

1

2

3

4 COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,

5 U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

6 WASHINGTON, D.C.

7

8

9

10

11 INTERVIEW OF: DANIEL B. SMITH

12

13

14

15

Thursday, August 31, 2023

16

17

Washington, D.C.

18

19

20

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

21

Building, commencing at 9:35 a.m.

1

2 Appearances:

3

4

5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

6

7 [REDACTED], [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED], [REDACTED], SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

9 [REDACTED] [REDACTED], SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

10 [REDACTED] MINORITY OVERSIGHT [REDACTED]

11 [REDACTED]

12 [REDACTED] MINORITY [REDACTED]

13 [REDACTED] MINORITY [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

15

16

17 For the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE:

18

19 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

20 [REDACTED] OFFICE OF THE LEGAL ADVISOR

1

2 For DANIEL B. SMITH:

3

4 ANDREW DOCKHAM, PARTNER, DISPUTE RESOLUTION GROUP

5 LOREN TERRY, ASSOCIATE

6 FRESHFIELDS BRUCKHAUS DERINGER

7 700 - 13TH STREET NW, 10TH FLOOR

8 WASHINGTON, DC

1

2 [REDACTED] It is 9:35 a.m. on August 31st, 2023, and this is a transcribed
3 interview of Ambassador Daniel Smith. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman
4 Michael McCaul has requested this interview as part of the committee's investigation of
5 the Afghanistan withdrawal.

6 Can the witness please state your name for the record?

7 Ambassador Smith. My name is Daniel B. Smith.

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

11 My name is [REDACTED] I am [REDACTED] on Chairman McCaul's staff on the
12 House Foreign Affairs Committee majority. I now welcome the committee staff from
13 both the majority and minority to introduce themselves before going over some ground
14 rules.

15 [REDACTED] I'm [REDACTED] I'm [REDACTED] Oversight and Accountability for
16 the majority.

17 [REDACTED]. And I'm [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] for the House
18 Foreign Affairs Committee.

19 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] the Democrats.

20 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] for the Oversight and
21 Accountability Subcommittee and [REDACTED] for the full committee,
22 minority.

23 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] on
24 the minority side.

25 [REDACTED]. Hi. I'm [REDACTED] I'm the [REDACTED] the full

1 committee on the minority side.

2 [REDACTED] As noted, I'll go over a few ground rules for today's interview
3 which will hopefully aid our discussion.

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

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

10 We'll also be taking a lunch break midday. Please let us know when you'd like to
11 do so. Although, I'll warn you, the lunch options are a bit limited here during recess.

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

14 Does that all make sense?

15 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

16 [REDACTED] So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we'll do our
17 best to limit the number of people to those on the staff whose turn it is. We'll ask that
18 you please speak clearly so the court reporter can understand and so everyone can hear
19 you. We'll do our best to do the same.

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

24 Witnesses who appear before the committee have the opportunity to freely
25 consult with counsel if they so choose. And it is my understanding that you're appearing

1 here today with private counsel, correct?

2 Ambassador Smith. Correct.

3 [REDACTED]. Can counsel please identify yourselves and state your names for
4 the record?

5 Mr. Dockham. Andy Dockham, Freshfields.

6 Mr. Terry. Good morning. My name is Loren Terry. I'm also at Freshfields.

7 [REDACTED]. It's my understanding that agency counsel is also present today.

8 Ambassador Smith, you understand that agency counsel represents the State

9 Department, not you personally, correct?

10 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

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

13 [REDACTED] [REDACTED], agency counsel.

14 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED].

15 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

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 do not remember, please give us
21 your best recollection and share with us who, to the best of your knowledge, might be
22 able to provide a more complete answer to that question.

23 Additionally, it is okay to tell us if you learned information from someone else.

24 We just ask that you communicate how you came to know the information.

25 Ambassador Smith, this portion of the interview is unclassified. So if a question

1 calls for any information that you know to be classified, please state that for the record as
2 well as the reason for the classification to the best of your abilities.

3 Once you clarify that to the extent possible, please respond with as much
4 unclassified information as you're able to. If we need to have a classified session later,
5 we can arrange for that, as we've already done.

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

8 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

9 [REDACTED]. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff in an
10 interview. Do you understand this?

11 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

12 [REDACTED]. Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be
13 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C.
14 1001. Do you understand this?

15 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

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

18 Ambassador Smith. No.

19 [REDACTED]. Finally, I'd like to make note that the content of what we discuss
20 here today is confidential. We ask that you not speak about what we discuss in this
21 interview to any outside individuals to preserve the integrity of our investigation. Do
22 you understand?

23 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

24 [REDACTED] For the same reason, the marked exhibits that we'll use today
25 will remain with the court reporter so they can go in the official transcript.

1 All right. That is all the majority has to say on this topic. Is there anything that
2 my colleagues from the minority would like to add?

3 [REDACTED] Nothing.

4 [REDACTED]. The clock now reads 9:40, and we will start the first hour of
5 questioning.

6 EXAMINATION

7 BY [REDACTED]

8 Q Ambassador Smith, can you please give us a brief overview of your career at
9 the State Department?

10 A I spent 38 years in the Foreign Service of the Department of State, beginning
11 as an entry-level officer and ending my career as -- the formal title was director of the
12 Foreign Service Institute.

13 I had a number of overseas and domestic assignments. I'd be delighted to give
14 you those in detail if you want to hear them. But for the purposes of this hearing or
15 transcribed interview, I would simply note that I was asked after I had retired to come
16 back and conduct the after-action review.

17 Q Thank you.

18 When did you retire from the Department?

19 A In September of 2020. Sorry. 2021. Excuse me.

20 Q And what was your position at the time of your retirement?

21 A Well, I had been, as I say, the last formal position I had was director of the
22 Foreign Service Institute, which is the training center of the Department of State. I'd be
23 glad to discuss that in detail since it pertains to your work if you'd like to hear more about
24 it.

25 But I was then the transition director for the State Department, and then served

1 as Acting Secretary and Acting Deputy Secretary in the early months of the new
2 administration. And then my final assignment was as charge d'affaires in our mission in
3 India.

4 Q Thank you.

5 What was your role in the State Department's after-action review on Afghanistan?

6 A So I was asked by Secretary Blinken to lead an after-action review of the
7 State Department's involvement in the withdrawal from Afghanistan, covering the period
8 from the time of the signing of the agreement in the Trump administration with the
9 Taliban, which, as you know, laid out the terms can under which we would withdraw all
10 U.S. forces, until the time -- the end of our mission in Afghanistan. So the end of
11 August 2021.

12 Q And when did you assume that role?

13 A I was called, I believe, in October, and we began work in December.

14 Q And I believe you briefly touched upon this, but how were you selected for
15 that role?

16 A I was asked by the Secretary of State to assume this responsibility.

17 Q And when did you first discuss the possibility of this role with the Secretary?

18 A When he called me.

19 Q And when was that?

20 A As I say, it was, best of my recollection, it was in October of 2021.

21 Q Okay. Were there any discussions that led up to your assuming the role?

22 A No.

23 Q Did Secretary Blinken communicate why you were the person selected for
24 that role?

25 A He did not, other than to say that he had confidence that I would be

1 objective and fair in my assessment.

2 Q Did anyone else communicate to you why you were selected for that role
3 within the Department?

4 A No. No.

5 Q What was your understanding or belief for why you were selected for that
6 role?

7 A I can only speculate.

8 Q Who directed that there should be an after-action review of the Afghanistan
9 withdrawal?

10 A It was the Secretary's decision, as I understand.

11 Q To the best of your knowledge, was the White House involved in this
12 decision?

13 A I have no idea.

14 Q Do you have professional experience involving Afghanistan?

15 A I never served in Afghanistan.

16 Q Do you have professional experience involving after-action reviews or similar
17 efforts?

18 A So there has not been a history of after-action reviews in the State
19 Department. This was a new enterprise, one that I thought Secretary Blinken deserved
20 great credit for initiating. I would like to see this become a pattern for the Department
21 of State.

22 I think lessons learned and after-action reviews are standard operating procedure
23 in the Pentagon, but haven't been in the State Department. And so there was really no
24 template for it as to how it would be done, and we were going to be figuring this out as
25 we went forward.

1 Q And why do you believe Secretary Blinken called for this after-action review
2 in this instance?

3 A I think because he wanted to know what had gone right, what had gone
4 wrong, and what we could do better going forward.

5 Q What was the employment arrangement through which you were brought
6 on to lead the AAR?

7 A I was brought in as a contractor.

8 Q And what were your dates of employment as a contractor?

9 A So I began work, as I say -- I don't know the exact day, but it was in the
10 beginning of December. And then we concluded our review at the beginning of March.
11 So we met our timeline, give or take a few days.

12 Q And what was the compensation arrangement?

13 A A contractor.

14 Q Were you paid at the rank you departed the Foreign Service at?

15 A No. I was paid as a contractor, which was a different rate.

16 Q Were you full time --

17 A It was not more.

18 [Laughter.]

19 Q I believe I know the answer to this question, but were you full time or part
20 time?

21 A Full time.

22 Q Were you fully based in Washington, D.C., or did you engage in remote
23 work?

24 A So for the first month we were in Washington. Then there was another
25 wave of the pandemic. So for the second month we worked remotely. And then we

1 were back in Washington for the final stage.

2 Q Thank you.

3 What specifically was the mandate you were brought on to accomplish as
4 presented to you by Department leadership?

5 A So, as I indicated before, the mandate was to look at the role of the
6 Department of State in planning for and executing its responsibilities with regard to the
7 time period from which it was determined that the U.S. military would withdraw from
8 Afghanistan until they finally withdrew and until we finally closed the mission.

9 Q And what guidance were you given as to how this should be completed?

10 A I wasn't given guidance per se, other than I should look at the role of the
11 State Department and the State Department's responsibilities and how it executed them.

12 Q Was a timeframe specified to you for its completion?

13 A Yes. Well, I was asked to do it within 90 days if I could.

14 Q Who do you report to in this assignment?

15 A So I worked with the counselor of the Department, with Derek Chollet
16 primarily, throughout the time of my work.

17 Q Did you informally report to anyone else?

18 A Informally?

19 Q Informally or formally.

20 A I did not.

21 Q How many direct reports did you have?

22 A We had roughly 10 people who worked on it, and it would be fluid. So it
23 was not all of them were there the whole time.

24 Q And who were your direct reports?

25 A I'd rather not give their names.

1 Q Can you describe their positions?

2 A So they were people who were experts and had had experience in crisis
3 management, in diplomatic security, in management of resources, in consular affairs, and
4 other things that I felt were germane to the after-action review.

5 Q And were they existing employees of the Department?

6 A Primarily.

7 Q Did you provide any guidance to your direct reports?

8 A We worked together as a team and in our own manner figured out who we
9 wanted to interview and how we would proceed.

10 Q Okay. So the AAR refers to an AAR team. Can you please explain what
11 the AAR team was?

12 A I just explained.

13 Q The same thing? Okay.

14 And what was your budget for the team?

15 A I don't know that we had. Good question. Most were current employees.
16 So, basically, they were on the State Department payroll. There wasn't any additional
17 expense that was involved. But there was some additional expense, obviously,
18 associated with bringing me on as a contractor, my travel and things.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q Were any of the people on your AAR team, had they been involved in the
21 withdrawal from Afghanistan?

22 A Some had personal knowledge of it and had played various roles that were
23 relevant to it.

24 Q Are you able to talk about what the roles that they had played in the
25 relevant timeframe that you were investigating?

1 A I'd rather not only because I -- they are not at a senior level. I'd rather they
2 were not subject to their own transcribed interviews for the work that they did.

3 But they -- some had direct experience with regard to the security of the mission
4 in Afghanistan and knowledge of the actual evacuation. Some had knowledge of the
5 work of the task force back in Washington.

6 A lot of people had volunteered, and I don't actually know how many had, to serve
7 in various capacities, for instance, at the Dulles Expo Center when it was set up for
8 receiving Afghan refugees as they came in, that sort of thing.

9 Q Gotcha. Were any of them on the ground at HKIA during the evacuation?

10 A One was.

11 ██████████ Did you consider their personal involvement to be a conflict of
12 interest at all?

13 Ambassador Smith. No, I did not, and I think that all of us as a team were trying
14 to be as objective and insightful as we could with the goal of finding and making
15 recommendations that we thought could strengthen the State Department going forward
16 in crisis management.

17 ██████████. And for those individuals that were not existing employees,
18 were they also brought on as contractors?

19 Ambassador Smith. One other, yes.

20 BY ██████████

21 Q Can you give us more information on the individuals who were not at the
22 Department, what their background was, where they were brought on from?

23 A Who were not current employees?

24 Q Yes.

25 A All had been former. Even the one, myself, of course had been a former

1 employee. But they had expertise, as I said, it was relevant to what we were doing,
2 particularly in terms of citizen services, consular affairs, those sort of things.

3 Q And those individuals were brought back on contractor arrangements?

4 A One was.

5 Q And were there other individuals from outside the Department who were
6 brought back through a different arrangement?

7 A No.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q How were the individuals on the team selected?

10 A I selected them.

11 Q What did you look for in selecting them?

12 A As I indicated, I looked for expertise that I thought would be relevant to our
13 investigation, our after-action review. I looked for people who had a broad range of
14 experience, but especially experience in crisis management and in dealing with crisis
15 situations, whether it's evacuations or natural disasters or whatever it might be.

16 Q And I know you noted that this review is the first of its kind. But did any of
17 these individuals have any experience in conducting any sort of review or inquiry?

18 A I don't know all of their backgrounds. I think some had been involved in
19 previous, whether it was accountability review boards or other things, but that was not a
20 prerequisite in my mind.

21 Q Were any of the team members assigned or detailed over from other
22 Department bureaus?

23 A They came from various parts of the Department, yes.

24 Q Can you speak to what those bureaus were or offices?

25 A We had people from Diplomatic Security. We had people from -- actually,

1 I'd have to go through and look at what each person's employment category was at the
2 time. I honestly don't know. But what I was looking for, as I indicated, was their
3 background in terms of what they had worked on before.

4 So some had worked in the Secretariat in crisis management. Some had worked
5 in consular affairs. Some had worked in logistics and supply. Some had worked in
6 security.

7 Q Were any team members detailed over from other government entities
8 outside the State Department?

9 A No.

10 Q Were any team members hired to the Department specifically for the
11 purpose of working on the AAR?

12 A Hired into the Department?

13 Q Contractors.

14 A Other than the two contractors, no.

15 Q And how was the team organized? Specifically, what did the leadership or
16 management structure look like?

17 A You're looking at the leadership structure.

18 So I organized the team and had a deputy who worked closely with me just to set
19 out a schedule, an ambitious schedule, that we would hopefully use to meet the deadline
20 of 90 days, which we knew was going to be ambitious and going to be a challenge.

21 And as we were tackling this issue, of course, we had to come to grips with: How
22 do we start? Do you start by looking at the documents? Do you start by doing
23 interviews? Or do you start by doing a combination?

24 We decided very quickly that actually the interviews were key to understanding
25 the documents and to finding the documents you needed to see. I mean, there were a

1 host of documents that you would obviously get if you asked for anything related to
2 Afghanistan during this period of time, but the volume of material could be
3 overwhelming. So this was critical to our success, I think, as a team.

4 Q Thank you.

5 And the deputy that you mentioned was an existing employee of the Department?

6 A Yes.

7 Q Can you speak to which bureau they came from?

8 A I don't know where she was at the time actually. I think she may have been
9 between jobs, so --

10 Q Okay.

11 A Which happens a lot in the system.

12 Q And where was the AAR team housed within the State Department
13 organizationally?

14 A Physically?

15 Q So organizationally, if you put the org chart, was it sort of in an isolated own
16 in terms of -- I know you noted previously --

17 A We wouldn't appear on the org chart.

18 But we, as I say, we're an independent entity. We relied extensively on the
19 Secretariat for administrative support, for office, for other support in that regard, the
20 Executive Secretary. And as I say, I reported primarily to the counselor.

21 Q And now physically, in terms of the building, were you at --

22 A On the first floor at HST.

23 Q What other resources were placed at your disposal for the review?

24 A We were given access to all the materials we requested. We used the
25 auspices of the Secretariat, which, as you know, is the keeper of the records, especially

1 for the 7th Floor and for State Department principals. So we had access to their
2 resources and would make requests for information or documents through them.

3 [REDACTED] Did you consider yourself to have a boss?

4 Ambassador Smith. That's an excellent question.

5 I always considered myself to have a boss. But I would say that I've never felt so
6 independent as I did in this role.

7 [REDACTED] Gotcha. Who did you consider your boss to be?

8 Ambassador Smith. Well, ultimately, the Secretary of State.

9 [REDACTED] I want to enter exhibit 1 into the record, which I'm sure you're
10 familiar with. This is the public copy of the "After Action Review on Afghanistan."

11 [Smith Exhibit No. 1

12 Was marked for identification.]

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q So, Ambassador, I'm going to point you to page 3 of the AAR, after-action
15 review, "Methodology." Give you a moment to look at it.

16 Can you please explain the methodology you used to conduct the Department's
17 after-action review?

18 A Well, I think our -- we laid it out fairly clearly in that statement. But I don't
19 know, you want me to elaborate on any of the points in there?

20 Q Yes. I mean, we have the statement in front of us. But if you could just
21 elaborate on that and speak sort of personally as to what the methodology was?

22 A Well, I think what this -- the purpose of this was to understand, first of all,
23 the scope of what we were doing, focused primarily and almost entirely on the role of the
24 Department of State during the period of time from the decision, the signing of an
25 agreement by the Trump administration with the Taliban, until the final withdrawal of the

1 U.S. Embassy from Kabul.

2 We were, as I say, given access to all pertinent records that the State Department
3 had at its disposal for that period of time.

4 We were allowed to interview anybody we wanted to interview, although this was
5 on a voluntary basis. We couldn't compel anybody to interview with us and to give
6 information.

7 I will say, we didn't find any problems certainly from current officials and from
8 current State Department employees in that regard.

9 Q Did the Department provide any guidance on the methodology?

10 A Well, the guidance that I received was the mandate that I got from the
11 Secretary in terms of what it is we were trying to accomplish in this period of time and
12 what we would be looking at. But that was the extent of the guidance.

13 Q Did you use any existing methodology as a basis for the after-action review?

14 A What do you mean by existing methodology?

15 Q Prior guidance, prior reviews that you had done with the Department from
16 prior experience?

17 A Well, as I indicated, this was unique, and we were to some extent figuring
18 out as we went along how we would do this and where we would go with this.

19 [REDACTED] Did you look to any preexisting standards, guidance, methodology
20 from any kind of inquiry or similar exercise as a model?

21 Ambassador Smith. Not per se. I mean, we were familiar, of course all of us
22 are, with accountability review boards in the State Department. But since there was no
23 mandate in this case to do an accountability review board, we knew this would be
24 different and that there would be more flexibility in terms of our inquiry, and we decided
25 to pursue that to the fullest we could.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q And you noted various sources, such as interviews, records being made
3 available. How did you develop the methodology ultimately used?

4 A As I say, as we went in the course of our investigation, as we conducted
5 interviews, as we found documents, they would lead us to other documents, to other
6 people we wanted to interview.

7 We often found the interviews themselves were extremely useful in terms of
8 pointing us to specific documents or where certain information might be available that
9 we needed.

10 Q The AAR methodology section states that "the goal has been to understand
11 how the Department prepared for and executed its duties and responsibilities in light of
12 the decisions of both Presidents to end the U.S. military mission after nearly 20 years in
13 Afghanistan."

14 How did you set that goal?

15 A As I said, the mandate was given to me from the Secretary as to the scope of
16 what we would do.

17 Clearly, when you're looking at that period of time, history didn't begin with the
18 February 2020 agreement between the United States and the Taliban under the Trump
19 administration. It began before that. So you had to go back somewhat in looking at
20 the antecedents of that.

21 But what we were not doing was looking at the whole history of U.S. involvement
22 in Afghanistan. That would have taken years. We'd still be there right now.

23 Q So would you say that the goal of the review was set by Department
24 leadership or yourself?

25 A This was the mandate I received from Department leadership.

1 Q In specifying this goal, did you consult with Department leadership
2 beforehand?

3 A Well, as I indicated, I got a call from the Secretary. I then worked with the
4 counselor to formulate exactly what the mandate was going to be that we would receive
5 and how it would be executed. But the guidelines were pretty broad.

6 Q And what degree of independence did you and the AAR team have in
7 conducting the review?

8 A A great degree.

9 Q Was there any mechanism in place to safeguard the independence of the
10 review?

11 A I'm not clear what you mean, any safeguards in that regard.

12 Q To ensure the independence of the review.

13 A No, I understand the purpose, but what would you mean by safeguards?

14 Q Involvement by Department leadership. Was there -- specifically operated
15 in isolation from leadership, there was no consultations throughout, just ensuring that
16 the independence -- that there wasn't any sort of outside involvement beyond the AAR
17 teams.

18 A We certainly did that and adhered to that carefully. I think ultimately the
19 safeguards are our integrity as public servants.

20 Q Of course.

21 Were there ever any issues with independence of the review being challenged or
22 infringed upon?

23 A No.

24 Q Were there ever any challenges you encountered?

25 A No, in terms -- not in terms of access to documents. There were some

1 people who didn't want to be interviewed, mostly -- entirely previous administration
2 officials. But that was the extent of it.

3 Q Did any Department leaders or other officials ever raise political, media, or
4 similar other concerns or sensitivities relating to the AAR or the broader project?

5 A That's a broad question, so I'm not certain what you mean by that. But if
6 you mean in terms of when we were conducting our research and as we were writing the
7 report and even as we handed the report over, we weren't focused at all on any concerns
8 like that.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Did any of the Department leaders or principals raise or note any concerns in
11 that regard?

12 A About the content of the report or about the --

13 Q About the political or media or other concerns or sensitivities related to the
14 report and the review.

15 A Not as such.

16 Q Was there something -- you scoped "as such." Is there something outside
17 of the "as such"?

18 A No. I simply mean, we were working obviously in confidence trying to
19 prepare a document that we knew would be handed over to Department leadership.
20 We would safeguard the AAR as we would anything else in the State Department in that
21 regard to prevent leaks or disclosure.

22 Q And you mentioned before Counselor Chollet. Could you talk a bit more
23 about his role and how you worked with him on it?

24 A Well, as I say, he was my primary liaison on the 7th Floor when it came to
25 carrying out this exercise. So I simply let him know what resources I thought I needed.

1 I also worked with the Executive Secretary of the Department to make sure that
2 we had, as I said, the office space, the staffing and support that we needed in that regard,
3 and that any of our document requests were met.

4 Q But he was not involved in examining or monitoring the content?

5 A No.

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q And I want to revert back to sort of the timeframe.

8 How did you decide to scope the timeframe of your review from January 2020 to
9 August 2021?

10 A Well, as I indicated, this was the mandate that I was given from the Secretary
11 from the beginning, the goal and the objective being to understand what the State
12 Department did, what actions it took, how it prepared for its roles and responsibilities in
13 light of the military withdrawal or the likely military withdrawal, and from that
14 standpoint, starting with the agreement with the Taliban through the end made sense.

15 Q Beyond the mandate that you were given by leadership, did you consult with
16 Department leadership when you -- following the scoping of that specific date?

17 A As I've indicated, I continued to work with the counselor to the extent that I
18 needed support or needed help on anything.

19 Q And who is the intended audience of the review?

20 A So, obviously, this was a mandate from the Secretary of State. So the final
21 intended audience was the Secretary of State.

22 That said, we wrote the report, insofar as we could, with the intent that this would
23 help inform various parts of the Department as they carried out their duties and
24 responsibilities and as they, themselves, conducted their own lessons learned on what
25 had happened in Afghanistan.

1 So we wanted this to be a useful document for the Department as a whole in that
2 regard.

3 Q Thank you.

4 And can you speak a bit more as to how the audience was determined?

5 A How the audience was determined?

6 Q Beyond the Secretary, of course, who provided you sort of the original
7 mandate, in terms of informing the rest of the Department. Did you come to that
8 determination yourself or was that something that was communicated to you more
9 broadly?

10 A No. I, in consultation with the counselor, had decided how we would
11 proceed, that we wanted to have, to the extent we could, maximum extent we could,
12 unclassified findings and unclassified recommendations that could be used widely in the
13 Department as a roadmap, not necessarily as -- we had no mandate. We're not the
14 inspector general. We were not an accountability review board.

15 But to the extent that they would be useful and helpful in the Department in
16 carrying out any reforms or changes that might be necessary, we wanted to share it
17 broadly in that regard.

18 Q Thank you.

19 And can you speak a bit more as to the discussion that surrounded making the
20 review publicly available?

21 A I was not part of that discussion.

22 Q Are you aware if there was a discussion?

23 A I'm certain there was a discussion. There was likely an ongoing discussion.
24 The only time I would hear about it would be if Director Chollet had a question for me.

25 Q Was there a discussion of making the review available widely within the

1 Department?

2 A As we were writing it, no. And as I say, once my work was done and I had
3 handed this over to the Secretary through Counselor Chollet, my responsibility for it
4 ended.

5 Q Was there discussion of making the review available to Congress upon its
6 completion?

7 A I was not privy to any such discussion.

8 Q Are you aware if any such discussion took place?

9 A I'm not aware.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q You mentioned several times accountability review boards. Could you
12 explain what an accountability review board is?

13 A So an accountability review board is a proceeding mandated by law in the
14 event that -- and maybe [REDACTED] will correct me if I have the language wrong in this
15 regard -- but if there is a death or serious injury of an employee under chief of mission
16 authority abroad, the State Department will invoke an accountability review board to
17 conduct an investigation and make recommendations about that incident.

18 Q And could you speak as to why there was no accountability review board in
19 the case of the Afghanistan withdrawal?

20 A Because it wasn't mandated by the law in this instance. That is, there were
21 no deaths or serious injuries of Department of State employees under chief of mission
22 authority during the evacuation or during this period.

23 Q And the 13 servicemembers who were killed during the NEO, which is under
24 chief of mission authority, would not have qualified under that definition?

25 A The 13 members who were killed tragically in the operation here are heroes,

1 but they were not under chief of mission authority.

2 Q And why -- did the Secretary have the option to initiate an accountability
3 review board at his own initiative?

4 A I actually don't know the answer to that, whether you could without the
5 mandate.

6 But as I say, I think what he wanted to do was get as broad an understanding of
7 what the lessons learned and what recommendations we would draw from this based
8 upon an after-action review. So, from my perspective, he's to be applauded for doing
9 that, for taking that initiative.

10 Q And could you speak to some of the procedural and substantive differences
11 between the after-action review as an exercise and an accountability review board?

12 A Well, I've never been formally part of an accountability review board, but I
13 have been on the discussions and served on the body which would recommend whether
14 an accountability review board was necessary in a given circumstance.

15 I think the parameters and procedures are much more established with regard to
16 an accountability review board. And, although I've seen accountability review boards
17 which expand their own mandates, the mandate is usually much more narrow.

18 Q And do you -- did you look to the procedures for an accountability review
19 board to inform how you conducted the after-action review?

20 A I think we were familiar with the procedures of the accountability review
21 board and how they operated. I think the main aspect of it that informed us was the
22 need for independence, the need for discretion, and the need for careful recordkeeping.

23 Q And did you adopt various procedures to try to promote those needs?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Can you speak to that specifically?

1 A Well, we actually had somebody from the Secretariat who was with us
2 throughout to keep records of everything that we saw and handled during the course of
3 the accountability review itself and were very careful in terms of our operations in that
4 regard.

5 Q And is it fair to say that the after-action review was an informational exercise
6 seeking to draw lessons learned and gather information as opposed to an exercise
7 seeking accountability?

8 A Yes.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Mr. Smith, we touched upon this already. If you could please explain or
11 walk us through how you went about gathering information for the after-action review?

12 A Well, as I say, we had an ambitious timeline, and initially our thought had
13 been we would review as many documents as we could before we started conducting
14 interviews.

15 We quickly realized the volume of material was such that that would be
16 overwhelming. But we also realized as we started interviewing that those were
17 extremely helpful in terms of pointing us to things we needed to see or we may not have
18 been aware of the existence of in that regard.

19 So we did a combination of document searches, interviews, and then requests for
20 additional information.

21 Q Thank you.

22 The AAR features 328 citations, which cite a significant number of documents, as
23 you've noted. How did the AAR team identify and collect the documents you used?

24 A Well, there were broad document searches obviously related to the period
25 underway. For instance, you wanted communications, official communications, what

1 are called front channel messages, between the embassy and Washington.

2 But a lot of things, as you may be surprised to hear, are done on unofficial
3 channels and through other channels. So you also want to cast as broad a net as you
4 can. You may be asking for emails, you may be asking for text messages, everything
5 under the sun that you think would be relevant to the investigation, to the work of the
6 accountability review board -- excuse me, of the after-action review.

7 Q And were these documents all provided on a voluntary basis, or was the
8 Department required to turn over documents upon request?

9 A We never had a request that was denied.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Can you talk a bit about who was responsible for the collection and
12 performed that function?

13 A As I indicated, we had someone from the Secretariat, the Executive
14 Secretary of the State Department, who was assigned to us for that purpose, both of
15 ensuring that we could track these requests and make these requests and that they were
16 responded to, but also ensuring that we did our due diligence in terms of recordkeeping.

17 Q And was the A Bureau involved also in running document searches, email
18 searches, things like that?

19 A I can't speak to that. I'm not certain whether we actually asked them or
20 needed them to help us in that regard. But if we had had need of it, we would have
21 asked them.

22 Q And your point person on this was essentially the individual on your team
23 from the Secretariat?

24 A Right. And others in their own, because, as I say, in the course of
25 interviews people would say, "I have emails, and I'll be glad to turn those emails over to

1 you."

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Was the Office of the Legal Adviser involved in this process at all?

4 A Yes.

5 Q How so?

6 A They provided legal counsel and guidance, especially on recordkeeping and
7 throughout the process.

8 Q Okay. To what extent was the AAR team reliant on officials involved with
9 the withdrawal to identify documents?

10 A As I indicated, we relied heavily on them to guide us in terms of the
11 documents we wanted to see, in part because the scope of the material is so voluminous
12 from this period of time that you need help in terms of pointing you in the right direction.
13 So that we found to be extremely helpful.

14 Q Did the AAR team have the ability to initiate searches for and production of
15 records, such as emails, cables, memos, and others?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Did the AAR team seek to review any documents, records of the
18 Department that specific custodians refused to produce?

19 A No.

20 Q Were there any documents, records that the AAR team sought to review but
21 was otherwise unable to gain access to?

22 A No.

23 Q Is it fair to say that the AAR team obtained access to all the documents it
24 sought access to?

25 A To the best of my knowledge, yes.

1 Q Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review the Executive Secretariat
2 packages and documents involving Afghanistan?

3 A I'm sorry. Could you clarify? What --

4 Q Of course. So all of the packages and documents that the Exec Secretary
5 was able to obtain, did the AAR team have the ability to review all of that?

6 A Again, I'm not really clear what you're asking in that regard. But anything
7 that we asked for on our behalf, is that what you're referring to?

8 Q Correct.

9 A We obtained access to them.

10 [REDACTED] Were are all of the Executive Secretariat packages or documents, all
11 of the paper that flowed through Exec Sec related to Afghanistan, was that all produced
12 in total to the AAR team?

13 Ambassador Smith. I think that's the same question, but it's basically everything
14 that I think they found they produced and gave to the AAR.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review all State Department
17 meeting records, such as minutes, say, of EACs?

18 A Yes. EACs, those are generally reported in a front channel message from
19 embassies to Washington. So we had access to all of those.

20 Minutes? I mean, it depends on what meeting you're talking about, whether
21 they're minutes or whether any formal record of those meetings.

22 Q But formal record was the preferred method?

23 A Right.

24 Q Exactly. Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review all State
25 Department cables relating to Afghanistan withdrawal?

1 A We had the opportunity to, yes. I can't say that we reviewed everything,
2 but we had the opportunity to.

3 Q Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review all emails of key
4 Department policymakers, such as Secretary Blinken, DMR McKeon, Ambassador Wilson,
5 and Ambassador Khalilzad?

6 A We had access to emails, their emails and other emails. Most of those are
7 kept by the Executive Secretariat for senior level officials or the Bureau of IRM actually,
8 Information Resource Management, and others. So we had access to those.

9 [REDACTED]. Did you review all of those emails?

10 Ambassador Smith. Again, I hesitate to say we reviewed all of the emails. We
11 reviewed what we thought were the relevant emails and most pertinent documents in
12 that regard.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Can you speak to how you chose which emails to review, which not to
15 review? Is there a search function or something you look for specifically?

16 A Well, we certainly looked for anything, obviously, between certain principals,
17 which we knew might have been focused on Afghanistan. We wanted to see those.

18 But, as I say, in the course of many of our interviews, people would actually point
19 us in the direction of specific emails or specific documents that they knew existed that we
20 thought -- they thought we should see.

21 [REDACTED]. So for officials who were heavily involved in very senior roles, such as
22 Ambassador Wilson and Ambassador Khalilzad, did the AAR team go through their emails
23 comprehensively?

24 Ambassador Smith. I don't know that we examined every one of their emails
25 because a lot of their emails would have been on very routine or mundane matters. But

1 we looked at those that pertained to the subject matter that we were focused on.

2 [REDACTED] Sure.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q And to what extent was the AAR team able to access documents generated
5 by other agencies that were relied upon by Department officials?

6 A So our scope was, of course, the role of the Department of State, and we
7 focused primarily on the role of the Department of State. We had access to documents
8 that the State Department created or that it put in its records relating to interagency
9 engagement or interagency meetings and things of that nature.

10 Q Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review the full range of
11 intelligence community reporting on Afghanistan used by State Department officials?

12 A We examined intelligence community reports and met with intelligence
13 community officials in the Department of State, who were part of the Department of
14 State, who are in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

15 Q And, of course, we're in an unclassified setting, but to the best of your
16 ability, can you speak to the most significant documents or information you relied upon in
17 that context?

18 A In terms of intelligence?

19 Q Correct.

20 A I don't know that I can in this context talk about intelligence or intelligence
21 matters, but I'm delighted to do it in a different setting.

22 Q Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review the full range of military
23 reporting used by State Department officials, such as commanders' daily place mats?

24 A Well, to the extent that these were incorporated into State Department
25 records we saw them, but we didn't request additional information from the Pentagon,

1 that was not our mandate, and didn't ask for other things that State Department officials
2 might not have been privy to or might not have been involved in their decisionmaking.

3 [REDACTED] Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review interagency
4 records, such as SOCs and other readouts?

5 Ambassador Smith. We did, especially those -- as I say, I can only speak to those
6 that were in State Department records, SOCs that came from the White House, from
7 meetings that the State Department had participated in.

8 [REDACTED] And were those turned over as a group by the White House or NSC,
9 or were those identified from the records that were in the possession of various State
10 Department custodians?

11 Ambassador Smith. They were identified from the records of the Department of
12 State.

13 [REDACTED] Is it fair to say that all of these materials are in the custody of
14 the State Department then that you relied upon?

15 Ambassador Smith. They were in the time.

16 [REDACTED] Were any of the documents that you were being given redacted
17 in any way, or were you being given full access to the records?

18 Ambassador Smith. I'm not -- to the best of my recollection, there were no
19 redactions of any of these documents.

20 BY [REDACTED]

21 Q Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review the July 2021 dissent
22 channel cable sent by numerous officials at U.S. Embassy Kabul?

23 A I reviewed it.

24 Q Did anyone else on your team have the opportunity to review?

25 A No.

1 Q Why not?

2 A The dissent channel message is and the dissent channel itself is a very
3 carefully guarded tradition in the Department of State going back to the Vietnam War.

4 It's something that I think every Foreign Service and Civil Service employee of the
5 State Department wants to protect the integrity of that process, the confidentiality of
6 that process, the ability of the State Department employees, which is unique in the
7 Federal Government, to speak truth to power or at least to raise concerns that they might
8 have at a very senior level.

9 So protecting the integrity of that dissent channel was vitally important from the
10 standpoint of all of us.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q How was the decision made that only you would review it?

13 A I think because the dissent channel was carefully controlled.

14 Q But who made the decision? Did you make it? Did the custodians of the
15 dissent channel make it? Did Counselor Chollet, Secretary Blinken make it?

16 A The custodians of the dissent channel made it.

17 Q The custodians of the dissent channel made it.

18 A Uh-huh.

19 Q And who specifically? Was it an individual that you had that discussion or
20 agreement with?

21 A To the best of my recollection, it was with the head of policy planning,
22 because that's the channel. They control the channel.

23 Q Salman Ahmed?

24 A Yes.

25 BY [REDACTED]

1 Q Did anyone on the AAR team request access to it?

2 A No. I mean, they knew that I had seen it.

3 Q Was the team otherwise briefed on it or given a summary of its contents?

4 A We may have discussed it in general terms, but they were not given a
5 summary of it or saw any reference to it otherwise.

6 Q Do you believe, having the opportunity to review it, that it would have
7 increased the AAR team's insight into the withdrawal?

8 A In my opinion, no. I think that what the dissent channel did was
9 underscore some concerns that were being expressed in various channels at the time and
10 by various people and that the light that it would shed on those concerns was not that
11 significant or different from what was being heard in other ways.

12 Q In conducting the interviews, did the AAR team interview any individuals
13 who identified themselves as signatories of the dissent channel cable?

14 A I don't know if they identified them as such. I think we did interview
15 people we knew had been associated with it.

16 Q Can you speak to how many?

17 A I can't. I don't know.

18 Q Can you speak to what they told you about it?

19 A About the dissent channel?

20 Q About the situation in Afghanistan, about the dissent channel, or just more
21 broadly.

22 A Well, as I say, to my mind, what they were expressing were concerns that
23 were being expressed by a number of people about the deteriorating situation in
24 Afghanistan and how quickly this might devolve.

25 [REDACTED] Did they speak about the Department's response and their view of

1 the Department's response?

2 Ambassador Smith. No, I didn't discuss that with them.

3 [REDACTED] Was there a reason why you didn't discuss it with them?

4 Ambassador Smith. Because I didn't think it was necessarily relevant to what we
5 were trying to do and what we were trying to accomplish in that regard.

6 [REDACTED]. What did they tell you about its context?

7 Ambassador Smith. Its context?

8 [REDACTED]. Context of the cable.

9 Ambassador Smith. As I say, I'm putting it in the context of -- I don't know what
10 they would say about the context -- I would put it in the context of a series of events that
11 were happening on the ground and concerns that were expressed by a number of people
12 in Kabul and in Washington about how quickly the situation might deteriorate.

13 [REDACTED]. Did you ask any of them specifically why they signed the cable?

14 Ambassador Smith. I did not. I did not talk to them about that process. But,
15 as I say, they were free to tell me whatever they wanted to tell me about their concerns
16 at the time and whether they felt those concerns were being taken into consideration.

17

BY [REDACTED]

18 Q Did they share their views on whether they wanted you to review it?

19 A We didn't discuss that, as far as I'm aware.

20 Q Did they speak to making it publicly available?

21 A No, we didn't.

22 Q Did --

23 [REDACTED] Can I ask one more?

24 [REDACTED] Yes.

25 [REDACTED]. What are your thoughts on what the dissent channel cable said?

1 Do you think it was important?

2 Ambassador Smith. Well, as I've indicated --

3 [REDACTED] So I'm sorry. The cable, as you know, is classified. So I think if
4 we're going to do this, we need to do it in the next session.

5 Ambassador Smith. Yeah.

6 [REDACTED] And the Secretary has discussed the dissent cable in public hearings.
7 Is there an unclassified-level response that you could give and we could discuss in more
8 detail in the classified setting?

9 Ambassador Smith. Well, I can't go beyond what I've already said, which is I
10 think the concerns expressed were similar to concerns being expressed in various
11 channels?

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q Let's transition to the next sentence.

14 The AAR notes that "the AAR team conducted more than 150 interviews with
15 current and former State Department officials at all levels of the organization." It
16 further states that "interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and either for
17 attribution or on background."

18 How did you determine what current and former officials to interview?

19 A We wanted to, obviously, interview very senior officials whom we thought
20 would be relevant to our review, from the Secretary of State on down, those who had
21 been involved in decisionmaking with regard to Afghanistan, those who had played a role
22 in the interagency process.

23 But beyond that, we wanted to get a sense of others who had been on the ground
24 in Kabul, had been at the various places where we were transporting refugees from, as
25 well as from the domestic side.

1 So we wanted to get as full a picture as we could. A lot of people volunteered to
2 come forward. They wanted to be heard.

3 Q And for those who didn't volunteer, how were you able to engage with
4 them?

5 A Well, everybody did it voluntarily, I should say. But we reached out to
6 some specifically because of their roles.

7 Q More broadly, how were individuals put on notice that these interviews are
8 being conducted? Did you put out a --

9 A There was a Department notice, as I recall, of some notice to the effect that
10 the accountability -- excuse me, the after-action review was being set up and being
11 established, and if people had questions, they could contact us. So a lot of people had
12 seen that and would reach out to us in that manner.

13 Q Was that distributed to specific individuals or was it just a broad --

14 A Well, we specifically reached out to individuals that we really wanted to
15 interview and we knew would be germane to this, that is people especially who had been
16 in senior leadership positions in the Department or at the mission overseas.

17 Q Were those communications via email or phone?

18 A Through a variety of methods.

19 Q Can you speak a bit more as to what extent the Department's senior officials
20 participated in interviews?

21 A Yes. I interviewed everyone from the Secretary of State, himself, on down
22 in the current administration.

23 Q Did you interview Deputy Secretary Sherman?

24 A Yes.

25 Q And DMR McKeon?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Ambassador Wilson?

3 A Yes.

4 Q Ambassador Khalilzad?

5 A Yes.

6 Q How about Michael Adler?

7 A Michael Adler? Yes.

8 Q And to what extent were departed appointees from the prior administration
9 interviewed?

10 A So we reached out to various prior administration officials, including
11 Secretary of State Pompeo. He declined through his attorney to be interviewed.
12 Several former officials declined. But we felt that between the documents that we had
13 access to and other information we could still tell the story pretty completely.

14 Q Thank you.

15 And I want to sort of go back to the senior officials that I previously mentioned.

16 In terms of Secretary Blinken, did he make himself available or did you request an
17 interview?

18 A We requested an interview, but he had indicated he would be available.

19 Q How about Deputy Secretary Sherman, did she voluntarily appear or did you
20 request an interview?

21 A Well, as I say, everybody voluntarily appeared. But --

22 Q Let me rephrase. Did she come forth herself or did you request the
23 interview?

24 A I think we requested it.

25 Q And how about DMR McKeon?

1 A Same.

2 Q And Ambassador Wilson?

3 A We requested it.

4 Q Ambassador Khalilzad?

5 A We requested it.

6 Q Michael Adler?

7 A I don't recall.

8 Q What was the breakdown of the amount officials participated for attribution
9 and on background?

10 Specifically, can you identify any officials who chose to speak for attribution?

11 A I'm sorry. I'm not clear what you're asking.

12 [REDACTED] I guess you've made the distinction that some officials spoke for
13 attribution and some officials spoke on background. What was the breakdown, what
14 percentage or estimate would you say of how many officials spoke for attribution and
15 how many officials spoke on background?

16 Ambassador Smith. I can't give you a figure. I don't know for certain. I will
17 say, I don't think any senior officials asked to be not for attribution.

18 [REDACTED] And of the overall of the 150 employees, how frequent was it that
19 people spoke for attribution generally and how many -- how frequent was it that they
20 wanted to speak on background?

21 Ambassador Smith. Again, I don't know in terms of the actual breakdown of it.
22 I don't think that -- this was not a major issue with regard to senior officials. It was an
23 issue, I think, with regard to lower-level officials who might not want to be identified.

24 [REDACTED] So the officials that we kind of ran the list through, they -- none of
25 them asked to speak on background?

1 Ambassador Smith. Not to the best of my knowledge.

2

BY [REDACTED]

3 Q To what extent did officials from outside the Department participate in
4 interviews?

5 A So we, you know, our mandate was looking at the role of the Department of
6 State. We did not request interviews of military officials, White House officials per se, or
7 anything like that.

8 Q There was no need to speak with those in terms of their engagement with
9 the Department of State?

10 A I think it was beyond our mandate. Our role was to look at the overall
11 Department of State.

12 Q So did you interview officials that had not served at State, but served at
13 other agencies in the withdrawal, such as USAID?

14 A We did not.

15 Q Did you interview any officials from the White House or NSC?

16 A I should -- I should -- let me just clarify that. I don't recall we ever spoke.
17 We may have spoken with someone from AID. I don't know. But we did not
18 specifically go after information related to their experience.

19 Q Did you interview any officials from the White House or NSC?

20 A Who are currently serving in the White House or NSC?

21 Q At the time or currently.

22 A At the time of the withdrawal? I'm sorry. I'm trying to --

23 Q At the time of your review.

24 A I'm trying to figure out 150 careers.

25 [REDACTED] White House officials during the withdrawal or NSC officials during

1 the withdrawal.

2 Ambassador Smith. We may have spoken to people who had knowledge of that
3 or had been involved in various aspects of it, but not, per se, not directly.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Did you interview any foreign officials?

6 A No.

7 Q Did you interview any individuals who were involved in the withdrawal in
8 nongovernmental roles?

9 A No.

10 Q And I believe you spoke on this. If you could elaborate to what extent the
11 Department officials refused to be interviewed.

12 A The only individuals who declined to be interviewed were former
13 government officials.

14 Q Did any Senate-confirmed officials refuse to be interviewed?

15 A Currently serving Senate-confirmed officials, at the time?

16 Q At the time.

17 A No.

18 Q Did any DAS-level or above officials refuse to be interviewed?

19 A Not to best of my knowledge.

20 Q Were there any bureaus, offices, or posts where a significant amount of
21 officials refused to be interviewed?

22 A No.

23 Q Were there any bureaus, offices, or posts where you did not get to interview
24 as many officials as you wanted for reasons other than them declining?

25 A That's a very open-ended question. I'm not clear how to answer that.

1 I mean, if you had 2 years to do this investigation, you might have continued to do
2 interviews at length about it. But I felt like we could tell the story adequately with the
3 interviews we had done.

4 Q Let me reframe. Were there any bureaus specifically regarding, for
5 example, logistical issues, time issues, et cetera, that they could not participate in the
6 interviews?

7 A No, although I'm sure there are more people we could interviewed. There
8 always are.

9 Q Was there anyone who asked to be interviewed that the AAR team declined
10 to interview?

11 A Not to the best of my recollection.

12 Q Were the interviews generally conducted by the same group of team
13 members or different ones?

14 A So it would depend on the subject matter itself generally. Especially with
15 senior-level officials, it was -- tended to be the same group of people. With various
16 people at other levels in the Department, it would depend on the subject matter.

17 Q Can you speak to how that, those responsibilities, were divided based on
18 subject matter?

19 A So clearly we wanted people in the room who knew what they were talking
20 about and knew the questions they should be asking in that regard. We generally left it
21 open to the discretion of team members if they wanted or did not want to join.

22 So there were some who were likely in every interview, whether they wanted to
23 be there or not, and there were some who were just there for select interviews.

24 [REDACTED] To what extent did you personally participate in the interviews?

25 Ambassador Smith. I participated in, I think, virtually every senior-level interview

1 and tried to attend as many interviews as I could.

2 [REDACTED] And for the purpose of your participation, how did you define senior
3 level?

4 Ambassador Smith. I usually define that as probably Deputy Assistant Secretary
5 and above.

6

BY [REDACTED]

7 Q You previously mentioned that you had a deputy as well on this team. To
8 what extent did your deputy engage in interviews?

9 A She did the same that I.

10 Q How long did the interviews range from?

11 A So it really depended on the subject matter and what the individual's
12 experience was. It could be not as long as this transcribed interview will be. But it was
13 usually an hour or 2 hours in general, perhaps, that we would spend with them.

14 Q Would you say that was the average amount of time?

15 A Probably, yeah.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q How long did you talk to Secretary Blinken?

18 A I don't recall. But I imagine -- he actually was very generous with his time.
19 I think it was half an hour, 45 minutes, which with the Secretary of State is gold.

20 Q Okay.

21 How long did you talk to Ambassador Khalilzad?

22 A We talked to Ambassador Khalilzad for a longer period of time, in part
23 because his involvement goes back through a longer period of time. But I don't recall
24 offhand how long the interview was.

25 Q Can you give an estimate?

1 A I would say several hours.

2 BY [REDACTED]

3 Q And are those on numerous occasions, or was it all at once?

4 A So that's a good question, and I don't recollect. As I say, it's been now a
5 year and a half since we did this review.

6 I would say there were a couple of officials whom we spoke to more than once. I
7 don't recall if that was true of Ambassador Khalilzad. It may have. We sometimes had
8 follow-up questions that we wanted to ask of individuals.

9 Q Can you speak to which officials you did speak to more than once, to the
10 best of your recollection?

11 A I think we spoke to Ross Wilson more than once. I think we spoke to John
12 Bass more than once. As I say, we may have spoken to Ambassador Khalilzad more than
13 once.

14 Q Did you keep records of the interviews?

15 A We took notes on the interviews and kept those notes.

16 Q So those would be in the custody of the State Department?

17 A Uh-huh.

18 [REDACTED]. But were there formatted interview reports or sort of the informal
19 contemporaneous notes that you took?

20 Ambassador Smith. We would do, in effect, a memorandum of conversation
21 about it. So it was not a transcribed interview per se, but it was a record of our
22 understanding of the conversation?

23 BY [REDACTED]

24 Q How long would you say those memoranda were?

25 A It would depend on the interview itself and how substantive it was and how

1 long it took.

2 Q And did you keep additional records, such as audio or video recordings?

3 A I don't know that we ever did any audio or video recordings.

4 Q The AAR citation cites to interviews generally rather than specifying
5 interviewees, so specific individuals you interviewed. How did the AAR team internally
6 keep track of which citations refer to which interviews?

7 A I don't know that I can recollect exactly how we tracked it, but we wanted to
8 make sure that, first of all, we could document everything that we said in the
9 accountability review -- excuse me, I am misspeaking again -- in the after-action review,
10 and that we had a good basis for every conclusion that we made in that regard.

11 What we wanted to do, though, at the same time -- and this I just want to
12 underscore the importance of -- was protect the identities of people who asked to speak
13 with us in confidence. I think that's critical going forward, that we do that collectively if
14 we're ever going to have another after-action review.

15 Q And did -- you noted people who asked to speak in confidence. Did they
16 explicitly say so or was that a disclosure provided beforehand?

17 A We asked them what the terms were under which they were being
18 interviewed.

19 [REDACTED]. Okay.

20 [REDACTED]. I think we're --

21 [REDACTED] We're at time. So we will turn it over to our colleagues on the
22 minority, and --

23 [REDACTED] We'd like 5 minutes, please.

24 [REDACTED]. I was going to just say, if anyone would like to take a break.

25 [REDACTED] We're off the -- we'll go off the record until the start of the next

1 round.

2 [Recess.]

1

2 [10:49 a.m.]

3 [REDACTED]: My name is [REDACTED], and I'll be asking questions on behalf of
4 the minority.

5 Before we turn to questions, I wanted to read into the record: We wanted to
6 note that, notwithstanding any agreement made between the majority and the witness
7 today for this transcribed interview, there is no provision governing or mandating
8 confidentiality of investigations and/or transcribed interviews in the House or the
9 committee's rules for the 118th Congress.

10 With that, I will turn it to questioning for Ambassador Smith here.

11 EXAMINATION

12

BY [REDACTED]

13 Q I wanted to note we may revisit topics previously discussed, so if you would
14 indulge us with that --

15 A Sure.

16 Q -- we'd greatly appreciate it.

17 At the top, we wanted to level-set a couple of terminology criteria. So those
18 would be related to the withdrawal and the evacuation.

19 As to the withdrawal, we understand this to describe the retrograde of U.S.
20 troops, equipment, and personnel from Afghanistan. As such, the withdrawal was
21 initiated in the February 2020 Doha deal, involved partial troop drawdowns prior to 2021,
22 and was completed by August 31st, 2021, to include the withdrawal of both U.S. military
23 and diplomatic personnel.

24 Is that -- does this comport with your understanding of the term withdrawal?

25 A Well, when you talk about the Doha Agreement, that pertained only to the

1 military withdrawal itself, not to diplomatic personnel and the withdrawal of diplomatic
2 personnel. And it was the operating assumption of the State Department throughout
3 this period of time, until the end, that we would continue to maintain a diplomatic
4 presence in Kabul notwithstanding the withdrawal of U.S. Forces and allied forces from
5 Afghanistan, security conditions permitting.

6 Q Understood. And so, it would therefore follow that U.S. troops and
7 equipment are primarily the domain of the Department of Defense and military
8 leadership. Is that correct?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And, as to the evacuation, we understand this to describe the removal of
11 American citizens and their eligible family members, lawful permanent residents and their
12 eligible family members, SIVs and their eligible family members, and certain other Afghan
13 allies. As such, this encompassed the civilian-led Operation Allies Refuge that began in
14 July 2021 and the subsequent military NEO that occurred from August 16th to 31st, 2021.

15 Does this comport with your understanding?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Great. So we'd like to proceed with our round, understanding the
18 differences and the overlap as related to the withdrawal and the evacuation.

19 Turning back to your experience, I wanted to ask you about a couple of specific
20 positions you held within the State Department.

21 A Uh-huh. Yes.

22 Q Is my understanding correct that you served as an Assistant Secretary of
23 State for Intelligence and Research?

24 A Yes, I did.

25 Q And what were the dates of that employment?

1 A Roughly from -- I wasn't certain exactly when I was confirmed, but 2013 to
2 2018.

3 Q And, in that capacity, did you conduct intelligence analysis?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Are there any other skills underpinning that position that would be relevant
6 to your involvement in the AAR?

7 A Well, the role of the Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research is to
8 manage the relationship between the State Department and the intelligence community
9 writ large, elements of which we can't talk about in this room. But it also has its own
10 analytic arm, dating back to the OSS actually, that became part of the Department of
11 State and became eventually the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. So it's known for
12 its analysis as well, its independent analysis as part of the intelligence community, but
13 also separate from.

14 Q Understood.

15 A And is it also correct that you served as the Executive Secretary for the State
16 Department?

17 A Yes. Under both Secretaries Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton.

18 Q And would this role have included overseeing the operations center and its
19 crisis management components?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And would this experience have been germane to your involvement in the
22 AAR?

23 A Yes.

24 Q How so?

25 A The operations center is generally the center for crisis management in the

1 Department, so I worked on, during my tenure as Executive Secretary, a number of crises,
2 from the earthquake in Haiti to military coups in Sub-Saharan Africa to any number of
3 issues that the Department was engaged with.

4 Q And what about Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs?

5 A Yes. Consular Affairs, as you know, is responsible for all citizen services
6 abroad, as well as passports and visas.

7 Q And so, would this have included overseeing Consular Affairs capacities and
8 activities to repatriate or evacuate Amcits as needed around the world?

9 A Yes.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q And for clarity for the record, when did you hold the position of Principal
12 Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs?

13 A I can't speak with authority on the dates without seeing my own resume, but
14 I was -- I was there from roughly 2002, I think, to 2005 or 2006.

15 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q And how would that role have impacted your role on the AAR?

18 A It gave me insight into how the Bureau of Consular Affairs handles
19 evacuations, handles crisis management, sets up a task force, and works to support the
20 Department's work during a crisis.

21 Q Are there any other roles that I have not asked about that would have had a
22 direct impact on your involvement in the AAR?

23 A I was chief of mission in Athens, and we facilitated evacuation from -- from
24 Egypt during that time, so I was involved in the field as well.

25 Q And is my understanding correct that you retired under the rank of career

1 ambassador?

2 A Correct.

3 Q Is that the highest rank obtainable in the Foreign Service?

4 A It is.

5 Q And help us contextualize. Approximately how many people among the
6 roughly 14,000 members of the Foreign Service do you estimate hold that rank at this
7 current time?

8 A At the time I retired, it was five. I think it may be four now.

9 Q Okay. Have you received any awards for your contributions related to the
10 Foreign Service?

11 A I have.

12 Q Could you briefly describe those for us?

13 A I've received the Secretary's Distinguished Service Award. I've received
14 Presidential awards. I've received the Arnie Raphel Award, which I'm particularly proud
15 of, for mentoring and developing other employees in the Department of State. I've
16 been honored with several awards.

17 Q Is it fair to say that you're a distinguished and decorated State official?

18 A I'm embarrassed to say it is fair to say that.

19 Q You shouldn't be embarrassed. It's quite a career.

20 Do you think that these contributions helped inform Secretary Blinken's decision
21 to invite you to come out of retirement to conduct the AAR?

22 A I can only speculate, but I think it may have played a role.

23 Q Okay. Do you feel, at the time in which you were asked to conduct the AAR
24 or lead those efforts, you were qualified and prepared to do so?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Did you have any reservations going into the AAR about your capabilities?

2 A No.

3 Q Okay. And please describe your experience drafting, editing, or overseeing
4 the development of comprehensive reports more broadly.

5 A So, as I indicated earlier, there really was no template for this sort of report.
6 We were creating it as we went along in that regard. But I -- the State Department
7 produces reports on a -- on a daily basis, usually at request from Congress. So I've been
8 involved with a number of reports over the course of my career, everything from human
9 rights reports to reports on the budget. You name it.

10 Q When you use the word, "a number," could you describe about how many?

11 A How many reports I've been involved in one way or another?

12 Q Correct.

13 A Well, the State Department, on an annual basis, produces hundreds of
14 reports. I would say that I've -- I've at least been involved with a hundred in one way or
15 the other --

16 Q Okay.

17 A -- either as an editor or as a contributor or in some other capacity.

18 Q What percentage of those would you have been lead drafter?

19 A In most instances, I was not; I was contributing drafter to those reports, not
20 the lead of those reports. But they're generally collective enterprises. So the Human
21 Rights Report is a massive undertaking involving every mission abroad and bureaus in the
22 Department.

23 Q Understood. And how often have you conducted informational interviews
24 prior to your lead on the AAR?

25 A I hadn't had a lot of experience in terms of this sort of direct interview of

1 individuals for a report, per se, but my work -- I joined as a political officer, so I've done
2 this sort of work throughout my career. We interviewed people and report back to
3 Washington continuously, so I've had a lot of experience with it.

4 Q Is it fair to say that some of these informational interviews were of a
5 sensitive nature regarding employment, emergency situations, or the like?

6 A Absolutely.

7 Q Do you feel qualified and capable interviewing folks related to sensitive
8 content?

9 A Yes.

10 Q In your professional assessment, do you feel qualified to make interviewees
11 feel comfortable and empowered to share with you sensitive information?

12 A I hope so, yes.

13 Q Okay. Do you have experience reviewing documents and conducting
14 analysis related to those documents?

15 A Yes. And certainly from my time in -- as Assistant Secretary of Intelligence
16 and Research.

17 Q Okay. What about conducting policy-related research?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Conducting region-specific research?

20 A Yes.

21 Q And develop and make written recommendations for Department or
22 administration leadership?

23 A Yes, I have.

24 Q How often have you developed such written recommendations for
25 Department and/or administration leadership?

1 A Throughout my career, it would be impossible to say, but this -- on an
2 ongoing basis throughout my career.

3 Q Could you quantify how many?

4 A How many times --

5 Q Uh-huh.

6 A -- I've done this? That's very difficult to say. I would say that I've done it
7 dozens, if not hundreds of times.

8 Q Okay. Fair enough.

9 A And what about leading review teams?

10 A So this is -- as I say, this was a unique enterprise and something that the
11 Department had not undertaken before. I've been part of efforts to, of course,
12 understand and analyze and present to policymakers options and decisions that we think
13 they ought to make or need to take into consideration, but never something along these
14 lines before.

15 Q Okay. What about leading large teams generally in terms of your
16 management and your ability --

17 A I've led very large organizations. The Bureau of Intelligence and Research
18 has over 300 employees. The Embassy in Athens has more than that. The Bureau of
19 Consular Affairs is one of the largest bureaus in the State Department and with worldwide
20 responsibility. So I've led large organizations.

21 Q In your assessment -- and perhaps this goes back to the award you described
22 prior -- do you feel that your subordinates are comfortable and feel that they can take
23 concerns to you?

24 A I hope so.

25 Q Do you feel confident and capable in terms of digesting those concerns and

1 finding reasonable solutions?

2 A Yes.

3 Q Do you have any concerns about your management or leadership style?

4 A I don't.

5 Q How would you describe your management and leadership style?

6 A I try to be as inclusive as possible, to listen to all concerned, to build a sense
7 of consensus and teamwork in any enterprise that I've led. But I also don't and do
8 recognize -- don't hesitate to make difficult decisions and will take responsibility for those
9 decisions.

10 Q Do you feel that you're an objective and fair manager?

11 A I do.

12 Q Okay. Turning to the AAR specifically, did you understand the
13 Department's AAR to be part of a broader set of AARs by U.S. agencies involved in
14 Afghanistan?

15 A I was aware, yes, that -- that certainly that -- I think there was public
16 knowledge of an evaluation that the Director of National Intelligence was doing an
17 intelligence analysis at the time, and that the Pentagon was doing as a separate
18 enterprise.

19 Q Are you aware of whether those reviews were conducted in tandem with
20 State's AAR, or after?

21 A I am aware that the Pentagon one was begun about the same time that we
22 were beginning our after-action review, and I spoke with them on a couple of occasions
23 about how they were going about their review. And I believe they asked me at one
24 point in time if I had any objections to their interviewing a State Department official.

25 Q Did you have any such objections?

1 A No.

2 Q Okay. And you had previously testified that it was the Secretary who
3 initiated the AAR. Is that correct?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Are you aware of whether he publicly made this intention known?

6 A There was a -- an announcement, I think, shortly after I was asked to begin
7 the AAR.

8 Q And so that would have been in October of 2021. Is that correct?

9 A It may not have been until -- we actually were beginning the review, so
10 closer to December.

11 Q Okay. And did you feel any sort of undo influence in terms of getting
12 started on the AAR and how you would approach conducting the research and analysis
13 related to it?

14 A No.

15 Q And you'd previously testified, just to be really clear, there was no undo
16 influence by the White House, for example?

17 A Right. No.

18 Q Okay. And I believe you also said that the Secretary called upon you likely
19 because you'd conduct a fair and objective assessment as related to the AAR. Is that
20 correct?

21 A I believe so, yes.

22 Q And just one more question on the term -- in terms of additional agency
23 AARs. Did you agree with the instinct for these AARs to be separate in terms of each
24 agency?

25 A Good question. I don't think I really focused on that fact, but I -- it made

1 sense to me, given the scope and parameters of this subject matter, that you would do it
2 by agency.

3 Q Okay. And so -- so why did it make sense to you?

4 A Because I think the volume of material and the roles are unique to these
5 agencies, and that made sense in terms of their roles and responsibilities, and why you
6 would want people who were conversant with and knowledgeable of those roles and
7 responsibilities conducting those AARs.

8 Q Okay. And so would it, therefore, follow that, in your professional opinion
9 and experience, it would be appropriate for the AAR State team to interview State-related
10 employees, whether they were current or former?

11 A Yes.

12 Q And, by extension, it would have been perhaps introducing challenges to
13 interview employees from other agencies who were conducting their own AAR
14 assessments?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Okay. Why did you decide to accept the Secretary's request?

17 A This -- when they want you to accept something, they have the Secretary of
18 State call you directly.

19 Q Did you have any personal goals -- understanding that the mandate was very
20 clear from the Secretary, did you have any personal goals related to your involvement
21 with the AAR?

22 A Well, as I say, I commend the Secretary for initiating this AAR. My goal was
23 to create a template, because we didn't have a template, for how these could be
24 conducted in the future. I think this can be a very useful exercise if the Department
25 follows that going forward in any circumstance, but especially in crisis management, as a

1 tool to learn from what we've done and to apply those lessons to the future.

2 So my goal, as such, was to create a blueprint that others could follow going
3 forward.

4 Q Okay. And why was a template needed in your opinion?

5 A Well, because the Department didn't have a history of doing after-action
6 reviews in that regard. As I say, there is a separate category on the accountability
7 review board. There is, of course, the work of the Office of the Inspector General. But
8 there was not a tradition, as there has been in the Pentagon, of conducting these
9 independent reviews.

10 Q Okay.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q Just to follow up on that, this type of independent internal review, what did
13 you see as the value that it brought to the Department that isn't already captured by the
14 accountability review board mechanism or its independent --

15 A Well, first, in this instance, there was not going to be an accountability
16 review board. But what I thought this was tremendous value added in terms of not
17 defining the parameters of what we were looking at, but trying to look at the totality of
18 what the Department had been involved in and what it had been doing.

19 The accountability review board, which can have enormous value added, are
20 usually initiated -- are initiated, as I say, because someone has been killed or has been
21 seriously injured as a result -- was under Chief of Mission authority. This was a much
22 broader mandate and a much broader perspective on lessons learned from a very long
23 period of time in terms of how the Department had planned for and executed its
24 responsibilities over time -- over that period of time.

25 So I thought there were lessons learned and recommendations that would be of

1 broader interest perhaps than an accountability review board would have been.

2 Q And of broader utility to --

3 A Yes.

4 Q -- the Department?

5 [REDACTED] Thank you.

6 BY [REDACTED]

7 Q Turning to the AAR team specifically, your prior -- you had previously
8 testified that there was about 10 people in addition to you on the team. Is that correct?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Had you worked with any of these individuals prior?

11 A Yes.

12 Q And, given your prior experience, why did you decide to include those folks
13 in your team?

14 A I hadn't -- I should say I hadn't worked with all of them. I had worked with
15 several of them. My choices were made on the basis of their background, their
16 experience, their insight, and their knowledge that I thought that they would bring to this
17 process. I also chose people whose reputation and integrity, I thought, was beyond
18 reproach.

19 Q Okay. Throughout the duration of the review, were there any issues
20 related to any of the team members?

21 A No.

22 Q Do you feel that the work product you received from each team member
23 was excellent?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Did you personally review work product that was finalized, including the

1 memos -- the memoranda of transcribed interviews?

2 A Yes.

3 Q Did you ever provide any edits to those?

4 A Yes, I would, especially, of course, of those interviews that I had participated
5 in to provide clarity or to make some of the points that had been made in the course of
6 the interview more clear.

7 Q And did you make each team member aware of the mandate as given to you
8 by the Secretary?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Do you feel that they had a firm grasp on what that mandate was?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Do you feel that they followed through with personifying that mandate and
13 ensuring it was complete?

14 A I do --

15 Q Okay.

16 A -- to the best of their ability.

17

BY [REDACTED]

18 Q You testified previously that the timeframe that was set out for the scope of
19 your review was 90 days. Can you say more about who directed that timeframe?

20 A I believe that was raised by the Secretary in his initial phone call was that
21 they wanted the review done in 90 days with the goal of clearly making recommendations
22 as quickly as possible that might be implemented.

23 Q And did you feel that was a reasonable timeframe to undertake the work?

24 A I thought it was an ambitious timeframe, but I think, in the end, it proved
25 reasonable.

1 Q Okay. So, at the end of the 90 days, you felt like you were able to complete
2 the mandate satisfactorily?

3 A I think we -- I think we did our work well.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q I also want to refer back to your prior testimony. You had said something
6 along the lines of you've never felt so independent. That really struck me.

7 Could you describe for the record why you felt so independent in your leadership
8 related to the AAR?

9 A It may be the liberation of being retired that you -- makes you feel
10 independent in that regard, but I -- I think that, in the course of this, as I say, although I
11 kept in touch with Counselor Chollet and kept him apprised of any problems that we
12 encountered. I was really given as much discretion as I possibly could have imagined to
13 write the report that I wanted to write.

14 Q Okay. So, by extension, is it -- is it correct to say Secretary Blinken never
15 told you that certain information needed to be included in the AAR?

16 A Correct.

17 Q And by extension, he, likewise, did not say certain -- he did not say certain
18 information should not be included in the AAR?

19 A Correct.

20 Q Okay. And would that be the same for the White House?

21 A I wasn't involved directly with the White House.

22 Q Okay. You never had any discussions with the White House in terms of
23 updates related to the AAR?

24 A No.

25 Q What about at the top -- at the outset before you conducted the AAR?

1 A No.

2 Q What about after you had completed the report?

3 A No.

4 Q Okay. Are there any constraints that you feel your team operated under in
5 terms of resources?

6 A No. Other than the time constraint of doing 90-day review, we didn't really
7 face any constraints in that regard.

8 Q Okay. And, in terms of the interviews themselves, was there ever a call for
9 interviews disseminated internal at the State Department?

10 A As I say, there was a -- there was an announcement that the after-action
11 review was beginning, and that triggered a number of people to come forward who
12 indicated they wanted to be interviewed.

13 We tried to be as -- as comprehensive as we could. We -- as I indicated earlier,
14 we -- we began with very senior officials and worked our way down in that regard.
15 There were people we expressly, at a lower level, wanted to speak with. But a lot of
16 them came forward of their own volition to say they wanted to be interviewed.

17 Q Is there anybody who affirmatively asked to be interviewed that you
18 declined to interview?

19 A No. But what I can say with authority is -- I mean, we could have continued
20 this process for months on end, and there may have been more people who would have
21 liked to have been interviewed --

22 Q Okay.

23 A -- but we didn't interview.

24 Q What accommodations were given to you or your team by the Department
25 to conduct your work?

1 A Physical accommodations, or --

2 Q Space, resources, equipment.

3 A We had all the space that we needed in a Department that is often short of
4 space and, all the access to information technology and other support that we needed.

5 Q Okay. Were there any constraints on who within the Department or
6 elsewhere in the USG you could interview?

7 A Well, as I indicated, it was -- our focus was the Department of State. So I
8 think, to that extent, we did not think it was appropriate that we would be interviewing
9 necessarily military officials on the ground or others. That was the purview of the
10 Pentagon in its after-action review.

11 Q Okay. And what about what you could ask interviewees?

12 A No.

13 Q Okay. What protections were you given to operate confidentiality and
14 discretely during the AAR process?

15 A So we were located separately in our own quarters, in effect --

16 Q Okay.

17 A -- so we would conduct interviews there out of sight of anybody else in the
18 Department.

19 Q Okay. So, when you say you were located separately, there was a physical
20 space --

21 A Correct.

22 Q -- that was dedicated to conducting interviews and document analysis?

23 A Correct. Correct.

24 Q Okay. And is it a fair assessment that that was done, in part, to ensure the
25 confidentiality of interviewees?

1 A I think the Department wanted -- but, again, I'm speculating here, so I don't
2 know, but I certainly wanted to make this as easy as possible and as discrete as possible.

3 Q Maybe another way to ask: So, when you set up interviews with
4 individuals, particularly those who you affirmatively reached out to, did you identify that
5 you had a physical space for the AAR that was separate and apart from other Department
6 facilities?

7 A I don't know if we did in every instance, but we would invite people to come
8 to our space, so they would be aware that there was a separate space.

9 Q Were any of the interviews conducted virtually?

10 A That's a good question. And, again, this is 18 months ago. I think we may
11 have done some -- and especially some on the follow-up, by phone or by video.

12 Q Okay. And how long did you and your team spend on process planning?

13 A We were thinking about process almost the entire time that we were doing
14 this report in terms of were we getting access to what we needed, were we going to be
15 able to tell as complete a story as possible, what were the missing pieces that we might
16 have, who might we want to interview? So the process was an ongoing discussion.

17 Q Okay. Pivoting more specifically to informational -- information gathering,
18 approximately how long did you and your team spend in the information gathering phase
19 of the 90 days?

20 A That's an excellent question. I don't know that we had a cutoff date. That
21 is, I think we were still interviewing people at -- near the end, which -- whom we felt
22 could shed light on important things, or add important context. But we also -- we
23 contacted people if we wanted clarification as we were writing the report.

24 Q So is my understanding correct that the information gathering was, in part,
25 contemporaneous to drafting the report itself?

1 A We started drafting fairly early on on a lot of the report, yes.

2 Q So the drafting was, in fact, an iterative process that was informed by
3 additional entities and documents?

4 A Absolutely. Absolutely.

5 Q Okay. And, by extension, then, just to be clear for the record, findings were
6 not made prior to conducting interviews and document analysis?

7 A Correct.

8 Q The findings were, in fact, informed by the information gathering?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Okay. How many interviews were conducted?

11 A I believe we indicated at least 150 interviews.

12 Q At least 150.

13 Do you have a ballpark number in terms of the hours of interviews conducted?

14 A Well, at a minimum, as an hour per interview, it would be 150 hours, but I'm
15 sure it was far more than that.

16 Q Far more than that.

17 What, if any, terms were read to the interviewee at the top of each interview?

18 A We made it clear to everybody that this was a voluntary interview that they
19 were giving, that we wanted their candid feedback, that they had a right to request
20 anonymity if they wanted, and that we would, to the best of your ability, respect that
21 request.

22 Q Okay. What about freedom from retaliation?

23 A I think that was part of the understanding with -- of -- of why they could
24 request anonymity and should feel -- avail themselves of that if they were afraid.

25 Q Did any of the interviewees express concerns related to retaliation?

1 A Not to the best of my knowledge.

2 Q Okay. I want to pivot back to your prior testimony. You had indicated
3 that large in part, employees did not decline to be interviewed. Is that correct?

4 A Did what? I'm sorry?

5 Q Decline to be interviewed.

6 A Large in part, you said, the --

7 Q Overall --

8 A Oh.

9 Q -- of those who you contacted affirmatively and asked to be interviewed,
10 most people said yes?

11 A Certainly every current official said yes.

12 Q Okay. And you previously testified that there were individuals from the
13 prior administration that declined to be interviewed.

14 A Yes.

15 Q Can you describe for us why they declined to be interviewed?

16 A I could only speculate why they declined, but I can tell you that several
17 senior officials declined.

18 Q Did they provide any justification?

19 A No.

20 Q They simply said, No, I do -- I do not want to be interviewed?

21 A Correct.

22 Q About how many individuals from the prior administration declined to be
23 interviewed?

24 A About four.

25 Q Okay.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q Does that number include the former Secretary Pompeo that you --

3 A Yes.

4 Q Okay.

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Did you push back on those individuals who declined to be interviewed?

7 A So we contacted, for instance, former Secretary Pompeo through his
8 attorney, or, actually, the Office of Legal Advisor reached out. And, through his
9 attorney, he declined.

10 I had some email exchanges, I think, with the former Deputy Secretary, who
11 declined.

12 I don't think we ever heard back from one other senior official we reached out
13 several times to. And I had one other series of exchanges with another former official,
14 who actually had been a career official, about his possible -- his possibly being
15 interviewed before he declined.

16 Q Okay. And can you identify -- if you don't want to -- we'd like their names.
17 If you don't want to provide the names, could you identify the roles of these individuals?

18 A Secretary of State, Deputy Secretary of State, Under Secretary for
19 Management, and Deputy Under Secretary for Management.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q Can you also just clarify for the record, when you said you reached out to
22 each of these four individuals, in every case, was that a written request?

23 A It wasn't -- I don't know that it was ever a formal letter as such. I think we
24 often sent -- communicated by email with them to ask them.

25 Q But would you testify today that the request was clear, that you were --

1 A Yes.

2 Q -- making?

3 A Yes.

4 Q And can you give us a sense of whether the request differed from what you
5 were asking of any other interviewee in terms of time and --

6 A It was the same.

7

BY [REDACTED]

8 Q And you said -- I'm sorry -- you could only speculate why. Would you care
9 to speculate for us?

10 A No. I -- you know, I -- as I say, I don't want to read into what their
11 motivations were or concerns were.

12

BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q Thank you.

14 In terms of taking the interviews, you had previously testified that official notes
15 were taken. Those notes were memorialized in memoranda.

16 Was there a process for sign-off on each of those memos?

17 A I think everybody who had been in the interview itself would certainly look
18 at that to make sure it accorded with what their understanding was in their own notes
19 from that interview, and I would review all of them.

20 Q Okay. What was the highest level official you interviewed in terms of
21 seniority?

22 A Secretary of State.

23 Q And the most junior?

24 A Would have been, maybe, a first- or second-tour officer.

25 Q Okay. Anyone who was not a Federal Government employee?

1 A No. And the deputy -- the -- I was asked that previously. I don't recollect
2 that we ever talked to -- everybody we talked to was either a current or former
3 government employee.

4 Q Okay. Turning to the document review and analysis portion of your
5 information gathering, approximately how many pages of documents were collected?

6 A I actually don't have an estimate on that, but we looked at thousands of
7 documents, if you include, of course, emails and everything as a document that is created
8 that's relevant.

9 Q Did you ever run into obstacles with requesting or reviewing documents?

10 A No.

11 Q Okay. And in terms of memorializing the findings from these documents,
12 can you describe for us what that entailed?

13 A So we had with us actually somebody from the Office of Records
14 Management within the Secretariat who made sure that we were adhering to guidelines
15 and the rule of law with respect to the documents themselves, that we were keeping
16 track of everything that we had seen and reviewed, and that we could memorialize all the
17 work that we had done.

18 Q Okay. So, in terms of memorializing the information, did you have a
19 document chronology?

20 A Document chronology? Sort of a record of everything you -- itself, you
21 mean?

22 Q Yeah. What I'm trying to get at is you had testified there was a memo
23 written after each interview. How did you memorialize and then use the information
24 gleaned from documents in a methodical way?

25 A So we kept track, of course, of all of the memoranda and all of the

1 documents that we thought we would cite --

2 Q Okay.

3 A -- in the report itself, and those were all archived, but also accessible to the
4 team as we were writing.

5 Q Was there any written analysis related to the documents themselves?

6 A I'm not clear what you mean in that --

7 Q Any work product that was generated in tandem with the document review
8 and analysis?

9 A No, but there were various drafts as we went through. Such as you
10 indicated, this was an iterative process. We started drafting fairly early, and some of
11 those drafts may have evolved considerably over the course of our -- of our work.

12 Q Do you feel confident that the information gleaned from your document
13 review was reflected in the report itself?

14 A Yes.

15 Q What makes you feel confident?

16 A First of all, it was a very good team, and they were very comprehensive and
17 thorough in producing this document. We allowed everybody to have a chance to read
18 the whole of the document, and provide edits or critiques or suggestions as we went
19 through this process. So we made it as collaborative as possible there. And I think, in
20 light of that, I have great confidence in the quality of the product.

21 Q Were there other sources used besides documents and interviews that were
22 incorporated into the AAR report?

23 A Well, documents, of course, includes a very broad category of things, as I
24 say, ranging from text messages to emails to anything that -- any written record, of
25 course, that existed. But, apart from that, no. It was -- that was the crux of what we

1 were relying upon.

2 Q Okay. So maybe let's clarify for the record. You just mentioned text
3 messages. Were there any sort of other nontraditional documents that were included,
4 so text messages, emails, memoranda, meeting notes, anything else that I'm missing?

5 A No. But, as I say -- and one of the things that you'll note in our report, the
6 recommendations, is the challenge which we identified of operating in a very difficult
7 environment overseas where access to information technology is not readily available.

8 People were using anything they could at their disposal, WhatsApp and others, to
9 communicate in that regard. We tried to capture as much of that as we could in this
10 context. But one of the things that we underscored was the need for more flexibility on
11 the part of the Department in such environments, in such operating environments, to
12 allow people to do their work, to do their jobs.

13 Q Are there any swaths of information that you feel you should have
14 reviewed?

15 A I don't see any major omissions in that regard.

16 Q Okay. So, to the best of your knowledge, you reviewed all relevant
17 documents related to the mandate set forth by the Secretary?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Okay. Were you asked to provide periodic updates during the information
20 gathering stage to the Secretary?

21 A I did not provide updates to the Secretary during the process.

22 Q Okay. So he wouldn't have seen a draft of the report?

23 A No.

24 Q He only saw the report when it was in final form. Is that correct?

25 A Correct, to the best of my knowledge.

1 Q Okay. Turning to drafting, you said that it was quite an iterative process.
2 Can you identify when the draft originated?

3 A Well, this is an existential question. I think, in the course of making notes
4 and accumulating notes, I find -- I was trained as a historian -- it's good to start
5 memorializing those things in writing, and sooner rather than later. It helps clarify one's
6 thinking. It helps clarify the questions that are still outstanding, and point you in certain
7 direction that you want to go in that regard. So, very early on in the process, we started
8 drafting, at least some of our preliminary findings, but also some of the narrative, that is
9 mostly not contained in here.

10 Q Were there specific individuals on your team who were tasked with the
11 drafting piece?

12 A Yes.

13 Q How many of the 10?

14 A It was really one person that I worked with very closely who was the primary
15 drafter, but all of them contributed to the process.

16 Q Okay. And, the lead drafter, would he or she have been working on all
17 sections of the AAR?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Okay. Were sections of the AAR drafted in a particular order?

20 A That's a good question. I think that the chronology itself, much of which is
21 still classified, was written, sort of, in the order in which it appears. That is, we began at
22 the beginning and ended at the end. But there were times in which we were jumping
23 back and forth in terms of our focus, and in terms of what additional information we were
24 getting that we thought was relevant to that. So we would -- we would pick and choose
25 in terms of what we were focused on.

1 Q Okay. And were there any separate processes for drafting classified versus
2 unclassified portions of the report?

3 A We -- again, getting back to the issue of a template, there was really no
4 template for how this should work. What we intended to do, with the objective of
5 making this as broadly available as possible, was to, to the maximum extent possible,
6 make the findings and recommendations unclassified. And we also had an introduction
7 and a conclusion that we thought should be unclassified so that this could adhere
8 together, notwithstanding the fact that the bulk of the report that was going to remain
9 classified and would be not necessarily available to everyone.

10 Q So I believe you just testified that you wanted most of the report to be
11 unclassified. Is that correct?

12 A No. I -- what I wanted -- well, I mean, the objective of any bureaucrat
13 should be to -- maximum use of unclassified information as you can and to make it as
14 accessible as possible. My goal was to protect those portions that needed protection,
15 but to also have a -- a document, if you will, sort of a separate set of findings and
16 recommendations that would be and would remain unclassified.

17

BY [REDACTED]

18 Q Just to follow up on this -- and I appreciate your characterization of the
19 objective that a diplomat should have to -- maximum use of unclassified info given that
20 you were the former I&R Assistant Secretary, but just to make things crystal clear, did you
21 or your team have any intent to use a classified report format as a way to shield
22 information from being available to interested parties and people who could essentially
23 benefit from it?

24 A No. We simply want to protect classified sources and materials.

25

[REDACTED] Thank you.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q I believe you used the word, you want it to be accessible. Why would that
3 be the case?

4 A Well, I feel -- I felt at the time, and I think my team members agreed that we
5 wanted this to be as useful as possible for the State Department. And to make it as
6 useful as possible, the more accessible it is, the more useful it can be. So, if you create a
7 document which is completely classified and available to no one, it will gather dust
8 somewhere.

9 Q Okay. And I want to go back to -- you've discussed in some detail the
10 process was deeply iterative. How do you determine when a finding was a finding and
11 to stop iterating on that specific finding?

12 A I think, even up to the end, we were -- we were tweaking some of our
13 findings in that regard. But there were certain things that were sort of clear to us early
14 on. And, to the extent that we followed the chronology of what we were dealing with
15 here -- that is, the period from the signing of the agreement with the Taliban to the end
16 of American presence in Kabul at the end of August, we -- we wrote in that chronological
17 fashion. So we focused initially on that initial period, and then built on that edifice, if
18 that makes sense.

19 Q So, from your perspective, what did finalizing entail?

20 A I think finalizing entailed making sure that we were comfortable with all of
21 the findings, with all of the recommendations, that we had hit the most important issues
22 that we thought Department leadership and rank and file needed to know, and would
23 find useful in addressing any future crises, notwithstanding, I will say, the fact that a lot of
24 our findings and a lot of the document itself addresses the uniqueness of the situation in
25 Afghanistan.

1 Q Were you the final sign-off for the findings?

2 A Yes.

3 Q And I believe you testified that each person in your team read the draft and
4 signed off on it. Is that correct?

5 A I -- each person was involved in the process. I can't attest that everybody
6 signed off on everything, but yes, they were involved from -- throughout.

7 Q At any point, did team members have a difference of opinion related to the
8 findings?

9 A You know, there was discussion throughout about the nature of the findings,
10 what the recommendations should be, which direction we should point. I think we had
11 a robust dialogue. But, at the end, I think we were pretty much in consensus where we
12 were going.

13 Q What did that robust dialogue look like?

14 A As I indicated, we had people with a lot of unique expertise and background
15 and experience. Some of them had expertise and knowledge that I actually did not
16 have, obviously, or I wouldn't have put them on the team, particularly with regard to
17 information technology and with regard to some of the challenges that the Department
18 faced in the course of this crisis when it became a crisis, especially in the period in August.
19 And they had recommendations with regard to what IT systems we should be using, to
20 what technology might be most useful in that regard. So there were a lot of discussions
21 in that context.

22 Q Okay. I know we asked about Secretary Blinken, but did anyone else in the
23 Department who was not a member of the AAR team review the report in draft form?

24 A Not those who were in the -- otherwise not a member of the AAR team, with
25 the possible exception of the Office of Legal Advisor.

1 Q Okay. And why would the Office of Legal Advisor have reviewed a draft?

2 A First of all, because they're the best writers in the State Department, but
3 because --

4 [REDACTED]. Except for me.

5 Ambassador Smith. -- we wanted to be sure that we were on sound footing in
6 the material we were using, we were citing, that we weren't creating any problems down
7 the road that we were not -- we were not anticipating.

8 Q Okay. And so what impact did the office's review have on the text itself?

9 A They made a few suggestions, but very minimal.

10 Q What about on the findings themselves?

11 A Almost none. I mean, that I can recall.

12 Q And as to the recommendations?

13 A None.

14 Q So would it be fair to say that the lawyers who reviewed the draft were there
15 large, in part, to help with word choice and --

16 A Yes.

17 Q -- potential liability?

18 A Yes. I can give you actually chapter and verse of which additions they
19 made.

20 Q Okay. This may be an impossible question, but how many drafts did you
21 review before the AAR was finalized?

22 A I reviewed it on an ongoing basis as we were drafting, and then read it again
23 for -- many times at the end to make sure that the whole made sense, that this flowed,
24 and it was a coherent story we were telling, but also that we had captured everything we
25 wanted to in our recommendations.

1 Q Is it fair to say dozens of times?

2 A Yes.

3 Q More than that?

4 A I was -- at the end, I was doing it on a daily basis several times a day, so --

5 Q Okay. Fair enough.

6 Did you personally draft any sections of the report?

7 A I edited a lot of it, and I -- some of it is my language, I confess.

8 Q Okay. What is your understanding of how the AAR was circulated and to
9 whom, following it being finalized?

10 A So, when I was done, we turned this over to the counselor of the
11 Department, and my involvement ended at that point.

12 Q Okay.

13 A My employment actually ended at that point.

14 Q Okay. So you didn't continue in conversations related to that
15 dissemination after --

16 A So I was -- I was informed periodically about what plans might be, whether
17 things would be disseminated, but I was not part of those conversations or that
18 decisionmaking.

19 Q Okay. Were there any issues or takeaways that you would have liked the
20 AAR to address, but was left out of the final product?

21 A No. Not to the best of my knowledge.

22 Q Okay.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q So we wanted to just pivot to a couple of topics that were previously
25 discussed between one of our majority colleagues and just make sure we're clear.

1 First of all, I think you testified earlier that, at least with respect to the 13
2 servicemembers who were killed during the NEO, that the purpose of the after-action
3 review was, more broadly, to gather lessons learned and was not to achieve
4 accountability for those deaths. Is that accurate?

5 A Well, and, as I indicated, it was not an accountability review board, and
6 those 13 servicemembers who are heroes were not under Chief of Mission authority.

7 Q Okay. So, following from that, who do you understand had responsibility
8 among Federal entities for pursuing accountability in this case?

9 A That's a very good question. I think that they were under the command of
10 military officials on the ground.

11 Q So you don't see any role for the State Department, per se, in accountability
12 for those deaths?

13 A I think we all feel like we have a terrible responsibility for the deaths of any
14 servicemember and that they were all performing heroic actions. I will note they were
15 working side by side with consular officers, with diplomatic security officers.

16 We recognized in conducting this review that we also could have lost people in
17 that environment and that it was a very difficult and stressful and -- what should I say -- at
18 times, dangerous environment we were operating in. And I -- I just, again, can't say
19 enough about the quality of the people we had on the ground, about the quality of both
20 of our military, of our civilian employees, and the heroic acts they were performing under
21 incredible duress to handle this evacuation.

22 Q Thanks.

23 A So I think everybody was doing the best they could under those
24 circumstances.

25 Q Okay. Thank you. I appreciate the helpful clarification.

1 Do you see the after-action review that you led as something that can contribute
2 in the future beyond the State Department to other agencies in the Federal Government
3 who are operating alongside State in crisis situations?

4 A I do think there are things that we highlighted in the report that will help the
5 interagency operate more effectively in this crisis management situation. Primarily, of
6 course, the focus was on those -- that relationship that is so critical in these operations
7 between the Pentagon and the State Department. But there are also things that other
8 agencies, I think, could do and could help learn lessons -- draw lessons from that might
9 help them in crisis situations.

10 Q And you also were asked previously about the dissent channel cable.

11 A Uh-huh.

12 Q Did we understand correctly that your earlier testimony was that you believe
13 it's appropriate that you were the only member of the AAR team who saw the cable?

14 A I think that it was. I think that, as I say, the Department goes to great
15 lengths to protect the integrity of that process, the anonymity of that process. But I felt
16 that and do feel today that we had enough other information that it was not necessary
17 for everyone to have seen it.

18 Q And to clarify, you testified earlier, I believe, that no one on your team
19 requested to see it who was then prevented from seeing it. Is that accurate?

20 A Not that I recall anyone requesting.

21 Q Okay.

22 A I'm sure they all would have liked to have seen it.

23 Q I believe you previously characterized your understanding of the contents of
24 the dissent cable as generally comports with information that we knew from other
25 channels, or that the Department knew from other channels about challenges with

1 respect to the withdrawal.

2 Based on your overall work conducting the after-action review, do you believe
3 that the State Department was responsive to those concerns that had popped up in
4 various channels, including potentially the dissent channel?

5 A So this gets, I think -- your question -- I may need more time to answer, but I
6 think gets at the heart of a lot of the challenges that policymakers face in any crisis
7 situation. That is, there are various sources of information that are coming to them,
8 often on a real-time basis.

9 You're getting intelligence reports. You're getting reports from State
10 Department channels. You're getting outside experts providing information on what's
11 happening. And you're trying in that environment to make the best sense that you can
12 of what's happening and how quickly things might be changing.

13 And as I say, one of our key takeaways -- one of our key recommendations is the
14 need -- and this is true in any crisis environment, in any situation -- for people to
15 constantly challenge their own assumptions about what's happening and to look at, if
16 things really do change -- if the environment is changing, if it's getting worse quickly,
17 more quickly than we thought, what are we going to do? Are we prepared for that
18 contingency? And this is a challenge in any crisis that I've seen, but particularly in a
19 situation like this.

20 Q So is it fair to say that, based on your review and based on what you knew to
21 be broad concerns or -- let me rephrase that -- concerns that had been expressed through
22 various channels and multiple channels, the Department made a good-faith effort to
23 address those concerns?

24 A I have no reason to doubt that senior officials were asking -- acting in what
25 they thought was the best interests of the United States at the time.

1 Q Okay.

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q I have one additional question: So it's your recollection that nobody on
4 your team asked to see firsthand the dissent channel cable. Is that correct?

5 A You know, I -- I can't, with absolute certainty, say they didn't ask me, at
6 some point, or express interest in it, but it was not a major point of contention or
7 concern.

8 Q Okay. And would it be fair to say that perhaps that was due to the fact that
9 they trusted in your ability to internalize the contents of the cable and act accordingly?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Okay.

12 [REDACTED] We have no further questions. Thank you.

13 [REDACTED] Let's go off the record.

14 [Recess.]

1

2 [11:55 a.m.]

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

4 Ambassador, I had a couple follow-up questions, the first beginning with, you
5 noted that whenever you requested those documents from the Department you received
6 those.

7 Can you speak to how quickly those documents were produced to you?

8 Ambassador Smith. Most of the documents that we requested were produced
9 immediately and given to us. Some of them might have taken more time to find or to
10 track.

11 [REDACTED]. Okay.

12 [REDACTED] In the longest instance?

13 Ambassador Smith. I can't say exactly. I would think -- I mean, some of the
14 requests were very specific. We knew exactly the document that we wanted. Those
15 were generally found almost immediately and available to us. Some of them were more
16 broad searches for documents under various categories. Those would take longer to do,
17 a day or two.

18

BY [REDACTED]

19 Q And I just had one point of clarification. We noted previously that with the
20 13 servicemen and -women whose lives were tragically lost, they were not under COM
21 authority.22 Can you speak a bit more as to what State Department leaders viewed their roles
23 and responsibilities within a noncombatant evacuation operation, or a NEO?24 A Well, State Department responsibility is for helping to coordinate particularly
25 the evacuation of official Americans under chief of mission authority, American citizens,

1 legal permanent residents, and others, and working closely with the Pentagon in that
2 process of identifying who should be evacuated and how they might be evacuated. But
3 they never have and do not have direct authority and command and control over military
4 assets.

5 Q And as part of evacuees, designated persons would fall under that umbrella
6 as well, correct?

7 A Designated persons?

8 Q Designated persons, individuals who may not be American citizens but that
9 the Department deems to be sort of eligible for evacuation.

10 A That would be part of the discussion with the Pentagon about who else
11 would be evacuated.

12 Q Do State Department leaders acknowledge the Department's role as the lead
13 agency for a NEO?

14 A Again, this is a partnership really between the State Department and the
15 Pentagon. Only the U.S. military has the assets, the firepower, the knowledge, and the
16 know-how that would be needed to execute a NEO, but it's done in conjunction with the
17 Department of State and in close cooperation with the Department of State.

18 Q Let me reframe that question. We, of course, understand that there are
19 different jurisdictions and entities involved. But in terms of who led the NEO, was it
20 understood that the chief of mission essentially was the lead of the noncombatant
21 evacuation operation?

22 A I would not say that. I would say, again, this was a -- this is a -- if anything,
23 it is a partnership between the Department of Defense and the Department of State with
24 active involvement from the White House and others in this whole process. So it's not
25 really fair to say it was a Department of State-run NEO in that sense.

1 Q So there is no formal agreement, to your knowledge, or arrangement that
2 the State Department was the lead agency for a NEO?

3 A I don't know what the formal documents are, to be honest, in terms of that
4 agreement. But, as I say, there is certainly no reason to believe the State Department
5 had authority over Department of Defense assets.

6 [REDACTED] Do you agree that it is the State Department's role and responsibility
7 to request a NEO from the Department of Defense?

8 Ambassador Smith. That's ultimately what happens, yes. It requests the formal
9 request for a NEO. But, again, this is an interagency process.

10 [REDACTED] And could you speak to -- you mentioned the White House is
11 involved. Could you speak to that?

12 Ambassador Smith. Clearly, in any situation like this, the National Security
13 Council, the White House is monitoring the situation and is involved in the situation
14 closely.

15 [REDACTED]. During your review, who did you believe was in charge of the
16 NEO?

17 Ambassador Smith. Well, again, I thought it was collective basically between the
18 Department of State and the Pentagon in terms of the actual operation on the ground,
19 but the whole process was overseen by the White House.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q How about the successful completion of the NEO? Who, in your view, was
22 the lead agency or entity responsible for the successful completion of the NEO?

23 A I'm not clear what you're asking in that regard.

24 Q Ultimately there were combined efforts, but was there one agency, to the
25 best of your recollection or understanding --

1 A Who deserves the most credit for the NEO? Or what do you mean by that?

2 Q No. I believe there's an understanding or arrangement that there's one
3 agency that's responsible as a lead agency for the successful completion of the NEO.
4 Were you aware of that, or do you know which agency was responsible?

5 A For the successful -- I'm just certainly not clear about what you're asking in
6 terms of successful completion of the NEO. As to when it ends? Or what do you mean
7 in that?

8 Q We can --

9

BY [REDACTED]

10 Q Who is designated as the official lead agency?

11 A Who's designated as official lead agency? That's a good question. I don't
12 know for certain. I do know that it is a joint operation. But, as I say, the Department
13 of State never has control over DOD assets in this environment.

14 Q The AAR identifies a document collection called the AAR files. Can you
15 please explain what the AAR files are?

16 A As we've indicated or we discussed before, those are all the documents that
17 we consulted and memoranda. It was a conversation for interviews we held.

18 Q And somewhat repetitive, but what is included within the AAR files?

19 A All of those documents and memorandums of conversation.

20 Q And can you please give us your best estimate of the volume and scope of
21 the AAR files?

22 A I would only be guessing.

23 Q The AAR states that the Department of State has preserved the material in
24 this collection as permanent records that will be managed according to records
25 disposition schedules approved by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

1 Can you please elaborate on how the AAR files were preserved and maintained?

2 A As we discussed, they were accumulated as we were going through our
3 review. We kept careful track of everything we had seen, of everything we had
4 consulted, and of all of the interview notes and every memoranda of a conversation that
5 we created.

6 Q Were the AAR files preserved or retained in any kind of distinctive manner
7 different from the normal course?

8 A I think they were retained and kept as the Department is required by law for
9 any documents.

10 Q And to what extent were the AAR files retained together as a united
11 collection?

12 A I think we indicated, and you indicated in that portion you read, that they
13 were in a coherent whole.

14 Q And were the AAR files retained in digital format, physical format, or both?

15 A Both, I understand.

16 Q To what extent are there records within the AAR files that are not cited
17 within the AAR?

18 A Well, again, this is a record of everything that we may have consulted and
19 everything we may have seen. Whether or not we used that material is another
20 question. So there may be things that we did not cite.

21 Q And could you elaborate on what some of the records that you used in the
22 review but did not ultimately cite in the report?

23 A It would be very difficult after a year and a half to recollect everything that
24 we cited or didn't cite, but there were clearly things that we had acquired that we didn't
25 think were relevant to what we were writing and doing.

1 Q In terms of categories, are you able, in the general sense, are you able to
2 elaborate on what you found less relevant?

3 A Well, as I say, I think it gets back to first purposes of what our goal and
4 objective was here, which was to make recommendations that we thought could help the
5 Department in crisis management and in future such situations.

6 So if there were things that came out in the course of our review that we didn't
7 think were germane to that, we wouldn't necessarily have cited it.

8 Q And, as you may know, the committee subpoenaed the AAR files following
9 the Department's failure to comply with a voluntary request to produce them.
10 Department officials cited to the committee that they had trouble identifying the
11 responsive documents that constitute and are part of the AAR files.

12 Are you familiar with these issues, and if so, can you elaborate on them?

13 A I'm no longer part of the Department of State.

14 Q Has the Department consulted you in trying to locate and produce these
15 records?

16 A No.

17 Q And I believe you addressed this, but are the interview records part of the
18 AAR files?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Can you please walk us through the timeline and process of the after-action
21 review project from beginning to end?

22 A I'm not clear what you're asking me.

23 Q If you could give us sort of a brief overview of the timeline and process of
24 the AAR project.

25 A Well, as I indicated before, I was called in roughly in October of 2021 by

1 Secretary Blinken and asked to undertake this review.

2 We began our work, the 90-day review, the clock started ticking in early
3 December, and we finished in the first week in March. So that was the broad timeline of
4 our review, of our work.

5 Q Did the AAR team conduct any site visits or other travel for the review?

6 A No.

7 Q Were you able to access and engage personnel who were stationed at
8 various posts and records from those posts?

9 A Everything we asked for, yes.

10 Q And to confirm, did you complete the entire process of collecting
11 information, reviewing it, and writing the report within 90 days?

12 A Yes, believe it or not.

13 Q How did you determine that the overall classification of the AAR should be
14 secret?

15 A So the classification of any constituent part determines what the overall
16 classification is.

17 Q Was there any content that was top secret or above that you examined as
18 part of your review and contemplated discussing in the AAR but did not?

19 A There were top -- we can't go into detail about what they were -- but there
20 were top secret elements that we looked at, intelligence community and other products.

21 Q But there were no State Department products that were top secret or
22 above?

23 A Not that I recall.

24 Q And --

25 A Although, let me clarify that. There may have been INR products that were

1 top secret, which would count as State Department.

2 Q How did you determine which sections of the AAR to portion mark as secret?

3 A In accordance with what the underlying information was and underlying
4 classification of the material.

5 Q And the AAR identifies you as the classifying individual. Are you the
6 original classification authority for the document?

7 A I am.

8 Q And did you receive guidance on what should be classified and at what level?

9 A Not specific to this, but I have received guidance throughout my career and
10 have been involved in this throughout my career.

11 Q And is there a formal guidance document that governs this within the State
12 Department?

13 A There is a formal executive order which governs the classification of
14 materials.

15 Q When did you submit your final draft of the report?

16 A Early March, as I indicated.

17 Q And to whom did you submit the final draft?

18 A To Derek Chollet, counselor.

19 Q And did the Department or any other entity make any further edits to your
20 final draft of the report?

21 A Not that I'm aware of.

22 Q And at the time that you left the Department, did you consider that version
23 of the report final?

24 A Yes.

25 Q And in reviewing -- I believe you had the opportunity to review the report

1 recently at the State Department? Is that correct?

2 A I saw it for the first time in 18 months yesterday in full.

3 Q And in reviewing the report, were there any noticeable changes or omissions
4 to it from when you submitted your final version at the Department?

5 A My memory is very good, but I couldn't, to the best of my knowledge, I
6 couldn't detect anything, any changes that had been made.

7 Q Once you completed your review, did you brief Secretary Blinken on your
8 conclusions or otherwise discuss them with him?

9 A I discussed them with the counselor. I can't recall if I had an exit interview
10 with the Secretary or not. I may have. I honestly don't recall.

11 Q And what was the counselor's reaction?

12 A He thanked us for our work, he thanked us for the comprehensiveness of it,
13 and dismissed me.

14 Q Did he provide any substantive response to any of the findings or
15 recommendations that you made?

16 A No.

17 Q And did you brief any other State Department officials or offices on your
18 conclusions?

19 A I was not asked to, and I did not.

20 Q The AAR report is dated March 2022, but the committee did not receive it
21 until April 6th, 2023. After requesting the AAR in January 2023, the committee was told
22 by the Department that it could not be produced at that time because it was still under
23 Secretary-level review. Was that consistent with your understanding of where it was in
24 the process?

25 A Again, my involvement ended in March 2022.

1 Q I believe you mentioned that the Department at times gave you periodic
2 updates on the status of the review. Can you please --

3 A The Department gave me, you said? I'm sorry.

4 Q Yes. I believe you said --

5 A Or that I gave the Department?

6 Q Well, I believe you said that after you left --

7 A Oh. Oh, I'm sorry.

8 Q -- that the Department gave you periodic updates.

9 A I heard periodically about whether there were plans to release or what the
10 thinking was, but not officially.

11 Q And could you please run us through what updates you received as such?

12 A Well, periodically I talked to the counselor about the product, and mostly in
13 the context of whether or not I might be asked to give a -- any sort of public statement on
14 it or to make explanation.

15 Q And had you offered to? Or what was the discussion on that matter?

16 A Had I offered to what? I'm sorry.

17 Q To give a public statement on the matter. What was the discussion on
18 that?

19 A I mean, I was at the disposal of the Department for whatever purposes they
20 needed in that regard.

21 Q And did Counselor Chollet say that he did not -- he preferred that you not
22 make or that the Department did not deem it was necessary for a public statement on --

23 A He never asked me to make any public statement, and I refrained from any
24 public statement or any interview on it.

25 Q Did you -- did the Department consult you at all after the committee

1 requested the AAR?

2 A No.

3 Q Did you have an opinion on whether the report should be produced to
4 Congress?

5 A I did not.

6 Q And while the Department has released the unclassified sections of the AAR,
7 it has not publicly released any of the narrative section which forms the bulk of the
8 report.

9 Do you believe that more of the report could be declassified and publicly
10 released?

11 A Again, my involvement ended in March 2022. It's at the discretion of the
12 Secretary and the Department what they do with it.

13 Q Did you brief the White House on the AAR?

14 A No.

15 Q So I want to now turn to the report's findings and recommendations, which
16 begin on page 11. This is in exhibit 1.

17 A Okay.

18 Q Tell me when.

19 In finding number 1 the AAR found that, in both the Trump and Biden
20 administrations, "there was insufficient senior-level consideration of worst-case scenarios
21 and how quickly those might follow."

22 Can you please elaborate on that?

23 A So one of the findings, obviously, that we made in the course of our review
24 was that, as we discussed before, there were conflicting reports about what was
25 happening on the ground, about how rapidly the situation might deteriorate.

1 I think everyone understood the withdrawal of U.S. military was a significant step
2 and had profound consequences for the viability of the Afghan Government and the
3 Afghan National Security Forces.

4 What was not clear to either administration, to either White House, was how
5 quickly those might evolve -- or devolve -- how quickly the situation might deteriorate,
6 and what sort of warning we might get in advance of that.

7 But it was our recommendation and our feeling and our concern that perhaps in
8 both administrations there was insufficient understanding of how profound an impact
9 this was going to have and how quickly the situation on the battlefield might deteriorate.

10 Q The ultimate decision to unconditionally withdraw was made during the
11 Biden administration in 2021. Can you elaborate on the ways in which there was
12 insufficient senior-level consideration in the Biden administration?

13 A I'm not certain of the premise of what you just said. Could you repeat what
14 you --

15 Q Can you elaborate? You said it was found insufficient senior
16 consideration --

17 A No, no, your preface to that.

18 Q Sorry, that the ultimate decision to unconditionally withdraw was made
19 during the Biden administration in 2021, but the President announced his decision in
20 April 2021.

21 A That was -- that led to the -- but both administrations had made a decision
22 to withdraw U.S. military.

23 Q Can you elaborate on the ways in which there was insufficient senior-level
24 consideration in the Biden administration?

25 A So, as I say, I think there were a number of contingency plans that were

1 being drawn up. And certainly from the perspective of the Department of State, which
2 is what my after-action review was looking at, the Department had a number of
3 contingencies, which we outline in the report, everything from business as usual if the
4 security environment permits, to a significant drawdown if things are deteriorating, to a
5 move to Hamid Karzai International Airport in extremis, or to completely leaving the
6 country. So those plans were well developed and articulated in that regard.

7 The broader issue and the challenge, and this was, I just want to underscore, this
8 was never going to be easy, under any circumstance was this going to be easy. Ending
9 20 years of military engagement in Afghanistan, either under President Trump or under
10 President Biden, was never going to be easy.

11 And the difficulty, I think, in that environment was making decisions about not just
12 the official Americans who would be withdrawn, because that we can handle, we do that
13 all the time, even American citizens, but the host of other people for whom we felt
14 responsibility in that environment.

15 And I think we tried to articulate in this report that this was a situation perhaps
16 without parallel since Vietnam in terms of ending 20 years of military engagement and
17 having what we felt was a moral obligation to Afghan citizens in particular who had risked
18 their lives to serve side by side with us. And that's what complicated this whole
19 environment and made it enormously challenging in that context.

20 If it had been a normal crisis evacuation, you name the circumstances, a political
21 coup or an earthquake or whatever it might be, and all you were taking out was official
22 Americans and maybe helping American citizens who might need assistance, it's a very
23 different scenario than bringing out 125,000 Afghans and others whom we thought were
24 at risk. So --

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Can I --

2 A Please.

3 Q I didn't mean to interrupt you.

4 You had mentioned that both President Trump and President Biden made
5 decisions to withdraw, but the April 2021 decision to withdraw U.S. troops by
6 September 11th, 2021, that was a decision made by President Biden, correct?

7 A Absolutely.

8 Q And was that decision by President Biden, was that what U.S. troops were
9 operating under from April 2021 onward?

10 A Yes.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q Did any of the State Department's preparations include plans for an
13 evacuation from HKIA in a situation where the Taliban controlled Kabul and almost all of
14 Afghanistan?

15 A I don't know that any of the plans had fully anticipated how quickly the
16 situation might deteriorate and what the environment might be.

17 Q Can you speak more broadly to what preparations did the State Department
18 make for worst-case scenarios?

19 A Well, as I indicated, the State Department was focused, first and foremost,
20 on what would happen to official Americans, how we would reduce and protect those
21 assets in the worst-case scenario, and there were a number of plans that were related to
22 that.

23 There were also -- again, maybe we ought to be in a classified environment before
24 we discuss this -- but there were exercises and other things aimed at the broader
25 preparation for a possible NEO where questions arose that hadn't been answered.

1 Q And what documents and interviews or sources were most instrumental to
2 your understanding of this finding?

3 A In terms of preparations?

4 Q Yes.

5 A There were a number of documents. There were a number -- there were
6 emergency action plans and others that were developed that were relevant to that.

7 Q In finding number 4, the AAR found that, "Critically, the decision to hand
8 over Bagram Air Base to the Afghan government meant that HKIA would be the only
9 avenue for a possible NEO." Can you please elaborate on that?

10 A Well, again, this was outside of the State Department's mandate and control.
11 It wasn't part of the discussion. But it's simply a statement of fact that there was only
12 one exodus at that point.

13 Q And what was the State Department's role in the decision to hand over
14 Bagram, including providing input into the broader decisionmaking process?

15 A I don't know if the State Department had any role in that. It was under
16 military control.

17 Q Did the U.S. Embassy in Kabul have a position on whether it wanted to do a
18 potential NEO through HKIA or through Bagram?

19 A So I can't speak to that. I don't have knowledge of it directly. But I will
20 say, there were challenges with either option.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q Were these questions that you asked of Secretary Blinken or the other State
23 Department officials? Did you ask what the State Department's position was on doing a
24 NEO through HKIA or through Bagram?

25 A I don't know that we expressly asked about that, because I think by the time

1 this was being discussed it was already one option for it.

2 Q So you said you don't know if you asked? Like --

3 A I don't recall asking.

4 Q You don't recall if you asked whether the State Department preferred to do
5 a NEO through Bagram or through HKIA? You don't remember?

6 A I don't recall asking.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q Do you recall anything that State Department leaders said regarding the
9 decision to hand over Bagram?

10 A I don't recall.

11 Q Finding number 5 states that there was a plan for a stay-behind force to
12 provide embassy security, that the details of it and what the Taliban would accept as
13 consistent with the Doha Agreement had not been clearly established by the August 2021
14 fall of Kabul.

15 Can you please elaborate on that?

16 A So part of the discussion that we had throughout and I think that is detailed
17 in the report is, what were the key enablers that the U.S. military provided that we were
18 going to have to mitigate once they were lost? So there was a discussion of everything
19 from life support to physical protection, all of the things that the military had done.

20 And there was a discussion throughout, in both administrations, of some residual
21 force that might remain in Kabul, U.S. military, that could continue to provide some of
22 that security and that support.

23 The difficulty was determining whether or not the Taliban would ever permit this
24 in accordance with the agreement that the Trump administration had signed and what
25 the terms would be for that.

1 Q The AAR narrative, the unclassified portions thereof, outline disagreements
2 between offices, including Diplomatic Security and SRAR and SCA, on whether to initially
3 request a stay-behind force.

4 Can you please elaborate on that?

5 A I'm sorry, what were you referring to?

6 Q So the -- this is not in the public portion, but this is in unclassified portions of
7 the narrative.

8 The AAR narrative outlines that there were disagreements between offices within
9 the State Department, including DS and SRAR and SCA, on whether to initially request a
10 stay-behind force. Can you elaborate on that?

11 A I really can't. I would note that a lot of it may have pertained to when such
12 a request would be made, how it would be made. But I don't know -- I don't recall the
13 details of it.

14 Q And how was a plan for a stay-behind force ultimately formed?

15 A Well, as I've indicated, this was a -- this is a moving target, if you will. So
16 throughout this period of time there are plans that are unfolding, there are efforts being
17 made by the State Department, and this was never, again, never going to be easy, never
18 simple to mitigate the loss of these key enablers.

19 And it's in the course of that planning and those discussions that this idea of a
20 residual force had arisen and was still being entertained even to the end there. And
21 there were questions about, as I say, what would the traffic bear, so to speak, what would
22 the Taliban permit as being consistent with our agreement.

23 Q And can you explain what the plan was that was being discussed for
24 retaining some U.S. forces in Afghanistan in August 2021 at the time that Kabul fell?

25 A I don't recall all of the details about it, but as I say, it was -- the idea was

1 some sort of residual force that could provide force protection and provide extraction
2 capability in extremis.

3 Q Finding number 8 of the AAR states that, "up until almost the time that Kabul
4 fell, most estimates were that the Afghan government and its forces could hold the city
5 for weeks, if not months," but that, "some argued for more urgency in planning for a
6 possible collapse" as the situation in the country deteriorated.

7 What documents were these estimates of the sustainability of the Afghan
8 Government and its forces presented in, and where did they originate?

9 A I think we're going to be getting into classified information here.

10 Q The AAR notably uses the qualifying language "most." What were the
11 outliers?

12 A "Most" in what context? Sorry.

13 Q It said "most estimates were that --"

14 A Oh.

15 Q So suggesting that there were estimates that diverged from that.

16 A I think, as in any circumstance, you get a range of estimates about amount of
17 time that it might take or that things might deteriorate. And that's certainly true with
18 intelligence matters, it's true with any other person who's looking at a circumstance, of a
19 situation. And so nobody has a crystal ball. Nobody knows exactly when something is
20 going to happen.

21 Q Was there anyone, any individuals or offices, that were notable in that they
22 came the closest to predicting what would happen?

23 A I don't know that I can speak with authority on that.

24 Q Do you know who was -- can you speak to who was arguing for more
25 urgency and at what point in the timeline within the Department?

1 A I think, especially as the situation was deteriorating in the spring, there were
2 those who were looking at Taliban advances throughout Afghanistan who were saying
3 that, again, this could start to fall much faster than we thought.

4 There were people, both within government and on the outside, experts, who
5 were, I think, very prescient in terms of noting that, again, this could unravel much faster
6 than people were anticipating.

7 But, as I say, policymakers are getting a broad swath of information, including
8 directly from the President of Afghanistan himself, who was saying he had no intention of
9 leaving and he was going to fight to the end.

10 Q Can you identify more specifically who was arguing, whether individuals or
11 offices, was arguing for more urgency at the State Department?

12 A I can't, but I can say that there were many people, especially those who
13 were concerned about the ability to get Afghans at risk out, who were expressing these
14 concerns.

15 This is one reason, though, and I would note to the credit of the administration,
16 they did begin a concerted effort to try and expedite the SIV process to try and get more
17 people out quickly.

18 The unfortunate thing is they ran out of time. But they did begin, as we noted in
19 this, a process to bring out and to do final processing for a lot of SIV applicants in July and
20 August. They also opened up new categories of refugee referrals, again with the eye
21 toward helping as many people as possible.

22 Q Finding number 9 states that, "U.S. military planning for a possible NEO had
23 been underway with post for some time, but the Department's participation in the NEO
24 planning process was hindered by the fact that it was unclear who in the Department had
25 the lead. Coordination with DOD worked better on the ground in Kabul."

1 Why was it unclear who in the Department had the lead?

2 A Well, this gets back to our recommendations, I just would cite those in the
3 report, where we think it should be the crisis management staff in the Executive
4 Secretariat who is the point of entry for all NEO planning, and that it would be crystal
5 clear to the Pentagon and to anybody else that that would be the entry point.

6 I think the confusion comes when people don't know whether it's that entity or
7 whether it's the regional bureau involved in it or who it might be is the single point of
8 contact. But one of our recommendations is that be crystal clear to everybody.

9 Q Can you please elaborate on the statement that, "Coordination with DOD
10 worked better on the ground in Kabul"?

11 A Part of it is they're just side by side there and that they were working on a
12 daily basis and it seemed to be more expeditious there.

13 Q What were the deficiencies of coordinating with DOD in Washington?

14 A Well, as I indicated, I think there was some confusion about who had the
15 lead.

16 Q And that was between the State Department and the Department of
17 Defense?

18 A No. That was within the State Department as to who was the lead and who
19 was the point of entry for dealing with --

20 Q Who was the point of contact for DOD?

21 A Correct.

22 Q And how did that confusion manifest and affect the coordination with DOD?

23 A Well, I think it -- in any time there is confusion about who has authority it
24 can impede careful planning.

25 Q And it slowed the process?

1 A It didn't work as expeditiously as it could have.

2 [REDACTED]: Who were the competing potential leads within State?

3 Ambassador Smith. I wouldn't say it was competition so much as, as I say, sort of
4 a confusion on the part of who was the point of entry.

5 [REDACTED]: And who were the candidates for that?

6 Ambassador Smith. Well, I'd indicated before, you could go to the geographic
7 bureau that's responsible for Afghanistan and say they should be the lead on this or you
8 go to the crisis management staff.

9 And one of -- we made a couple of recommendations in the report aimed at
10 addressing this, not only to make it clear that it's crisis management staff that is the point
11 of entry, but also that they themselves develop more of a planning capability in this
12 regard.

13 And this is a challenge, I think, that many have long identified, is that there isn't
14 enough of a robust planning capacity in the Department for these contingencies.

15 [REDACTED] In terms of Department leadership, who in the Department, to
16 your recollection, had the lead?

17 Ambassador Smith. Well, again, getting back to our recommendations, this was,
18 I think, a concern throughout the crisis. And one of the recommendations we'd make is
19 the Secretary in any complex crisis like this should appoint a single person, usually a
20 principal on the 7th Floor of the State Department where the leadership is, who is the
21 point of -- who is the coordinator for this crisis.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q And that speaks to finding 10, which states that, "Senior administration
24 officials had not made clear decisions regarding the universe of at-risk Afghans who
25 would be included in the NEO by the time the operation started nor had they determined

1 where those Afghans would be taken. That added significantly to the challenges the
2 Department and DOD faced during the evacuation."

3 Why had senior administration officials not made clear decisions on which at-risk
4 Afghans would be included in a NEO?

5 A I could only speculate, but I think this was, as I say, was going to be one of
6 the challenges that any NEO faced in this environment, was what is the universe of
7 people we're responsible for and where are we going to take them.

8 Q To what extent were decisions on which at-risk Afghans would be included in
9 the NEO made inside or outside of the State Department?

10 A To what extent were they made inside or outside the State Department?

11 Q Were they made -- were those decisions made inside the State Department
12 or outside of the State Department?

13 A This was an interagency discussion.

14 Q And did who within the interagency had responsibility change over the
15 course of the planning process?

16 A I'm not clear what you're asking.

17 Q Did the entity, say the State Department or NSC or USCIS?

18 A No. As I say, it was an interagency-led process led by the NSC.

19 Q And who within the administration was responsible specifically for the
20 decisions on what at-risk Afghans would be included in the NEO?

21 A Again, I think this was an interagency process. I don't know that there was
22 one specific person who was responsible for it.

23 Q Could you tell us more about how many Afghans the State Department
24 considered to be at risk?

25 A I really can't elaborate on that other than to say the universe of potential

1 people who are at risk could be vast.

2 Q Finding 11 states that, "Crisis preparation and planning were inhibited to a
3 degree by concerns about the signals that might be sent, especially anything that might
4 suggest the United States had lost confidence in the Afghan government and thus
5 contribute to its collapse."

6 Who in the Department were the main sources of these concerns?

7 A Well, I don't know that there's exactly one person, and I can't recall specific
8 details about it, but there were expressions of concern, as there are in many
9 circumstances about signaling that's being sent in this environment.

10 And one of the recommendations we make is to the maximum extent possible
11 that planning for any potential NEO in any crisis situation be insulated as much as possible
12 from those political considerations.

13 But those are not illegitimate concerns. If it comes out or turns out or is leaked
14 that the State Department or the U.S. Government is planning for an evacuation in this
15 sort of environment, you can imagine what the political implications could be.

16 Q Finding number 18 states that, "Naming a 7th Floor principal to oversee all
17 elements of the crisis response would have improved coordination across different lines
18 of effort."

19 Why was there no 7th Floor principal named to oversee the crisis response?

20 A I don't know. But, as I say, that is one of our key takeaways, is that the
21 authority has to be clear in this environment.

22 Q What were the levels of involvement of the various 7th Floor principals in
23 overseeing the crisis response?

24 A I think there was -- a level of involvement was very intense, especially in the
25 crisis situation, and there were many people who were involved at all levels.

1 Q Who came the closest amongst 7th Floor principals to overseeing the crisis
2 response?

3 A Who came the closest to overseeing --

4 Q Oh, of individual senior leaders at the Department or senior leaders --

5 A Again, I don't think there was one clear person, which is why we made that
6 recommendation in that regard.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q When you made this recommendation you noted that a draft of the report
9 was provided to the Secretary. Did you engage with him further on this topic
10 specifically?

11 A I did not.

12 Q Finding number 19 states that, "The complicated Department task force
13 structure that was created when the evacuation began proved confusing to many
14 participants, and knowledge management and communication among and across various
15 lines of effort was problematic."

16 Can you elaborate on that?

17 A Sorry, which one was that?

18 Q Finding 19, "The complicated Department task force structure --"

19 A Nineteen. So to some extent the task force structure evolved over time as
20 the crisis evolved in very real time. I think that there were a couple of other challenges,
21 one which we've highlighted, which was COVID was still going on at the time. Another
22 was actually the Operations Center was under reconstruction at the time. So physically
23 a lot of the task forces had to be separated from one another.

24 I also think the scale and scope of this crisis was such that there was not a lot of
25 muscle memory, if you will, for how to do this and how we might operate in this

1 environment. And we were constructing this -- the State Department was constructing
2 it as it went on.

3 I've mentioned in the report, we mentioned in the report, we've highlighted in the
4 narrative how extraordinary the situation was once it became a NEO, how extraordinary
5 the pressures were on the State Department from all different sources, both within the
6 administration, former administration officials, Members of Congress, members of the
7 press, and others to help individual Afghans who were at risk on the ground.

8 I think the Department's information management systems, if you will, case
9 management system was overwhelmed by the volume of requests and the scale of those
10 requests that were being made.

11 So there are a number of recommendations that we make that would better
12 prepare the Department to have that surge capacity in a crisis situation, recognizing, as I
13 say, that there were many things that were extraordinary about this crisis.

14 Q Finding number 24 states, "Constantly changing policy guidance and public
15 messaging from Washington regarding which populations were eligible for relocation and
16 how the embassy should manage outreach and flow added to the confusion and often
17 failed to take into account key facts on the ground."

18 Can you please elaborate on that? And how did the policy guidance and
19 messaging constantly change?

20 A This gets to the issue of, again, coming back to the point we were discussing
21 before, who are we going to evacuate, who is at risk, what are the priorities in that
22 regard?

23 There were clear priorities in terms of American citizens, but beyond that -- and
24 locally employed staff and others who had worked with us -- beyond that, who was going
25 to be eligible and how do we determine that eligibility.

1 Again, I just want to emphasize the extraordinary pressure under which
2 particularly people on the ground were operating in that environment.

3 You know and have read from the account the lack of control at the gates, the fact
4 that there was no systematic way of processing these people, in many cases
5 extraordinary circumstances in which our individuals, our consular officers, our diplomatic
6 security, our military had to wade out into these crowds to try and find people they were
7 looking for. It was extraordinary in that regard.

8 And I think messaging in terms of we will take out at-risk Afghans, we will take
9 care of this group of people or that group of people, or that individual calls that people in
10 some cases were getting on the ground directly from people in Washington and
11 elsewhere added to their -- certainly their anxiety and pressure, but also took away from
12 their ability to do what they were otherwise going to be able to do.

13 So every time you had to go out and find somebody, individual in the crowd, you
14 couldn't do something else in that environment.

15 Q What were the key facts on the ground that it failed to take into account?

16 A Exactly that, physical conditions and the ability of people to do that.

17 Q Recommendation number 1 states, "Strengthen the Department's Overall
18 Crisis Preparedness and Response Capabilities." You touched on this a little earlier.

19 Can you please explain the role that crisis and management response played in
20 withdrawal planning and the emergency evacuation?

21 A The crisis management strategy, you mean, the CMS?

22 Q Yes, CMS.

23 A So CMS plays a key role in terms of managing any crisis situation and
24 ensuring that embassies and the Department are as prepared as possible with regard to
25 crisis management.

1 That said, one of our recommendations is that the role of the CMS, the crisis
2 management and strategy element in the Operations Center, needs to be enhanced, their
3 planning capacity needs to be built, and that there should be a Senior Executive Service
4 person in charge who is familiar with crisis management.

5 Q Who were the key officials responsible for -- within CMS -- related to
6 Afghanistan?

7 A I can't tell you. I don't know.

8 Q Can you please explain the role that the Operations Center specifically
9 played in withdrawal planning and the emergency evacuation?

10 A Well, again, the Operations Center in a crisis situation becomes the nerve
11 center of the Department and is where all the task forces are housed and is responsible
12 for overall coordination as well as communication with other agencies in terms of
13 requests and in handling those requests.

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q And you said that the Operations Center was under construction at the
16 time?

17 A It was under reconstruction.

18 Q Reconstruction, yeah.

19 A Uh-huh.

20 Q What was the impact of that?

21 A I think it made it more -- obviously more difficult in terms of having the
22 capacity for the task forces that were going to be set up, so that the task forces had to be
23 physically separated from one another for the simple fact that they didn't have the
24 capacity there in the Operations Center.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Did you examine as part of the review the Department's decision to
2 dismantle the Crisis and Contingency Response Bureau?

3 A No, although I'm aware of it.

4 Q Was there a reason you didn't examine it as part of the review?

5 A We didn't think it was germane to this review. That is, first of all, it was
6 outside the jurisdiction of it. But, secondly, what it had been set up to do, as I
7 understand, was in response to the COVID crisis where you were transporting people and
8 individuals in a permissive environment where you could charter aircraft. This was a
9 NEO.

10 I just want to reiterate, the only people who could have done this are the U.S.
11 military. No charter aircraft will go into that environment. Only the U.S. military has
12 the force, has the power, has the authority that would be needed to conduct this
13 evacuation. I can't say enough about it. I mean, the U.S. military is unique in the world
14 in that regard.

15 Q Were you aware of the public reports that the leader of that bureau had
16 commented that he believed it could have had an impact on the Afghanistan withdrawal
17 in the article in Vanity Fair?

18 A I'm not aware of it, but I don't know what he means.

19 Q Recommendation number 2 states, "The Department must insulate
20 contingency planning and emergency preparedness from political concerns."

21 In what way were contingency planning and emergency preparedness negatively
22 affected by political concerns when it came to Afghanistan?

23 A I think this gets back to the point we were discussing before, that is that the
24 concern about NEO planning, about emergency planning, any information about that can
25 leak out is an inhibiting factor and to some extent we feel needs and should be insulated

1 from that.

2 It should be seen as a routine operation. You plan for everything. The
3 Pentagon may have plans for an invasion of Canada. We don't worry about that. You
4 just plan. And you ought to be able to do that without worrying about the
5 consequences of it.

6 Q Recommendation --

7 A I don't know, for the record, but --

8 [Laughter.]

9 Q Recommendation number 4 states that, "Given that DS is charged with the
10 safety and security of U.S. missions and personnel, DS's ability to provide its unfiltered
11 assessment of security conditions to senior Department leadership, including the
12 Secretary, must be ensured."

13 Do you believe that DS did not sufficiently have opportunity to provide unfiltered
14 assessments to the Secretary and other senior Department leaders?

15 A So this is an important recommendation, first of all, and it's been made in
16 many different contexts similar to this. That is, it's important that security professionals
17 be able to speak directly to decisionmakers in that regard.

18 I think they did provide it. I think they were at times concerned that people
19 were not paying enough attention to what they were saying in that regard. And that's
20 the reason for that recommendation.

21 Q Can you speak more to those concerns?

22 A I think they're documented in the report, that they were concerned that the
23 level of risk that we were assuming, that the ability to mitigate the loss of key enablers,
24 that perhaps policymakers were not fully aware that they were not comfortable in saying
25 we could do this completely.

1 Q The AAR narrative describes disagreements between DS and other offices,
2 such as SCA and SRAR. Are you able to elaborate on those dynamics?

3 A I don't have any more to add than what I've said.

4 Q Did you ever hear that inputs from within DS were removed or softened by
5 others within the Department?

6 A I think there was a concern that sometimes in the broader context some of
7 their warnings may have been more muted than they should have been.

8 Q And could you please give us more detail?

9 A I can't really elaborate because I don't remember chapter and verse of this.
10 But, as I say, DS does have an opportunity to speak directly to the Secretary, to send
11 things directly to the Secretary and to other principals.

12 But in the course of the wonderful drafting process that is the Department of
13 State, sometimes people feel like their views are not conveyed with the urgency that
14 maybe they should have been.

15 Q And how did the drafting process inhibit the expression of those views?

16 A Well, all I'm saying is, to the best of my recollection, during this time there
17 were some instances where DS felt that perhaps it was not -- perhaps the concern or the
18 urgency of their concerns was not fully conveyed in some of these documents.

19 Q And did they say that their inputs were removed or softened in the
20 documents?

21 A I don't know if that's what they would say, but I think that was their concern,
22 not that they were removed but that they might have been softened or they were not
23 fully articulated.

24 Q That they might have been watered down?

25 A Potentially.

1 Q Recommendation 9 states, the State Department -- or, "The Department
2 should establish a central repository of lessons learned and after-action reports and use
3 them to improve crisis planning."

4 The AAR's methodology section also states, "We understand that many parts of
5 the Department have already drawn their own 'lessons learned' from this period and
6 have made or are making appropriate changes."

7 Can you please elaborate on what parts of the Department conducted their own
8 lessons learned or after-action reviews pertaining to Afghanistan?

9 A I don't recall the details of that, but I think that there were some, certainly
10 within the Secretariat or other bureaus that had been actively involved, who were
11 drawing their own conclusion as to what they might do better in the future.

12 Q Through the creation of written after-action or hotwash-type documents?

13 A That and basically sort of -- yeah, I think an assessment of where they had
14 performed well, where they could have performed better, what they might do differently.

15 Q Do you know which bureaus conducted such exercises?

16 A I don't.

17 Q Do you wish to offer any additional specific ideas for policy changes and
18 particularly for potential legislation that could help ensure that another similar
19 catastrophe does not occur in the future?

20 A Wow, that's a wide opening.

21 [Laughter.]

22 Q I wanted to give you the opportunity.

23 A As I say, my concern -- one of my concerns -- is I really think this is a sincere
24 effort and was a sincere effort on the part of the Secretary and others to try and derive
25 lessons and to apply those lessons going forward.

1 And, please, don't accept this as any criticism, but I really think we need to make
2 this as bipartisan as possible. We need to have a Department of State, a Federal
3 Government that is as capable and effective as it can be in dealing with these
4 circumstances. I'm sure you all would agree on that.

5 I find there were -- there's plenty of blame to go around in terms of things didn't
6 operate as they should have, they might have gone differently. This is a challenge.
7 This is a story that spanned two administrations. It really spans back to the beginning of
8 our involvement in Afghanistan in that regard.

9 And I hope that as we go forward the effort to improve or to do better is
10 recognized as the primary driver in that, that we really do want to derive lessons learned
11 that we think can be applied and can enhance the role. That was the way we were
12 writing this. That is the way I hope that your investigation will go.

13 But it's not, as I say, it's not an effort to necessarily identify the one person who's
14 responsible for this or made this mistake or that decision. These were collective
15 decisions for the most part. They were made under great duress and under very
16 difficult circumstances.

17 I have no reason to doubt in both administrations the sincerity and the patriotism
18 of those involved. They were trying to do their best in very different circumstances.

19 And I just -- this is an appeal more than anything else -- I hope we can address it in
20 that context, that we really need to do better, but we need to do better recognizing that,
21 as I say, no one party, no one person is really to blame.

22 Q What documents do you think provided you with the most insight into the
23 events of the withdrawal, to be understood to include planning for the military
24 withdrawal, as well as the emergency evacuation and any other aspects related to the
25 withdrawal?

1 A That's an excellent question. I don't know that I could point to one
2 document or one set of documents that were the most interesting in that regard. Again,
3 this is a search over -- across a broad spectrum of things that we're looking at in that
4 regard.

5 I will say, there was a notable difference, and we highlighted that in the report,
6 between how the previous administration worked and how the current administration
7 works, especially with regard to the National Security Council process.

8 So in the previous administration there was, suffice it to say, not a very robust
9 interagency process when it came to these things. Decisionmaking tended to be
10 handled in very narrow channels and among a few people.

11 In the new administration there was a return to what most of us in government
12 have experienced over the course of our careers, which is a very robust interagency
13 process. I'm not saying one is better than the other, but it was very distinct in watching
14 this transition and this change.

15 I do think the advantage of having a more robust decisionmaking process,
16 interagency process is you bring all of the players to the table who need to be involved in
17 it, because it's not just the Department of State, it's not just the Department of Defense.
18 When you're dealing with a crisis of this magnitude in this sense, you've got Department
19 of Homeland Security, you have FBI, you have all sorts of other equities at play.

20 And when decisionmaking and some of this discussion is too narrowly handled, it
21 makes it very difficult to sort of get the full scope of what needs to happen and who
22 needs to act in that environment.

23 And I'm saying this nonpartisan, because I've seen this over the course of 38 years,
24 Republican administrations and Democratic administrations that work effectively and
25 deal effectively with this. I will say, as I say, that the previous administration was unique

1 in my experience.

2 Q Are you able to say what interviews provided you with the most insight?

3 A That's a great question. The ones that stand out in my mind, Zal Khalilzad
4 is an interesting interview, if you haven't had Zal Khalilzad in.

5 Q What was interesting about it?

6 A Because I think he has unique perspective on things, both in terms of his
7 tenure -- I mean, he is one figure who transcends both administrations, who transcends
8 many administrations -- but he also had unique insight obviously into what was going on
9 on the ground in Afghanistan and in Doha, and you'll find it an interesting interview.

10 [REDACTED] Well, thank you.

11 Our round is up, so it's now the minority's time. We defer to the minority and to
12 you, sir, if you want to take any kind of break.

13 Ambassador Smith. Can we take 5 minutes?

14 [REDACTED] That's great.

15 [REDACTED]. Off the record.

16 [Recess.]

1

2 [1:05 p.m.]

3 [REDACTED] All right. We'll go ahead back on the record.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q So the minority will proceed with another round of questioning. Before we
6 do, we appreciate your very thorough answers, and we want to caveat that some of our
7 questions may feel repetitive. That is for the purpose of ensuring we have a complete
8 record and are able to ask about contours to specific topics that perhaps our colleagues
9 on the other side did not ask.

10 A I understand.

11 Q With that said, we have two objectives for this round. The first is to go
12 through the findings pretty systematically, and then the second is to go through the
13 recommendations.

14 So, if you want to turn your attention to page 11 of exhibit 1, the after-action
15 review, the publicly available version, I'll go ahead and get started there.

16 At the jump, do you stand behind all the findings rendered in the report?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Do you feel any findings of the report are less airtight than others?

19 A That's a good question. You'll have to tell me whether you think they're
20 less airtight. I think they stand on their own fairly well.

21 Q Okay.

22 In terms of planning for the military withdrawal, we want to discuss planning
23 efforts under both the current and former administrations.

24 What do you see as some of the biggest gaps in planning for the withdrawal by the
25 Trump administration?

1 A Well, I think there's similarities, actually, in many respects, in terms of what
2 the gaps were. That is, in both administrations, I don't think anyone had answered the
3 question of, what is the universe of people, in extremis, in a worst-case scenario, for
4 whom we are going to be responsible in that environment? How many people are we
5 going to take out?

6 And, again, this could easily spill over into classified discussion. But, even up
7 until the end, there was a tabletop exercise that we refer to where some of these
8 questions were not answered.

9 Q Okay. Fair enough. Were these gaps related to institutional deficiencies?

10 A I'm not -- again, I think part of it is -- and this is one of the reasons why we
11 made a recommendation about worst-case scenarios, about challenging assumptions,
12 which runs across administrations and governments -- that there is a need for people to,
13 if you will, think outside the box --

14 Q Uh-huh.

15 A -- on, what if our operating assumptions are wrong? What if the situation
16 deteriorates much faster than we thought? What's it going to look like in that
17 environment?

18 It's easy to plan for, in terms of a NEO, for instance, if the universe is just official
19 Americans or a defined set of people. But if the parameters are undefined and it's
20 potentially much broader than that, it's enormously challenging.

21 Q Okay. And what about gaps related to resource constraints?

22 A "Gaps related to resource constraints." I mean, part of any planning
23 situation is determining how much time you're going to have, how many airplanes you're
24 going to have available, what is the universe of people you can actually move. And so
25 resources become a key in terms of your logistical planning, in terms of any NEO planning,

1 of what is the window you have and how much can you do in that time.

2 Q And what about implementation challenges?

3 A "Implementation challenges"? I'm not certain what you mean in that
4 context.

5 Q In terms of gaps in planning for the withdrawal by either administration, do
6 you see any implementation challenges?

7 A I think we see implementation challenges in terms of how things evolved at
8 the time. I'm not really clear what you're asking in that context.

9 Q Were there any gaps in terms of how planning was set forth and then
10 implementing such plans as the evacuation took place?

11 A Certainly in terms of the official evacuation from Kabul -- that is, the
12 movement of our embassies -- I don't think there were major gaps. It worked pretty
13 much according to plan. And I think that's what we documented in our report.

14 The challenge was not getting those official Americans to HKIA, Hamid Karzai
15 International Airport, or extracting them. The challenge was then, as I say, the universe
16 of others for whom you would take responsibility. There was the gap.

17 Q Okay.

18 And so you said "according to plan" in reference to implementing the evacuation
19 plan. Is that because, in your experience through conducting interviews and reviewing
20 the documents, there was a directive in terms of how to get people out of Kabul?

21 A Well, when we talked about -- I think in the context -- but I'm not certain
22 what you're asking or which specific point you're referring to. But in terms of the actual
23 movement of our official Americans from the embassy compound to the airport, there
24 may have been -- it was more accelerated than people had necessarily thought was likely,
25 but it worked pretty much as it did -- as it should have.

1 The acceleration created some problems in terms of the destruction of materials
2 and other things, which is not unusual in these environments. And one of our
3 recommendations -- a lot of our recommendations related to how we operate in these
4 high-threat posts. What is the amount of material that people are able to keep? How
5 quickly should you be able to destroy and leave in that environment? So we did have
6 specific recommendations with regard to that.

7 But, overall, those plans worked as they were envisioned in that regard, and
8 people successfully got out.

9 Q Okay. And so maybe to put a finer point on it --

10 A Uh-huh.

11 Q -- I want to clarify for the record that, in your opinion, there were such plans,
12 those plans did exist?

13 A For that, yes. Absolutely.

14 Q Okay.

15 [REDACTED]

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q So the majority talked a bit about the timeline for troop withdrawals in the
18 last round, and I just wanted to clarify the timeline.

19 We discussed that President Biden made a decision to complete a full withdrawal
20 around April of 2021, correct?

21 A Uh-huh.

22 Q But I wanted to just clarify, the initial commitment to withdraw all troops on
23 an 18-month timeline came about as a result of the February 2020 Doha Agreement,
24 correct?

25 A Yes.

1 Q And the February 2020 agreement initially called for all U.S. troops to
2 withdraw by May of 2021, correct?

3 A Correct.

4 Q And on the Doha deal, according to the terms agreed to by the Trump
5 administration and the Taliban, the U.S. would withdraw troops pending the completion
6 of various commitments by the Taliban, correct?

7 A Correct.

8 Q And, from your review, did you hear concerns that these draw-downs
9 undercut negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban?

10 A So this opens a whole new discussion here in terms of the relationship
11 between the United States and the Afghan Government and their interpretation of the
12 agreement that was signed in February 2020.

13 I think it's safe to say, they were not party to that agreement, they were frustrated
14 that they were being expected to implement various commitments under that agreement
15 to which they were not party, and that that had a profound impact on the relationship.

16 Q And, to clarify, when you say "they," you mean the Afghan Government?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Was there any discussion of some of the elements that undermined the
19 Afghan Government that were part of the Doha Agreement?

20 A Was there any discussion when?

21 Q Meaning, elements of the agreement that disproportionately affected or
22 undermined the credibility of the Afghan Government?

23 A Well, first and foremost, I think there was a commitment under the
24 agreements and side agreements for an exchange of prisoners, and I think the Afghan
25 Government felt like they were being pressured to go forward with that exchange of

1 prisoners, release of prisoners, notwithstanding what they saw as the unwillingness and
2 actual failure of the Taliban to live up to a commitment in terms of reducing violence and
3 attacks.

4 Q And, to clarify, the prisoner exchange that you're talking about was the
5 commitment that the Afghan Government would release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in
6 exchange -- do you recall what it was in exchange for?

7 A It was also prisoners that were those being held by the Taliban that were
8 going to be released. But it was in exchange, under the terms of the agreement overall,
9 for a decline in violence and decline in attacks on -- as well as the entry into -- well, it was
10 a precondition for the entry into negotiations, then, between the Taliban and the
11 government.

12 Q We understand there was some concern that the troop draw-downs and
13 other United States engagements that were part of the agreement were happening -- in
14 particular, the troop draw-downs were occurring -- despite the fact that the Taliban were
15 not meeting their commitments. Was that something that you heard during your
16 discussions?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And from the people you interviewed who are in a position to know, were
19 these views widespread?

20 A I think for those involved with Afghan affairs, they were widespread.

21 Q And during the course of your work, were you made aware of any concern
22 that these troop draw-downs made in 2020 and the early part of 2021 occurred despite
23 the Taliban not fully fulfilling their commitments? I think you just answered that.

24 A Yeah.

25 Q And so you would confirm that there was concern that these were also not

1 conditions-based decisions?

2 A I think there were concerns that the only condition that was really focused
3 on was whether there were attacks on U.S. forces, and not the overall level of violence
4 and fighting that was going on.

5 Q Okay.

6 And, from your review, what impact did the partial troop draw-downs over the
7 final months, including the decision to draw down to 2,500 troops in mid-January 2021,
8 have on the Department's ability to plan for the withdrawal?

9 A That's a good question. I don't know that it necessarily impeded the
10 Department's ability to plan for the withdrawal. I think that it accelerated and
11 accentuated the issue of, what support and what key enablers would the military
12 continue to be able to provide? What as the -- and, again, we can't get into classified
13 discussions, but -- what was the information that was going to be available, the
14 intelligence that was going to be available to policymakers? And how was that
15 impacting, overall, our ability to sustain a diplomatic presence there?

16 Q And, lastly, were there concerns conveyed to you in your evaluation that
17 that final withdrawal to 2,500 was also not conditions-based?

18 A I think that was articulated by many people.

19 Q Okay.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q When you say "articulated by many people," would those people have been
22 individuals in senior positions?

23 A Yes, some.

24 Q Who have experience to have made that opinion and/or assessment?

25 A They were involved in Afghan affairs and had experience in Afghan affairs.

1 Q Okay.

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q So I want to pivot back a little bit. We spoke previously with you about
4 some of the gaps you saw in both the Trump and Biden administrations with respect to
5 planning, but I want to unpack a little bit the transition between the two
6 administrations --

7 A Uh-huh.

8 Q -- and what you uncovered about that in the course of your review.

9 Over the course of your review -- interviews, document review -- did you identify
10 planning documents that had transpired under the Trump administration related to the
11 withdrawal?

12 A We looked at everything that was available to us. What we didn't -- we
13 didn't find a -- I mean, there were plans that were going on, as we discussed, about the
14 evacuation of the embassy itself and various contingencies. What we didn't find was a
15 comprehensive plan for what it would mean to withdraw the military and what might
16 follow from that.

17 Q And you testified previously that your review found that the previous
18 administration's interagency process was -- I believe you used the term "not
19 robust" -- and that decisions were made in narrow channels.

20 Does that assessment extend to the production of plans and documents as well,
21 that the process was not robust and that it was fairly narrow in terms of who was
22 involved?

23 A Yes, certainly in terms of the absence of a robust interagency process, which
24 one would've expected in this environment.

25 Q In your experience, are robust interagency processes generally --

1 A Painful but necessary.

2 Q Painful but necessary. And a forum where comprehensive plans are
3 developed and merged?

4 A Well, where it could be and where the gaps in those plans could be
5 identified.

6 Q Okay.

7 And just to clarify for the record, did you serve in any capacity related to the
8 transition?

9 A I was transition director for the State Department.

10 Q Can you describe what your responsibilities were?

11 A So every agency is required to appoint is a transition director, who is
12 therefore responsible for the preparation of materials, accumulation of documents,
13 briefings and other things that would take place during the transition to get the new
14 administration ready for office.

15 And I was asked by the, actually, Under Secretary for Management Affairs, Brian
16 Bulatao, to serve as the Department's transition director and did the job to the best of my
17 ability.

18 Q And, in that capacity, would you have received instructions or been aware of
19 instructions that were sent out by the former administration to departments and
20 agencies to prepare transition materials for the incoming administration?

21 A Yes.

22 Q And would you have been aware of or received such taskings with respect to
23 the State Department?

24 A There were broad taskings, yes, that were sent out to the interagency about
25 the preparation materials.

1 Q And were you aware of any taskings directed by the outgoing Trump
2 administration or outgoing officials, political appointees at the State Department, related
3 to the withdrawal from Afghanistan that was underway?

4 A I was not aware of taskings per se, interagency, that were related to that.
5 There were documents that were prepared by the Department of State, as I'm sure there
6 were by other agencies, to prepare the new team for the challenges that they were going
7 to face in this context.

8 Q And who directed the production of those documents?

9 A Some of them we asked for -- "we," that is, as the transition director, I asked
10 for -- in anticipation of it. Some the incoming team, the Biden-Harris team, asked for in
11 anticipation of what they might need and information they might want. And they also
12 asked for briefings and other things.

13 Q Okay. So, to be clear, some of these products that were developed inside
14 the Department related to Afghanistan were the result of you, a career official,
15 anticipating what the incoming administration would need and requesting such
16 documents --

17 A Right.

18 Q -- and others were the result of the incoming administration specifically
19 asking for it.

20 A Correct.

21 Q Are you aware of any that were produced at the behest of outgoing officials?

22 A There may have been cases where outgoing officials suggested that certain
23 information would be useful or would be necessary. There were certainly cases where
24 outgoing officials made themselves available for interviews and wanted to meet with the
25 new team to talk about some of these issues.

1 Q Okay. But is it fair to say that the bulk of written product that you were
2 aware of was produced because of what was anticipated would be needed by the
3 incoming administration or because they asked for it --

4 A Yes.

5 Q -- specifically?

6 BY [REDACTED]:

7 Q Is it typical for outgoing administrations to affirmatively prepare documents
8 for the incoming administration?

9 A Is it typical? Yes.

10 Q Was that what occurred here?

11 A As I say, under my purview, we certainly prepared documents and tried to
12 prepare the new team as much as we possibly could for their responsibilities.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Let me pivot away from your role as transition coordinator for the
15 Department and back to the hat you were wearing while running the AAR.

16 Did you hear any concerns over the course of the AAR process that the planning
17 for the withdrawal by the Trump administration had been insufficient?

18 A We heard concerns, I think, that, as we discussed earlier, the focus was on
19 withdrawing the military as quickly as possible and that a lot of the contingencies or
20 implications of that had not been fully thought through.

21 Q And, from your review, what impact, if any, did you assess that the change in
22 administrations had on planning for withdrawal?

23 A Well, I've already noted that there were certainly, with the new
24 administration, a very robust change in the tempo and nature of the interagency process.
25 And I will -- and this is, again, in a bipartisan spirit -- underscore that they undertook, in

1 particular, an examination of a number of elements that had been -- had not been
2 necessarily priorities in the previous administration, such as the SIV process, the Special
3 Immigrant Visa process, which was needlessly complicated and difficult and had been -- I
4 think the challenges had been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic in terms of the ability
5 to process people, but there was a concerted effort to see how we might expedite that
6 processing.

7 And they did, to its credit, set up the Afghan Coordination Task Force at the
8 Department, which I think did a tremendous job in terms of moving people out, although
9 it came at the very tail end of the period of time that it turned out we had to get people
10 out.

11 Q Okay. Thank you.

12 So I note that AAR, on page 11, refers to some key questions that had remained
13 unanswered --

14 A Uh-huh.

15 Q -- in your team's assessment, when the Trump administration left office.
16 So I want to dig into one that you just mentioned specifically, which is Special Immigrant
17 Visa processing.

18 A Uh-huh.

19 Q On page 13 of exhibit 1, at the top of the page, paragraph 13 notes, "At the
20 time the Trump administration signed the agreement with the Taliban in February 2020,
21 there was a significant backlog in the Afghan SIV process. That administration made no
22 senior-level or interagency effort to address the backlog or consider options for other
23 at-risk Afghans despite its commitment to a military withdrawal."

24 Can you say a little bit more about that finding?

25 A I would just underscore that an effort was made in the new administration

1 to try and expedite the SIV process.

2 I do want to preface my remarks by noting that the previous administration faced
3 enormous challenges in terms of COVID and the impact that had on it.

4 But I think the concern that was articulated by the AAR and others was, it was
5 clear, under the terms of the agreement which we've discussed already, in February 2020
6 that we were to withdraw our military forces by May. Now, some people might've
7 thought the President might rethink that, might not do it, might do other things. But if
8 that's your timetable for doing that, then the lack of attention to, "Okay, what about
9 SIVs? What about at-risk Afghans?" was notable in that context and was problematic.

10 Q Notable because of the time it generally took for an individual applying for
11 an SIV --

12 A Exactly.

13 Q -- to pursue --

14 A Exactly.

15 Q -- the process?

16 A Exactly.

17 Q Do you have a sense, from your review, of historically how much time it did
18 take for somebody to complete the SIV process?

19 A You know, I don't recall. I think we certainly looked into that, in terms of
20 what the processing delay was. But it was -- there were a number of challenges, not the
21 least of which was actually documenting who was eligible and confirming that they were
22 eligible, going through the interagency clearance process and any number of steps that
23 had to be taken in that.

24 It took -- I don't know. I'd venture -- I can't really guess how long it took. But,
25 usually, it was probably over a year for people to get through that process.

1 Q And for the period that's relevant to your review, from January 2020 through
2 to the end of August 2021, did you identify or assess that the time necessary for
3 processing SIVs had diminished?

4 A There was a -- as I've indicated before, with the new administration, there
5 was a concerted effort made to expedite that processing and to figure out ways in which
6 the final elements of the processing, whether it's the medical evaluation or whatever it
7 might be, could be done out of country, or some way in country expeditiously, in trying to
8 accelerate the departure. And there was a concerted push from the White House to do
9 that.

10 Q So did your review find that that concerted push had achieved some degree
11 of success?

12 A There were almost 2,000 people who were evacuated.

13 Q Okay.

14 [REDACTED]: Can I jump in quickly? Sorry.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q You mentioned that, given the May 2021 timeframe, that the lack of
17 preparation notable.

18 I just wanted to clarify, were you or anyone else that you spoke with aware of
19 plans or preparation to lay the groundwork to work with foreign governments to host
20 Afghan evacuees that predate January 2021?

21 A I'm not aware of any discussions in that regard. But this was -- I want to
22 underscore, this was a problem in both administrations. That is, having these sorts of
23 discussions with third countries about their willingness to host particularly at-risk Afghans
24 for whom we might not have full documentation or be able to say with some certainty
25 where they were going to go or that we were going to accept them in the United States

1 was going to be problematic in any circumstance.

2 And it was probably fairly easy to get an agreement to bring out Americans.
3 Most countries don't have a problem with that. The issue and the challenge was always
4 going to be those at-risk Afghans, as I say, for whom you hadn't completed processing
5 and you couldn't assure those host countries that you would take them. Because the
6 obvious question then is going to be: Okay, what happens to them?

7 Q Right. But were there discussions with third countries, though, that
8 predate January 2021?

9 A I'm not aware of any.

10 Q Okay. Thanks.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q All right. Now, turning to the subsection entitled "Pre-Crisis Contingency
13 Planning and Execution" on page 12 of the AAR, what was your assessment of the
14 embassy's preparedness for emergencies on the ground?

15 A So, again, coming back to the discussion we've had before, I think the
16 embassy was well-prepared for various contingencies, but there are lessons learned that
17 we tried to draw in terms of things that might be done better going forward.

18 And one of the challenges in any of these environments in a high-threat post is to
19 get the post to come up with what used to be referred to as "tripwires" but are, sort of,
20 indicators that things are going worse than they thought, and tie them to concrete action
21 that they might take in that environment -- so, having an emergency action plan that has
22 some real teeth in it other than, sort of, you know, the usual of, "We're going to meet
23 again when something goes bad and have a discussion of it." That's a challenge in any
24 environment and is a challenge in any administration. So that was one of the things we
25 focused on.

1 I think we also focused on, as I say, the need to minimize holdings of classified
2 information, to minimize destruction times, to reduce as much as possible in advance the
3 sort of material which you wouldn't want to fall into others' hands, as well as to reduce
4 the overall footprint.

5 And here, again, I want to underscore, this was an enormous challenge in
6 operating an embassy in a war environment. So many of our people on the ground
7 there were we related to life support and security. So you can reduce the number of
8 political officers by 50 percent; it isn't going to have any impact at all on your overall
9 footprint, or a de minimis impact on your overall footprint, because that's not what your
10 embassy is composed of at that point in time.

11 Q Uh-huh.

12 A So there was a tradeoff, if you will. And just as the embassy is trying to get
13 ready for any contingency and any emergency, they're also being asked to take on these
14 key enablers that were a result of the military withdrawal. So you almost have a
15 tension, if you will, between the desire to have the minimum footprint in the event that
16 there is an emergency and the need to have augmented it, as it were, in terms of life
17 support and security, because the military's no longer going to be there for you.

18 Q Uh-huh.

19 So I want to ask an additional question. You just mentioned the tradeoff. In
20 your interviews of individuals who were at the embassy, was it their impression that the
21 tradeoff or the calculation that was made was a correct one, given the complexity of the
22 situation as it unfolded?

23 A I think their view was that people were making the best decisions they could,
24 given the information they had, and it was their best efforts.

25 Q Now turning to the subsection entitled "Services for U.S. Citizens, SIVs, and

1 other at-risk Afghans" --

2 A Uh-huh.

3 Q -- starting on page 12 but largely on page 13, what was the general
4 assessment by your team of the effectiveness and dedication of the State Department
5 consular officers on the ground at HKIA?

6 A Their performance was extraordinary and heroic in every sense of the word.

7 Q Without breaching any confidentiality, are there any narratives that you
8 could describe for the record in terms of the excellence that you heard about in these
9 interviews?

10 A You know, that's a great question. One of the things we tried to do -- I
11 don't know whether it attracted anybody's attention -- was to put some vignettes in this
12 of what people were doing in all sorts of circumstances there and to highlight those
13 things, because they really were extraordinary.

14 But they were working side-by-side with their military colleagues at these gates.
15 It was both regional security officers who were responsible for the security of our
16 personnel, of our consular officers, and the consular officers themselves.

17 I think there may have been some hiccups initially in terms of trying to figure out
18 the rhythm of what they were doing, but once they got into a rhythm, I think it worked
19 remarkably well. But it was under enormous duress and under incredibly challenging
20 circumstances. I can't overestimate that. It just -- it's really hard to describe.

21 And a lot of what we found -- and I think we tried to capture this in the AAR -- was,
22 people were still processing this -- not just the people who'd been on the ground; the
23 people who'd been on the receiving end of calls from relatives, from others in
24 Washington and had to deal with some of that. This was emotionally draining for all of
25 them, because they wanted to do everything they could for everybody they could. And

1 you had to make life-and-death decisions on the ground, and that's -- it's something we
2 expect of our officers, but it's extraordinary, what they did and their level of service and
3 dedication.

4 Q Are you aware of the timetable in which the Consular Affairs folks were
5 working on the ground? Was it 24 hours per day?

6 A You know, I don't know. I believe -- I think they were working around the
7 clock and had -- I mean, maybe it was 12-hour shifts, actually, that they were doing.

8 Q Okay. And did all of these individuals volunteer --

9 A Yes --

10 Q -- to be on the ground? Okay.

11 A -- to the best of my knowledge. Nobody was told.

12 Q And I also want -- I appreciate you bringing up the vignettes, and I would like
13 to read one into the record.

14 On page 6 of the AAR, on the right-hand side, there's black box that's entitled
15 "Consular Officers at HKIA."

16 "Consular officers responded heroically to extraordinary challenges while on the
17 ground at HKIA. Under relentlessly hostile and threatening circumstances, they assisted
18 thousands of panicked U.S. citizens and at-risk Afghan in navigating a path to safety,
19 drawing on their experience and judgment to make often wrenching decisions about who
20 could enter HKIA to be evacuated and whom to turn away. The AAR team found the
21 accounts of their experiences both uplifting and heartbreaking."

22 Does this still comport with your understanding of Consular Affairs on the ground?

23 A Yes.

24 Q Turning to the subsection entitled "Crisis Operations" on page 13 of the
25 AAR -- first, as an initial matter, are you aware of the Afghanistan Task Force?

1 A Afghan -- I'm sorry, what --

2 Q Afghanistan Task Force? Just as an initial background question.

3 A I'm not certain what you mean by that. You don't mean the Coordination
4 Task Force? You mean that?

5 Q Yes, that's correct.

6 A Yes.

7 Q Okay. Were there any specific concerns raised by those you interviewed or
8 in documents you reviewed related to the Afghanistan Task Force team?

9 A To the -- again -- because I would differentiate. There was a task force set
10 up during the evacuation itself. But there is the Afghanistan Coordination Task Force
11 that's set up before, and that's specifically to address the issue of SIVs. So that's what
12 you're referring to? Or ---

13 Q Yes, that's correct.

14 A So were there any concerns? I'm sorry.

15 Q Yeah. Were there any specific concerns that were raised about this task
16 force?

17 A No. I think -- I didn't hear any.

18 I did hear that, again, they had overcome a number of challenges and really made
19 a concerted effort to try and expedite this SIV processing. They were very proud of the
20 fact that they got out almost 2,000 people in advance of the fall of Kabul.

21 And I think, you know, they were under -- we documented that in the
22 report -- they were under enormous pressure, including from the White House, to try and
23 accelerate this process as much as possible. And the regrettable thing, if there is a
24 regret, is that it came to an end on August 15th. You couldn't continue it once the city
25 fell.

1 Q Uh-huh.

2 Were there any specific concerns raised by those you interviewed or in the
3 documents you reviewed about communications with embassies outside State during the
4 NEO?

5 A There were enormous challenges of communications with entities outside
6 State, but I'm not certain what you're referring to in that regard.

7 There were communications, of course -- and we've discussed this. Some of
8 them were challenges of current senior officials, former senior officials, Members of
9 Congress, VIPs calling and asking for specific help about specific cases. And, in some
10 cases, they called -- and this is where I think there was -- and we documented it -- where
11 the, sort of, Department was unable to buffer the people on the ground. There were
12 people on the ground who were directly getting these calls.

13 Q Uh-huh.

14 A So, if somebody got their phone number, they would call directly to that
15 person, saying, okay, I need you to go outside the gate to do this or do that or find this
16 person or do that. I mean, on the one hand, people want to help whatever way they
17 can. On the other hand, it makes for a very confusing environment when you're getting
18 this sort of direct input from all different sources.

19 So the Department was trying to, as I say, provide a buffer to sort of filter this so
20 that you could decide, okay, what are the priorities, how are we going to do this. But it
21 really was almost impossible in that environment.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q To follow up on that, did you uncover, over the course of your review, that
24 these incoming requests, this voluminous number of incoming requests from outside
25 officials or outside entities that I believe you testified earlier took away from officers on

1 the ground's ability to do their task at hand -- did you find any indication that the
2 bandwidth that that absorbed resulted in individuals being evacuated who did not fit the
3 prioritization and the criteria that the administration established?

4 A So maybe we ought to have a classified discussion of some of the challenges
5 that were faced in that regard.

6 But, yes, I think it's safe to say that the concern was -- and concern was certainly
7 expressed by people who had been on the ground -- that these sorts of demands or
8 requests -- and, again, I'm not meaning to -- none of them were malign. All of them
9 were well-intentioned. And you can understand the circumstances and the pressure
10 that people felt in this life-and-death circumstance. But that that sort of individual
11 pressure, if you will, took them away from other things they might have done.

12 Q And potentially did not comport with the prioritization that had been laid
13 out for them to follow?

14 A Yes.

15

BY [REDACTED]

16 Q And to perhaps put a finer point on it, on page 14, in paragraph 23, the
17 report in fact states, "Responding to such demands often placed Department employees
18 at even greater risk and hindered the effort to move larger groups of people out."

19 A Right.

20 Q In terms of the interagency communication that was going on as the crisis
21 unfolded, is it your assessment that there were regular meetings within the interagency
22 related to the evacuation as it unfolded?

23 A My understanding is there were very frequent meetings that were taking
24 place, and there was a lot of demand for information. In fact, the demands for
25 information became almost overwhelming in that regard. What is the volume of people

1 we're taking out? Who are we taking out?

2 We haven't touched upon it, but we do in the report, about the effort to reach out
3 to American citizens and the challenges that that posed for the Department in that
4 context. So there was a very robust interagency effort in that and demands that we
5 made.

6 Q Okay.

7 Yeah. And to actually touch upon that, the AAR specifically praised the
8 Department for its outreach to AMCITs and "entrepreneurial efforts to get in touch with
9 those that had not previously made the Department aware of their whereabouts."

10 Can you share any specific efforts you learned related to the AMCIT outreach?

11 A Well, again, this is one of the things that was extraordinary about this crisis.
12 And we haven't gotten into it and you haven't asked questions about how do we know
13 how many American citizens are in country and whatever. You all probably know the
14 details of that.

15 But the reality is, the State Department at any one time can only give you an
16 estimate of how many people, because we rely on a voluntary system where they contact
17 us. So, if they've registered with the embassy, they've told us their whereabouts, we
18 could tell you with some degree of confidence that they're in country. But many of
19 them will never reach out to the embassy. And it's only in a crisis situation, often, that
20 you get more visibility into how many Americans are in country.

21 Q Uh-huh.

22 A Often, these are dual nationals, many of whom, of course, are not going to
23 leave unless they can leave with their family members, who may not be American
24 citizens. They have made their own calculations.

25 We thought and we found that the warnings from the Department, from the

1 embassy, were very clear about the risk to Americans in this environment, but they are
2 making their own calculations about, sort of, what is the element of risk they're willing to
3 accept, what is the situation they find unacceptable. And, for a variety of reasons, it's
4 only in a crisis situation, as I say, that you then discover how many Americans are there.

5 There was an enormous pressure to try and reach out to everyone we could
6 identify. And I think Consular Affairs was enormously entrepreneurial in enlisting
7 people from around the world. So various missions, who may be on a different clock
8 and have resources that they could use, were being used to call these Americans to find
9 out their whereabouts, to find out whether they wanted to leave, and to provide
10 whatever information we could.

11 So one of the things we praised in that was that flexibility and that resilience that
12 the Department showed and Consular Affairs showed.

13 Q What were the privacy concerns you identified related to the Department's
14 work to contact AMCITs and the efforts surrounding evacuation?

15 A So, I mean, there are always privacy concerns. And I think one of the
16 questions -- and this is a question both for the Hill and for the administration going
17 forward -- is, is the expectation going to be that we will reach out to every American in
18 every crisis and evacuate them? And if it is, we're going to need a hell of a lot more
19 resources to do it, because it would be an enormous undertaking.

20 And, by the same token, how much do we want to track Americans? And I think
21 there are significant privacy concerns in that regard. I think most Americans would not
22 be enamored of the idea that the U.S. Government is tracking their whereabouts abroad
23 and would much prefer a voluntary system, which is what we've relied on for years in that
24 regard. But there are obvious gaps that that creates in a crisis situation, because, as I
25 say, you do not know the universe of Americans who are in country who may want to

1 leave.

2 Q Okay.

3 So, just to close this out, is it your assessment, based on the interviews conducted
4 and the documents reviewed, that Consular Affairs on the ground, in coordination with
5 State and Washington, did all that it could to reach American citizens and ensure that all
6 American citizens who wanted on their own accord to leave Kabul could do so?

7 A I think they did an extraordinary job in doing that, yes.

8 Q Okay.

9 Turning to the "Recommendations" section of the AAR on page 16, do you stand
10 behind all recommendations rendered in the AAR?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Do you feel that any of the findings of the report are less significant to
13 implement or less airtight than others?

14 A The findings or the recommendations?

15 Q Sorry. The recommendations. Excuse me.

16 A I think there may a hierarchy of recommendations in terms of importance,
17 but I think they're all important recommendations or we wouldn't have included them.

18 Q In your assessment, what is the most important recommendation?

19 A I think, overall, my feeling is that the Department needs to build its crisis
20 management capacity, or rebuild its crisis management capacity.

21 And that's a very broad topic. It includes everything from, as we've discussed
22 before, making it clear who's the point of entry when it comes to NEO planning, to
23 making sure that we have a case management system that won't be overwhelmed in a
24 crisis like this one was, that we have systems that talk to one another.

25 And here, again, there are some -- you've mentioned the privacy concerns -- there

1 are concerns in that regard. I mean, the Department has sensitive information in its
2 passport files and other things. You want to protect that information.

3 But in a crisis environment, you also want to be able to tap into that to confirm
4 that somebody's an American citizen, to make sure that you have, as I say, systems that
5 are talking to one another and that can be shared with the interagency, to the extent that
6 we can do so consistent with privacy concerns.

7 So I think the investments in IT infrastructure and case management systems are
8 vital. I think, as I say, rebuilding and enhancing the role of CMS, Crisis Management and
9 Strategy, is vital.

10 I think also -- and this was highlighted in the previous round of questions -- some
11 of the takeaways in terms of making it clear who is in charge --

12 Q Uh-huh.

13 A -- in the Department in this environment. In the Foreign Affairs Manual, it
14 actually says that the crisis manager of the Department is the Under Secretary for Political
15 Affairs, I believe, Ken, if I'm not wrong. The reality is, that's often not the case. It
16 depends on the crisis. And there are other parts of the Department, especially on the
17 Under Secretary for Management, you know, the resource side, that are perhaps even
18 more critical in a crisis like this.

19 But I just -- we think, and our recommendation was, that the clarity of command,
20 in that regard, and responsibility is important.

21 Q You helpfully answered all of our questions --

22 A Good.

23 Q -- related to the subsection on strengthening the Department's overall crisis
24 preparedness.

25 So, moving on to subsection number 2, about insulating crisis planning and

1 preparation from policy concerns, starting on page 16, can you expand upon the
2 recommendation to insulate contingency and emergency planning from political
3 concerns?

4 A So this gets back again to the previous round of questions that I attempted
5 to answer. I think -- and we make reference to it, as well -- every post does an F-77 on
6 the number of Americans they think are in country at any time. It's a moving target. It
7 is an estimate, at best. But the fact that you collect that information on a routine basis
8 means that you don't trigger panic in a country when you're collecting this information.
9 And it's important, I think, that the planning for any contingency environment be done, to
10 the maximum extent possible, without concern for what you might be signaling.

11 This was especially difficult in this environment because of the uncertainty.
12 We've talked about the challenges, the friction that maybe resulted from the agreement
13 before and the tension in the bilateral relationship. I do know, and I think we
14 documented, that even with the expedited SIV processing, the Ghani government, Ghani
15 himself, had expressed concern about that, thinking that this was a signal that you've lost
16 confidence in me and in my government.

17 Q Uh-huh.

18 A So this is a dilemma you're going to face in any environment. But the more
19 you can make this routine, the more you can make it as a matter of course, so that if it
20 leaks out or it's exposed, we say, yes, we do that here even in Germany, not thinking that
21 the German Government is going to fall or it won't be able to provide security but that
22 that's part of good government; this is what we do.

23 Q Okay.

24 And then turning to the subsection on "Department Leadership During a Crisis,"
25 one question for you: How should the Department balance establishing policy

1 objectives and priorities with the need to be flexible and adaptable in crisis situations?

2 A I'm sorry. You're referring to which one?

3 Q Under "Department Leadership During a Crisis" on page 17.

4 A Right. Is it the last bullet you're talking about? I'm sorry.

5 Q I can restate the question.

6 A Yeah.

7 Q So my question on this section in particular is that the AAR recommends
8 focusing more on clear policy objectives and priorities in crisis planning. So,
9 understanding that, how should the Department balance making clear policy objectives
10 with the need to be flexible and adaptable in crisis situations?

11 A So this gets back to a philosophical thing about planning. The Prussian
12 General Staff used to say, "Plans never survive first contact with the enemy." You have
13 to plan, you have to be prepared for any contingency, but those plans are often most
14 useful as an intellectual exercise, and once your crisis starts, you've got to be adaptable,
15 you've got to be resilient, you've got to be able to adapt those plans to whatever the
16 environment is and whatever the challenge is you might face.

17 And I think what we were trying to get at here was more, the plans should set the,
18 sort of, 30,000-foot view of what you should do and what you're planning to do, but a lot
19 of the execution is going to have to be left to people on the ground who are actually in
20 charge of that environment.

21 Q Okay.

22 And then one question for you on the subsection entitled "Strengthen Diplomatic
23 Security's Channel to Decision Makers." That's again on page 17.

24 A Yes.

25 Q Did you or your team assess that DS's current reporting structure hinders its

1 ability to respond to a crisis?

2 A No, we did not.

3 Q Okay.

4 A We just wanted to underscore the importance of DS having a direct channel
5 and being able to speak directly to principals about its concerns.

6 Q Helpful clarification.

7 And then moving on to "Build a Red Team Capability," how, in your experience,
8 does red-teaming and conducting tabletop exercises assist with crisis preparedness?

9 A So this is something that the military does frequently, that the intelligence
10 community does a lot as well, where you have, in terms of a red team, you have people
11 who challenge your assumptions, who look at very carefully, sort of, what is the basis on
12 which you're establishing a policy? What are those underlying assumptions? And
13 which of them may be questionable or, if they prove questionable, could undermine your
14 policy and your policy goals?

15 So I think it's important in any planning environment, in any environment where
16 you are trying to figure out what the future should be of our policy or our conduct, that
17 you have people who are, if you will, sort of, contrarians, who are raising questions about
18 that and who are challenging your assumptions. Not that you'll necessarily change your
19 plans, but that you ought to have considered certain things and certain contingencies in
20 advance of moving forward.

21 So that, I think, is a critical function. I would like to see it built up. We had an
22 idea as to where it should be housed, but I don't honestly care. I just think it needs to
23 exist and you need to be able to call upon it in this crisis planning.

24 Tabletop exercises, again, something the Department doesn't do as much as the
25 Pentagon does but which I think are enormously helpful, and especially in the early days

1 of an administration. You've got any number of challenges. We talked about the
2 transition of a new team coming on board. They need to understand the, sort of,
3 universe of players in a crisis and how they respond and how they will respond, what are
4 the assets they can call upon. And there's nothing like a tabletop exercise to try and
5 concentrate their understanding of that.

6 Q In your assessment, when you conducted interviews, had interviewees gone
7 through tabletop exercises that would be relevant?

8 A Some had.

9 Q Some had?

10 A Some had.

11 Q And some had not?

12 A Right.

13 Q Okay.

14 Do you think it's feasible for the Department to implement these types of tabletop
15 exercises?

16 A I think there are some things that have to be done on interagency level, but
17 there are certain things the Department could do on its own as well.

18 Q Okay.

19 Then, turning to the subsection entitled "More Effectively Utilize Personnel
20 Resources in a Crisis," on page 18 --

21 A Right.

22 Q -- did you get the sense from your research that finding appropriate
23 individuals and enough individuals to TDY to Kabul during this emergency was a
24 challenge?

25 A I think the Department was able to find people who would be TDY'd to Kabul

1 fairly effectively. I do think deploying people to war zones or to some of what were
2 called colloquially "the lily pads" without adequate preparation was somewhat of a
3 challenge. That is, people don't know what they're going into -- you know, what
4 clothing they should bring; you know, what sort of support are they going to get?

5 And our view is, the more you can prepare these individuals for the challenges
6 they're going to face, the more they work together as a team, the more they have the
7 equipment they need, the better off you are in that environment. So flyaway teams or
8 some sort of reserve corps that trains in this way --

9 Q Uh-huh.

10 A -- and is prepared to deploy in a crisis situation would be enormously
11 helpful.

12 Q Did you receive any information during your interviews that led you to
13 believe performance by any Department volunteers in Kabul was insufficient?

14 A No.

15 Q Could you expand upon maybe some of the narratives you received and how
16 these individuals were sufficient or exemplary?

17 A Well, we talked about before, I think, it was extraordinary dedication to duty
18 and willingness to sacrifice and put themselves on the line in that environment. I think
19 it was emotionally exhausting and even traumatic for many of them.

20 One of our recommendations actually leads to conclusions about, sort of,
21 post-crisis care and help for people in that environment. I think we need to do a better
22 job as an institution, the State Department as an institution, of providing counseling,
23 providing mental health support, and making sure that people are coping with what
24 they've just gone through.

25 We did not lose anybody in Kabul, thank god, but they were there with their

1 colleagues in the military who were lost. They were side-by-side in the aftermath of
2 that. They saw some horrific things, and they dealt with some horrific things. And I
3 think more counseling, more support for them would be enormously helpful.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q So I'm glad you raised the issue of the challenges that people faced firsthand
6 when they were on the ground in Kabul. And so I want to pivot to the section of your
7 recommendations that relates to strengthening lessons learned, care, and support.

8 Did anyone that you interviewed raise concerns about their treatment by the
9 Department or the attention that was paid to them by Department leadership upon their
10 return?

11 A I think many of them felt like they were somewhat left their own devices in
12 terms of figuring out how to cope with what they had experienced and that there was no
13 effort made, necessarily, to reach out to them individually to see how they were doing
14 and to help them.

15 Q And did you develop recommendations over the course of your review for
16 how to specifically mitigate this in the future?

17 A As I say, our overall recommendation was to make this systematic and a
18 standard operating procedure, that they would not only be debriefed, because there are
19 lessons learned that you can gain from any one of these crisis situations, but that they
20 would also have an opportunity to talk to people who understood the trauma that they'd
21 been through and maybe could help them cope with that --

22 Q So --

23 A -- without any stigma, without any consequences.

24 Q Did you hear concerns about stigma?

25 A I think there are always questions, there are always concerns in that regard,

1 you know, that people are worried how others might perceive them or how they might be
2 perceived or whether it would jeopardize their security clearance or whatever that might
3 be. I think we've made great progress in that regard, but some of those concerns linger.

4 Q Okay.

5 I want to revisit an exchange from an earlier round. I think the word
6 "catastrophe" was used in a question posed to you to define the NEO. Do you think that
7 the NEO was a catastrophe?

8 A No, I don't think the NEO was a catastrophe. I'm sorry if I didn't pick up on
9 that use of the term. But I do think it was enormously challenging. And I think some
10 have used the term "chaos" to describe especially the initial days of it, and that's not
11 unfair in terms of what people faced on the ground and the challenges they faced on the
12 ground.

13 You know, the catastrophe, if there was a catastrophe, was the loss of 13 lives.
14 That is something we all mourn and all regret deeply. I think that that weighed heavily
15 on certainly -- I'm only speculating, but -- in terms of the decision about whether to
16 continue and to lengthen the time of the evacuation, that there was a recognition that
17 every day was a risk to us and that there were constant threats and that the environment
18 was not going to get better in that regard.

19 Q So is it a fair characterization, then, that the situation itself presented
20 potentially catastrophic challenges but the response that you reviewed was not
21 catastrophic?

22 A Yeah. In my understanding of the term "catastrophic," no.

23 Q Uh-huh.

24 A I mean, when you successfully evacuate 125,000 people, it's not
25 catastrophic.

1 On the other hand, as I say, I don't want to minimize or diminish in any way the
2 challenges that they face and especially the challenges in the initial few days on the
3 ground in Kabul when people without cleared access had been let on the tarmac and you
4 had to make some very difficult decisions about what to do and who to evacuate.

5

BY [REDACTED]

6 Q I'd like to just say to bookend this, something that really struck me in your
7 prior testimony was when you identified the sincerity and patriotism of those involved.

8 A I just want to underscore that, you know. I mean, it's easy to second-guess
9 people; it's easy to pass judgment on them. I was just enormously impressed
10 throughout my interviews with how passionate people felt about their duty and what
11 they had been able to do, even people who, we discussed before, were working remotely
12 on these things. You know, we had Embassy Beijing dealing with the crisis in
13 Afghanistan. I think people felt a sense of commitment but also a sense of reward, you
14 know, "I can do something to help others," and felt good about it.

15 But, you know, I didn't feel that anybody I interviewed was insincere or wasn't
16 trying to do the best they could under incredibly difficult circumstances.

17 Q Thank you.

18 That concludes our round. We can go off the record. Thank you.

19 [Recess.]

1

2 [2:46 p.m.]

3 [REDACTED]. So we're going to go back on the record.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Ambassador, Command Sergeant Major Jake Smith testified to our
6 committee last month that he -- in early 2021, DS officials from U.S. Embassy Kabul visited
7 him at Bagram to do a site survey and that he relayed to them that doing a NEO out of
8 HKIA would be a terrible idea and that it should be done through Bagram, and he said
9 that DS officials agreed with him.

10 Are you aware of this generally?

11 A I'm not aware of that particular conversation, no.

12 Q Did you come across during your investigation that there were DS officials at
13 State that preferred to do a NEO through Bagram rather than HKIA?

14 A I hadn't expressly heard that, no, but this could well have happened.

15 Q During the evacuation, the number that's come out about the maximum
16 number of consulars on the ground, consular officers on the ground, was 36. Does that
17 number comport with your recollection?

18 A I don't recall the exact number, but that seems about right.

19 Q Did you -- were you able to establish a timeline in terms of when consular
20 officers were arriving and departing to establish kind of how many people were on the
21 ground at a given time or day?

22 A We didn't track that exactly.

23 Q Gotcha.

24 Do you think that there were enough consular officers on the ground?

25 A So I think that -- I can't answer that definitively, because I don't know what

1 more consular officers would have done or what the difference might have been. That
2 would be speculative. But I do think the Department was prepared to provide whatever
3 resources it could.

4 Q Do you think -- because you have referenced times when consular officers
5 were maybe pulled away to do one thing so they were unable to do another. Would
6 having more consular officers have enabled the consular officers to do more?

7 A Having additional ones might have -- in those circumstances, it could have
8 helped. It also, though, created additional security concerns. The more people you
9 have, the more people you have to remove and protect.

10 Q During your investigation did you determine whether the State Department
11 had ever figured out exactly how many Americans there were that wanted to get out?

12 A So I think they made extraordinary efforts to try and determine how many
13 there were who wanted to get out. But, as I say, this is always a challenge, in any crisis
14 situation, because you don't know in advance how many Americans are in country.

15 Q Right. Totally understood. But were they able to ever determine exactly
16 how many Americans there were that wanted to get out?

17 A I don't know that they determined with exact, definitive numbers how many
18 wanted to get out. I think they tried as best they could to contact every American they
19 could find.

20 Q Gotcha.

21 [REDACTED] Was there a count of how many Americans, when they withdrew on
22 the 30th, were still remaining in the country that wanted to get out --

23 Ambassador Smith. I'm not aware --

24 [REDACTED]. -- that were not --

25 Ambassador Smith. I'm not aware of that.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q Did the Biden administration do an investigation or assessment on whether
3 the Taliban was meeting the conditions of the Doha Agreement?

4 A So I'm not clear what you mean, investigation or assessment. I think there
5 may have -- there were intelligence reports. There were all sorts of reports about what
6 the Taliban were doing.

7 Q And had the Biden administration or State Department done an assessment
8 and reached a conclusion on whether the Taliban was abiding by the terms of the Doha
9 Agreement?

10 A I don't know that they were ever asked to do that.

11 Q Okay. President Biden did say that he was tasking officials with doing that
12 assessment, but you're not aware of that?

13 A With doing an assessment -- State Department doing an assessment of
14 whether --

15 [REDACTED]. I believe there is an interagency review that was conducted to
16 assess whether the Taliban were adhering to the terms of the Doha Agreement under the
17 new administration, and I believe that's what you're referencing.

18 Ambassador Smith. I wasn't aware of that.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q During your interviews with either Secretary -- well, with Secretary Blinken,
21 did you talk to him about -- he called Zal Khalilzad -- he praised his vital work when
22 determining to keep him on.

23 Did you ever ask Secretary Blinken what he was referring to?

24 A I don't recall if we ever discussed Zal Khalilzad's remaining. We may have.
25 I may have asked that. I just don't recollect the details of that conversation.

1 I do recall having discussions with various officials about this decision to keep him
2 on. And my understanding was the rationale was, of course, that he had been involved
3 from the beginning on these negotiations. He knew it backwards and forwards. He
4 knew all the players. And there was logic in keeping him in that position.

5 Q Got it.

6 In your conversation with Secretary Blinken, did you ask him what advice he gave
7 to President Biden before President Biden made his decision to withdraw all U.S. troops
8 by --

9 A No.

10 Q -- September 11th?

11 Did you ask Secretary Blinken about the pushback that the Biden administration
12 was getting from NATO?

13 A We discussed -- I don't remember if I discussed this specifically with
14 Secretary Blinken, but we discussed with other senior officials the engagement with allies
15 and what allies were saying.

16 Q Gotcha.

17 So we've talked a lot about this was an after-action review, and sometimes the
18 word accountability review has --

19 A My apologies.

20 Q Well, no. But did you see accountability as any part of your tasking here?

21 A I think our goal was, distinct from an accountability review board, was to find
22 broader recommendations that we thought would strengthen the Department in crisis
23 management and in similar circumstances going forward.

24 That said, had we found anybody who was guilty of dereliction of duty or any
25 other things, I don't think we would have hesitated to address it or to mention it.

1 Q Do you think that accountability is a part of making sure that mistakes don't
2 happen again in the future?

3 A That's a good question. I would draw a distinction between it. That is, as
4 I said before and will reiterate, I didn't get the sense from anybody we interviewed or
5 from the people we talked to and talked about in the course of this that anyone was
6 doing less than their level best in a very difficult circumstance.

7 And it's easy, in 20/20 hindsight, to second-guess people, to say they should have
8 done this, they should have done that.

9 We tried to avoid that. We tried to say things that we thought people at the
10 time could have done or might have done differently rather than say, okay, everybody
11 should have understood that the Ghani government would collapse on August 15th and,
12 therefore, acted accordingly.

13 I think there is always that danger in this -- in any after-action review -- that you
14 have a perspective and an insight and understanding that policymakers did not have.

15 Q And during your role on the transition, did you warn the incoming
16 administration about, for instance, the dangers that a rapid and full withdrawal of U.S.
17 troops might have on conditions on the ground there?

18 A Did I warn them, or did I -- because I was not in charge of briefing them on
19 Afghanistan or preparing papers.

20 Q You or anyone on your team.

21 A I think we tried to give the full understanding of the challenges that they
22 faced, the implications of withdrawing the U.S. military and what challenges that
23 presented, especially from the perspective, again, of the Department of State in terms of
24 its diplomatic mission and continuing its diplomatic mission.

25 [REDACTED] Diplomatic Security prepared a memorandum on the transition that

1 outlined, in grave and stark words, these issues. Is that correct?

2 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

3 [REDACTED] And was that memo provided to the Secretary?

4 Ambassador Smith. I don't know. I can't say with authority that he saw it
5 personally. But it was turned over to the transition team.

1

2

BY [REDACTED]:

3

4

5

Q So I'm going to transition a bit. This may be redundant of what we may have previously outlined, but for purposes of the record I'm going to sort of walk us through these individuals.

6

7

But can you please outline the roles of the following individuals in the withdrawal as you understood them? We'll start with Secretary Blinken.

8

A The role of the individual?

9

Q Yes, in the withdrawal, as you understood them.

10

11

A He had overall responsibility for the Department of State and the safety and security of Department personnel and the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

12

13

Q And did he delegate any of the responsibilities with respect to Afghanistan to other individuals in the Department specifically?

14

15

A I don't know, when you say delegate, whether it's an official delegation, but he relied on many others in the Department in the course of this.

16

Q And which other individuals did he primarily rely on?

17

18

19

A He relied on his two Deputy Secretaries, Deputy Secretary Sherman, Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources McKeon. For the Acting Under Secretary for Management, or the acting -- or not acting. The assistant -- I mean -- excuse me -- the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and other senior officials on the 7th Floor. For Derek Chollet as counselor, and his chief of staff and others.

22

23

Q In terms of Deputy Secretary Sherman, what were her responsibilities and, more specifically, her role in the Afghanistan withdrawal?

24

25

A So she, like all senior officials, became engaged in various aspects of the Afghanistan withdrawal.

1 There were many moving pieces, of course, when it began, including the issue
2 which we've touched upon of setting up these safe havens abroad. Where are you
3 going to bring people to? How are you going to house them? How are you going to
4 feed them? How are you going to process them in moving back to the States?

5 She was involved, as I understand, with some of those negotiations that went on
6 with foreign governments to ask them to host.

7 This was an extraordinary achievement, in very short order, to get these countries
8 to open their doors and allow us to move through tens of thousands of non-Americans
9 through these countries, and she and others on the 7th Floor played a key role.

10 Q And how about DMR McKeon, what were his responsibilities?

11 And I'll preface it with the fact that our understanding is that various individuals
12 with the Department, some focused on the continued diplomatic presence; others
13 focused on the NEOs. We're just trying to better understand what their responsibilities
14 and roles were.

15 A Well, I think, as we articulated -- and I don't believe this is classified -- but in
16 terms of the division of labor, as it were, that both he and Counselor Chollet were sort of
17 the main interlocutors on a lot of the interagency meetings that took place. And he had
18 ultimate responsibility for a lot of the things that fall under the management side of the
19 house in terms of staffing and support and movement.

20 Q And would you characterize Counselor Chollet as sort of a lead
21 decisionmaker on Afghanistan issues?

22 A He was the senior official.

23 Q And what was Ambassador Ross Wilson's role in the withdrawal as you
24 understood it?

25 A So Ambassador Wilson was charge d'affaires, so he was the head of our

1 mission there.

2 I will say, just for the record, he'd been asked to go out for 4 months, and he spent
3 18 months, I think, in total. He had been asked by the previous administration to go out
4 to run our mission.

5 So he had performed above and beyond what he was initially asked to do in that
6 regard and had been running the mission for a considerable period of time since the last
7 officially confirmed ambassador to Afghanistan, who was John Bass.

8 Q And can you speak to why President Biden chose to retain Ambassador Ross
9 Wilson as the chief of mission in Afghanistan at the change in administration?

10 A I can't speak with any authority about that. But I think he was a career
11 official, a former career official, and had a very good reputation in the Department -- has
12 a very good reputation in the Department.

13 Q Thank you.

14 And how about Ambassador John Bass? You just mentioned him as well.

15 A Ambassador Bass had been chief of mission in Afghanistan. He had been
16 gone for over a year and a half, maybe 2 years at that point in time. I don't remember
17 the dates. And he was asked, as you know, during the evacuation to go back in and to
18 help coordinate that evacuation.

19 Q Was he there to supplement the efforts of Ambassador Ross Wilson --

20 A Yes.

21 Q -- as chief of mission?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And how about Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad?

24 A He was the chief negotiator with the Taliban and interlocutor with -- and a
25 key interlocutor with the Afghan Government.

1 Q Was he the only individual that was interfacing with the Taliban, or others as
2 well?

3 A There were others on his staff.

4 Q But they were all on the SRAR's team?

5 A [Nonverbal response.]

6 [REDACTED] Could you verbalize that?

7 Ambassador Smith. Verbalize it?

8 [REDACTED] For the court reporter.

9 The Reporter. Say yes or no.

10 [REDACTED]. Say yes or no.

11 Ambassador Smith. Oh. Yes. Sorry.

12 [REDACTED] Took me a moment as well.

13 [Laughter.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q How about Acting Under Secretary Carol Perez, what was her role?

16 A She was in charge of -- she was Acting Under Secretary for Management, so,
17 therefore, in charge of a lot of key components, like the Bureau of Consular Affairs, the
18 Bureau of Administration, a lot of the logistical and other issues and challenges that we
19 faced that she had to deal with. She had to deal with issues like setting up these lily
20 pads and staffing of the lily pads and the processing centers in the States. So all of that
21 fell under her domain.

22 Q So, from our understanding, there are two different work streams, one being
23 the NEO, the other being the continued diplomatic presence, which, from prior
24 testimony, had sort of been in the planning phase up until the fall of Kabul.

25 Can you speak to what role she played, or was she working on both the NEO and

1 the continued diplomatic presence, or where did her responsibilities primarily lie?

2 A So I don't know that she was working on the NEO per se, I'm not certain
3 about that, because that would have fallen to, as I say, Crisis Management and the
4 Executive Secretariat, as well as the regional bureau, who did not report to her.

5 She was certainly involved in planning for our mission there, for the safety and
6 security. DS was also part of her chain of command in that regard. So she had
7 oversight of that.

8 Q And how about Chief of Staff Suzy George, what were her responsibilities
9 and roles?

10 A So chief of staff does whatever the Secretary asks the chief of staff to do.
11 But in this crisis situation she was given certain responsibilities. She played a key role, I
12 think, in terms of liaison to the White House, in terms of fielding a lot of the requests
13 from senior-level officials for help for people on the ground.

14 Q Did she interface with the NSC as well?

15 A I'm not clear if she interfaced with the NSC. Presumably she might have.
16 But she certainly interfaced with the White House.

17 [REDACTED] You mentioned P. What was the role of Under Secretary Nuland?

18 Ambassador Smith. So she played a role, as did Deputy Secretary Sherman, in
19 helping negotiate with allies and with friendly countries for permission to move people
20 through and be able to, as I say, under extraordinary circumstances, to be able to house
21 people whom we couldn't guarantee we could accept resettlement in the United States.
22 So it was an enormous challenge.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q Were there any other key officials you think were particularly significant in
25 this effort?

1 A There were others who played important roles, and I think we highlighted in
2 the report itself the Under Secretary for J, for security assistance and democracy, human
3 rights, played a role and especially in terms of the liaison to nongovernmental
4 organizations and others there.

5 That was one of the extraordinary things about this, was the numbers of private
6 sector individuals who came forward who wanted to move at-risk Afghans out, the
7 numbers of NGOs and media organizations who were organizing their own charter flights
8 in this environment. And I think we described in pretty good detail some of the
9 challenges those presented.

10 Q And did the veterans organizations also aid in this effort as well?

11 A Yes.

12 Q I'm going to name a few bureaus and offices that we believe were involved
13 in the withdrawal as well, and we'd love to hear your perspective as to what you
14 understood their roles to be and identify key officials within those bureaus or offices.

15 We'll begin with SCA, so South and Central Asian Affairs.

16 A So they had overall responsibility for managing the relationship with
17 Afghanistan and played a key role in terms of the crisis management.

18 Q Did they set the Afghanistan policy? That's a broad question, but --

19 A Yeah, that's a very broad question.

20 Overall policy toward Afghanistan is the prerogative of the President and was set
21 by the President and the White House. They were in charge of advising the President
22 and giving advice to the Secretary and other senior officials about our policy and
23 implementing that policy.

24 But, to the extent you ask about setting policy, the policy is ultimately set by the
25 President.

1 Q Advice on policy, I guess --

2 A Right.

3 Q -- would have been a more accurate framing.

4 [REDACTED] Could you please elaborate on SCA's role in crisis management?

5 Ambassador Smith. So in any crisis situation the regional bureau involved -- in
6 this case SCA -- with responsibility for the country plays a leading role. They are often in
7 charge of the main task force in the crisis and will help staff that task force. They are the
8 ones with the most expertise on what's going on on the ground and they play a critical
9 role.

10 But there are any number of other bureaus that also contribute in that regard,
11 everything from Political-Military Affairs, Diplomatic Security, and Consular Affairs.
12 There are other key players, but they are a critical one.

13 BY [REDACTED]

14 Q Would you identify the key officials within SCA, those most involved in
15 withdrawal?

16 A Dean Thompson, who was the Acting Assistant Secretary at the time.

17 Q And how about the SRAR team? Obviously, Ambassador Khalilzad was the
18 head of that. Specifically, what did you understand their role as well as the key
19 individuals within that team?

20 A SRAR and Ambassador Khalilzad, as I say, were the key negotiators with the
21 Taliban and often the key interlocutors with the government. He has extensive
22 experience in Afghanistan, a long history in Afghanistan. He knows everybody there
23 who is important. And his engagement was at all different levels, with officials both in
24 Kabul and in Doha, where the negotiations were going on. And he was also reporting
25 back to Washington.

1 Q Do you know if the SRAR team engaged with SCA on that, or were they two
2 separate sort of siloed organizations?

3 A So we're going to get into dirty laundry in the State Department, I guess.

4 But it's -- the challenge in any of these environments is, under whose authority is
5 somebody like the special representative operating? And the special representative
6 reported to the Secretary and reported to the President. This was especially true in the
7 previous administration.

8 And sometimes I would say, maybe not too diplomatically, there were challenges
9 in terms of the communication and the communication infrastructure in both
10 administrations of finding out exactly what was being negotiated, what the conversations
11 were in Kabul -- I mean, in Doha, but also in Kabul. And you'll probably hear some
12 frustration expressed by senior officials in the Department or at the embassy about their
13 visibility or lack of visibility in what was going on.

14 Q Thank you.

15 How about within Consular Affairs? Obviously, there are specific equities that
16 they have. But can you speak to their role within the withdrawal, including the
17 evacuation, as well as their key officials?

18 A Well, they clearly were providing a lot of the expertise and knowledge that
19 was needed on the ground in Kabul in terms of screening people. They played a key role
20 in terms of outreach to American citizens. They have primary responsibility for the
21 welfare of American citizens abroad. They have all authority over passports, over visas.
22 So it was a critical role.

23 The new Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs had just arrived, I think the day or
24 two before the crisis began, Rena Bitter.

25 Q Who was the acting ambassador -- secretary --

1 A I don't know who had been acting before. I'm sorry.

2 Q Okay. It's our understanding that Jayne Howell arrived around the time
3 that Ambassador Bass, Mr. Jim DeHart, and she was there for sort of the Consular
4 operations. Can you speak a bit more as to how she interfaced with Consular at that
5 point?

6 A I don't know if I can speak with any detail about that. I think she
7 communicated both with them and as much as possible with Consular Affairs.

8 Communication on the ground, I will note and we've noted in our report, was a
9 real challenge for them. The radios they were handled were being jammed by the
10 military, for obvious reasons, because of the terrorist threat. And they were resorting to
11 anything they could use, SMS text or WhatsApp or whatever they needed in order to
12 communicate and to get information.

13 But that was an enormous challenge, and one of our findings and
14 recommendations relates expressly to that.

15 Q How about Diplomatic Security? What did you understand their role to be?
16 And who were the key officials that were most involved in the withdrawal?

17 A So Diplomatic Security, of course, has overall responsibility for the safety and
18 security of official Americans in country. They supervised the evacuation from the
19 embassy, the movement to HKIA. They were responsible for the security of the chief of
20 mission personnel who were at HKIA throughout the evacuation and, as well, for the
21 security at all of the overseas safe landing zones.

22 Q And which officials within Diplomatic Security do you believe, based on your
23 review, were most involved?

24 A So I don't think the new Assistant Secretary had been confirmed by then,
25 and I believe it was Todd Brown who was one of the key players throughout this time.

1 But I would have to refresh my memory.

2 Q Thank you.

3 So we briefly touched upon this, but what is your understanding of the
4 Department's decision to deploy John Bass to Afghanistan during the emergency
5 evacuation even though Ambassador Ross Wilson was already on the ground?

6 A So my understanding was that Ambassador Bass received a call from the
7 Deputy Secretary asking if he could go in rapid order to Afghanistan.

8 And as it turned out I think the division of labor that he worked out with
9 Ambassador Wilson was very fortuitous. That is, he became the principal liaison with
10 the military, with our folks who were at the gate, and Ambassador Wilson was the liaison
11 to whatever remained in terms of Afghan officials, but also to Washington, and that that
12 actually helped a lot.

13 I mean, one of the things you find in any crisis situation is the demands for
14 information, the demands for sort of ground truth is almost insatiable. And the more
15 senior officials you have who have the trust and confidence of Washington the better in
16 that environment. So it actually worked fairly well in that sense.

17 Q Am I correct in understanding those designations of responsibilities weren't
18 defined beforehand, but were worked out amongst the two of them --

19 A Yes.

20 Q -- once on the ground?

21 A That's my understanding.

22 Q Did the decision reflect a lack of confidence by the Department in
23 Ambassador Wilson or limited capabilities?

24 A I couldn't speak with any authority, but to my thinking I think it was a feeling
25 that additional hands would be helpful in this environment. But Ambassador Wilson is a

1 superb professional and was doing the best he could under, again, extraordinary
2 circumstances.

3 Q To the best of your recollection, has there been another instance where a
4 former ambassador is sent in to assist the current chief of mission, whether it be
5 evacuation, withdrawal, et cetera?

6 A Well, Afghanistan was always unique in that regard. We had what was
7 called an assistant chief of mission, which we don't have anywhere else. So there was
8 always a layering of senior officials because there was a recognition that the span of
9 control and the issues you were dealing with were so extraordinary.

10 Q And there was reporting earlier this week by The Atlantic, I'm not sure if you
11 had the opportunity to review it, but it stated that Ambassador Bass was sent in by
12 Deputy Secretary Sherman because Wilson, Ambassador Wilson, "was shattered by the
13 experience of the past week and wasn't 'able to function at the level that was necessary'
14 to complete the job on his own. Sherman needed Bass to help manage the exodus."

15 Is this consistent with your understanding?

16 A I think that's very unfair to Ambassador Bass -- to Ambassador -- excuse
17 me -- to Ambassador Wilson.

18 Q Can you elaborate?

19 A You know, I don't know what the sources are or whom he interviewed for
20 this.

21 I will say Ambassador Wilson, as I say, was doing an extraordinary job still on the
22 ground. The addition of Ambassador Bass was extremely helpful in that environment
23 because of the division of labor they were able to undertake. But I would never cast
24 aspersions on Ambassador Wilson or the job he did.

25 Q What was your understanding of Ambassador Wilson's role during the

1 emergency evacuation? I know you touched upon the designation of responsibilities
2 briefly, but --

3 A Some of it we may have to talk about in the classified setting. But, as I say,
4 his primary role was to help communicate and coordinate with Washington as the crisis
5 continued.

6 And, as I say, the demands for information from Washington, the demands for
7 meetings at all hours of the day and night are extraordinary in these circumstances. And
8 so having somebody with Ambassador Wilson's experience and knowledge there to
9 answer questions was critical, and to coordinate with Washington.

10 Q Thank you.

11 The unclassified portion of the AAR, page 28, which I'll turn to myself as well -- oh,
12 apologies. It's in the unclassified portion of the -- not the public release --

13 [REDACTED] The narrative.

14 [REDACTED] -- but the narrative of the AAR describes a, quote, "sustained
15 prudent planning effort through the second half of 2020 to address a wide range of
16 potential future security environments."

17 Can you please elaborate on this effort to the best of your ability?

18 Ambassador Smith. I'm not clear what you're referring to in this.

19 [REDACTED] The unclassified portion of the AAR describes -- and that's a
20 quote -- "a sustained prudent planning effort through the second half of 2020," prudent
21 planning exercise plan for a potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan, such as the
22 size of the embassy, that there's alpha, beta, gamma, omega options.

23 Ambassador Smith. I think I've referred to that before, that there had been
24 planning that continued in both administrations about -- if we're talking about the same
25 thing -- about various contingencies and what our footprint would be in those

1 contingencies, where our people would be located.

2 So it was everything from continuing with a very robust presence, to continuing
3 with a very downsized presence, to moving to HKIA, to evacuating completely.

4

BY [REDACTED]

5 Q So the contingency planning had also been performed by the prior
6 administration in 2020. Is that correct?

7 A In terms of the State Department presence.

8 Q And do you recall what the most important sources that informed your
9 understanding of this effort were?

10 A I think documents prepared by the Bureau of South Central Asia Affairs and
11 Diplomatic Security.

12 Q Do you believe that the Taliban was actually interested in any sort of
13 power-sharing agreement with the Afghan Government?

14 A I'm not an expert, but I don't.

15 Q Did the State Department consider the possibility that the Taliban was
16 interested in total military conquest of Afghanistan rather than some sort of interim
17 government?

18 A I think this is a question every senior policymaker was asking themselves at
19 the time, was, what is possible? Is it possible that a deal could be reached that might
20 be -- provide an interim solution to this, or could you trust the Taliban?

21 Q And I believe my colleague touched upon this previously, but I want to sort
22 of refer back, I want to refer to the time period in which the President, President Biden,
23 announced the decision to withdraw.

24 At that time, based on your review and your assessment, had the Taliban been
25 living up to its commitments in the Doha Agreement?

1 A I think they'd been living up to some of the commitments they had made.

2 Q They had not fulfilled the conditions --

3 A No.

4 Q -- correct?

5 A Just to backtrack a little bit, you've read the agreement, so there's a lot of
6 ambiguity in the agreement or at least some flexibility in terms of what the agreement
7 meant in that regard.

8 And some of this was to undertake negotiations with the new government and to
9 do the best efforts to reduce the level of violence and other things that were not really
10 metrics you could sort of articulate very carefully.

11 Q And to what extent was there a recognition within the State Department
12 that the Afghan Government and military could only sustain itself for a limited period, but
13 an acceptance of this under the belief that it sustain itself for a period of weeks or
14 months after the U.S. military withdrawal?

15 A Could you repeat that? I'm sorry.

16 Q Of course. That was a long question.

17 The basic gist of this is, to what extent was there a recognition within the
18 Department that the Afghan Government and military could only sustain itself for a
19 limited period following a U.S. military withdrawal?

20 A I think there was a recognition, not just in the Department but throughout
21 the interagency, that there were going to be enormous challenges for the Afghan military
22 to sustain itself after the military withdrawal.

23 Q Was there a belief that allowing the Afghan Government to fall was
24 acceptable?

25 A I don't know. I've never heard discussion of that.

1 [REDACTED]. Was there an understanding that it was only going to be sustainable
2 for a period of weeks or months after the military withdrawal?

3 Ambassador Smith. I think there were varying estimates of how long it was
4 sustainable and how long they could continue, and that was true under both
5 administrations.

6 [REDACTED]. And I'm going to introduce another exhibit into the record. I'll
7 say it's 200 pages, and I didn't want to kill any more trees, so I will rotate the exhibit
8 around, but it's important that you have a copy. And we'll send ours around as well. I
9 tabbed these for ease of reference.

10 [Smith Exhibit No. 2

11 Was marked for identification.]

12

BY [REDACTED]

13 Q So I'd like to introduce exhibit 2 into the record. This is the Joint
14 Publication 3-68. I can represent that this document is unclassified, publicly available.
15 It came to our attention in the course of reviewing State Department materials, and we
16 were able to pull it from the DOD website.

17 So I'd like to point you to the first tab, which is romanette 9. I'm going to read a
18 part of the overview into the record.

19 "Noncombatant evacuation operations are conducted by the Department of
20 Defense to assist in evacuating U.S. citizens and nationals; DOD civilian personnel, and
21 designated persons (host nation [HN] and third country nationals [TCNs]) whose lives are
22 in danger from locations in a foreign nation to an appropriate safe haven, when directed
23 by the Department of State.

24 "U.S. policy is contained in a memorandum of agreement between DOD and DOS,
25 titled 'Memorandum of Agreement between the Departments of State and Defense on

1 the Protection and Evacuation of U.S. Citizens and Nationals and Designated Other
2 Persons From Threatened Areas Overseas."

3 Have you had the opportunity to review these -- this memorandum of agreement?

4 A I haven't.

5 Q Have you had the opportunity -- have you seen this JP 3-68, which was
6 referenced in State Department materials, previously?

7 A I'm sorry. What?

8 Q Have you reviewed this document previously?

9 A This document, no.

10 Q Okay. I'm going to move on to the next paragraph.

11 "During NEOs, the chief of mission (COM), neither the geographic combatant
12 commander (GCC) nor the subordinate joint force commander (JFC), is the senior United
13 States Government authority for the evacuation and, as such, is ultimately responsible for
14 the successful completion of the NEO and the safety of the evacuees."

15 Were you aware of this delegation of responsibilities, Ambassador Smith?

16 A During the NEOs, the chief -- I'm not even certain I understand the wording
17 of this. It's double negative.

18 Q I did not draft this, so I can't take responsibility.

19 A I understand it. I mean, I can read it, but it's a little confusing.

20 Q Let me reframe the question.

21 When conducting your review of the Afghanistan withdrawal and the evacuation,
22 were you aware that the chief of mission was the ultimate authority responsible for the
23 evacuation?

24 A I'm not certain that I would agree with that. That is, as we discussed
25 before, I think the decision to implement a NEO and the conduct of the NEO is a joint

1 enterprise between the Department of State and the Pentagon, but there is involvement
2 from senior-level officials, from the White House down, in terms of that process.

3 So I don't know that saying the chief of mission is ultimately responsible for it is
4 fair.

5 Q So would you disagree with this joint publication?

6 A Well, I'd say, in practice, that's not the way it works.

7 Q Is it memorialized anywhere in sort of an --

8 A I don't know.

9 Q -- SOP by the Department?

10 A I don't know.

11 [REDACTED] Is it fair to say that the Department's understanding of its role in a
12 NEO diverges from what is in this document?

13 Ambassador Smith. I think it's safe to say that practice diverges from that in
14 certain sense, yes. That is that this is a broader interagency effort that is undertaken in
15 extreme circumstances and that it doesn't necessarily capture what happens or the
16 decisionmaking.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q So I want to point us to the next tab, second tab, which is I-3, "Terminology."
19 And I'll read this into the record as well.

20 "As the President's personal representative to the HN, host nation, the COM,"
21 chief of mission, "is the lead diplomatic official of the highest rank. Variations of the
22 title COM, or other titles referring to the senior DOS diplomatic agent (U.S. ambassador, if
23 assigned; charge d'affaires; consul general; or principal officer at a particular diplomatic
24 post) could be interchanged throughout this publication and not change its relevancy."

25 That's your understanding of the chief of mission as well?

1 A Fine. Yes.

2 Q And I want to point you to the next paragraph, number 3. It says, "During
3 NEOs, the COM, and not the geographic combatant commander (GCC) or the subordinate
4 joint force commander, is the senior USG authority for the evacuation and, as such, is
5 ultimately responsible for successful completion of the NEO."

6 That's what we previously stated.

7 A Okay.

8 Q But I just want to point us to this as well.

9 "The decision to evacuate a U.S. embassy is diplomatic and/or political and threat
10 driven and is, therefore, retained by the chief of mission."

11 A Uh-huh.

12 Q Is that your understanding as well, Ambassador Smith?

13 A Well, as I say, my understanding is this may well be true in terms of the
14 actual authority. That is, in practice, however, it is a broader decision. A chief of
15 mission on his own authority doesn't -- or her authority -- doesn't invoke this without a
16 discussion with Washington or part of an interagency discussion.

17 Q Great. I'm going to point to the last tab.

18 Under the introduction, this is III-1. I'm going to point us to subsection 2.

19 It says, "Within the HN," host nation, "the COM, although not in the military chain
20 of command, is the lead federal official for protection and evacuation of all U.S.
21 noncombatant evacuees, including DOD dependents."

22 A Within DH -- I'm sorry. I'm just reading this.

23 Q Of course. Please take your time.

24 A Okay.

25 Q Does that comport with your understanding of the chief of mission's

1 responsibility?

2 A The chief of mission is responsible for protection and evacuation of U.S.
3 noncombatant evacuees in a NEO environment. Yes, that makes sense to me.

4 But, as I say, this is a division of authority, and there is a partnership there. The
5 chief of mission does not have authority over military assets or military personnel.

6 Q Well, I want to revert back to an earlier question that I posed in terms of the
7 successful completion of the NEO. Now, reading this document, I want to ask that
8 question again.

9 And based on the materials that were provided, what's in writing, is it fair to
10 interpret this as stating that the State Department is responsible for the successful
11 completion of a NEO if, in fact, the chief of mission is the ultimate authority?

12 A As I've indicated, chief of mission, of course, serves at the pleasure of the
13 President. Ultimate authority for any NEO, for any operation like this, devolves from the
14 President and the President's authority. So, to the extent that there is responsibility, it's
15 a shared responsibility throughout the executive branch.

16 Q Well, let me reframe.

17 In terms of -- I believe in the AAR there was confusion as to who was ultimately
18 responsible within the Department. In this instance, is it fair to characterize it was chief
19 of mission being ultimately responsible within the Department?

20 A In terms of the --

21 Q In terms of the NEO?

22 A -- crisis management, or in terms of the NEO?

23 Q In terms of the NEO?

24 A I think we're asking two -- this is sort of maybe a semantic issue. But what
25 I'm trying to say is that, in actual fact, this is going to be a collective decision of a number

1 of different agencies under the auspices of the NSC. So no chief of mission on their own
2 authority is going to say, "I'm convening a NEO," without authority from Washington or
3 without support from Washington.

4 Q Do you think it would be beneficial to memorialize this in an SOP or some
5 form of manual, as it is here, as to how it's actually played out in practice?

6 A Again, I think we're talking about two different things, because our
7 recommendation was clarity within Washington, within the Department, within the
8 interagency, of who was the central point of contact in Washington and the central
9 authority in Washington. I think that stands in terms of our recommendation.

10 In terms of the NEO itself, it could well be that there should be more clarity in
11 terms of authorities and responsibilities. But, as I say, as a practical matter, it is
12 something that is determined by the NSC and by the White House.

13 Q But that's not in writing anywhere within the Department, correct? There
14 is no SOP which memorializes that arrangement?

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

16 Q Thank you.

17 [REDACTED]: Excuse me. [REDACTED] could you identify what this document is
18 called so the minority can look it up online?

19 [REDACTED]: I'm going to pass it on to you right now, the JP 3-68. I believe
20 I've previously introduced it as well.

21 [REDACTED] Yeah, but we never get to look at it now, so --

22 [REDACTED]: Yeah. The date is right on the top, and I can attest to the fact
23 that this was in effect during the withdrawal and ultimate evacuation.

24 [REDACTED] Appreciate it.

25 Mr. Dockham. Are we moving on from this?

1 [REDACTED]. Yes.

2 Mr. Dockham. Okay.

3 [REDACTED] Thank you.

4 BY [REDACTED]

5 Q Ambassador Smith, was there resistance within the Department to
6 discussing the NEO or using the term NEO?

7 A I think there was concern about the implications of leakage of the term NEO
8 or invoking a NEO and what that implied.

9 Q Did any individuals explicitly or specifically express that concern?

10 A To the best of my recollection, I can't say. I don't know.

11 Q To what extent was there consideration of the fact that the planned military
12 withdrawal timeline -- so September 11th at that point -- removed the military during the
13 annual fighting season in Afghanistan?

14 A I think there was concern in general about the implications of the removal of
15 the military, but I don't know if it was tied specifically to the fighting season. But I'm not
16 aware of that.

17 Q Are you aware of any discussions delaying that date based on this
18 information?

19 A Again, that would have been out of the purview of my review.

20 [REDACTED]. Were you aware of other discussions of delaying the date of the
21 withdrawal?

22 Ambassador Smith. No.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q What was -- this may be a bit redundant, but, for purposes of the
25 record -- what was the State Department's role within the overall interagency process?

1 A That's a very broad question. Do you have a specific?

2 Q Let me reframe.

3 So our understanding is that there's an interagency process in place in terms of
4 making decisions with respect to Afghanistan, both during the transition and later on as
5 events progressed, which I believe we touched upon.

6 A Well, during the transition, they had no authority. But after the --

7 Q After the transition, yeah. And we just want to better understand what the
8 State Department's role was.

9 Specifically, did they have an equal role in the decisionmaking? Did they defer to
10 the NSC in the decisionmaking? Were there specific issues that they took priority on
11 decisionmaking authority? Just better understanding what their role was in the
12 interagency process.

13 A The State Department was one of the key players in the interagency process
14 in that regard. When you talk about the interagency process, of course there is
15 everything from principals level, deputies level, and IPCs and others that are important in
16 this regard. Various issues were discussed at various levels. The State Department
17 was at the table for those discussions.

18 Q Can you speak to who the key decisionmakers were at the NSC?

19 A I don't know how much I'm allowed or should say about what the NSC was
20 doing or --

21 Q To the best of your abilities in this setting.

22 [REDACTED] You have the ability to say anything in the unclassified level that you
23 choose.

24 [REDACTED] So the issue is whether or not he was a participant at the time.
25 And if he was, which I don't -- I defer to you, Ambassador, if you were. I don't believe

1 you were.

2 But if he was, that answer would potentially implicate the executive branch
3 confidentiality interests, because it would be communications feeding into a Presidential
4 process.

5 So I don't know if that -- usually L does not clarify things when it says things like
6 that.

7 Ambassador Smith. Yeah.

8 [REDACTED] But I think you have to decide whether or not you actually have
9 any witness knowledge of the processes they're asking about.

10 Ambassador Smith. For that reason, I'd rather not discuss or comment.

11 [REDACTED] Did the Department ever voice disagreement with other
12 interagency entities?

13 [REDACTED] Did it ever voice --

14

BY [REDACTED]

15 Q Disagreement with other interagency equities?

16 A In my experience, there is always disagreement in interagency discussions,
17 and the Department is never hesitant to raise concerns or its own issues.

18 Q Let me reframe the question.

19 In terms of issues within its jurisdiction, did it voice any disagreement with other
20 interagency equities or the NSC?

21 A In terms of issues within its --

22 Q Specifically relating to diplomatic mission and the ultimate evacuation.

23 A Again, without more context or specifics, it's hard for me to answer that.

24 Q Did the State Department defer to the NSC on matters within the
25 Department's purview, such as Consular Affairs and embassy operations?

1 A Defer? I would take exception to the idea of deferring. I think they
2 coordinated with the interagency and with the NSC on these matters.

3 Q Did the NSC ultimately make the decisions, or did they have decisionmaking
4 authority on those issues?

5 A On consular matters, or you have a specific thing in mind?

6 Q On embassy operations, consular matters, et cetera.

7 A The NSC plays a key role on all of these matters.

8 [REDACTED] On which populations were eligible for evacuation?

9 Ambassador Smith. They were part of that process. They played a key role in
10 that process.

11

BY [REDACTED]

12 Q Can you speak to the Taliban's role in providing security at the airport at
13 HKIA?

14 A I can speak with -- in terms of my knowledge and memory of this. Of
15 course, when the government collapsed and Afghan National Security Forces collapsed,
16 we found a situation where the Taliban was in control of access to the airport, of key
17 points of entry. And it became extraordinary in terms of the need to engage both in
18 Doha and in Kabul with the Taliban in order to coordinate the removal of people from
19 Kabul.

20 Q And can you speak to why General McKenzie declined the Taliban's offer to
21 allow the U.S. to retain security control of Kabul?

22 A I can't.

23 Q In discussing the administration's AARs, John Kirby stated, quote, "For all this
24 talk of chaos, I just didn't see it, not from my perch."

25 Do you agree with this statement?

1 A Again, I don't know what he saw from his perch. I will tell you that the
2 situation, at least initially, was fairly chaotic on the ground.

3 Q Thank you.

4 A And what was your assessment of the preparation and process through which the
5 embassy destroyed sensitive materials and evacuated the embassy facility?

6 A So one of the recommendations we made and which we feel is important
7 going forward is the Department has procedures in place and guidelines about the
8 holding of classified materials in high-threat posts and the amount of time you should
9 have in order to destroy that material.

10 A The difficulty which we found and was articulated in several interviews and why
11 we made the recommendation is in order to enforce that you almost have to walk around
12 the embassy to find what people have.

13 A And this is only human nature. People tend to hang on to documents. They
14 hang on to materials. You needed to physically go around and make sure that they were
15 adhering to that and that they were minimizing their holdings. And that was a challenge
16 in this environment, as it is in many evacuations.

17 Q And were they given any sort of preparation beforehand given the
18 projections, et cetera?

19 A I believe, based on our understanding, around June, July there were significant
20 Taliban advances in the country. Was there any guidance provided by the Department
21 around that period to ensure that these materials -- sensitive materials -- were protected
22 and destroyed properly?

23 A I think there was standing guidance and there was reiteration of that
24 guidance at post, is my understanding.

25

BY [REDACTED]

1 Q The AAR lays out a lot of ways the COVID-19 pandemic impacted
2 Department operations, including in 2021, including operations at the U.S. Embassy.

3 The timeline indicates that many COVID impacts took place after the COVID
4 vaccine was widely available and distributed.

5 Why did the State Department make these COVID mitigation decisions that
6 hampered the functioning of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, especially amid a U.S. troop
7 withdrawal and a rapid Taliban military advance?

8 A Could you repeat that? I'm sorry. It was a long preface to it.

9 Q Yeah. So the impact that COVID had and COVID mitigation efforts
10 undertaken by the State Department included, according to your report, some limitations
11 on the functions at the U.S. Embassy at Kabul at various periods in 2021.

12 A Also in 2020.

13 Q Also in 2020. Absolutely.

14 The timeline indicates that, in 2021, these COVID impacts took place after the
15 COVID vaccine was widely available and distributed.

16 So do you know why the State Department made these COVID mitigation
17 decisions that slowed or hampered the functioning of the U.S. Embassy, especially amid a
18 U.S. troop withdrawal and Taliban advances?

19 A My understanding was that there was an outbreak in May and June. This
20 was another wave that actually had originated in India, that I can speak with some
21 authority to since I was charge in India, and that that had a very negative impact on our
22 operations in Kabul. And the State Department was taking precautions to keep its staff
23 and personnel safe.

24 Q This also impacted the processing of Afghan SIV applications as well in 2021
25 for a time.

1 Do you believe that the State Department made the right decisions in
2 implementing these COVID mitigation --

3 A I think, as we indicated, COVID was a challenge throughout this period of
4 time that we looked at, for the last year of the Trump administration and the first year of
5 the Biden administration.

6 And the State Department was trying to balance various needs and various
7 concerns, as I say, to keep its personnel safe and, at the same time, to do its duties and
8 responsibilities. And that was always a challenge.

9 Q And the report lays out, even when the evacuation began in August 2021,
10 the impact that COVID had on the workforce posture, the engagement in telework and, it
11 says here, "initial difficulties in staffing and running the Department's in-person crisis
12 response."

13 Are you able to lay that out any further?

14 A Well, as indicated, we went back to full, in terms of our staffing in the
15 Department itself. I'd say it was a mixed blessing in some respects. As I indicated, we
16 could use flexibility and use telework capacity to do things remotely that we might not
17 have otherwise done.

18 At the same time, bringing people back in close proximity to one another in the
19 middle of a pandemic was also a challenge.

20 Q As you've laid out here, the AAR credits consular officers on the ground and
21 their actions and responses there. Numerous military servicemembers who were on the
22 ground have said that some consular officers would only work shorter shifts and that
23 consular officers would often not be available when marines or other servicemembers
24 would need their help.

25 Did you investigate these issues? Did you interview consular officers and U.S.

1 servicemembers about this?

2 A I think, as we indicated before, we were focused on the Department of State
3 and its role, so we were interviewing State Department employees. We did not
4 interview the military about this.

5 Q What do you think accounts for the discrepancy sometimes before the
6 Department's perspective on the actions of some of the consular officers and the
7 perspective of many of the servicemembers who were on the ground?

8 A I really can't say, because I didn't interview them and haven't seen their
9 perspectives.

10 [REDACTED] Ambassador Smith, many observers have stated that while a
11 large number of Afghans were evacuated in the Kabul airlift, that many of the Afghans
12 who were evacuated were not eligible. Some have used the term "wrong", which I
13 really want to refrain from using. But specifically that they were unvetted and unknown
14 individuals.

15 Based on your review, do you think this is correct?

16 Ambassador Smith. I think we have to go into classified setting and talk about
17 screening and --

18 [REDACTED] The AAR also discusses how the rapid fall of Kabul occurred amid
19 a major staff transition in late July --

20 Ambassador Smith. Yes.

21 [REDACTED] -- and early August 2021, including the senior RSO and head of
22 the consular section.

23 To what extent, if any, were there discussions within State during 2021 about the
24 wisdom of ending and starting rotations in the summer of 2021 in the middle of the U.S.
25 troop withdrawal and as the Taliban was making big advances?

1 Ambassador Smith. I think, as we highlight in the report, this was a dilemma,
2 and some people expressed concern within the Department about these transitions
3 taking place at a critical time.

4 [REDACTED] Ambassador Smith, I briefly want to touch upon your
5 preparation for this interview.

6 How did you first learn of the committee's interest in conducting a transcribed
7 interview?

8 Ambassador Smith. Gosh, I think you asked for my email.

9 [REDACTED] What was your reaction?

10 [Laughter.]

11 Ambassador Smith. You asked for it through the American Academy of
12 Diplomacy, and the head of American Academy of Diplomacy was Ron Neumann. And
13 he thought you wanted to talk about my report on diplomatic training and professional
14 development. And I said, "Would that I were so lucky, Ron."

15 [Laughter.]

16 [REDACTED] We'd note that Ron is also a former ambassador to Afghanistan.

17 Ambassador Smith. He is, and actually is a brilliant person to talk to about
18 Afghanistan.

19 [REDACTED]. That's definitely one reaction.

1

2

BY [REDACTED]

3

Q What kind of preparation did you undertake for this interview?

4

A I read the report yesterday, and I read again the unclassified portion that

5

had been released before.

6

Q What State Department officials, if any, were involved in your preparation?

7

A [REDACTED] was kind enough to give me access to the classified portion. But other

8

than that, I was not engaged with State Department officials in preparing for this.

9

Q And we thank him for all his efforts as well --

10

A Thank you.

11

Q -- in making today -- helping today happen.

12

Did State Department officials give you any guidance on whether -- on what the

13

circumstances for this transcribed interview are?

14

A No.

15

Q Did Department officials ask you not to answer certain questions or provide

16

any suggestions on how to answer certain questions?

17

A No.

18

Q Were any U.S. Government officials from outside the Department involved

19

in your preparations?

20

A U.S. Government officials? No. I'm just making sure I understood your

21

question.

22

Q I imagine not any foreign officials either.

23

Did the committee minority have any discussions or engagements with you

24

leading up to this interview?

25

A Did -- I'm sorry?

1 Q The minority in the committee have any discussions or engagements with
2 you leading up to this interview.

3 A I met them outside the room before we came in. But other than that, no.

4 Q And as we are wrapping up, what were you most proud of about the
5 after-action review, Ambassador Smith?

6 A So I'm proud of the fact that I think we told a story that needed to be told.
7 We highlighted -- and I just want to underscore this again and again -- the extraordinary
8 efforts by the Department rank and file.

9 I think all of us, as American citizens, as public servants, should be gratified and
10 grateful for them in what they did under these extraordinary circumstances.

11 We tried to -- not to pull any punches -- we tried to identify where we thought
12 there were shortcomings, where we think things could have been done better. This is
13 true with both administrations.

14 And, again, in dealing with a complex situation like Afghanistan it's hard to say
15 that things begin on a given date and end on a given date. This is a continuum.

16 No administration inherits a tabula rasa. They inherit what they got from the
17 previous administration. That said, they also take it from there, and they are
18 responsible from there.

19 But I think we did a good job of telling the story of what happened, of drawing
20 some conclusions about what went well, what went right, what went wrong, and what we
21 could do better going forward.

22 So I believe the report stands on its own.

23 Q And if there was anything you could have done differently -- or is there
24 anything you would have done differently in retrospect?

25 A Not answered the Secretary's phone call. But other than that --

1 [Laughter.]

2 Q Well, we appreciate your answering our questions today. We obviously
3 have a lot more we could ask, and I'm sure we will in the classified setting. But we want
4 to just thank you for appearing before us today.

5 A My pleasure.

6 Q Do you have any closing remarks?

7 A Nope. Thank you.

8 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

9 [REDACTED]. Thanks.

10 [REDACTED]. We can go off the record.

11 [Recess.]

1

2 [3:47 p.m.]

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

4 All right, Ambassador. Hello again.

5 Ambassador Smith. Hi.6 [REDACTED] Thank you again for being here voluntarily. Hopefully we can keep
7 this quick, as I know you've been here answering questions for several hours now.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q Let me go back to a couple items that were touched upon in the last round
10 of questioning.11 You testified before that career officials had prepared materials for the incoming
12 Biden administration that discussed the risks that a continued withdrawal of U.S. troops
13 from Afghanistan down to zero would pose. Is that correct?14 A That discussed the challenges this would present particularly from a State
15 Department perspective in terms of maintaining a diplomatic presence in Kabul.16 Q Okay. And what was the deadline for a full U.S. withdrawal of troops that
17 had been stipulated in the Doha deal?

18 A May 1st.

19 Q And what did the Biden administration ultimately set as the withdrawal date
20 of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan?

21 A September 11th.

22 Q And what was the withdrawal date that ultimately was adhered to?

23 A End of August.

24 Q Did your review assess the decision to extend that withdrawal deadline from
25 May 1st to ultimately August 31st?

1 A No. That was really outside the scope of our after-action review. We
2 were not to look at decisions by the President or determinations that the President may
3 have made about whether to extend that or how long to extend it. We were looking at
4 the implications for the Department of State.

5 Q Okay. But, to your knowledge, incoming administration and Department of
6 State officials did read and absorb the materials you prepared for them --

7 A I believe so.

8 Q -- on the transition team about those risks?

9 A About the risks to the State Department, yes.

10 Q And is it reasonable, then, to assess that the extending of the deadline could
11 have, in whole or in part, been in order to manage for those risks?

12 A I could only speculate, so I don't want to get into that, but I think it would
13 make sense, from my perspective, to think that that would help mitigate some of the
14 risks.

15 Q And would the additional time also reasonably then allow for de minimis
16 planning necessary to get down to a full withdrawal of troops to zero?

17 A It would allow for a more measured series of steps that could be taken.

18 Q Okay. Thanks.

19 And I want to go back to something on SIVs, as well. In your understanding,
20 based on the review that you led, was COVID the only challenge facing the SIV program --

21 A No.

22 Q -- under the last administration?

23 A By no means.

24 Q So your understanding is that the backlog in SIV processing predated COVID?

25 A There had been a backlog for quite some time. As I indicated, this was

1 administratively a very difficult process. There were any number of challenges with
2 recordkeeping, with the vetting process for SIV applicants. So, even under the best of
3 circumstances, if you hadn't had a pandemic, this was not going to be easy.

4 Q But, in fact, the AAR described something else that was not the best of
5 circumstances under the last administration. It said that the administration took no
6 steps to address the backlog. Is that accurate?

7 A That's fair.

8 Q Okay. Thank you.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q One additional point of followup. You previously testified to conducting
11 the review as to State and how it prepared for and executed its duties and
12 responsibilities. Is that correct?

13 A Correct.

14 Q And this was under the mandate of Secretary Blinken. Is that correct?

15 A Correct.

16 Q Would it follow that you, in turn, reviewed State Department guidance?

17 A State Department guidance to the embassy? Or --

18 Q Writ large.

19 A Yes.

20 Q And in your document review and analysis, you focused primarily on work
21 product including guidance that was drafted by State Department personnel for State
22 Department personnel. Is that correct?

23 A Correct. And to the extent, of course, that the chief of mission has
24 authority over other agency personnel at post, we would've focused on that.

25 Q Helpful clarification. Thank you.

1 And it therefore follows that you perhaps considered other authorities as well as
2 customary practices which were informed by your 32 years of service in the State
3 Department. Is that correct?

4 A Thirty-eight years, but yes.

5 Q Thirty-eight. Thanks for clarifying.

6 [REDACTED] We do want a clean record.

7 BY [REDACTED]

8 Q Difference of 6 years. That's important.

9 So, turning to -- we endeavored to get through "Findings" and
10 "Recommendations" in the last round. We almost got through "Recommendations."
11 So, if you'll indulge us, we'd like to draw your attention to page 20 of the AAR, exhibit 1,
12 as related to the subsection entitled "Recommendations for High-Threat Posts."

13 A Yes.

14 Q One of the recommendations in the AAR was related to 1-year tours.

15 A Uh-huh.

16 Q Could you talk to us a little bit about the recommendation of virtual 2-year
17 assignments?

18 A So this is one of the challenges I think that is apparent not just in a post like
19 Afghanistan but any high-threat post or in an unaccompanied tour post -- that is, that you
20 have a frequent turnover of personnel, usually a 1-year assignment. As we indicated in
21 the report, there are compelling reasons why you would do that.

22 That said, it also presents enormous challenges. And the Department tried to
23 mitigate those in some ways. That is, it mandated, for a while at least, overlap of
24 personnel, so that if you were replacing somebody, you would have a couple of weeks, a
25 month, which is often a luxury in the State Department context --

1 Q Uh-uh.

2 A -- where you could deal with your predecessor and get to know the ropes.

3 So there were some recommendations we were making in terms of knowledge
4 management but also in terms of providing more continuity, so people are not just
5 working on this issue for a year but they maybe worked a year before in Washington on
6 it, they're familiar with it, and, in that way, sort of mitigate, as I say, the impact of this
7 constant turnover.

8 Q Do you think that this approach would be feasible in terms of the current
9 infrastructure of the State Department?

10 A The State Department will tell you they need more resources.

11 Q Fair enough.

12 I'd like to turn to the post-AAR process. When did you officially conclude your
13 tenure working on the AAR?

14 A In March, when we completed the report. Early March.

15 Q Okay.

16 And you previously testified that you did not have an exit -- or, to your
17 recollection, you did not have an exit interview with the Secretary. Is that correct?

18 A I don't recall, honestly. I don't recall whether we had one or not, I have to
19 say. I'm sorry.

20 Q Okay. Did you have a debrief or an exit interview with anyone else in the
21 State Department related to your role?

22 A I spoke with the Counselor, Derek Chollet.

23 Q Okay. And what did that consist of?

24 A We handed over the report, I highlighted a few things that I really wanted to
25 highlight from that report, and we concluded our meeting.

1 Q Okay.

2 Did you conduct any exit interviews with your subordinates related to the AAR
3 process?

4 A I didn't conduct exit interviews. I thanked them all for their service.

5 Q Okay. Did they have any feedback for you in terms of how the process
6 went?

7 A I don't know. And I hesitate to speak for them. I think most of them, all
8 of them I hope, felt pride of ownership of this report, felt that they had given their all in
9 preparing this report, and felt that it was a good product at the end of the day. But
10 maybe there are dissenting voices. I don't know.

11 Q Fair enough.

12 At the time you finished your work on the AAR, what was the status of the report?

13 A It was a document that was in the hands of the Counselor and senior
14 leadership of the Department but had not been disseminated in the Department.

15 Q Okay. And, to the best of your knowledge, was a finalized report?

16 A It was.

17 Q So not in draft form at that time?

18 A Correct.

19 Q Okay. Do you have any knowledge of the report having been iterated on
20 after March when you departed from your role?

21 A I'm not aware of any changes that were made.

22 Q Okay. When you reviewed the document in preparation for your interview
23 today, did you notice anything had changed in relation to the text, the findings, or the
24 recommendations?

25 A No.

1 Q Okay. And, to be clear, did you review the AAR report in detail prior to this
2 interview today?

3 A I did yesterday.

4 Q Did you review the report generally in preparation --

5 A Prior to -- I'm sorry.

6 Q -- yes -- in preparation for the interview today?

7 A I did yesterday.

8 Q Okay.

9 And what did you understand were the remaining steps of the AAR process that
10 would need to be conducted after your departure from the review team?

11 A Again, there's no real template for this in Department of State, so there was
12 no clear guideline as to what would happen to it or where it would go. My hope, as I
13 say, was that it would inform Department efforts going forward to strengthen crisis
14 management and to learn lessons from this crisis. But I had no authority over that and
15 no visibility into it.

16 Q Fair enough.

17 Are you aware of whether the State Department eventually released the
18 unclassified portions of the AAR publicly?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Do you agree with the decision to do so?

21 A Yes.

22 Q Could you explain why?

23 A I felt that -- well, first and foremost, my concern was for sharing this within
24 the State Department. I felt it was important for State Department officials, not just
25 those who'd been interviewed but overall for State Department officials who'd been

1 involved one way or the other in Afghanistan over a 20-year period, to see what we had
2 concluded and to benefit from those recommendations and those findings. And, as I
3 say, we had written this with the intent that it could be easily released in that context, at
4 least the findings and the recommendations.

5 Q And are you aware of whether other agencies released their after-action
6 review reports?

7 A That were contemporaneous with this one? Because I've seen earlier
8 after-action reviews, so I'm not clear which one you mean, but --

9 Q We previously discussed that various agencies conducted their own
10 after-action reviews, correct?

11 A The Pentagon in particular.

12 Q Are you aware of, for example, the Pentagon, of whether or not it released
13 its report publicly?

14 A I'm not aware of it. I don't think so.

15 Q Okay. Do you agree with the decision to not release the AAR as related to
16 the Pentagon publicly?

17 A I can't say since I haven't read it.

18 Q Fair enough.

19 A I hesitate to opine.

20 Q And you previously testified that you have not publicly spoken about the
21 AAR. Is that correct?

22 A That's correct.

23 Q What is your reasoning --

24 A Other than I was responsible for it.

25 Q What is your reasoning for not doing so?

1 A Well, I wanted to protect the integrity and the confidence of this process. I
2 think it's important. I'm actually very pleased it never leaked. And, in this town, that's
3 a great tribute to the people who worked on it.

4 A And I think if there are going to be more AARs going forward, it's important that
5 we maintain the integrity of the document and of that process.

6 Q So your choice to not speak publicly about the substance of the AAR was, in
7 fact, intentional.

8 A Yes.

9 Q And that was to maintain the objectivity of the review and the document
10 itself.

11 A And its utility for the Department.

12 Q Fair enough.

13 Are you aware of whether other team members have spoken publicly about the
14 AAR?

15 A I'm not aware of any of them having done so.

16 Q Okay.

17 And you previously testified that you have had some contact with the Department
18 after --

19 A Yes.

20 Q -- the AAR. And can you characterize those conversations to us?

21 A So, of course, I know a lot of people at the State Department, so I have
22 ongoing friendships and contact with people. But in terms of the context of this, I had
23 periodic conversations with the Counselor, who was keeping me informed about what
24 the plans were and particularly with regard to whether or not I might be asked to say
25 something publicly or to brief on the contents of the after-action review.

1 Q Okay.

2 And notwithstanding the time that elapsed since you left State until the AAR was
3 in fact released to the public and subsequently furnished to Congress, do you have any
4 reasons today to doubt the credibility of the report?

5 A No.

6 Q The soundness of the methodology that underpinned it?

7 A No.

8 Q The capabilities of the researchers?

9 A No.

10 Q As to the drafters?

11 A No.

12 Q In your view, how should policymakers respond to the AAR report going
13 forward?

14 A Well, this was, as I indicated, always meant to be a blueprint of things that
15 we thought could be strengthened and could be addressed and should be addressed.
16 We have no authority to require anything or any response from the Department of State.
17 My hope was, voluntarily, the Department would undertake to review. I wasn't under
18 any illusion that they would agree with every recommendation or follow every
19 prescription that I had in terms of steps being taken, but, as I say, I wanted to start a
20 dialogue and highlight those things which I thought were most critical.

21 Q Do you feel like a dialogue has been initiated by the State Department
22 internally as to the findings and recommendations?

23 A I really have not been part of that, but I think my understanding is they are
24 undertaking that.

25 Q What informs this understanding?

1 A Conversations I've had with people who've told me that.

2 Q Okay.

3 How should Congress respond to the AAR?

4 A It should embrace the AAR.

5 Sorry.

6 I think -- I hope it will be taken in the spirit in which it was written. That is, this
7 was a sincere effort by State Department professionals, by people who knew the
8 Department very well over the course of many years, to hold the Department itself
9 accountable, if you will, to find and highlight those things that had gone well, to make
10 recommendations for things that could be done better going forward; but that this would
11 be something that I hope Congress would encourage the Department and other agencies
12 to continue in the future.

13 As I say, it's unprecedented, in my knowledge, in the history of the Department.
14 My concern is, this may be the first of the last after-action review. I hope it's not. One
15 of our recommendations was clearly aimed at the need to capture lessons learned to do a
16 better job as a department in drawing lessons from crises like this, and I hope that
17 Congress would encourage the Department to do that.

18 Q And how should the current administration respond to the AAR?

19 A As I say, I hope that they will take this as a series of recommendations that
20 are well-intentioned and hopefully well-informed that will lead them to make certain
21 changes that will improve the Department's performance in future crises.

22 Q And it's your testimony today that the AAR was conducted in a manner that
23 was objective?

24 A Yes.

25 Q Bipartisan?

1 A Yes.

2 Q And well-informed by documentation, in terms of physical documents and
3 also informational interviews; is that correct?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Is there anything you'd change regarding the researching of the AAR?

6 A No. I think we did an excellent job within the parameters that we were
7 given and within the timeframe that we were given.

8 Q Okay. And as to the drafting of the report itself?

9 A I'd leave it to others how well it's drafted, but I'm pretty pleased with it,
10 reading it again.

11 Q And as to the timeline you were given to conduct the review?

12 A It was ambitious but I think fully understandable in light of the need to
13 address these issues while they're still fresh in people's memory.

14 Q Okay. And communication with the interagency?

15 A About the AAR?

16 Q Correct. During the review itself.

17 A Oh. As I indicated, we did not interact a lot with the interagency on that
18 regard. We focused on the role of Department of State.

19 I did speak on a couple of occasions with those who were in charge of the
20 Pentagon's after-action review, mainly to make sure we deconflicted, we didn't step on
21 each other's toes. And only on one occasion did they reach out to me to ask permission
22 to speak to a State Department -- former State Department official.

23 Q And so that communication was limited intentionally because the mandate
24 was focused as to how State performed during the withdrawal and evacuation?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Okay.

2 Is there anything else you'd like to share with the record, with the public, in terms
3 of your involvement in the AAR or the successes of the withdrawal itself?

4 A That's a very good question. I mean, I do look forward to some discussions
5 in a classified setting about certain elements of this. I think there are important things
6 that everyone should understand and some challenges that we can only discuss in that
7 environment.

8 That said, as I say, I hope that one takeaway is, as we highlighted in this report,
9 the United States Government is blessed by having an extraordinary number of very
10 dedicated and talented public servants who serve this country with great enthusiasm and
11 patriotism in some extraordinary circumstances, and not all of them wear uniforms.
12 Some of them are certainly uniformed, and I have great respect and appreciation for what
13 they do, but a lot of them are civilians and they wear suits or khaki or whatever they
14 might happen to be dressed in in a given day. And they risk their lives and they risk
15 everything for this country very much as much as their military colleagues do. And they
16 are critical to the advancement of American national security, our foreign policy, and our
17 national interest. And we should be proud of what they do and what they contribute.

18 [REDACTED] Thank you.

19 With that, we'd like to thank you very much for your service, including coming out
20 of retirement to work on this important project. It was very well drafted.

21 Ambassador Smith. Thank you.

22 [REDACTED]. It has informed a lot of our investigation and how we think about
23 these issues.

24 Ambassador Smith. Good.

25 [REDACTED] So, on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks and minority staff, thank

1 you very much. And that concludes our round.

2 Ambassador Smith. Great. Thank you.

3  We can go off the record.

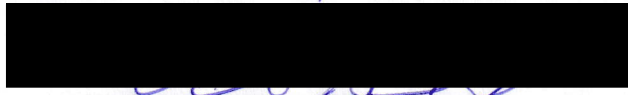
4 [Whereupon, at 4:07 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15

Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 201 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded.

*subject to corrections
submitted by counsel*



Witness Name

3/4/2024

Date

Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of Dan Smith dated 08/31/2023

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel , (4) private counsel (as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
2	13	Revise "MINORITY OVERSIGHT DIRECTOR AND SENIOR PROFFESIONAL STAFF MEMBER" to "MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF MEMBER"	
9	9	Strike "can"	
12	23	Strike "were"	
13	2	Strike "had"	
17	19	Change "office" to "offices"	
26	11	Change "." to "?"	
26	13	Change "on" to "in"	
27	3	Change "accountability" to "after action"	
28	20	Strike extra "had"	
33	15	Change "in" to "at"	
44	9	Change "She did the same that I." to "She did the same that I did."	
45	22	Change "?" to "."	
48	5-6	Change "record: We wanted to note that, notwithstanding " to "record: Notwithstanding"	
48	9	Change "committee's rules " to "Committee's rules"	
53	19	Change "I was ..." to "I was a ..."	
57	22	Change "And just one more question on the term in terms of additional" to "one more question regarding additional"	
58	9	Change "it would be appropriate " to "it is appropriate"	
58	20	Change "from the Secretary, did you have any personal goals related to your" to "from the Secretary – related to your"	
59	6	Change "on" to "of"	
60	12	Change "you decide to4" to "you decide to"	

63	9	Change "disseminated internal " to "disseminated internally"	
65	12	Change "discrete" to "discreet"	
67	5	Change "Decline to be" to "declined to be"	
117	8	Change "ask about contours to specific " to "to ask about the contours of specific"	
125	11	Strike second "is"	
164	9	Change "handled" to "handed"	