

USIP – ADST

Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #41

Executive Summary

The interviewee was the State Department representative in the PRT in Asadabad Kunar Province in Eastern Afghanistan from March 2004 through June 2005. For his first two months at the PRT he was the only civilian, but he was then joined by a USAID officer.

The interviewee noted that although a part of his presumed duties as State rep was to report to Embassy Kabul, he had been told up front by embassy leadership that he could get through his entire tour without filing a single report; his focus, instead, should be to serve as an agent of change. Still, the interviewee produced a number of reports, as well as a high volume of biographic reporting. Unfortunately, many of these reports did not leave the embassy. They were either delayed in the embassy's communications center by technical problems or by the lack of trained communicators or they were stuck in the embassy's clearance process until they became out-of-date. The interviewee criticized the centralization of information flow that, in his view, slowed or stopped useful information from reaching Washington end-users.

In the political realm, the interviewee states that the biggest problem he saw in his time in Afghanistan was the delay in removing corrupt or otherwise undesirable Afghan generals. By delaying this housecleaning, the USG, in view, only created more problems further down the road.

The interviewee strongly recommended that PRTs be brought into the broader policy-making process. He noted that it is important to remember that what goes on in the capital is frequently different from what happens in the countryside. According to the interviewee, the least effective program sponsored by the U.S. government in Afghanistan was its anti-narcotics program. It was formulated in Washington and, to a lesser extent, at Embassy Kabul without reference to knowledgeable personnel in the field. Consequently, the policy and resulting program was out of touch with local realities.

The interviewee further recommended that, as the PRT experiment evolves, the USG should consider replacing Army Civil Affairs units with civilian contractors.

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview # 41

*Interviewed by: Beverly Zweiben
Initial interview date: August 2, 2005
Copyright 2005 USIP & ADST*

Q: Thank you for being willing to talk to us today. Could you help us to put what you are about to tell us in some sort of context?

A. This was a particularly dangerous assignment even by Afghan assignments. I went to Afghanistan to Asadabad as the provincial reconstruction team State person. That's in Asadabad Kunar Province in eastern Afghanistan. Kunar Province covers two provinces, Kunar (the province I was in) and a neighboring province of Nurestan, that's on the Pak border.

Q: How many of you were there? I mean what kind of organization were you part of?

A: I was the lone civilian for the longest time. About a month or two months after I got there we had an AID person come in. The PRT is actually headed by a military officer who is a civil affairs officer, so his civil affairs unit which usually would be a dozen, 18, 20 guys if that, or 10 or even fewer, they form the core. They're the ones who kind of think of and sign contracts and review development proposals. A new hire contractor could actually do the work.

Now, we usually have some kind of local guard force guarding the PRT. Our particular base was also a firebase. It was an active military operating base, so you had Special Forces. Later on there was a marine infantry unit. Before that there was an army unit, but these units were operating and carrying out combat operations in that area from that same base. Special Forces had their own civil affairs. I was a State Department person assigned to the PRT unit. I had my own room in the PRT building with all the other PRT soldiers. The base itself is in a high-walled mountain valley, a river valley where the Kunar River flows. It's a 24/7, 365/a year river, a very powerful river coming out of the mountains. Very hot in the summer, can be kind of cold in the winter, but I didn't find it too bad. It's not all that different from most of the rest of Afghanistan, although Nurestan was very different, much more like Colorado, with spruce and the forests and green in the valleys and on the sides of the slopes. It's a very interesting place. It was a border area in two respects. It was on the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Of course, you also had the Pakistanis on the other side of the border with their operations and everyone over there. You have in a microcosm many of the issues that are being dealt with throughout the country.

Q: What kind of hierarchy was there? To whom did you report?

A: At first when they were doing this program it was still the stage when the PRTs were part of a Washington office of the Afghan reconstruction office rather than the PRT program from Washington. This had certain advantages and certain disadvantages. The disadvantage, and it was a big one, was that you didn't get support at all from the embassy logistically and you needed that because you're operating in-country. On the other hand, what you did get was a much wider reporting audience. You send your reports out to everybody, all of them. My e-mail probably had 15 to 20 people on it, all around Washington and in Afghanistan and at our embassy. This was actually quite useful because it means that your stuff is getting out to a much wider audience and no one is saying, oh, no, that's not politically correct and maybe editing out stuff that maybe ought to have been left in.

Q: That wasn't possible once you had such a wide audience?

A: Yes, exactly, because it was out there and people would say, hey, our man in Asadabad thinks that, and the people in the embassy might say, well he's wrong. And maybe they're right or maybe they're not right.

Q: Did this go out as cables, your reports?

A: Later, they would go out as cables, some of them. It was haphazard. That was one of the administrative problems: we had a very poor system of administrative support there that was later cleared up when they moved the PRTs into the embassy and also beefed up the office and gave it more resources, which really was a critical thing.

But the communications officer didn't have enough time to send out all the cables. He had all these other kinds of duties and obligations that he had to perform. A friend of mine had ten cables in the space of say four or five or six months that he had sent in and only three of them went out and the three that went out were by no means the three most important. It was like three cables chosen at random. The randomness was based on whether the communications officer had the time to do it. Otherwise the cable would be "OBE" (overcome by events), which was frequently the case. So that's why the e-mail system worked; because even though the cables might not go out our message, our information, got out in one form or another. Now, that problem has been resolved, and what you gain there is that it is also good to have the embassy perspective and their being able to say, well this guy is making a statement that is really going too far in the national context when it's only true of his own area, or whatever. They have other information and I think that's sometimes true.

Q: So, as cables the embassy cleared off on the substance?

A: Yes, they would review for substance. Essentially, before when we were working directly for AR (the office of reconstruction at the Afghan desk), we were working

directly for them, they would turn them into cables at the embassy because it was coming out of Afghanistan, but in effect we were like our own reporting operations and sometimes I think that is not such a bad thing, because I'm very suspicious of people who say only by centralizing all the information flow and the approval process can we get everybody on the same sheet of music, and that's better. I often think that's worse. That's my own personal opinion, because what you tend to get is group think. You tend to get the lowest common denominator and sometimes the guy who is off in left field seems kind of provocatively off in left field and forces people to rethink things that I think ought to be rethought. You can miss stuff when you go through this process of sending it all through one office.

Q: Well, what was it that you were supposed to do while you were there?

A: That's a good point, because that changed in emphasis. When I got there I remember the DCM, who had been instrumental in the creation of these PRTs based on the CORDS program in Vietnam, said, "I don't care if you don't write a single reporting piece while you're here." So, the idea is you're out there as agents of change, because this country obviously is not going to make it if we leave it on its own and the Afghans know that. He didn't say that last part, but I'm adding that last part. The Afghans knew and know that.

If we weren't there the Taliban would tear the country apart again. There needs to be an outside force. We were there to help bring stability, to help build the institutions, and the most important thing that we were supposed to be doing was helping build the central government's authority in the provinces so that we could work ourselves out of a job. Whether that was true, helping the government become more effective or helping the schools and building schools and clinics, making things happen, it gave us broad language.

Then the emphasis on the PRTs changed. The PRTs are not like anything else you're going to find in the Foreign Service. Here we did have a reporting function and part of our job was to report back what was going on, because that's another important thing about what we're doing that was kind of unique and probably worth perhaps emulating, i.e., what goes on in the capital city and what gets reported as going on in the rest of the country are often too very different things. This is especially true in the kinds of countries where finding out what's going on in the provinces is vital and you were least likely to know. That's why it's important to have people like the PRTers out there, because they're meeting with the governors and they're meeting with a wide range of contacts and they should have their fingers on the pulse of that area of their region. So at least that way when someone in Kabul says, someone can say, well we've got people in Ghazni, Kandahar, Sharana, Asadabad and Jalalabad and they all say something else. It gives the ambassador, it gives policymakers, it gives our analyst people something to argue with in policy debates about what's going on there, because you often find something. When something is a blank slate, a blank area on the map, people will project onto it their own little fantasies. Often in a self-serving way, we serve as a check of all the checks.

Q: Can you walk me through a project or a task that you had that you think symbolizes the kind of work you were doing?

A: Let's start with a typical day and segue into a task that would come out of that. A typical day would be when somebody shows up at the gate. We didn't have cell phones in my province. So, somebody would show up at the gate and say he was there to see me. So I go down to the gate and it turns out to be the district administrator of one of the northern districts of Kunar. I'll sit down and talk to him and say, thank you for dropping by, tell me what's on your mind. They're usually there for a reason.

Q: They don't just show up to shake hands.

A: Exactly. Of course, Afghans are pretty pragmatic people. They're looking for something themselves, so that's fine. It gives me a chance to chat them, up as it were, and I'll ask them whether there has been a recent attack or development in that province, I'll ask about that. If there hasn't been something that I know about I'll ask him what's going on. Any attacks lately? Smuggling was a huge issue. Opium smuggling, gem smuggling were huge issues in Kunar and Nurestan. So, that's something I'm going to check on.

Q: Would he tell you?

A: Sometimes he would. In fact, I would go ask this even if people I knew were corrupt thugs.

Q: Even if you knew they were going to lie?

A: Oh, absolutely, because I was interested in knowing what their lies were. In other words, a lie is something that someone tells you that they know is untrue but that they want you to believe. So, that tells me something about the things they don't want me to know about. See what I'm saying?

I'm trying to find out what this guy wants me to believe. That's worth knowing in and of itself. I'm not believing it myself, but I want to know. That's kind of a useful piece of information right there. I'll ask a lot of things. A big part of what I would do is ask about themselves and the people in the province in their district or in their organization that they were dealing with. Also, tell me about the district, if this was a district governor or district administrator, tell me about your district police chief. Especially if it is a rival, they love to talk about their enemies. One of my favorite techniques was to talk to both sides. If I talked to one guy in his group, I made a point to try to talk to the other guy because they'd spill the beans on each other. Then I could come back as I developed a relationship and slowly try to verify: "Well, what about this? I've heard this and that." Then I'd see their reaction and you'd get different stories from different people.

People in traditional society often live in a world of gossip if you might want to call it that. For one thing, you don't have the newspapers, you don't have the media, you don't

have what we call the hard news to verify a paper record. So, they live in a world of gossip. It's important to find out what the gossip is. It may not be true, but if people believe its true and they act on it then it has a reality all its own. You need to get tied into that and you need to keep an eye on what their gossip is about us, because that can have serious consequences if you don't monitor. It may not be true that we're building a biological warfare lab on the firebase in Asadabad, but if people believe it we could have a problem.

That was a part of it. The other part of it is building relationships. You don't want to wait until there's a crisis to go downtown and meet the chief mullah. I've met him before. Anybody that you think you might need to tap into in a crisis, your job was to have known them before that crisis occurs. That's one of the things that you want to do. The other thing is to build up that bio information; that's one of the most important kinds of information. Bio information is nonperishable. That's information on a given situation in like the fighting in district X. Well the fighting in district X is going to end when both sides run out of ammunition and that's usually a couple of days or a couple of weeks. However, bio information about each individual is critical. On one individual who is of particular interest, a negative individual, a completely bad guy from start to finish, I compiled a bio of something like over 40 pages single-spaced, typed. I not only knew about him, but I wrote down things about his father and his grandfather and his brothers.

Why? Because I wanted to know, this is one of our chief enemies, and I wanted to know everything I could about him. I wanted to know the world he lived in. I wanted to be able to get inside his head and you cannot do that whether it is a friend or an enemy if you do not know their background. Okay, he's got a brother, what does his brother do? How do they feel about him? Oh, they think he's a dirtbag, too. So, you see what I'm saying? Forty pages I think is probably the longest bio I did on anyone. Most of them, the vast majority, are just a couple of sentences, but everybody of any importance. If the guy was a member of a committee, I'd write down the name and date of the committee and then I'd create a bio file for every person on that committee and maybe that's the only entry that will ever be put by that person's name. But if five years from now, because I left this information to my successor, my successor comes in and meets this guy, he can pull up the file and say, yes, he really was a member of that committee, then add his own bio information or whatever information he may get. As you do that, what begins to happen is that you follow people's lives and the decisions they make and who they align with and why. Certain patterns begin to emerge when you begin to develop an understanding of that area. I had a bio file for people in Kunar and I had a bio file for people in Nurestan. My bio files for people in Kunar were over 300 pages single-spaced, typed.

Q. Did the other State Department people in your area or in other areas do the same kinds of things? Would you say that USAID people did different kinds of things?

A: AID people, yes. State Department people did roughly similar things. Again, what we're doing is, we get messages from the embassy coming from Washington ultimately saying we want you to do this or we're trying to do this out there, so you go out and do it.

You tell the governor or the military commander, whoever the appropriate Afghan official is, or local civilians, this is what we think should happen or this is what we think or whatever. So, that's the transmission belt of American foreign policy directly into the provinces. We're obviously a transmission belt going the other way, reporting information of various kinds, including bio and other information. What your AID people are doing is focusing on a very particular kind of transmission of a certain kind of information back to our folks or headquarters in Kabul and Washington, like reconstruction and development and capacity building of the local governments and the economy of the country at large. They're getting to meet people like contractors. They're getting to meet people who deal, say with women's issues because they want to perhaps help women with some grants to something or NGO organizations. They do a lot of different things and they meet a lot of the same people, only in a somewhat different context. If you do have AID colleagues there, it's good to be in fairly close touch with them if you can because of who they are meeting and what those people are saying. One, you don't want them playing one of us off against the other and, two, the bigger issue is that you want to keep your AID colleagues' knowledge flowing into the State Department data base, because that data base is what's going to inform the decision makers, for the whole time you're reporting there. And hopefully you will leave it to your successor after that.

Q: Did specific projects evolve from this intelligence gathering, building schools or roads or something?

A: If you built a road up this valley and you pop it over that pass into the next one and, if you did, what kinds of markets would you be connecting? You're working on those kinds of issues with the AID person. Originally when we first started out, the State people, if there was no AID person there, had the authority to spend some money on relatively small-scale projects, quick impact projects. I submitted something like 23 proposals, but they didn't go anywhere because it turns out that all the money got siphoned for another pressing need, but I wasn't told of that until after I had submitted these proposals and I'd met with people and collected the information. So needless to say I was quite upset.

Q: Was it safe for you?

A: Was it safe? Safe is a relative term. The base was fired upon by 107mm rockets on the average about once a week while I was there. I was there 14 ½ months.

Q: When precisely were you there?

A: I arrived in country on March 30th or 31st of 2004. I departed Afghanistan on the 23rd of June, 2005. Now of course I arrived in Kabul, spent a week there, spent 2 ½ to 3 weeks in Jalalabad and then went on to Asadabad. I arrived in Asadabad at the very end of April and was there more or less the rest of my tour. When I went out I was always accompanied by at least one armed American, usually more like four to six to eight. Always at least two vehicles.

Q: Did any of the Afghan forces provide security for you or was it totally American?

A: Yes, we did have some Afghan forces. Usually you'd get a combination. You'd always want to go downtown with a couple of Afghans as well as a couple of Americans. The Afghans, if there is a problem like somebody's chicken ran out in the street and was run over by one of our Humvees or something like that, help calm down the crowds. He understood what was going on. The crowd could communicate to us through him as well. It kind of prevents misunderstandings and bad things from happening in the first place. Of course I was always accompanied by an Afghan translator or at least an Afghan- American translator.

Q: Was the security enough? Are there ways in which it could have been made more effective?

A: I don't think so. I don't think it could have been made more effective. I thought it was very good. The other thing I mentioned, the rocket attacks, I was in one ambush. We were ambushed in the valley. It's my claim to fame. The other issue was IEDs and that became a much more serious issue in the latter part of my time there. IEDs became a much bigger issue later on. They had been a bigger issue earlier and that kind of tailed off and then it got worse again.

Q: Was this related at all to what was happening politically?

A: Somewhat. I think it's more than that. I think politically, yes, but probably what was politically happening in Pakistan and in the camps related to the insurgents', the Taliban, the Al Qaeda organizations', ability to raise funds and finance attacks. In other words, I think it had more to do with their internal politics than the politics of what was going on in the country.

Q: Were you involved at all with NGOs?

A: Almost no involvement with NGOs because there are almost no NGOs operating in Kunar province. It's too dangerous.

Q: Would it have been helpful to have NGOs engaged?

A: Oh yes. Anybody who is willing to go up there and help things out is positive. Plus there are another set of eyes and ears on the ground and can kind of tell us things. Like a Brit can pull you aside and say, some of these people really don't like Americans or some of the things that they're saying about Americans when there are no Americans present because it would be impolite to say it. That's actually a very valuable thing to hear. People who were willing to tell you those things are not your enemy, they're your friends, even if they're not really your friends, they are your friends. They don't know it maybe. That's a very important piece of information to get.

Q: What was the relationship between the work you were doing or trying to do and the presidential election, the electoral process?

A: Yes, we were trying to help to make that go off as smoothly as possible. We would go along with the PRT. Obviously the PRT commander is ultimately the one who is responsible for that area. We are seconded to them. We have our own chain of command. We don't work for them per se, but we're supposed to work with them and they're ultimately the arbiter, the top dog about what goes on there. For the most part PRT commanders and their PRTs tend to get along very well. People very quickly become a team out in these places. You know you always wonder if there is going to be a lot of infighting and maybe in some places there is, but I can't think of any place where that's happened. I'm sure there are some places with frictions, but I always got along really well with all the PRT commanders.

Q: You were all terribly reliant on one another?

A: Yes. Here's the thing, the State Department person can just sit there in his office and pretty much collect his pay, like a consumer of food. You know what I'm saying? But you also have the capacity to really help your military colleagues a lot because you have a more direct pipeline to policy and also you have a pipeline to other kinds of information that they may not have access to, and remember chances are you're more familiar with living in and dealing with a foreign culture, a non-American culture, than they are.

Q: Could you sense any change in the relationships you had with people from other agencies since January 1 or January 20?

A: Oh, the inaugural you mean?

Q: Yes.

A: I did not. We all consider ourselves at the tail end of everything, which we are. It's difficult to get to. It's difficult to get out of. Communications were always difficult, so we were all kind of in it together. Our relationships didn't change. Now, what may have been going on at the very top of the food chain may have been very different, but we didn't see it down below. It may be changing now even as we speak. In the period that I was there it did not change in any way that I could discern. Of course, I was the State Department guy and this is kind of an important thing to note, too. When I first got to that firebase the relations between the Special Forces guys for example and the PRTs were poisonous. One of my first diplomatic assignments that I kind of made for myself was to kind of help build a bridge between the two. Well, you know, I wasn't the only one.

I tried to help do that as best I could and there were also some personnel changes that occurred shortly thereafter, which also great familiarized things. But the bottom line was I worked to make things better internally as well as externally. The State Department guy

sets the tone because he's it. It's like being your own little mini-ambassador. The State Department may not be getting along with the Department of Defense back in Washington or even in Kabul, but you as the State Department officer on that fire base or that PRT base are going to largely determine how well or how badly the State Department and the Department of Defense get along right there.

Q: Were you at all involved with the local police and the courts and the prisons? Could you see how they were operating? Were there any changes?

A: I frequently met with police and military, less so the military because I let the military guys handle those contacts. As it was it was a grueling job.

I worked, slept, worked and ate every now and then, but it was a grueling job. I could have made it easy on myself, but I wouldn't have been nearly as effective. I think looking back on it now that for the 14 ½ months that I was there it was okay doing it that way, but for my time coming up I need to kind of figure out a way to kind of cut down the load on myself. Otherwise I'm going to burn out. I need to find a way to cut back responsibly and still get the most important stuff done, realizing that I'm not going to get everything done. In Asadabad I didn't get everything done, but I got a lot of stuff done.

Q: You said you were the first State guy in Asadabad.

A: I was the State Department officer to be assigned to Asadabad. They had just opened that up maybe two nights before I got there.

Q: That was quite a challenge for you, to set things up from scratch.

A: Yes, the biggest thing that you set up, at least in a place like that, is the relationships. That's where the bio files come in. I had this guy and he got there and he was on a TDY, a short term TDY and he's got my bio files. He's got all the notes I took. That was another thing I did. Every meeting I went to I wrote down everything and then I shredded the paper. I typed in my notes and put them on the computer when I got back. I have an electronic version of everything I learned for two years or for the whole year or so that I was there.

Q: How large a group were you working with?

A: In terms of the meetings, these are meetings with various Afghan contacts I worked on things with. When I left I left probably 1,400 pages single-spaced, typed of notes behind, everything that I learned from any source: "Oh, that's interesting I can use that to understand Asadabad and I'd write it down." Because nothing exists for very long in this business if it is not written down, because you leave and go on to the next job and then what? What good does it do you? I sure as hell was not amusing myself there and neither was anybody else. The larger point, the whole point to my being there, was to advance America's interests and Afghanistan's as well. The only way that I was going to make any kind of real progress there was by writing down everything I knew so that the

next guy who came in didn't have to create the whole thing from scratch.

Q: Well, you have a lot of grateful successors. Looking back at the time you spent there, what would you point to as progress or achievements, however you want to put it? And then on the reverse side of the coin, what would wish had worked out better?

A: In terms of the progress achievements, a lot of the information I collected on a lot of the bad people, the corrupt people, inside the provincial governments in Kunar and Nurestan, particularly Kunar, eventually filtered up and out to the right people in positions of authority back in Kabul to make things change there. It was part of an overall push I think. Of the six top bad guys in the provincial government, five were gone by the time I left.

So that was a major achievement. I didn't do much in terms of development or recommending where to put a fishpond, etc.; that's not my place. But, what I did recommend a lot about and talk a lot about, to whoever would listen is what I think about Kunar and Nurestan and what's going on there. They would say, here's what we think is going on. And I would say, in this area this is what we're seeing. I wrote a number of memos that had some impact that went up to generals, one, two and three-star generals, who read some of the things that I wrote and my recommendations and acted upon them. My biggest military thing was generals.

Where I got my biggest frustration is that it took so long to get the dirt bags out. They shouldn't have been in there one day, let alone over about a year. So, that was one frustration right there. We could have saved ourselves a lot of problems and made much more progress had we gotten rid of these dirtbags a long time ago. We failed to do so. We and the Afghan government. I use a very large "we" here. We failed to do so and we, the U.S. government, failed to push hard enough and to make that as much a part of our policy as we should have. So, we created a whole host of other problems for ourselves.

Q: Why was that the case? Why didn't we push harder?

A: That I don't know. I think there was a fear that it would cause instability. When I mentioned it to the embassy and other people would talk about it, this was the only justification that I ever heard anyone else give; but I don't really know. No one has told me yes, this is what the decision was back in National Security Council meeting XYZ. I never got that information. This is just kind of talking around the embassy, but I think it's probably true. People were concerned in Kabul about the instability effects from removing these people. What they failed to see was that the stability effects of leaving them in were even greater in many cases and that's why we have the troubles that we have in many parts of that country, at least in that part. Again, this is where the PRTers can be invaluable. One person can be sitting and telling you removing Hajji Hajji is going to cause disruption and another person can be sitting there saying that if we don't remove Hajji Hajji we're going to have major problems. The decision makers are saying, "How the hell do I know what to do? It's my name on this; it's my butt." You don't

want to get it wrong. People are going to die, let alone your career might suffer, and the answer is well, that's why we have PRTs. The PRTers can go back and say, yes, Hajji Hajji is not such a bad guy. Somebody who can sit down and knows the politics of that province intimately and knows the players can give you pretty good approximation of what is probably going to happen if you remove him, good, bad or indifferent. That's what we could have been. I know I said that several generals were acting on stuff that I did, but the greatest frustration that we had, and I don't think this is just limited to the PRTs by any means and this is especially true after we stopped sending our draft cables all over the world to Washington, just one person in Kabul would then decide whether or not to send it up at all. Suddenly a) you've got a bottleneck and b) your voice is potentially getting lost, whatever you say that does not go along with the conventional wisdom in Kabul.

Q: Doesn't get out?

A: Yes. Maybe for the most part the PRTers had a better grasp of what was going on in their area than Kabul did. The only real exceptions to that might be places like Herat. I knew the officer in Herat was very good and so I just can't see that she didn't know as much as Kabul did about what was going on in her neighborhood. There was another good officer in Kandahar, and another very good one in Mazar-I-Sharif, but there were some major cities where at least the ambassador, for example, who spoke the languages, said well, I know a few things that you don't. Aside from that, when it came to Kunar, for example, and Nurestan and some other areas, they'd say, oh, Kabul may be getting some good information, but we're probably getting more. It would be helpful if Kabul would share some of that; that was another thing. Anything that they got as to what was going on in our areas, if it went to the head of the operation, it never really came down to us. Even people inside the political section often had no idea what was going on in the front office or who he was talking to and what he was saying. I mean people would come to me and say, I met with the ambassador two weeks ago. I'd say, oh, I wish I had known that.

I'd say the single biggest problem that the PRTs labored under was that in Kabul you had a guy who was very focused on the big picture and what he was doing, and he was intimately involved in what was going on in a way that most ambassadors are not. I would argue in this case it was appropriate. Many people would say it's not. I disagree. I think the guy we had in Kabul running that operation was a good guy for that job. I just think that he needed to have been... he's not a career Foreign Service Officer, so there are certain things about keeping the troops informed. He tried. He recognized that this was an issue because I brought it up to him once. I said to him as nicely as I could and he was very nice in his response, very gracious. I said, "Look, here's the problem. I don't find out about these things. I don't want to ever say this is our policy and maybe that was our policy only to contradict you when our policy changes and I don't know about it." That's one of the dangers and then we end up giving a mixed message. That undermines my credibility and makes us look like we're amateurs and it creates confusion and doubt and all the things we don't want to have.

Q: Or people think that the Americans aren't telling the truth.

A: Yes, exactly. Either they think the ambassador is lying or I'm lying, either way, about our policy. That was one of the points that I made. He took that on board very nicely. Nothing much really changed, I think, in part because at that point once you get kind of ingrained in certain work habits it's hard to get out.

I didn't really expect things to change and they really didn't. He already had a certain style of doing things, but that's one of the things that I think perhaps from the Washington end or from Kabul or maybe the DCM should have said, look we need to bring the PRTs more into the policy making process. The anti-drug campaign is a big example of this kind of failure, where essentially the campaign got cooked up in Washington or Kabul or both and then it was presented to the field: here you guys carry it out. Well, we could have told them, we'll do it as best we can but you've given us a loser and we could have told you it was a loser from the very beginning, certain elements of it. It turns out it wasn't a complete disaster, but it wasn't nearly as effective as it could have been.

That was another thing, too you had certain elements that were not as effective as others in Afghanistan, certainly the narcotics program was one of them, probably the least effective of all the different programs that we were operating. The bottom line was the PRT should have helped prevent a lot of problems and could have made policy much better because they would have been better informed. It would have been for example on the warlords and thugs if we had been backed up. If I had gone, in other words, to the embassy, to X or Y, and said, he needs to be fired from his job, the sort of deputy governor of Kunar province, and this is why. People back in Kabul do a double-check, a little verification, which is appropriate. I'm not a proconsul out there and neither is the ambassador for that matter. But then what happens is we say we'll either fire the guy or people know he's probably on his way out, if not now then sooner or later; we've got his number. That's where we could have been very valuable in undermining and bringing down the warlords and the thugs, because they make life miserable for the average Afghan. We could have been the one group of people they couldn't reach, the thugs could not get to, could not corrupt, could not intimidate.

For example, in one case I helped weaken one thug, one warlord at Kunar, and the way I did it was to kind of interpret my instructions a little broadly. Let's go take down his checkpoint from the outskirts of Asadabad today. I didn't do that; what I did was I went to the governor and said, yes, that's a great idea and the governor was a good guy. He didn't have the power himself to do it. I said, no problem, this is how we will do it. You will order it. You will write up the order and I will back it up by accompanying your people in our military and we'll get in our car and we'll follow them and go out to the sites and see to it that everything gets taken down. That's exactly what we did. Now the guy he assigned to lead the Afghan side of it, he was a young kid, he was very Afghan, like his cousin or something, 25 and I'm like 39 at this point, still useful, and this guy was deferring to me as kind of being in charge here. That's okay. The Afghans are very pragmatic. They understood that we were the ultimate power in the country. We have

the ultimate power and in fact a lot of the Afghans wish we'd used it a lot more, especially against thugs like that.

Another time, I loved it. I had gone to the PRT commander and he had done this on his own. We both said look, this guy who we'll call DDR, a militia unit that had incorporated into the army ostensibly but in fact these were the warlords, one of the biggest warlords in the province. This guy as of today is completely defunct; he no longer has any official position. All of his guys are now private citizens. That means that we can go to this military base, actually a compound house he had been occupying downtown in Asadabad right across from the governor's residence. I said, yes. We heard they were storing ammunition there. Then they keep saying, no, we've turned it all in. So, we both said, we're going to walk out of that meeting because at midnight tonight he's still a soldier, but as of one minute after midnight he's not. So, we're going to walk out of that meeting and say are you sure you've turned in all your ammunition? Yes, we've turned it all in. This is exactly what he said.

Then we walked right out of that meeting right across the street with our convoy, our escorts, our soldiers, knocked on the door and said, we're coming in to search. Oh my God. We found opium, we found like 82 107-mm rockets. We found hundreds of mortar rounds, anti-aircraft rounds. We found enough explosives to have leveled Asadabad. We even found six World War I German machine guns. The old kind with the cylindrical barrel just like you see in the movies. Five were so rusted you couldn't tell, but one of them was in pretty good condition. I saw Berlin 1918 stamped on the manufacturer label. It was really something else.

You know, a number of old World War I artifacts, there's no other word, because they are not even weapons anymore, found their way to Afghanistan. The French in the First World War came out with their first tank, a very small light tank. I forget the name of it. Only one working example survived the war; one unmodified World War I version survived the war. Then in 2002 we discovered a second one in Afghanistan. Apparently it had been exported to Afghanistan in the early 1920s. It had been left in some tank park, some museum of a military base, for decades and survived everything. Now I think it's being restored or something like that, as it should be.

When we did that also there was a big poster of this particular warlord on that military base and we went up and one of the guys took it down and in fact, one of our guys took it home with him. Word spread throughout the province, because it took us five days, working like eight to 12 hours a day of loading ammunition, to unload all that ammunition from that base. It wasn't a base, it was more like a building. Huge amounts of stuff. Days and days. Well, people saw this because we were blocking off main streets in that provincial capital and they knew exactly who owned that base and they saw us take down this poster on top of it. He had terrorized people saying, if you do not do what I want I will go tell the Americans you are Al Qaeda and you will disappear. People did get arrested for being Al Qaeda and it turned out to be nothing more than his rivals and many of them were good people.

He was a bad guy. He played our people on the ground like a fiddle, especially our military guys who're more prone to this because they're not used to working in these countries or to the change in fluid alliances. They get suckered by these guys. They knew how to play us. These guys knew how to play us and they played us big time. Guys like us, us PRTers, are useful because we can help prevent that, because we developed the in-depth knowledge of the people and the players and we know their alliances and who their interests are with. This guy was playing us and that was one of the things that I pushed for and so did the PRT commander. We said, let's defang this particular individual before he does anymore damage. By doing it the way we did, in public for days and taking down his poster, we undercut his authority. As far as I know he has since not come back to that province and he remains in Pakistan. That's the kind of thing that we the PRTers should have been doing a lot of.

I'm going to take a neighboring province, Nangarhar, where there was a lot of drug trade and a lot of illegal checkpoints being set up. What we should have done as the PRTers having direct contact with Kabul and Kabul was to say, listen, we deferred to your local judgments to make the best move, but go ahead and take down all of these illegal checkpoints, as many of them as you want or you feel that you can get away with. Just keep us informed and we will back you up on it when the warlord squeals. That's the kind of thing that we could have used back-up on. We could have made the system more just and that would do more to increase the legitimacy and the support of the guys than anything else that we're doing and any road that we're going to build.

The biggest failure was the failure of people at the higher echelons in the embassy and perhaps in other parts of the U.S. government as well, I'm not sure, but people above us at some level, to realize what an incredible tool they had at their disposal to advance America's interest, to make their jobs easier. Part of that I guess is just inexperience: like, what are these things, I fear them, I don't know them.

Q: The dangerous aspect of that kind of job seems to be increasing.

A: Yes, at least in some parts. Mazar-I-Sharif, Kunduz, Herat, Bamian, those are pretty safe places. In Bamian, the biggest danger you face is getting crushed to death by the rugs that you buy. Yes, if they all roll on you at once, it might take days to find the body, trying to feel for a lump under 12 rugs. Some places are relatively easy to get along and easy to work in. Herat is a little bit mixed. Kandahar is definitely a little bit more on the dangerous side, definitely, but not a whole lot has actually happened in Kandahar. Jalalabad is another one that's kind of mixed. Asadabad is clearly in the dangerous category. If you go to Asadabad you're going to be in combat. I mean I had 107s pass right over me. I know because I hit the deck when I heard the whistling. 107 mm rockets' whistling sound is just like in the movies. That gives you about a second, maybe less, to hit the dirt before it impacts. When you hear that, you hit the ground.

Q: Is there anything that we've left out that you think should be part of this?

A: I'll just sum it up. I think PRTs are a great idea. I think even if they're just for

reporting, if that's all that they've become and some people in the embassy only wanted them to be reporting stations, they're worth it even for that. But where they really make their money in these kinds of situations is when they can actually be part of the policy implementation and formulation process. That's where you're going to get much better policy and you're going to get a much better implementation of whatever the policy is. You will have people out in the hinterlands where these things are coming, where the rubber meets the road, and it either happens or it doesn't happen. These are the people that can help make it happen.

Q: Your successors are continuing with the program? Has it expanded?

A: Yes, actually I think it has expanded and there are something like 20 posts. They don't have all of them filled of course, given the time, but yes, they have expanded the program.

Q: Well, good. Well, maybe, the lessons we are sifting out from these interviews will help the people who follow you.

A: Great. I hope so.

Q: Are there other folks that you think would like to be interviewed?

A: That I don't know. I don't know how they feel about it, but I think a lot of people are very open to talking about their experiences.