

Interview with the

Honorable Ronald E. Neumann

Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan

In April 2011, Simons Center contributor Lawrence "Chip" Levine sat down with Ronald E. Neumann, President of the American Academy of Diplomacy, to discuss his views on progress in Afghanistan. Ambassador Neumann traveled throughout Afghanistan in 1967 when his father was ambassador there and again in 2005-07 during his own tenure as ambassador. He also served as U.S. ambassador to Algeria (1994-97) and to Bahrain (2001-04). During 2004-05, he served in Baghdad with the Coalition Provisional Authority and was the Political/Military Counselor in U.S. Embassy Baghdad as principal interlocutor with the Multinational Command where he coordinated political aspects of military action. At the time of this meeting Ambassador Neumann had recently returned from a visit to Afghanistan.

Levine: Ambassador, you've just returned from a trip to Afghanistan that included meetings with President Hamid Karzai, General Petraeus, Major General Campbell, and others. What are some of your key observations and insights from this trip?

Neumann: The incongruence between Karzai and many of his opponents is they don't understand what we're doing.

Levine: Is that our problem?

Neumann: That is our problem. We have not articulated in a clear fashion what we want in Afghanistan. We have articulated a lot about our strategy and not enough about our goals. The adaptation of "defeat Al Qaeda" as a goal adds to the confusion because it does not tell Afghans what exactly we want. Does that mean we want to stay? Does that mean we want to go? Do we want to conduct counterterrorism and just kill people, which might meet our counterterrorism goals but offers nothing to Afghans except endless fighting? From their perspective there is no end to the war. They don't understand. And since it is a traumatized nation where people focus on survival, when they don't understand the goal they fill it in with conspiracy theories, and they adopt hedging strategies to protect themselves.

This theme "we don't know what you want" was one I heard from [President Hamid] Karzai; [Dr.] Abdullah; [Mohammad Hanif] Atmar; [Amrullah] Saleh; [Mohammad Ehsan] Zia, former Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development; [Enayatullah] Kasimi, former Minister of Transportation; Major General Khaliq; and private Afghans. When I say it's universal, it's universal.

Levine: Which General Khaliq?

Neumann: The former Deputy Minister of the Interior. What we need to clarify is a basic, simple statement: We want to take most of our troops home, leave some of our troops as long as you (Afghans) need them to help support your army handle whatever residual violence there is, and maintain economic support for the indefinite future to help build a stable government. Period. We

need a simple statement like that. Probably need to add that we do not intend to project power from there into their neighbors.

And that's it. Our desire to hang "Christmas tree ornaments" on a statement will destroy the clarity. Because as soon as we start talking about democracy and equality and justice and gender rights, and transport and who knows what else, Afghans will examine every single ornament we put on the tree, put it under a microscope, and try to figure out why is it really there. By the time they are done with that process you will have no clarity left.

Levine: Those additional topics are concerns for some senior leaders in the U.S. Do we explain to them we need to state very clearly our purpose and objectives and defer all of those things to later phases of our civil-military strategy?

Neumann: All of those things can be part of our strategy. We need a statement of our goals. We get so wrapped up in strategy we forget it is a way to reach an objective; it is not a definition of the objective itself. So we talk about strategy as though the strategy itself is a goal.

Levine: What is our larger end state in the region? One of the things I found interesting when at U.S. Central Command [CENTCOM] was a focus on Central Asia and the idea that Afghanistan is only one piece of a larger puzzle.

Neumann: I'm not sure we have an end state in Central Asia. We have a Russian influence; we have a policy toward Iran, which has its own interests; and we have democracy goals in Central Asia that may compete with our goals for resetting our relations with Russia. Then we have negative goals, things we do not want to happen. We certainly want to see Pakistan moving against extremism. But I think there is a legitimate question that can be asked about whether there is an end state because it goes to this idea that the planning process we have—that the military has—is suitable for all problems. Some problems do not have definable end states. If they do not have a definable end state, is the planning process suitable? We have reached a cultural point where we think this planning process is our hammer that makes every problem a nail.

What is the end state of U.S.-Franco relations? What is the end state of democracy in America? There are dozens of problems which do not have definable end states. They go on, they are dynamic, they continue. You are doing something today, you are doing something tomorrow to manage a problem or improve a situation, but the situations continue to evolve. They do not have end states. You can sometimes take pieces out of them that you plan for that have end states, and that is legitimate. But sometimes you have direction without an end state.

Improved Security

Levine: You know the U.S. Army loves its doctrine. It has its counterinsurgency doctrine that says intelligence drives the operation.

Neumann: And then we have the reality.

Levine: And the lens through which we view that reality has been primarily military. So we have driven a decision-making process, a thought process, what General McChrystal called a "mindset" that is primarily military. The challenge becomes how you begin to influence that mindset balancing civil along with the military concerns.

Neumann: There really is improved security in a number of parts of Afghanistan. And I feel

comfortable saying that because I heard it from enough Afghans and not just our always optimistic military.

But, everybody—military, civilian, Afghan, foreign—all said we are going to have heavy fighting this spring and summer. That is not exactly a stroke of revelation. It does suggest to me that we need to reframe our public discourse. Because the line of “progress that it is fragile and reversible” needs now to say we expect heavy fighting in the spring and summer, and we will be able to make a better judgment in the fall.

We need to give a context to the fighting. Otherwise, every battle or action that goes bad this fighting season will be taken by the press as showing that the progress either is not real or is being reversed. We have a line, without framing public context, which sets us up for “every bad action” to be a sort of Tet 2011 potential. We ought to get ahead of that.

Police Training

Neumann: I came back pretty comfortable with the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program. I saw three ALP sites, one in southern Arghandab [District of Kandahar Province], one up in Kunduz, and one in Chamkani District in Paktya.

There is the real ALP, which is being run by special operations forces, and then there are bits and pieces out there, village security, that have sort of grown up in other respects. The ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] Joint Command [IJC] is supposed to be doing an evaluation of these other bits and pieces to decide whether to move them into the mainstream ALP program, turn them into facilities protection forces of some sort, or disband them. I am very nervous about that, because I don’t necessarily believe the IJC will have the ability and the right people to look at each group closely and know what they are looking at.

If you have gotten to the parts in my book dealing with the Afghan National Auxiliary Police¹ [ANAP], there’s a good example there of how with the best will in the world people doing a job were not able to know what it was they were doing until we sent other people to look at it. The ANAP plan began as a rather desperate expedient to meet the offensive we knew would come in 2006 when we—ISAF, Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, the major embassies, and the Afghan government—knew we were not going to get additional troop reinforcements. The plan was to recruit individuals and place them under the police chain of command so that we would avoid creating militias. Then the ANAP recruits would get a minimal amount of training and be used as static security. The early reports from our trainers said the program was going well. But when we organized a mixed team of officers from the embassy, the coalition training command, and others to take an in-depth look we found all sorts of problems: militias being hired, recruits from one ethnic group being sent to work in areas of a different group, one tribe being favored over another in the same area, and so on. Nobody was trying to lie about the program. The problem was that the military and police training personnel lacked the political training to really know who they were training.

Rating the Afghan Army

Levine: I was in Afghanistan in 2008, and listening to the things you went through between 2005 and 2007 was like “*déjà vu* all over again”.

Neumann: Part of that is our tour length. One thing I think our military has to deal with somehow

is the recurring phenomena that “it was screwed up when my unit got here and it was better when I left.”

Because after 10 years of seeing that cycle in the same places, we have to say “Are you not fixing it? Are the problems different? Is the perception a victim of a commander’s desire to always make things better? But how trustworthy is our most honest analysis if we continue to watch this cycle? I think this also goes to how we rate the Afghan Army. We have a particular problem there because the training part is done by NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan [NTM-A] with a lot of transparency and public information. Yet the most important element of developing a real fighting force is the partnering, and that is under IJC authority. They do have an evaluations branch which is getting better, though I think they have some problems, but it is not tasked or resourced to produce transparency. Therefore, there is no public reporting on the most important part of developing a qualified Afghan Army, and therefore, you should expect your credibility to be called into question.

Levine: Does this imply we have a strategic communications problem?

Neumann: This has been messed up since the beginning. Anthony Cordesman with the Center for Strategic and International Studies has been fulminating about the lack of metrics and reporting on the military for years; it is not a new subject.

You should not expect to have credibility on the Afghan Army when you do not report to the public about progress and problems. There are all kinds of reporting from NTM-A which are very good. But it does not go to the question of the fighting quality of the Afghan units. There are some problems with reporting—how one assesses progress. Moving from milestone reporting to combat unit assessment is probably better, but still, I do not think it is perfect, still think it has a problem. Too much of it is self-rating by people who are partnered.

I agree the U.S. partners are hard-headed and trying to be professional about this. But there is no other place in the U.S. Army where we think we do not need separate inspectors; they are self-rating. Why do we think in the most critical mission of the war we do not need a well-resourced and adequately staffed inspection regimen?

Levine: You brought that up in your book. You talked about how we are measuring the wrong things: inputs and not outputs. Is this from your Vietnam experience as an infantry officer? Did you partner in Vietnam?

Neumann: I had one brief experience where we partnered a couple of times with some popular force platoons (local militia that protected its home villages). It was interesting. We did it twice; my particular platoon partnered twice. One unit had this old noncommissioned officer who fought with the French, and his was a very squared-away platoon. The second time there was a young Vietnamese lieutenant who sat on the bank and pitched grenades into the river to fish. My conclusion was that performance was totally dependent on the quality of the leader.

Levine: So that suggests that leadership is one of the metrics we should be looking at. But we tend to be focused more on logistics and did we get them the right number of vehicles.

Neumann: That is what the “mileposts” were. They have moved away from that. My favorite joke is that using the milepost system, the 20th Maine was clearly not able to fight at Little Round Top during the battle of Gettysburg, much too under-strength, under-equipped, and therefore combat ineffective.

Promotions Based on Merit

Levine: That is interesting. When you said General Khaliq, I thought you meant the Afghan 203rd Corps Commander. This guy is squared away. You could see the benefit over time of successive U.S. trainers and advisors. He has had guys like [Major General John] “Mick” Nicholson when he was a colonel commanding the 3rd Brigade 10th Mountain Division advising him. I’m an old armor officer, and we looked at crews. Having tanks and people and bullets did not make you qualified. You had to have worked together as a team, which is a more intangible metric. What you could see on General Khaliq’s staff were guys who had been with him for several years.

Neumann: This is an important point. This is very anecdotal and fragmentary. We went out to one training base and talked to people about some of the teams that we bumped into. We asked their opinion of merit promotions and removal of bad officers.

What was interesting was that we found a bifurcated process. Getting rid of poor people is hard. They tend to be moved around rather than relieved. On the other hand, everyone I talked to knows of cases where qualified Afghan officers are getting promoted on merit to more responsible positions. What you have is an old system protecting losers because of patronage networks, but not necessarily inhibiting promotion from what I can gather. Now that is a very anecdotal impression—really, a hypothesis that needs to be tested.

And there is a whole new development. They just signed or they just implemented the first stage of the new retirement law. There was something in the press recently that they had just retired the first 50 general officers, and there were some more coming behind them. As far as I could understand from people I talked to, it is not that somebody is kept in a position, but that he is kept employed—he has a safety net. So if you could pay him through a retirement plan, much of that problem would go away. We will see.

Critical Issue for This Year and Next—Credible Transition

Neumann: I came away feeling that the critical issue for this year and the beginning of next year is the south and southwest. My sense is [Major General] Nicholson, [General] Petraeus, and [Lieutenant General] Rodriguez all understand that. This is almost a single point of failure. If we can transfer many of our troops out of the south and southwest, and the Afghans can mostly hold the security of the population there, then transition begins to have credibility.

If we either cannot or will not transfer troops, either because we do not believe we can afford to or the Afghans cannot hold, then I think there will be no chance of putting credibility back into transition. You will have lost it.

So by the middle of next year, you have got to transfer substantial portions of the south to Afghan control. It will not be a total turnover since we will still be in overwatch and providing support. But it has got to be really, really, Afghans running it. And that means we have to start taking the training wheels off. They have to be able to get a bloody nose, but not necessarily a broken head.

There are some counter-cultural things we will have to deal with, as well as our risk assessment. Because people often will not want to transfer responsibility until the Afghans are really good. So we are going to have to look very, very closely at the quality of the Afghan fighting force; who we have there in terms of the Afghans and very careful supervision in terms of the Americans. Whether you are on a road to transfer or on the road to a cliff edge where you step back and hope they do not go over. How do you manage that? How are you going to test that without the test

being too bad if they fail?

Levine: The leadership is obviously critical. So if we are moving out older generals and promoting by merit, doesn't that start to lay a solid foundation?

Neumann: I do not profess to be an expert, though I know enough about it to occasionally find things. I was very impressed with Lieutenant General Bill Caldwell, commander of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan.

President Karzai

Neumann: I met with President Karzai for about an hour, most of it alone. I believe he is the same man he always was. I do not believe any of this stuff about he is off his meds. But we have a major problem, and at least 50 percent of it is our own creation. He does not know what we are about, but he is reasonably convinced that we are against him and that we have deliberately tried to undermine him and weaken his legitimacy, and he does not know if we are staying or not.

So Karzai is to my mind pursuing two basic policy paths, both of which are totally logical from his point of view. One is to build a network of supporters who will fight for him if we leave. That means he has no intention of moving those people or firing them because they happen to be corrupt or rapacious. And the other is he is trying to define himself separately as something other than the American puppet. Foreign puppets do not survive very well in Afghanistan.

We are acting as if we either do not understand the motivations or as if the motivations are irrelevant to what we want. That means we are in a constant head-butting contest. And every time we butt our heads, he assumes there is another purpose and the relationship goes down. That does not mean some of his behavior is not incredibly frustrating, but our approach to it I think is heavily flawed. It may be a little better now, but it is still basically flawed.

Levine: Better with General Petraeus? What is the improvement?

Neumann: He does not have a great relationship with Petraeus, and he has no personal relationship, of course, with Ambassador Eikenberry, which has been completely torn by various leaks. The Petraeus/Karzai relationship is nowhere equivalent to the McChrystal relationship. I do not think it is as negative as it is with Eikenberry, but it is not positive.

Levine: One of the impressive, first things I saw that General McChrystal did was when he brought in the head of Afghan Army intelligence, General Karimi, to the American operations center and gave him a briefing. It sent a strong message of partnership and seemed to change the tenor of the relationship.

Neumann: I came away from this trip thinking more people are now thinking about potential civil war than has ever been the case before.

Levine: Have we created those conditions?

Neumann: Only in the sense of our lack of clarity. The immediate thing that is pushing those is fear that Karzai will make a bad deal with the Taliban that brings them back to real power. That fear is quite explicit with some people.

Reintegration/Peace Council

Levine: What are your thoughts on reconciliation/reintegration? What is the right path to follow?

Neumann: I can only talk about the problem conceptually. To have any kind of negotiation or meeting, you have to keep the meeting group pretty small. On the other hand, Karzai has a major need to reassure people who are nervous about what he is going to do, which is at tension with keeping the group small. Forget the peace council, I think, it has no credibility for that mission.

Levine: Too big?

Neumann: It is the wrong people. It is clearly a group stacked and manipulated by Karzai for his purposes and, therefore, is not going to be able to reassure the Northern Alliance. Then you can talk about how to do reassurance. Part of that is we need to have a seat at the negotiation, and we have to be talking to a lot of people who are not in the negotiations. They have to have a sense from us that they are being listened to and that we understand what things scare them. And if we are not very specific about our red lines to everybody in the world, we need to understand that we could be a block to this kind of help and reassurance. I think we are moving to that position, but right now we do not have anybody to talk to.

Levine: I had the pleasure of having lunch with an Afghan businessman in his home in Kabul last year. When I arrived, he was sitting in his living room with a former Taliban commander. After his guest left, he said the coalition needed to speak directly with elders without the presence of government officials, who he said many elders did not trust. In referring to the former Taliban commander he said, "This guy can connect us with many elders." What do you think about our efforts at reintegration?

Neumann: It is in its very early days and it is very cautious, but I have a great deal of respect for what Phil Jones, is doing on that, the British Major General who is the International Security Assistance Force Advisor on Reintegration. He is on at least his second tour in Afghanistan. He was the Military Advisor to the UN Secretary General's Special Representative when I was there, then the British Army Attaché here in the U.S. He is a very smart guy who travels around Afghanistan all the time.

And then, of course, there is the question of whether there is some larger negotiation to be had, which may happen when we find people to talk to. But I think we have got at least to the point where we will talk to them.

Now the question is not about the theory, the question is if we have someone to talk to who wants to talk to us. My own suspicion is two-fold. By all means, we should start talking. Understand, this is a process of multiple years. If you look at Guatemala or Cambodia or Namibia, pick your place, where you finally came to a negotiated settlement: Paris peace talks, the American Revolution, etc. They all took many years to complete. Do not expect this to be an alternative to fighting. This is a two-, three-, five-year process that you are hesitantly beginning. So fine, begin it, keep talking, and keep fighting. You should not give away a single thing on the battlefield for atmospherics. For the sound of conversation you get paid with the sound of conversation. You do not get hard cash. Do not get confused about it.

The second thing about it is just take it a step at a time. We need to be at the table because too many people are afraid of Karzai. By the way, on a separate subject, I do not think we are doing a good job of tracking the patronage networks of the government figures or of senior military figures.

Patronage Networks and Corruption

Levine: Did you get to see Brigadier General H.R. McMaster while you were there?

Neumann: Yes, and H.R. has such a strong presentation you have to dig down to get to some of the subtleties some times. I think H.R. is going to get frustrated. We have the guidance which has come out now, which he is following, targeting the counter-corruption efforts much more narrowly on people that are a menace to the war.

Levine: Which seems to be a step in the right direction?

Neumann: I think it is a step in the right direction, but we have a political vulnerability. We have talked to Congress and the public, but we have not told them we are not trying to clean the whole stable. So you have a vulnerability. We have shifted focus, and the shift is right, but lack of explanation is a potential vulnerability. I still think most of what H.R. is stuck with is wrong-headed. It is an attempt to make this a juridical issue in the middle of what is a political problem.

When I was in Bagram, Major General John Campbell [U.S. Commander of Regional Command East] asked me how we should deal with Juma Khan Hamdard, Governor of Paktia, and a major problem on Petraeus's list. He raises the issue with Karzai frequently. I said, okay, you cannot do a strategy out of the blue. Why do you understand the man to be there? What do you think he is about? Answer: Well we think it has something to do with blocking Atta. I thought the answer was vague. Just for the heck of it I reached back overnight to a couple of people and ended up with a long memo about Hamdard, tracking him back into the 1980s. Born in Balkh, he is a Hezb-e-Islami² commander going back into the 1980s, and he is clearly, when you read this stuff, part of a major effort to rebuild Hezb-e Islami influence and diminish Jamaat-e Islami influence.

Now, with that clear background and assumed purpose, you are not going to get Karzai to move him just because he is rapacious. You either stop cracking your head against a hard object or figure out another strategy. Are you going to side with him? You have a number of potential ways you can go, none of which may be effective. Maybe you have to pay him off, maybe you have to try to stake out something—if you will leave certain areas alone or be more efficient about them, I will leave you alone. You have got to figure it out. But first of all you have got to start by figuring out what you are about. And our counter-corruption strategy does not start asking those questions often enough, in my view.

Levine: I spent a couple of weeks in Gardez last year, and spoke with Major General Abdul Khaliq [Commanding General, Afghan 203rd Corps] and his staff, and was told about conflicts between him and Governor Hamdard.

Neumann: [reviews memo, which included information on the relationship between Governor Hamdard and General Dostam, and how Hamdard, who is a Pashtun, facilitated the return of Dostam and defeat of Taliban in the north in 1997 by convincing Balk Pashtuns who were pro-Taliban to realign with him.] You have a strategy, but your operational level can not be superficial. You have to apply the same level of political understanding and finesse in designing your tactics and your political operations as you do to the military piece. And we do not, by and large.

Levine: General McChrystal and General Petraeus both spoke about the importance of understanding the “human terrain.” General McChrystal categorized it as paramount, and General Petraeus called it the “decisive terrain” during his confirmation hearings. How can we do this better?

Neumann: I did the research on Hamdard partly to test what is available, because I reached back and got this from a friend in 24 hours. But this is the level of detail we should have for every governor there. It is the level of detail we ought to have on every Afghan corps and brigade commander at a minimum, if not battalion commanders. If the guy is not brand new, he has a history. What is his history? Saying he is a Tajik does not tell you who he fought with or who he fought against or who he betrayed or what his loyalty network is. We are not tracking patronage networks and thinking about civil war. It would be really smart if we would track this.

I give that to you as an example of what I think is the depth of information that you need. You read that and you think about what is the tactic for dealing with Hamdard. And it is not just going in and telling President Karzai “Hey, this guy is corrupt.”

Levine: Another problem I understood was his Police Chief. He was setting up illegal checkpoints and running counter to what our strategy and objectives were. As you say, we are taking a juridical approach. How do we use him as an influential actor and modify his behavior to support the objective of establishing government legitimacy in the eyes of the population? Instead we threw him in jail, but this runs counter to what I think you are saying should be our approach. In the midst of an insurgency that could spin into a civil war, are we using our heads? Are we being smart?

Neumann: We sometimes have trouble using our heads, because we have institutional processes. Once you have evidence that something is in violation of U.S. law, you are very likely to have a U.S. investigation or grand-jury case started. Once you do that you probably cannot even hand over evidence. You may lose all political control. There are some cases where maybe you do want to do that. Take it to a higher authority. There are some cases where you want to try to use political influence to control things, as you say. There is no single scripted answer.

There is a bigger issue that we have never found a real way to deal with. A lot of the corrupt people in the police are part of a larger issue of political networks. So when you are trying to treat it as a technical issue of political corruption, you do not really understand it. Have you ever heard of a city in which you had a corrupt city government and an honest police force?

Levine: I grew up in New Jersey.

Neumann: There have been cases where clean city government cleaned up corrupt police forces. I have never heard of a case where a corrupt city government cleaned up the police force. The shorthand of the conversation I would like to have with President Karzai at greater length than I did, and it would have to be couched a little differently, is that if you are going to have a Mafia, you have got to be the Don. You have got to exercise control and influence. If your control is so loose that people do not depend on you, that you depend on them more than they depend on you, you have not really assured something. It is more a discussion about efficiency than corruption.

Final Thoughts

Levine: What are your final thoughts on our strategic communications or messaging—not selling, but how we are informing?

Neumann: It is not Lieutenant General Bill Caldwell’s piece, it’s the IJC piece. Caldwell’s piece, NTM-A, gets well disseminated. He does a lot of stuff. The problem is his piece is only half of the job. None of the partnering with Afghan units is with Caldwell. You cannot partner whole American battalions and brigades with Afghan units under NTM-A management and fight battles under IJC.

I understand that. But the partnering effort is where a lot of the professional development of the Afghan forces is actually going to come from the military advisors. And the IJC piece has no public visibility.

Levine: And needs to.

Neumann: Yes.

Levine: What would be your message to Congress?

Neumann: Focus on the south and southwest instead of the numbers of withdrawal. That is where the viability of our strategy is going to be tested.

Levine: That is in the Security line of operations under the ISAF campaign plan. What about the Governance and Development lines of operations?

Neumann: I think we actually have too much money in the south and probably need more in the north, west, and center. I think this is a sub-problem of the fact that there has been a very, very hard learning curve about the pace at which you can do change in governance and development.

And I think that was made much worse by the administration's July 2011 deadline decision, now fortunately pushed off, because it created this: "I have got to have this. Do not tell me you cannot do it. I need 40 districts developed by next year, and that is the requirement. And why can't the State Department, USAID, and the rest of your guys produce?" Well, I am sorry, this is where the inability of the situation to fit an end state leads to totally messed up planning. You are talking about social transformation. It does not happen at that rate. And willing it, commanders demanding that you "get with it," reaches a point at which this shades off to King Canute telling the sea to stay put.

There are certain things that fit this model and there are certain things that do not. I think we need to focus on the security piece. We do what we can. There are things that are working on the governance piece. The effort to assess ministries so as to flow more money through the Afghan government is a right effort. It has an awful lot of moving parts. It is going in the right direction. What the Independent Directorate of Local Governance is doing at the local level in local development has lots of good pieces, but they do not make a good whole yet.

Levine: And that goes back to your points on strategy and simplicity.

Neumann: Right. **IAJ**

NOTES

1 R.E. Neumann, *The Other War—Winning and Losing in Afghanistan*, Potomac Books, Inc., Washington, DC, 2009, pp. 121-124.

2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hezbi_Islami>