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SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL  
FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

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INTERVIEW OF: AMBASSADOR RYAN CROCKER

Thursday, January 11, 2016

BEFORE:

DR. CANDACE RONDEAUX  
JAMES WASSERSTROM  
KATE BATEMAN

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{time not provided}

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: -- (proceedings in progress) from different what SIGAR did in Iraq, hard lessons.

DR. RONDEAUX: So, it's different in the sense that this is -- though it's a substantial report, you know, fairly long, it's not a book.

In fact, the idea was really to stay away from doing a sort of 300 novelistic treatment of the entire epic of all things Afghanistan, because it's just too hard to read, too hard to distribute and doesn't really reach our primary audience in a way that makes sense, and our primary audience is Congress, as far as we're concerned, and then, you know, the secondary leader being the Executive Branch. So, that's one way in which it's very different.

I think the second way in which it's very different is that the program is led primarily by subject matter experts, like myself, like Jim, like Kate as well as others, who have spent time

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in Afghanistan, either beyond the wire, as I did, as an analyst and journalist or you know, inside the wire working on coordinating the policy and executing it.

So, that's a very substantial difference, in the sense that I think, you know, SIGAR was more about -- led by generalists, who had kind of a broad understanding, but couldn't get down into the weeds.

Lastly, I'd say, you know, the substantial difference is, you know, we have a time continuum where we're trying to get out a number of reports here, and we also envision the use of quantitative data to help back us up a little bit better.

We've dug very deep on, you know, an analysis of the cycles of obligation and disbursement, and how that sort of led to gaps in the disbursement of resources and programming, and what that meant, you know, for the political impact of the overall policies and programs and strategies in Afghanistan.

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So, I think those are the three substantial differences.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, that's pretty clear. Yes, I was much involved in hard lessons, but that was a -- a Washington centric effort, in how it was put together. As a field guy, I would incline myself more to what you're doing.

MR. WASSERSTROM: This is Jim Wasserstrom, Ambassador. I served with you, under you in the Embassy. I was there from 2010 to 2014.

So, I was the senior advisor of anti-corruption with the interagency law office.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Right.

MR. WASSERSTROM: The purpose behind my project is really to look at the evolution and the US reception and response to corruption over the period in question, 2001 to 2014, and using empathetic reconstruction to get a sense of how the US government initially perceived the problem, whether it did, and what were the manifestations of that perception and then, over time, how that perception evolved and what were the responses to

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the problem, not looking at corruption in Afghanistan per se, because of course, we could write thousands of pages on that, but really looking at what was the US role in the problem, but the perception and response, and what we did -- what we might have done better and differently looking in hindsight.

So, the lessons learned aspect of this is looking at the various -- at how corruption impinged on the agenda, and what priority was given to it, what were the intervening factors that may have shifted that priority, what superceded it?

Was there a conflict between corruption and other objectives, such as counter-terrorism among others, and then with the benefit of hindsight and wisdom, what might we have done better and differently with what we know now, and when would we have done that, and what with the -- what we might specifically advise for future interventions, because of course, the purposes of a lessons learned program is not necessarily, you know, to -- not only to analyze the past, but also

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to come up with generalizable lessons that we can apply to what's being planned now current, and for future interventions.

So, those are the two purposes behind our call today.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Okay.

DR. RONDEAUX: So, if we could start actually, just to give you a sense, we have done, at least for our project, probably I'd say 120 interviews so far, maybe more actually, at this stage, and what we're trying to do, if we can, is to work with particularly senior level officials like yourself, to make sure that the conversation is on the record, wherever and whenever possible, so that one, there's no sort of controversies, but two, more importantly, I just think for the sake of accuracy, fairness and balance, if we can do that, that would be preferred.

However, recognizing that sometimes that things that you want to say can be sensitive. If you want to go on background, we would appreciate it if you could tell us that in advance. If you

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want to go off the record, please let us know that, as well. Does that work for you?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, there's not much point in doing this, if it's not on the record.

DR. RONDEAUX: Excellent. So, maybe I should start just with some generalized questions.

I mean, you were there in the early days, and we just spoke with your colleague Ambassador DAUBINS {phonetic} a few hours ago, and you know, he had a very interesting take on things.

I think -- I would imagine you share that, which is that, you know, at the outset, it seemed like the US government really wasn't -- you know, obviously caught by surprise by the attacks, but it was really positioned in the sense of having a baseline assessment of what was actually happening in Afghanistan vis-a-vis the economy, vis-a-vis security.

What's your estimation, when you walked into the picture early on, of what we actually knew about the state of affairs, both politically and economically and security-wise in Afghanistan?

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AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I was parachuted in, if you will. I was not a South Asian specialist, by any means. I was just asked to go out and get the Embassy open.

So, I had no real background in Afghanistan, past or present, and since I moved out on 72 hours notice, had no time to acquire anything.

So, to me, the whole emphasis was on just getting a mission up and running, which was no small challenge under the circumstances, and then kind of dealing with the -- the issues of the present.

I did have some people out there, like MATRINCO {phonetic}, Alan Err, who did have some background and were quite helpful to me in that regard.

But you know, just given the highly operational nature of my mission, I was not -- not really focused on how much we knew beforehand and how it related to what we were uncovering on the ground. It was all about what we were uncovering on the ground.

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DR. RONDEAUX: What did you find when you arrived?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Absolute devastation. It seemed to me that coming into the city, primarily for the first time, I used the image often, reminded me of pictures of Berlin in 1945, and Kabul airport was closed at the time. You had to come in from Bagram, and driving through mile after mile of basically lifeless landscape, having to ford, you know, a river because the bridge was out.

It was a very sobering experience, that there was almost literally nothing there, and that of course, was reinforced by my early meetings with KARZI {phonetic} who arrived only a couple of weeks before I did, that here was a leader of interim authority, who had no real authority and nothing to work with, no military, no police, no civil service, no functioning society.

So, the enormity of the task kind of hit me significantly right at the outset.

DR. RONDEAUX: It was a big task. It would have required -- certainly, it seems to me,

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everybody understood it was going to take years, but even opening the Embassy, you know, we talked with Ambassador Finn, as well.

I mean, he describes kind of the living conditions for folks early on and the challenges there.

I mean, to you when you arrived, what was the first priority, in terms of getting things up and running?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, as always in anything remotely comparable to that, in that part of the world, the first thing was security.

We had a company of Marines actually on the Embassy compound. So, I spent my first day walking the perimeter with the Marine company commander and the RSO, going through preparations, just being as sure as I could be, that we had a position, a facility that could be adequately defended if it had to be, and if you haven't got security, you haven't got anything.

Then after that, it was starting to build an on the ground relationship with the

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interim authority and KARZI in particular.

You made a comment earlier about it was going to be an enormous task that would take years. Well, at that point, we didn't know what the task was, you know, what the US was there to do, and as you know, there was -- in those early months, significant differences in view, in Washington, as to whether we should embark on a long term nation building effort or whether we wanted to keep our role and our agenda very minimal.

So, again, during the early-going path to reconstruction of Afghanistan with the -- an enormous multi-year task, obviously no question, but not clear that we would be the ones leading that effort.

DR. RONDEAUX: Not clearly because of that politic, but also I guess it was probably difficult to define.

I mean, you said security was the first concern, certainly for the Embassy. But it also seemed to be such a huge driving force in how we define the central pillar of all things strategic.

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There is some debate about, you know, our levels of investment early on, but given that ambiguity, it seems to me that it was only natural, in some ways, that the lead nation approach kind of came to the floor. Can you talk about sort of what you saw, in terms of the -- how that emerged?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, as you know, again, I think reflecting to a certain tenure in Washington, that we did not want this to be an entirely American project.

There was an effort from the outset, to involve others, to involve NATO nations, in particular, and I saw that, you know, within the 30 days I was there, I think, where you know, we would have the primary responsibility for security, the Brits would counter-narcotics, the Italians would do police. I can't remember who else had what.

But you know, that multi-lateral approach to reconstruction was certainly an element right from the beginning.

DR. RONDEAUX: Looking back on that, do

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you feel like there might have been a better path? I mean, I know we had no choice in some ways, but many people point to the lead nation approach as kind of one of those points on the map, where things began to kind of get out of kilter.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, that's why I look forward to reading what you write, because now, the (inaudible) had problems, no question.

Whether there was a better approach, I find that a little hard to answer because the only other two alternatives that I would see would be either a decision that there simply would not be a comprehensive reconstruction effort, which would have been pretty hard to justify and defend, given the extraordinary conditions in the country, and the suffering of the Afghan people.

The other option, of course, would be to say that the United States is going to lead and it's going to lead across the board.

You know, given the investment and blood and treasure that had transpired anyway, not within my capacity to say an American lead across

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the board would have been a good approach, but to me, it just seems that there are those three possibilities, a multi-lateral approach, a decision not to have a comprehensive redevelopment effort or a US-lead effort.

DR. RONDEAUX: Yes, I think -- I mean, that's right. I don't think we make any conclusions in our own -- at least my analysis about that, except to say that it was clear that, you know, certainly in the NSC, there was a great concern that having an American lead would just replicate the Soviet experience, and that this was, you know --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Sorry, which experience?

DR. RONDEAUX: The Soviet experience.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Soviet experience, right.

DR. RONDEAUX: Right, so having yet another sort of imperial power, as it were, come into the region and replay the dramas of the past was certainly many people's minds in the early days

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of the planning process.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, I remember, you know, when this was determined, feeling a sense of some relief, at least I wasn't going to have to worry about everything.

You know, I remember a meeting with the Italians and the Brit, for example, and coming out of those meetings just glad that somebody else had to worry about whatever it was, policing.

DR. RONDEAUX: But it did come with challenges, in terms of coordination. Could you talk about the challenges of coordinating with five or six different lead nations, what you saw?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I wasn't there long enough to -- to really see that, because again, I was only out there for three months or so, and with the -- was pretty well caught up in just trying to make our own efforts work.

You know, in that period, first week in March 2002, that we launched Operation Anaconda, which did not go well for us, and caused us to kind of reconsider what our -- you know, our own posture

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needed to be, in terms of security, I was spending a whole lot of time working with the -- the CIA and the military on force structures and roles and missions and so forth.

So, you know, coordination on other elements of reconstruction was not just something I really got much into in those first weeks.

You've talked to Robert Finn so --

DR. RONDEAUX: Yes.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes.

DR. RONDEAUX: Yes, we definitely have a better sense of that.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, and --

DR. RONDEAUX: Yes, we have. So, maybe we should fast-forward. I don't want to skip too many years, obviously.

But you know, you come in much -- into the picture much later and find a different Afghanistan.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, and the Afghanistan I found, for me, and throughout my time there, the second time, was very much a glass half

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full or more than half full.

It's all relative, because my frame of reference was the absolute devastation of early 2002, and what I came back to was -- for all of the problems, was light years beyond that.

DR. RONDEAUX: What do you think were the contributing factors to that shift?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: You know, after, again, you know this painfully well, after years of an economy of force operation, when we finally did ramp up militarily, you know, it clearly had an impact on the overall security situation, and by the time I came back, it allowed some significant steps to be taken in areas such as health and education.

Infrastructure, my focus in the early going had been to get a commitment from the US to develop physical infrastructure, focused mainly on roads, and of course, by the time I came back, the ring road had been completely reconstructed and you know, the difference that made, in terms again, primarily of security, but also just in the -- of

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the -- the ability of people to access schools, access healthcare, to move goods around, you know, just a marked difference.

I had an early focus on education, as you know, we got an education program launched almost immediately after the fall of the Taliban. There was no female education whatsoever.

We had a girls school opened in January of 2002, and I remember going to visit that, and you know, it was kids basically sitting on the floor, using mimeographed materials, and this is a first grade class and the girls were everywhere from six to 12, because the 12 year olds, of course, had been of primary school age when the Taliban came though, and you know, just again, thinking how little there was, how much deprivation there was and how hard all this would be to improve on.

So, coming back, I can't remember what the stats were when I got there in 2011, but you know, the number of kids in school, the number of girls in school was more than I would have even hoped for, when we were just getting started.

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DR. RONDEAUX: There was also another phenomenon that was kind of obsessively talked about at that time.

I mean, you know, for Afghan's, I think this phenomenon was an ever-present part of their life, whether or not it was always something that resinated with their American counterparts, and that -- that was the problem of corruption.

I want to open the floor to my colleagues to talk about that, but I am just curious about sort of, your general impressions when you returned in 2011, of that phenomenon, how it impacted your ability to do your job.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, again, corruption was not something I spent any time on, the first time around, and that would be -- if you will, a negative difference coming back, because you know, no question about the scale of corruption.

In one of my initial conversations with (inaudible), you know, we had (inaudible). Again, all of the mechanisms that you know so well.

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But I was struck by something KARZI said and repeated a number of times during my tenure, which is that the west led by the US, in his clear view, had a significant responsibility to bear for the whole corruption issue.

You know, I know what oath the military and USAID said about all the steps that were being taken to ensure that contracts were not subject to corruption, but I -- I always thought KARZI had a point, that you just cannot put those amounts of money into a very fragile state and society, and not have it fuel corruption. You just can't.

As we look at how we might ever do this again, that to me, is a really big issue, because you know, we've got the same thing in Iraq, where corruption is now some pandemic and deeply rooted, it's hard to see how a better political order and ever be established, that one thing the -- the have's, if you will, agree on, I think in both countries, however they may be divided on other political issues is, they like the current system because it pays.

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So, having been through this now twice, Iraq and Afghanistan, one of the profound questions I would ask, if we ever, God forbid, look at something on such a scale again, is how do you do it in a way that does not inadvertently fuel wholesale corruption?

MS. BATEMAN: Sir, do you have any concrete thoughts on an answer to that questions?

MR. WASSERSTROM: We're all ears, I have to tell you.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, well, I think the first thing -- I mean, one thing I would say is that you need to have the corruption framing everything you propose to do, in terms of development and reconstruction, and to overcome the instinctive American urge to do a whole lot and to do it tomorrow, to understand that if you try to do that, not only are there fundamental capacity questions and everything else you've been dealing with over the years, but that you will inevitably be fueling large scale corruption.

So, to throttle it back, so you're

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operating at a level where you can monitor, even if that is less than we American's would like to do it, it certainly will be, but you know, given what's happened again, in Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, you know, we've got to have the corruption lense in place, right at the outset of, not just development and reconstruction efforts, but the whole formulation of a reconstruction strategy.

MR. WASSERSTROM: Can I ask you -- this is Jim Wasserstrom, again, Ambassador.

You're referring specifically to reconstruction and so on, but one of the recurring themes that we -- that we hear, is also with the military's substantial footprint, as it grew over time, having fueled corruption through its demands for logistics and fuel and so on.

Would you agree with that, the sense of that statement?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, broadly speaking, I mean, yes. You know, again, you've got a very significant military presence. It requires

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a whole lot of stuff for maintenance and substance and in a sense, our military, you know, no longer kind of maintains an inherent capacity to do those things, because it's just too expensive, it takes too many people. It's going to be out-sourced.

When you're out-sourcing on that scale, in that weak of a society, with the time pressures that go along with it, you know, then you get the corruption.

I think it's a great point that you're making, because it's not -- I was focused really on developmental issues, but you know, the amount of money that went into military contracts, probably more towards even that.

So, what you may be looking at, in the amount and way of modern War, it is a virtual guarantee of corruption.

You know, our military cannot support itself, but itself, and I don't see any way we're ever going to reverse that because of the expenses, and that means we're getting goods and services from others, and you know, the time imperative and

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the scale make it very hard for me to see how you can ever do that, without fueling corruption at the same time.

I mean, it's -- it's worth a lot of your time, I think to kind of look at that question, can we fight -- or can we maintain a substantial momentary presence in conflict conditions, without inadvertently fueling corruption?

MR. WASSERSTROM: Yes, yes. Critical tradeoff, certainly.

I'd like to turn maybe to a case study of all of this, which is the delightful story of the collapse of Kabul Bank.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes.

MR. WASSERSTROM: I'm sure something with which you are well familiar and I was there during that period too, and how painful it all was.

How did that -- how did -- for you as the Ambassador during a critical period, how did you approach that issue? What were the -- there were obviously cross-currents that existed. We had many different priorities.

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The Kabul Bank was such a huge issue for quite a long period of time, the theft of one-billion dollars. So, what were the -- what was your thinking as you addressed the issue, both with Washington and with KARZI?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, the Kabul Bank, of course, it happened before I got there.

MR. WASSERSTROM: Yes.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: So, for me, it was -- you know, there was not the immediate crisis. It was how do you -- how do you deal with this in a way that would give both donor nations and Afghan's themselves, the sense that not only, what controls would you put in place to prevent something like that ever happening again, but that there would be accountability.

I have lost track of the number of conversations I had with KARZI and any number of others, about the accountability issue, and you know, promises were made, some steps were taken, but I've seen the recent reporting, you know, on Kabul Bank, and all that -- really, there never was

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an accounting.

You know, by the time I had left, it was fairly clear to me that again, given the entrenched nature of corruption and the extent to which the establishment, you know, including KARZI's own family, as well as (inaudible), that it was highly unlikely that steps would be taken to bring people to account.

You know, I had conversations with ASHRA FATI {phonetic} who would rail about this, and I think we all thought when he came into office, that maybe finally something would happen.

But I think what we're seeing clearly is what I was talking about earlier, that the deep rooted nature of corruption, whether it's Kabul Bank or anything else, is now beyond the ability of even a determined Afghan President to correct.

I used to go over to SOLIS's {phonetic} house to talk about these things, because he felt that the chances were pretty good that his house wasn't bugged, unlike his office, and you know, he -- you know, effectively said, it's bad, it's

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really bad and I can't do anything about it.

MR. WASSERSTROM: Yes.

DR. RONDEAUX: You know, the good thing about {phonetic} KHAN is that he is dead.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, and I check just about every other day, and as far as I know, he is still dead.

DR. RONDEAUX: You know, and as an old journalist hand, you know, you can't liable the dead. So, I'm wondering if we can talk about him a little bit more, and kind of his role, because he was around actually -- his role was really peaking.

What was your understanding of how much control he had, for instance, over the military, and this would have -- the sort of corruption, particularly with regard to the use of fuel resources and air assets?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, I met KHAN my first time out, and amid a lot of colorful personalities, he made a particular impression on me.

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One graphic moment, it was the time of the HODGE {phonetic} and not surprisingly, the early 2002, the charters got all messed up. You had people stranded at the airports and in bitterly cold temperatures for hours, if not days. It was the Minister of civil aviation that was suppose to be in charge of that.

One night, John McCall, the British force commander and I were meeting with KARZI fairly and (Inaudible) KHAN walked into the room. He was giggling, and he proceeded to relate to us that a mob had gotten out of control at the airport and had murdered the Minister of civil aviation, and he giggled while he related this.

Later, much later, it emerged, I don't know if it was every verified or not, it emerged that KHAN himself had the Minister killed.

But I certainly came out of those opening months with the feeling that even by Afghan standards, I was in the presence of a totally evil person.

When I came back, my sense of him was

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that he was not directly involved in major strategy or operational decisions, that he was more interested in making even more elicit millions, but that KARZI had to handle him with real care, because he could be dangerous and no question in my mind, he could be dangerous.

But my impression of him the second time around is that relatively speaking, he was less of a factor than he was the first time around, to which I gave considerable (inaudible).

DR. RONDEAUX: That's interesting, actually, so, I'm intrigued. I spent a lot of time looking at KHAN and his friends, and I'm just sort of intrigued by a couple of things, I guess.

If you remember, the National Military Hospital scandal, that also kind of unfolded right around the time that you were there, and there was another one that was sort of similar, and they were all wrapped up in KHAN primarily and his syndicate.

This the killing at the KIA, at the Kabul international airport, of nine airmen, who had apparently crossed one of KHAN's syndicates,

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in a corruption scandal. Do you remember much of that?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: The national military hospital, yes, I absolutely remember that. Again, I believe that was before I got there, but it was the -- the reverberations were still very much around.

Yes, I was -- it was interesting to me that -- and I guess again, it reflects the fear that KHAN could inspire, that would end the establishment, you know, on the part of Afghan military commanders, the chief of staff, the minister of defense.

I don't think I ever can recall an occasion in which an Afghan raised that issue. I think they were probably afraid to, and yes, I do remember the incident at the airport and the -- the view at the time, that KHAN was behind it.

I would have considered him capable of any inequity.

DR. RONDEAUX: How did that complicate efforts to kind of -- to nail it? I mean, you know,

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there were investigations on both of those cases, and here you had former defense minister, vice president kind of sitting in the midst of things.

But you know, part of the brief politically at that time was to sell the story that we were trying to something about corruption. So, how did that complicate the political picture?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Again, that -- all of you know it, some of you really know it, you know, there was a pretty significant US, in deed, international effort on anti-corruption, but you know, just like Kabul Bank, it sadly seemed that, you know, by that time, the corruption was so entrenched and so much a part of the lifestyle of the establishment writ broadly, you know, that I saw little prospect and you know, again, engaged on things like the Kabul Bank, just kind of a sense of utility.

Some of the more discouraging meetings I sat in on were periodic briefs from task force (inaudible), again, with all of the will in the world, and the positivism that has to go with an

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effort of that sort, I just did not see us making any substantial progress, because it was a systemic issue by that time, which is why, you know, just to reiterate the point again, you know, the corruption lense has got to be in place at the outset, and even before the outset, in the formulation of reconstruction and development strategy because once it gets to the level I saw, when I was out there, it's somewhere between unbelievably hard and outright impossible to fix it.

DR. RONDEAUX: That is true. Well, let me move onto another futile issue that you encountered.

You know, we interviewed Mike MATRINCO {phonetic}, spent some time at his lovely house in Carlisle, he is a true font of wisdom.

I remember him commenting back then, and in probably subsequent conversations that when you first arrived, you said there would be no deal on the bilateral security agreement, that you were discouraged from the outset.

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What was it that discouraged you so much about the prospect of a status of forces agreement with the QUASI {phonetic} administration at that time?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Which time are you talking about?

DR. RONDEAUX: Well, I guess this would have been in 2011, when you first arrive.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Okay, right.

DR. RONDEAUX: Yes.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, because you know, I had two charges directly from the President, our President.

One was to get a -- one was to reset the relationship with QUASI and the other was to get a comprehensive bilateral agreement that would involve security, but would go far beyond that.

Yes, at the outset, it was pretty discouraging. Talks had been held in Washington, and they really were going nowhere.

So, we agreed, us in Washington eventually, and the Afghan's, and basically

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Washington's view of it was, you know, we just want this off our plate and on your's. So, any way you want to do it is fine with us.

So, we shifted it Kabul, via Washington, so we would have leaders, decision makers right there, and that I'd be the lead negotiator for us. I had done the same thing in Iraq in 2008.

So, you know, once we got that -- once we fixed the structure, I can't say I was filled with bubbling optimism, I never am, but I could see that we were tracking right, although we didn't know we'd get the deal until we got it.

But in the latter part of 2011 and the early months of 2012, we were on a -- you know, a positive negotiating process. We just had to fix the structure first.

DR. RONDEAUX: Some of the structure, I mean, I was there as well at that time, and I spent a lot of time thinking about, primarily actually, some of the -- the chief hold up seemed to be around things like Bagram and the detainee process, which

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was -- I mean, at first was not nearly as public, I think, an obstacle as many people understood it to be, who were close to it.

But can you talk about that as an obstacle or a challenge, in terms of the negotiation process?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, there were several specific problems. Detainees was one. Night raids was another.

The way we approached it was to separate them out from the large negotiation and try to get specific technical level agreements, you know, worked out by people who understood the issues on both sides and to keep them away from the larger political context.

In other words, to de-politicize them, to the extent we could, and you know, we were able to get agreements on both, that a lot of this -- then, to proceed with the larger negotiation and get that agreement.

You know, it was clear to me, from the -- you know, well, not from the outset, but once

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we -- we had our new negotiating structure, that there was a definite will on the Afghan side, led by KARZI, to get these agreements. It took some effort on our side, to persuade folks that we were not going to get a traditional SILFA {phonetic} and that if we wanted a basis for an (inaudible) presence, we were going to have to be willing to be flexible on points of real importance to the Afghan's, such as detainees, and that we could afford to do it, and again, we were able to get those agreements.

DR. RONDEAUX: How did that -- how did that piece interface with the other piece, which was going on at the time, which was negotiations with the Taliban?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, well, there was -- I had a pretty good relationship with Washington. There were issues on which we differed, and one of them was the Taliban.

We paid lip-service to the notion that this would have to be an Afghan led, Afghan managed process, and for me, that is exactly what it was,

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that my mission and John (inaudible) felt the same for the military elements.

No element -- no part of my mission would get involved in contacts with the Taliban for political purposes, unless we were requested to do so by the Afghan's.

But there were those in Washington who felt that we should try to cut our own deal with the -- with the Taliban, and you know, we had to -- the cutter office surface on my watch.

KARZI was just incensed over that whole thing, and eventually we stood down on that. You know, it really took Secretary Clinton herself, to get a hold of it, and then of course, it re-emerged in subsequent years to, you know, the Taliban deal.

But you know, I was just adamant that we would work this with (inaudible), the de facto head of the high peace commission, and we would do nothing that he did not ask us to do.

But we did undermine our credibility with the -- with KARZI on that issue, as well as others, and then we totally hosed it up later.

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DR. RONDEAUX: So, I mean, it seems to me though, you know, you could do business with (inaudible) all day, every day, but if you weren't doing business with (inaudible), you had a real problem.

I mean, there were multiple players at the table, and you know, and this is where kind of the multi-lateral scenario becomes complicated.

The British had their ideas about what the negotiations should look like. The Turks' had their idea. The Saudi's had their idea. The Pakistani's had their idea, and each one of them had their clients inside the national security council, inside the palace.

So, it wasn't just that, you know, your hands were tied. It seemed like it was almost an impossible situation in a way.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, look, I never believed that the negotiations with the Taliban, conducted by whomever, were going to lead anywhere significant.

I felt at the most, it might be possible

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to chip away individual Taliban figures and bring them over to the government side, but that would be an incremental issue.

My concern was managing it in a way that did not do harm to our broader equities there. I never thought there was an upside. I just wanted to avoid the downside, and I could -- I thought involve the downside by dealing with (inaudible) and only with (inaudible) and letting him be the conduit to KARZI most of the time.

You know, if I were -- if I had have taken a different view, if I had thought there was a real prospect to that process, I never believed it.

DR. RONDEAUX: Interesting.

MS. BATEMAN: Excuse me, Ambassador, this is Kate Bateman again.

I wondered if we could just rewind quickly to -- you know, you've alluded, you've reiterated a couple times that with the benefit of hindsight, it would have wiser to have this corruption -- anti-corruption lense earlier on.

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But you know, in reality, when, you know, let's say this kind of effort may happen in, you know, Syria, Yemen, Lybia, Somalia next, and with relatively few staff on the ground, when we don't -- we don't have a fulsome understanding of the power relationships, you know, political patronage networks at play, what do you think -- you know, how do you -- do you think that US senior officials have -- currently have some understanding of the importance of considering corruption?

I guess my question is, you know, within the US foreign policy national security establishment, do you think there is now, after 15 years engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, do you think there is an acknowledgment that corruption is a security -- you know, poses a security threat, a threat to our security goals and our political stability goals?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, I think certainly for anyone who has worked on either Iraq or Afghanistan, absolutely.

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But I'd be very afraid that, you know, when the magical day comes in Syria and Yemen, in Lybia maybe, when the -- the hot conflict has ceased or at least bubbled to a low simmer, that we'll just want to charge in and start fixing everything as fast as we can, because as I alluded to this earlier, it's the American, and that we'll lose sight of what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the ultimate point of failure for our efforts, you know, wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption. We're going to lose sight of that.

You know, that's -- I'd love to see something our government is not well equipped to do. I'd love to see, you know, the serious scenarios start to be developed now, to establish certain points that what kind of reconstruction efforts might be most vulnerable to corruption and how do you prevent it?

In most cases, probably by not doing it. You know, because otherwise it's just -- it's going to be, you know, January 2002 and March 2003, all

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over again. Just pumping a whole heck of a lot of stuff into countries that can't manage it, and then, you know, our biggest single project, sadly and inadvertently, of course, may have been the development of mass corruption.

You know, that's the kind of the development legacy, in many respects, and I think there is a chance, based on your efforts and others, to develop a template for a very approach, but you have to start working on it before you need it, and we just don't do that very well.

MR. WASSERSTROM: This is very insightful and thank you very much for these -- these --

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes.

MR. WASSERSTROM: -- thoughts. We keep hearing, and others have said this, this tension between counter-terrorism and reconstruction. Is there a tension between the two?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, you know, these are huge concepts and undertaking. So, inevitably, one would expect to see elements of

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tension.

But broadly speaking, I certainly find that, either in Iraq or Afghanistan. You know, the counter-terrorism efforts largely focused on night raids, their own set of political problems as we all know, but in no way, was that amenable to development. You know, they -- they were just almost literally two different worlds.

So, no, I don't see an inherent tension there, and I -- I was struck reading -- I guess it was yesterday's New York Times, the -- a commander of Afghanistan special forces, talking about how essential the night raids were, that was kind of their whole strategy, and of course, all the, you know, arguments I had with KARZI over that, well, you know, we knew it was an effective tool and it's interesting to have the Afghan's themselves now, saying that it's absolutely critical in our effort to beat back the Taliban, and there is nothing in that again, is inherently contradictory to development.

But here is something that is

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contradictory with both development and security. I mean, if you look at the Afghan police now, horribly corrupt organization, and that is retail corruption, obviously.

MR. WASSERSTROM: Yes.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Not wholesale.

MR. WASSERSTROM: Right.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: You know, the Afghan special forces helped by us, can clear an area, but the police can't hold it, not because they're out-gunned or out-manned. It's because they are useless as a security force and they're useless as a security force because they are corrupt down to the patrol level.

Now, I don't mean to, you know, turn this into a pet-rock fetish, but you know, of all the painful lessons I carry out of my time in those two War zones, Iraq and Afghanistan, it's the -- it's the deadlines and corruption at every level, that is the starkest point.

MS. BATEMAN: Sir, if we could perhaps, as one more question. Is that all right for you?

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AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, what time is it? Yes, sure.

MS. BATEMAN: About 3:35. Okay, great. The subject of conditionality.

At least in my, you know, slice of time there, I was in -- under -- in Ambassador Rick Olsen's office, and you know, and also before that in SRAP, and I saw this discussion of conditioning our assistance.

You know, there is this great reluctance to do so, bureaucratically, I think and even just, you know, technically.

What could you say about -- do you see the US -- do you see us as reluctant to actually tie assistance and I suppose first of all, do you see that as a legitimate tool of exerting our leverage?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Well, like some of the other tools, it's legitimate if it works.

You know, my sense is pretty well gone over, because of the levels to which corruption had risen and the extent to which they were ingrained,

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by using conditionality to get rid of corruption just wasn't going to happen.

So, it's -- I thought the approach that we used in the run up to the July 2012 Tokyo economic ministerial, was the right one, which is what would the Afghan Government undertake going forward, to offer donors some level of confidence that assistance would follow the path of previous assistance, and you know, the Afghan's developed the document, pretty much on their own.

That was just shortly before I left, and I remember thinking, well, at least it looks good. Probably will never work, but at least, you know, they did it and it reflects and appreciation on the part of the leadership in Afghanistan, but these are important and significant issues.

But if conditionality is to have any chance, I think in that kind of environment, it has to be generated conditionality. In other words, where the Afghan's come up with their own conditions. Only they will know what is ultimately achievable, you know, not us.

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So, externally imposed conditionality, unless you absolutely know what you're doing, which is highly unlikely in these circumstances, probably just isn't going to work.

DR. RONDEAUX: Thank you for your time, sir. You've been very generous. It's quite late. I think we'd like to close, but do you have any questions for us?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Yes, just one. Do you -- what is your production schedule?

DR. RONDEAUX: We wish we knew some days, but I will say right now, we have a couple reports that are in the hopper, including the corruption report and the strategy report. We think that at least, you know, by mid Spring, we'll release one or two of them, and then there is another three or four that are kind of also under-scope right now, and those will come out over the course of the next year and a half, two years.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Right, and each of these will stand on its own. You're not going to make any effort to extract from them, the few

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broad general lessons?

DR. RONDEAUX: Well, there may be a Capstone report at the end.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Okay.

DR. RONDEAUX: That's still kind of TBD. But at this stage, given also that we also want to be relevant to the current discussions about countries like Syria and Yemen, probably better to keep moving ahead and pushing out what we can, when we can.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: No, that makes sense, and I hope you will consider a Capstone report, but you know, obviously that's not something you have to decide now.

Well, okay, good luck. I know it's got to be often, very depressing and frustrating, sustained over so many of years by so many of you, but it really is important, you know, as somebody who is on the other side of the aisle here. You're doing important work, and I hope to God it will inform, you know, the next set of nation building experiences.

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DR. RONDEAUX: Thank you so much.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thank you.

(Off the record.)