entire evacuation, one among many
19 issues, was that we had a list of Americans who wanted to be evacuated, and we
20 contacted every single one of them multiple times. You know, I'm not sure if every
21 single American was contacted the exact number of times, but we continuously were in
22 touch, not -- I was not in touch with them, but our team was in touch with them. When
23 it came time to actually come into the airport, a number of them, a large number of
24 them, expressed they were either unwilling to face the risk, the security risk, or were
25 unwilling to come if we wouldn't allow in their relatives, additional people, or simply said

1 they weren't ready to leave.

2 So one of the things that bothered me personally after the evacuation ended and I
3 got home was hearing accounts from politicians that said that we left Americans behind.
4 It's an obvious fact that Americans were left behind; I can't dispute that. However, I
5 believe, based on my personal experience, that we gave every single American citizen
6 who registered with us their interest -- we gave them multiple opportunities to come to
7 the airport. And I don't believe it's the State Department's fault that these individuals
8 chose, for whatever their personal reason was, not to come to the airport.

9 Q In the book, around page 231, it states, related to August 27th, that, quote,
10 "During a morning briefing, Sam learned evacuation priorities had tightened even more
11 than he expected. He wrote in his notebook: 'Amcits, LPR, LES,' meaning Americans
12 citizens, green card holders or legal permanent residents, and local embassy staff. Next
13 came U.S. nongovernmental organizations and 'federal affiliates.' Afghans of 'high
14 interest' remained technically on the list, and initially so did holders of approved Special
15 Immigrant Visas."

16 The book then goes on to say, quote, "Sam amended his priority list with a firm
17 note about Afghans who held SIVs: 'Won't happen. TB [Taliban] not allowing.' The
18 Taliban had begun stopping Afghans with U.S. visas at checkpoints. Negotiations to
19 allow legitimate SIV holders to exit proved unsuccessful, and the Americans could do
20 nothing about it."

21 Is that an accurate summation of the situation?

22 A That is. And I still have that notebook sitting at my house in Washington,
23 D.C., with that written inside of it.

24 Q So it sounds like the Taliban were blocking Afghan SIVs from making it to
25 Kabul airport.

1 A Yes. Yeah. It's sort of twofold. One, yes, the Taliban were blocking
2 these individuals. Two, there was essentially no way get into the airport except for
3 Glory Gate, which was, you know, functional to the extent there was three or four
4 individuals from other agencies there. So, yeah, it was sort of a twofold problem.

5 Q I'm interested: Do you believe that the Taliban's actions always lived up to
6 the description of them being, quote, "businesslike and professional"?

7 A I view businesslike and professional as two different things. Professional?
8 No, certainly not. Businesslike? From a high level, yes, businesslike. Professional?
9 No, I certainly can't say that.

10 Q And the book, on page 240, also says, quote, "Sam also learned that at least
11 some Taliban checkpoint commanders were preventing anyone who wasn't an American
12 citizen from approaching the airport."

13 Does that also sound accurate?

14 A Yes.

15 Q So page 240 further states, "Back inside the JOC, Sam joined Bass, DeHart,
16 and other State Department officials for a sensitive mission briefing by Rear Admiral Peter
17 Vasely, who was the highest-ranking U.S. military officer still in Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

18 [REDACTED]

19 [REDACTED]

20 [REDACTED]"

21 Is that an accurate summation of what happened?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Do you know around what time that briefing was?

24 A That briefing was [REDACTED]

25 Q And that would be [REDACTED]?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Are you able to provide any more details about that meeting?

3 A Yes, recognizing we're in an unclassified space.

4 [REDACTED]

5 [REDACTED]

6 [REDACTED]

7 [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED]

10 [REDACTED]

11 [REDACTED].

12 [REDACTED]

13 [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED]

15 Q During your time there, did you have any other interactions with Rear
16 Admiral Vasely?

17 A Nope. It was just those two briefings.

18 Q What about with Brigadier General Farrell Sullivan or Major General Chris
19 Donahue?

20 A I didn't speak to Donahue, but I did have interactions with General Sullivan.

21 Q And what were those interactions?

22 A It's nothing specific that comes to mind. There was a handful of times he
23 asked me just general questions about State Department operations. You know, I can't
24 think of specific things, but it was -- paraphrasing, it was along the lines of, does State
25 Department currently have people at such-and-such gate? Or, you know, what's your

1 capacity to process people at the passenger terminal? Things like that. Questions that
2 I was comfortable answering in my capacity without having to escalate to a higher level.

3 Q Thank you.

4 Can you just very briefly speak a little bit more about [REDACTED] ?

5 A Yeah.

6 So I met [REDACTED], I believe, my first day -- my first day, at HKIA. I was in the
7 passenger terminal on the second floor. And there was an Afghan woman, young
8 woman, with a child, who didn't speak a word of English, and her husband didn't make it
9 into the airport. And I just yelled out in the passenger terminal, does anyone here speak
10 English, can anyone translate for me, something like that.

11 And [REDACTED] came over and spoke to me in what I assessed to be a very Americanized
12 accent. Like, I thought it was phenomenal, how -- I actually thought [REDACTED] was with us. I
13 thought [REDACTED] was with the U.S. Government. And [REDACTED] told me that he at [REDACTED] years old
14 became [REDACTED] for a [REDACTED] team in southern Afghanistan and [REDACTED] did
15 that for, like, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] or so, maybe [REDACTED] years.

16 And [REDACTED] was already manifested for a flight. I saw that [REDACTED] had the bracelet on [REDACTED]
17 wrist that had the barcode, which meant that [REDACTED] had already been processed by the
18 Marines. So I asked [REDACTED] what [REDACTED] was doing there. Because [REDACTED] told me [REDACTED] slept there
19 the night before.

20 And [REDACTED] said that [REDACTED] parents got on the plane -- or, sorry, not [REDACTED] parents -- [REDACTED]
21 mother got on the plane and was in Doha, but [REDACTED] was waiting to try to get in [REDACTED] sister, [REDACTED]
22 sister's husband, and their [REDACTED] kids. And [REDACTED] asked if there was anything I could do.
23 And I was brand-new on the ground at that point, so I told [REDACTED] no.

24 But I just had a gut feeling that [REDACTED] could be useful to me at some point. And [REDACTED]
25 asked for my phone number, and at first I said no, and then I said, okay, sure, let's

1 exchange phone numbers. So I had [REDACTED] phone number.

2 I didn't really think about [REDACTED] again until August 23rd when I went to East Gate
3 and [REDACTED] showed up there with two 82nd Airborne intelligence officers. And so I ran into
4 [REDACTED] again. I told [REDACTED], still, I couldn't help [REDACTED] get [REDACTED] sister in; I would do my best if any
5 opportunity arose.

6 And then we stayed in touch, and that was when I texted [REDACTED] the morning of
7 August 26th when I got to Glory Gate and knew that I needed [REDACTED]
8 who -- essentially, I needed someone who would put it all on the line and take a
9 tremendous risk, and I knew that [REDACTED] was willing to do that.

10 So [REDACTED] did tremendous things for us. [REDACTED] wanted to stay behind after the Abbey
11 Gate bombing, and I essentially forced [REDACTED] onto that airplane, not physically, but I told
12 [REDACTED], like, "Get on the airplane now. I'm not going to use you again. Don't even think
13 about it."

14 I love this [REDACTED] to this day. Like, [REDACTED] an incredible human being. But [REDACTED] had
15 done so much for me at that point, and [REDACTED] got his family in, and I just wanted [REDACTED] to get
16 to safety.

17 But [REDACTED] and I are in touch, and [REDACTED] is doing well. He's in [REDACTED] now and just got
18 [REDACTED]. So, yeah.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q Mr. Aronson, when did you depart from Kabul?

21 A It was very late at night on August 28th, but it could've been after midnight,
22 so -- I had been awake for, at that point, it was just under 50, 5-0, hours, so I was, like, not
23 totally with it. It was either, like, 11:59 on the 28th or it was, like, 12:02 on the 29th.

24 Q Who did you depart with?

25 A It was the bulk of the State Department team. So I believe -- and it's in one

1 of these exhibits, that photo --

2 Q Uh-huh.

3 A -- of the very last thing. So, aside from those individuals pictured there,
4 every other State Department official left with me on that plane.

5 Q Thank you.

6 I want to point you one last time, at least for the majority, to exhibit 5, page 275
7 of the "Secret Gate" book.

8 Page 275 states, "After returning from HKIA at the end of August, Sam's supervisor
9 denied his request for a couple of days off to recover. Despite a pledge from Blinken
10 that no one returning from Kabul will be penalized for seeking therapy, Sam's supervisor
11 told him to inform the medical office that he'd seen a State Department psychologist,
12 who could've triggered a career-threatening mental health review."

13 Can you elaborate on this?

14 A Sure.

15 So I landed at Dulles in, I believe, midday or early afternoon on August 30th. I
16 think that was a Sunday. I'm not certain. But, in any case, I went home, went to sleep.

17 I was in temporary government lodging because I was between assignments.
18 The government -- I was on training orders, so I was assigned to a corporate apartment
19 building that they paid per diem and my apartment for. I also didn't have any of my
20 belongings from Nigeria, because I had just left that assignment.

21 So, first thing in the morning that next day, August 31st, I emailed my career
22 development officer, who was my supervisor at the time, and said, "Hey, I just got back
23 yesterday. I'm exhausted. I am in physical pain." I had a number of physical ailments
24 that arose from the incredibly harsh conditions of HKIA.

25 And he told me that they could not grant me administrative leave and that, if I

1 wanted take leave, I would then not be eligible for the lodging that I was already living in.
2 So I'd have to pay, it was something like \$350 a night, if I wanted to take even a day of
3 leave.

4 So, instead, he told me to register for some online training courses through
5 Foreign Service Institute and basically just do some online training. So I registered for
6 the courses. I did not attend the courses. I focused on my recovery for a couple of
7 days.

8 Q Uh-huh.

9 A And, then, your second point about the psychological counseling.

10 So, on or about September 8th, Secretary Blinken had those of us who were at
11 HKIA up on the eighth floor of State Department headquarters in D.C. for him to speak
12 directly to us and for us to meet him, you know, one-on-one and get a chance to speak to
13 the Secretary for a minute or so each.

14 And the Secretary made clear to all of us that he was making counselors from a
15 team called the Employee Consultation Services, which is the State Department
16 psychologists -- make them available to all of us to meet with. And he assured us, and
17 then Ambassador Bass chimed in to doubly assure us, that it would have no effect, no
18 bearing, on our security clearance or our medical clearance and that it was all
19 anonymous.

20 Q Uh-huh.

21 A So, about 2 months or so after that -- and I was seeing the ECS counselors
22 weekly -- or, one individual counselor weekly -- I was trying to not go to my next
23 assignment, which was Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, because I knew that one of my
24 post-traumatic-stress triggers was seeing women in head scarves, who I attributed in my
25 head to those who I failed to rescue at HKIA. And I would've been doing consular work

1 in Erbil. And, given the situation in Erbil, with refugees from Syria, it was not a good
2 plan for me to go and do that work.

3 So I told my career development officer, who was in charge of assignments, that I
4 really wanted to pull out of that assignment and I'd prefer to stay in Washington, D.C., for
5 2 years to recover.

6 He sent me an email back -- and I still have the text of it. I saved it. I sent it to
7 myself on my personal device. But he said, "I spoke to my supervisor, and" -- I'm
8 paraphrasing. "I spoke to my supervisor, and he told me to relay to you that chapter 3
9 of the Foreign Affairs Manual" -- and they gave a subsection -- "says that it is an
10 employee's responsibility to self-report any in-patient psychological" -- something,
11 something -- "psychological counseling to the State Department's medical bureau for a
12 review of your worldwide medical clearance."

13 And I told him, "Well, I'm not doing in-patient anything. I just see an ECS
14 counselor," employee consultation counselor, "once a week to discuss my experience and
15 this post-traumatic stress related to it." And he gave sort of a wishy-washy answer:
16 "Well, I'm just telling you what my supervisor says you need to do."

17 And I pushed back and I said, "Well, according to this section of the Foreign Affairs
18 Manual, I don't need to do anything. And I was assured by the Secretary himself that I
19 don't need to do anything. So thank you very much." And we had a little bit of a
20 contentious discussion about that. And it was never raised again.

21 But, you know, those two points were pretty disheartening for me and certainly
22 contributed to my desire to seek out a career that would keep me in Washington, D.C.,
23 and keep me away from bullets that were flying over my head.

24 Q Thank you for sharing that.

25 Are you aware of other FSOs who've shared similar concerns with respect to fear

1 over, you know, threatening their careers?

2 A I know of a number of Foreign Service professionals who left the State
3 Department after their experience in Afghanistan in 2021. I can't speak to exactly why
4 they each made the individual determination, but I do know that, over a month after we
5 returned, I got an email -- we all got an email from, it was either Jean Akres or Scott
6 Weinhold or John Bass -- I'm sorry; it was someone from a leadership role who was at
7 HKIA with us -- that said they were aware that there was no availability for the ECS
8 counselors and that there were members of our team who were not able to get mental
9 health support that they wanted due to -- I'm not sure why. But basically saying that
10 they raised this to the highest level, the Secretary's team, and that they would do their
11 best to make these resources available ASAP.

12 Q Do you feel that Secretary Blinken's promise was kept by his subordinates,
13 ultimately?

14 A I believe that Secretary Blinken was genuine with what he told us.

15 That being said -- and I referenced this in my opening remarks -- there are State
16 Department officers who I would trust with my life and my child's life and there are
17 others who I would not trust to tell me the time. To the latter, there are midlevel State
18 Department officers who have never had to serve in a challenging or austere
19 environment.

20 My career development officer, for instance, who's an incredibly nice individual -- I
21 like him personally -- but the hardest assignment he ever served in was Seoul, Korea. So
22 it completely falls on deaf ears when I tell him that I can't go to my next assignment
23 because I'm having flashbacks, you know?

24 So I don't blame him for this. I have done a lot of thinking about it over the last
25 2 years. I can't blame this individual, because he simply just has never experienced that.

1 It's not his fault that he's never experienced it.

2 But, in any case, he did not follow the Secretary's wishes. I don't blame the
3 Secretary for that. But midlevel management, there were individuals who did not follow
4 the wishes of leadership.

5 Q Thank you for sharing that.

6 Can you speak to what you are most proud of about the evacuation and what your
7 biggest regret was?

8 A Oof.

9 My biggest regret's an easy one. My second day at Abbey Gate, which was
10 August 22nd, that was the day that we had the most restrictive entry criteria for who we
11 were allowed to let in. And I was outside the gate, and I interviewed what I assessed at
12 the time to be nearly 500 individuals, and I only allowed in 90.

13 I know I was following the letter of the rules at that point; I know I was following
14 the letter of the policy. However, that's a tremendous burden to have to live with, you
15 know, for me personally.

16 What I'm most proud of is spending almost 10 years in a rigid government
17 bureaucracy and having the judgment to know when it was worth the risk to step outside
18 of the bounds, essentially.

19 And despite exhibit 7 having the title "Screw the Rules," I actually don't think
20 that's an accurate or a really good title for this article. I don't think I ever screwed the
21 rules. I don't think I ever broke any sort of rules. I think, going back to what I
22 discussed with the minority side last round, I used that 80 to 90 percent judgment to
23 operate within general bounds of what I thought was allowable. And, you know, I made
24 a mental calculation of, it was more likely than not that I would be successful in this
25 endeavor and get this family, get these multiple families in and keep alive and uninjured

1 myself.

2 So I'm proud of that. And I think, you know, looking back, it changed me a lot as
3 a person. I used to follow the rules quite closely, I think. Not that I don't follow them
4 now, but it's just, I come to decisions with a different set of experiences.

5 Q Uh-huh.

6 A So I'm most proud of that.

7 Q So I know you touched upon this in your opening statement, but I'd love if
8 you could elaborate on this point. Why do you think the government could have and
9 should have done better?

10 A So I am not personally familiar with what conversations happened leading up
11 to August 15th at U.S. Embassy Kabul, but, in retrospect, looking back, I think it is clear to
12 me that we should've started this evacuation and withdrawal sooner.

13 And, as a result of not starting it sooner, my colleagues and I from the State
14 Department, from the military, and from the intelligence community had to really put our
15 lives and our careers on the line -- which we did. When we swore that oath to the
16 Constitution when we took our respective offices in our respective agencies, everybody
17 who swears that oath understands their responsibility, or at least should understand that
18 responsibility.

19 So I believe that the State Department rose to the task. I really do. And I think
20 that the media and I think there are Members of Congress who have been a little bit -- or
21 maybe even a lot of bit -- unfair to the career State Department officials who were on the
22 ground for this evacuation making these incredibly difficult decisions.

23 That's to say nothing of Charge d'Affaires Wilson and the conversations that he
24 had leading up to August 15th. So, you know, I think there needs to be a distinction, and
25 I'd hope that you could bring back to your respective sides why that distinction is

1 important.

2 Q Well, appreciate that distinction.

3 And we greatly appreciate you answering our questions today and making yourself
4 voluntarily available to us, and, most importantly, for your service to the Department and
5 the American public.

6 I want to give you an opportunity -- I know we have 15 seconds. Is there
7 anything else you'd like to share?

8 A Not at this time.

9 [REDACTED]. Well, on behalf of Chairman McCaul and his staff, thank you so
10 much for appearing today. And we appreciate your time and taking time off work for us.

11 Mr. Aronson. Thank you.

12 [REDACTED]. Off the record.

13 [Recess.]

14 [REDACTED]. Thanks, Sam.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q I wanted to just go back to some of the things we talked about in the last
17 session or discussion. And, in particular, you talked a little bit about some of the
18 testimony that has happened before in committee --

19 A Yeah.

20 Q -- in particular, on the descriptions related to the suicide attack. You said,
21 to be clear, you heard all alerts related to the potential attack?

22 A All alerts?

23 Q You heard the alerts related to the potential attack?

24 A Yeah, I heard the alerts that were shared with me related to the attack. I
25 can't speak to, like -- I'm not sure if there were other side conversations. But I was -- I

1 mean, I was -- I heard ample alerts leading up to the attack from credible sources who
2 had access to the actual intelligence, not just a game of telephone, but the actual intel
3 reports.

4 Q Okay. And in the alerts you heard, none of those alerts, to confirm, contain
5 information on what the bomb had looked like.

6 A Correct.

7 Q And so it was correct to say that there was no description of a backpack in
8 any of the alerts that you heard?

9 A Correct.

10 Q And would it be correct to say that there was no description indicating the
11 attacker was clean-shaven?

12 A Correct.

13 Q And, to confirm, it would be correct to say that there was no description of a
14 black vest?

15 A None that was shared with me.

16 Q And in the alerts that you heard, it'd be correct to say that there was no
17 description offered that the bomber was traveling with a companion?

18 A Not that I can recall.

19 Q Okay. And so, therefore, to be clear, you would dispute the testimony
20 provided to this committee by military personnel who asserted he could've identified
21 these humans based on these physical descriptions that you received from people who
22 collected the intel?

23 A I did not receive of any of those descriptions. And it strikes me as odd,
24 based on my training and experience, for tactical intelligence to contain such a descriptive
25 assessment of an attacker. It's not something I have ever heard before in thousands and

1 thousands of intelligence reports I read, and it's certainly not something I heard at HKIA.

2 Q Okay. Thanks.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q We also wanted to touch back upon your interaction with the Department
5 once you arrived back from Kabul.

6 You previously testified that you were received well by Secretary Blinken. Is that
7 correct?

8 A Yes.

9 Q But that you had some issues and gripes with the HR department. Is that
10 correct?

11 A I'm not sure I'd use the term "gripe," but I was not satisfied with the
12 information that was corresponded between myself and the career development office in
13 HR.

14 Q Okay. Fair enough.

15 And, then, in terms of any sort of debriefings at your arrival back in the States, did
16 you have any debriefs?

17 A With the team?

18 Q Yes.

19 A No. Just the event with the Secretary on or about September 8th.

20 Q Did you have an opportunity to raise any concerns or issues you had had
21 with the evacuation and how it unfolded?

22 A No.

23 Q Do you believe that there's a way you could've raised those concerns?

24 A Sitting here before you.

25 Q Okay. Was there anyone in the Department that you feel you could've

1 talked to about your concerns?

2 A Yes.

3 Q Who would those individuals have been?

4 A I probably would have spoken directly to Ambassador Bass, given my
5 preexisting relationship with him.

6 Q Did you speak to him?

7 A About?

8 Q Concerns that you would have related to the evacuation.

9 A No.

10 Q Why not?

11 A I don't have a good answer there. I'm sorry. I -- I'm not sure.

12 Q Okay. Fair enough.

13 And, then, in terms of the AAR, you previously testified that you were not
14 interviewed for the AAR. Is that correct?

15 A Correct.

16 Q Did you want to be interviewed?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And why weren't you interviewed?

19 A I can't answer that. You'd have to ask them.

20 Q Nobody ever contacted you --

21 A Correct.

22 Q -- about the after-action review?

23 A Never.

24 Q Did you ever receive any information related to the after-action review being
25 conducted?

1 A You mean Dan Smith's after-action review?

2 Q Yes.

3 A No, I never received any sort of correspondence in any capacity about it.

4 Q Would you still have been employed with the State Department at the time
5 the after-action review was being conducted?

6 A That's an excellent question and could very well be -- could very well play a
7 role in that. In fact, that could be the entire reason. I just -- I just don't know.

8 Q Would you be surprised to learn that the after-action review was kicked off
9 in October of 2021?

10 A No, that doesn't surprise me, but that would certainly indicate that I was still
11 very much employed.

12 Q Okay. And would you be surprised to learn that the drafting and the
13 interviews related to the AAR began in December of 2021?

14 A No, that would not surprise me.

15 Q Okay.

16 I'd like to introduce for the record as exhibit No. 9 an excerpt of the transcribed
17 interview of Daniel B. Smith dated Thursday, October 31, 2023.

18 [Aronson Exhibit No. 9

19 Was marked for identification.]

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q And if I could call your attention to pages 37 and 38. Do you want to
22 quickly review the bottom of 37 and the top of 38?

23 Great. So, if I could call your attention to line 18 on page 37, the question reads,
24 "How do you determinate what current and former officials to interview?" And the
25 interview is referencing as related to the AAR.

1 On line 19, Ambassador Smith responds, "We wanted to, obviously, interview very
2 senior officials whom we thought would be relevant to our review, from the Secretary of
3 State on down, those who had been involved in decisionmaking with regard to
4 Afghanistan, those who had played a role in the interagency process."

5 He continues on line 23, "Beyond that, we wanted to get a sense of others who
6 had been on the ground in Kabul, had been at various places where we were transporting
7 refugees from, as well as from the domestic side."

8 Continuing on to page 38, starting on line 1, "So we wanted to get as full a picture
9 as we could. A lot of people volunteered to come forward. They wanted to be heard."

10 On line 3, Ambassador Smith is asked, "And for those who didn't volunteer, how
11 were you able to engage with them?"

12 He replies on line 5, "Well, everybody did it voluntarily, I should say. But we
13 reached out to some specifically because of their roles."

14 He is asked on line 7, "More broadly, how were individuals put on notice that
15 these interviews are being conducted? Did you put out a --"

16 Ambassador Smith interrupts and says, "There was a Department notice, as I
17 recall, or some notice to the effect that the accountability -- excuse me, the after-action
18 review was being set up and being established, and if people had questions, they could
19 contact us. So a lot of people had seen that and reached out to us in that manner."

20 And so I want to ask you again, did you receive any sort of notification about the
21 after-action review having been conducted?

22 A Not that I'm aware of. I don't believe I did.

23 But I'd also like to call attention to lines 9 through 12 that you just read on
24 page 38. If the Department notice went out, as Dan Smith attested to, stating that "if
25 people had questions, they could contact us," quote/unquote, I think that's different than

1 saying "if people want to be interviewed, they can contact us."

2 So, again, I don't remember receiving a Department notice, but I can assure you,
3 just -- I sit here before you saying that, if I received an email saying there's an after-action
4 review and for those who were involved in HKIA, if they want to speak to us, please get in
5 touch, I can state with near certainty that I would have gotten in touch.

6 Q Understood.

7 But would you agree that, on line 11 through 12, where it says, "So a lot of people
8 had seen that and would reach out to us in that manner," would you agree that many
9 individuals, despite perhaps it not saying there was a call for volunteers, in fact responded
10 to the Ambassador's email and asked to be interviewed?

11 A Again, I don't dispute that that's what Dan Smith writes in the -- or what it
12 states in the transcript, but I can't speak directly to who reached out. It's just not
13 something I have knowledge of.

14 Q Understood.

15 Do you have any reason to believe that Ambassador Smith would've not
16 interviewed you if you had asked him to do so?

17 A I have no indication whatsoever.

18 In fact, I think it's worth noting that, in mid-December, I received correspondence
19 from State Department spokesperson Ned Price asking me to be interviewed on the
20 record at the State Department for The Wall Street Journal that was doing a piece
21 focused in large part on Glory Gate. And, based on my experience, it's incredibly rare
22 for the Department to ask a junior official, a very junior ranking individual like myself, to
23 be interviewed on the record by a national or international publication.

24 But the Wall Street Journal correspondent interviewed -- spent over 2 hours with
25 Ambassador Bass, spent over 2 hours with Mustafa Popal, and over 2-1/2 hours with me.

1 So I certainly feel like my voice was heard, to the extent that I wanted to talk about the
2 great achievements and incredible success stories that my colleagues and I did on the
3 ground that day --

4 Q That's fantastic.

5 A -- or, sorry, that week.

6 Q I'm glad to hear you were able to lodge any concerns that you had.

7 A couple more questions. In terms of your preparation for today, did you speak
8 with the majority separately about your interview here today?

9 A I have spoken to the majority, yes. I've also spoken to the minority at times
10 over the last 6 months. If I had to estimate the amount of time I've spent with both
11 sides leading up to today, I would estimate somewhere around 5 hours with the minority
12 side and somewhere around 7 hours with the majority side.

13 Q Fair enough.

14 To be more specific, in terms of the interview as it was conducted today, did you
15 at any point confer with the majority regarding the interview today specifically?

16 A You mean leading up to it?

17 Q Yes.

18 A I did not confer with them about what I would be saying in this interview, no.

19 Q Did you have any meetings, just the majority and yourself, related to what
20 would be discussed in the interview here today?

21 A Specific questions you mean?

22 Q Yes.

23 A No, I don't -- not to my recollection, no.

24 Q Did you ask the majority to question you on any specific issues?

25 A I may have brought up this morning that I wanted to make sure I could speak

1 about my concerns with seeking mental health counseling after returning from
2 Afghanistan, but I did not relay specifically what I planned to say on that.

3 Q Okay. Did you ask them to question you on any topics in particular?

4 A Not to my recollection, aside from what I just brought up.

5 Q Okay.

6 [REDACTED]. Just to be clear, is it your recollection that the 5 hours of
7 conversation you had with the minority side all transpired prior to your being invited to
8 sit for a formal transcribed interview?

9 Mr. Aronson. Yes.

10 [REDACTED]. Okay.

11 [REDACTED] So I know it's been a long day and you've been subjected to a lot of
12 questions, including on, you know, some very painful experiences, but I want to assure
13 you that your testimony here today, your willingness to appear voluntarily are really
14 critical for us to do our job as Congress, to learn new facts, to scrutinize facts that we've
15 already heard, and to really make sure that we have a clean and clear picture going
16 forward.

17 So I want to thank you again on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks for your time.
18 And I want to thank you again for the service that you and scores of other Department
19 officials undertook in Kabul, and it was very commendable.

20 Mr. Aronson. Thank you.

21 [REDACTED] We have nothing further.

22 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

23 [REDACTED]. We can go off the record.

24 [Whereupon, at 2:48 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 169 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded.



Witness Name

02/20/2024

Date

**Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of
Sam Aronson dated 09/15/2923**

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel errata, (4) counsel private (as applicable) and witness errata

| Page | Line | Change | Reason |
|-------------|-------------|---|---------------|
| | Universal | Replace “Akres” with “Akers” | |
| 2 | 14 | Change “ ████████████████████ ████████████████████ ████████████████████, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY ██████████ ██████████” | |
| 37 | 13 | Replace “out by a day” with “shortened by a day” | |
| 47 | 19-20 | Replace “Afghanistan policy of the region and its” with “Afghanistan policy, the region, and/or its” | |
| 52 | 19 | Replace “what informs the basis that you’re testifying that” with “what is the basis for your testimony that” | |
| 56 | 24 | Replace “your languages as you speak” with “languages you speak” | |
| 62 | 4 | Strike “The more specific question” | |
| 68 | 15 | Replace “katgirl” with “KAK” | |
| 94 | 19 | Replace “are” with “FSOs or local embassy staff” | |
| 114 | 5 | Strike “line 21” | |
| 124 | 11 | Replace “retention, no.” with “retention, I did have retention training.” | |
| 126 | 11 | Replace “leading the JOC” with “leaving the JOC” | |
| 157 | 15-16 | Replace “did you have any debriefs” with “did you have any debriefs upon your arrival back in the States?” | |
| 162 | 15 | Strike “regarding the interview today specifically” | |