

Notes on UAA Development Issues Committee Discussion
“Reflections on Afghanistan”
September 22, 2021

Discussion leaders were James (Jim) Bever, Amb. Earl (Tony) Wayne and Hilda (Bambi) Arellano

In his brief introduction Development Issues Committee (DIC) Co-Chair, Steve Haykin, noted that each of the three discussion leaders had served in Afghanistan at different times and did not overlap. Thus, we would have the perspectives from three different periods in the Afghanistan war, early days (Jim Bever), middle years (Tony Wayne) and the “surge” phase (Bambi Arellano).

Jim Bever, Mission Director in 2003-2004 opened the discussion by noting that USAID officers – and the Agency itself – can look back with pride in what was accomplished in Afghanistan in terms of improvements in health care, education, infrastructure and institution building over the 20 years of engagement in the country, despite the efforts being a “work in progress” at the time of the Taliban takeover in 2021. He noted the challenges USAID career officers faced in the early days in maintaining the “delicate balance” of maintaining a voice for the Agency’s points of view amongst the political appointees on the NSC, State and DOD. USAID does not “do war” yet in the early days the war itself dominated discussions at the political level and it was a challenge to be heard or heeded as a non-cabinet agency. AID was in fact sometimes undermined by political appointees who went to Congress around the career officers without informing or consulting them. Bever also pointed out that a glut of resources complicated matters -- AID sometimes questioned how much Afghanistan could effectively absorb and without crowding out other funds and staff to manage them needed elsewhere, but the funds kept coming in nevertheless.

Tony Wayne, Deputy Ambassador in Afghanistan from 2011- 2012, highlighted that during this period the pace of work was extremely intensive and with so much going on people really had almost no time to talk with each other and as a consequence teamwork and coordination suffered. He noted (in the Q & A session) that over time coordination improved and that the “whole of government” approach began to function reasonably well -- at least in the field. In his first year the discussions were almost entirely among the American staff – with little or no Afghan participation. This improved during his second year. He noted also with the surge in authorized staff levels, it was challenging getting good people to come. Not all were experienced, some were very good and some not so good and as a result there were inconsistencies in how effectively projects/programs were carried out. He noted among other USG agencies the DEA had the most experienced people for environments like Afghanistan.

He also highlighted “timetable issues.” The military folks had a very much shorter “timetable” than the development folks. Being under pressure to deliver in short time frames, the military promoted ideas like “government in a box” solutions and expected very quick results while the AID folks understood that development programs take much longer. Given the demands to deliver in short timeframes, military commanders too often looked at aid programs as a “tactic”

and not as “development goals” and that, in an important sense, they expected the whole agency to follow the DART/OTI model.

Finally, he noted that it was essential to be serious about problems, such as corruption, and to recognize the very serious difficulties presented for effectively carrying out programs in an environment with pervasive corruption in addition to ongoing fighting. It was very challenging to get top level USG officials to recognize how this seriously undermined changes for success.

Bambi Arellano, who served in Afghanistan from 2012-2013, noted the expectation, especially on the military side, that lessons learned in Iraq would be transferable to Afghanistan, which they were clearly not. It was difficult for the development professionals to “speak the truth” to high-ranking military and political leaders, say in the Interagency group, who had little experience in working in other developing country contexts. All too often, the programs got stuck in the “security trap” which dominated thinking and created serious sequencing issues.

In the future, she felt the Agency leadership in Washington was not completely understanding of the difficulties of operating in a war zone (“bifurcation”) and could do a better job of setting the terms to “feel better about what we do” and “have our back” in forums like the NSC and the Interagency.

Many questions were asked of the discussion leaders. Terry Brown brought up the corruption issue. Bambi Arellano noted that with so much money flowing in and so few officers to manage such huge programs it was inevitable that corruption would become a problem. Tony Wayne noted that it was the Kabul Bank scandal which presented the opportunity to have honest discussions about corruption. He noted that at most senior levels the Afghan government was really not all that committed to addressing this issue. He further noted that the military’s credo was “push for all the money you can get”, regardless of whether it could reasonably be absorbed efficiently and without corruption. USAID among many others had a really hard time effectively managing so much money and program activity with very limited staff and access to projects. He felt we should be more modest in our expectations in a war time environment like Afghanistan.

Ted Morse said that after the debacle of the Taliban re-taking power, the military has started to raise the cry of “no more nation building.” Bambi Arellano felt the military should stop using this term and admit we made mistakes.

Rebecca Black asked what should we do now. The consensus was that it is the UN that has to step up to coordinate the humanitarian effort – and if it is not able to do so there is the potential for a real disaster situation akin to what is happening in Yemen. Yet there is some question if the UN is capable of fulfilling this role.

Jim Bever noted during his tenure that AID was not really equipped, staffing wise, like the military, to operate in a two -front war – Iraq and Afghanistan. With insufficient staffing, e.g., no health office Director at all for Afghanistan in 2003-4 despite its largest budget portfolio in the world then, it was no wonder development officers were stretched to the breaking point. He also noted that AID has traditionally had an “inferiority complex” vis a vis other Cabinet-level

agencies, like DOD, and should step up more forcefully if it wishes to maintain its influence and funding.

In their final remarks, Jim Bever felt that we should “keep track of and keep our Afghan experienced FSO and FSN brains together” in case we have to go back in at some point—as we had to in Pakistan. Tony Wayne felt there is a need to write down the Afghan experience in a “digestible form” so that we can learn from our mistakes and share lessons learned. Bambi Arellano reiterated a need to be more forward looking and questioned if we can argue responsibly for such enormous resources in the middle of a war zone. She also noted the tremendous management stress that these massive programs create for smaller agencies, especially on the human resource base, and that effects of this can be long term.