



Women's Foreign Policy Group
November 30, 2010
New York, NY

James Dao
The New York Times

A Report from the Field: The View from Northern Afghanistan

Ambassador Ritva Jolkkonen: Welcome everybody. I'm really excited to see you all. Tonight, despite the rain, I must say that I am very honored and pleased to host this event. I have been in New York for two years and most of this time I've been a member of the Women's Foreign Policy Group and I have enjoyed it very much and I think the work they're doing is really great and important. I think for us diplomats who are only here for a while particularly it is especially interesting because it brings us together and we have the possibility to meet very important people and I'm very happy to be part of that tonight. I think that the topic we have tonight is also really interesting and relevant. So welcome, and thank you for coming.

Patricia Ellis: First of all, I just wanted to thank Ambassador Ritva Jolkkonen, the Consul General of Finland, for hosting us. She has had a very impressive career. She came here from Buenos Aires, which was her last assignment. It is not bad, coming from Buenos Aires to New York. [*Laughter.*] We are so pleased to be here tonight, with this gorgeous view, and just really appreciate your very kind hospitality. I also want to share that we have membership renewal going on and the Consul General was one of the first to renew. Obviously we are very happy that she enjoys working with us because we love working with the diplomatic community, particularly the women diplomats, and there are a number here tonight, such as the Czech Consul General. There are also a number of other diplomats and UN officials here, so thank you all for coming. This is not Elisabeth Bumiller. [*Laughter.*] Elisabeth was very busy today and was stuck in Washington covering the decision on gays in the military. She is very sorry she can't be here with us tonight, and hopes that she'll be able to speak with you on another occasion. Instead, we have another great *New York Times* reporter, James Dao. James, thank you so much for your willingness to jump right in and come along and make this the great evening it already has been. James covers military and defense affairs. He currently, since March, has been covering a battalion in 10th Mountain Division out of Fort Drum. He went over with them on their deployment as part of the surge in Afghanistan, and he will be following them for the whole year and each time he was embedded with them for five to six weeks. Prior to that, he was embedded in Iraq. He covered the Pentagon during 9/11, and previously covered the State Department and Congress. He was Albany bureau chief and the deputy metropolitan editor, and he and Warren have both shared this title. He is going to Afghanistan in March and he was most recently there in October, so it's very fresh. He's going to talk to you about northern

Afghanistan. A lot of coverage has been focused on southern Afghanistan. We'll have plenty of time for questions, so before I turn it over to him, for those of you who don't know me, I'm Patricia Ellis, President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We have a lot of interesting things planned for 2011 in New York. We also do the Celebration of Women Diplomats, we do a UN conference, so look forward to receiving invitations from us. Now, I will turn it over to Jim and when he's finished making some remarks we'll open it up for questions. So, thank you all again. [Applause.]

James Dao: Thank you for having me. I'm not much of a projector of my voice, so if you can't hear me, please wave a hand or shout. Not only am I not Elisabeth Bumiller, I am not really an expert in foreign policy and I'm not much of an expert in military policy. What I do for *The Times* is cover a beat that's sort of of my own making, called military affairs. But what it really is a piece designed to get a sense of the lives of troops on the ground. It was always my sense that having once covered the Pentagon that this was a world that most Americans don't know about. It could be its own state practically; there's well over a million troops and almost 10 million veterans out there. They speak their own language, they have their own institutions, they have their own culture, and for better or for worse, because the military is voluntary, is that most Americans don't participate. I often feel as though we have almost a separate part of American culture that the rest of us don't really see or understand, and that's where this whole idea came from. What I'm hoping you'll find interesting today is—part of what I've been doing is covering a battalion in 10th Mountain Division out of Fort Drum in their year long deployment. They were among the first troops to go in as part of the 30,000 troop surge that the President ordered. They arrived in northern Afghanistan by March. A photographer from *The Times*, Damon Winter, and I went over there with them. We were able to visit them in Fort Drum before they left, we boarded on a plane and we went with them and got on the ground with them as they were just arriving. It was a great way to see how 19 and 20-year-old kids are thrown into a new situation. We spent about a month there with them then, came back and did a couple of stories and produced a whole bunch of multimedia productions which I hope you all will take a look at when you leave here. It's called "A Year at War," and what we tried to do is really bring to life troops out of the print and photos. There are interviews with the soldiers where they just speak into the camera, and there are also short videos of life on a Forward Operating Base, most people have no idea what it's like to be in a fire fight. It's to give people a sense of life on the ground there. And, as Pat mentioned, we were there for all of September and half of October, and we're now producing our stories from that and I'm going to talk about those. We're going back in January and February and hopefully fly home with the companies.

So, let me tell you a bit about where we are, because we were in this place that isn't in the news very much. Almost all coverage of Afghanistan—if it's not in Kabul, it's in the Kandahar or Helmand Provinces. I can't really argue with that, that's where the focus of the American military mission really is. The sense is that you can't really stabilize Afghanistan if you can't stabilize Kandahar. There was actually a moment where I could have been embedded with the unit that was going to Kandahar and was given the option of going to the North, and I'm really quite glad that I took the option I did. Because I think—I'm in a place called Kunduz Province, it's about a couple hours flight from Kabul; it's on the Tajikistan border. It's a place that I think if you asked somebody two years ago what a stable province in Afghanistan would look like, they'd probably tell you Kunduz Province was a good example. It's very ethnically mixed, it

had been quite peaceful and it's, relatively speaking, somewhat prosperous because it's lush and there's a lot of farm land there. It's considered one of the bread baskets of Afghanistan. But the Americans are there now, in part because it's becoming less and less stable. In some ways, you can learn a lot about what's happening in Afghanistan by seeing the worst, sort of most violent, front-line sort of situation like in Kandahar, but also a much more mixed place like Kunduz. It was eye-opening for me when we arrived because we went thinking there would probably be pockets of insurgent fighters and that much of the province would be relatively safe. What I think the Americans discovered was that they essentially could not travel more than a couple miles from most urban centers without running into—if not firefights, then roads that were completely mined and completely impassable. That right away tells you something about the nature of the mission that I was in and the major obstacles that were in place.

That said—I was talking with some folks here earlier about people's impressions of Afghanistan, and when you come back from these long trips, people always think there's 24/7 firefights and everywhere you move you're getting blown up. That can be the case if you choose to be in certain situations, but the truth is that most of the country is pretty quiet. You're probably only going to get shot at if you're with American troops. If you're not with American troops, then you might not be; it's a very different situation. I try to capture that a little bit even with the last story I wrote, which is sort of a week in the life of a company, of a front line platoon, where I wanted to get a sense of how these guys—a lot of life is just waiting for things to happen, waiting for fights to happen, waiting to go on patrol. And very often it's really remarkably quiet. It's only when they choose to go to certain places and confront what they think are insurgent strongholds that then they get into fights. And that's essentially what's happening in Kandahar, which is one big effort to push into insurgent areas and inevitably the units down there are in constant fighting.

A little bit more about the project itself: one of the goals and objectives was to try to track and see what happened to the soldiers over the course of the year. How they changed, how a year away changed them, how Kabul changed them, how casualties involving friends changed them. And that's why we've tried to do a lot of interviews with people before that—before we left and at midpoint and again before we left in the end.

I'm going to share with you a couple of the people that we're following. One of them—and I'll mention her first because Pat asked me to talk a little bit about women soldiers, so as to channel Elisabeth. [*Laughter.*] It's an infantry battalion, which means that it is 98% men. Women are not in the infantry, but there are support units involved, attached to it. One of the women that we're following was the mother of two little kids. She is an equipment technology person; she fixes night vision goggles. She is actually a team leader and has about five soldiers under her. She's in a position of authority. She is a sergeant and she is a very unlikely sergeant. And this is one of the things I love about the project: the people just surprise you in many ways. The military is actually much more impressive than I think any of us realize. Her great struggle was leaving her kids. She has been a soldier for years, she deployed to Kandahar maybe five or six years ago. It was no big deal for her to go then, but this time she has two little kids. She weeps constantly about them. Through the miracle of modern technology she has an international cell phone so she is texting them constantly. They do have Skype over there, so they can get on a computer and she can talk to them regularly. I think she is struggling with her marriage—her husband is being Mr.

Mom at home and I think it's been a real struggle for him. We are going to try and follow them and see how they do.

Another guy we are following—we're actually going to have a very long story about him in about two weeks. He is a company captain, Yale graduate, and probably one of only, maybe, two people in his class who joined the military. I think from a very middle class family—his father was a corporate lawyer. He tells us that he was deeply upset—I think he has always been interested in the military, but what really motivated him to join was that he said he was deeply upset about Abu Ghraib and what he thought was just a terrible breakdown in military leadership—which it was. And he went out and signed up. He went to officer school, and is now a company captain. What we are trying to capture in the story that is going to come out soon is the immense responsibility that is weighing on the shoulders of these guys. He is relatively old for a company commander, he's 32, but some of them are 27 and 28. They are in charge of 150 soldiers and their lives—the lives of 150 soldiers are in their hands. They will plan their day, they will plan the mission; and if the mission goes wrong, or someone gets hurt, it really falls on his or her—well, his, they are all infantry men—shoulders. And in his case, a couple people do get hurt. It's really very wrenching. He is really a very remarkably sensitive and vulnerable guy. I think far more than you would expect from your typical infantry man. He talks a little bit about his feelings about the guys that get hurt.

There is one other character that I am very fond of, who will also be a huge feature in an upcoming story and video we do. He is a single dad who is more typical of the kind of people that are in the military today. He is from a little town in Wisconsin, joined the Army because I think his dad wanted him to join the Army—it was either that or become a police officer, a state trooper I think. He joined the Army, traveled around to a number of posts, and then got divorced. His wife had drug and alcohol problems, and he just decided that he would get sole custody of the kids. He won sole custody of the kids, and then the next year got deployed. So he has now sent his kids off to live with his brother, who's an absolute saint; he has taken the kids in, and has incorporated them into his family for the year. So it's really quite a story. He actually has been injured as well, so he may be back—his deployment may be over. So those are three of my favorite characters.

So, you should all ask questions that you have; I'm going to ramble for a little bit. Because Pat had talked to me to talk a little bit about—I don't spent a lot of time talking to generals about the broad policy of the war in Afghanistan, but you can certainly see it playing out on the ground every day. From my perspective, with the tide I'm covering, they are all really central to what we're doing in Afghanistan, which is training the Afghan police, as their job. That is what has been laid out by Petraeus, by the presidents, and that is their pathway out of Afghanistan—to build up the police force and train them to the point where they're reasonably confident that they can secure the country on their own. You'll see a lot of soldiers out with the numbers of people they're training—fabulous numbers, in the hundreds of thousands now. These stories capture just how real it is, because the trainings are very grim, many of them. Literacy is a huge issue. The average police officer cannot read—they can't read a map, which is a giant problem; they don't really know how to go from point A to point B. There are some rough skills there they can work on, but there is a long way to go.

Calling it training is really kind of a misnomer I think, because it's not as if the Americans are there showing them how to use weapons—we don't need to show most Afghans how to use weapons; they've got that part of it down. [*Laughter.*] They're not really showing them how to march or maneuver even, it's really, they try to back them up and take them into tough areas and get shot at basically; get them to stand up and fight. And I'm oversimplifying a bit there—they are training them how to clear areas and clear compounds and that sort of thing, but the main part of it is just backing them up and giving them confidence in themselves. There are places where there's some success, and a lot of places where it's far from being successful. There are many other places which I've witnessed where they just lose control of the situation and shooting starts, and the Afghan police are gone. So they've got a long way to go on that.

From the American soldier's point of view, one of the big issues also is trust. There is a story today out of Kandahar, I think, involving an Afghan police officer who had been working with the Americans for several years—I think maybe three years. Something happened and he went and just shot six or seven of them, I believe. They still don't know what happened to him. They don't know if he was turned by the Taliban or if he just had a terrible argument with his father, and then just took it out on the first people he saw. It's hard to know what happened there. But the troops that I'm covering, they live and eat with the Afghan police officers; they spend a lot of time with them. There really is a leap of faith for them, where they really just have to decide if they're going to trust these folks. It's an extremely complicated and difficult situation. Inevitably, the Afghan police and the Afghan Army have family that are in the insurgency, and they have people in their villages that are in the insurgency. The Americans just assume that anything they tell their Afghan partners will be conveyed to the insurgency. It makes for a very strange planning process because you're almost, kind of willfully telegraphing the things you're going to do because you're assuming the other side knows already. So it's complicated.

Ms. Ellis: The other thing you said you might talk about is how this is a microcosm of the war. Everyone's focusing on the South, but what happens [in the North] because there isn't as much violence...

Mr. Dao: I think perhaps what you can learn from a place like Kunduz, which isn't considered the most violent part of Afghanistan is that while there isn't constant fighting, there isn't a lot of security anywhere in the country. It's a strange sort of in-between, where there may not be bloodshed; there may not be IEDs even necessarily, but the government is not welcome in large parts of the country. We see that clearly in Kunduz Province, where even we have a relatively stable place and relatively functioning government; there are even police units in various districts. But the government doesn't reach out into the vast majority of villages, and in some of the places there's absolutely no government presence because they'd be in danger there in some of the areas. There's a very real standoff in a place like Kunduz, where there's not constant violence, but the government has a long way to go before it really establishes itself and before you can really call Kunduz a secure place.

So we were talking earlier about the civilian side of all this, it's the civilian surge, as the President called it, which is considered the next important step beyond just getting the security forces built up. There's so much that could be done in terms of improving agriculture and building small businesses there, and the problem is just security. You had people in jails where

government officials, where American consultants would be free to go to those places. I spent a couple days with a great guy, a farmer from Iowa, who had worked for Ohio State at one of their cooperative staffs in Columbus. There were state budget cuts in Ohio and he lost his job, and then when his daughter went to college, he decided to go to Afghanistan—he had an offer to go to Afghanistan and said ‘what the hell.’ [*Laughter.*] So there he was, in Kunduz Province, and his job was just to go and survey farmers and find out what their problems were and what they needed, and perhaps what the government could do to help them. One of his first trips out—they wouldn’t let him travel alone—he went with a convoy of American troops. They arrived, and the farmers said ‘never again, you’re not coming to visit us; we are not going to meet with you if American troops are there.’ He spent a good four of five months just trying to find people to meet with. And what was kind of unique and tragic was that he—I spent a day walking with him in some fields, and he was telling me about some of the very simple ways that Afghan farmers’ lives could be improved. They had a problem with melon flies; it’s just a fruit fly, and with certain simple procedures, maybe some pesticides, they could really cut into the problem. But some of the farmers—and this is the melon capital of Afghanistan—had lost 50-80% of their crop and they had no idea what the problem was. If someone could get in there and help them, it could make a huge difference for them. He said, practices in the rice fields of the North were terrible. Apparently at least they had a sort of cooperative water system, but with 30 years of war that is being demolished now; it appears someone controls the water, and it is not being evenly distributed. So some equity in the way water is distributed would be very beneficial. Anyway, he picked up, in a couple of days spent with farmers on the ground, he saw ways production could be increased significantly if he could just get the chance to spend time with them and get out into the fields, and to get them to trust him.

Ms. Ellis: Well should we open it up to questions? That was great, thank you so much. [*Applause.*] I want to lead off with three different things, but they are interconnected. First of all, everyone I think wants to know, what’s it like for you? You’ve been out there, you’ve been embedded; you talked about general security. What about your own security? How much are you afraid. Number two, women; you’re not here to talk about the women marines, but they do play a role, and it’s related to what you are saying. They were able to talk to the Afghan women and men, and get a lot of information. And I was wondering, from what you are seeing there, how do you feel this might be helpful and possibly be expanded? I know you’re not an expert on it. And thirdly, the issue of—and also, if women are being penalized by not being allowed to be in combat, and it is controversial, but these women marines and some of these other women are really on the front line, they are practically in combat but they can’t officially be there. And for those who are ambitious and want to progress in the military, since it’s a very special type of life, don’t they need to be able to get that experience?

Mr. Dao: Yeah, it’s a very good question. On my own security; it may on virtue of being there, the real terrible sides of combat, but I don’t feel particularly scared in those situations. You can kind of pick and choose the soldiers you are with; and when they stop walking, you stop walking. I think—I mean it’s not like you are in a hellish, constant fire. The kind of fighting in Afghanistan is if they begin shooting at you, you are going to lay down and they are going to shoot over your head probably. The big fear of course is IED and mines; we had a photographer for *The New York Times*, Joao Silva, who lost both his legs in Kandahar a few weeks ago

walking through a booby-trapped house. And I have been in a mine field as well, and there is nothing you can really do besides walk where everyone else is walking and hope for the best. But as I was saying earlier, we don't feel constantly in danger. And there are moments where it's scary and your heart rate goes up, but much of the time it's relatively peaceful. And if you are careful... we don't hear of a lot of reporters getting hurt. They are watching out for themselves, and it's possible to stay safe most of the time. IEDs are unpredictable.

Ms Ellis: And on the question on women?

Mr. Dao: What I did see in terms of women, sort of in non-support roles in my part of the country—and I think this applies to what Elisabeth has written about—clearly the American military has figured out that women could be the best ally in Afghanistan. Women have probably the most to lose by the return of the Taliban. In Kunduz for sure there are a lot of schools for women, and probably about all of them are run by women principles and teachers. There are a lot of natural allies among women; there is a lot of potential for women to setup small businesses, whether it is weaving or whatever. A couple reasons—the only way to communicate with most women in the country, not all but most, is through women troops. So one avenue of advancement for women in the military is to be an intelligence officer, because it is not considered a front line combat role, and a lot of women are good at it apparently. They become analysts, there was a sergeant in my battalion who has been in all the major planning meetings, and she was sort of in charge of intelligence. She had access to a lot of classified material, she would get a lot of it down to the platoon leaders, and she herself was going out and talking to Afghan women a lot. So that was to improve relations but also to gain intelligence for them. So it's always sort of a dual role they have; she is asking them about their lives, about whether they've been visited about the Taliban at night, and her job is to collect all those developments. So there are a lot of women doing that, as well as the sort of—I mean they are essentially intelligence gathering units. In terms of whether there is a ceiling for women because they can't do front line combat, I think there is no question there is a ceiling for them in the Army and Marine Corps. You essentially have to have been in war, on the front line as a commander, to rise up in the Army and Marine Corps. There would have to be major shift in the culture for there to be a place for women to be in top jobs. That doesn't mean there won't be women in major positions in terms of healthcare, or others that are not combat involved. But it would be hard for me to see women rising in the service without a serious change there. Women are now taking front line positions in the Air Force; there are women pilots. There was a woman F-15 fighter pilot when I was in Kunduz. You see that a lot, there are women who fly attack helicopters; and that's as front line as it gets for the Air Force, flying a fighter job. So it is possible there; it took many years, but it seems there is not as strong of a feeling there. And starting soon, but I don't know when, women can now be officers on submarines in the Navy. So the class that just entered Annapolis, when they graduate, those women can plan to be nuclear sub officers. So again, there is potentially great opportunity there for women.

Question: I'm Dana Freyer and I am co-founder of the Global Partnership for Afghanistan. We have been working since 2004 with farmers, men and women, and helping them restore their livelihoods, basically. I just want to make a few comments, because we have been working on the ground. Our organization is really all Afghans now, 180 Afghans working in 12 provinces and 450 villages with more than 15,000 farmers who now have businesses. So just a couple of

comments, we work with the military—we get funding from the military, which is controversial in itself, but the key to our success, and I think this is an aspect of US foreign policy in Afghanistan that is being recognized, is that agriculture is the driver of the economy. You have to focus on the agriculture base, which 80% of the Afghans depend on. You have to do that by working with local communities, and you have to do that by building Afghan capacity to manage and run the system. And so, the interface between the military and these local provincial reconstruction teams and argi-development teams, like some of the ones that James described, is that they need local NGOs and local organizations through which they can do development projects. They can't do it on their own because they don't have the ties to local communities, and you need the local leader to lead them into a community. Our Afghan staff meets with local leaders, consults with them, and we've made it a condition of participation that women be beneficiaries and be participants. This defies the stereotypes in many of the villages we work with, but the male leaders have agreed in all cases. And the way we have done this is by building up a staff of 40 women, of our 180 Afghan staff members, and they work with the women. So when you talk about the women in the military being an outreach to local Afghan women as a source, they have to do that through local Afghan women. I've seen the pictures of the American women soldiers going into these communities in their fatigues, and it just gives me chills. They will be hospitable because Afghans are hospitable, and they will just shake their heads and say have some tea, but they are not being respectful of the local culture. So anyway, I think the policy is there, and the intent in there, but it's a question of how you implement. And we are now faced with the wonderful challenge for our organization: everyone is coming to us from the European Union to the American military, because we are the connection to local communities. And that has to grow, and there needs to be more of us and we have to continue to support the local organizations that do that. And one last comment, as everyone here is interested in foreign policy, and we have the foreign policy here in our government now, they understand this need to work with local communities, and how we implement it is the real challenge. And I think we could do a lot with the people in congress and the government, and try to move in that direction.

And the other comment I have is, briefly, for James—he and all the media is embedded with the military. When Bruce and I go to Afghanistan and the other directors of our organization, we are with our staff. We have no security, we dress appropriately we travel with our staff and travel all over to the provinces we are working in, for the most part. And we really get to know the people, and the problem is our government and the media only see the war. Or are they are confined to their compounds. So they really don't get that outreach to the community, so the only news you read about is about the war. Even James says, the war is not going on in these places. There are places in many parts of the country where people are trying to rebuild their lives. So I think that we need to get the media to talk about some of the positive things that are happening there, and that could change the debate.

Mr. Dao: As I told you, I completely agree. It is a huge challenge to major media organizations; maybe the answer will come from outside of the media organizations. Because it is just dangerous as hell for *New York Times* correspondents to travel—one of my colleagues was kidnapped in the same province I was in a year ago, and his translator was killed. So we are forbidden now to travel to most parts of the country on our own, if we're not embedded. So it is a problem, trying to report on what's really happening in Afghanistan on the group with Afghan people. We are trying to have Afghans in other parts of the country who can do reporting...

Ms. Ellis: What about other foreign journalists, are they are allowed to go—like Europeans?

Mr. Dao: I think any nation that is in danger of being kidnapped is wary. If you can pass as an Afghan, well, then you have chance. There was a Japanese reporter kidnapped the week I arrived; he was held for six months I think. And a lot of it isn't even the Taliban, its just criminal activity. If you aren't an Afghan—and even if you are, you are subject to danger.

Question: My name is Ruth Cowan. There is inconsistency when looking to the military to bake cookies. The two policies of the United States Government are community development and developing the police force. The people who can train police are police; not the Army! So we have the Army assigned to do a job that they are, I think, ignorant, number one. Number two, the other policy is community development. And against, that's not a function that's appropriate for the Army, particularly since they don't speak any of the languages. I saw a documentary where the soldiers were speaking to the people in the village in English, and the men are looking at them; so the soldiers speak louder, a common practice for people when communicating in another language that if they speak more loudly the difficulties will go away. So the Army is being assigned two functions that they are ill qualified for.

Mr. Dao: Well, I do agree with you. But, first of all, I think there are German police teams and Italians there who are somewhat veterans teaching the Afghan police force. But the reality on the ground is the reason the Army is there is that the Afghan police really are a paramilitary force; they are not arresting people, unless they're occasionally Taliban—some insurgent fighter that they don't kill, they will arrest them. But there is not a court system, and that's the other part of the civilian surge. The poor guys from the justice department trying to build a legal system, and I don't know what he can do; people can't read, they don't have a clear set of laws. That is a long way to go. So the police are basically there—they are a paramilitary force to a large extent. In terms of community development, this is the last thing that any infantry man wants to do. It was hoisted on them, and for better or worse that is why Bush ran on the nation-building. He was sort of channeling the frustration of the military; they are not good at it and didn't want to have to do it. The Obama Administration is clearly trying to get them out of that business, and that's why there are a lot of NGOs there doing a lot of that work, and why there is consultants there trying to do things. But if you can't get the villagers to develop, it's a problem.

There is actually an interesting debate going on, talking about soldiers going to these places in their helmets, just stumbling in and potentially alienating the population—there is this whole debate going on about whether body armor is bad for certain strategies. The obvious answer is yes, it's terrible; it's a terrible way to walk in, with helmets and body armor. They leave their weapons at the door, but—it doesn't work. But if a platoon was blown up or caught in an ambush, and some of them died, a whole bunch of commanders would loose their job and there would be outrage all over the place. So it's a difficult balancing act for them.

Ms. Ellis: The State Department and USAID are trying to train more people to take over more of these projects.

Mr. Dao: Yeah.

Question: My name is Warren Hoge from the International Peace Institute and I want to ask you about the young soldiers. You mentioned the Captain who was roused by Abu Ghraib, he had a sense of mission. But I want to ask you about the young guys, and what their motivation is. And also what their commanders tell them, in the following way: do they think this is their job, and their goal is survival? Do they think they are doing American national security work? Do their commanders tell them you are serving their country? What I am trying to get at is, how much USA, USA, USA is there in the directives they are given? And how much do they feel they are sort of doing God's work, America's work, or how much is the reality that this is their job and they will do the best they can, but they really just want to go home?

Mr. Dao: Well, people join for all kinds of reasons. But for a lot of them, they have economic reasons. This is the factory worker of America today; they are mostly from small towns, they either weren't interested in college, or were poor students and couldn't get a scholarship, or they went and hated it so they dropped out and joined the military. It's solid pay, you can start a family, and if you make it through you are going to get a great pension at the end of the day. And that's where a lot of them start from. And I think right after 9/11 there was sort of a wave of patriotism, people coming in and wanting to fight to get back at terrorists. I think there is less of that now. People might get in with purely economic reasons, but I think a lot of them are filled with a sense of—sometimes you could call it idealism, it's maybe slightly heroic in nature, what soldiers do, and they would like to think they are accomplishing something and making America safer. I think some of them in their hearts are hoping that is what will happen. What they find is a lot less idealistic in that sense. They spend a lot of time just shooting at people they can't see, and it's very frustrating for them. And they are fighting IEDs, which are the worst enemy possible because you can't even fight them.

Question: My name is Kimberly Kahnhauser, from the Women's Foreign Policy Group. I just wanted to ask a little bit more about the challenges of covering Afghanistan. You mentioned a little bit about using stringers in certain areas, and I wanted to know what some of the advantages of that are—as you said, they won't get kidnapped, but beyond that are there are other advantages or disadvantages of using stringers to cover the war.

Mr. Dao: Well, the obvious is, that probably—the same problems we deal with in New York City or elsewhere in America—the stringers are not considered to be as qualified or as good reporters as *New York Times* correspondents, and that sounds very haughty I know. But particularly when you are in a country like Afghanistan, the local stringer has at most a high school education. It works because they speak English pretty well—they might not be able to write a word, but... I've dealt with some of our translators and they are amazing, really speak incredibly well, but I think some people out in the countryside are really just eyes and ears. They see things happening and they can tell you the basis of what's going on. Some of them may even have contacts with the local elders or a governor or something, but they are never going to ask all the questions you need to ask, and that is the shortcoming of stringers. The best written stories are the ones you report yourself really, when you write a story that someone else reports you lose something. We use stringers in the US too, if we can't get to West Virginia for a day or something you may use a stringer.

Ms. Ellis: Okay, so we are going to take a couple together because we want to get to everyone and we have to wrap up somewhat soon.

Question: I'm Bruce Freyer from the Global Partnership for Afghanistan. Having been very closely involved with one battalion, give us your assessment, if you can, on how well this battalion has been on the cultural and ethnic make up of the people in Afghanistan, and the environment in which they would trust. Especially because, as you indicated, they are there to train police.

Question: My name is Peggy Blumenthal from the Institute of International Education, and I'm going to take the other end of it, which is coming back. How well prepared they are if any for re-entry into the United States? Have we learned anything from the Vietnam vets that came back and the huge problems that they faced?

Question: I'm Jane Antilla from the Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN. I used to work in Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008 as a human rights advisor. I wanted to follow up to a couple of the issues that have come up—we have talked about journalists being embedded and very few people being able to get around. I was interested—and I don't know if you can shed light into that, but do you feel that your recording is restricted, because you are embedded? And the other question is a little bit of a follow-up to the cultural awareness; we hear a lot about how the military might do a lot of things in a culturally insensitive way, and you talked about the military being sort of its own subculture, and so I was interested, in the case of the battalion you covered, how do they actually train kids of 19 or 20 years old to do that kind of work? How do they address these protection concerns, and how are they able to take it forward in their work with the Afghan police?

Mr. Dao: Nine tenths of training for soldiers is learning how to be soldier; how to handle weapons and how to defend yourself, and learning how to maneuver and stay alive. This is not the ideal force for civilian surge work—they are soldiers. What they do try to do, and they have been doing more of this, and it really started probably with the surge in Iraq, where the military went whole hog, and then kind of a resurgence, and the idea was to work with the locals, win their trust, and try to build security that way. What they do now is every unit, before they go to Afghanistan or Iraq, will go through major combat training, and they set up mock Afghan villages, populated by Afghan immigrants or translators they have brought over. And they try to role play what it's like to deal with the corrupt local officials, and it's almost comical on one level, but as it turns out, the State Department goes through the same training actually. But that's about it. The more ambitious of them will study Dari and learn a few words, but really, like so much of the military, it's on-the-fly training. They get there, and it's really up to their company commanders to guide them to deal with the local population in the right way, in as culturally sensitive way as possible. But it's really on-the-fly, truth be told.

In terms of what happens at the other end—did we learn anything from Vietnam? And I think the shocking answer is no, we didn't learn a lot from Vietnam. Initially, it's really quite surprising how surprised they were about PTSD. People come back and do crazy things, and I think the added twist to what happens to troops these days is medication. They treat them with medication—they put them on meds, and there are a lot of heavily medicated kids who come

back from deployment. There is clearly no good treatment for PTSD, so, at some degree, they are just doing what American psychiatry does. But, they were caught remarkably flat footed in terms of having enough therapists and psychologists, but very late in the game—probably around 2007. You would have thought they were more ready.

Question: There is money for GI education, but can you really go back to school when your brain is a mess? Let alone your body.

Mr. Dao: I mean PTSD for a lot of people—your brain chemistry changes when you go through something like that, but its not necessarily changing everything. People find a way to live with it, a way to channel. And college seems like a very good way to channel it. I've talked with some college professors, and some of these guys were dreadful high school students but they've grown up. They're matured and focused, and they go back home knowing what they want to do and they do great. But a lot of returning troops don't want to call it PTSD, they call it PTS, they don't want the disorder part because they don't want to be thought of as mentally ill—and many of them are not. But different? Yeah they are different. It's a post traumatic stress something or other that they are living to deal with, some in constructive way and reintegrating.

Question: But is the Army helping them?

Mr. Dao: The Army is trying—it's doing a much better job than it was even two weeks ago. It's sort of analogous to having soldiers do development projects—it's not what they do. And when you have psychologically damaged kids in a military setting... there is a big debate in the military going on about this, and basically they want to treat them like soldiers. They want to line them up and put them on medication, and they haven't figured it all out yet.

In terms of stories being restricted: I haven't reported on anything really incriminating or anything, not that I would have if it happened, but I just haven't seen any of that. Nobody has said anything like 'oh you can't write that,' and they don't see it because I don't write it over there, I come over here and write it. I have written three pieces and there is a lot on the website, and no one has ever complained. Well, I hear about complaints, but its mostly stupid stuff; like soldiers bitching about having to shave, and the commanders telling them to deal with it.

Question: The protection of civilians... how do they make sure that soldiers don't cause unnecessary harm?

Mr. Dao: They have a huge, huge concern—and I think the civilian causality is the worst thing you can deal with, it's a point of anger, frustration, and dismay for soldiers. When there is hooting coming from over there, they just want to level it; the guys I saw were highly restrained, and very unhappy on how restrained they were. The major restraint is they don't drop bombs on places. I was in a place where they were watching men gather in a compound, and the assumption was that they are going to start shooting there; and three years ago, they would have dropped a bomb on them. But they didn't, and sure enough the guys started shooting, but they never dropped a bomb, and the guys got away. So, there is a fair bit of restraint. You do hear a lot of complaints about night raids. And this is an ongoing sort of tension, because it seems like betrayal. From what I saw, night raids are—you can't do culturally sensitive night raids. You are

going to go to homes and pull men out and put them in cuffs. You will have to see women and they will all be weeping, and that's the way it is and it's not going to get nicer. I think they are trying to do less of them because obviously they cuff perfectly innocent young men and it's infuriating. In Kunduz, there were occasional night raids—now it's all special operations guys—and I know commanders think they are very effective. They are very targeted, a particular leader in a particular place. I think they feel it's a way to reduce civilian casualties, as you capture that guy and kill him. You don't raid or attack the village; you just come in and get him out. So there is a lot of this, and it will be a continuing source of tension, because they will make mistakes.

Ms. Ellis: I am sorry to end the program, because I know others have questions, but Jim has agreed to stay on and the Ambassador has invited us to stay on and continue the conversation. You have done a wonderful job, thank you so much. [*Applause.*]