

Beginnings

Interviewer

These are really oral histories. I'd like to hear just a little bit of your private history in this as well. Where did you grow up and what got you interested in going into the Foreign Service?

Ryan Crocker

I grew up in the Air Force. My father was a career Air Force officer and I moved around with him both in the U.S. and overseas, Morocco, Canada, Turkey

Interviewer

Hold for one second. I'm just going to turn off that air conditioner.

Interviewer

Okay go ahead.

Ryan Crocker

Alright, I grew up in the Air Force. My father was assigned at Fairchild Air Base near Spokane when I was born. For the first 18 years of my life, through primary and secondary school, I was an Air Force brat. I graduated from high school in Turkey on his last assignment, and I knew going through college that I wanted to be involved in service and it was tradition kicked up with him but like a lot of sons, I did not want to follow my father's footsteps exactly.

Ryan Crocker

Having lived overseas, having spent a year abroad in a university in Ireland, my junior year we traveled through Asia during that time. I was interested in the Foreign Service, took the exam my senior year and came into the Foreign Service, directly out of college.

Interviewer

So you must've by growing up as an Air Force brat you must've developed an interest in other cultures I'd imagine by virtue of that. Is that right?

Ryan Crocker

Well that's exactly it. I had my preschool years in Morocco. I had part of my elementary education in Canada and then of course my high school in Turkey. And my parents believed in taking advantage of their overseas tours. So we traveled extensively as a family whenever my dad could get away, and then on my own during my junior year of college and the summer thereafter.

Interviewer

Which college did you go to, then?

Ryan Crocker

Whitman College in Washington State.

Interviewer

And what was your major there?

Ryan Crocker

English Literature.

Interviewer

And languages, you studied languages, I'd imagine.

Ryan Crocker

I did but like I think many students of my generation, languages were intellectual abstracts. They were not living means of communication. I did not do particularly well in languages. I'd studied Spanish; I'd studied German and really could not communicate in either and thought I was something of a linguistic dunce until I joined the Foreign Service. The Foreign Service has possibly the best foreign language teaching program in the English speaking world, and I discovered I was actually not too bad at languages. So when the languages I've acquired, I acquired in the Foreign Service—Farsi, French, and mainly Arabic.

Interviewer

And that sort of lack of interest or capability in foreign languages, that's sort of an American trait, isn't it?

Interviewer

It is. We're a great nation and a great people, and I think the greatest on earth, but we do have our drawbacks and weaknesses. One of them is language because the rest of world, by and large, can speak to us in English and because we are still with all of the globalization that is moving forward, we are still a nation-continent in many respects. We simply do not devote the resource to language that I believe we should.

Interviewer

Do you think that's then driven more by our geography or by our sort of arrogance?

Ryan Crocker

I wouldn't call it arrogance. Again America for all of its global reach is in many respects an inward-looking nation. The size of our economy and the expanse of our geography, most Americans are occupied with things American, and when we do venture out, of course, it's into a world where English is—if not the first language it's pretty much the second language. So

Interviewer

It's certainly the language of business, obviously.

Ryan Crocker

It's the language of business. It's the language of government. It's even the language of the arts to a marked degree. So I wouldn't really call us arrogant in that sense. It's just that we don't see the imperative to learn languages.

Interviewer

Do you call upon your Arabic training in your diplomatic work or is it more to sort of familiarize yourself with the culture? Â Do you actually engage in negotiation and diplomacy through a separate language?

Ryan Crocker

Well for me Arabic was very much a working language. Â There are parts of the Arab world, like the rest of the world, where English is widely spoken, but there are parts where it is not. Â And in Iraq, for example, the prime minister does not speak English, and our conversations were conducted in Arabic without interpretation so I could have a direct contact with him, and I think that is invaluable.

Ryan Crocker

Iâ€™ve done negotiation in Arabic for highly complex, highly sensitive issuesâ€”I do use a translator. Â You simply cannot afford to get a single word wrong and also even if youâ€™re reasonably good in language, if it is a negotiation and the stakes are high, the added time that you have between the utterance and a foreign language and its translation into English can be extremely valuable.

Interviewer

I can see where it actually could be valuable to have the time, [but] it could also sort of drag the communication though in a way, right? Â But if youâ€™re speaking directly to an Arab speaker, you could have much more of an exchange, isnâ€™t that right?

Ryan Crocker

Absolutely. Â Again, Iâ€™m talking about negotiations [Crosstalk] in a very technical sense.Â

Interviewer

So you went from college right into the Foreign Service?

Ryan Crocker

Directly, yes. Â Just a few months after I graduated.

Interviewer

And where were you first posted at?

Ryan Crocker

It was interesting. Â At that time in the Foreign Service entering officers were normally given one of their top five choices, and I was actually the only one in my entering class for whom that did not happen. Â I had wanted to go to the Middle East. Â I had traveled thereâ€”Turkey, borders the Middle East, is a Muslim culture. Â I was intrigued by it.

Ryan Crocker

I wound up being assigned to Guatemala, which was fine. Â I was 22 years oldâ€”it

didn't matter, it was all an adventure. A I actually started Spanish, and two weeks into Spanish training I got a call one night asking if I would like to go to Khorramshahr, and I said, "Sure," figuring it had to be the Middle East or they wouldn't be offering it. And after I said "sure," I looked up where Khorramshahr was because I didn't have a clue. It's down in southwestern Iran near the Iraqi border.

Interviewer

Hold on just for a sec. ^ ^ ^

Interviewer

So what year first of all was that for Guatemala? That would've been in the '60s, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

No I graduated in '71.

Interviewer

'71.

Ryan Crocker

So this was '72.

An American in the Shah's Iran

Interviewer

'72. And then you went to Iran then the next year, is that what you said?

Ryan Crocker

I went to Iran in '72, yes.

Interviewer

So tell me what Iran was like in 1972?

Ryan Crocker

Well I learned a very valuable lesson during that first tour in Iran. This was the time of course of global revolution on campuses. I had been affected by that as I think my entire generation was. So I arrived

Interviewer

You mean with the youth revolution of the '60s?

Ryan Crocker

Yes, yes, exactly. So I arrived in Iran with this preconception that regimes like that of the Shah were heading for the dustbin of history, that the authoritarian monarchies simply could not withstand the new forces in the world, and I spent my two years there trying to prove that case through discussions with labor union representatives, students at university, and so forth. I didn't get a lot of resonance from the embassy on that and, of

course, as history has shown us I may have been quite right about the survivability of the Shah, but I was 180 degrees wrong about the direction of his downfall. It did not come from the left”

Interviewer

You anticipated”

Ryan Crocker

It came from the right.”

Interviewer

You anticipated a liberal democratic regime to replace”

Ryan Crocker

Right.

Interviewer

Or that”s what you wished for.

Ryan Crocker

Well not “wished for” that”s what I believed was going to happen, and the lesson I derived from that is do not carry your own intellectual baggage and preconceptions into someone else”s very complex political culture. You”ve got to be on-receive particularly in your initial months. You”ve got to see reality in its own terms. That”s something I”ve always tried to follow.

Interviewer

So it”s to observe rather than to affect.

Ryan Crocker

That”s a different thing. It”s to observe and to interpret a culture, a political society as objectively as you can in its own terms, so that you can then affect it in a way that makes sense.

Interviewer

So as a diplomat one of your primary missions, then, is to understand the political, cultural, economic environment in which you”re working so that you can have a greater effect when you do institute policy, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

That”s exactly it. If you”re simply observing and analyzing then you”re a graduate student. You”re not a diplomat. Diplomats are there for a purpose and that is to further the interests of their nation. So it”s very much about affecting, but you”ve got to understand where you and how it works before you can really have a constructive effect.

Interviewer

So again describe Iran in 1972 and describe "I guess that would be the Nixon administration's policy toward Iran in 1972.

Ryan Crocker

Well here is why, in addition to language, I think an understanding of history is extremely important in diplomacy. I consider it the most important of academic pursuits to inform a serving diplomat, more so than political science, because you need to understand Iran at that time by looking back to World War II and its aftermath. It was World War II, of course, that launched us as a major player on the world stage. Churchill made clear in 1946 that Britain could no longer carry its traditional role vis-à-vis the Soviets. We sought to do that directly. That is I think an important interpretation of our intervention in Vietnam.

Ryan Crocker

That clearly was not going well for us by the time I arrived in Iran, and a new policy, the Nixon Doctrine, was already taking shape that we would try not to have to do these things by ourselves, secure the world. It would be far better if we could find powerful, yet reliable allies, to do this in our stead. Iran was such a country. We saw Iran as a means of ensuring stability and an anti-Communist, anti-Soviet, pro-Western influence in the Middle East, and it was the policy of the Nixon administration to fully support the Shah.

Interviewer

What was the Shah like? You must've met with him?"

Ryan Crocker

I didn't. Again, I was not in Tehran. I was way down the road in a three-person consulate, which for a brand-new Foreign Service officer couldn't have been better, because it meant I had a lot of responsibility. We covered the whole southern swath of Iran from the Iraqi border to the Pakistani border, but it meant that I was in the provinces. I was not in the capital, not engaging with the central government."

Interviewer

What did an authoritarian, modernizing regime with support of the American foreign policy [establishment] look like in the provinces? What did you see as the life of the typical provincial Iranian?"

Ryan Crocker

One "even as a junior officer" one saw the gulf between the establishment, the ruling elite and their allies and much of the population at large. The secret police, SAVAK, was widely feared. You could feel it talking to Iranians. They were often quite ready to be frank if they were alone with me or with other Americans. If there were other Iranians present, particularly those they did not know well or fully trust, you could see the circumspection set in.

Ryan Crocker

That was my first real exposure what I would term a police state, and it had its impact. Again, provincial government officials, the provincial economic and business elite were in one place, much of the rest of the population was in a different place "not in open opposition by any means. That wasn't there. They did not dare to have it there, but a

distance, dissociation, and I think fear.

Interviewer

Did you sense resentment toward America even then for its alliance with the Shah?

Ryan Crocker

It was there but—again it was understated or not stated. Fear, I think, once again of what the consequences could be of speaking openly and on that even speaking openly to an American, because it was about America. So one didn't hear it, one could feel it.

Interviewer

What about the fundamentalists, the germ, or the root of the fundamentalist movement that would emerge later in the '70s? Did you see any elements of that?

Ryan Crocker

Absolutely invisible to me but again, I was looking everywhere but there. I wouldn't have recognized a politicized mullah if I tripped over one. Again that's the—it wasn't there to be seen if I really, really looked, I'm not sure, but given my outlook, I wasn't going to find it.

Interviewer

So how long were you there, in Iran?

Ryan Crocker

Two years.

A "Bedouin Shepherd" in the Desert

Interviewer

And then where did you go from there?

Ryan Crocker

To our newly-opened embassy in Doha, Qatar.

Interviewer

And from—well how long were you in Qatar?

Ryan Crocker

Two years.

Interviewer

Two years. And what was your work there?

Ryan Crocker

A little of everything, and we had just really opened our embassies down in the Gulf, the Gulf States—with the exception of Kuwait, and, of course, Saudi Arabia—had only

acquired their independence from Britain in 1970. We didn't move in right away, so it was just in 1974 as I left Iran that we really began to establish full-fledged embassies—which were very small. I think there were seven or eight of us in Qatar, altogether. So I was nominally the economic and commercial officer, but I did everything—administration, political reporting, back up consular work. And again, it was a tremendous opportunity for still a junior officer to get full exposure to what a diplomat does.

Interviewer

Now at this point you had been in—this is your third Muslim country really, right? Because you'd been in Turkey growing up, which was a Western European-style of state. You had your experience in Iran and then Qatar. People sometimes think of the Muslim world as one big, single monolithic thing—Americans sometimes do, I should say, but it's a very varied and nuanced world, isn't it? What did you discover therefore comparing your experiences across national borders?

Ryan Crocker

Again I was fortunate that by the time I was 25, I had spent—what would it have been? Six and a half, almost seven years, in three enormously different Muslim countries—different culturally, different ethnically, historically, and linguistically. So by the time I had completed my first tour in the Arab world in Qatar, I had internalized [that] the Muslim world, so-called, was as varied, different, and divergent as the so-called Western world.

Interviewer

What was Qatar like then by comparison to Iran?

Ryan Crocker

The full impact of oil wealth was just emerging, just starting to transform the country, both physically as well as I think culturally. Hadn't quite taken hold yet, so I'd had the opportunity to see a society in transition from the traditional means of livelihood—trading, fishing, pearling—into an almost exclusively petroleum economy. I also had a chance to see, again, because it was still very present—Bedouin culture, the Arab culture of the desert and how profoundly that differed from Iran's highly sophisticated urbanized culture.

Interviewer

I read that you spent some time just out as a shepherd for a while to understand that, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

That was later.

Interviewer

That was later.

Ryan Crocker

Again it was the practice, if not the policy, of the [U.S. Foreign] Service in those years that



before the enormous investment that was made in an officer to teach him or her Arabic—it's a two-year program and that's all that one does—that it was important for that officer to have an initial tour in the Arab world to be sure that there was some compatibility there. The last thing the Service wants to do is invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in someone who then decides he doesn't really like Arab culture. So it was after Qatar that I spent two years studying Arabic, and it was during the second year of my Arabic studies that I spent time kind of herding sheep in southern Jordan.

Interviewer

So where was your Arabic study done then?

Ryan Crocker

The way it was done is still the way it is done—the first year in Washington at the Foreign Service Institute, the second year in Tunisia.

Interviewer

And classrooms? Is that right? Is that how you learned or was that?

Ryan Crocker

Certainly the first year. The second year, one was expected to supplement the full classroom experience with experience outside. Tunisia was not the best linguistic environment for that. Many educated Tunisians prefer to speak French. It wasn't our first choice—that had been Lebanon but the outbreak of the civil war had forced the movement of the [Foreign Service] Institute to Tunisia.

Interviewer

Okay, so you went to Jordan as part of this training, too. And how long were you there living as a shepherd?

Ryan Crocker

I was there with a Bedouin family for a month, which doesn't seem like a long time, but if you are living as a Bedouin—it's a pretty intensive experience.

Interviewer

So you—no breaks? You did everything with them? You followed their life, you ate their food, you—

Ryan Crocker

I did, and again all though it was fairly arduous at the time, I definitely profited from the fact that the family I was with—and this was spring, it was sheep shearing season, a very busy time—was extremely short-handed, one son in the army, another son working in the Gulf, so they could use even my hopelessly unskilled help. So I actually had a role to play—herding goats and trying to hold sheep still while more knowledgeable hands sheared them.

Interviewer

Were they suspicious of you? What did they make of this American coming there to live

with them?

Interviewer

Well again itâ€™s how things are done in this society. One doesnâ€™t simply show up and say, â€œCan I live with you for a month?â€ Working through our ambassador in Jordan, Thomas Pickering, I got an introduction to the paramount chief of Al-Howaitat, put this to him, and he said yes he could make it happen. So he then chose the subtribe and the family, and if the paramount sheikh says, â€œThis would be a good thing to do,â€ the subtribe and family will stand up and salute.Â

Interviewer

So what did you learn in that month?Â

Ryan Crocker

I learned several things. This was a time in which Arabs, and particularly Bedouins, could themselves be extraordinarily insular. I found that the women of the family, for example, found me so amusing as I spoke Arabic, because they could not conceive of people who didnâ€™t speak Arabic as a native language. So as I made mistakes and had this strange accent they thought I was either mentally deficient or just having them on as some kind of elaborate joke. Because, again, their experience did not encompass anyone, theyâ€™d never met anyone, who was not a native speaker of Arabic. I learned how important history is and how oral traditions shape a sense of history and of culture.

Ryan Crocker

At night after dinner, my host would sometimes be visited by other members of the subtribe, and they would talk about what Mohammad bin Yusuf had done, his great adventure in Saudi Arabia. It sounded as though it had been last month, but as they talked further you begin to realize this was generations, even centuries old, part of this elaborate family and tribal historical narrative.

Ryan Crocker

I also found how important lineage was. Every one of the people I met could recite their ancestry back ten generations. They knew exactly who they were and how important family connections were.Â

Interviewer

What strikes me is a couple of things that comes from that then. Their sense of time is very different than the modern Western sense of time and their sense of family and race is likely to be very different. Did you take that away from it?Â

Ryan Crocker

Well absolutely. I remember one day when a four-wheel drive pickup came through the wadiâ€™this was of real interest to my people, it wasnâ€™t one they recognizedâ€™stopped some distance from us. Â One of the men went over, came back, and said, â€œItâ€™s okay, theyâ€™re Arabs.â€ My reaction to that was, â€œWell, what were they expecting, Puerto Ricans? I mean who else is it going to be?â€ Arab to them meant people like them.

Ryan Crocker

They were of the broad tribal confederation. They were also nomadic, they were Bedouin. Arabs for them did not encompass non-Bedouin Arabs. Palestinians were not Arabs. City-dwelling Jordanians were not Arabs. Only they were Arabs. And in terms of time, it was again, literacy had come to some in this family, not all, but the oral tradition I think affected the way time was perceived and their life itself.

Ryan Crocker

The time was of seasons. When are the sheep born? When are they sheared? When are they slaughtered? There was some rudimentary agriculture also driven by the seasons. The cycle of the day, these were a diurnal people. They were awake with the sun.

Ryan Crocker

Unfortunately for me they did not go to bed with the sun, either. That's when they sat around talked. Anyone who thinks of Arabs as lazy should spend a month doing what I was doing. They got by on it seemed like five hours of sleep, maybe a nap in the afternoon and an incredibly strenuous existence.

Interviewer

Sounds like the ways they apprehend life, too, is through stories, is through narrative, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

Well again we would call it stories. For them, it is the total body of their knowledge. It's history, it's politics, it's literature. It's in a world in which television was completely absent radios, not where we were there was no reception at the time. Literacy was still very rudimentary. It was all an oral tradition, but story might encompass it but only if we understand "story" in its broadest possible term.

From Saddam's Iraq to an Embattled Lebanon

Interviewer

So after your experience there, you were posted where then?

Ryan Crocker

I went from language training to Iraq in 1978.

Interviewer

And your position then was in Baghdad? It was at the embassy in Baghdad, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

It was at the embassy in Baghdad but not at the American embassy. It was at the Belgian Embassy because at that time we did not have formal diplomatic relations with Iraq so we were the U.S. Interests section

Interviewer

I see.

Ryan Crocker

Of the Belgian Embassy.

Interviewer

And in that circumstance you had contact with Saddam Hussein?

Ryan Crocker

Again not—we did not. Saddam Hussein was as he was pretty much throughout his history. He was not accessible, not to foreign diplomats and not to his own people. So, no, no contact with Saddam and very little contact with the Iraqi government who viewed us, at that time, with enormous mistrust and suspicion.

Interviewer

What was Iraq like in 1978?

Ryan Crocker

It—I had been in Iran under the Shah so I had some familiarity with a police state. This was a police state raised to the order of 10. The Iranian style of control was far more subtle and, as severe as it could be, far less repressive than Saddam's regime where our neighbor was afraid to talk to us—absolutely, even to exchange a pleasantry.

Interviewer

Is that because you were an American or were they—any foreign connection would've been forbidden?

Ryan Crocker

Almost any foreign connection. He as it happened was married to an East German and—although, of course this was still the days of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact with which Iraq was allied—that put him under some suspicion that he dared not carry another step of seeming to have any kind of connection with me.

Interviewer

So what was your work like there?

Ryan Crocker

My work was primarily again economic and commercial. They may not have liked us, but they were willing to do a certain amount of business with us. So I looked for those opportunities. How could I increase the market for U.S. goods? And we found a number.

Ryan Crocker

Also, of course, traveling as much as I could because there was a tremendous interest in Washington in knowing as much about this very closed country and society as we could manage. And, of course, I did have Arabic at that point—and I used it at every opportunity I had—I had to at least give an anecdotal sense of what was going on, what life was like, what the editorials were saying. It was a bit of Kremlinology at that time, analyzing even photographs—who stood where like the old photos of the May Day parades [in the Soviet Union]. So it was again—some of my colleagues found it hugely isolated. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the challenge. One could not really enjoy life there, because although we were

certainly exempt from the horrors of the state, they were not invisible to us.A

Interviewer

And were you watched and listened in on and observed in a suspicious way there?

Ryan Crocker

We assumed that any telephone conversation was monitored. We knew we were followed. The Iraqi regime of the day was anything but subtle. They would follow you at a distance of seven feet and didn't particularly care whether you knew it or not.

Interviewer

I may have my history wrong here but wasn't during '78 that the Israelis bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor?

Ryan Crocker

No that was 1981.

Interviewer

1. Were you still there?

Ryan Crocker

No, I was in Beirut.

Interviewer

In Beirut. So you went from Iraq then to Beirut? And that was a terrible time for Beirut.

Ryan Crocker

It was. I had met my wife in Iraq. She was also in the Foreign Service and posted to Baghdad at the same time, and we were married at the end of 1980 and literally had our honeymoon in Beirut where we were both assigned. And Beirut was no longer fashionable as a honeymoon destination by that particular period.

Interviewer

It had once been one of the most beautiful spots in the world?

Ryan Crocker

Yes, "the Switzerland of the Middle East" as it was called.

Interviewer

So describe the situation in Lebanon in the early 1980s?

Ryan Crocker

Well it was my first experience in a conflict environment, and a war was on.

Interviewer

Were you now the U.S. ambassador?

Ryan Crocker

No, no, no, no. I was the head of the Political Section in '81 to '84 and like anyone in the military, you can read about it, you can even train for it, but until you're in it you really don't know what it's like. The noise, the uncertainty, and the fear and again anyone who is in a combat situation who says they're not afraid has got to be either dumb or lying, but you learn to "just like soldiers" over time, you learn to adjust to it, to adapt to it.

Interviewer

That's an interesting point. You made that point last night about your safety is not the first line of your mission.

Ryan Crocker

There isn't "if it's all about safety there is no mission, and I think we veered, over the years, too far in that direction. We're starting, I think, to correct back. Then it was expected that you would live with the danger and carry on with what you're supposed to.

Interviewer

You were there during there then during the 1982 barracks bombing?

Ryan Crocker

1982 was the Israeli invasion. 1983 was first the embassy bombing in April and then six months later the barracks bombing. Yes, I was there for all of it.

Interviewer

Describe that situation and your role in responding to it.

Ryan Crocker

Well I was in the embassy when it was bombed in April and the side of the building that was hit "mercifully for me it was the back not the front, because the whole front of the building was sheared off, that's where all the people were lost. Again, the initial reaction is you just account for your people, check to see where everybody was.

Interviewer

So you lost many friends, I assume.

Ryan Crocker

I did indeed, yes, yes, and I worked to ensure they got out of the building, but in the process of heading them downstairs, I went upstairs to see if my chain of command was still alive, the ambassador and the deputy chief of mission, because if they weren't then I had this appalling thought that it would be me.

Interviewer

Who was the ambassador then?

Ryan Crocker

Robert Dillon. "They were, neither of them were harmed, so I had this incongruous sense of relief that at least in this awful crisis that it did not fall on my shoulders to manage what we did next.

Interviewer

And what did happen next?

Ryan Crocker

Well for me it was all about again the recovery. "I sort of set myself up on-site and worked through two full cycles, day-and-night because again we accounted for everyone alive in the first few hours then came the process of digging through the rubble, and since we held out hope that there could be survivors trapped under the rubble it had to be done with huge care, and I again kind of took it on myself to try to be part of that, of being sure that those operating equipment did not operate it anywhere near where someone could be. "It was done painstakingly by hand and then as bodies were recovered to ensuring that identification was made and that they were properly accounted for.

Interviewer

Tell me, what goes through a diplomat's mind in that situation? "You know when this question comes up for soldiers, of course all the time, you've lost your buddy, you've lost your pal, you've lost those you worked very closely with, with whom you share profound experiences, and resisting the impulse for revenge is very hard. "What's it like in your profession?

Ryan Crocker

Well again not very dissimilar. "We are all human and these are fundamental human, the most elemental of human conditions. "But, as for soldiers, the initial focus is not on revenge, it's on recovery, as long as that's going on and then, of course, the question of revenge against whom and because it was by no means who the architect of the attack had been. "This was again the beginning, the virtual beginning, of the suicide bomb era and the suspicion fell on a number of parties, initially the Palestinians because of the Sabra and Shatila massacre of the previous year, for which many held the U.S. accountable. "It was really a long time before I think the finger of blame sort of settled on Hezbollah.

Interviewer

Is there ever a sense of, particularly in that part of the world, a sense of despair that these—this kind of conflict, historical conflict is irreparable?

Ryan Crocker

Again I think despair is a luxury of distance and contemplation. "There was no distance. "This was ground zero and there certainly wasn't any time for contemplation—you just get on with it. "And again I think the parallels with the military are clear. "If you are in the middle of the fight, no matter how bad it may look, you don't say, "despair—you carry on with it and that's what we all did.

Back to the Books

Interviewer

So Lebanon, you departed in 1984?

Ryan Crocker

Mmm-hmm, I did.

Interviewer

And you go to 1984?

Ryan Crocker

I went to Princeton. I had a year of postgraduate studies under State Department auspices. As I mentioned earlier that I early came to the view that history was a hugely important and essential tool for a diplomat, particularly in the Middle East. Princeton, at that time, had what I considered the best Department of Middle East Studies in America. And I applied there and was accepted so I spent the academic year of 1984/1985

Interviewer

When Bernard Lewis there.

Ryan Crocker

Bernard Lewis was there. Carl Brown was there. It was a really, really strong faculty.

Interviewer

What did you come away learning? At this point you had been steeped in the whole Middle Eastern picture, so it's interesting to go from the real-world circumstances to the books and the professors. What did you take away from your experience there?

Ryan Crocker

Well again my purpose in going was to study Middle Eastern history and that was pretty much a blank slate for me. I knew what was going on in the contemporary Middle East. I had some dim sense of the progression of events, post-World War II but almost no knowledge of everything that had preceded that, and I learned in the process just how important history is in understanding the forces and trends in the modern Middle East.

Interviewer

So did you look back then on your time in Qatar, and Lebanon, and Iran, and Turkey and be able to say, "Ah-ha! That's why that was that way, that's why!" because you had been a-historical, in a sense, in your grasp of things and now you were becoming much more deeply historical?

Ryan Crocker

For example I learned during that year at Princeton how historically important the clerics had been in Iran. The Shah thought he had done away with them in the 1960s, but one could see how deeply-rooted they were both in their own right and within Iranian society, all of that, of course, was something I was totally oblivious to during my time in Iran.

Interviewer



Thinking back now, okay? So 1970â€”you experienced the 1979 revolution in Iran while you were in Iraq, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

That is correct.

Interviewer

And having been there and watching what was going onâ€”did you think it as an isolated Iranian response to perhaps the Shah or to a kind of forced modernization? Â Or did you see it then as something we may look back now as the first sign of the twenty-first century?

Ryan Crocker

Again at that time, from that place, which was Iraq, it seemed to be a particularly Iranian phenomenon. Itâ€™s own particular history and expression of a Persian civilization and history, not so much an Arab one. The connection to the broader Middle East wasnâ€™t apparent to me until I was in Lebanon a couple of years later and saw the forging of the Iranian/Syrian axis that began in some respects immediately after the Iranian Revolution. Â But it was 1982 and the Israeli invasion that really brought them together and led to the birth of Hezbollah, and we could then see the carryover of Iranian Shia Islamism to Arab Shia Islamism.

Interviewer

Now Bernard Lewis had been sort of on to this early himself, isnâ€™t that right? Did you learn from him at Princeton what he was seeing as part of the galvanization of this Arab cross-national identification?

Ryan Crocker

Bernard Lewis wrote early and brilliantly on the phenomenon of East meets West, the intersection and often the collision between the Western world and the Middle East, and I found that applicable both in a historical sense but also in a contemporary and even a predictive sense. Â In my own personal view, Bernard Lewis has divided his work into two distinct periodsâ€”the earlier, and longer, period when he was a practicing academic as a member of the Princeton faculty and the period after he retired, for which he is better known. But in that second period, I think he felt himself free from the rigor of scholarship, more free to advance opinions, not necessarily based on research, and frankly I have found his earlier work to be more valuable, stronger, and more informative.

Interviewer

Has he remained a friend? Is he someone that you stayedâ€”

Ryan Crocker

I havenâ€™t seen him in years.

Interviewer

So from Princeton, you go where?

Ryan Crocker

From Princeton I had my first and one of only two assignments in Washington as Deputy Director of Israeli and Arab/Israeli Affairs.Â

Interviewer

And that wouldâ€™ve been during the Reagan administration.Â

Ryan Crocker

â€™85â€“â€™87, yes.Â

Interviewer

And from there to where?Â

Ryan Crocker

To Cairo as political counselor, from â€™87 to 1990.

Interviewer

I see so and then again that would be in the transition from the Reagan years to the Bush I years.Â

Ryan Crocker

Right.Â

Interviewer

So yet another Arab country hereâ€™describe Egypt by comparison to Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, and Qatar, and Turkey. I mean what do we see in Egypt, an historically bound country also?Â

Ryan Crocker

And thatâ€™s a very important point and this time I was informed by an appreciation of the history that I certainly didnâ€™t have before. Â And found that extremely valuable, knowing that a bit of Egyptâ€™s history, as well as language, gave me entre that I may not have had before and the fact that I could quote some of Egyptâ€™s historians really did give me an access that might otherwise have been denied and even more importantâ€™it gave me a framework for understanding historical events. Not remembered here at all but the year before I got there, there had been a police mutiny. Hundreds of Egyptian police conscripts had rioted over pay and conditions andâ€™

Interviewer

In Cairo.

Ryan Crocker

In Cairo. And it had been very alarming to us. Again, the fear of revolution that the combination of poverty, of autocracy could bring about another Egyptian revolution. Again the perspectives I had now developed led me to think that there was far more continuity than risk of revolutionary change. We looked at it closely. We studied it regularly. We reported on it extensively, but I became fairly persuaded that Egypt was fundamentally a stable society, that the development of radical Islam was going to pose terrorist threats but

was very unlikely to sweep away the regime.Â

Interviewer

Because you saw it within the context of Egyptian history asâ€”or a continuum not as somethingâ€”not a catalyst for dramatic change?Â

Ryan Crocker

Right. Egypt is hard to move, particularly once it was out of the shadow of the British. The British occupation delegitimized the monarchy, which then made its own serious mistakes that led to the initial revolution of 1952, but those factors I saw as not present. Â I also againâ€”with a deeper appreciation of Islam, its currents, and its formsâ€”understood the Egyptian people to be very committed to their religion as an element of their identity and therefore remarkably resistant to some radical telling them that they werenâ€™t good Muslims. Â So I kind of thought that the Muslim Brotherhood and its spinoffs was going to have troubleâ€”however desperate daily life might be for Egyptiansâ€”have trouble really getting traction among a people who thought they were just fine as practicing believers and didnâ€™t need any coaching from somebody else.Â

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s interestingâ€”has it borne out? Iâ€™m just trying to compare this that countries where the attachment to religion may be weaker that radical Islam has had a greater footing. Has that been borne out?

Ryan Crocker

There was that famous book by Arthur Koestler decades ago now, *The God That Failed*, an indictment of Soviet-style Communism. Â In the Middle East there have been a number of gods that have failed as organizers of political life. What I found is that it really was in societies where Islam was not, if you will, a determinant of daily lifeâ€”these societies were more vulnerable to the â€œismâ€ of the moment, whether that be Baathism, Arab Nationalism, its Palestinian variant, or what have you. Those in which Islam was deeply-rooted were much more resistant.Â

Ryan Crocker

A very potent force and again in a society like Egypt, the two are inextricably bound together, Egyptianism, if you will, and Islam. Curiously there is another very tight linkage and that is between Egyptianism and Christianity. Egyptâ€™s Coptic Christian minority is fiercely Egyptian in their identity and consider themselves, with some historical justificationâ€”they are the original Egyptians. Â These Islamic outsiders donâ€™t have the same claim to the â€œEgyptianistâ€ that they do. So national identity, perhaps not defined in the same way as the West, is a very, very potent force. You see it in Iraq, always one of the most fiercely nationalistic of nations and peoples and that is, of course, being asserted today.Â

Interviewer

And how does that interact with nationalism? We always think of nationalism as being a weaker force in the Arab world than it is in the West for instance. Is that true? Does it compete with religion? Is the attachment weakening with the rise of the global world? How does that compare, nationalism withâ€”?

Interviewer

Even though Iraq is a newer nation than Egypt, right? I mean it's not as if its nationalism is really post-World War I? Is that right or do I have my history wrong?

Ryan Crocker

Well again the shape of the modern Middle East emerged after the First World War, the lines on the map, but the cultural, the historical senses of identity are centuries old. Iraq has gone by that name since virtually the dawn of time, and again Iraqis are very aware of that long history and very proud of it.

Interviewer

They're less likely to think of it as a political boundary as we think of in the post World War I definition than to think of it as a cultural or ethnic boundary?

Ryan Crocker

One of the interesting aspects of the Middle East is the extent to which, in many respects, artificial boundaries that emerged in the '20s had been boundaries that had been respected and for which the inhabitants of any given country are quite ready to fight and die for. One does not find Iraqis, or Kuwaitis for that matter, saying well, "this boundary has no meaning. It was drawn by the colonial hand." No, these are boundaries to be defended to the last drop of blood, as we saw in the Iraq/Iran War, for example.

Interviewer

Yeah, you were in Iraq during the Iraq/Iran War?

Ryan Crocker

I left just about a month before it started.

A Traumatized Kuwait

Interviewer

Before it started. So you go from Egypt to where?

Ryan Crocker

Well I left Egypt in 1990 to be ambassador to Lebanon.

Interviewer

And how did Lebanon look in 1990 by comparison to 1982?

Ryan Crocker

Well I left in '84, so it had been about six and a half years, and the increased devastation was stunning. Just the degree to which the country had physically, virtually destroyed itself, particularly in the Beirut area.

Interviewer

And what was the political strength of the regime in Lebanon at that time?

Ryan Crocker

Well the political strength lay with the Syrians, supported by the Iranians, and that was also a striking difference. The Syrians had been, of course, a major actor in Lebanon since the civil war, but they were now clearly the dominant power.Â

Interviewer

But does that mean that you had to deal directly with the Syrians?

Ryan Crocker

No, I made it a point to make sure that didnâ€™t happen, that if Lebanonâ€™s sovereignty was challenged by Syrian domination it was nonetheless extremely important for the United States to respect the images and the forms of that sovereignty. So I was extremely careful to deal only with Lebanese.Â

Interviewer

And you were in Lebanon for how long, then?Â

Ryan Crocker

I was there for just about three years, â€™90 to â€™93.

Interviewer

And then you went where?Â

Ryan Crocker

From Lebanon I was assigned as ambassador to Kuwait.Â

Interviewer

Kuwait and that would be the period in Kuwait after the Gulf War.

Ryan Crocker

It was. I was there from â€™94 to the end of â€™97.

Interviewer

And tell me what Kuwait was like, another different country.Â

Ryan Crocker

Well extraordinarily traumatized. Kuwait disappeared as a sovereign nation literally overnight, and the psychological impact on Kuwaitis in the mid â€™90s was still hugeâ€”as it would be for anyone.Â

Interviewer

You say it disappeared as state, but the Iraqis were driven back so they were then defeated. So how did it disappear as a state?Â

Ryan Crocker

That itâ€”again overnightâ€”was totally occupied by an enemy power with its government

gone, all the institutions of the state gone.Â

Interviewer

So that increased the sense of vulnerability is what you mean.Â

Ryan Crocker

Vulnerability at a level that I think an American cannot fully appreciate. It was more than the physical vulnerability. Again, their whole identity had been shaken, if not broken, but certainly compromised.Â Â

Interviewer

So how do you respond to that as an ambassador?

Ryan Crocker

It was very, very important that Kuwaitis understood there was an absolutely rock-solid U.S. commitment to their sovereignty and to their territorial integrityâ€”that it could not be emphasized too often. It could not really be emphasized enough. And to be sure that Washington was aware of how deep that trauma was and again how Kuwaitis saw us as the only guarantee that that little episode of history wouldnâ€™t be repeatedâ€”as it almost was in 1994 when Saddam tested a relatively new administration under President Clinton by moving south again, and all the indicators were it was not an exercise, that this was an invading force.Â

Interviewer

And did you get the support from the Clinton administration that you wanted toâ€”Â

Ryan Crocker

Yes. Again this was early in my own tenure, the â€™94 crisis. Â The Clinton administration responded immediately by deploying forces to fall in on a prepositioned armor set, withinâ€”literally within 48 hours. Â Whatever Saddam intended, and we still donâ€™t know, once he saw the firmness of the Clinton administrationâ€™s response he did turn that forced movement into an exercise. They just made a hard right turn instead of advancing further south.Â

Interviewer

You were in the embassy when that was all going on?Â

Ryan Crocker

I was.Â

Interviewer

And what did it feel like in Kuwait City during that time?Â

Ryan Crocker

There was a huge fear that history was going to repeat and almost desperate reliance on us to assure that it didnâ€™t and a position by the Kuwaiti government that one thing would be different, that nobody was going to run this time. Â And again, I certainly admire

their courage and their commitment, because it kept the population steady. During the crisis there were actually more people returning to Kuwait rather than leaving it, but my decision was that we were not going to evacuate dependents. We were going to hold tight. I felt that any U.S. evacuation wouldâ€™ve just caused wholesale panic.â€

Interviewer

This goes to the heart of another thing you mentioned last night, which was the sometimes disappointing Americanâ€™on the question of American commitmentâ€™to remain someplace where we have been, in other words to back up our promises by staying close by. â€ You may infer this directly with Pakistan, but this is kind of an American tradition, isnâ€™t it, to dive into the world and then want to dive back because of ourâ€™some of thatâ€™perhaps some of that cultural element that you mentioned before that Americans do like to sort of retreat or turn inward, right?

Ryan Crocker

Well again we are a democracy, the worldâ€™s leading democracy, and that means literally that the people get a vote, and we saw this in Iraq. The election in 2002 basically was, in my interpretationâ€™it was an election to have a war. â€ It was a vote to have a war. In 2006, in that midterm election there was the vote not to have the war anymore, but guess what? â€ The war is on. The film doesnâ€™t reverse.

Ryan Crocker

And lâ€™our adversaries count on our inconsistency, our allies fear it. â€ Lebanon, again, in the early â€™80s, was a telling development. After the Marine barracks bombing, of course, the decision was taken to withdraw the Marines. And Syria and Iran learned something from that, and the lesson they learned was â€™apply pain and the Americans will go homeâ€™ and â€™apply pain and the allies of the Americans will go homeâ€™ because thatâ€™s what the Israelis did in 2000 when they made their final withdrawal from Lebanon. And that was the mindset they took into Iraq.

Ryan Crocker

And here again is a lesson of the Middle East, historically. The Middle East knows it cannot keep out the great Western powers, whether it was Britain, France, or Russia in the nineteenth century, or whether itâ€™s the United States in the twenty-first or the twentieth.

Ryan Crocker

So they accept that the foreign armies will come. Itâ€™s what happens next. If you canâ€™t keep them out with a strong left cross, then clench up and start pounding under the ribs and see how much they can take. Thatâ€™s the lesson that Tehran and Damascus learned from Lebanon, and it has informed their policy I think for the following quarter of a century. And itâ€™s what they expected in Iraq. Andâ€™

Interviewer

What do you do as a diplomat in response that? Do you admit to this history and tell our allies that weâ€™re going to be different now?

Ryan Crocker

Well again it is why I think that strategic patience and consistency is importantâ€™critical. Itâ€™s why a good understanding of history is important, because once youâ€™re in then

all of these other factors come into play. Â So be careful about what you get into. Be careful about your commitments. Be very informed about what undertakings you make because, boy, once youâ€™re across the line of departure then the consequences become highly, highly significant if you decide you donâ€™t like it anymore.

Interviewer

Well this is consistent with the Powell Doctrine, right, which is if you enter something you ought to be fully committed and then you ought toâ€™got to stay there to fix what you break, right?

Ryan Crocker

Iâ€™d say in part. If the Powell Doctrine means overwhelming force, itâ€™s really the day after, the month after, the year after. Again this is a region in which our adversaries may not even begin to fight until after we think weâ€™ve won. Â So itâ€™s looking beyond the obvious. Itâ€™s looking certainly beyond the military equities.

Interviewer

And also this strikes me as another clash of the different concepts of time as we were just describing a while back. So you go from Kuwait to where?

Ryan Crocker

I left Kuwait inâ€™at the end of 1997 and then went on as ambassador to Syria.

Interviewer

To Syria. So you were in Syria in the late 1990s, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

From â€™98 to 2001.

A Birdâ€™s Eye View of National Tragedy

Interviewer

To 2001? So were you in Syria on September 11th, 2001, or where were you?Â

Ryan Crocker

No I left Syria in June of 2001 and Iâ€™mâ€™I then had my second of two assignments to Washington as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs. Â And I was on the 8:00 a.m. USAir shuttle from Washington LaGuardia on 9/11, which meant we were making our descent toward LaGuardia when the first tower was hit. We could see it.

Interviewer

You saw it?Â

Ryan Crocker

We sawâ€™Â

Interviewer



Out of the plane you could see it?

Ryan Crocker

Out of the plane we could see the smoke. None of us understood what had happened, just that

Interviewer

So there was smoke and then

Ryan Crocker

There was a fire

Interviewer

There was no information and

Ryan Crocker

No we were one of the last flights that day to actually complete its scheduled route. Just as we landed, the second tower was hit.

Interviewer

And then you landed in LaGuardia were you trying to get to Manhattan when they closed Manhattan then?

Ryan Crocker

I was. I was stuck in traffic on the Queensboro Bridge and watched both towers go down from the bridge.

Interviewer

You could see it?

Ryan Crocker

Mmm-hmm.

Interviewer

You actually saw the crumbling towers?

Ryan Crocker

Mmm-hmm.

Interviewer

Wow what was your you were in a taxi?

Ryan Crocker

I was.

Interviewer

What was your conversation with the taxi driver about at that time?Â

Ryan Crocker

He was a Muslim, an immigrant, and he was almost out of control.Â

Interviewer

Really?Â

Ryan Crocker

Just panicked.Â

Interviewer

Really?Â

Ryan Crocker

Because I think we all had the intuition that this had come out, somehow, of Islamic extremism, and he took us back to Long Island to the Avis Car Rental place and tried to refuse fare. I think he was justâ€”Â

Interviewer

So he felt guilt-ridden and panicked thatâ€”

Ryan Crocker

Yeah, again he didnâ€™t articulate it in any way, but he was so emotional that he feared reprisal.

Interviewer

Youâ€™re tearing up a little bit as you tell this.Â

Ryan Crocker

Well, you know even eight years into thisâ€”Â

Interviewer

Yeah. Â Itâ€™s very, veryâ€”and so even in that exchange, it was an international event that rattled the life of a Muslim cab driver, too, right? Thatâ€™sâ€”who likely had no connection with anything to do withâ€”but suddenly there was this rift between the two of you that he wanted to apologize forâ€”

Ryan Crocker

Right, right, right. And I gave him double the fare and had to shove it into his pocket.

Interviewer

Really? Really? Then you got a car. Were you able to get to Manhattan?

Ryan Crocker

No, no, Manhattan was sealed off, and I needed to get back to Washington then and, of course, Avis said you can have a car but you can't take it off of Long Island. We said, "Sure, where do I sign?" And of course immediately drove up to Orient Point, got on the ferry and headed for Connecticut and made the long sweep down.

Interviewer

I see. You drove all the way from Connecticut down to Washington.

Ryan Crocker

Down to Washington, yeah. And but it was clear to me my colleague, also a Middle Eastern specialist, now ambassador to Algeria, and I were talking

Interviewer

Who was that?

Ryan Crocker

David Pierce. Most Americans didn't focus on it, but a few days before Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was the leader of the Northern Alliance, who had held out in that northern part of Afghanistan against the Taliban had been assassinated in a suicide attack. And on the trip back to Washington we completed that equation. There was almost certainly in our mind a linkage between Massoud's assassination and 9/11, that it had come out of Afghanistan. And that the architects were very careful to take the one threat off the field that could be an ally to us if we decided to retaliate.

Interviewer

Had you been to Afghanistan before?

Ryan Crocker

I had been there again as a student. It was one of the countries I hitchhiked through in the summer of 1970.

Interviewer

So you'd come back to the State Department then in those days after September 11th and then obviously you're deeply involved with what's about to happen next.

Ryan Crocker

I was. Within days I was on a plane to Geneva and really right after aviation resumed to engage the Iranians on Afghanistan.

Interviewer

And what does that mean? Who were you sitting down with and what kind of conversations were you having with them?

Ryan Crocker

There had been a mechanism in existence already for a couple of years, and it was called

the Geneva Group. A The U.S., Iran, Italy and Germany, meeting under United Nations auspices to talk about Afghanistan's refugees and so forth. "This had not had any policy significance at all. The Near East Bureau was not even involved in it but"

Interviewer

It was purely humanitarian then?

Ryan Crocker

Humanitarian, right. After 9/11 it assumed a whole different import. Because as divided as the U.S. and Iran were, we were united in the view of the Taliban, against whom Iran almost went to war in 1999. So we decided to see if we could use this existing channel to talk about Afghanistan in a far more serious way.

Interviewer

And when you arrived in Geneva, was the Iranian response as vigorous immediately as you wished it to be?

Ryan Crocker

Yes absolutely. The Iranians, from our early encounters there in Geneva, were pressing very hard for swift U.S. military action.

Interviewer

And then it comes.

Ryan Crocker

And then it comes.

An American Nation at War

Interviewer

And where were you when we made the decision to invade Afghanistan?

Ryan Crocker

Well I was actually in Geneva talking with the Iranians first week of October.

Interviewer

And then you yourself go to Afghanistan?

Ryan Crocker

I did, yes, right after New Year's 2002, the first week in January.

Interviewer

This is after the fall of the Taliban. This is after the driving out of the Taliban, the success of the war, and you arrived to do what? Who are you going to be there?

Ryan Crocker

I was the chargé d'affaires of the embassy. Again among our perhaps systemic weaknesses is the length of time it takes to nominate and then confirm an ambassador. And we needed somebody on the ground yesterday. So I was detached from my work in the Near East Bureau and asked to go out and get us going diplomatically in Kabul. Again the Afghan interim government had just been installed with Karzai as the chairman, his selection, under UN auspices, a product of U.S./Iranian concurrence, incidentally. But we needed to be there on the ground diplomatically and that was my job.

Interviewer

Did we have an embassy in Kabul before that?

Ryan Crocker

The embassy in Kabul had been closed since 1989, and we reopened it at the end of 2001, the beginning of 2002.

Interviewer

So you literally arrived in Kabul to a physical building that has been locked up and closed all that time?

Ryan Crocker

That is correct, yes. It wasn't exactly physically intact. It had taken a number of rockets. It was fairly badly damaged, and I learned all about being cold all the time, living, working, and sleeping in a building that didn't have a lot of glass left in it.

Interviewer

How much did you rely upon the [U.S.-led] military presence in Afghanistan then to be able to construct that embassy from scratch, essentially?

Ryan Crocker

Well the military presence was absolutely critical. We had a company from the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade there, just under 90 Marines and Sailors. It was a concept that developed after the East African bombings and really paid off for us, because these less than 100 Marines brought with them everything I needed to sustain that embassy. They had an indigenous intelligence capability, a medical capability, an engineering capability, even an anti-armor capability, so just a tremendous asset.

Interviewer

Describe to me your first encounter with Karzai then?

Ryan Crocker

Well it was I think the day—the day I arrived or the day after I arrived, he was in the [Afghan] Presidential Palace, which didn't look a whole lot better than the embassy did. Bitterly cold inside, a reflection of all of the challenges that he and we would face—we couldn't even get the heat turned on. At that point he was not even the mayor of Kabul, let alone the ruler of Afghanistan. And we just sat down and started to map through the steps that he and we would need to take to ensure that there was an Afghan government that could function like a government. And again the challenge was almost beyond words.

Interviewer

Even if you had the heat up and running, governing Afghanistan is a huge challenge. It's different than Iraq. It's different than Syria. It's different than even Lebanon. It's different than any of the countries you had been posted to before this. Talk to me about that. It's very tribal, right?

Ryan Crocker

Well again history is instructive. Afghanistan has never had a tradition of a strong central state. The geography is challenging in the extreme. The ethnic mixes are hugely diverse with Hazaras, Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks. There is no common language. And by 2001, we were looking at more than two decades of sustained conflict since the Soviet Invasion of '79, a conflict that at its inception when the Soviets came in, they came into a desperately poor state with challenges of governance even then.

Ryan Crocker

So Iraq for all of its difficulties and challenges was objectively far easier than Afghanistan. No sustained chronic history of inter-nascent violence in Iraq. A memory, if not the reality, of a middle class society where education was highly prized, where Iraqi families had the same expectations as American families and finally, a source of income. Afghanistan had absolutely none of those things.

Interviewer

It's chief source of income was the drug trade.

Ryan Crocker

Right.

Interviewer

When you got there could you even have identified the difference between a Pashtun and a Tajik or any of the ethnic were you familiar at all with the ethnic divisions of the Afghanistan political state?

Ryan Crocker

Again this is outside my regional specialty. Afghanistan is South Asia. I had not really studied it but because of what I had studied I at least had the wit to know what I didn't know. So the first thing I did is read a book by a former professor, now deceased, at West Point, Louis Dupr , who wrote the book called simply, Afghanistan. It didn't tell me what to expect in politics, but it certainly told me what Afghanistan was in its geography, its history, its ethnicity. And I basically toted that book around with me the whole time I was in Afghanistan. It was hugely helpful.

Interviewer

Now not long after you arrived there, plans for Operation Anaconda are negotiated. Tell me about that when you first heard of it and how you what part you played in that operation.

Ryan Crocker

I had the opportunity to meet General Hagenbeck who had returned to Afghanistan to assume command of the 10th Mountain. "But, more broadly, conventional forces in Afghanistan" a very important step and one that I, in retrospect, believe we should've taken earlier. "I went out to see him at"

Ryan Crocker

You say to the step of introducing conventional forces and"

Ryan Crocker

Introducing conventional forces under unified command because again when I got there, my kind of question was, "Who's in charge?" And for the military, there was no clear answer. "It was not a conventional force commander" the Special Forces had Afghanistan divided into two sections, one commanded from Kandahar, the other from Uzbekistan.

Ryan Crocker

And I remember getting on the phone to the CFLCC commander, Lt. Gen Mikolashek, who had been my OMC chief when I was ambassador to Kuwait and again, personal relationships are so important in military life and diplomatic life, and I said, "Who's in charge here?" [Laughter] "And he was aware of it." He said, "We're working on it, we're working on it." But it made a huge difference when General Hagenbeck arrived because then with those two stars it was clear who was in charge. "What did I know about the concept of operations for Anaconda?" "I'm a civilian."

Ryan Crocker

I do know there were some resource concerns, and those resource issues became pretty clear once Anaconda was underway. "We really did not have armor for that fight, and it became clear that we were up against an entrenched enemy, against whom armor was going to be important." So my mission was to negotiate the safe passage of a Tajik armored element, belonging to the Northern Alliance into the heart of the Pashtun region, and it was not an easy process.

Ryan Crocker

Diplomacy is sometimes seen as, or interpreted as, being nice to people. "In this particular case, I was negotiating with a member of Karzai's cabinet whose brother was the primary tribal leader in the area and was saying they will not pass." And after explaining how this element was only in it for the purposes of Anaconda, the fight against those who were fighting us. "They had no intention of inserting themselves into Pashtun affairs and getting nowhere."

Ryan Crocker

I finally delivered the bottom line which is, "Look, if you resist this advance, you will be fighting us," and this bearded Pashtun with whom I was talking by light of kerosene lanterns at night said, "Oh, oh!" And it was okay from then on in. "We were able to get the armor down, but the fact that we had to resort to asking the Northern Alliance to provide several companies of T55 tanks, because we didn't have anything suggested this was an under-resourced operation."

Interviewer

Now Karzai was not told about Anaconda until just a couple of days before.

Ryan Crocker

That's right.

Interviewer

What did that do to your relationship with him?

Ryan Crocker

He was actually fine with it.

Interviewer

He was.

Ryan Crocker

Yeah, he again he had his hands so utterly full of everything that he was not in any way presenting himself as the commander-in-chief of all military operations in Afghanistan. He appreciated being notified before the fact and wished us well. And again the whole effort to bring Tajik armor down again I informed him we were going to be doing this, or attempting to do it. But he was not really involved in the process.

Interviewer

Was that your primary role in terms of Anaconda was the diplomatic exchange in order to release the Tajik armor, or did you have another part in the operation?

Ryan Crocker

I was intensively engaged with the CIA at that time but obviously not something at this remove I can go into in any detail.

No Time for Despair in Iraq

Interviewer

Right, from Afghanistan you go into Iraq, is that right? Or was there a period in between?

Ryan Crocker

Well there was. I did go to Afghanistan from Iraq almost directly. I left in Kabul at the end of March and the beginning of April, I was in Iraqi Kurdistan. This was in 2002. I made a series of visits at the beginning of December 2001 to Iraqi Kurdistan in the run-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom both to encourage and to steady the Kurds. Our main message there was, "Trust us." No decision had been taken on OIF, but my main purpose was to ensure the Kurds did not do anything unilaterally.

Interviewer

And given the history of the previous war and the Kurds that must have been very hard.

Ryan Crocker

Well again history, even recent history, but Kurdish history is a long and bloody one and a



very uneven one with the U.S. History can be a help because part of the message was, "We don't need another 1991. We have got to work together, we have got to coordinate together, we cannot surprise each other. We can't surprise you, you can't surprise us. We don't want" however this goes "we do not want to see it be another run for the refuge of the mountains." And again, I think, they appreciated that.

Interviewer

So what you're saying is that history can be used to say we won't do something as well as?

Ryan Crocker

Exactly.

Interviewer

So you reversed it, in a sense, from what might have been the initial response. So where were you when the invasion of Iraq began?

Ryan Crocker

I was in Ankara, Turkey, getting set to head for the airport to take a plane back to Washington, having totally failed in one, final, last-ditch effort to get the Turks to agree to allow the 4th ID to come down from the north.

Interviewer

And so the 4th ID ended up having to come down "come up from the south"

Ryan Crocker

Exactly and that "our failure to be able to move through Turkey had consequences in Iraq that are still present.

Interviewer

Talk to me about that, about the negotiations and the consequences, because we have a number of 4th ID personnel that we've interviewed and that was a pretty tragic step for them that they were so ready to go from the north, right?

Ryan Crocker

Well they were just boring holes in the GNC aboard ship. It was "yeah, I" again you don't spend a career in diplomacy without some singular failures and that's one I'll never forget.

Interviewer

Now tell me about the nature of the negotiation, and what strategies you tried to employ, and why you think it failed?

Ryan Crocker

Well there was "if you recall the whole issue required parliamentary approval. For a moment we thought we had it. The vote actually did carry to approve the transit of the troops but then on a more detailed count, it was discovered that there were not enough

deputies in total present in the chamber to make it a legal vote.

Interviewer

There was a quorum so to speak though.

Ryan Crocker

There was a quorum but under Turkish procedures, you have to have more than a quorum for certain votes. And again I'm not a specialist on Turkey. We consider that part of our European Bureau, the same organization that the military has, as part of EUCOM, its not part of CENTCOM, so I can't pretend to fully understand Turkish politics, then or now. But what I clearly sensed was this was about more than simply a reluctance to have Turkey be involved in the invasion of its neighbor. It was also caught up in Turkish internal politics and in particular the tensions between the Turkish General Staff and an Islamist Civilian Government. And I believe that it was those tensions that the civilian government was prepared to support this endeavor that resulted in the ultimate failure.

Ryan Crocker

The Turkish General Staff did not throw its weight behind the effort, they did not use their influence in parliament that I think could've led to a successful vote, and they would not authorize the expedencies that would've allowed us to transit them in any case closer to the day. I invoked everything I could think with Bob Pierson, who was our ambassador. We recalled the long history of the U.S./Turkish alliance, how we had stood together against the Soviet threat, how we had stood together in Korea when they deployed forces and behaved with extraordinary valor. It was not within my mandate to call into question the future of the relationship, but I tried to hint at it by talking about the past and, of course, we did not succeed in convincing them.

Interviewer

It's interesting. I've always wondered what goes on behind closed doors on those kinds of negotiations and you're saying that you tried to put the request in some kind of historical context because that's very important, of course, for all of the reasons we related and yet if the answer is no, the answer is no, I guess.

Ryan Crocker

Right and again the administration, as important as all this, was clearly and I believe rightly saw our long-term equities with Turkey as such that they were not in any way prepared to have a threat issued. And again, at the time, I was more than ready to do some threatening, but I think they were right.

Interviewer

Now what's since this is a very since this is certainly germane to the world that we're standing in right now, where the relationship between State and Defense under such a circumstance must be very delicate, am I right? It's a Defense request but State is having to negotiate.

Ryan Crocker

Right.

Interviewer

How does that work?

Ryan Crocker

Well first again because it is so hugely important to Defense, you have as a key component of the team, the military. And we had a two-star general as part of the team. I can't remember [his name] now. And it has to be that way. For all of the differences that were present at that time between State and Defense—and that's a whole other chapter—between Rumsfeld and Powell, on this issue there was absolutely no daylight. Again we're the negotiators, but boy we did everything we could to try to make that happen because it was so critical to the war effort.

Ryan Crocker

Okay.

Interviewer

As an aside, I mean, you worked for many different Secretaries of State. I know we're getting close to the—are you—

Ryan Crocker

Yeah, I'm really—

Interviewer

Okay.

Ryan Crocker

Yeah.

Interviewer

About five more minutes, would that be all right?

Interviewer

Probably the next three or four minutes would be good.

Interviewer

Okay, alright.

Interviewer

Tell me about your relationships, your impressions of the many secretaries of state that you worked under.

Ryan Crocker

Well it only really starting with Colin Powell that I had kind of a really direct and sustained relationship. I of course knew previous secretaries and as an ambassador, you know your Secretary of States. So that goes back to James Baker. Baker, Christopher, Albright, but it was really with Colin Powell that I had a fairly intensive and extensive relationship. So with

Powell and then with Rice?

Interviewer

So your impressions of those two?

Ryan Crocker

Extraordinary figures, both of them. You have the sense that you are dealing with pillars of history. These are individuals that are shaping history and watching them deal with overwhelming challenges and crises and watching the two of them and I'm sure their predecessors were the same way I just didn't experience it directly the way they maintain composure, focus, consistency, sort of an even keel, it helps me understand why they got to the positions they reached.

Interviewer

One last question. So you arrive in Iraq as ambassador in 2007, is that right?

Ryan Crocker

Right, March, 2007.

Interviewer

And just quickly if you could give me a run-up to the situation on your arrival and then upon your departure in January of 2009.

Ryan Crocker

A very different place in 2009 and 2007. In 2007, it was like my return to Beirut after a number of years except far worse. My first visit to a Baghdad neighborhood, the first week I was there, the neighborhood of Dora, into which a Surge brigade had just deployed, brought to mind the term hopeless. The level of devastation, the mood and attitudes of the people just caused me to go back to the office and think, "How did I get into this and how am I ever gonna get out of it?" And David Petraeus had [laughs] much the same view. He's talked about it at the same time but again, you know, despair is not an option. You just have to get on with it and start chipping it out.

Interviewer

And so by 2009?

Ryan Crocker

By 2009, I left right after the conclusion of the very successful second round of provincial elections which took place in a totally violence-free atmosphere in which the Sunni boycott had been overcome by extensive Sunni participation and which the losers accepted the results. So I left at a time, I think, of real hope. We had just negotiated two historic agreements with Iraq both on our strategic partnership and the status of our forces, which were a roadmap for the new administration, and I had been involved in my last weeks preparing options for General Odierno for the new administration. So I felt that I was leaving at a time not at which one could declare a victory by any means but in which there was real hope.

Interviewer

And your impression of your successor?

Ryan Crocker

Chris Hill is one of our top professionals. He has been at this a long, long time, and he knows how to do it. I think the new administration chose very well.

Interviewer

Thank you very much.

Ryan Crocker

Okay! Thank you!