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5 COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,

6 U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

7 WASHINGTON, D.C.

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12 INTERVIEW OF: MARK EVANS

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Wednesday, August 23, 2023

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Washington, D.C.

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The interview in the above matter was held via Microsoft Teams, commencing at

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8:04 a.m.

1 Appearances:

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5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

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7 [REDACTED], [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED], [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED], [REDACTED], SUBCOMMITTEE

10 ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

11 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

12 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

13 [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

15 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

16 [REDACTED]

17 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

18 [REDACTED]

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21 For the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE:

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23 [REDACTED], OFFICE OF THE LEGAL ADVISOR

24 [REDACTED], H INVESTIGATIONS [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]. It is now 8:04 a.m. eastern time on August 23, 2023, and this is a transcribed interview of Mr. Mark Evans. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul requested this interview as part of the committee's investigation of the Afghanistan withdrawal.

Can the witness please state his name for the record.

Mr. Evans. It's Mark Evans.

[REDACTED]. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for appearing here today, Mr. Evans, to answer our questions. The chairman appreciates your willingness to appear voluntarily. My name is [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] on Chairman McCaul's staff on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

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

[REDACTED]. My name is [REDACTED]. I am [REDACTED] for Oversight and Accountability.

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] subcommittee.

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] on

behalf of the minority.

[REDACTED] Hi, everyone. [REDACTED] HFAC minority side, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED], the [REDACTED] for the Democrats, Foreign

Affairs Committee.

[REDACTED]. [REDACTED] for the Oversight and

Accountability Subcommittee for HFAC minority, as well as a [REDACTED]

with HFAC minority. Thank you.

1 [REDACTED] Great. And I think, Mr. Evans, my apologies, your camera may
2 be off again. If we could just try the on and off trick that we previously improvised.

3 Mr. Evans. I'm trying. Is that better?

4 [REDACTED] Yep, much better. Thank you so much.

5 Mr. Evans. Okay.

6 [REDACTED] So, as noted, I'll go over a few ground rules for today's
7 interview, which will hopefully aid our discussion. Our requesting will proceed in
8 rounds. The majority will ask questions first for 1 hour, and then the minority will have
9 an opportunity to ask questions for an equal period of time if they choose. We will
10 alternate back and forth until there are no more questions and the interview is over.

11 We will take a short break at the end of each hour, but if you'd like to take a break
12 apart from that, please just let us know. We'll be happy to accommodate. We'll be
13 also taking a lunch break midday. Please let us know when you'd like to do so, though
14 we understand that, given the time difference, it might be a bit late for lunch for you.
15 However, regardless, will you just let us know.

16 As you can see, there's an official court reporter transcribing the interview for a
17 written record, so we ask that you give verbal responses to all questions. Does that all
18 make sense, Mr. Evans?

19 Mr. Evans. Yes, it does.

20 [REDACTED] So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we will do
21 our best to limit the number of people to those on the staff whose turn it is. We ask
22 that you please speak clearly so the reporter can understand and so everyone can hear
23 you. We will do our best to do the same. If you can't hear us at any point, please just
24 let us know.

25 The court reporter unfortunately cannot report nonverbal responses, such as

1 shaking your head, so please answer each question with an audible, verbal response.
2 Additionally, it's important for the record that we don't speak over one another or
3 interrupt each other.

4 Witnesses who appear before the committee have an opportunity to freely
5 consult with counsel if they choose. It's my understanding that you're appearing today
6 with agency counsel, correct?

7 Mr. Evans. That is correct.

8 [REDACTED] Mr. Evans, you understand that agency counsel represents the
9 State Department and not you personally, correct?

10 Mr. Evans. Yes.

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

13 [REDACTED] This is [REDACTED], agency [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED]. This is [REDACTED]

15 [REDACTED]. Thank you, both.

16 We want you to answer our questions in the most complete and truthful manner
17 as possible, so please take your time. If you have any questions or if you do not
18 understand one of our questions, please let us know. Our questions will cover a wide
19 range of topics, so, if you need clarification at any point, we'd be happy to do so.

20 If you don't know the answer to a question or don't remember, please give us
21 your best recollection and share with us who to the best of your knowledge might be able
22 to provide a more complete answer to that question. Additionally, it is okay to tell us if
23 you learn information from someone else; we just ask that you communicate how you
24 came to know the information.

25 Mr. Evans, this interview is unclassified, so, if a question calls for any information

1 that you know to be classified, please take it for the record as well as the classification to
2 the best of your ability. Once you've clarified that to the extent possible, please
3 respond with as much unclassified information as you're able to. If we need to have a
4 classified session or forum later, we can arrange for that.

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

7 Mr. Evans. Yes, I do.

8 [REDACTED]. It is also required for questions posed by congressional staff in
9 an interview. Do you understand this, Mr. Evans?

10 Mr. Evans. Yes.

11 [REDACTED]. Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be
12 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C.
13 1001. Do you understand this?

14 Mr. Evans. I do, yes.

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

17 Mr. Evans. No.

18 [REDACTED]. Mr. Evans, we are conducting today's transcribed interview in a
19 virtual format. Where are you taking this interview from?

20 Mr. Evans. From my office at the Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden.

21 [REDACTED]. Is anyone else in the room with you?

22 Mr. Evans. No.

23 [REDACTED]. Do you or will you have any communication assistance enabled
24 during the course of this TI?

25 Mr. Evans. No.

1 [REDACTED]. We ask that you do not communicate with anyone other than
2 your counsel. Does that make sense, Mr. Evans?

3 Mr. Evans. Yes, it does.

4 [REDACTED]. And we ask that you refrain from using communication systems
5 during questioning time. Of course, if you need to privately consult with counsel during
6 questioning rounds, please just ask for a break in questioning to do so.

7 Do you have any recording devices enabled today, Mr. Evans?

8 Mr. Evans. No.

9 [REDACTED]. We ask that you just please refrain from using your recording
10 devices throughout the duration of the transcribed interview.

11 And, finally, I'd like to make note that the content of what we discuss here today is
12 confidential. We ask that you do not speak with -- do not speak what we discuss in this
13 interview with any outside individuals to preserve the integrity of our investigation.
14 Does that all make sense?

15 Mr. Evans. Yes, it does.

16 [REDACTED]. For those same reasons, the marked exhibits that we use today
17 will remain with the court reporters so that they can go into the official transcript.

18 That is all the majority has to say on this topic today. Is there anything else that
19 my colleagues from minority would like to add?

20 [REDACTED]. No. Thank you.

21 [REDACTED] Okay. The clock now reads 8:10, and we will start the first
22 hour of questioning.

23 EXAMINATION

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q Mr. Evans, what is your current position at the State Department?

1 A I'm the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden.

2 Q What position or positions did you hold at the time of the Afghanistan
3 withdrawal?

4 A At the time of the Afghanistan withdrawal I was the Acting DAS for
5 Afghanistan, Deputy Assistant Secretary, at the State Department.

6 Q Did that also include a period as the director of the Afghanistan desk?

7 A Yes. I became the director of the Afghanistan desk in October of the
8 previous year, and then, when the administration changed in January of that year, I was
9 asked to become the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan. I remained in
10 that position until October of that year.

11 Q Thank you. What was your professional experience involving Afghanistan
12 leading up to becoming the director of the Afghanistan desk?

13 A I had actually not had any direct Afghanistan experience prior to taking that
14 position.

15 Q How were you selected for the position of the director of the Afghanistan
16 desk?

17 A I had just finished a tour in Baghdad, Iraq, prior to that. And, at the time,
18 when I became director, I applied for the position, interviewed, and they selected me.

19 Q Who selected you for that position?

20 A It was the leadership of the South Central Asian Affairs Bureau, specifically
21 then-DAS for Afghanistan, Nancy Jackson.

22 Q And why did you leave the position as director of Afghanistan desk? I'm
23 assuming it's to become the Acting DAS.

24 A Yes, that's correct.

25 Q And, as director of the Afghanistan desk, to whom did you report?

1 A Until January, when I became Acting DAS for Afghanistan, I directly reported
2 to Nancy Jackson, also to leadership within the South Central Asian Affairs Bureau.

3 Q And who comprised the leadership within the Bureau?

4 A At the time, the senior bureau official was Dean Thompson, and then the
5 Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary was Erv Massinga.

6 Q Thank you. And what was Dean Thompson's position?

7 A His official title was senior bureau official because there wasn't a confirmed
8 Assistant Secretary at the time.

9 Q And how many people reported to you as director of the Afghanistan desk?

10 A It varied somewhat, but somewhere in the low to mid-20s.

11 Q And who were your direct reports, if you're able to recall?

12 A Yeah. Directly reporting to me, we had two deputy directors, one was
13 named Melissa Lan (ph); she's a Foreign Service officer. She departed early summer
14 when I was Acting DAS. And then the -- after she left, there was a slight gap.
15 Somewhat after August or just about the time of the withdrawal, the new deputy director
16 was Erik Schnotala, and then we also had a Civil Service deputy director, Tim Wilder.

17 Q Thank you. And can you speak a bit more as to what your position as
18 director of the Afghanistan desk entailed?

19 A Yes. As director, I was really responsible for ensuring that the operations of
20 the desk supported our objectives in Afghanistan in every way that entailed. We had
21 three different units within the Afghanistan desk. We had an economic unit, a political
22 unit, and a political military affairs unit. Each one of those units had different varied
23 roles depending on the situation and the challenges we were facing, but that was the
24 general description of the areas they covered.

25 In that sense, it really was a process of supporting the State Department's

1 objectives in a broader sense at the time. When I first came on board as the director,
2 our primary objective was to support the special representative for Afghanistan
3 Reconciliation Office led by Ambassador Khalilzad because their objective was to bring
4 about a political reconciliation between the Taliban and the existing government in
5 Afghanistan. And so, in any way that we could support that effort, we did so, whether
6 that was through production of papers. We also had it -- or whatever.

7 We also had the direct responsibility of supporting operations of our Embassy in
8 Kabul, as was appropriate, working very closely with the leadership in the Embassy in
9 order to support whatever their needs happened to be day-to-day, yeah, and so forth.

10 Q And did your role change at any point throughout your tenure? As you
11 noted, when you first came on, you had specific obligations, priorities. Did that evolve
12 throughout your tenure as director of the desk?

13 A Yes, it did, of course. I would say the shift first started with the change of
14 administration. The new administration was looking at the question of whether or not
15 to maintain a troop presence long term, and so that became a focus through various
16 interagency meetings that took place.

17 Initially, primarily our role was to support answering the questions that came
18 about in the discussions regarding whether or not to withdraw troops largely through
19 interagency meetings that took place. We also, as soon as we looked at the possibility
20 of troops withdrawing even before that decision was made, we started to talk about
21 contingency planning and how to support that, what that might look like and what would
22 be required in that respect.

23 We, in that regard, started working very closely with our Embassy, with our
24 military contacts and so on, to really talk about two scenarios and start planning for them:
25 One being, if we were able to maintain a diplomatic presence post troop withdrawal,

1 what that would look like in terms of presence in the country, what would the
2 requirements be in terms of maintaining a secure diplomatic facility, especially knowing
3 that there were certain support roles that the military had been providing that would no
4 longer be in place. And so that became a major focus of our effort.

5 Simultaneous and parallel to that, we started discussions both internally within
6 the State Department about what an evacuation, if it became necessary, would look like
7 and what would be required. And then that also extended to the question of if an in
8 extremis type of evacuation took place, in other words a noncombatant evacuation
9 operation that would be primarily executed by the U.S. military, what needed to be done
10 in that regard.

11 As that developed, our primary role in that respect was to provide information to
12 our military colleagues, both in Washington and overseas, through the Embassy to
13 CENTCOM officials in order to help them go through that planning process and be
14 prepared.

15 Let's see. And then, as things evolved over the coming months, the decision was
16 made to withdraw troops, we proceeded with both of those planning streams in earnest.
17 And I would say, increasingly, another area of focus became, how do we first identify who
18 we have a moral and ethical obligation in Afghanistan to over time; if it became necessary
19 to help them leave Afghanistan, how would we -- what kinds of programs would be
20 necessary to do that.

21 And then, specifically, when we were talking about those who were in the process
22 of applying for special immigrant visas, that was our primary focus in terms of helping
23 people leave. And so, even before August, we were in a coordination role in supporting
24 those efforts to bring out eventually, starting in July of that year, those who had reached
25 a stage in the special immigrant visa application process where we were confident that

1 they would qualify but just had a few steps left. And we started to support the
2 government's decision to start bringing those people out with their family members in
3 earnest to help move them out of harm's way, that we foresaw might come.

4 Q Thank you, Mr. Evans. And I will have some followup questions on that
5 later, but just so I can contextualize the timing on that, so, with respect to the
6 contingency planning, sort of the -- diplomatic presence concerning evacuation options,
7 et cetera, do you recall what timeframe that was?

8 A Well, it ramped up certainly, but earliest discussions took -- started taking
9 place, I would say, with the change of administration in early February.

10 Q Thank you for that.

11 And, just for the record, when did you assume again the position of Acting DAS for
12 Afghanistan?

13 A It was the day after the change of administration, in January of that year.

14 Q And how were you selected for that position?

15 A Leadership within the Bureau approached me and asked if I would take on
16 that role.

17 Q And do you recall who approached you or who selected you for that
18 position?

19 A It was Dean Thompson who asked if I would take on that role.

20 Q And can you speak a bit more as to what that position entailed? I know we
21 spoke about, you know, the varying priorities, and, given the timeline, I assume that
22 corresponds with your role as Acting DAS, but if you could speak a bit more as to sort of
23 the -- distinguish an element of that position relative to your director position previously.

24 A Sure. As Acting DAS, I had a much more forward-leaning role in terms of
25 working with other parts of the U.S. Government, with equivalent officials at my level and

1 higher, a more prominent role within the State Department in terms of supporting senior
2 officials within the State Department who were involved in various aspects of Afghanistan
3 policy and the implementation of that policy. And that manifested itself in various ways,
4 a lot more direct involvement in high-level interagency meetings that took place in
5 support of those more senior officials, for example.

6 Q And do you recall what other parts of the government you worked with --

7 A Sure.

8 Q -- in that role?

9 A Yeah. Very direct and frequent interaction with OSD at the Department of
10 Defense, specifically the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense at the time, Becky
11 Zimmerman. Other agencies included over time people at the Department of Homeland
12 Security, various people within the intel community, and yeah. Those were the primary
13 ones, I would say.

14 Q And did you interface with sort of the White House and the executive as well
15 in that role?

16 A Yes. Yes, I did, with the National Security Council staff.

17 Q And how often would you say that you engaged in these sort of interagency
18 meetings as Acting DAS?

19 A It was a very steady drumbeat. In fact, at one point, we even decided to
20 look back and see on average how many times we would have interagency meetings on
21 various aspects of Afghanistan planning and policy decisions. And, if I could recall
22 correctly, the number was about two and a half per week on average of those types of
23 meetings.

24 Q And did you report to a Dean Thompson in your role as Acting DAS?

25 A Yes, I did.

1 Q And how many people reported to you in that position, do you recall?

2 A Essentially what happened was that we -- I was dual-hatted in the sense that
3 there was nobody brought in new as in the acting office director role. I maintained
4 some of those duties, but I also -- we also stepped up the responsibility of the two deputy
5 directors on the desk in terms of what was expected from them on a daily basis.

6 Q So you continued to perform those day-to-day responsibilities of the director
7 position in addition to those of the Acting DAS, correct?

8 A To some extent, yes, in regards to those areas where it felt appropriate for
9 me to continue in that role rather than pass them to the deputy directors.

10 Q And the deputy directors remained your direct reports then, correct?

11 A Yes, that's right.

12 Q So can you speak a bit more -- I know we touched upon this, but sort of what
13 your role in the withdrawal was to be understood more broadly, including consideration
14 of and planning for the military withdrawals, emergency evacuation, and all other
15 aspects?

16 A Your question --

17 Q From beginning to end and sort of, you know, the withdrawal planning
18 yourself, which you touched upon, leading up to sort of the August evacuation, can you
19 speak more about sort of what your role was when you first became involved, and I guess
20 this is a broader question, how it evolved with time?

21 A Okay. And this is specific to the evacuation aspect of things?

22 Q From withdrawal, so, in a prior year, 2020 to then the --

23 A Yeah.

24 Q -- ultimate withdraw in August 2021.

25 A Yeah. Sure. As I mentioned, we started engaging in various planning

1 aspects for that potential need for an evacuation. And, as in all evacuation scenarios,
2 really that can happen in one of two ways, broadly speaking: One is an evacuation
3 where it's necessary to bring the military in and have them lead the evacuation, what we
4 call a noncombatant evacuation, which is essentially in the end what happened. The
5 other potential evacuation type is one where you're not in that sort of a crisis situation;
6 you're able to do it in a more measured fashion. Typically, in those situations, the State
7 Department has the lead, will charter airplanes, for example, to come in and bring people
8 out in a -- whatever fashion is possible.

9 And so we were looking at the planning in those two respects. As noted, the
10 NEO planning, which was ultimately the responsibility of the military and specifically
11 under the AOR of CENTCOM, our role in that regard was one of providing information,
12 answering the questions that they had so that they could get -- could gather the data
13 necessary to plan for that type of operation.

14 That received very broad and high-level attention very soon into this -- into the
15 new administration. If I recall correctly, it was in March, I believe, when I accompanied,
16 for example, the Deputy for Management and Resources Brian McKeon, and the Acting
17 Under Secretary for Management Carol Perez to an exercise that the Pentagon did on a
18 Saturday morning to talk about issues associated with a NEO and to do some initial
19 planning in that regard.

20 That was a very high-level exercise, essentially Cabinet level, but that represented
21 the type of attention that these issues were getting -- was getting. The -- of those
22 interagency meetings that I mentioned earlier, you know, it was a mix of topics that were
23 covered, but a large number of those, significant number of those meetings every week
24 touched on issues having to do with a possible evacuation scenario and what would be
25 needed and who we would -- who would we be helping, et cetera.

1 And so the types of questions that would be asked of the State Department were
2 assessments or estimates of, for example, how many U.S. citizens were present, how
3 many people who were eligible for SIVs remained in Afghanistan or potential eligible.
4 There was a lot of discussion about who else might warrant U.S. assistance and trying to
5 define that group and what sort of assistance we would provide to them and so on.

6 In terms of the other possible scenario, a non-urgent crisis type of evacuation, I, as
7 one of the things I did, as Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary, was to pull in all of the
8 offices within the State Department that would have a role in that type of an evacuation
9 and do contingency planning with them. That working group that I formed met, I would
10 say, formally two or three times, but informally we communicated by email over time to
11 address various aspects of that planning and those requirements.

12 Then, when August 15th came and the Taliban took over, our role from my
13 perspective shifted quite a bit because then it was an execution phase in terms of just
14 moving forward with meeting the requirements at the time. And the State Department
15 formed a task force that was in charge of all of those efforts and working very closely with
16 those who we had on the ground in Kabul and our military colleagues.

17 And, also, in terms of what I did at that time, our role was primarily focused on
18 really supporting the task force in whatever way was necessary, but, at the same time,
19 there were specific things that we were in charge of, broadly speaking. Initially what
20 that entailed was working with countries that we had identified which had U.S. bases in
21 place that we could use as way points for those that were being brought out of
22 Afghanistan to then be processed, and we could figure out then where they should go on
23 from there.

24 We had already worked with a number of those countries in terms of initial
25 overtures, because when we started bringing out NIV applicants, as I mentioned earlier

1 who were at that late stage of the process, we had approached all of those same
2 countries to ask whether or not we could use our facilities at various bases in order to
3 bring them and process them through those final steps before they could come to the
4 United States.

5 That -- so it sort of paved the way so that, when August 15th occurred, we'd
6 already done that communication, we had those initial contacts in place. And it was in
7 our mutual interest at that point, along with those countries, for us to be able to use
8 those bases for that purpose, and so it really went rather quickly in terms of making those
9 arrangements really overnight, frankly.

10 And then, beyond that, once the initial 2-week period after August 15th ended,
11 our focus shifted once again to several different questions: Number one, how do we
12 continue to support efforts to bring people out of Afghanistan, and what sort of structure
13 did we need to form within the State Department to continue to do that? At the same
14 time, we had questions on a policy front in terms of how we would engage with the
15 Taliban, to what extent, what those limitations would be moving forward given the
16 nature of the group.

17 Where we ended up with that was we formed an Afghanistan Affairs Unit in Doha,
18 which is the same location where we had had discussions with the Taliban in terms of the
19 political reconciliation efforts. And, yeah, and so we staffed up that office and got it
20 running.

21 Q Thank you, Mr. Evans. I have a few followup questions. As to the working
22 group that you mentioned, do you recall who comprised that group?

23 A I can give you a list from my memory banks, not entirely confident that it
24 would be comprehensive. But certainly it included officials from our Administration
25 Bureau, because -- ALM is the acronym -- they're the ones who would be in charge of

1 chartering flights if necessary. It included people from our Consular Affairs Bureau,
2 including the DAS who has primary responsibility for support for overseas citizen services
3 for U.S. citizens. It included a few other Consular Affairs officials as well, representatives
4 from our Population, Refugees, and Migration Office. They are the ones who are in
5 charge of our refugee programming from the State Department perspective, other
6 representatives from regional bureaus where we thought there might be some sort of
7 nexus in terms of evacuation routes.

8 Q Do you recall which regional bureaus?

9 A If I recall correctly, we had someone from the EUR, the European Bureau,
10 and then other officials from within the South Central Asian Affairs Bureau --

11 Q Do you recall the names of any of your --

12 A -- and -- I'm sorry, and NEA because we were looking at the possibility of
13 using the Doha and other Middle Eastern -- Middle East locations.

14 Q Do you recall any key points of contact, any names from those various
15 bureaus and offices?

16 A Let's see, the Consular Affairs DAS at the time was Julie Stufft. I can't
17 remember anyone else who was there from Consular Affairs by name. I can think of
18 faces but not names. From the Population, Refugees, and Migration Bureau, the
19 primary person was Larry Bartlett. Otherwise, I can't say -- oh, I can't remember names,
20 but I just remembered another participant, and that was the Diplomatic Security Bureau.

21 Q Thank you. And, within SCA, who were the key individuals in addition to
22 Dean Thompson?

23 A Within SCA, certainly the Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Erv
24 Massinga, then working closely also with directors of various desks, such as the Pakistan
25 desk, yeah.

1 Q What was the relationship like between SCA and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul,
2 sort of your daily -- did you engage on a regular basis, how was information coordinated,
3 et cetera, if you could speak a bit more to that.

4 A Sure. We really had daily communication with the embassy, talk about
5 every -- all kinds of different issues that needed to be addressed. From my seat, I dealt
6 primarily with the Embassy leadership, that included Ross Wilson, who was our chief of
7 mission at the time; and also the two people who were filling deputy chief of mission
8 types of roles, one of them a more traditional DCM type of role; the other one focused
9 primarily on sort of security and logistics. So the first one being Ian McCary, and then
10 the second in that role was Scott Weinhold.

11 Q And what was the relationship like between SCA and the Special
12 Representative Khalilzad and his team?

13 A It was a good cooperative relationship. They had a mandate that they were
14 pursuing. We were working in support of that mandate. I didn't have much direct
15 interaction with Ambassador Khalilzad. Most of my interaction with that office was with
16 the Deputy Special Representative Molly Phee.

17 Q And how were the roles and responsibilities divided between the special
18 representative's team and SCA?

19 A Well, as noted, they had a very specific mandate, which was to bring
20 about -- help negotiate a political reconciliation between the Taliban and the existing
21 government. That was their really primary and sole focus. And so what we did with
22 respect to that office was to support them in any way that was needed.

23 Our responsibility from a desk perspective was much more broad. It covered all
24 of the things that I've already mentioned in terms of planning and other things that I
25 haven't mentioned. There were roles, for example, in terms of, you know, consular

1 matters and supporting the Bureau's efforts to improve SIV processing, any number of
2 things.

3 Q And did that -- did their mandate evolve throughout your tenure at any
4 point, or was it sort of consistent across administrations?

5 A The Special Representative's Office?

6 Q Correct.

7 A I think it was consistent.

8 Q Was there a senior leader at the Department with overall responsibility for
9 the planning of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan, whether it be in SCA or any
10 other bureau?

11 A I don't know that anybody was specifically named as such, but in practical
12 terms, certainly the most senior official in the Department that was involved in those
13 discussions on a regular basis was the deputy for management and resources, Brian
14 McKeon.

15 Q And did SCA have any details -- just to backtrack a bit, any detailees on the
16 special representative's team at all?

17 A Hmm. I don't recall anyone being a detailee specifically, no, from SCA.
18 They had their own staff, but I'm not entirely aware of what the -- sort of the
19 administration -- the administrative arrangements would've been that helped them bring
20 that staff together. That happened before I arrived.

21 Q Thank you. I know you named a few officials that you worked with, but for
22 the record, can you please state some of -- who were the senior leaders at the
23 Department that you believe were most involved in matters related to the withdrawal
24 and what their roles were?

25 A I would say, as mentioned, Deputy for Management and Resources Brian

1 McKeon. His role was to represent the Department in discussions within the
2 interagency. Where decisions had to be made at the deputy's level, he was usually in
3 the chair, and there would be periodic internal meetings that he would lead to discuss
4 matters.

5 Let's see, certainly in terms of other planning, I would say Acting Under Secretary
6 for Management Carol Perez was involved. Although, I would say her primary
7 involvement wasn't focused on the evacuation, per se; her primary involvement was
8 focused on the other side of our efforts that I mentioned previously, which was planning
9 for a continued diplomatic presence and ensuring that the arrangements would be put in
10 place so that that could happen in a safe and effective manner.

11 There were other officials that were brought into the discussions as topics arose
12 and as it was appropriate, but really the most senior official, I would say, was the Deputy
13 for Management and Resources.

14 Q And do you recall which officials on DMR McKeon's staff were most involved
15 or were you engaged with most often?

16 A Yes. The person I primarily interacted with on a staff level was Lisa Brown.
17 There were other staffers involved, but I don't recall their names.

18 Q Thank you. And, with respect to Acting Under Secretary for Management
19 Carol Perez, you noted that there were these sort of two analytical tasks that -- one
20 would be evacuation; the other continued diplomatic presence. Do you recall, did her
21 sort of responsibilities change throughout the course of the withdrawal leading up to the
22 evacuation, or was she -- that was sort of her portfolio throughout your tenure?

23 A I'd say that was consistently her portfolio, yes.

24 Q Was there a lead bureau or a family of bureaus that you could say were
25 responsible for the Afghanistan withdrawal?

1 A I guess, I'm having a hard time responding to that question because the
2 premise is that the State Department was the bureau or the agency responsible for the
3 Afghanistan withdrawal, and as noted earlier and what I said, a noncombatant evacuation
4 operation is the responsibility of the military. So, to whatever extent the State
5 Department had a role, it was in support of both the planning and execution of those
6 efforts by the military.

7 Q Do you recall what the role of the P family was at the time? Were they
8 responsible in engaging with sort of the military at that point?

9 A You're talking about the Under Secretary for Political Affairs and those who
10 come under her? P family responsibilities were, as always, focused on engaging with
11 other countries that in some way touched upon both evacuation planning and eventual
12 execution. And so they did not have a tremendously deep involvement in terms of the
13 planning process, that that fell to other parts of the Department in terms of providing
14 information to DOD or internal planning in terms of a possible non-crisis type of
15 evacuation.

16 Q Is it fair to say that, on a sort of day-to-day more regular basis, your office
17 did not engage with the Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland during the
18 planning phase?

19 A That's fair to say, yes.

20 Q How often did you all engage with Secretary Blinken throughout the
21 withdrawal planning?

22 A Directly with him, I did not. There were occasional principal-level
23 interagency meetings where we would provide support papers and so forth for his use in
24 those meetings, and so, on those occasions, we would interface with the Secretary's staff
25 in prep -- or to prepare those materials for him in the way that he wanted in order to

1 meet his needs.

2 Otherwise, the interaction with the Secretary would've been done by the senior
3 bureau official, Dean Thompson, and then through whatever conduit of information was
4 in place with respect to what I described with, the Deputy for Management and
5 Resources and the Acting Under Secretary for management.

6 Q Do you recall how often Dean Thompson met with the Secretary throughout
7 this period?

8 A Well, I know that he did on a -- on average, I mean, weekly basis along with
9 the other leads for the regional bureaus. That's assuming that the Secretary was in
10 town, of course.

11 Q And do you recall which officials on Secretary Blinken's staff were most
12 involved with withdrawal?

13 A No, I don't.

14 Q Did you engage at all with his chief of staff Suzy George throughout your
15 tenure?

16 A No, I did not.

17 Q You mentioned a few bureaus and offices that you engaged with throughout
18 this period, one of those you noted Consular Affairs. Can you speak to which officials
19 were most involved in the withdrawal planning?

20 A Certainly Julie Stuftt, as mentioned. She's the Deputy Assistant Secretary at
21 that time in charge of supporting U.S. citizens overseas. Beyond that, I don't recall any
22 names. I can recall faces, people who were normally present in meetings, but I don't
23 remember the names or the positions.

24 Q And this isn't necessarily within the Bureau in D.C., but did you engage with
25 the head of consular at U.S. Embassy Kabul on a regular basis? Did they have a consular

1 section?

2 A No, I did not have any regular interaction with that individual.

3 Q And, within Diplomatic Security, do you recall which officials were most
4 involved?

5 A Yeah. I interacted primarily with a couple of the Deputy Assistant
6 Secretaries within DS. They were the ones -- one -- the one in particular that I
7 interacted with -- and I don't recall his name at the moment -- he was primarily
8 responsible for the security of embassies overseas and those types of arrangements, and
9 where I interacted with him was primarily on the planning for maintaining a diplomatic
10 presence.

11 Q To the best of your recollection, when did Diplomatic Security become
12 involved?

13 A From the very beginning. I mean, there were -- and it's hard to separate
14 my interaction with them in a way, because, even as we were doing all of these planning
15 exercises and efforts, there were also ongoing issues in Kabul where DS was involved, of
16 course. We were considering appropriate staffing levels at the Embassy, what steps
17 might be needed in terms of ensuring its security. All of those things involved
18 discussions with Diplomatic Security Bureau on an ongoing basis.

19 Q You noted that you primarily engaged with them in terms of sort of the
20 continuance of the diplomatic presence, so embassy security in that respect. Do you
21 recall what their position was or whether that position evolved given that they were, as
22 you noted, involved in the very beginning?

23 A Their position in what sense?

24 Q On a continued diplomatic presence.

25 A Whether they -- I'm sorry; I don't understand the question.

1 Q Let me refrain. My apologies. Whether they believed that diplomatic
2 presence was sustainable, whether they recommended it, whether -- what their position
3 generally on that was, given that there are these two various paths the Department was
4 pursuing.

5 A Uh-huh. Uh-huh. They were very particular, and I think appropriately so,
6 on what would be required in terms of maintaining the security of a facility post troop
7 withdrawal, and so there were a lot of discussions, very detailed discussions about what
8 those requirements would be, how we might be able to put those requirements in place.

9 So it was an evolutionary process in the sense of -- I think what we all had was a
10 sense of the magnitude of the challenge involved, and it was only over time, as we started
11 sort of going through the checklist and meeting those requirements in ways that were
12 satisfactory, that confidence grew that we would be able to maintain a diplomatic
13 presence. By the time we hit, I would say early July, the summertime, we had finally
14 reached a point where it really did look like we would be able to do so, assuming an
15 overall security environment allowed it.

16 Q Thank you. And one of the bureaus that -- was medical service involved in
17 any of these sort of discussions, planning, et cetera?

18 A Yes, they were involved certainly in the discussions about maintaining a
19 diplomatic presence because one of the things that we needed to ensure continuity for
20 was the provision of medical services, including emergency medical services, trauma
21 services, the types of services one would need in an atmosphere like that potentially.

22 Q Do you recall --

23 A So they were involved in discussions -- sorry. They were involved in
24 discussions about what that had to look like, because we would no longer have the
25 military resources in place, and we were able to work through those challenges.

1 Q Do you recall which officials were most involved in those discussions?

2 A Yeah. From my perspective, it was the director of the Medical Bureau. I
3 don't recall his name now. I could tell you who the current one is, but I don't recall his
4 name.

5 [REDACTED] Was that Padgett?

6 Mr. Evans. He's the current. Or, no, he was director for a while, but I think
7 there was someone who preceded him. I'm not entirely sure, to be honest.

8 BY [REDACTED]

9 Q Thank you. To the best of your recollection, when did Med get involved?

10 A Med got involved as we started to look at the requirements on the medical
11 side in terms of sustaining a diplomatic presence, and so that would've been spring,
12 probably early March, I would guess.

13 Q And, within Legislative Affairs, do you recall if they were at all involved
14 throughout this process?

15 A They were involved certainly with respect to periodic staff briefings that
16 would take place and making the arrangements for those, coordination for those. I was
17 involved in a number of those as one of the briefers.

18 Q Do you recall which officials were most involved?

19 A No, I don't.

20 Q How about within the Office of Legal Adviser, so L, do you recall which
21 officials you engaged with most often?

22 A I can think of the person, but I can't recall the name at the moment. It was
23 a man. I had worked -- I should be able to recall it. I don't. But I'd worked with him
24 fairly extensively on these issues, on issues that arose of a legal nature.

25 Q Was it in the front office? Was it Rick Visek?

1 A No.

2 Q Was it within the regional for the acting -- so the assistant legal adviser?

3 A It was within L. It was the -- there were a couple of individuals, and, again,
4 I don't remember their names, a man and a woman, who were specifically tasked with
5 Afghanistan issues within L.

6 Q To the best of your recollection, when did L become involved in this process?

7 A I really couldn't give you a timeframe because they sort of popped in and out
8 depending on what the issues at hand were and whether or not there were legal aspects
9 that had to be addressed.

10 Q Thank you. And I know we touched upon this previously, but if you could
11 please describe the interagency process related to planning the Afghanistan withdrawal.
12 I know that you had noted a number of departments that were involved, but we'd love to
13 learn a little bit more about what so that sort of -- how that interagency planning process
14 was organized to begin with, and then who sort of the key executive department agencies
15 involved were.

16 A Sure. I would characterize it really in two respects: One was sort of the
17 analysis and decisionmaking process that took place. That was on an interagency basis,
18 typically involving deputy-level meetings called by the National Security Council where
19 indepth discussions would take place regarding various aspects of really Afghanistan
20 policy in every respect. But it also included discussions of identifying challenges, making
21 decisions with respect to decisions about troop withdrawal, decisions about how we
22 would facilitate bringing people out of Afghanistan, how we would coordinate in terms of
23 planning.

24 The actual coordination was the other stream. That took place really with DOD
25 in the lead for NEO. That planning really kicked off, I would say, at a high level and then

1 got increasingly diffused through the system in various ways so that those planners within
2 DOD could get all the answers that they needed. A tremendous amount of those
3 discussions took place in Kabul between CENTCOM officials on the ground and those in
4 the Embassy leadership and others within the Embassy, because they were the ones who
5 had all of the detailed information.

6 They were the ones who were interacting with others that we, for example, had
7 signed agreements with other foreign missions that we would provide evacuation
8 assistance if it became necessary. And so there was that aspect, assessments of what
9 sorts of resources were available on the ground already from an Embassy perspective,
10 how they could effectively use those resources in coordination with military resources
11 that the combatant regional command had in place, and, yeah, and so forth. So that's
12 where a lot of those discussions took place.

13 From a Washington perspective, within the State Department, as I mentioned, we
14 would get involved whenever there were questions that were sent our way that we could
15 most appropriately answer, so that was a facilitation role that we played.

16 Q Thank you. So you noted the sort of deputy-level meetings called by the
17 NSC. Can you speak a bit more as to what their role was in the Afghanistan withdrawal?

18 A It was a role that I would say encompassed identifying challenges, ensuring
19 that various parts of the interagency understood in full what their responsibilities were,
20 that that coordination was moving forward in a way that it needed to over time. That's
21 how I would describe their role.

22 Q Is it fair to say that -- please correct me if this is incorrect -- any set priorities
23 were set during those meetings as well?

24 A Yes, certainly priorities in the broadest sense, yes.

25 Q And, within the military, do you recall who the key military figures

1 were -- who were the key military figures working with the State Department?

2 A I interacted with -- what's his name? I'm not entirely sure. I think it was
3 General Fenzel on Joint Staff, but that was also in coordination with the Deputy Assistant
4 Secretary for Defense, Becky Zimmerman, who was my primary interlocutor within DOD.
5 I did have interaction with them though. I did, for example, go over to the Pentagon
6 and have meetings with them on occasion; other times, I would talk to them over secure
7 videoconferencing systems.

8 Q And what were their roles specifically in addition to their title?

9 A Their roles were varied. From my perspective, their roles both entailed
10 supporting that information and decisionmaking process -- information gathering and
11 decisionmaking process that was taking place within the interagency discussions. Often
12 there would be specific taskings that would come out of those meetings where it would
13 require further coordination between the State Department and the Department of
14 Defense, and so we would have discussions about those issues.

15 Sometimes there were issues to be resolved in that regard where perhaps
16 Department of State and Department of Defense had different views on things, and so we
17 would discuss those types of questions that would arise and try to find solutions. They
18 also were involved from a senior level clearly in terms of interfacing with their own
19 regional command, specifically in this case CENTCOM, to facilitate information gathering
20 where it was necessary.

1 [9:05 a.m.]

2

BY [REDACTED]

3

Q Thank you.

4

And what foreign official did you work with in relation to the Afghanistan

5

withdrawal?

6

A We interacted with -- well, it depended on the phase that we were in or the

7

period of time that we were in.

8

I would say, initially, we worked periodically with officials from the various

9

embassies that had a presence in Afghanistan. Because they were clearly interested in

10

Afghanistan matters, they would often seek briefings about our general impression of

11

how things were going in Afghanistan in various respects.

12

And then, as we entered into the evacuation phase -- well, even before that, as I

13

mentioned -- we worked with a number of other nations in addition to those when we

14

were exploring the possibility of using our facilities in those countries. We had, I would

15

say, a deeper level of coordination and cooperation, certainly with our closest allies, the

16

U.K. being the chief among those, and we would have frequent conversations with them

17

covering various aspects of our efforts in Afghanistan.

18

And then, as the evacuation hit, they were very specific targeted conversations

19

with embassies. Most of those conversations, though, took place overseas in terms of

20

making the arrangements or reaching out to officials overseas from Washington in terms

21

of making arrangements for use of our facilities as what we called lily pads or waypoints

22

to bring people out.

23

And then that continued after the fact, after August. We had extensive liaison

24

with a number of countries, all of whom were interested in what approach we were going

25

to be taking toward Afghanistan policy and making sure that to the extent possible we

1 were coordinating in that fashion in important respects.

2 Q Do you recall which country you engaged with, with respect to the
3 evacuation period?

4 A During the evacuation period or prior?

5 Q Correct. To ensure -- you noted previously -- and, again, if I'm not framing
6 this correctly, please feel free to correct me -- but in terms of other countries in the
7 region that you were coordinating with and in discussions with, given the sort of the
8 situation in country in ensuring that others were able to get out. But there were a
9 number of countries that you were engaging with in the planning stage. Do you recall
10 which countries those were?

11 A Yeah. So certainly they included the countries where we had bases that we
12 might want to use for various purposes. That included Italy, Spain, Germany, certainly
13 Qatar, the UAE, Pakistan, some of the -- in some respects, a few of the Central Asian
14 countries, such as Kazakhstan.

15 And then, in a broader sense, they had also included the countries that had a
16 diplomatic presence in Kabul that we worked very closely with. That included some of
17 the Nordic countries, certainly our close allies there, the U.K. and so forth, many of whom
18 we signed formal agreements with in terms of evacuation assistance.

19 Q And who are the key Afghan officials the Department worked with, with
20 respect to the withdrawal?

21 A That's an interesting question in the sense that, given that a withdrawal is a
22 crisis situation and we were not inclined to have conversations with senior Afghan leaders
23 where we were projecting that would be necessary, I don't know to what extent we had
24 specific conversations with them regarding a withdrawal.

25 [REDACTED]. And we include the military withdrawal, not just an evacuation,

1 when we say withdrawal, to clarify.

2 Mr. Evans. So, I mean, when the withdrawal itself took place we were dealing
3 with the Taliban. We were no longer dealing with the Afghan Government that had
4 existed previously.

5 And so there was communication with the Taliban officials, both in Kabul and also
6 to our channels in Qatar, regarding various aspects of coordination, things that we had to
7 insist upon for the ongoing security of the airport, for example.

8 So there were those conversations that took place because of the nature of the
9 crisis and the necessity to have those conversations.

10 [REDACTED]. Thank you, Mr. Evans. And I think we are talking a bit over the
11 minority and make sure to add additional time. But I wanted to offer at this point if we
12 wanted to take a quick break and go off the record. I'm happy to do so. If not, I'll be
13 happy to proceed. I defer to the minority.

14 Mr. Evans. I would appreciate a short break.

15 [REDACTED] Great. The minority as well. Thanks.

16 [Recess.]

17 EXAMINATION

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q Hi, Mr. Evans. My name is [REDACTED]. I will be asking some questions
20 of you, along with [REDACTED] from the minority.

21 As an initial matter, we wanted to table set on some terminology just to ensure
22 precision and that we're all talking about the same thing.

23 So could you describe for us your understanding of the term "withdrawal" as
24 related to Afghanistan?

25 A Sure. I mean, in general terms, withdrawal to me means that you are

1 departing the country, you would no longer have a presence diplomatically or otherwise.
2 Generally speaking, that's what my understanding is.

3 Q Would you agree that the withdrawal was initiated in the February 2020
4 Doha deal, involved partial troop drawdowns prior to 2021, and was completed by August
5 31st, 2021?

6 A Yes. In terms of the military withdrawal, yes, I would agree with that.

7 Q Okay. And can you describe for the record your understanding of the
8 evacuation?

9 A Sure. My understanding of the evacuation is that when the Taliban
10 entered Kabul on August 15th, it became necessary to get people out as quickly as we
11 could. That involved a noncombatant evacuation operation that was performed by the
12 military in coordination with the State Department, which continued to have a presence
13 on the ground over those 2 weeks at the airport in Kabul.

14 It initiated with an evacuation of our diplomatic facilities, along with our partners.
15 It quickly grew into a much broader effort to help Afghans that we felt we had a duty and
16 an obligation to assist in leaving Afghanistan to get out of the country.

17 And we mounted a very significant effort, in coordination with partner countries,
18 with the military, to do exactly that. And over the course of 2 weeks we, all told, helped
19 evacuate about 124,000 people.

20 Q Thank you.

21 As such, would you agree that the evacuation encompassed a civilian-wide
22 Operation Allies Refuge that began in July 2021 and a subsequent military NEO that
23 occurred from August 16th to 31st, 2021?

24 A Yes, I would agree with that.

25 Q Would you agree that, while interrelated, it's important to define the

1 withdrawal and the evacuation a bit differently?

2 A Yes, I would agree with that as well.

3 Q Okay.

4 So we're going to go ahead and proceed with our questions provided this
5 understanding of the withdrawal and the evacuation.

6 A Okay.

7 Q And I also want to off the top say we may be going back to some questioning
8 that the majority had offered previously. But our purpose in reiterating is to hopefully
9 ask about some additional contours as well as focus on timelines and dates specifically.
10 So please bear with us.

11 A Okay.

12 Q We also wanted to ask a little bit more about the State Department
13 Operations Center.

14 What is the Ops Center?

15 A The Operations Center is the State Department's 24-hour-a-day center
16 focused on a number of things. Coordination of the information flow as information
17 comes in from overseas through cables and other matters and other avenues. It is the
18 facilitator of communication between senior officials both in Washington and overseas,
19 including our embassies overseas. And then it tracks developments on a 24-hour basis
20 in order to ensure that as things happen that need to be shared with senior-level officials
21 within the Department, that that information flow is uninterrupted and facilitated.

22 And then, the other aspect of the Operations Center is the crisis management side
23 of the Ops Center, known as Crisis Management Support. CMS, as we call it, is the part
24 of the Operations Center that, when necessary, stands up and supports the operations of
25 task forces to respond to ongoing crises that occur overseas.

1 Q Thank you.

2 I want to focus a little bit on the crisis management piece.

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

4 A Yes. In fact, I spent a year working in the crisis management support unit.

5 Q Could you describe for us a bit about what your job responsibilities were in
6 that role?

7 A Yes. I was one of the support officers within CMS. I was specifically
8 tasked with the East Asian Affairs Bureau's area of responsibility. So all of the countries
9 in East Asia, in the Pacific, Micronesia on down, Southeast Asia, et cetera.

10 My responsibilities included tracking developments in that part of the world
11 where crises might be developing in some fashion. It included working with the various
12 regional bureaus when that was the case.

13 Specifically, at that time, and this was in 2003 to 2004 that I was in that role, there
14 was a lot of discussion, given what was going on on the Korean Peninsula about possible
15 evacuation requirements if something were to happen in the Korean Peninsula.

16 And so I spent a lot of time ensuring that the right kind of communication was
17 taking place between the State Department, the Department of Defense, our embassies
18 in both Korea and in Japan in order to ensure that we were considering all aspects of that
19 type of an evacuation operation should it become necessary.

20 And then, finally, the ongoing responsibility of every person within CMS is when a
21 task force needs to be formed, and it's essentially all hands on deck, ensuring that they
22 have everything that they need to operate successfully.

23 Q Did you ever develop crisis management guidance for the Department?

24 A I would characterize it as contributing to the development of crisis
25 management guidance. I was not the author or the policy decisionmaker, but I certainly

1 supported that process.

2 Q So you used the word "contributed." Can you define for us what that
3 meant?

4 A Sure. It goes back to some things that I've talked about previously, which
5 was ensuring that the necessary information was being provided to make decisions in an
6 appropriate fashion, in a measured way. It included ensuring that all parties to any
7 eventual operation were part of that discussion so that we were getting input from all of
8 the various places.

9 So it was largely a coordination role, and then a role of compiling that information
10 and presenting it to people who need it.

11 Q Okay. So when you talk about presenting, did you ever train any
12 employees on crisis management?

13 A So the year prior to working in the Operations Center, I actually worked in
14 our Crisis Management Training Division at the Foreign Service Institute. And in that
15 role, I did become a trainer.

16 I made several overseas trips to various embassies and missions overseas. I both
17 authored and then I ran crisis management exercises, as we call them, where we visit an
18 embassy or a mission overseas, we present various crisis scenarios, sort of a tabletop
19 exercise type of thing, and then help them work through that exercise so that they are as
20 fully prepared as possible should some type of crisis happen that required a reaction.

21 Q Using ballpark numbers, do you have an idea of how many trainings that
22 you've led related to crisis management?

23 A Let me think. Somewhere in the range of 16 to 20.

24 Q Okay. And about how many individuals would those efforts have included
25 in total?

1 A Oh, that's hard to say. The sizes of missions vary widely, and the scope of
2 the training that we presented would vary widely accordingly. It ranged from missions
3 such as I ran an exercise once in Samoa where we had, for example, just one officer, an
4 American officer present, plus about 20 local staff.

5 And then, on the flip side, I was involved in exercises in places like Damascus and
6 Sanaa where we presented over the course of a couple, 3 days trainings to -- training
7 sessions to dozens of individuals on staff at those facilities, both so that they were
8 personally prepared, and also so that we could work through broader issues for embassy
9 leadership and mission leadership.

10 Q Is it fair to say that these trainings were extensive in terms of their reach and
11 depth as related to country-specific issues?

12 A Yes, absolutely fair to say that.

13 Q And did you develop crisis management plans for specific embassies?

14 A I have been involved in the development of crisis management plans.
15 Currently, as the deputy chief of mission in Stockholm, I'm involved in that. There's an
16 annual review process where we go through the emergency action plan, make sure that
17 it's fully updated in every necessary way, that what we call decision points are
18 appropriate.

19 Those are the things that we identify as possible markers of oncoming crises and
20 that would then require a response. The idea being that it's too easy to get caught up in
21 the moment if you don't take a deliberative approach. You need to constantly be
22 assessing where you are as things develop so you don't get caught by surprise at the last
23 moment and put yourself in a bad situation.

24 So, yes, I have been involved in that and currently am involved in that.

25 Q Do you think your experience related to crisis management and CMS

1 specifically informed your role related to the withdrawal and evacuation?

2 A Yes, absolutely.

3 Q How so?

4 A It really familiarized me through all of those experiences with the types of
5 questions that needed to be asked and answered and who would play what role in
6 various scenarios in terms of responding to a crisis.

7 Knowing that up front helped me to identify individuals within the Department
8 that needed to be involved in various discussions and planning sessions.

9 If nothing else, it certainly helped familiarize me with what the resources were in a
10 broader sense within the military, who would be involved in a NEO type of situation, for
11 example. Yeah, really all aspects.

12 And then also, how did the Department itself, the Department of State, both went
13 through a planning process and then an eventual execution phase in the event of a crisis
14 and what that looked like.

15 Q Okay. And related to that, would you -- is it a fair assessment to say that
16 you're an expert related to crisis management?

17 A I have a great depth of experience. I'm not sure I would assign myself that
18 title. But yes.

19 Q Okay. And do you think that this great depth of experience related to crisis
20 management was perhaps one of the factors your superiors considered when you
21 stepped into the role as Acting DAS?

22 A Potentially, yes. I do believe that it was also part of the reason that I was
23 asked to become the director for Afghanistan. I had done two tours in Baghdad
24 previously.

25 The first tour was at the time in 2011 to '12 when we first withdrew our troops

1 from Iraq. And so I had seen that process firsthand and been involved with it to some
2 extent.

3 And then, after that, I was the deputy director on the Iraq desk at the time that
4 ISIS entered Iraq and was very deeply involved in responding to that particular crisis from
5 that position.

6 And so I had some extensive experience that I think that they believed was
7 relevant given possible scenarios moving forward in Afghanistan.

8 Q So therefore by extension you felt qualified to take on the role as Acting DAS
9 and to help participate in plans related to the withdrawal and eventual evacuation?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Great.

12 I want to talk a little bit further about your time as Acting DAS. I know that we
13 helpfully walked through your kind of day-to-day and main responsibilities. But I
14 wanted to ask in particular what responsibility took the bulk of your time when you were
15 in that role.

16 A I would say my primary responsibility was ensuring the coordination
17 between various parts of the Department and the interagency, that the needed
18 information flow was taking place, that senior officials were apprised of developments, of
19 requirements, briefing them, having conversations with them as required, and then a very
20 extensive liaison role primarily at that time with the Department of Defense, both Joint
21 Staff and OSD within DOD through Becky Zimmerman, who I mentioned earlier.

22 Q Okay. And again to clarify for the record, you were Acting DAS from the
23 start of the Biden administration through October of 2021. Is that correct?

24 A That's correct. I moved back formally to the office director role when Tom
25 West was named as the special representative for Afghanistan and also took on the role

1 of DAS for Afghanistan at the same time.

2 Q Okay. And what group of responsibilities took the second-largest portion
3 your time as Acting DAS?

4 A I would say direct involvement in lower-level meetings. I mean, we had the
5 steady drumbeat of very senior meetings, usually at the deputies level. But there was
6 also a concurrent very steady drumbeat of meetings that were taking place at a lower
7 level where it was most appropriate for me to be the person in the chair for the State
8 Department.

9 Those were meetings that were focused really on the more practical aspects at
10 that time of various efforts, whether it was working through issues that had come up
11 within those deputies-level meetings that required greater coordination at a working
12 level, or it was working through challenges, for example, that we were facing in
13 accelerating the processing of special immigrant visas. That took a lot of our time.

14 And then a lot of extensive discussions about questions that did have relevance to
15 an eventual evacuation. And I would say in that sense it was primarily focused on the
16 process of defining who we had a responsibility to help.

17 And that proved to be a very challenging question because you could define it
18 incredibly broadly, to the point where you're talking about over half of the population of
19 Afghanistan -- obviously, that's not practical -- or could you define it in a much narrower
20 fashion, which we ended up doing.

21 But then, even once you define who we are going to provide assistance to, then
22 you need to figure out what that assistance would look like.

23 So, broadly speaking, we defined those that we had an absolute duty to support as
24 those who would be eligible for special immigrant visas because of their past close work
25 with the U.S. Government in Afghanistan and the U.S. military.

1 And then, more broadly, we defined it as individuals who had various kinds of
2 association with us that did not meet the SIV requirements as written into law, but that
3 still had some sort of past association with us where we felt they would be qualified
4 through a referral system to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

5 Q Okay. Thank you.

6 During this assignment, did you ever physically travel to Afghanistan?

7 A No. I was scheduled to do so on a couple of occasions, but the pandemic
8 interfered in both cases.

9 Q Fair enough.

10 [REDACTED] did you have something?

11 BY [REDACTED]

12 Q Thanks.

13 I did just have a few quick follow-up questions on your testimony just now.

14 You said earlier, when describing your experience with crisis management, you
15 stressed the, quote, need to take a deliberative approach and not get caught by surprise.

16 Can you say a little bit more about this belief and what you meant?

17 A Sure. Through extensive experiences over really decades now, we've
18 learned within the State Department that it's necessary to be very deliberative in
19 planning for any type of crisis that might occur.

20 Obviously, you can't ever anticipate everything, but I think you can, and this is the
21 objective, you can identify certain events or things that both are indicative of an
22 impending crisis or could contribute to what type of crisis occurs and the magnitude of
23 that crisis.

24 And so that's, when I say deliberative, that's what I'm referencing. I'm
25 referencing that process of identifying what we call decision points, actually putting those

1 on paper.

2 And then, depending on what happens in a particular location, you are -- we have
3 actually a requirement within the State Department to sit down within what we call our
4 Emergency Action Committee at a post or an embassy and in every case when you hold
5 one of those meetings go through the decision points in a formal way to help you really
6 objectively assess what's happening in a place, what are the concerns, and where things
7 might be heading and what you need to do accordingly.

8 We just went through that process this past week in Stockholm because Sweden
9 raised its threat level from a three to a four on a five-point scale.

10 And so we held an Emergency Action Committee meeting. We went through
11 those decision points and discussed where we were and if we needed to, for example,
12 change our security procedures, our posture in terms of staffing, either overall or on a
13 day-to-day basis, et cetera.

14 So that's what I mean by deliberative.

15 Q Thank you.

16 And did this belief in the need for a deliberative process in identifying decision
17 points inform your work on Afghanistan?

18 A Yes, absolutely, it did. We had copies of Kabul's emergency action plan
19 certainly that we referenced frequently both from Washington and then also in
20 communication with embassy leadership. The embassy leadership frequently would
21 hold Emergency Action Committee meetings. In a place like Kabul that happened really
22 almost on a weekly basis at times. And those predetermined decision points would be
23 topics of discussion and the basis for decisions.

24 Q And did that effort to undertake a deliberative process and identify in
25 advance key decision points, did that inform the contingency planning that you testified

1 to earlier, I believe, around maintaining an embassy, a possible State Department-led
2 evacuation, and an in extremis DOD-led NEO?

3 A Yes, it did. We did frequent assessments about, for example, in connection
4 with that, embassy staffing levels, what was appropriate.

5 And that included planning for various scenarios based on those decision points
6 and possible developments in country in terms of potentially drawing down, for example,
7 staffing or moving our staffing that was still in place to a more secure location.

8 And so, yes, there were ongoing discussions about that.

9 Q Okay. And I think my colleague [REDACTED] will get into the details of that
10 planning a little bit more. But just to close my follow-up here.

11 Do you believe that the deliberative approach that you've just described helped
12 you and the Department manage surprises that may have emerged?

13 A Yes, I do. No question about that. All of those discussions identified
14 questions that needed to be answered, resources that needed to be put in place that
15 were then put in place for eventual use. So, yes, it informed that in a number of ways.

16 Q Okay. Thank you.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q Great. Thanks, [REDACTED]

19 Turning back to the job responsibilities. Just quickly, if you could talk about your
20 time as the director on the desk. What took your bulk of time?

21 A As director, the bulk of my time was to ensure that the desk personnel were
22 fully supporting our various effort streams with respect to Afghanistan and that, as that
23 happened, that senior officials within the Department, both within the bureau and more
24 senior, were informed of things as they needed to be. So it was really an overall
25 coordination and leadership role.

1 Q Okay. And this position would have bookended your time as Acting DAS.
2 So you were on the desk before and after that role. Is that correct?

3 A That's correct. I both started and ended my time on the Afghanistan desk
4 as the director.

5 Q And during this assignment did you travel to Afghanistan?

6 A No.

7 Q We also want to talk about you had mentioned an Afghanistan task force in
8 your prior testimony. How did you become aware of the task force and its operations?

9 A Well, the task force was stood up almost immediately after it became
10 apparent that the Taliban was taking over Kabul.

11 Q And when would that have been?

12 A That would have been August 15th.

13 Q Okay. And can you briefly describe your understanding of what the task
14 force's objectives were?

15 A Really the primary and almost entire focus of the task force was to support
16 efforts to get people out of Afghanistan. That shifted in focus only in the sense that we
17 had our immediate priority set, which was to ensure the evacuation of our personnel, of
18 American citizens, first and foremost.

19 And then, as things ramped up and those people had been taken out of
20 Afghanistan, the focus shifted to Afghans who were assisted in leaving Afghanistan.

21 And so the task force's role in that regard was multifold. It was ensuring State
22 Department internal coordination in terms of outreach to other countries as necessary, in
23 terms of really doing an incredible job of pulling people from various missions overseas
24 and sending them on very short notice to places that we had our lily pads and ensuring,
25 well, our waypoints -- that's what we called them, our lily pad operations -- and then

1 making sure that there was full coordination and communication, that we had a structure
2 in place at each of those locations.

3 It entailed working directly with those who were still in Kabul at the airport to
4 make sure that they were being provided whatever they needed. They were really the
5 ones who were running the show because they were there in place.

6 And so in that sense the task force's role was to make sure that they were
7 receiving everything they needed. If there was high level of communication required,
8 for example, between the State Department and DOD, in that respect, that needed to
9 take place in Washington through those channels, the task force would be involved in
10 that.

11 And then keeping Department leadership informed of what was going on on a
12 daily basis, really on an hourly basis in some cases, because that was the primary focus of
13 Department leadership over those 2 weeks.

14 Q Okay. So you have identified that the first priority was to get USG
15 personnel and then also citizens out, and then there was a shift in priority as related to
16 at-risk Afghans. Do you recall the date in which that shift occurred approximately?

17 A I couldn't assign a date to it because it was a gradual shift in the sense
18 that -- I mean, up until the very last day it remained a priority to get American citizens
19 out.

20 One of the challenges the State Department always faces in this type of a situation
21 is that we as a country do not have a requirement that American citizens living overseas
22 identify themselves to embassies.

23 And so when we approach these types of planning requirements, it's always our
24 best estimate in terms of what the total number of people in country that would fit within
25 various criteria happens to be.

1 We have something that is called an F-77 report, which the Bureau of Consular
2 Affairs puts together. They have to update that at least annually in every mission
3 overseas.

4 Where that estimate is put on paper, that was a topic of constant discussion
5 between the State Department and the Department of Defense in terms of their
6 planning, for example, because they were trying to, to the extent possible, get hold of
7 real numbers where, unfortunately, they were impossible to get because, again, we just
8 don't know in many cases. And we found in Afghanistan, just as we have found in other
9 crises in other places in the world, there are always more American citizens than one
10 might expect, and you never know where they're going to come from.

11 And so it's a real challenge. So there was no date certain -- to get back to your
12 original question -- where we could say, okay, we're done with that, now we can move on
13 to the second part. It was a shift in emphasis rather than moving from one to another.

14 Q And I believe you prior testified that you were not a formal member of the
15 task force. Is that correct?

16 A That's right.

17 Q Did you have interactions with the task force?

18 A Yes, daily during those 2 weeks.

19 Q Okay. And can you describe for us in broad strokes what those interactions
20 entailed?

21 A I would have frequent conversations or be in meetings with various leaders
22 within the task force, including Dean Thompson, who ran the task force over those 2
23 weeks as the director of it; to others. He obviously couldn't work 24 hours a day,
24 though he came close to it. And so there were others who would step in in that role
25 that I would work with.

1 There were also, as things developed, people in specific roles and responsibility.
2 For example, one person who had overall responsibility for lily pad operations from a task
3 force perspective, another person who had primary responsibility in terms of
4 communication with our officials still on the ground at the airport. And so I would meet
5 with them as well on an as-needed basis. But it was really daily.

6 Q Was the task force based in D.C.?

7 A Yes, it was based in the Operations Center at the State Department.

8 Q And do you recall how many members were on the task force?

9 A You know, I honestly don't know. Dozens. And it was a rotating staff
10 because people would do shifts.

11 Q Do you know how members of the task force were selected?

12 A Yes. There were people on the task force who had the responsibility of
13 maintaining task force staffing. And that would happen largely on an ongoing volunteer
14 basis. You'd have spreadsheets where you have roles that need to be filled on a shift
15 basis, and people throughout the Department would step forward to fill those roles.

16 That was sort of the daily shift staffing. But then, as I mentioned, you also had
17 people who were designated in more senior leadership roles that maintained those
18 positions over those 2 weeks.

19 [REDACTED]. To follow up, did the task force operate on a 24/7 basis?

20 Mr. Evans. Yes.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q And you had mentioned that Dean Thompson led the task force. Is that
23 correct?

24 A That's right.

25 Q Do you have any understanding as to his background in Afghanistan policy?

1 A Not specifically beyond knowing that he had been the senior bureau official
2 within the South Central Asian Affairs Bureau the entire time that I had been in the role
3 on the Afghanistan desk. And so he worked on various aspects of Afghanistan policy
4 from that position really on a daily basis.

5 Q And are you aware of whether or not he had experience related to crisis
6 management?

7 A No, I don't know his resume to that extent.

8 Q Did you trust him as a leader of the Afghanistan task force?

9 A Absolutely.

10 Q Can you identify for the record why?

11 A I have the utmost respect for Dean Thompson as an individual and as an
12 officer. He is incredibly skilled in all aspects of those roles as a leader within the
13 Department. He proved within the South Central Asian Affairs Bureau to be an
14 exceptional leader, knowledgeable, very savvy, a great strategist and leader and
15 decisionmaker. Yeah, I think very highly of him.

16 Q Fair enough.

17 And what's your impression regarding the overall effectiveness of the task force
18 during the evacuation?

19 A I think it was highly effective. And I think that the proof of that is just how
20 many people they facilitated the exit from Afghanistan for.

21 Q Okay. We've also done a number of these transcribed interviews, and
22 through the duration of them we've heard different testimony related to additional task
23 force involvement or participation.

24 Are you aware of additional work streams or task forces related to the evacuation
25 itself?

1 A No, I am not. I mean, there were various parts of that task force that I
2 guess might be confused with something like that. For example, you had a Consular
3 Affairs portion of the task force that was specifically charged with issues having to do with
4 assisting U.S. citizens.

5 So I'm not aware of what one would call an additional task force.

6 [REDACTED]. Do you recall the other sub task forces, for lack of a better term?

7 [REDACTED]. Or work streams.

8 [REDACTED]. Or work streams that may have existed --

9 Mr. Evans. Yeah.

10 [REDACTED] -- like the Consular Affairs work stream that you just identified?

11 Mr. Evans. Sure. I mean, the work streams, I think that's a better term for it.

12 When you have a crisis like that overseas, the one exception, which I identified as
13 the consular portion of the task force, always -- almost always exists, because no matter
14 what the type of crisis overseas that requires a task force, there are concerned U.S.
15 citizens seeking information, there are U.S. citizens in that place overseas that require
16 support to facilitate travel and so forth. And so that always exists.

17 But then, within the Afghanistan task force, you had various streams of effort.
18 I've already mentioned some of them. You had a portion that was focused on the initial
19 evacuation efforts in Kabul at the airport. You had the portion that was focused on all of
20 our various lily pad operations in place at U.S. military bases in various countries where
21 people would be brought to initially. They would be processed in the sense of
22 determining who they were, what their situation was, and what was most appropriate for
23 them as a next step.

24 And then you had the portion that supported both State Department and
25 interagency efforts in terms of bringing those who could immediately come to the United

1 States to the U.S., making sure that they got the appropriate support when they landed
2 and so on.

3 So, speaking broadly, those were the work streams, I would say. And then there
4 were various aspects that were a part of those various work streams interacting and
5 interfacing with leaders in different countries as necessary. Often those were things
6 that were then tasked out further to other parts of the Department that could handle
7 them. Some of those fell to the Afghanistan desk.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q All right. Thank you.

10 We'd like to pivot to planning efforts related to the withdrawal specifically.

11 What did you understand to be the terms of war criteria for a U.S. troop
12 withdrawal from Afghanistan?

13 A So really the topic of a U.S. troop withdrawal of Afghanistan was one of
14 serious consideration at the time that the U.S. signed an agreement with the Taliban.

15 That essentially put in writing that in exchange for the Taliban meeting certain
16 requirements, both in terms of not attacking U.S. or allied forces, taking certain steps
17 within the counterterrorism realm, and other things, in return that there would be a
18 withdrawal of U.S. forces.

19 And it went so far as to give a particular date. That date was not met for a
20 number of reasons, primarily because there were certain things that we did not believe
21 that the Taliban had done in terms of meeting its commitments.

22 But during the time in the latter part of the Trump administration from the time
23 that the agreement was signed until the change in the administration, there were various
24 decisions by the White House to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

25 So that process of lowering the troop level had already begun at the time that I

1 entered the role of director for Afghanistan in October of 2020.

2 And then, with the advent of the Biden administration, as I mentioned earlier, a
3 deliberative process took place through various interagency meetings and discussions
4 that led to the eventual decision by the President to withdraw troops. And he set a date
5 for that, which then kicked off in earnest, as I mentioned, various other planning
6 processes.

7 And that also included, frankly, once that decision was made, communication with
8 the Taliban to explain why we were not meeting the original timeline for troop
9 withdrawal, that it would take place many months after that date that we had originally
10 committed to.

11 I would personally assess that they begrudgingly accepted that because one of
12 their clear objectives was for the U.S. troops to depart. And I think at that point they
13 likely made a judgment call that they weren't going to upset the process in any way and
14 wait for that to occur.

15 Q Okay. So just for ease of reference, you had identified an agreement
16 between USG and the Taliban. Is my understanding correct that that refers to the
17 February 2020 Doha deal?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Okay. Great. So I'm going to go ahead and use that terminology moving
20 forward.

21 A Okay.

22 Q Is my understanding also correct that it's your testimony the Taliban was not
23 complying with the terms of the Doha deal, which facilitated a need to not fully withdraw
24 at that time?

25 A That is my assessment, yes.

1 Q Okay. In your view, how did the Trump administration's decisions related
2 to the Doha deal, including in substance that it was negotiated without the then Afghan
3 Government, impact planning for the withdrawal?

4 A It is my view that once the Doha agreement was in place and a timeline had
5 been therefore put in place for an eventual withdrawal, that the requirements that we
6 put in place as stated on the Taliban in order to proceed with that withdrawal did
7 not -- were not fulfilled in full, and, in fact, never have been fulfilled in full. But even
8 with that, there were a number of decisions that decreased our presence in Afghanistan
9 militarily.

10 And, again, it's my belief that, because of that process, the Taliban reached a
11 conclusion that in some ways it did not have to fulfill all of the agreements that they
12 entered into within that agreement or the requirements that they agreed they would
13 fulfill, that it was their assessment that over time we would eventually leave regardless.

14 And so that created a very difficult dynamic, including in our efforts to bring about
15 a political reconciliation in Doha between the Taliban and the existing government in
16 Afghanistan. And I think the evidence of that is the ways in which the Taliban leadership
17 delayed that process, made that process very difficult over time in terms of even agreeing
18 to the terms of reference for those discussions, for example.

19 And they also chose to use leverage as they saw it to push for certain things, such
20 as prisoner releases and so on, that they assessed that they could get in order to reach
21 certain objectives without fulfilling the commitments that they had entered into.

22 And so that framed, in my view, again, the situation that existed at the time that
23 the Biden administration came in, and it was certainly a major -- those were the factors
24 that were in play as we were having discussions on an interagency level in terms of
25 looking at the various aspects of what a withdrawal might mean, whether or not troops

1 should leave, what might happen if they didn't leave.

2 All of those questions, the answers to those questions, were affected accordingly
3 and impacted.

4 And so that was the situation at the time, and I believe the decisions were made
5 based on that reality.

1 [10:09 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]

3 Q So, just to be crystal clear on the essence of your testimony here, is it your
4 testimony that then-President Trump directed partial troop drawdowns that were
5 unconnected to any fulfillment by the Taliban of the terms of the Doha deal?

6 A That is my personal belief.

7 Q And is it your testimony today that those partial troop drawdowns
8 throughout 2020 and early 2021, prior to the change of the administration, negatively
9 impact -- negatively impacted prospects for a peace deal in Afghanistan?

10 A Yes, I believe so.

11 Q And is it your testimony that these factors, as you described them, were
12 impediments, were challenges for the new administration to take up in early 2021?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Thanks.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q And, to build a little bit upon that, you've been testifying about a change in
17 inertia upon the onset of the Biden administration.

18 So, to kind of back up a little bit, it would be helpful if you could identify for us
19 whether planning efforts related to the withdrawal had already begun by the time you
20 arrived on the Afghanistan desk in October 2020.

21 A Planning efforts in connection with the military withdrawal?

22 Q That is correct.

23 A Yes, there had been discussions about -- even when I arrived, from a State
24 Department perspective, about what that might require moving forward.

25 Q Were those plans and preparations increased and nuanced in a significant

1 manner upon the change of administration?

2 A Yes.

3 Q Did you receive any transition papers upon your arrival at the Afghanistan
4 desk related to the withdrawal or preparations for it?

5 A No.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q Were you asked to prepare, as part of the transition of administrations, any
8 documents related to the ongoing withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan?

9 A Yes, we were tasked with preparing papers like that at the change of
10 administration.

11 Q Do you know if those papers were received by the incoming administration?

12 A Yes, they were.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q And was it your sense that the Trump administration was intent on
15 withdrawing U.S. troops from the country regardless of the degree to which the Doha
16 deal terms were being implemented?

17 A I don't feel qualified to make that assessment. I don't know.

18 Q Understandable. At the conclusion of the Doha deal, did you believe that
19 such withdrawal could be directed by then-President Trump unexpectedly quickly,
20 regardless of the deal's implementation?

21 A Yes, that was our assessment and -- because, as the Commander in Chief, he
22 had that authority.

23 Q And what really informed that sense?

24 A Just the pattern of reductions that had taken place previously.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Just a quick followup on your earlier testimony that there had been some
2 planning within the State Department related to a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan
3 when you began in October 2020. Did that planning include contingency plans for the
4 maintenance of a U.S. Embassy?

5 A Not in a formal sense. And, when I say that planning or discussions had
6 taken place, those were internal discussions to the State Department. They were not an
7 interagency-based discussion.

8 Q Thank you. That's helpful.

9 A So, yeah, we were looking at issues that just we felt we needed to plan for in
10 anticipation of the various eventualities.

11 Q Okay. That's helpful clarification.

12 And did that planning that you had observed prior to the change in administration
13 involve contingency plans for a State Department-led evacuation?

14 A A full evacuation? No.

15 Q And did it include contingency plans for State Department's role in
16 supporting a possible noncombatant evacuation operation?

17 A No, it did not at that time.

18 Q Would you characterize the planning as you had observed it prior to the
19 change of administration as detailed?

20 A No.

21 Q Would you describe it as directed at a high level or undertaken internally by
22 the State Department as part of your efforts to ensure a deliberative process?

23 A I would characterize it as the latter.

24 Q Thank you.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Can you just -- when you say you characterize it by the latter, can you
2 describe why that's the case, what informs your opinion?

3 A Because, at the time, we were not receiving any sort of interagency-based
4 directions to plan in that regard. And so, based on that, our discussions, as I mentioned,
5 were internal to the State Department, internal to the various offices within the State
6 Department that might be involved in that sort of a response, but there was no formal
7 tasked process as there was in the months after the Biden administration came into place
8 to actually do that in a coordinated fashion across the interagency.

9 [REDACTED]: Okay, great. I don't have any further questions. [REDACTED] do you?

10 [REDACTED] No. I think we can give you 2 minutes of your time back.

11 [REDACTED] Thank you.

12 [Recess.]

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Mr. Evans, I wanted to sort of start the discussion with reading things from
15 your prior testimony, and please feel free to correct me if you have a different
16 understanding.

17 But, based on your prior testimony, throughout the course of the military
18 withdrawal, the Department was pursuing or sort of assessing two different paths, one
19 being the continued diplomatic presence, which would go primarily through Acting Under
20 Secretary for Management Carol Perez, and the other being a potential evacuation and
21 the planning that ensued. Is that correct?

22 A Yes, that is correct. Broadly speaking, yes.

23 Q For that reason, I just wanted to sort of reiterate for our collective
24 understanding in terms of defined terms that, when we speak of the term "withdrawal,"
25 we're doing so to reflect both of these different paths, so not just the evacuation but also

1 the fact that, in addition to the evacuation we were also assessing or the Department was
2 also assessing the potential for continued diplomatic presence.

3 So, as we speak about the withdrawal, I just want to make sure we keep that in
4 mind, that we're not just speaking about the August evacuation, which came at a later
5 point in time but also the potential for a continued diplomatic presence.

6 [REDACTED]. And the overall process of planning for the military's departure and
7 all those streams.

8 BY [REDACTED]

9 Q Does that make sense?

10 A Yeah, it makes sense.

11 Q Our focus is primarily on the --

12 A I think --

13 Q I apologize. Continue.

14 A Could I ask a question in terms of definitions then because, I mean, there are
15 various ways you can use the term "withdrawal" and in various aspects. There's
16 certainly the military withdrawal.

17 In my mind, from a State Department perspective, there was also a diplomatic
18 withdrawal. So, in that -- I guess in that sense, the reason I'm asking the question is
19 because a continued diplomatic presence was -- the planning for that was to avoid that
20 diplomatic withdrawal.

21 But yes, to that extent, we can agree that -- that it's -- it encompasses more than
22 just the events of August.

23 Q Correct. Exactly. We differentiate between the diplomatic withdrawal,
24 given that that followed at a different point in time. Our focus is really sort of -- when
25 we use the term "withdrawal," we mean more broadly the military withdrawal, which

1 necessarily captures both the potential for a diplomatic withdrawal or the potential for a
2 continued diplomatic presence. So we just wanted to clarify that point.

3 A Okay.

4 Q Thank you. So, going back to a prior discussion point, we want to address
5 the question of -- readdress the question of sort of the Afghan officials the Department
6 was engaging in now sort of defining what we interpret to be the -- you know, the
7 withdrawal.

8 Who -- were there any officials throughout that process the Department was
9 engaging with?

10 A Yes. Thinking about that withdrawal as we've now discussed it in a broader
11 sense, certainly Afghan leadership, President Ghani, his advisers, in addition to Afghan
12 military leadership.

13 Q And when did the communications with the Afghan Government sort of go
14 on by or stop, if at all?

15 A They stopped when President Ghani left the country.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q And who were the key officials who were your main points of contact?

18 A So, from a -- from the Washington perspective, we did not have daily
19 interactions or even frequent interactions with those officials. That interaction took
20 place in Washington -- I'm sorry, not in Washington; in Kabul, through senior leadership
21 at the embassy primarily.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q So, just so I'm understanding correctly, as Under Secretary -- Acting Under
24 Secretary for Management Carol Perez was assessing sort of the continued diplomatic
25 presence, she did not maintain direct contact with the Afghan Government?

1 A No. That's not her role. Her role was to work on the planning within the
2 Department and the interagency. Interaction with foreign officials in Afghanistan took
3 place through leadership at our Embassy.

4 Q And SCA at no point engaged during that period with the Afghan
5 Government either, correct?

6 A We did so through their Embassy in Washington.

7 Q Did you or others in SCA ever engage directly with the Taliban?

8 A I never engaged directly with the Taliban nor did individuals in SCA, but
9 certainly the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation and his team did so,
10 yes.

11 Q Did anyone else within the Department engage with the Taliban?

12 A Not to my knowledge.

13 Q Did SCA support the Special Representative in its engagement with the
14 Taliban?

15 A Loosely support, yes. Directly, no. There were -- the Special
16 Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Khalilzad, had a great deal of
17 what I would call freedom of movement and decisionmaking authority. And so the
18 coordination took place at very senior levels.

19 He had a direct line to senior leadership within the Department. At the lowest
20 possible level in terms of that communication, I would include Dean Thompson as the
21 senior bureau official within SCA. He would have been within those loops. But nothing
22 below that.

23 Q Can you speak a bit about sort of the indirect engagement or the indirect
24 support that was provided?

25 A Really, it was ensuring that the efforts of the Special Representative were

1 fully coordinated with our representation through the Embassy in Kabul, and so that
2 there was full information flow as things developed, as questions arose, as steps needed
3 to be taken of various kinds. And so that was the primary role that we had in that.

4 Q Thank you. And you had previously mentioned sort of this Emergency
5 Action Committee. Did you or others in SCA participate in those meetings with the EAC?

6 A Can you hear me?

7 Q Yes, we can hear you.

8 A Yeah. I got disconnected for a moment. Sorry about that.

9 Could you repeat that question from the beginning?

10 Q Of course. You previously testified to this -- kind of this Emergency Action
11 Committee. I was wondering if you could please elaborate more as to whether SCA
12 participated in those meetings with the EAC?

13 A No. The Emergency Action Committee meetings took place at the Embassy
14 in Kabul. That was something that would be an internal process to the Embassy.

15 Q Did anyone -- are you aware if anyone in D.C. participated in any of those at
16 any point?

17 A No. They would not have participated in those meetings directly. What
18 would happen is that, every time an EAC meeting took place, a record of that meeting
19 would be sent by cable to the State Department.

20 And then, if there were any issues requiring followup or questions from a State
21 Department leadership perspective, then, based off that report, there would be followup.

22 Q So the Department would have record of those meetings, correct, via those
23 cables?

24 A Yes.

25 Q And you also mentioned decision points that were assessed in the course of

1 the deliberative process. Can you follow the decision points in Afghanistan in terms of
2 the withdrawal order?

3 A Not in any great detail. I'd have to look at those documents to see what
4 they were. I mean, they certainly covered the issues having to do with the security of
5 Kabul, having to do with developments on the battlefield in terms of Taliban advances, in
6 terms of various terrorist activity that was happening periodically in Kabul by ISIS-K and
7 other groups.

8 And so all of those things would have played into it. But, in terms of greater
9 detail than that, I'd have to have the document in front of me.

10 Q Do you know which documents would have that information?

11 A Yeah. The Embassy's emergency action plan.

12 Q Thank you. Then I want to backtrack briefly to a prior question. You had
13 mentioned sort of the deputy-led interagency meetings led by the NSC.

14 Can you speak a bit more as to the White House and the NSC's role in the
15 Afghanistan withdrawal?

16 A I can speak in general terms. It was a coordinating role and a role in which
17 often the White House would task certain actions by various parts of the U.S.
18 Government in response to questions that needed to be answered, information that
19 needed to be gathered, planning documents and so forth.

20 Q Thank you.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q Who were your main points of contact at the White House on the NSC
23 throughout the process?

24 A The main point of contact was Mike Adler, Director for Afghanistan.

25 Q So, when you took over as Director of the Afghanistan desk in October 2020,

1 where did things stand with respect to the potential military withdrawal from
2 Afghanistan?

3 A As noted, there was an understanding that there would be a military
4 withdrawal, based on the Doha agreement, that that military withdrawal was tied to
5 certain commitments made by the Taliban. And, as also noted, when I joined the desk
6 as the director, there had been a series of troop reductions that had taken place prior to
7 that time.

8 Q And you discussed this a little in the minority's round, but what planning had
9 been done relating to a potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan at that time that
10 you took over?

11 A I can't really respond to that because, from the State Department's
12 perspective, we were not part of those conversations, as far as I could see.

13 Q Could you explain, please, what the prudent planning process was?

14 A Well, prudent planning, generally speaking, is the process that we go
15 through on a regular formal basis to ensure, for example, that emergency action plans are
16 accurate and up to date, that decision points within those documents are fully
17 considered, updated as necessary, that, when you look at various scenarios that are likely
18 in some form, that you consider what would be required to respond to those scenarios in
19 an effective fashion.

20 It's a fairly broad term.

21 Q But would it be correct to say that there was a prudent planning process
22 underway and preparations being made, you know, under that term in anticipation of a
23 potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan?

24 A What timeframe are you referencing?

25 Q In late 2020 and prior to that.

1 A When I arrived on the desk, which is the timeframe you're referencing then,
2 I would say that whatever planning was going on with respect to a troop withdrawal was
3 not being done on an interagency basis. And so I can't speak to what might have been
4 occurring within other parts of the U.S. Government in that respect.

5 From the State Department perspective, as noted, we were looking at the
6 questions or the possible repercussions of a military withdrawal on our diplomatic
7 presence, since that's what the State Department has as its primary focus.

8 And so we were having internal conversations about that. But, again, as noted, it
9 was not taking place on an interagency basis.

10 Q Can you please explain what the Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Omega plan
11 options were?

12 A That referenced staffing levels at the Embassy, based on various scenarios,
13 based on various security conditions within Afghanistan.

14 And so we produced those documents as a way of trying to, again, take a
15 deliberative approach to determining what would be appropriate staffing diplomatically,
16 depending on developments in Afghanistan.

17 Q And can you please identify what the various options were?

18 A I can speak about it broadly. Some of it goes into sensitive matters. But,
19 broadly speaking, the options began with what was then the current staffing level at the
20 Embassy, and then, based on the degrading security scenario at each level, ended with
21 either a very small skeleton type of presence at the airport or a remote presence outside
22 the country.

23 Q And, when you say that you're limited in how much detail you can go into
24 because of sensitive matters, can you elaborate on that? Do you mean because it would
25 require a classified setting or something else?

1 A Yes, it would require a classified setting, because it touches on broader
2 issues of -- yeah, sensitive issues.

3 Q And can you say, you know, how and when those options were formulated?

4 A So those options evolved over time, but they were matters of deliberation, if
5 not at the time I arrived on the desk, shortly thereafter.

6 Q And was there a particular option that the SCA Bureau supported or
7 favored?

8 A No, because it wasn't that type of a planning document. It wasn't one
9 where we went in trying to back a certain approach. It was an assessment of what
10 would be appropriate under various scenarios.

11 Q And did any of the options formulated contemplate the possibility of the
12 Taliban --

13 A What was the end of the question? Sorry. It got garbled.

14 Q Did any of the options contemplate the possibility of the Taliban taking over
15 the country?

16 A Of the Taliban taking over the country, is that what you said?

17 Q Yes. Yes, whether through dominating the government or by force, either
18 way.

19 A I can't recall in specific detail, but, yes, at the far end, it contemplated Kabul
20 no longer being a secure place to operate from, which is why I referenced really the two
21 options in that scenario would either have been skeleton staff at the airport or no
22 diplomatic presence in country.

23 Q When you took over as director of the Afghanistan desk, what was SCA's
24 position on whether the U.S. should maintain its Embassy in Afghanistan following the
25 military's withdrawal?

1 A SCA didn't have a position at that time. There was an assessment made by
2 the U.S. Government, both by the White House and by the State Department, as we
3 worked through the issues after the change in administration that a continued diplomatic
4 presence was desirable and that we should work toward that goal.

5 Q Did you personally have an assessment?

6 A Not per se. I think my overall attitude was that if we could maintain a
7 presence that there were -- and that there were U.S. objectives that would be benefited
8 by maintaining a presence that we should do so, assuming it could be done in a secure
9 fashion.

10 Q And you mention that SCA didn't have a position at that time. Did SCA, you
11 know, come to have a position? Did that evolve during your time, you know, as Director
12 and as Acting DAS?

13 A Your question assumes that SCA would have a formal position per se. It
14 wouldn't in the sense that it would take direction from more senior levels within the
15 government.

16 Q So how did Diplomatic Security characterize the level of risk that would
17 result from maintaining Embassy operations in the absence of a military presence?

18 A They were -- I would say it was -- they had a high level of skepticism certainly
19 at the beginning of the process of planning. They, in my view understandably, set a very
20 high bar for what would be required in order to maintain a diplomatic presence in a safe
21 and secure fashion.

22 Over time, as we came up with solutions to problems and solutions to
23 ameliorating the loss of certain support functions that would leave with the U.S. military, I
24 think we reached a point where they were less skeptical. I can't speak for them in terms
25 of whether they were entirely comfortable at any point. I just don't know.

1 Q What was the high bar that they set out?

2 A So we identified a very lengthy list of requirements, and that was attached
3 to the support functions that the U.S. military would be taking with them when they
4 departed.

5 And so that high bar was just simply ensuring that, in each of those areas that we
6 were satisfied with the substitute capability that either we were able to come up with
7 internally or put in place that hadn't been there before.

8 And so those were the issues that -- it was Acting Under Secretary for
9 Management Carol Perez, that she was really spearheading through the Management
10 Bureau through weekly conference calls, both with a broad range of offices in the
11 Department as well as embassies at our -- officials at our Embassy in Kabul that we would
12 cover in detail.

13 And she'd get progress reports, and we'd work through barriers, make sure that
14 resources were available, that things were moving forward in the ways that they needed
15 to.

16 Q What was your reaction to DS' security assessments and those of the SCA
17 Bureau?

18 A Those are two separate things.

19 Q Well, what was yours? Start with yours first.

20 A What was my assessment of DS' reaction?

21 Q Yes.

22 A To --

23 Q Their security assessments and concerns.

24 A I thought that they were appropriate and warranted, and I shared them.

25 Q And what was the SCA Bureau's reaction overall?

1 A I think -- I think when you talk about SCA leadership -- and I include myself in
2 this -- there was a full understanding of the DS views on these matters.

3 If there was any difference, it was in I would say the overall desire to find solutions
4 and to work through problem sets because I think there was a greater desire on the part
5 of the SCA Bureau to maintain a diplomatic presence.

6 Q And you kind of separated yourself out from, you know, when you said those
7 were two different -- two different answers and indicated that you shared DS' concerns.

8 Were there other -- I guess other leaders within SCA leadership who were more
9 inclined to find ways to keep the embassy open who, you know, disagreed or were, you
10 know, not in full agreement with DS' concerns?

11 A No, I don't think there was anyone that was in disagreement with their
12 concerns. As I stated a moment ago, if there was a difference, it was in the overall level
13 of desire to maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan.

14 Q And can you elaborate on the difference between SCA's position and DS'
15 position?

16 A Sure. I think it's a matter of perspective from where you sit. DS' mandate
17 is to maintain the security of diplomatic facilities overseas. SCA's mandate is to
18 implement the foreign policy objectives within that region of the world.

19 And so I think that's simply based on the assessment that you can do so much
20 more effectively in terms of pushing forward U.S. foreign policy objectives when you
21 maintain a diplomatic presence whereas that wouldn't have been DS' primary concern.

22 Q Were there disagreements between SCA and DS on the level of risk in
23 maintaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan without military support?

24 A No, I would not say so.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q A quick followup question, Mr. Evans: So you noted previously that SCA
2 didn't have a formal position as to whether the U.S. should maintain its Embassy. That
3 happened at a much higher level.

4 A Uh-huh.

5 Q But sort of elaborating on that, obviously, you know, throughout your
6 tenure, the Department's position changed as to whether or not we could continue
7 Embassy operation or diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and the evacuation ultimately
8 ensued.

9 Can you speak a bit more as to when SCA's assessment changed, sort of when that
10 happened and how, if at all?

11 A When the assessment that we would not be able -- so you're asking when
12 did we reach the point that the assessment was we could not maintain a diplomatic
13 presence?

14 Q Correct.

15 A Okay. I would say that that assessment changed in August of 2020
16 because, up until the Taliban took over Kabul in very rapid fashion, there was still an
17 assessment, based on certain security assumptions remaining true, that we would be able
18 to maintain a presence, because I think at that point we had reached the point where we
19 had met all of those requirements in full in terms of being able to maintain a presence,
20 and we were satisfied with what was going to be in place that we could maintain a secure
21 facility.

22 But, again, that was always connected to whether or not certain security
23 assumptions remain true. Once the Taliban entered Kabul, those were no longer true,
24 and the assessment quickly shifted that clearly this is not possible, it's time to shut down
25 our operations.

1 Q By August 2020, I'm assuming you mean August 2021, correct, Mr. Evans?

2 A Yes. Sorry. August 2021.

3 Q No problem. I assumed that, but I just wanted to make sure for the record
4 that we had that in there.

5 A Yeah. Thank you.

6 Q Thank you.

7

BY [REDACTED]

8 Q Was SCA involved in the preparation of memos for senior Department
9 leaders, such as Secretary, Deputy Secretary, DMR, counselor, and so forth?

10 A Yes.

11 Q What was the clearance chain process in the Bureau like for those memos or
12 inputs into memos?

13 A It varied according to the topic of the meeting, of course, and the issues that
14 were covered. It was a very -- every time, for example, that there would be a
15 senior-level interagency meeting, SCA, the Afghanistan desk specifically, was tasked with
16 preparing the memo provided to whatever senior official represented the State
17 Department in support of that meeting. And depending on the topics, the clearance
18 process would include really any and every office representing viewpoints on those issues
19 that would be covered.

20 So it could -- certainly on a regular basis, on a consistent basis, it would include
21 clearances from the Management Bureau, from Diplomatic Security, from Consular
22 Affairs, from other regional bureaus as necessary, the representatives of various
23 senior-level offices within the Department, to include the counselor, the Political Under
24 Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, certainly the Deputy for Management Resources, yeah,
25 and so forth. Really, as broadly as it needed to be disseminated for clearance, it would

1 be.

2 Q And would you have generally reviewed memos pertaining to your areas of
3 responsibility before they went to senior leaders? Was that a part of that process?

4 A Yes, in every case, I would have been one of the last clearers before it went
5 to those senior leaders. It would have gone -- it would have gone through me, and then
6 it would have gone to the senior-most leadership within the SCA Bureau for final
7 clearance before it would go up.

8 Q Did SCA or others ever remove or soften language provided by any other
9 bureaus in memos relating to the withdrawal that expressed concerns about the security
10 situation or the level of risk?

11 A No.

12 Q And can you definitively state that this did not occur?

13 A Could you restate the question then?

14 Q Could you definitively state that this did not occur, that other bureaus did
15 not provide inputs expressing concern about the security situation or the level of risk and
16 then, you know, SCA or other bureaus removed or softened the language that, you know,
17 was provided by them?

18 A I would say that we never removed that language. I would say that, in
19 some cases, as in any clearance process, the language would be altered in negotiation
20 with those other bureaus.

21 That's really what the clearance process is about. It's a matter of negotiating
22 acceptable language that everyone can agree to. And so that is the way I would
23 characterize the process, and that, if you're asking did we ever just simply ignore inputs,
24 no, we didn't.

25 Q But were there cases in which, you know, as through the process of what

1 you just described, language concerning, you know, the gravity of the security situation or
2 the level of risk was altered?

3 A No, I do not believe so, to my knowledge.

4 Q Did the Department ever, you know, formally consider requesting that DOD
5 provide a stay-behind force?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And can you elaborate on that?

8 A Not in any detailed fashion because it goes to matters that I consider too
9 sensitive for this format.

10 Q Okay. Did SCA at any point oppose such a request?

11 A No.

12 Q And you can state that definitively?

13 A Yes, I can state that definitively.

14 Q How -- were there any points of disagreement overall between -- you know,
15 concerning the withdrawal between SCA and between DS?

16 A There were certainly very spirited discussions at times, I would say, in terms
17 of what requirements would be, and that would be based on an assessment of what
18 would be required from Embassy -- from a perspective of Embassy leadership.

19 So, yes, there were -- there were discussions about differences of opinion at
20 various times.

21 Q Could you elaborate on those differences of opinion?

22 A I can in general terms. In general terms, there were times where, in my
23 view, there were requirements put in place or proposed by -- "proposed" is a better
24 word -- by DS officials that we didn't think were either necessary or pragmatic.

25 And then we would have discussions, and sometimes things would go in both

1 directions. Either we would move toward their position or -- or the movement would be
2 toward ours overall.

3 But most of those assessments were based on what we were being told by
4 Embassy officials in Kabul in terms of their own assessments on the ground in terms of
5 what was practical, actually required -- and actually required in order to maintain a secure
6 Embassy facility.

7 Q Can you provide a little more detail on what, you know, specific areas of
8 disagreement, what specific topics those disagreements or differences of opinion were on
9 without entering into any classified information?

10 A I think I can speak to it in very general terms. And what I would say is that
11 there were certain aspects of support functions that the military had been
12 provided -- providing that, because the State Department is not the military, we would
13 never be able to duplicate in exactitude.

14 And so, in some areas, we had to do assessments of whether or not what was
15 possible was sufficient, if that makes sense. And that's -- those were the areas in which
16 we would have those discussions with DS regarding what was actually sufficient or not.

17 Q Did SCA believe that certain -- certain options were sufficient and DS did
18 not?

19 A I can't speak for DS in that regard. Certainly, their initial opinions, as
20 expressed to us in some of these areas, there was a gap between the assessment on the
21 ground by our Embassy officials -- that included I would note some portions of DS who
22 were actually operating on the ground in our Embassy in Kabul -- and the positions being
23 taken by DS officials in Washington.

24 So there was that gap, but that gap had to be resolved, and we did so to the best
25 of our ability.

1 Q And who were the DS officials in Washington that there were these
2 differences of opinion with?

3 A I tried to remember his name earlier. I'm afraid I still don't. But it was the
4 Deputy Assistant Secretary within DS charged with the security of overseas facilities.

5 Q And to discuss this issue in more detail would require a classified setting and
6 you could discuss it, but it would have to take place in a classified setting. Is that
7 correct?

8 A That is correct.

9 Q How was the issue of a potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan
10 approached in the Presidential transition to the Biden administration?

11 [REDACTED]: So, to the extent that -- I'm sorry, this is [REDACTED].

12 [REDACTED] Go ahead, [REDACTED]

13 [REDACTED] So, Mark, to the extent that you know of the existence of
14 identification of issues within that process, I have no problem with that.

15 To the extent -- and I don't know what your answer would be, which is one of the
16 issues. To the extent that this involves advice actually being provided, the actual
17 substantive advice provided to a transition team, that advice is potentially subject to
18 executive branch confidentiality interests.

19 And, while I know this is a voluntary interview, I would -- that information is not
20 owned or controlled by you, and I would ask that you respect any future interventions I
21 have to make in this regard.

22 [REDACTED] And the committee notes that the witness is participating in today's
23 proceeding voluntarily and that the witness is free to choose to answer or not answer any
24 questions the committee poses but that, in the event that the witness chooses not, you
25 know, to answer a question or provide information that the committee may find it

1 necessary to compel their -- compel them to provide it in a deposition, through a
2 compulsory process.

3 And we also note that it is the witness' decision whether or not to share any
4 information which the committee asks of it and not the Department's or the White
5 House's.

6 [REDACTED] So, first of all, you can attempt, as I once noted before, to compel.
7 That's totally true. That isn't a finite thing.

8 And, secondly, it is the witness' decision whether or not to respect a request from
9 agency counsel for the potential protection of agency and administration information.

10 [REDACTED] So let's continue.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q How would you choose to answer the question, which was, how was the
13 issue of a potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan approached in the Presidential
14 admin -- the Presidential transition to the Biden administration?

15 A It was approached through a very deliberative information-gathering process
16 that started just after the advent of the Biden administration through a series of
17 high-level interagency meetings where issues were discussed, information was gathered,
18 papers were tasked.

19 And, from my perspective, our role was to be supportive of that process, to
20 provide that information or obtain it, to do those assessments in coordination
21 with -- both internally in the State Department and in coordination with other parts of the
22 U.S. Government, and then to provide that information or those papers and feed them
23 into that continuing process.

24 Q What bureaus and offices were involved in addressing a potential military
25 withdrawal from Afghanistan during the transition within the State Department?

1 A Within the State Department, certainly the SCA Bureau, specifically
2 Afghanistan desk, but other parts of the SCA Bureau with equities as well. Also, the CT
3 Bureau, the Political Military Bureau, and then the range of bureaus that I already
4 mentioned: Consular Affairs, Population, Refugees, and Migration.

5 And then, on top of that, certainly -- well, and DS. And then, on top of that,
6 various leadership offices within the Department to greater or lesser extents. That's the
7 list.

8 Q What was SCA's role in preparing information recommendations on the
9 Afghanistan withdrawal during the Presidential transition period?

10 A So can I ask a question? What are you referencing specifically in terms of
11 the Presidential transition period? How do you define that?

12 Q The period between the Presidential election and, you know, the period in
13 which President Biden took office.

14 A Okay. So, in that regard, there were various papers that were tasked and
15 discussions that were had with the transition team. Those papers were tasked through
16 the Presidential transition team, which had a presence in the State Department.

17 I joined SCA leadership. In meeting with that team initially, we had other
18 conversations that followed that, and where they defined what their interest areas were,
19 what types of information they were seeking. And so -- and we provided the
20 information that they requested to the best of our ability.

21 Q Did SCA brief the incoming Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, on a potential
22 withdrawal?

23 A I do not recall.

24 Q Okay. Did SCA prepare briefing documents for the incoming Secretary?

25 A Yes.

1 Q And what were they?

2 A They were documents that covered the full range of issues that we were
3 dealing with within that entire region.

4 Q And what was the overall takeaway of the information and
5 recommendations which SCA provided to the incoming Secretary on the issue of the
6 potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan?

7 A So those papers would not have been of the type where specific
8 recommendations were provided. That would not have been our role. What our role
9 would have been is to provide factual information, both historical and current, to provide
10 a description of the issues that needed to be addressed. But, in terms of specifically a
11 recommendation regarding a military withdrawal, that would not have been a part of
12 those documents.

13 Q And what factual picture and assessment of the situation in Afghanistan did
14 SCA provide at that time?

15 A Much of it touched on the issues that we've already discussed to some
16 extent. It would have included a description of the agreement reached in Doha with the
17 Taliban, the issues pertaining to that agreement, where things stood in terms of
18 fulfillment of commitments within that agreement, how things were going in terms of the
19 Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation's engagement with the Taliban and
20 the government in Doha to bring about a political reconciliation.

21 Some of those papers accordingly would not -- on that topic specifically would not
22 have been produced by SCA. They would have been produced by the Special
23 Representative's office, because they were the ones who would have provided that
24 assessment. And then it would have touched on other broader issues pertaining to
25 Afghanistan at that time.

1 Q What was your impression of why Ambassador Khalilzad was retained as
2 SRAR by the new administration?

3 A My personal assessment was that they shared the goal of wanting to see a
4 political reconciliation take place and that they reached the conclusion that he was best
5 positioned to continue the efforts in that regard.

6 Q And what was your reaction to the decision?

7 A I noted it. I had no particular opinion about it.

8 Q And what was your impression of why Ambassador Ross Wilson was retained
9 by the new administration as chief of mission?

10 A Because I think they made the assessment that he was doing a good job in
11 that role and should continue.

12 Q And what was your reaction to the decision?

13 A I thought it was appropriate.

14 [REDACTED] Mr. Evans, I'd like to enter exhibit 1 into the record.

15 [Evans Exhibit No. 1.

16 Was marked for identification.]

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q According to a statement by NSC spokesperson Emily Horne, on January 22,
19 2021, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan informed his Afghan counterpart, Hamdullah
20 Mohib, that the United States would review the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement,
21 i.e. the Doha agreement, including to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its
22 commitments.

23 Is it correct that an interagency policy review commenced after this?

24 A Yes, it is correct.

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

1 A It lasted from the beginning of the administration through to the time in
2 April when the President announced the decision to withdraw troops.

3 Q What, to the best of your understanding, were the goals of the policy?

4 A The goals of the policy reviewed were to assess where we were in terms of
5 Afghanistan policy with respect to all of the issues we've touched upon but more
6 specifically to the situation on the ground in Afghanistan in terms of the security
7 situation, the current situation with respect to the agreement with the Taliban, where we
8 were in that process, and an assessment of the repercussions in both scenarios: first if
9 we retain troops, and second if we did not.

1 [11:19 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]

3 Q And how was the review conducted?

4 A It was conducted under the direction of the NSC through that interagency
5 process in those senior-level meetings that I referenced earlier.

6 Q And what were the interagency meetings that took place, and how often?

7 A Most of those meetings took place at the deputies level, and they would
8 take place at least once a week.

9 Q And what was the State Department's role in that interagency review?

10 A Our role was to provide information, provide responses to questions that
11 need to be answered, provide assessments on policy questions and impacts. We were
12 really feeding information and papers into the process.

13 Q And what officials led the State Department's participation in the
14 interagency review?

15 A I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

16 Q What officials led the State Department's participation in the interagency
17 review?

18 A It was a combination of the deputy secretary and the deputy for
19 management and resources, Brian McKeon.

20 Q So Deputy Secretary Sherman was also heavily involved?

21 A She would often chair State Department participation in those meetings as
22 well, yes.

23 Q Was there any distinction or division of responsibilities between her and the
24 DMR?

25 A Over time it sort of reflected the various tracks that developed with DMR

1 increasingly focused on -- focusing on questions of maintaining a diplomatic presence.
2 And then the broader policy issues of maintaining a troop presence and the
3 repercussions, one way or the other, fell more within the deputy's purview.

4 Q And what were the key bureaus and offices involved in the State
5 Department's participation in the interagency review?

6 A Certainly, the SCA Bureau, primarily the Afghanistan desk, but other country
7 desks as appropriate, such as the Pakistan desk and desks representing Central Asia, CT
8 Bureau --

9 Q Was SRAR involved?

10 A SRAR was involved to the extent that they would provide regular updates on
11 progress being made in Doha.

12 Q I didn't mean to interrupt you. I didn't realize that you were continuing the
13 list, so please continue.

14 A Yeah. I was going to add the CT Bureau was heavily involved given all of
15 our CT concerns in Afghanistan.

16 Q Was the embassy in Kabul involved in the interagency review?

17 A Yes, absolutely.

18 Q Was DS?

19 A DS was involved as we started discussing more earnestly maintenance of a
20 diplomatic presence.

21 Q And about what -- when in time did that start?

22 A Oh, very early on actually, end of February, early March maybe.

23 Q And was Consular Affairs involved?

24 A In the question of troop presence, not really. But, again, as we started
25 working our way through the possible repercussions one way or the other, yes, they

1 became involved.

2 Q And when? At what point in the calendar did they become involved?

3 A Oh, a rough estimate, probably also in the February/March timeframe.

4 Q And what was SCA's role within the interagency review?

5 A Our role, again, was to ensure that the information and papers and so forth
6 that were coming out of the more senior policy process were provided in a timely and
7 supportive fashion.

8 Q And what was your role personally in the review?

9 A My role as director initially and then as Acting DAS, really from the advent of
10 the new administration, was multiple.

11 On one hand, it was to continue to ensure that those tasks that are more working
12 level had the support they needed, the resources they needed, and were reacting in a
13 timely fashion to taskings that were coming their way as part of this process so that we
14 ensured that that information flow continued as desired.

15 It was to interact with both more senior officials, both within the State
16 Department and within other agencies, to ensure coordination where necessary for some
17 of those products. It was to work through problem sets as they arose between agencies
18 so that we could be responsive and timely.

19 And then it was also to support more senior officials within the State Department
20 who were leading this process, meeting with them, having conversations with them
21 periodically to ensure that they were fully informed what they needed to know and
22 understood all the issues.

23 Q And what other SCA officials were involved in the review?

24 A Certainly the senior bureau official, Dean Thompson, who I mentioned
25 previously. At a more senior level, it was primarily myself and Dean Thompson.

1 Q And what were the major issues and questions that the State Department
2 had to address during the review?

3 A It varied from the impact of a decision in one direction or another on our
4 diplomatic presence, on the ways in which that would affect relationships with our
5 other -- the other countries in the region. It was working together with the CT Bureau to
6 assess how it would affect our counterterrorism objectives. It really touched upon the
7 broad range of issues that we ran into, SIVs, et cetera.

8 [REDACTED] Okay. We're at time for our round.

9 [REDACTED] We can go off the record.

10 [Recess.]

11 [REDACTED] Let's go back on the record.

12 BY [REDACTED]

13 Q So thank you again for your willingness to appear voluntarily today and
14 answer questions.

15 I do want to ask for your indulgence. I don't want to belabor definitions, but
16 since your testimony to us previously was that you believe it's important to be precise in
17 the use of terms, I just want to state for clarity for you that for the minority, when we ask
18 you questions about the withdrawal and the evacuation, we are referring to two discrete
19 things.

20 And by "withdrawal," just to clarify, we mean the commitment in the
21 February 2020 Doha deal to withdraw U.S. troops fully from Afghanistan, the partial troop
22 drawdowns that occurred in 2020 and 2021, all the way through to the August 31
23 withdrawal of the last U.S. troops remaining in the country.

24 Is that clear?

25 A Yes.

1 Q And I will slightly amend that earlier definition based on your prior
2 testimony. "Withdrawal" also in this case could refer to the contingency that was
3 ultimately pursued to undertake a diplomatic withdrawal in August 2021.

4 Is that clear?

5 A Yes, it is.

6 Q And by "evacuation," for clarity, when we say "evacuation" we are referring
7 to, first, the Operation Allies Refuge, State Department-led effort to evacuate SIV holders
8 and American citizens from Afghanistan and subsequently the DOD-led noncombatant
9 evacuation operation that resulted in the evacuation of over 120,000 individuals from the
10 country.

11 Is that clear?

12 A Yes, it is.

13 Q Okay. Thank you.

14 So I want to revisit a few topics that you were just answering questions on in the
15 round prior.

16 First of all, I want to get a little more clarity from you around the transition
17 between administrations.

18 You testified previously that you did draft papers for the incoming administration
19 regarding the situation in Afghanistan and factors that they would need to consider,
20 correct?

21 A That's correct.

22 Q And you testified that it was your understanding that the incoming
23 administration read these papers, correct?

24 A That's my understanding.

25 Q And you said previously, in response to questions from the majority, that

1 these transition papers were tasked to you by members of the Presidential transition
2 team. Is that accurate?

3 A That's my understanding, yes.

4 Q And when were these papers tasked?

5 A They were tasked in the period after the election took place, up until the
6 change of the new year, early January.

7 Q And these members of the Presidential transition team that tasked these
8 papers, were they members of the incoming administration?

9 A They were -- yes, they were individuals who became part of the new
10 administration, yes.

11 Q Yeah, let me clarify. I didn't ask that in the most precise way.

12 The members of the Presidential transition team, these individuals represented
13 the incoming administration and had been identified and placed in that team by the
14 incoming administration, correct?

15 A That is correct.

16 Q And they are the ones who tasked these papers?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And were any papers for the transition tasked to you by the outgoing
19 administration?

20 A No.

21 Q Thank you.

22 I want to move also to the discussion you were having with our majority
23 colleagues about questions that had been raised, debates that had occurred around the
24 security risks of a withdrawal. And, specifically, I think you discussed the debate
25 between SCA and DS about the security risks of maintaining the U.S. Embassy, the

1 questions around a possible residual force.

2 Let me back up a bit and make sure we're clear on your previous testimony.

3 You testified before, did you not, that the partial troop drawdowns that occurred
4 in 2020 and January 2021 that were undertaken by then-President Trump
5 disincentivized -- I don't know if that was your word, but I'll use it -- disincentivized the
6 Taliban to make any additional effort to comply with the terms of the peace deal -- or of
7 the Doha deal, correct?

8 A That's my opinion, yes, that's correct.

9 Q Okay. And how did the impact of these partial troop drawdowns in 2020
10 and early January 2021 impact the Taliban's ascendancy and internal strength in your
11 assessment?

12 A It's a great question. I'm not sure I have an immediate view on that matter.
13 I don't think that I have the expertise to assess to what degree it may or may not have
14 affected that.

15 Q Okay. So let me approach it a slightly different way then.

16 Did you understand in 2020 that the Taliban was making gains against the
17 Government of Afghanistan's troops and was consolidating its strength on the battlefield?

18 A Based on what we were seeing at the time, it was more the second thing
19 that you mentioned than the first.

20 Q Okay.

21 A In our view, they were using that period to consolidate their strength and to
22 prepare for what would then become the spring 2021 offensive that they launched.

23 Q Thanks for that clarification.

24 And I believe it was mentioned earlier, but if not we can clarify for the record. In
25 connection with the concluding of the February 2020 Doha deal, there was a release of

1 5,000 Taliban prisoners, correct, that was stipulated by that deal and undertaken? Is
2 that accurate?

3 A Yeah, that is accurate.

4 Q And how do you think the release of those 5,000 Taliban prisoners that had
5 been negotiated by the U.S. Government and the Taliban exclusively without the
6 participation of the then-Afghan Government, how did that prisoner release impact the
7 Taliban in terms of its morale and its strength?

8 A It's my assessment that it certainly was a boost to their morale and a
9 practical boost to their strength. Many of those prisoners that were released had direct
10 connections to the Taliban, returned to the battlefield thereafter at some point in the
11 future.

12 Q Okay. So your testimony today is that the release of the 5,000 prisoners,
13 the partial troop drawdowns in 2020 and into 2021, in total these did contribute to the
14 Taliban's consolidating of its strength and potential ascendancy?

15 A To be specific, again, I don't think I can assess whether the troop drawdown
16 specifically led to the consolidation of their strength -- or supported the consolidation of
17 their strength or contributed to it. I do believe personally that the prisoner release did
18 so.

19 Q Okay.

20 A Yeah.

21 Q But you did testify previously that the partial troop drawdowns
22 disincentivized the Taliban to seek to --

23 A Meet its commitments.

24 Q -- improve its compliance. Exactly. Okay.

25 A Yes. Yes, it did disincentive them, in my view, to meet their commitments

1 under the Doha Agreement.

2 Q Okay. And did the Doha Agreement include any provisions that required
3 the Taliban to cease attacks on U.S. troops?

4 A Yes.

5 Q And what was your assessment of their compliance with this provision of the
6 deal?

7 A In my view, that is the one commitment they made that they actually
8 followed through on in a serious fashion.

9 Q Okay. So your testimony is that the Taliban by and large had stopped
10 attacking U.S. military in country and that separately they were consolidating their
11 strength, drawing on the release of these prisoners, incentivized to not further cooperate
12 with the terms of the deal by the partial troop drawdown.

13 So, in your assessment, if the incoming administration had decided to renege on
14 withdrawing entirely, how do you think the Taliban would have responded?

15 A I strongly believe that they would have reversed their policy to not target
16 U.S. troops and our partners and that they would have begun doing so once again.

17 Q So you -- do you believe that the risk to USG military and personnel in
18 Afghanistan would have increased if the decision to withdraw were rescinded?

19 A In my view, there's no question of that.

20 [REDACTED] I think I can pass to you, unless you have anything else on this.

21 BY [REDACTED]

22 Q Sure.

23 Just when you say you have no question to that, can you identify anything with
24 specificity that informs your opinion?

25 A Without being able to go into any great detail because of the nature of the

1 conversations, there were indicators that that would be the case in communication with
2 the Taliban.

3 Q Okay. So to be clear, I know that you can't talk about such indicators, but
4 there was reasoned information that leads you to assess leaving troops would have been
5 highly detrimental to the safety and welfare of USG personnel and citizens?

6 A That's correct.

7 Q Okay.

8 A Yes, that's a correct assessment.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q One last follow-up before we pivot.

11 Was this belief or assessment of the heightened risk of Taliban attacks against
12 USG personnel, did that inform deliberations inside the Department on planning for a
13 withdrawal and an evacuation?

14 A Yeah, it informed it. It was a factor that was considered depending on
15 what decision was reached by the White House, absolutely.

16 Q And do you believe it informed the White House's policy review on
17 Afghanistan and the ultimate decision that was taken?

18 A I personally believe that, yes.

19 Q Okay.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q Okay. Great.

22 Could you describe for us your knowledge of Operation Allies Refuge and State
23 Department-led efforts to evacuate SIV holders that began in July of 2021?

24 A Sure. That was based on an interagency decision that was also directed by
25 the White House. It was an effort to bring out as many individuals and their family

1 members as we possibly could in short order.

2 And that group was focused -- we defined that group as those who had reached a
3 particular stage in the SIV application process where there were only a few remaining
4 steps.

5 And so we set up a process where they would be brought from Afghanistan to our
6 site at one of our military bases in Doha. They would go through those final steps and
7 then they would be brought to the United States.

8 That exact process varied. As we implemented things, there were certain
9 decisions that needed to be made along the way, new requirements that popped up in
10 terms of immunizations, both for COVID and for other standard immunizations that we
11 require in the United States for the purpose of protecting public health, that caused some
12 delays along the way.

13 But by and large, it was successful. We moved a large number initially to a site in
14 Virginia where they were then provided assistance through other U.S. Government
15 agencies and also our PRM Bureau with its partners in terms of sort of standard refugee
16 assistance types of support, and then they were moved onward to various communities in
17 the United States.

18 Q When did planning commence for this operation?

19 A It commenced in June.

20 Q Of which year?

21 A June of 2021.

22 Q Okay. And what was your role in the context of this operation?

23 A Our role was to provide practical support in whatever way we could.

24 Essentially, the equivalent of a task force was formed for that purpose within the State
25 Department. It was led by a senior official, a retired ambassador who came back for

1 that purpose.

2 In terms of one practical way that we supported it, we essentially seconded one of
3 our personnel on the Afghanistan desk to do that full time, to support leadership in terms
4 of pulling up that task force, getting it organized, and getting it moving forward.

5 I was involved in numerous interagency discussions leading up to that point where
6 we talked through the various issues involved over time. Exactly, for example, where
7 would these people be taken to initially? What were the requirements in a practical
8 sense in terms of finishing up their SIV processing? Were there additional barriers or
9 efficiencies that we could either eliminate or put in place to make this process go as fast
10 as possible?

11 We also worked quite directly with our NEA Bureau to facilitate an agreement
12 with Qatar to grant us permission to use our military base in Qatar for that purpose.

13 Q Okay. And to be clear, so discussions related to this operation commenced
14 in June of 2021, and that would have preceded the evacuation. Is that correct?

15 A That's correct.

16 Q And who was prioritized or allowed to participate in the program?

17 A SIV applicants who had reached the final stages of the SIV application
18 process. Generally speaking, those were individuals who had established their
19 qualifications, who were ready to travel. They already had passports and documents in
20 place.

21 And so they just needed things like health checkups and so forth, the remaining
22 steps. And so we reached out to those individuals and made that option available, and
23 those who chose to avail themselves of it were a part of the program.

24 Q Were there any other groups in addition to SIV applicants who were eligible
25 to participate?

1 A No, not that I recall.

2 Q What about individuals who were USG employees?

3 A Well, USG employees who were that far along in the SIV process, yes.

4 Active USG employees, such as local employees at the embassy, no, they weren't a part of
5 that.

6 Q Understood.

7 And do you know whether there was a strong demand signal from Afghans for
8 access to these flights?

9 A Yes, there was. There were a lot of people who were very concerned about
10 their personal safety.

11 Q And were these flights leaving with every seat occupied?

12 A As far as I'm aware, yes.

13 Q Okay. So to sort of close this out, is it your impression that this program
14 was effective?

15 A I believe it was, yes. We removed thousands of individuals and family
16 members from Afghanistan in short order.

17 Q And do you believe, to refer to a word you used prior, that plans to execute
18 this program were deliberate?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Okay. And I want to talk -- we've talked a lot about your interagency
21 communications during the evacuation itself.

22 Just to briefly lay some foundation for later questions, is it your testimony that
23 these interagency communications were regular?

24 A Yes, they were.

25 Q Did you find them to be productive?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Did you find them to be frequent enough in order to inform your directives
3 and objectives?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Did you ever have any concerns that you raised during these interagency
6 meetings --

7 A Yes.

8 Q -- about the evacuation?

9 A Oh, about the evacuation specifically?

10 Q Uh-huh.

11 A If you're referencing the 2-week period in the latter half of August of 2021, I
12 wasn't actually involved in a lot of those communications because they were being
13 handled by the task force.

14 There were periodic conversations between myself and Becky Zimmerman, the
15 DASD handling Afghanistan, where we talked through various issues that we were aware
16 of. But in terms of the actual coordination of the evacuation, that wasn't part of our
17 role at that point.

18 Q Understood.

19 So when you raised any such issues, did you feel that the issues were addressed in
20 an efficient manner?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Did you feel listened to when you raised such issues?

23 A Yes.

24 Q Do you have any concerns related to the coordination and interagency
25 efforts as related to successfully evacuating folks from Afghanistan?

1 A No, I don't have any concerns in that regard.

2 Q Okay. We also wanted to touch upon your interactions with folks on the
3 ground in Kabul. We haven't discussed that much yet. We know, however, that you
4 said there was extensive communication and coordination from D.C. to Kabul. Is that
5 correct?

6 A Yes, that's correct.

7 Q We've conducted several transcribed interviews at this point, as well as held
8 hearings, and through those avenues we heard folks testify that the Department and
9 personnel on the ground were dedicated.

10 Is that an assessment that you share?

11 A Absolutely, yes.

12 Q Do you feel that the Department and folks on the ground were
13 entrepreneurial in terms of finding creative solutions to a complex situation as it unfolded
14 in Kabul?

15 A Yes, I feel that way.

16 Q Do you feel that the Department personnel on the ground acted in admiral
17 ways, with integrity?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Is there anything that you could share with the record in terms of specific
20 interactions or information that leads to these assessments?

21 A Yes. I mean, my personal interactions with people within the embassy, as
22 noted before, were primarily focused on the more senior officials within the embassy. I
23 mentioned Ross Wilson, Ian McCary, Scott Weinhold, Ben Dille, the management
24 counselor, and there were a few others that I would have periodic interaction with in
25 every respect. I mean, they were dealing with incredibly complex problem sets, and

1 their level of devotion to finding solutions I found second to none.

2 On the side of planning for evacuation eventualities, Scott Weinhold was really the
3 primary point person, in my view, for the embassy. He was a walking encyclopedia of
4 knowledge about the mission, its posture, the personnel there, its requirements,
5 vulnerabilities, everything.

6 And he would always join us at all hours of the night for them -- for example, on
7 those conference calls that we would have on a weekly basis with the under
8 secretary -- acting under secretary for management, Carol Perez -- so that he could
9 provide information from post in a timely fashion. Ben Dille was also on those calls, the
10 management counselor.

11 And then that was consistent on down the line. I mean, our other personnel on
12 the Afghanistan desk would also have direct interaction at a more working level with
13 various officials in the Department depending on what their own individual jobs were and
14 portfolios were. And across the board, people were dedicated and worked admirably.

15 Q That's really helpful.

16 In terms of engagement with military personnel on the ground, how would you
17 describe the communication and coordination efforts?

18 A I would describe them as being incredibly close and frequent. Based on my
19 conversations with Scott Weinhold, for example, I know that he would have daily
20 discussions with military commanders on the ground. They were essentially physically
21 adjacent to each other within Kabul, so communication was easy, it was frequent, it was
22 face-to-face more often than not. And so that communication was very good.

23 Q What about communication between the Department and Consular Affairs?

24 A Well, I mean, Consular Affairs is part of the Department. So what's the
25 question, I guess?

1 Q So did you have specific interactions with the Consular Affairs team on the
2 ground, and if so, what was your assessment in terms of the effectiveness of Consular
3 Affairs on the ground?

4 A In Kabul?

5 Q Uh-huh, in Kabul.

6 A Yeah. My assessment was that they did a stellar job in really tough
7 circumstances. We went through a series of adjustments in terms of our overall number
8 of personnel. We were under ordered departure status essentially that entire time.
9 And yet Consular Affairs personnel, that was the one section where we never decreased
10 personnel, and over time we significantly increased through a series of TDY personnel
11 that we sent to Kabul.

12 For a long time, they were not able to do interviews because of the pandemic and
13 restrictions that were in place because of that. The pandemic never went away at that
14 point, but they figured out a way to start up interviews again, and when they did so we
15 really beefed up their operation so that they could push through as many SIV applications
16 as they could as rapidly as possible.

17 [Evans Exhibit No. 2.

18 Was marked for identification.]

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q Great.

21 I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 2. Mr. Evans, we'll be sending an
22 email to you which contains the exhibit, as well as disseminating it to majority staff and
23 the reporter. So that should come into you here shortly from [REDACTED]

24 The document that we'll be referring to is the After Action Review on Afghanistan
25 dated January 2020 to August 2021, issued in March of 2022. It is an unclassified copy

1 of the After Action Review, and it is available publicly. Please let me know when you've
2 received the documents.

3 [Pause.]

4 A It just arrived.

5 Q Great. If you want to go ahead and open it. You don't need to review it
6 in full, but if you want to just take a quick glance through it to familiarize yourself with
7 what it looks like.

8 [Pause.]

9 A Okay.

10 Q Great. Have you seen this document before?

11 A Actually, I have not. I've intended to read through it in careful fashion, but
12 I've not found the time yet.

13 Q Okay. But so -- but to be clear, your understanding generally of the AAR is
14 an after-action review as drafted by the Department. Is that correct?

15 A That's correct, yes.

16 Q Okay. I wanted to refer you to page 12 of the document, paragraph
17 number 11. Do you see that on your screen?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Great. So I just would like to read it into the record.

20 "Crisis preparation and planning were inhibited to a degree by concerns about the
21 signals that might be sent, especially anything that might suggest the United States had
22 lost confidence in the Afghan government and thus contribute to its collapse. However,
23 the AAR" -- which refers to this document, the after-action report -- "notes that once it
24 got underway, the plan for closing the embassy compound and evacuating U.S.
25 Government personnel and U.S. citizen and third-country contractors proceeded well,

1 considering the speed at which it was implemented."

2 Do you agree with this assessment?

3 A Yes, I do.

4 Q What informs that opinion?

5 A It's informed by having lived through it. I mean, I -- we were part of
6 discussions regarding crisis preparation and planning. I know that those were largely
7 internal to the United States Government. There were statements made at various
8 times in various fora that we needed to be prudent, I think is the right word, in terms of
9 how we interacted with the Afghan Government because we were simultaneously trying
10 to maintain its confidence and its ability to withstand Taliban advances and attacks.

11 And then, certainly, the second part of that statement I absolutely agree with, that
12 once the evacuation got underway and the embassy compound was closed and we had to
13 get people out, we did so very quickly and effectively.

14 Q Great. And that is because, I believe, as you previously testified, you felt
15 that the plans as related to the evacuation were deliberate. Is that right?

16 A Yes, they were deliberate, and I believe that they were comprehensive.
17 We were very dedicated to answering all calls for information that came our way from
18 CENTCOM, from the Department of Defense.

19 I know that as part of those planning processes and as we were approaching the
20 summer, once the decision had been made to withdraw troops, CENTCOM made the
21 decision to preposition certain equipment in the region that they anticipated that they
22 would need if something were to happen and it was required.

23 Q And I believe you also testified that you found interagency communication,
24 particularly with the onset of the Biden administration, to be robust. Is that correct?

25 A Yes, that's an appropriate assessment, in my view.

1 Q And folks on the ground in Kabul were efficient and admirable in their ability
2 to evacuate individuals from Kabul?

3 A Yes.

4 Q And I believe you also previously testified that the task force was working
5 24/7. Is that correct?

6 A That's correct.

7 Q Is it your understanding that folks on the ground in Kabul were likewise
8 working on a 24/7 clock?

9 A Yes.

10 Q I'd like to talk -- unless there's any other questions, [REDACTED] -- I'm going to turn
11 to post-evacuation.

12 Okay. Were you interviewed as part of the AAR?

13 A No, I was not.

14 Q You were not, okay. And you have testified that you hadn't seen it prior?

15 A That's correct.

16 Q Okay. So you were aware of its drafting. Is that correct?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Do you know who drafted the document?

19 A It was drafted under the direction of Dan Smith. I believe that's his name,
20 if I'm remembering correctly. He was the leader of the After Action Review. I'm not
21 sure who on his team actually drafted it.

22 Q Okay. Do you personally know Dan Smith?

23 A I've met him. I don't really know him.

24 Q Do you have an assessment of his professional reputation at the
25 Department?

1 A He certainly has a very good reputation within the Department, yes.

2 Q What is that reputation?

3 A Someone who is very effective, measured, a strategic thinker, a good
4 colleague.

5 Q Okay. Given that general reputation, do you have any reason to doubt the
6 credibility of the AAR's findings?

7 A No.

8 Q Given the individuals who work on the AAR generally, would you -- is it a fair
9 characterization to say you would read through the findings and trust its assessment?

10 A I don't have any reason not to.

11 Q Okay. And I also want to talk about, given your sort of broad experience
12 related to crisis management, when you look back on your experiences related to the
13 evacuation, how do State's efforts to plan for and deploy the evacuation compare to
14 other crises you've assisted in?

15 A Similar in the sense of the basic structure of how it was approached, the
16 formation of a task force and so forth. But I would see just different just by the degree
17 of magnitude. It was an effort on a scale that I had not previously seen in any
18 experience in my Department years.

19 Q So when you say it was at an extreme, can you provide some more clarity on
20 how this situation is different and more extreme compared to other crises you've
21 experienced or worked on?

22 A Well, we frequently internally would draw comparisons to our withdrawal
23 from Vietnam.

24 Q Okay.

25 A That it was really on a scale that was comparable but in -- and the same sort

1 of rapid crisis emergency situation. And really, if you look at the sweep of history
2 between then and now, I can't think of another example like that just in terms of the
3 scale, the magnitude, the scope.

4 And I also believe that, similar to Vietnam, this is an effort that we will continue to
5 engage in in terms of getting people out of Afghanistan in the same way that it took over
6 a decade for many of those who were left behind in Vietnam to get out, and it's
7 something that we'll continue to need to put resources into.

8 Yeah. I mean, earlier crises that I've experienced in my career were on a much
9 smaller scale. I was in Beijing, for example, when we bombed the Chinese Embassy in
10 Belgrade, and we were essentially under assault over the course of the next 3 days. A
11 nerve-wracking experience, especially for those who were there on the ground, but
12 certainly nothing of this magnitude.

13 I count myself lucky in the sense that I've never actually been at a post where a
14 large-scale evacuation in sort of extreme circumstances took place. I've been in
15 Baghdad twice. We've gone through drawdowns. I was always in positions where I
16 was determined to be essentially personnel that needed to stay behind.

17 So I've experienced my fair share of mini-crises, but, again, nothing on this scale.

18 Q Okay. And I want to ask with more specificity, you used the word
19 "extreme." Could you talk about what made this particular evacuation extreme as
20 compared to others?

21 A Yeah. In my view, there were several factors. Certainly the magnitude of
22 the evacuation. The timeframe under which it took place. The situation on the ground
23 at the time, because we were essentially operating out of a very small physical platform
24 at the airport, that that platform was under duress, as we saw tragically with the death of
25 multiple servicemen when the bombing took place.

1 It was incredibly challenging to, since the Taliban already controlled the city,
2 incredibly challenging to actually communicate with people that we wanted to assist in
3 exiting Afghanistan, let alone facilitating their movement to and into the airport.

4 And so there were just so many challenges on multiple levels.

5 And then, even once we got people out, the level of engagement that was
6 necessary at our various overseas sites, the personnel staffing requirements that were
7 involved in that. I mean, a lot of incredibly dedicated people stepped forward and did
8 really stellar jobs, in my view, in supporting that effort.

9 And I've talked with a lot of colleagues who have served in various ways, in various
10 aspects during that process, both in Kabul, at the lily pads, at the receiving end of the
11 United States for those who came to the United States in short order. It's left an impact
12 both positively and negatively. There are emotional issues that people are working
13 through and will be for some time, I believe.

14 Q Okay. Thank you.

15 I'm going to turn it to [REDACTED]. She has a few additional questions as well.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Hello again. I wanted to close out on a few cats-and-dogs topics that we
18 haven't had a chance to ask you about yet.

19 First of all, you did mention in your testimony previously that there were
20 challenges that the Department faced in defining who should be evacuated or who should
21 be targeted in your effort to get people out of Kabul. Is that accurate?

22 A Yes, it is.

23 Q Can you say more about those challenges?

24 A Yeah. It was a challenge of defining who we had, as the U.S. Government,
25 an ethical and moral responsibility to assist.

1 And then, beyond that, once you define the universe of those people, there were
2 two associated challenges, one being what sort of assistance would we then provide.
3 And the final challenge was simply assessing how large was that universe in practice,
4 because there were varying opinions from various parts of the U.S. Government about
5 how we should define that universe.

6 And I would say in general terms that those opinions were based on very noble
7 intentions, but those desires that came from the best places would often run up against
8 practical implications in terms of resources, in terms of ongoing commitment. And so
9 that was a major topic of conversation in many of those interagency discussions that I've
10 referenced.

11 We eventually came to, I think, largely an acceptable and -- "simple" is probably
12 not the best word. I think we finally came to a definition of who those people were in a
13 way that most people could accept.

14 And so we ended up with two basic programs. We had the existing SIV program
15 for those who qualified under the requirements of the SIV law. And then we had this
16 larger group of Afghans who could be identified and nominated through a U.S.
17 Government source as someone who met certain criteria to be referred for rapid
18 processing through the U.S. Refugee and Admissions Program, what we called our P1 and
19 P2 designations. And those were designations that were put in place in coordination
20 within the interagency largely by the Population, Refugees, and Migration Bureau.

21 But even once those universes were defined, it wasn't entirely clear to us how
22 many people we were talking about, because you couldn't predict beforehand how many
23 people would receive those types of referrals.

24 Q So is it fair to say the situation was very dynamic in terms of the debate
25 around who should be prioritized but also the people that were presenting themselves as

1 in need of USG assistance? Is that a fair characterization?

2 A It was incredibly dynamic, and it actually remains dynamic. To this day, I
3 know that there are discussions going on within the interagency about particular groups
4 and whether or not they should be provided assistance or not.

5 Q And notwithstanding the dynamic nature of this challenge, is it your
6 assessment that clear guidance was ultimately reached and disseminated for State
7 Department personnel to rely on over the course of the evacuation?

8 A By the time the evacuation took place, I think it's appropriate to say that
9 those broad definitions were fully in place.

10 Q And we've heard characterized by some other Department personnel their
11 understanding that the mission was ultimately to help as many eligible people as they
12 could.

13 Would you agree with that characterization of the mission?

14 A Yes. Yes, I would.

15 Q Were you aware of calls being made to the Department or Department
16 personnel directly by other U.S. Government officials asking for help in evacuating
17 specific people?

18 A I knew that was taking place.

19 Q And were you aware of such calls from Members of Congress or their staff?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And were you aware of such calls from outside groups?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Can you describe, broadly speaking, what you understood to be the scope
24 and nature of these sorts of requests?

25 A The scope was large and the nature was broad. There were calls being

1 made by various sources that various individuals needed to be helped, and those people
2 fell into a large number of categories.

3 Q And those categories may or may not have reflected what you described was
4 a painstaking effort to define priorities and who should be helped first?

5 A That's fair -- yes, that's correct.

6 Q What was your role, if any, in handling some of these special requests that
7 were coming in?

8 A I didn't really have a role. Those requests were largely funneled to the task
9 force personnel, and they were handled by the task force in various ways.

1 [12:27 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]

3 Q Okay. Are you aware of what impact these special requests and incoming
4 calls had on the task force's ability to accomplish its objective of helping as many people
5 as possible to leave the country.

6 A No, I'm not in a position to make that assessment.

7 Q Okay. Thanks. Let's pivot also to special immigrant visa processing. You
8 mentioned previously, I believe, that, particularly during the Operation Allies Refuge, the
9 focus of the Department was on identifying and assisting the relocation of eligible SIV
10 holders. Was that an accurate characterization?

11 A Yes, those who were at the -- who were nearing the final stage and had
12 already been assessed that they would qualify for an SIV but hadn't gone through the
13 final steps.

14 Q And what was your office's role, if any, in the processing of SIV applicants
15 through those stages?

16 A So we were deeply involved in discussions about how to facilitate the more
17 rapid processing of SIV applications. That started very early in -- those discussions
18 started very early in 2021. And we took multiple steps even before Operation Allies
19 Refuge took place to speed up processing. Concrete examples of the steps we took
20 included vastly increasing the number of people who were operating from Washington
21 within the SCA Bureau for what we called the chief of mission vetting stage. That was
22 originally a staff of 10. If I recall correctly, we added 30 personnel or more in very short
23 order to that staff so that we could push more people through that stage more quickly.
24 It included helping identify individuals who could go to Kabul to increase the number of
25 interviews that were taking place at that stage of the process. More broadly, it -- we

1 were involved in all kinds of discussions, both internal to the Department and within the
2 interagency to talk about where we could find greater efficiencies in putting people
3 through the stage of the process where they were doing security background checks. It
4 was really an across-the-board effort to find efficiencies wherever possible and make sure
5 that the resources were there to move forward under the requirements of the law.
6 Because there were certain things that, you know, you just had to do. They were
7 requirements based on the laws that was written. But, in some cases, we found ways to
8 significantly increase the speed with which the various steps in the process took place.
9 So, yeah, it was multifaceted, and it was comprehensive.

10 Q And would you characterize this multifaceted comprehensive effort as
11 having achieved some success in --

12 A Absolutely, yeah. Just purely based on the numbers, we saw a very rapid
13 increase of throughput in various stages of the process.

14 Q You described earlier that these discussions to improve SIV processing
15 started in 2021. Did they start before or after the change of administration?

16 A They started after.

17 Q And what was your understanding of SIV processing when you began in the
18 job on the Afghanistan desk in October 2020?

19 A When I began on the job, my understanding was that there was a
20 tremendous backlog in SIV application processing that was based on a number of factors.
21 Some of it related to resources. Some of it related to the pandemic and restrictions on
22 interviews, for example, in Kabul. And that was a pressing problem.

23 Q Can you say more about the restrictions that were related to resources?

24 A Only insofar that those resources that were in place were the resources in
25 place and that, given the resources, there's only so much that could be done at any given

1 stage in the process at that time.

2 Q Did you express to leadership in the prior administration any concerns about
3 insufficient resources for SIV processing?

4 A I did not specifically, no. I was aware of the issue, but it really wasn't my
5 place or position to do so.

6 Q And were you aware of the Office of Inspector General reporting on some of
7 the challenges in SIV processing that was released in 2020?

8 A Yes, I was.

9 Q But, to clarify your testimony, did you see any steps taken by the then Trump
10 administration to address some of these challenges in SIV processing?

11 A Not that I recall based on what I was seeing.

12 Q Did you get a sense that moving SIV applicants through the process so that
13 they could enter the United States was a priority for the Trump administration?

14 A I don't think I'm in a position to assess that.

15 Q But, based on your earlier testimony, the discussions to improve processing
16 started after the change of administration in 2021. Is it your assessment that the Biden
17 administration was prioritizing SIV processing in a way that had not been the case
18 previously?

19 A Yes, that is correct.

20 Q I think that's all I've got.

21 [REDACTED] anything else from you?

22 [REDACTED]. Nothing further. Thank you.

23 [REDACTED]. And, again, we're giving you 2 minutes back. That seems to be our
24 sweet spot.

25 And, again, thank you for the time that you've committed to be spend with us

1 today answering our questions. We very much appreciate it. And I know that it took
2 you away from probably a gorgeous late summer afternoon and evening in Stockholm.
3 So, with that, we'll close out this round.

4 [REDACTED] And let's go off the record.

5 [Discussion off the record.]

6 [Recess.]

1 [1:03 p.m.]

2

BY [REDACTED]

3

Q Let's go a little bit back to our questions in this sort of interview. I

4

apologize in advance if these questions appear redundant. However, for purposes of

5

the timeline, recordkeeping, these are all necessary. But I want to start with sort of the

6

conditions-base that we touched on previously in your testimony. Specifically, what was

7

your assessment of whether the Taliban was meeting the conditions of the Doha

8

agreement around the time of interagency review?

9

A My assessment was that they were meeting it only insofar that they had

10

refrained from attacks on U.S. military personnel and our partners. That they had not

11

fully met their commitments on the CT front. Yeah, that's essentially it.

12

Q What was your assessment of whether the Taliban were living up to the

13

commitment to cut ties with terrorist groups?

14

A My assessment was that they had not done so in a way that we considered

15

that they had fulfilled those commitments.

16

Q And what would that be based on?

17

A That was based on reporting that we saw.

18

Q How about your assessment on whether the Taliban was reducing violence

19

more generally against the Afghan population, including women and children?

20

A Our assessment was that they had not done that.

21

Q What was your assessment of the Taliban's commitment to engage in any

22

negotiations with the Afghan Government?

23

A Our assessment was that, though, they had begun the process, there was a

24

lot of what I would call intensive foot dragging on their part.

25

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

1 A No.

2 Q Did you believe the U.S. should adhere to the Doha agreement in your
3 professional opinion?

4 A In my professional opinion, we should adhere to it in its entirety. That
5 included holding the Taliban to their commitments.

6 Q Based on this sort of the various assessment, do you believe that a decision
7 to withdraw, including our military and ultimate evacuation, followed a conditions-based
8 approach?

9 A You're referencing conditions within the Taliban agreement?

10 Q Correct.

11 A Specifically?

12 Q Correct.

13 A I believe that the decision was based on an assessment of conditions related
14 to the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, related to the conditions with respect to
15 the situation with the Taliban and the threat that they imposed.

16 It did not fully conform to the Taliban-U.S. agreement reached in Doha in the
17 sense that it -- there wasn't a checklist approach that we would not withdraw until the
18 Taliban fulfilled particular commitments.

19 Q Did you believe the United States should reduce its military presence in
20 Afghanistan at the time of interagency review?

21 A Did I personally believe that?

22 Q Correct.

23 A I honestly was not fully decisive on that point, I saw pros and cons.

24 Q And why was that?

25 A Just based on my assessment of the reality of what happened, I saw valid

1 points on both sides of the argument and the discussion. And so, in that sense, I
2 personally was reserving judgment. I hadn't come to a conclusion yet.

3 Q Thank you. What course of action did the Afghan Government urge the
4 United States to take during that review?

5 A Well, the Afghan Government clearly wanted the troops to remain.

6 Q What course of action did NATO and our allied countries urge the United
7 States to take?

8 A That's not clear, actually. Varying countries had varying opinions. And I
9 think, in large part, they were waiting to see what the decision was and then would react
10 accordingly. But there wasn't any clear consensus among other countries about which
11 direction should be taken.

12 Q Which countries urged us to stay?

13 A I'm not in a position to say.

14 Q What did you assess the sustainability of the Afghan Government and
15 military to be without U.S. military presence in Afghanistan at the time of the review?

16 A Could you repeat that? It was garbled a little bit.

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

19 A My personal assessment was that they would be able sustain themselves at
20 least in the short term. I wasn't clear on what the long-term outcome would be.

21 Q What did you assess the likely political consequences within Afghanistan to
22 be if the U.S. military withdrew?

23 A Could you repeat that again? Sorry.

24 Q Of course. What did you assess the likely political consequences within
25 Afghanistan to be if the U.S. military withdrew?

1 A Political consequences in terms of the stability of the government?

2 Q The trust in the government, the stability of the government, et cetera.

3 A I think that the Ghani administration would have come under criticism and
4 pressure.

5 Q Can you please walk us through the sequence of events of the policy review,
6 sort of how this review was -- how this review was structured, how the import was
7 obtained, you know, the relevant actors, et cetera.

8 A Sure. I'll be repeating myself somewhat, but essentially fairly shortly, like a
9 week after the new administration was in place, an interagency meeting took place where
10 it became clear that this policy was going to -- policy review was going to happen; that
11 the objective of the policy review was to gather information and make assessments to
12 feed into the decisionmaking process by the White House on whether or not troops
13 would remain. And, if they did the part, at what point in time would they depart?
14 That was followed by a rapid number of follow-on interagency meetings where we
15 continued to discuss and assess all of the issues associated with that -- with those
16 possibilities. Those meetings happened frequently, at least once a week, sometimes
17 more; usually at the deputy's level, occasionally at the principal's level; with a significant
18 number of meetings to address specific questions that would arise within those more
19 senior-level meetings at a lower working level meet -- at a lower working-level format.
20 And then that continued really until the President announced his decision in April.

21 Q Were there any records of those meetings?

22 A Yes. Yes, ma'am. There was a record of every one of those meetings.

23 Q And are they then in the custody of the State Department, or is that
24 produced by the White House?

25 A Those documents would have been produced by the White House.

1 Q As part ultimately of the culmination of that review, what recommendations
2 did SCA make?

3 A We didn't make recommendations. That wasn't our role.

4 Q What about the Department?

5 A To what extent specific recommendations were made by senior-level leaders
6 within the Department. I wasn't privy to that.

7 Q Can you address the decision to remain in the Doha agreement; specifically,
8 to the best of your ability, what discussions surrounded that decision?

9 A Please repeat that.

10 Q Of course. Can you please address the decision to remain in the Doha
11 agreement or to adhere to it; specifically, what discussions surrounded that decision?

12 A I do not recall that there -- being a part of any specific discussion where it
13 was be a question of whether or not to remain in Doha agreement as the topic. It was
14 based on my recollection and assumption, quite frankly, that we would continue with that
15 process. I don't remember any sort of active discussion about withdrawing from it.
16 And the process of engagement by the Special Representative for Afghanistan
17 Reconciliation continued without pause with the shift in administration.

18 Q When was it clear the decision would be an unconditional withdrawal?

19 A It was clear that the troops would withdraw by a particular date when the
20 President announced it in April.

21 Q Was there any consideration given when the withdrawal would be during
22 the fighting season in Afghanistan?

23 A I'm certain that people were aware of that fact. How that factored into the
24 decisionmaking process, I couldn't state.

25 Q Was there ever a consideration of leaving the Doha agreement?

1 A Not that I am aware of.

2 Q Were options presented for the withdrawal timetable to change?

3 A As I recall, the only insofar that there were some discussions regarding the
4 ability of us to put in place necessary support structures to maintain a diplomatic
5 presence and whether or not that timeframe would allow for that. But I do not recall
6 any specific options being discussed or even recommendations being put forward in that
7 regard. And as things proceeded it became increasingly clear in my view that we were
8 going to be able to meet that timeline anyway. And so that as a topic of discussion
9 never really gained steam.

10 Q In the possibility of meeting that timeline, was the magnitude of evacuation
11 be considered?

12 A Meeting that timeline was not an evacuation scenario. Meeting that
13 timeline was a question of maintaining diplomatic presence, and an evacuation would not
14 have been necessary.

15 Q Around April 2021, SCA prepared a paper on options for resettlement of
16 Afghan foreigners in crisis. Do you recall what options this paper presented?

17 A Not specifically.

18 Q Did this paper present any recommendations?

19 A Again, I don't recall that paper, specifically, enough to tell you that.

20 Q Do you recall any chance what the context in which that paper was written?

21 A The context was that we were -- as I referred to earlier, we were doing an
22 ongoing assessment of the scope of the universe of Afghans that we would commit
23 ourselves to support and what sort of support we would provide. But as far as -- I don't
24 recall any specifics regarding that paper.

25 Q Thank you. Will you sort of address, just to confirm for the record,

1 throughout this process, throughout interagency review and its culmination, Ambassador
2 Khalilzad was engaging the Taliban and Afghan Government, correct?

3 A Yes, that's correct.

4 Q Are you aware what outcomes that yielded?

5 A It yielded agreement on the terms of reference for future discussions. And
6 there had been a commencement of earlier discussions between representatives, but on
7 a very slow pace.

8 Q Did these efforts affect the policy review in any way, the interagency review?

9 A They were certainly factors that were taken into account. As I stated
10 earlier, at the outset of every one of these interagency discussions, one of the agenda
11 items would be a presentation of the current status of ops in Doha presented by the
12 Office of the Special Representative.

13 Q And you noted that, on April 14th, when President Biden announced U.S.
14 would conditionally withdraw from Afghanistan by I believe it was September 11, 2021,
15 when did you first learn that that would be the President's course of action?

16 A On that date in April.

17 Q How did you learn of it?

18 A I don't actually recall. I don't know if I learned of it through the media or
19 through communication within the government. I don't recall.

20 Q What did you think of it?

21 A As I noted, I was of two minds about whether that was the appropriate
22 course of action. So honestly what I did was I took it into account and assessed what
23 that would require of the desk and what it would require of me and so forth.

24 Q Was that date then shared within SCA as well?

25 A There were varying opinions within the bureau.

1 Q How about your leadership?

2 A I'm not in a position to assess or speak for them.

3 Q How about throughout the Department of leadership?

4 A The same answer. I'm not in a position to assess that.

5 Q And what was the Afghan Government's reaction, if you can recall?

6 A They weren't pleased. I think they were hoping that the troops would
7 remain.

8 Q Were there any followup communications by the government to the
9 Department on that announcement?

10 A Yes, there were conversations that were had between representatives of the
11 government of Afghanistan and senior Embassy officials, other U.S. officials. Yes.

12 Q Were there any other requests for formal meetings?

13 A I don't recall. And I don't quite know how to define "formal." There were
14 meetings.

15 Q Do you know who those meetings were with?

16 A Oh, yeah, they were with -- some of the meetings were with President
17 Ghani. Some of the meetings were with his representatives within, you know, other
18 senior leaders within the Afghan Government.

19 Q So you're saying within the Department who they were with specifically?

20 A I don't recall any face-to-face meetings specifically. I do recall that there
21 were phone calls that took place between leadership.

22 Q Were you aware of what the Taliban's reaction to the President's
23 announcement was?

24 A I'm sure they were pleased, but I can't speak to that specifically.

25 Q How about those with NATO or allied countries?

1 A As I recall, the reaction was one of taking it on board as a decision by the
2 President, and that started a process of various conversations where people were seeking
3 more information. They were seeking to ensure that they latched up with the Embassy
4 in terms of its planning. Because they were all assessing what that would mean for their
5 own diplomatic presence moving forward.

6 Q Did any of them express surprise, shock, disappointment?

7 A Not that I recall.

8 Q Following the President's decision of the unconditional military withdraw,
9 what direction did SCA receive toward implementing that decision?

10 A As noted previously, the planning processes in those two tracts that I
11 referenced earlier, depending on how things worked out, continued. If anything, there
12 was an extra sense of urgency since we now had a date in place where we knew that we
13 needed to meet certain deadlines in order to make, for example, a continued diplomatic
14 presence possible. And, yeah, that's how I would assess it.

15 Q Based on my recollection, up until I believe July, the continued diplomatic
16 presence was a real option, correct, July of 2021?

17 A It was our assessment that it was a real option on base until the events in
18 August.

19 Q And what withdrawal plans were in place at the time of the decision to
20 withdraw? Specifically had any formal plan been formulated?

21 A Yes, but I can't speak to the contents of those plans. Those were military
22 plans.

23 BY ██████████:

24 Q Did the Department have access to them?

25 A Yes, they did. I didn't have a reason to see them, but I know that they were

1 shared with Embassy leadership, and I expect they were shared with other officials that
2 had a need to know.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q So, based on those planning efforts, I imagine that at [inaudible] instituted
5 across the government or broadly given through interagency efforts throughout, was the
6 Department meeting these efforts, or if not, who was?

7 A Which efforts are you referencing, specifically?

8 Q Following the decision to withdraw, but the plan then to whether it be
9 continuing diplomatic presence or a plan for a full-scale evacuation, who was leading
10 those efforts, or was it an equal effort throughout the government?

11 A So it was split. The State Department had primary responsibility for
12 determining what was necessary to maintain a diplomatic presence and to put in place
13 what was required accordingly. But there were also discussions in that regard that
14 touched upon the interagency process, because it continued to affect our interagency
15 partners, and they also had a role to play. In terms of the -- in terms of NEO planning,
16 noncombatant evacuation operation planning, the DOD was in the lead on that.

17 Q So, over the course of 2021, prior to the emergency evacuation, did any
18 Department official provide direction to U.S. Embassy Kabul to reduce its footprint and/or
19 staffing?

20 A Yes, at various times, adjustments were made in terms of overall staffing
21 levels.

22 Q We touched upon previously, but are you familiar with Acting Under
23 Secretary for Management Perez' visit to Afghanistan in April of 2021?

24 A Yes, I recall that. She was accompanied by Dean Thompson, I believe by
25 our -- what we call our EX director Rashna Kornoham (ph). She is the senior

1 management official within the SCA Bureau. There may have been others on that trip,
2 but that's what I recall.

3 Q To the best of recollection, what was the purpose of that visit?

4 A The purpose of the visit was to do an on-the-ground assessment to get eyes
5 on the situation in Kabul, the security situation at the Embassy, to have a fulsome
6 understanding of really what would be required to maintain an Embassy post troop
7 withdrawal.

8 Q And what was your understanding of the outcome of that trip?

9 A I think it better framed for Acting Under Secretary Perez and for bureau
10 leadership what the challenges specifically were and what needed to be done. And they
11 could envision in their minds firsthand exactly what was happening on the ground, what
12 the situation was, and what needed to be done.

13 Q What did they think needed to be done?

14 A They needed to find ways to mitigate the loss of support that came from the
15 U.S. military in various areas.

16 Q Did anyone else other than the individuals you mentioned visit Afghanistan
17 during that period until August 2021?

18 A Yes, there was a fairly constant stream of people going there primarily at the
19 working level, certainly in the consular field. There was a general caution that was in
20 place though regarding trips to Afghanistan, both because of the security situation and
21 because of the pandemic. And so you had to get specific authorization from senior
22 Department leadership before you were authorized to travel there.

23 Q Thank you.

24 [REDACTED] Did any other senior leaders, you know, Under Secretary Newland,
25 other, you know, any -- principals visit Afghanistan between the April announcement and

1 the evacuation.

2 Mr. Evans. Not that I recall.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q We briefly addressed the reduction in footprint that was -- that there was
5 some direction on that. Do you know when that came, how soon after Under
6 Secretary's visit to Afghanistan?

7 A I do not recall specifically, no.

8 Q Do you recall who provided this direction?

9 A Well, whenever there's a reduction in posture to any of our embassies,
10 there's a process that is undertaken. Sometimes that recommendation comes from the
11 post itself. Sometimes it comes from Washington. And there's a discussion, and they
12 work out an agreement about what's appropriate. Sometimes it's just a directive.
13 Again, I don't recall the specifics regarding reduction in posture over that time period.

14 Q Do you recall if it came from Acting Under Secretary Perez or if it didn't?

15 A I do not recall. She would have certainly been involved in that decision
16 process, though.

17 Q Did any official object to it?

18 A Object to a drawdown?

19 Q Correct. The reduction in footprint at the Embassy?

20 A No. Not that I recall.

21 Q Do you recall how Ambassador Wilson reacted to that?

22 A I do not recall.

23 Q Was the Embassy's footprint and staffing ultimately reduced?

24 A Well, yes and no. As I recall, the irony was that, even as we reduced people
25 who were permanently assigned in Kabul in order to put in place the necessary support

1 structures to maintain an Embassy posture post military withdrawal, it required sending a
2 series of TDY personnel who were there for short stints. And so, if I recall correctly, the
3 overall number of personnel at the Embassy remained largely static in practical terms.

4 Q Do you recall what the position on reducing the Embassy's footprint and
5 their staffing was?

6 A Not with any specificity at any given time, no.

7 Q How about Ambassador Ross Wilson, do you recall what his perspective was
8 on that one?

9 A No, not without referring to a specific set of circumstances at a given time.

10 Q When did you first get the impression that the situation on the ground in
11 Afghanistan was deteriorating and that the Taliban was making significant military gains?

12 A Probably sometime in the June timeframe.

13 Q What was your reaction to those rapid gains in June 2021?

14 A They were certainly concerning because they weren't good news. We did
15 know that a lot of the gains that were taking place were at that time in fairly remote
16 provincial areas where there was not a significant Afghan Government military presence.
17 I mean, there were Afghan soldiers in a lot of those places, but it was our assessment that
18 they were fairly isolated and weren't getting a lot of direct support. And so that's why
19 we saw in our assessment a series of rapid gains at that point in time by the Taliban
20 because they were focusing on what I would call the easy pickings, if you will, militarily.
21 And that was the early pattern that we were seeing.

22 Q Those gains continued in July 2021, correct?

23 A That's correct.

24 Q What actions did the Department take in response?

25 A Well, the Department and the U.S. military representatives in Afghanistan

1 engaged with Afghan Government and military leadership to lend support in the ways
2 that we could and at the same time giving strategic advice in terms of military strategy.
3 That would have come from CENTCOM and specifically the commander in the field and
4 his staff. So I know that those discussions were ongoing. Yeah.

5 Q And what was your impression of the Afghan national defense and security
6 forces during that period?

7 A My impression was that they were -- as noted earlier, they were extended
8 too far. But my understanding at that point in time was that they still had the majority
9 of their forces in major city centers and surrounding those cities. And so the
10 expectation and the analysis at that point in time was that the Taliban would run up
11 against increased resistance and that their advances at some point would slow down.

12 Q Did you believe that they could successfully hold off the Taliban in the
13 absence of the U.S. military?

14 A I'm not in a position to make that assessment.

15 Q Was that Afghan military successfully holding off the Taliban at that point?

16 A No.

17 Q Did others within the Department ever express concern that the Afghan
18 military would be able to hold the country without the U.S. Forces?

19 A Perhaps. I don't know.

20 Q Do you recall who may have expressed concerns?

21 A No.

22 Q Did anyone raise those concerns with you ever?

23 A No.

24 Q Did you follow military reporting and periodic updates on the situation in
25 Afghanistan during that period?

1 A Yes, I did.

2 Q What indicators did they show between April and August of 2021?

3 A As I stated earlier, the indicators were that the Taliban were making rapid
4 gains in the hinterlands where Afghan military presence was light. And the assessments
5 that I was reading at the time were that those advances would slow down as they
6 entered into more heavily fortified areas surrounding major cities in particular.

7 Q Without providing any classified details, do you recall intelligence
8 community reporting on the situation in Afghanistan during that period?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And, again, if it's not possible to do so without providing classified details,
11 please refrain from doing so, but what indicators did they show?

12 A I can only speak to that in very, very general terms. I think all I can say is
13 that there was a constant assessment and ongoing reassessment of what was being seen
14 and what those indicators implied in terms of future outcomes. And some of those
15 assessments -- well, all of those assessments also included estimates of timeframes for
16 various possible outcomes.

17 Q Did it indicate a stable or worsening situation in the country?

18 A Over time a worsening situation.

19 Q Mr. Evans, are you familiar with the July 2021 Dissent Channel cable sent by
20 State Department officials from U.S. Embassy Kabul?

21 A I'm aware of its existence. I have never seen it.

22 Q So, prior to understanding sort of the regional desk, you never had an
23 opportunity to read it?

24 A No, because Dissent Channel cables go through a very specific channel, and
25 they're very restricted in terms of senior level leadership.

1 Q Was the sense of it or the overall takeaway of the cable communicated to
2 you?

3 A No.

4 Q Was it ever communicated to SCA leadership?

5 A I don't know.

6 Q Did you ever receive a briefing on it?

7 A No.

8 Q When were you informed of it -- of its existence?

9 A I'm not sure, but well past August of that year.

10 Q Do you think it would have been beneficial to have had the opportunity to
11 look at it prior to them?

12 A Perhaps, but not knowing what's in it, I don't know.

13 Q Are you aware of to what extent the cable influenced Department
14 decisionmaking?

15 A No.

16 Q Are you aware if SCA took any action in response to the cable?

17 A No.

18 Q You previously noted that Ambassador Ross Wilson served as the chief of
19 mission throughout the withdrawal. How often did SCA engage with Ambassador
20 Wilson throughout the withdrawal?

21 A In this case, by "withdrawal" you are referencing what period of time?

22 Q So not the evacuation itself, but in a period between the President's
23 announcement continuing throughout the summer.

24 A Okay. Really on a daily basis in various forms there was daily
25 communication either by phone call, through emails. So, yes, on a daily basis.

1 Q What was discussed during those engagements?

2 A Oh, various things. The current situation in country, in Kabul. The
3 security situation. Communications with Afghan Government representatives. What
4 they were seeing on the ground in terms of inputs regarding what was going on in Doha,
5 in conversations with the Taliban. Really the full range of topics that the chief of mission
6 would be expected to cover.

7 Q What was your perspective on the U.S.' continued diplomatic presence in
8 Afghanistan?

9 A My personal perspective was that, if it could be maintained in a safe and
10 secure fashion, that it was something that was desirable because it would help us to
11 continue to promote our objectives in the country.

12 Q And Ambassador Ross Wilson's perspective?

13 A Oh, what was his perspective? I don't know. I couldn't say.

14 Q Did he ever express concern about the security situation and the ability to
15 continue operations?

16 A Yes, in the same way that everyone did because there were hurdles that we
17 had to overcome.

18 Q Mr. Evans, you're familiar, I can presume they asked you, given that we
19 discussed it at length, but you're familiar with what a noncombatant evacuation, or a
20 NEO, is, correct?

21 A Yes.

22 [REDACTED] I am going to introduce, I believe, it is exhibit 3 into the record.

23 [Evans Exhibit No. 3.

24 Was marked for identification.]

25

BY [REDACTED]

1 Q I need a moment. And this is an unclassified document that was pulled
2 from the DOD website that -- this is a memorandum of agreement between the
3 Department of State and the DOD which was in effect at the time of the withdrawal and
4 ultimate evacuation. And I can give you a moment to look there. But you are looking
5 ultimately at page 2. It's the parties' memorandum of agreement concerning the
6 respective goal and responsibilities, providing the protection and evacuation of U.S.
7 citizens, nationals, and designated other persons from threatened areas overseas. Let's
8 go to page 2. And you'll see in section C the various responsibilities that are outlined in
9 Doha between the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, and number two
10 being the Secretary of State.

11 So, up until this point from my recollection, we've been referring to NEO as a
12 DOD-led exercise. Correct.

13 A Yes.

14 Q And here it states: The Secretary of State will exercise overall
15 responsibilities for attaining objectives in section A and, except as noted in section C.3.b
16 [inaudible] shall, A, identify the offices within the Department of State having major
17 evacuation planning and implementation responsibilities; and, B, prepare plans for the
18 protection and evacuation of all U.S. citizens, nationals, and designated other persons
19 abroad, including Department of Defense noncombatants. These plans shall provide for
20 in-place welfare protection; evacuation to the United States or to other safe haven areas
21 and their welfare and protection in those areas in the event of in-place protection is not
22 feasible; coordination to maximize timely use of available military assets and existing host
23 nation support infrastructure.

24 So, based on this, I am correctly understanding that that responsibility lies with
25 the Department of State, correct?

1 A Yes.

2 Q And did you ever witness any of the plans for evacuation that the Secretary
3 prepared?

4 A Yes, I did because those plans -- for example, the Operation Allies Refuge
5 Operation that was referenced earlier -- and that was a precursor to the type of planning
6 that was taking place on an interagency basis, including involvement by the State
7 Department in terms of planning for what that would look like.

8 Q And were those plans shared with the Department of Defense at any point?

9 A Yes, absolutely, it was an interagency iterative process.

10 Q Thank you.

11 [REDACTED] And I would like to introduce exhibit 4 into the record.

12 [Evans Exhibit No. 4.

13 Was marked for identification.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q So this is a much longer document that pulled [inaudible] I don't want you to
16 have to look through the 200-plus pages. But I would like to represent that the provided
17 version of the Joint Publication 3-68 was in effect at the time of withdrawals, also an
18 unclassified document, and a revised draft submitted by the DOD on May 26, 2022. I'll
19 give you a little peek at it.

20 So I just want to clarify, Mr. Evans, during the NEO, am I correct in understanding
21 that the chief of mission, that would be Ambassador Wilson, not the geographic
22 combatant commander or the Joint Force commander, was the senior U.S. Government
23 official onboarding for the evacuation and as such responsible for successful completion
24 of the NEO?

25 A Yes, in the same sense that, under the Department of Defense and

1 Department of State understanding the chief of mission has authority within the country
2 except for specified exceptions, such as military operations. But, yes, in the case of a
3 NEO, that is my understanding.

4 Q Thank you. So, based on this, what was the basis for why we have
5 continued to refer to DOD as the lead on the NEO?

6 A Because there's a policy-defined role, and there's a pragmatic role. The
7 Department of Defense is responsible for conducting the NEO. They're the ones who
8 bring in the planes and the personnel and the equipment that's necessary to evacuate
9 people and then execute all phases of that evacuation until such time as people are
10 brought to a safe place outside of the country. And so all of the practical planning lies
11 with DOD for that very reason.

12 Q But the policy lies with the Department of State, correct?

13 A Yes, as defined by that document, in a practical sense, it lies with the
14 interagency because those decisions are taken in interagency consultation, including the
15 White House.

16 Q Ultimately, given those documents, if we were to look at sort of who the
17 ultimate authority would be, based on that, it would be Ambassador Ross Wilson,
18 correct?

19 A Yes, he's the chief of mission on the ground.

1 [1:52 p.m.]

2

BY [REDACTED]

3

Q Who ultimately decided that a NEO was necessary in Afghanistan?

4

A Senior leadership within the U.S. Government, but I couldn't specify which

5

individual and how that actual decision was reached. I will say that it was a pretty

6

obvious decision as of August 15th.

7

Q When did the possibility of -- the real possibility of requesting a NEO come

8

up?

9

A I don't know.

10

Q How likely of a possibility did you believe a NEO was, and when?

11

A Projected long-term, I thought it was a possibility.

12

Q When likely?

13

A Well, by definition, a NEO is something that happens in a true crisis situation

14

where the other options are not available.

15

And so I did not expect that Kabul would fall as rapidly as it did, and I thought that

16

there would be a period of time that we would have to mount a more measured

17

approach to an evacuation where we would not be in an extreme security situation.

18

And, therefore, in that scenario the State Department would actually have been in

19

charge of organizing it, chartering planes, getting people on those planes, and getting

20

people out. I thought that was the more likely scenario.

21

[REDACTED] How long did you think you had?

22

Mr. Evans. How long did I think I had for what?

23

[REDACTED] How long did you think that the timeframe was before that would be

24

a, I would say, significant likelihood of the need for a NEO?

25

Mr. Evans. Certainly months longer than we had in reality.

1 [REDACTED]. And when the NEO was ultimately commenced, was it being
2 executed off a preexisting plan?

3 Mr. Evans. Yes.

4 [REDACTED]. What was that plan?

5 Mr. Evans. It was the plans that had been put in place by CENTCOM.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q Were you involved in the formulation of that plan at all?

8 A I was involved to the extent that we were providing information on a
9 constant basis to the military. I was involved in some discussions and sort of tabletop
10 types of exercises where we were gaming out what the requirements would be and what
11 the roles would be. So, yes, I was involved.

12 But in terms of the actual pen-to-paper planning process, in terms of the
13 requirements, the resources, the equipment that was necessary, the number of
14 personnel, where they'd come from, et cetera, those planning processes resided with
15 CENTCOM.

16 Q Do you recall when the plan was formulated?

17 A Well, it was an ongoing process of formulating the plan that started, I think I
18 can safely say, at least by March of that year, 2021.

19 Q Were any exercises conducted based off the plan? I imagine other plans
20 existed as well.

21 A There were exercises that were conducted that looked at it in a broader
22 sense. There was the exercise in, I believe, March of that year that I referenced earlier
23 today that it was a very senior, Cabinet-level. Deputy for Management and Resources
24 Brian McKeon and Carol Perez represented the State Department. It took place on a
25 Saturday morning. I accompanied them and observed what happened during those

1 discussions.

2 I also personally participated in some smaller-scale discussions and tabletop
3 exercises over at the Pentagon in later weeks.

4 And so, yeah, that was all part of the planning process to help provide information
5 and identify things that needed to be addressed.

6 [REDACTED]. Did any of the tabletop exercises run through worst-case scenarios?

7 Mr. Evans. Yes. They were all based on worst-case scenarios, because they all
8 envisioned the need for some sort of military role in an evacuation, and that is a
9 worst-case scenario.

10 [REDACTED]. What were those scenarios?

11 Mr. Evans. Scenarios that entailed getting a lot of people out of Afghanistan in
12 very short order. And that was -- they were all based in one way or the other on a
13 deteriorating security situation.

14 [REDACTED]. Did the State Department ever put together a specific plan for
15 conducting a NEO with the Taliban controlling everything besides HKIA?

16 Mr. Evans. No. Number one, the State Department doesn't put those plans
17 together, CENTCOM does, as I've stated. So, no, they didn't. No one anticipated the
18 scenario that actually occurred, in my view.

19 [REDACTED] Was it considered the fact that when we left Bagram that would
20 leave HKIA as the only option for executing the NEO?

21 Mr. Evans. That was a little bit garbled. Could you say that again?

22 [REDACTED] When we left -- in the decision to leave Bagram, was it considered
23 that that would leave HKIA as the only avenue for a NEO?

24 Mr. Evans. I feel confident in stating that the planners were aware of that fact,
25 but I wasn't privy to any of those conversations specifically.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q Mr. Evans, I want to backtrack a little bit. It sounds like there were multiple
3 individuals, departments involved in this process. Was there an Afghanistan NEO
4 working group?

5 A There was what I would call an Afghanistan evacuation working group that I
6 pulled together in my Acting DAS role that pulled together, again, as I stated earlier,
7 leadership from the Consular Affairs Bureau, Administration Bureau, others in the
8 Department who would have a role in a State Department-led evacuation.

9 We also in those meetings discussed various information requests that were
10 coming from the Department of Defense for NEO planning and followed up on those to
11 ensure that the information was provided.

12 Q When was that group formulated, formed, again?

13 A I do not recall specifically. To the best of my recollection, it would have
14 been likely in May, sometime in May was the first time that it met.

15 Q And did the group produce any work product or any sort of deliverables?

16 A No, not per se. I mean, we did -- I did have somebody on the desk there
17 that took notes of the meetings and pulled together a list of action items after each
18 meeting to be followed up on.

19 Q And was DS represented in that group, again? I know you mentioned that
20 there were bureaus and offices.

21 A Yes.

22 [REDACTED] At the time that the working group was stood up, who was
23 represented in the working group?

24 Mr. Evans. I think I've answered that multiple times.

25 [REDACTED]. Was DS an original participant or was it only added later?

1 Mr. Evans. As I recall, it was an original participant.

2 ██████████. Mr. Evans, how adequate do you believe the planning and
3 preparation was?

4 Mr. Evans. I think in the end it was as good as we could have done. And I think
5 that the demonstration of that was the success in the execution of the evacuation
6 operation over the last 2 weeks of August.

7 ██████████ What do you think its major shortcomings were?

8 Mr. Evans. I couldn't say. That we didn't have a crystal ball about what was
9 actually going to happen in August.

10 ██████████ We have 20 seconds left. There won't be enough for that
11 question. So we'll stop here.

12 Can we go off the record?

13 [Discussion off the record.]

14 ██████████. We're back on the record.

15 BY ██████████

16 Q And, Mr. Evans, I'll start, and, again, with appreciation for your indulgence as
17 we just try to ensure that we have the cleanest possible record.

18 You had testified before that President Trump drew down U.S. troops in 2020 and
19 early 2021 without regard for whether or not the Taliban was complying with the Doha
20 deal, correct?

21 A That is my opinion, yes.

22 Q And you testified that this reduced the Taliban's likeliness to ever seek to
23 comply fully with the terms of the Doha deal, and you noted your belief that they never
24 fully did comply with those terms, correct?

25 A Yes, that's my assessment.

1 Q So based on that, in your view, were the efforts to withdraw U.S. troops
2 undertaken from 2020 through August 2021 ever, in practice, fully or exclusively
3 conditions-based?

4 A No.

5 Q And you testified earlier your belief that had President Biden reneged on
6 completing a full withdrawal in 2021 that the Taliban would renew attacks on U.S.
7 personnel, correct?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And that would make American personnel less safe, yes?

10 A That's correct.

11 Q Is the safety and security of Americans a compelling U.S. foreign policy
12 interest, in your view?

13 A Absolutely.

14 Q Should the Commander in Chief consider the safety and security of
15 Americans in his or her decisionmaking?

16 A Always.

17 Q And is the safety and security of Americans a more compelling U.S. foreign
18 policy interest than what an ally or partner government thinks or wants?

19 A Yes, I would say so.

20 Q And in this case, was it a more compelling interest than even what the
21 Afghan Government may have wanted?

22 A Yes. I think in the end we need to do what is appropriate for our own
23 government, the interests of our own people.

24 [REDACTED] Okay. That's all I've got.

25 [REDACTED] over to you.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q I want to briefly touch upon the topic of the dissent cable. You had
3 mentioned that you did not review it. That's correct?

4 A That's right.

5 Q And is that because, in part or full, it's intended to be a narrowly distributed
6 document?

7 A It's specifically because of that. There's a very directed process that when
8 a dissent channel is sent it goes through particular channels to the Secretary and not to
9 other people.

10 Q And so is that guidance stipulated in the Foreign Affairs Manual?

11 A It's certainly stipulated somewhere. If it's in the FAM, as we call it, that
12 would make sense. I don't know.

13 Q So maybe a better question is, you said there is guidance related to dealing
14 with a dissent channel cable. Where is this guidance received? How do you internalize
15 that guidance?

16 A I believe that it is widely understood within the State Department that a
17 dissent channel cable goes through particular -- a very specific distribution, then it goes
18 directly to the Secretary, that the vast majority of those in the State Department will
19 likely never see it unless there's a specific reason they need to.

20 Q Okay. And so in your assessment, is a private, safe channel for internal
21 dissent important?

22 A Yes, absolutely.

23 Q Why?

24 A Because it's a system that is designed to promote confidence among those
25 who want to dissent that they are going to be able to express their views to senior

1 leadership within the Department knowing with confidence that it will reach them, that it
2 will be read, that it will be considered, and that it won't be subject to broader distribution
3 in ways that it might get to the media, in terms of content, or other places where people
4 wouldn't want it to go.

5 Q So, by extension, is it fair to say you found it appropriate that you were not
6 in receipt of the dissent channel cable in question?

7 A Yes, I found it appropriate, and I never had any expectation that I would see
8 it even after I learned of its existence, which, again, was after the events in August.

9 Q Understood.

10 BY [REDACTED]

11 Q Just one quick follow-up on that.

12 Regardless of whether you saw the dissent channel cable, which you testified that
13 you didn't, is it your testimony that there was a robust and healthy dialogue inside the
14 Department about the withdrawal and the evacuation as they were unfolding?

15 A Yes.

16 Q And do you believe that that robust dialogue and debate helped contribute
17 to better outcomes?

18 A Yes, I do.

19 Q Thank you.

20 [REDACTED]. Just in closing, we'd like to offer you an opportunity to share with
21 the committee anything about your experience related to the withdrawal and/or
22 evacuation, your experience within the Department at that time, just a very broad,
23 open-ended question if there's any additional information that hasn't been covered that
24 you would like to share.

25 Mr. Evans. I think I would simply say that, personally, I remain satisfied with the

1 efforts that were put forward by not only the staff that I supervised, but everyone that I
2 interacted with in the Department.

3 I believe that people across the board acted in good faith. They represented
4 their views robustly. There were active conversations that took place about various
5 aspects, various challenges, various decisions that had to be made. That's the way the
6 system is designed, and it's entirely appropriate and expected.

7 When there are any divisions at any time, you either work it out at that level or, if
8 need be, you push it upward, and senior leaders make decisions based on the inputs that
9 those sources provide.

10 In the case of all of this planning that took place in those two streams that I
11 referenced multiple times, we did our absolute best to meet leadership's needs, to
12 provide the inputs that were requested in a timely fashion and in an accurate fashion.
13 And I remain satisfied that we did, indeed, do our best.

14 If we'd had that crystal ball that I referenced a short time ago, perhaps we -- well,
15 I'm sure we would have done some things differently. We didn't.

16 When it happened in August as rapidly as it did in terms of the fall of Kabul, there
17 was, honestly, a broad-based level of dismay, some shock, certainly a large degree of
18 surprise. But then people went to work and responded in the best way they possibly
19 could given those remarkably difficult circumstances.

20 [REDACTED] Thank you. You know, while we reserve the right to ask some
21 follow-up questions in our next round, we do want to take the opportunity to thank you
22 very much for your service. It's great to hear that you feel satisfied in that planning,
23 helped deliver it, communication was organized and effective. Those are all great things
24 to hear. We thank you for your voluntary testimony on behalf of Ranking Member
25 Meeks and the minority staff here today.

1 So, with that, the minority concludes its round, and we can go off record.

2 Thanks.

3 [Recess.]

4 ██████████. We're back on the record.

5 BY ██████████:

6 Q So, Mr. Evans, let me go back to where we last left off, where the majority
7 left off, and go back to planning and preparation. I had last asked you what you thought
8 the major shortcomings were.

9 I want to follow up with, do you feel that you had the ability to suggest, plan, and
10 execute things differently in your role as Acting DAS?

11 A Would you repeat that one more time?

12 Q Of course.

13 A I want to make sure I understand it.

14 Q So following the announcement of the withdrawal and as the summer was
15 progressing, do you feel that you had the ability to suggest, plan, and execute things
16 differently?

17 A If you're asking did I have the ability to put suggestions into full
18 consideration, yes.

19 Q Did you have the ability to request more time?

20 A More time for what specifically?

21 Q More time with withdrawal, to extend the date of the full military
22 withdrawal, to allow for the evacuation to proceed.

23 A Yes, I believe I had that option. I never did because, as I noted earlier, as
24 late spring, early summer progressed I was increasingly confident that we would be able
25 to meet the requirements necessary to maintain an embassy.

1 ██████████ What was that based on?

2 Mr. Evans. That was based on the very real, practical progress that we were
3 seeing in all of those identified areas on a weekly basis and the amount of attention and
4 resources that was being put toward meeting those challenges.

5 BY ██████████

6 Q That was despite the June and July Taliban gains?

7 A Well, that was a backdrop. But the discussions I think regarding making
8 sure that we were prepared to maintain an embassy, that was a separate discussion in
9 the sense that we were aware of Taliban gains, but the assessment at that time was still
10 that Kabul would remain secure for the foreseeable future.

11 Q In publicly released sections of its After Action Review, the Department
12 found that there was insufficient senior-level consideration of worst-case scenarios and
13 how quickly those might follow.

14 Why do you think the Department -- in your professional opinion, why do you
15 think the Department was deficient in anticipating being prepared for the worst-case
16 scenario?

17 A I think because of the inputs that we were getting from other places within
18 the government and what those assessments were in terms of estimates of future
19 outcomes and when those might occur and might not occur.

20 Q What could the Department have done differently?

21 A In hindsight, I think the Department could have been more aggressive
22 in -- well, there's a thing that we reference, red teaming possible outcomes, and when
23 those things might occur.

24 The objective, if you're not familiar with a red team approach, is to basically put a
25 team in the role of placing before you the most negative outcomes, as improbable as they

1 might be, so that you can then consider everything that is necessary in response to those
2 challenging situations.

3 I think we could have done a better job, in hindsight, in taking that sort of
4 approach.

5

BY [REDACTED]

6 Q So members of the DOD have expressed frustration at the unwillingness of
7 the State Department to plan for a potential NEO early enough as the security situation
8 deteriorated in Afghanistan.

9 Why do you think members of the DOD assert this?

10 A I will give you my personal opinion on that. My personal opinion is that
11 statements made by various DOD leaders after August of that year were in some respects
12 an attempt to displace responsibility, because it is not my view that the State Department
13 was deficient in the ways that they claimed.

14 Q All right. Did you take part -- do you believe -- are you saying that DOD was
15 deficient?

16 A No, I'm not saying that either. But what I'm saying, that in an atmosphere
17 where various parties, including in the media, are attempting to place responsibility or
18 assign responsibility, there is an instinct, in my view, which is unfortunate, which is often
19 to shift blame elsewhere.

20 Q Did you take part in or were you aware of any internal meetings at State and
21 with the DOD regarding the decision to shut down Bagram and leave HKIA as the only
22 serious option for conducting a NEO?

23 A I sat in meetings where the timeline for the military withdrawal was
24 presented by CENTCOM leadership, and they were very detailed in terms of timelines that
25 they saw as necessary to withdraw troops by the date specified by the President.

1 That included the closure of Bagram at a particular stage in that withdrawal. And
2 so that was part of the process that they were -- had both planned for and were
3 implementing.

4 They did raise with interagency leadership the fact that once Bagram was closed
5 that their resources on the ground would be lessened compared to beforehand, and they
6 talked about the challenges that that would pose. That was really the extent of those
7 discussions that I recall.

8 Q And, to the best of your knowledge, do you know when the decision to shut
9 down Bagram was made and by whom?

10 A I don't know, because that was part of that planning process taken by
11 CENTCOM and in terms of the timeline that they had to follow. So I wasn't privy to that
12 when it happened.

13 Q And what did you think about the decision to conduct the NEO through HKIA
14 instead of Bagram?

15 A I wouldn't call it a decision, frankly, because by definition a NEO is something
16 that happens in a crisis situation and in this case certainly based on circumstances that
17 people did not anticipate.

18 So there wasn't ever a decision per se. The reality was simply that at the time
19 the Taliban took over Kabul, that was the situation on the ground and we didn't have
20 those resources available anymore.

21 ██████████ I just want to clarify one point. We previously discussed the
22 worst-case scenarios. So the situation that transpired was not anticipated?

23 Mr. Evans. No.

24 BY ██████████

25 Q Did anyone raise any concerns about conducting the NEO through HKIA?

1 A Only insofar as I just mentioned, that the military, CENTCOM specifically,
2 shared the limited -- well, the difference in resource availability once Bagram was closed.

3 Q Are there specific people who shared those concerns with you?

4 A They didn't share them with me directly. They were shared in the context
5 of broader interagency meetings with senior officials.

6 Q Can you elaborate at all on the decisionmaking process that led to the
7 decision to request the NEO?

8 A I mean, there is a formal process that goes on in terms of a transfer of
9 documents between the State Department and DOD that basically officially kicks off the
10 NEO. The deliberative process that leads up to that I wasn't privy to at the time.

11 Q Did Department leaders ever communicate to you directly that a NEO was
12 going to be requested?

13 A Not before it had already been done, no.

14 Q State's publicly released AAR admits that the NEO planning process was,
15 quote, "hindered by the fact that it was unclear who in the Department had the lead."

16 Why do you think this was unclear?

17 A I don't know what that assessment was based on, so I don't know how to
18 answer that.

19 Q Okay. Do you know who ended up having the lead?

20 A No, I don't, because I wasn't there at the time when those decisions were
21 made.

22 Q State's AAR also stated that a major challenge for the NEO planning was that,
23 quote, "Senior administration officials had not made clear decisions regarding the
24 universe of at-risk Afghans who would be included by the time the operation started nor
25 had they determined where those Afghans would be taken."

1 Do you know who these senior administration officials were?

2 A No, not specifically, though I would certainly include those people who were
3 present in those interagency meetings where those topics were discussed.

4 Q Do you know why it took so long to make those decisions?

5 A Yes. Because it was tremendously difficult to, first, accurately assess what
6 numbers we were talking about, depending on how you defined the world of at-risk
7 Afghans. That had practical implications moving forward.

8 By the time of August, we had, though, reached conclusions, in my view, that were
9 very definitive with respect to certainly SIV-eligible individuals and their family members,
10 and also those that were deemed eligible through the P1/P2 referral program to the U.S.
11 Refugee Admissions Program.

12 And the discussions had gone far enough to also, in that respect, eliminate certain
13 groups that some in the U.S. Government would want to include, based on prior
14 association.

15 I mean, I can give you an example of that, a very specific example, which would
16 be, how far do you extend contractual relationships that USAID had on the ground? Do
17 you limit Afghans at risk to those who had the primary contractual relationship as a
18 partner with USAID or do you extend it to every possible Afghan subcontractor to those
19 groups?

20 That's why defining that group was so difficult, because there were varying
21 opinions coming from various parts of the U.S. Government depending on their own
22 individual agency experiences in Afghanistan.

23 The clear, understandable inclination is to be as expansive as you possibly can be,
24 because we're talking about people's lives. But then you run up against practical
25 considerations of resources, the long-term commitment of legal authorities,

1 requirements, and so on.

2 And so even though we were I think very far down the road and we had largely
3 defined who those people were, that was an iterative process that wasn't complete. I
4 agree with the AAR's assessment in that regard. And I would argue that it's not
5 complete today.

6 I'm no longer in the Afghanistan policy world, but I do know that there are
7 ongoing conversations about one group in Afghanistan or another where some are
8 arguing we should assist them, and those are tough decisions to make.

9 Q Can you please walk us through your involvement and role in the emergency
10 evacuation in August 2021?

11 A My role in that actual operation was limited to a support role, to really doing
12 whatever the task force needed us to do in whatever sense they needed it done, whether
13 that was working with foreign officials to answer questions, provide information,
14 briefings, whether it was working through internal issues in the Department that they
15 wanted assistance from us.

16 Really, at that point, in those 2 weeks, the task force really was in the lead on all of
17 those things and we were supporting them.

18 Q And what agreements did the U.S. Government reach with the Taliban as the
19 situation deteriorated in August 2021?

20 A So, in some cases, I would call them agreements. In other cases, I would
21 call them stipulations on our part.

22 We sent a very strong and clear message to the Taliban that they were not to
23 interfere with our operations at the airport as we were getting people out, that they were
24 not to directly attack the airport or our personnel, and that if they did that there would
25 be a response.

1 So that wasn't an agreement. That was just simply something that we informed
2 them of, and they took it seriously.

3 We also over the course of those 2 weeks, in various circumstances at various
4 times, though, had communication with the Taliban to try and facilitate the movement of
5 people through Kabul to the airport in a safe fashion. I mean, broadly speaking, that's
6 where our focus was.

7 Q And do you know if the State Department paid any money to the Taliban
8 throughout the course of the evacuation?

9 A Not to my knowledge, no.

10 Q Was Secretary Blinken in contact with the Taliban?

11 A I do not believe so directly, no.

12 Q Do you know which State officials were?

13 A Most of that communication took place in Doha through the channels that
14 had already been set up through the Special Representative's efforts.

15 Q Are you aware of any interaction between the U.S. and the Haqqanis?

16 A No.

17 Q What do you believe the relationship to be between the Taliban and
18 Haqqanis?

19 A I mean, you could argue that the Haqqanis are part of the Taliban. They
20 are a distinct part in the sense of history and so on, but a very close relationship.

21 Taking into account that the Taliban is not a monolithic organization itself, there
22 are various factions and groups within the Taliban that are ascendant or not in various
23 aspects.

24 Q Then you'd disagree with the State Department stating that they believe that
25 they are -- that the Haqqanis and the Taliban are separate entities?

1 A I am not a CT expert on the same level as many are. I just shared my
2 personal opinion.

3 Q Do you have any knowledge or insight into why the U.S. chose not to take
4 security control of Kabul during the evacuation and, instead, allowed the Taliban to do
5 so?

6 A That would have been a military judgment. I personally don't believe that,
7 from what I heard and understood, that we had the resources there to do so, that that
8 would have been a very difficult objective, if not impossible, under the circumstances.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Do you have any insights into the SRAR's activity during August 2021 and, in
11 particular, the period in which the evacuation was occurring?

12 A They, the SRAR, continued to talk with the Taliban. The focus shifted
13 during that period to communicating messaging from the U.S. Government that touched
14 upon our requirements in Kabul at the time.

15 Q What were our requirements in Kabul at the time?

16 A Facilitating the safe passage of people that we wanted to provide assistance
17 to to the airport to get them out of Afghanistan. That was the primary objective. And
18 that was particularly true of U.S. citizens.

19 Q And once the Taliban began nearing Kabul and once the government was
20 clearly imperiled, what actions did State take to address the situation?

21 A Those events happened very rapidly. And in some ways, we were
22 monitoring developments. There was certainly communication with the Ghani
23 government up until the point that he fled, and engagement, both in terms of a
24 diplomatic -- in terms of diplomatic engagement and also military engagement.

25 At a certain point in time, it became clear that what happened was going to

1 happen --

2 Q What was --

3 A -- and that the Taliban -- huh?

4 Q What was the time would you say that was?

5 A Sometime in the 24 to 48 hours before Ghani fled.

6 ██████████ Are you aware if President Ghani was told by the U.S.
7 Government to stand down?

8 Mr. Evans. No, I'm not aware of that, and I don't believe that was the case.

9 BY ██████████

10 Q What message -- what engagements was the United States having with the
11 Afghan Government in the days leading up to the fall of Kabul?

12 A I'm not in a position to say, nor would I care to speculate, because I wasn't
13 directly privy to those conversations and the developments happened fast enough that I
14 can't even claim to be aware of that.

15 Q And who would be the officials who were engaging in those discussions?

16 A Certainly senior leaders on the ground in the embassy and within our
17 military command in Afghanistan. Certainly Ambassador Khalilzad in Doha and through
18 other channels. Beyond that, I simply don't know.

19 Q And in July of 2021 there was a significant deterioration in the
20 Afghanistan -- in the Afghan Government's position militarily. Is that correct?

21 A Yes, that's correct.

22 Q What steps did the Department or the whole-of-government take to adjust
23 the plans for the military departure in response to that?

24 A There were no adjustments made.

25 Q Why was that?

1 A Because the assessment remained that Kabul would remain secure for the
2 foreseeable future.

3 Q And you don't believe that the deterioration of conditions on the ground
4 raised an immediate concern that there's a situation that needed to be addressed?

5 A Needed to be addressed in what sense?

6 Q That the conditions were deteriorating in an unanticipated way and that the
7 Department needed to engage in a response to address that to ensure that disaster was
8 avoided.

9 A I'll -- you've just gone off camera for me. So anyway.

10 No. It's my view that the assessment across the board was, in terms of
11 everything we were hearing in those interagency meetings, et cetera, was that Kabul
12 would remain secure for the foreseeable future, that we should continue to proceed with
13 our planning as we had done so. There was not discussion of shifting timelines in any
14 way.

15 And I think that the strongest indicator of just how much a surprise it was to
16 everyone, as far as I can tell, when the Taliban did take over as rapidly as it did, is that if
17 you go back and you look at the emails that were being sent between U.S. Government
18 officials up to a day or two before the Taliban takeover, there was really no clue that that
19 was what was impending.

20 And so it truly was something that happened so rapidly that people were taken off
21 guard and surprised by it.

22 BY ██████████ :

23 Q Ambassador Bass was sent to Afghanistan around mid to late August 2021,
24 correct?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Was he there as a co-chief of mission?

2 A I don't know exactly what his title capacity was at that time.

3 Q Did it seem unusual to send a second ambassador to the country in a senior
4 role in August 2021?

5 A It didn't seem unusual to me, because knowing John Bass, he had previously
6 been chief of mission in Afghanistan. He had that base of experience. And he also is
7 an incredibly capable senior officer within the management structure of the State
8 Department and brought to play, accordingly, a tremendous amount of practical
9 knowledge and experience that was of great use at that time.

10 Q So was it always part of the plan to send in a second ambassador or to send
11 in Ambassador Bass to Afghanistan?

12 A No, it wasn't always part of the plan.

13 Q When did you first learn of that decision?

14 A I don't recall specifically. Very shortly after he departed or about the time
15 he departed.

16 Q Did Ambassador Wilson seem to be a strong leader as chief of mission?

17 A Yes, in my view.

18 Q Do you know if Ambassador Bass was sent in because of concerns
19 surrounding Ambassador Wilson's capability during the evacuation?

20 A No, I can't speak to that. I don't know.

21 Q You don't believe there were any concerns about Ambassador Wilson's
22 capabilities in the lead-up to the evacuation?

23 A Not that I ever picked up on, no.

24 [REDACTED]. What vacuum was Ambassador Bass filling in that Ambassador
25 Wilson wasn't already performing?

1 Mr. Evans. I'm sorry. Repeat that, please.

2 [REDACTED] What responsibilities or vacuum was Ambassador Bass filling in
3 that Ambassador Wilson, as chief of mission, wasn't already performing in his capacity as
4 the head of embassy?

5 Mr. Evans. I don't know. I also don't know if the premise of the question is
6 accurate, that there were vacuums. I just don't know.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q So what did you understand to be the division of responsibility between
9 Ambassadors Wilson and Bass?

10 A I don't know, actually, because the dealings with them in those 2 weeks took
11 place through the task force. And, as I've stated earlier, I wasn't part of that day-to-day
12 operation.

13 Q Who did you understand to be in charge during the evacuation, Ambassador
14 Wilson or Bass?

15 A I don't know. I simply don't know. If there was -- I don't know if there
16 was a clear instruction given or not in terms of one person being superior to another or if
17 this was a cooperative relationship or if they worked in shifts. I don't know how it
18 operated.

19 Q Do you know if Ambassador Wilson was supportive of the decision to send
20 Ambassador Bass to Afghanistan?

21 A I don't know.

22 [REDACTED]. You mentioned, again, the task force. Could you give us a little
23 more clarity on kind of the different roles and divisions of responsibilities of SCA and the
24 task force when it came to Afghanistan during the evacuation and when that started and
25 how long did that continue?

1 Mr. Evans. Well, the focus of the task force was the evacuation operations.
2 They managed every aspect of that operation from the departure of people from
3 Afghanistan to the lily pads and onward. We acted in a support role to the task force in
4 whatever way that we were called upon in those efforts.

5 At the same time we were also, though, having discussions internally within the
6 bureau, within the desk as well, about what it would mean going forward dealing with an
7 Afghanistan that was controlled by the Taliban.

8 And so we started having initial discussions about that. And that was in response
9 to questions that were being posed in that regard, information that was being requested
10 from leaders within the bureau and leaders within the Department, because it was an
11 open question. What was that going to look like moving forward? How could we
12 manage it most effectively?

13 And so there were policy decisions that we were already anticipating would come
14 our way. But really during that 2-week period the primary focus was on the evacuation
15 efforts and whatever we could do in support of those efforts.

16 ██████████ And I want to return to something that you said earlier when you
17 mentioned that with regard to the deteriorating conditions on the ground and that was
18 not what you were hearing within the interagency.

19 Who were you hearing the inputs from in the interagency that led you to believe
20 that?

21 Mr. Evans. Yeah. The primary responsibility for those types of assessments
22 was within the intel community.

23 BY ██████████

24 Q What was SCA's role in consular operations related to the withdrawal,
25 including providing visas for Afghan partners and at-risk Afghans as well as consular

1 operations during the emergency evacuation?

2 A Very little. Those responsibilities remained within the Consular Affairs
3 Bureau.

4 Q And did Consular Affairs engage with SCA on matters relating to the
5 withdrawal?

6 A Yes, primarily in the realm of ensuring ongoing staffing needs were met,
7 particularly at the various lily pad locations that we had set up.

8 Q Did they engage with you specifically on those matters?

9 A No. The staffing issues specifically, they were engaging with the
10 management side of the SCA Bureau primarily.

11 Q And so earlier we discussed the paper SCA prepared on the resettlement of
12 at-risk Afghans. Can you please speak to SCA's overall role on this issue?

13 A Our role on that particular issue was to really provide information and
14 assessments, as tasked by the interagency, within the interagency meetings that took
15 place.

16 Q So what other bureaus and/or offices in the Department were responsible?

17 A I mean, there were a number of offices within the Department that had
18 viewpoints based on their own interests within Afghanistan, their experience in
19 Afghanistan, and their activities there.

20 But I would say that there was fairly broad consensus in terms of who we had an
21 absolute duty to support and help in terms of Afghans at risk. That started with those
22 who directly worked for the State Department at our facilities in Afghanistan, both
23 including those that had established eligibility for SIVs and were current employees as
24 well.

25 So depending on who those individuals were, they were associated with various

1 parts of the Department, such as Consular Affairs.

2 Overall, though, our role was more focused on engaging with other parts of the
3 U.S. Government in terms of collecting information from them about their views on who
4 should be included in that definition, ensuring that we shared that information with
5 Department leadership so that when we went into those interagency discussions they
6 were fully informed and, where we felt appropriate, had views to share.

7 Q Who were the key individuals involved on that issue?

8 A The lead individual in the Department on the issue of the broader questions
9 of Afghans at risk was the Department -- the deputy for management and resources,
10 Brian McKeon.

11 And that I think was by virtue of the fact that those who had responsibility for
12 really implementation of finding those efficiencies in the SIV process fell under his
13 purview. He had been deeply involved in that. And then that evolved into broader
14 discussions of how we would define other groups that we had reason to support.

1 [2:58 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q And what plans were formulated related to this issue, and how did those
4 plans change over time?

5 A Well, it was very clear at the outset that we had a duty to support and help
6 SIV-eligible individuals and their families, and then, over time, that we discussed all kinds
7 of possible ranges of who we would define as those at risk. I mean, that could be as
8 broad as all women in Afghanistan, or obviously much narrower than that. And
9 so -- and then you got into questions of specific sub groups that we felt would be targeted
10 by the Taliban for various reasons. So, you know, if you couldn't help all women in
11 Afghanistan, then perhaps you would've wanted to include all female members of the
12 Afghan military because of the way that the Taliban thought about them.

13 And so all of those discussions were taking place, you know, how do you define
14 those groups, and then on a practical level what should our commitment look like in
15 terms of the practical assistance that we can and should provide. And so, you know,
16 was that going to be active evacuation assistance, a commitment to do that moving
17 forward, was that going to be -- and then, on top of that, what sorts of processes and
18 benefits would apply to them, and that's where we ended up through the Population,
19 Refugees, and Migration Bureau defining the parameters of the P-1/P-2 designation
20 program to make people eligible for it on processing through the U.S. refugee admissions
21 program. So that's how those discussions evolved.

22 Q And, when the emergency evacuation itself occurred, was the Department
23 operating off of an existing plan?

24 A Regarding Afghans at risk in the definition? Is that what you're asking?

25 Q Yeah.

1 A We were not operating off of an existing plan as much as I would say we
2 were operating off of parameters that had been put in place based on those discussions
3 and where we had arrived in terms of who we were committed to provide assistance to.

4 Q When -- do you know when that was determined?

5 A SIVs was clear from the outset. In terms of the P-1/P-2 program, I think
6 that was largely in place by sometime in June, if I recall correctly.

7 Q Did SCA play any role in determining which populations were eligible to be
8 evacuated?

9 A No.

10 Q Was SCA involved in determining which segments of the Afghan population
11 were considered at risk?

12 A Yes, we were involved in all of those discussions on an interagency basis.

13 Q Was SCA involved in the evacuation of senior government officials or other
14 prominent Afghans?

15 A Not directly, no.

16 Q Was SCA involved in assessing what the acceptable documentation should
17 be in order to get out of the country?

18 A No.

19 Q Did SCA have a role in providing input on a number of consular officers on
20 the ground in the months leading up to the planned military departure?

21 A That wasn't an SCA-based decision; that was a decision taken in coordination
22 between the Embassy, its leadership, consular officials in the consular section in the
23 embassy, and the Consular Bureau at the State Department. But that was also a matter
24 of discussion in terms of frankly a more senior-level assessment of how many people
25 could effectively be used in that role because of resource limitations, the number of

1 interview windows, things like that.

2 Q And did SCA play a role of providing input into consular operations at all
3 during the evacuation?

4 A No.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q It was suggested that the Afghans who were airlifted out of Kabul were
7 individuals without ties to the U.S. while many of our Afghan allies were left behind. Do
8 you believe this to be correct or incorrect?

9 A Absolutely, to some extent, it is correct.

10 Q How so?

11 A What was that?

12 Q How so? So why do you think that?

13 A Because I am aware that there were some individuals that got onto those
14 airplanes under those crisis circumstances that didn't meet the criteria that we were
15 working from, or those parameters, as I put it a short time ago, that we were working
16 from, and that just represented the situation on the ground. It was a matter of filling
17 airplanes to those who initially especially had been able to make their way because they
18 were fearful of the Taliban. I do think that as days passed we got better at filtering
19 people through, but that was a process. It wasn't something that immediately occurred.

20 Q Given the limitations of sort of, I don't want to use the word "tracking," but
21 reporting requirements of American citizens overseas, do you also believe it's likely that
22 American citizens were left behind?

23 A I know that there were some American citizens who didn't depart during
24 that period, in many cases because they chose not to. They specifically communicated
25 that for their own personal reasons, whether it was other family members in Afghanistan

1 that they would be leaving behind and they weren't willing to do that or other
2 circumstances, they -- they made the decision to stay. There were other American
3 citizens that, despite efforts, didn't make their presence known until after the fact, and
4 so, yes, there were American citizens that didn't depart at that time.

5 Q Let me reframe the question. American citizens who wanted to get out but
6 couldn't make it across, through the gates or through the situation at hand, that wanted
7 to leave Afghanistan but couldn't.

8 A Yes, there were those individuals as well, which is -- which became the
9 primary effort of efforts immediately after the 2-week evacuation period, and that was
10 the focus of our ongoing efforts in the immediate period after that to try and help those
11 people leave. And we were highly successful in doing so.

12 We could honestly say that, after a number of weeks post August, we had
13 provided assistance to the American citizens who had expressed a desire to get out.
14 But, even then, there were people who were in circumstances who either decided that
15 they didn't want to leave or -- or who were not able to given the broader situation within
16 Afghanistan and fears for safety in terms of movements to Kabul, et cetera, so -- but that
17 was the real focus of our effort immediately after August.

18 Q Thank you.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q So is it your testimony that, after several weeks, there were no Americans
21 who wanted to get out, who were left behind in Afghanistan?

22 A No, that's not my testimony.

23 Q Okay.

24 A My testimony is that every effort was made to assist those individuals, as I
25 just stated a moment ago, though there were still individuals who were simply unable to

1 safely move to Kabul, perhaps lacked documentation to demonstrate that they were
2 Americans, other issues that were likely to prevent them from successfully leaving
3 Afghanistan.

4 Q And how many Americans who wanted to evacuate are you aware of that
5 were not able to both by the time that the U.S. withdrew and also by, you know, that
6 period, a few weeks of which you say you were successful of getting most of those who
7 remained out?

8 A Yeah, I couldn't give you specific numbers. That would be a question for
9 Consular Affairs, and even they, I think, would have to reference the documents that
10 were being produced at the time.

11 Q Was Consular Affairs, were they leading those efforts?

12 A They were -- they were deeply involved in those efforts, but they were doing
13 it in coordination with our ongoing, for lack of a better term, task force operations. I say
14 that only because the task force focused on the 2-week evacuation period was pulled
15 down, but there was still a team in place devoted to trying to get Afghans out. And
16 that -- that team eventually evolved over time into what we now refer to as the care
17 team, which is still to this day tasked with helping Afghans that we have a commitment to
18 to leave Afghanistan.

19 Q And, for the effort to get Americans who were not evacuated by the end of
20 the withdrawal but wanted to leave, who were the key individuals who were, you know,
21 involved in that, leading that effort?

22 A So the head of that effort immediately after August or soon after August was
23 Beth Jones. She was the leader of those efforts in terms of the overall team, and then
24 there were individuals who were tasked -- they really divided the responsibilities down
25 into three areas: One was support for the continued departure from Afghanistan.

1 That effort for a significant period of time was led by Karen Decker, who later became the
2 head of the Afghan Affairs Unit in Doha. That's where she is currently.

3 I do not recall the names of the other two individuals who were leaders of the
4 other teams. One was focused on working through issues that were arising in Doha
5 where we continued to use our facilities there to take people to and then move them
6 onward, as well as some of the other lingering issues from the August evacuation effort,
7 because we still had individual Afghans in various places in some of those lily pad
8 locations that we needed to figure out how to assist.

9 And then the third team was focused on those who we could successfully bring to
10 the United States to ensure that we still had coordination with other elements of the U.S.
11 Government to ensure that they had as soft landings as they possibly could and got
12 support they needed.

13 Q And I wanted to ask -- also follow up on something that had come up earlier
14 in the interview. It's a separate issue. You mentioned that you, you know, had been
15 planned to travel to Afghanistan several times in 2021 and -- but those trips had to be
16 canceled because of COVID precautions, and that that was an issue that, you know, also
17 affected the Department more broadly in terms of inhibiting travel to Afghanistan, you
18 know, separate from the security concerns inherent in that. Could you speak to, you
19 know, those COVID precautions and how they inhibited travel to Afghanistan a little
20 more.

21 A Yeah. That was -- there was a general -- there were general travel
22 restrictions in place for the State Department during the height of the pandemic that
23 applied not only to Afghanistan but really to travel throughout the world. Travel was
24 highly restricted. You had to get specific authorization from senior leadership within the
25 Department, and you had to -- in every case you had to justify why that trip was

1 necessary under the circumstances given COVID concerns.

2 That was based on a lot of considerations. You know, obviously, when you
3 traveled, you were at higher risk of contracting COVID. You were also imposing
4 increased risk on whatever embassy you were visiting in terms of bringing COVID into that
5 community. And so there was a real effort across the board throughout the world
6 globally to decrease those risks.

7 Q And this continued, you know, throughout 2021 when the vaccine was
8 widely available?

9 A Gee, I can't remember exactly when those restrictions were pulled down,
10 but, yes, I believe so. The vaccine -- the State Department started distributing the
11 vaccine to missions overseas, I believe, beginning in December of 2020, but there was a
12 limited supply to begin with. It took many months to roll those vaccines out worldwide,
13 and it was done in a prioritized fashion.

14 Our Embassy in Kabul was one of the first to receive vaccines because of various
15 considerations and it being a priority. But, even with that, they were not able to escape
16 COVID completely. There were a few separate waves of COVID transmission within the
17 embassy community that took place.

18 Q And this continued to inhibit travel from personnel at headquarters to
19 Afghanistan throughout 2021?

20 A Well, as long as we had a diplomatic presence there until August, yes.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q Mr. Evans, I want to briefly touch on your preparation for this interview.
23 How did you first learn of the committee's interest in conducting a transcribed interview?

24 A I saw reference to it in the media.

25 Q And what was your reaction?

1 A I took note of it, wasn't completely surprised.

2 Q What kind of preparations did you take for this interview?

3 A I had a couple of discussions with State Department personnel where they
4 provided information about, you know, practical issues regarding the interview, what it
5 would look like, what to expect, and then a general discussion of what I would be
6 expected to provide, that I was free to offer my opinions on things, that there were
7 certain considerations in terms of privileged information where the administration was
8 concerned, that they would step in if necessary, things of that nature.

9 Q And which State Department personnel were involved in that preparation?

10 A [REDACTED], who is online with us; [REDACTED]n, I think is [REDACTED] name; and in
11 the first session, I don't know [REDACTED] name, a DAS within H, legislative affairs, was online as
12 well.

13 Q Was it [REDACTED]?

14 A I think so.

15 Q And I know we have a couple of minutes, so I'm going to sort of close us out
16 in that period. What were you most proud of about the withdrawal of this evacuation,
17 Mr. Evans?

18 A I was most proud of the people in the U.S. Government, especially within the
19 State Department, who stepped forward and at great personal sacrifice to meet the crisis
20 at hand. I think it was just a tremendous demonstration of their dedication and their
21 loyalty to the U.S.

22 Q And what was your biggest regret?

23 A My biggest regret was that there were so many people that were still left
24 behind and that are still left behind. There are a tremendous number of people in
25 Afghanistan who put their own lives and their family lives at risk on our behalf and our

1 objectives in Afghanistan, and they remain in danger, and that's something that I
2 frequently think about.

3 Q If you could do something differently, what do you think should have been
4 done different in retrospect?

5 A I don't know. I truly believe that we put forth our best efforts under the
6 circumstances at the time, and we made the best decisions we could with the information
7 that we had, you know. Like everybody else, in hindsight, I wish that we would've
8 anticipated certain things that we didn't, but that just simply wasn't the case.

9 Q Well, Mr. Evans, we greatly appreciate your appearing voluntarily today and
10 answering our questions. Clearly, we have a lot more we could ask, but we understand
11 it's getting late and do appreciate your answering our questions today. On behalf of
12 Chairman McCaul and the rest of the majority staff, thank you. And I know we're
13 nearing the end, but do you have any closing remarks?

14 A No, I don't think so. You know, I fully understand why these questions are
15 important and need to be asked and so happy to support the process in any way I can
16 moving forward.

17 [REDACTED] Thank you.

18 And thanks, minority, for indulging us that extra time. And, if we're back to the
19 minority, if they want to continue their questioning.

20 [REDACTED] I don't think we have any further questions. And don't worry,
21 majority, we weren't indulging. It's your prerogative as the majority to initiate new
22 question rounds.

23 But I'll just reiterate again, as I already did, but I'll take the chance to say thank
24 you as well to you, Mr. Evans, on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks and members of our
25 caucus for your thoughtful, detailed, clear, informative answers today. We really

1 appreciate the time that you spent, and we appreciate your service more broadly.

2 Mr. Evans. Thank you.

3 [REDACTED]. Thank you, Mr. Evans.

4 [REDACTED] Thank you, sir.

5 [REDACTED] Thank you.

6 Mr. Evans. Thank you.

7 [REDACTED]. And if we could go off the record quickly.

8 [Whereupon, at 3:22 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

9

Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of Mark Evans dated 08/23/2023

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel, (4) private counsel (as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
2	15	Revise to “Minority Staff Director, Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability” and “Professional Staff Member”	
12	4	Change “followup” to "follow-up"	
14	3	Strike “as” from “as in the acting director role.”	
16	3	Change “potential” to “potentially”	
17	21	Change “followup” to "follow-up"	
17	9	Change “arrangements really overnight frankly.” to “arrangements. Really overnight, frankly"	
17	15	Insert “and” after “to what extent	
17	25	Change “ALM” to “A/LM”	
18	3-4	Change sentence beginning “It included a few other...” to “It included a few other Consular Affairs officials as well as representatives from our Population, Refugees, and Migration Bureau"	
18	5	Insert “plus” before “other”	
18	9	Strike “the” before “EUR”	
18	13	Strike “the” before “Doha”	
19	4	Change “Embassy, talk" to "Embassy to talk"	
21	16	Change “Brown” to “Browne”	
25	1	Change “refrain” to “rephrase”	
27	17	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
27	19	Change “indepth” to “in-depth”	
29	10	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
29	11	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
34	7	Change "off the top" to “at the top”	
35	5	Change "described for us a bit about" to “describe for us what your”	
38	12	Change “went” to “go”	
42	20	Change “leading” with “leaving”	
56	1	Change “followup” to "follow-up"	
60	17	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
61	20	Change “followup” to "follow-up"	
61	21	Change “followup” to "follow-up"	

69	1	Change “followup” to "follow-up"	
76	17	Change “I joined SCA leadership. In meeting with that team initially, we had other” to "I joined SCA leadership in meeting wit that team initially. We had other"	
79	4	Change “reviewed” to “review”	
92	13	Change "so to sort of close" to “So to close”	
100	11	Change "given your sort of broad" to “given your broad”	
100	16	Change “see” to “say”	
101	16	Change “essentially” to “essential”	
113	12	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
113	13	Change “the part” to “depart”	
114	24	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
114	6	Change the period (.) after “Department” with a dash (--).	
114	13	Change “in Doha Agreement” to “in the Doha Agreement”	
115	3	Strike “the” after “As I recall,”	
117	8	Change “followup” to "follow-up"	
118	17	Strike “on base”	
125	14	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
135	15	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
138	22	Change "satisfied in that planning, helped deliver it, communication was" to “satisfied by your efforts related to planning and execution of those plans, and that communication was”	
143	6	Change “decisionmaking” to “decision-making”	
158	9	Strike “of efforts”	
159	2	Insert “or” after the comma	
159	16	Change “care” to “CARE”	

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing ____ pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded.



2/20/24

Date