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I want to thank the Commission for the invitation to be here today, as well as their willingness to take on this critical piece of reflection.

It is important to remember those images of the Taliban marching into Kabul in August 2021. While many were shocked at how quickly the Afghan army and government fell, there was no great popular uprising in support of the Taliban either. The Taliban did not win as much as the Afghan government, with all of its international backing, had become an empty husk that crumbled away. This was the result of the government and the international community's failure to build legitimacy, the empowering of Afghan leaders who undermined the government and was, until the latest stages, avoidable.

To understand this trajectory, I believe it is important to return to those early days of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan when there was a great deal of political and economic optimism among policymakers and Afghans themselves.

This was certainly the case when I first arrived in Istalif, a small market town about forty-five minutes west of Bagram Air Base, in 2005. The Taliban had leveled most of the town in 1997 and over the almost two years I spent there, people were building homes, opening businesses and getting married. The international presence was welcomed and upcoming elections were viewed with curiosity.

Attitudes towards the U.S. changed drastically in the decade that followed. As Afghan commanders and other politicians bought up gardens around Istalif, the economy increasingly revolved around a small set of power brokers who had enriched themselves largely through contracts on Bagram Airbase or through other international connections. The town never embraced the Taliban, but there was more and more sympathy for anti-government groups and a disillusionment with the international presence.

As I went on to work with the United States Institute of Peace, the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit and a series of other organizations, I got the opportunity to travel across the country and observe how variations of this pattern repeated itself almost everywhere. Certainly there were areas in which the Taliban had deeper roots and allies, but the Taliban's victory was not due to affinity for their ideology, but the erosion of faith in the government and the international community to improve their lives.

Ambassador Neumann previously spoke to the multiplicity of U.S. policies over the course of the twenty year war. One of the issues with these policies was their siloed nature. Counterterrorism and later counterinsurgency operations and priorities were built without enough consultation with other U.S. funded development, governance and human rights initiatives. In many cases these projects undermined each other.

At the same time, Afghans did not perceive the distinction between COIN, development and governance projects. They were all part of the same political-economic shifts reshaping the country. (This was particularly true during the surge years when the amount of money being spent and the speed needed to spend it increased.) While the U.S. government insisted it was not nation building throughout the war, many of its policies suggested otherwise to the Afghan public. This left ordinary Afghans confused and politically uncertain.

This was highlighted to me by a voter in Paktia in 2009 who asked me who I thought he should vote for. Should he trust one of the government bureaucrats who was attempting to build the state and might eventually bring them some resources or a commander who had stolen his land, but would at least protect him from the Taliban. Later, more and more Afghan communities, confronting civilian casualties by international forces and the Afghan government's failure to provide resources, turned to anti-government groups who could at least provide them with some stability.

Fueling this process, Afghan communities watched COIN funds taken by commanders that undermined both governance and human rights, and massive, poorly designed and poorly overseen development projects that enriched international contractors and Afghan elites, but did little to improve development indicators. The elections in 2009 were a turning point, with a drastic increase in fraud and corruption, which would mar all the elections in Afghanistan that followed. The U.S.-backed settlement between Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah that finally resolved the election averted violence in the short term, but was ultimately seen by Afghans as evidence that the U.S. was not truly committed to democratic practices in the country. At the time, many U.S. officials commented that they were not "interfering" in Afghan politics, when, in reality, the U.S. troop presence meant to most Afghans that they already were.

* Frustration with the failure of the Afghan government to build legitimacy and local capacity resulted in policy makers making the same mistakes again and again. Take for instance the conception of local governance as envisioned in the 2004 Constitution through district and village councils, the "government in a box" approach at the height of the counterinsurgency and, most recently, the World Bank-driven Citizens Charter Program. On a policy level, these programs looked very different and were led by

different organizations, but locally each envisioned new centrally-imposed, local governance structures that would theoretically build legitimacy. Instead, each of these proved not just impossible to implement, but when they were partially implemented, created government interference not desired by many Afghans, while providing resources that were monopolized by commanders and other power brokers, further eroding faith in the Afghan government and its U.S.-backers.

**As this example suggests, and I hope the Commission keeps in mind, while there were many countries and international organizations, not to mention Afghan partners, involved in the war in Afghanistan, it was always the U.S. that was seen as leading and shaping agendas, even when the U.S. government was not directly in control of these agendas.*

* Related to the siloing of these policies, I hope that the Commission also takes time to review the size and scope of contracting that went on during the Afghan War. This was a historical break from Vietnam, World War II and other previous U.S. wars where military personnel and government employees outnumbered contractors. The shortcomings of contractors were most visible on the military side, where contractors managed everything from police training to fuel delivery, but development, governance and human rights projects were all largely contracted out, meaning that the government had little direct control over how money was being spent. In many instances, it would have been far more effective to spend less money well, then the waste and distortion of the Afghan economy that many Afghans witnessed due to contracting. From Afghan doctors who left their practices to work as translators to a real estate boom on stolen land near the U.S. embassy and traffic jams caused by armored cars, contracting money did not build sustainable growth as much as it created an economic free-for-all. It does not seem coincidental to me that the U.S.'s longest war to date, is also the war that relied most on contracting.

Some reflecting back on the Afghan war have suggested that “we didn’t know” and that, for some reason, the U.S. government could never really understand Afghan culture or politics. I would strongly resist this urge. Counterevidence is well represented on this commission: Andrew Wilder’s report on the relationship between aid and security, Anand Gopal’s reporting on how U.S. military operations empowered anti-government actors and Dipali Mukhopadhyay’s work on provincial governors were all timely, well informed critiques of U.S. policy, which were widely read but rarely incorporated into policy decisions.

I believe it is worth the Commission's time to ask, how did so many people know there were structural failings in how the U.S. government was intervening in Afghanistan, but why was it so unable to change course.

** It is also worth reflecting on what did not go wrong in Afghanistan. To take one sector as an example, higher education in Afghanistan bloomed during the twenty year U.S. presence. Relying on a combination of private and development funds, by 2020 there were 39 public and 128 private universities enrolling 400,000 students and accreditation standards were raised significantly. But this was a sector that did not attract the same level of funds and political attention that others did. It is often in the areas where the U.S. devoted the most money and policy attention that it failed most spectacularly.*

At inflection point after inflection point, earlier lessons were not learned, opportunities were missed and a self-defeating cycle of overly ambitious, overly funded and overly militarized approaches continued. Ultimately, it was U.S. military personnel, frontline civilians, and ordinary Afghans who bore the burden of these shortcomings and I appreciate the Commission's careful inquiry into these issues.

Thank you.