MAJOR GENERAL RICHARD MILLS ON AFGHANISTAN

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WELCOME/MODERATOR:
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President,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SPEAKERS:
Major General Richard Mills,
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JESSICA MATHEWS: So good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I’m Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment. It’s my great pleasure to introduce General Mills to you. There are times when – I think when history feels like it’s kind of moving too fast. And from my vantage point these days, this is one of those. And while it’s hard to drag our eyes away from the enormous history that’s unfolding in the Middle East, it’s really critical to remember also that we are still in the middle of the longest war in American history, in Afghanistan – 115 months, as I counted, and still counting – with 130,000 U.S. and allied troops on the ground and a set of challenges, both military and civilian, that have proved enormously resistant to solution.

You all know the list. We have a government – local government partner that’s really – doesn’t earn that moniker, partner. It’s neither popular nor trusted in country.

We have weak Afghan institutions and an insurgency that still enjoys safe havens across the border in Pakistan, a situation that in American history has proven to be almost an insurmountable obstacle to military victory, certainly in – both in Korea and Vietnam, where we’ve – where we’ve faced the same problem.

The U.S. has made, obviously, over this enormously long period, a tremendous effort, changed strategies, changed leaders, changed relative emphasis of priorities in struggling to deal with this set of issues, and now faces one of the toughest moments, which is to try to figure out how to begin to end it. Are we, as I gather – our title is the end of the beginning – or the beginning of the end.

And this question of where, as we’ve seen this week with the Kandahar prison escape, which, for me, anyway, was particularly telling, because in the five months it took to dig this tunnel into the prison, at least as far as we’re told in the U.S. press, no Afghans came to tell us or Afghan authorities that this effort was under way. Tells you something about what we’re up against.

We’ve heard from General Petraeus recently a word of cautious optimism about the military situation. But we’re now at the – farther into this year’s fighting period and facing, I think, a changing situation.

We have with us today to share his insights in the situation on the ground – we have the privilege of hearing from Major General Richard Mills, who for the last year has been the senior-most Marine in Afghanistan and has been leading Regional Command Southwest there, where he oversaw 30,000 coalition troops in Helmand Province.

He has – he had two tours of duty in Afghanistan – I mean, sorry, in Iraq, and before that also in Kosovo. So he has had a long – in the course of a highly successful, 36-year career in the Marines, he’s had a long experience with situations of insurgency, not unlike the one that he has faced in Afghanistan.
So we’re going to hear his assessment after his last tour of duty there; where we stand in terms of both civil and combat operations, and what the challenges are ahead; and then we'll have a chance to ask him some questions after he's finished.

And we want to thank you for coming to share your assessment with us, and we very much look forward to hearing from you. Thanks.

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MAJOR GENERAL RICHARD MILLS: Thank you very much.

Well, I want to start off first of all by thanking Ms. Mathews and the endowment for this opportunity to speak for such a distinguished crowd. And I hope that I live up to all of your expectations, and I look forward, certainly, to the questions that I will get at the end of the – at the end of the brief.

Let me just qualify my presentation just a bit, so you understand where I’m coming from. I’m going to talk about the southwest corner of Afghanistan, Helmand and Nimruz province and a small slice of Kandahar. That was my world for the past 12 months. That’s where I was – that was – made up my area of operations; that’s where I concentrated on and where I was focused. I’d be happy to answer any other questions about Afghanistan as a whole, but again, that would be, you know, my opinion, and not certainly – probably not forged by personal observations.

I spent most of my time, as I say, down in Lashkar Gah, which is the capital.

Just a quick background. I was the commander of the 1st Marine Division on Camp Pendleton, very happy in my duties. The plan for the Marines in Afghanistan in late 2009 was that the 10,000 Marines on the ground, commanded by a one-star, would be replaced, so man for man. And that would be the extent of our – of our commitment there.

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In December 2009, President Obama made the decision to surge, and I was alerted that I would be sent forward with about 20,000 Marines to take over the command there and to expand our forces within Helmand province. I was also told at that time that I would morph into a regional command, a NATO regional command that would encompass the two provinces I spoke about, and also take under my command about 10,000 British forces. And within those British forces were embedded some other NATO forces: the Estonians, the Danes, and I would also have Georgians under my command. So it was a NATO force.

My headquarters, Pendleton, was then joined by about 120 British officers, who fleshed out my staff and made it a NATO command. And my deputy was a U.K. one-star who served with me during my year on the ground out there.

What I had, based around 20,000 Marines, was a Marine Air-Ground Task Force based around a Marine division of 13,000 men, heavy in infantry but also with tanks, artillery, light armored vehicles, engineers, reconnaissance elements, a(n) aircraft unit that was comprised both of fixed-wing F-18s and C-
130 aircraft, and the entire gamut of rotary-winged aircraft: our V-22 Ospreys, the newest aircraft that we had on the battlefield at that time, and some close air support provided by Hueys and Cobras.

I don’t want to certainly insult anyone’s intelligence. I’m just going to point out where we were operating in. It’s the – it’s the southwest corner of Afghanistan, Helmand and Nimruz province. There’s about 2 million Afghans who live in that area. Most of those, about 1.5 (million) of them, live within Helmand province.

I will speak separately about Nimruz province. It was a different operation for me. It was a very low level of the insurgency there. So I approached it in a different manner while they – while I was on the ground.

Helmand province, with its capital Lashkah Gar (sic), has a long connection with the United States of America. And the people there remember the Americans very, very well. Back in the ‘50s and ‘60s, USAID imported millions of dollars to build a(n) agricultural irrigation system in Helmand province, which turned the desert out there into a very lush agricultural area that was on – about 10 kilometers wide on both sides of the Helmand River.

The province is dominated by the Helmand River; that runs from the northeast down to the southwest, eventually flows into Iran. Mountains on the northern part of the province, 10,000 feet in height, provided some challenges to my aircraft. And it slowly slopes off down to the Pakistani desert, and the last hundred miles from the foothills of the mountains down to the Pakistan border are pretty much flat terrain.

The population’s focused along the river. About 1.5 million of the – or 1.4 million of the 1.5 million in the province live in the string of towns along the river, as you might guess; everything from Kajaki in the north to Khanashin in the south.

Just one more word on the – on the irrigation system. It does play a very important role for us – again, built by the Americans in the ‘50s and ‘60s, a simple irrigation system based on a large hydroelectric dam built up in Kajaki, which provides power to parts of Afghanistan. But more importantly, it provides water control so that the area can – is farmed 12 months out of the year.

The irrigation system is simple yet very effective: gravity-fed; has been maintained by the Afghans ever since. And they remember the Americans quite fondly there.

The provincial capital of Lashkar Gah was basically the company town built by the company that went over to build the dam and the system. And if you see some old photos – and people will be happy to show them to you – you’ll see American ladies playing tennis in short skirts at the country club and American men moving around and Afghan people in Western dress also working very closely with the Americans.
It was the breadbasket of Afghanistan for many years and produced everything from corn, wheat, potatoes down to world-class pomegranates. If you haven’t had a Helmand pomegranate, you haven’t had a pomegranate, so. (Laughter.) Put the word out, please. Do me a favor. (Laughter.) Quite lush.

When – the unfortunate part about it is the area’s also probably a natural garden for poppy. And some 90 percent of the world’s heroin is produced there. It became a huge cash crop under Taliban and remains so under the insurgency. Focused in two areas, around Sangin in the north and Marja in the south, it’s a cash crop that every farmer dreams about.

Guy shows up around October, hands you a big bag of seed, you throw it on the ground, it doesn’t take much rain, takes very little care; in April it blooms in beautiful tri-colored flowers, and then it hardens into a bulb, which you score, squeeze, get the sap out of it, and another guy comes around in the middle of the night and collects that sap and pays you cash money for it. So it’s a great – it’s a great deal for the farmer who’s just trying to feed his family.

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Unfortunately, of course, it goes – it ends up in the streets of New York, Chicago, L.A., London, Paris as heroin. It is the main source of the insurgency’s funds. We dealt with it as that and we interdicted it. We did not get ourselves involved in eradication, but we dealt with the interdiction of those drugs as they supported the insurgency.

Generally, when you found a cache of weapons, you found drugs with it. And the town of Bahram Chah, which is down on the Pakistani border – I’ll talk about it a little bit more in a minute – is – was a key node in that supply section. Drugs flowing south were sold there; weapons and explosives going north were then bought and moved up to field the insurgency.

So once again, the southwest corner of Afghanistan. This was our operational approach to the – to our time there. I’ll just point out a couple of – a couple of things here. Again, as you note, that’s the river that flows here, that green line that runs north to south. It kind of snake(s). And those are the various towns along the river. Most of them are, in fact, market villages that you’d find in any rural agricultural area, small shops, marketplaces, places where you can buy and sell cotton, wheat, potatoes, and unfortunately, many of those places where you could buy drugs a year or so ago.

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That’s not so anymore.

I’d also point out the fact that we operated very, very closely with the Afghan government. Everything that we did was partnered with our Afghan security partners, both in the military and in the police role. I had a full corps of Afghan soldiers within my area. It was 215th Corps, formed in March 2010. It had three brigades, about 12,000 soldiers on deck, well-commanded, well-led and increasingly well-trained.

When I left, six weeks ago, they were effectively conducting independent operations with just enabler support from our forces – things like communications, some supporting arms, air support and medevac. Although they could have done their own medevacs, we gave them that support so they would get the same medevac capability that our own forces enjoyed as well.
We had an integrated information campaign that we operated with both the Western media, coalition media, and with the Afghan media, in order to get the story of what we were doing out on the street to the Afghan people.

And perhaps some slight change in what had been done before we got there was an emphasis on maintaining momentum on the enemy. When we arrived in country, there was somewhat of a stalemate. We had – we had cleared many of those areas that you see on the map, but our forces were relatively stable. And the – in my opinion, the enemy had somewhat of a momentum on the ground. He was able to dictate where and when the fighting would take place, able to use IEDs to very lethal effect against predictable operations by the coalition forces.

We decided to change that. We consolidated some bases, freed up some forces, and we went on the attack. We felt there should be no place within the province that the enemy was free to train, refit, plan and just take some time off. We went after him in his areas of what he felt were relatively safe havens. I’m sure people in this room, some of you, have probably heard of Marja. The battle for Marja was under way when we arrived. We took a look around and just used our intel – our intel capabilities and decided the battle of Marja was not going to be won in the streets of Marja, but rather was going to be won in the outlying community surrounding Marja.

The impact of that was to disrupt the enemy, push him back on his back foot and have him react to us. We found that to be extraordinarily successful. Although a tough, resilient enemy, he has ways in which he likes to conduct his operations. He fights very linearly. He likes to fight in a series of positions that he can fall back on from one to the next. He doesn’t like supporting arms. He’s terrified of close air support. And he wants – he is deathly afraid of being maneuvered against.

All those we brought to bear on the enemy in a series of battles, and drove him away from the population centers, pushed him out into the desert, pushed him away from the green zone, moved him into areas where he could be less effective. We found that we had some success at doing that.

The battle of Marja, as I said – Marja is – was a – was a major fight for us all last summer. And by the fall it had – it had morphed into a much quieter place. Marja now – you go in the streets of Marja today, there are restaurants that are open, there are kebab stands where you can get a nice lunch, there are bakeries, there are shops where you can buy clothing, shoes, whatever it is that you particularly are interested in.

It is a town where downtown Marja has very few security incidents whatsoever. And it is a town that has more and more Afghan security providing their own security out in – out on the streets.

The Afghan police force: When I arrived in June and met with the elders of Marja, I asked about a(n) Afghan local security force. They all shook their heads absolutely not. They wanted no part of Afghan police. The Afghan police had a reputation of thuggery, thievery and being shakedown artists. They said they would never accept a(n) Afghan police presence within Marja.
In working with them over the summer months and in showing them some of our training objectives and some of our training techniques, they slowly gave in. We were able to transfer some veteran police officers from without the province into Marja to get a footprint on the ground, and then began to actively recruit local Marja boys.

When I left, we had five police stations open in Marja, we had 300-plus police officers on duty; 120 of those police officers are local Marja boys recruited off the streets of Marja and returned back to Marja to do their police work.

In the training perspective, we stressed, of course, police techniques and skills, but also we stressed an ethos of protect and serve (vis ?) a paramilitary ethos. And we seemed to be having some success at doing that.

One of the battles we had, of course: To be a police officer in Helmand province, you need to have a third-grade education. It’s very difficult to find anybody with a third-grade education in Marja, or in Helmand, for that matter. We think the literacy rate in Helmand province right now for men is below 10 percent. For the ladies, it’s probably below 1 percent. There’s really no way to gauge the female literacy rate, because our ability to deal with them is relatively light. I’ll talk about that again here in a minute.

So we are – we do have a literacy program ongoing, both in the police training academy and once they get out on the beat. We use local teachers, again, to teach basic third-grade literacy.

And this is the way we found Helmand province when we arrived. That’s the map on the left, dated April of 2010. We found a resilient, robust insurgency that had been kicked out of some of the key population centers but was still a fairly – was a – was a significant presence within the – within the province. Of course, on that map, if it’s red, that’s bad; if it’s yellow, we’ve got – the government of Afghanistan is going to take control; green is government of Afghanistan control, backed up by coalition force, of course.

As you can see, in April, significant, resilient insurgency on the ground, well funded through the use of drug money, had well-organized and significant lines of communication in order to supply themselves flowing in all directions, primarily coming north out of Pakistan through the town of Bahram Chah, which is the red blob that you see down on the bottom.

We focused on the population and we began to look at the areas in which, of course, the main – majority of the population lived.

Now, when we arrived, we were obviously doing full-fledged COIN operations focused on the population. But we felt that perhaps it had been a little bit out of whack. We felt that perhaps the – while you had to focus on the population, you could not lose sight of the enemy. You could not allow the enemy to dictate what was happening on the battlefield. You could not allow to murder – for him to murder and intimidate his way through the efforts that you were trying to make.
So we attempted to rebalance that through that maneuver that I talked about a little bit earlier: to go – take the battle to him, to make him uncomfortable, to make him react to us.

Now, we found that, again, as I said, to be relatively successful. And as you know, perhaps, through a series of battles, first in Marja then down in what we call the fishhook, which is the southern part of the river, and then up in Sangin over the fall and winter months, we regained the initiative on the battlefield and have in – you can see there, in Marja, 2011. That’s slightly out of date at this point. I would put some more green and some more yellow on that map if I were doing it again. We believe that we have regained the initiative in controlling those population centers.

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Again, the town of Marja, as I talked about – and people think of Marja – it looks like Manhattan Island, but those are not roads. Those are actually irrigation canals that criss-cross the area. I show this map to just give you an example of what I believe is some of the metrics you can use to judge whether or not we’ve been successful.

This is a map – this is an overhead shot taken by U.S. satellite capability of the crops being grown in Marja. Remember that the insurgent fuels his insurgency through the use of drugs, the selling of heroin. On the left is Marja taken above there and just before we arrived. If it's yellow, that's poppy. That’s insurgent-controlled ground that – where poppy is being grown.

If you see green, that is a – that’s wheat. Wheat also grows very well there. If you see purple, that’s some other crop, not poppy.

On the left is prior to our arrival. On the right – and I wish the one on the right were all solid yellow – but it’s a – again, it shows you the progress being made. As we take control of those areas, as the government of Afghanistan begins to move in and do what local governments do, one of which is a very, very strong eradication program, you begin to see the poppy disappear.

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Governor Mangal, who’s the provincial governor, is a – is rabidly anti-drug. He has a – several very, very strong programs against poppy, and – all of which are effective. He has a very strong eradication program, which he does on his own, very effective.

He has a crop – a substitution program, which we work with him on, which, again, has been very, very effective. Forty-five thousand farmers signed up this year throughout the province to take part in the crop substitution program. What they got was a – was wheat seed, fertilizer, and lessons on how to grow wheat – not for free, but at a reduced price. That encouraged them to participate but was not a free ride in any way, shape or form. And we have seen success throughout the province on that.

Will there be poppy grown in Helmand province this year? Absolutely. But it will be a slow reduction, I believe. And overall what I see on that map is I see the funds the insurgent will not get. That is money he will not get his hands on. It’s why Marja’s so important to him. He fought for it so hard because it was critical. It was his bank. It was the way he – it was his funding source. He had to fight for it.

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In addition to being the center of the Pashtun community in Helmand province – and, of course, it’s a Pashtun insurgency we were fighting – it was psychologically important to him, but more importantly, it was materially important to him. He has to get Marja back. I fully anticipate a counterattack this spring. He can’t give it up. He can’t afford to.

We believe we cut his operating budget last year in half because of the reduction of the poppy. And how did we see that? What did that turn into? It turned into him trying to retrieve all the IEDs from the ground that he hadn’t used, and having accidents doing that and losing people to his own weapons systems. We saw it in the reduced ability of him to provide ammunition and new recruits to the insurgency.

Like any commander, he relies on resources. When his resources are reduced, his fighting force is reduced – no question about it.

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Again, that was the series of flights that we took. I showed you that one red blob down on the border in Bahram Chah, and I’ll just talk very quickly about that before I move on to the Afghan security forces. Bahram Chah is about 75 miles south of our – of my last line of force across wide-open desert. It’s a – kind of like the bar scene out of Star Wars. You go to Bahram Chah; it’s a big town. It’s got about 150 shops in it, probably. No people live there; just crooked shopkeepers. You want to buy any drug in the world, that’s where you want to go. You want to buy any weapons system in the world, that’s where you want to go. If you want to buy household products, don’t go to Bahram Chah. They ain’t – they ain’t there. You’re not going to find them.

But you will find about every drug in the world moving south, to be sold out in the world market, and you’ll find ammunition, explosives and recruits heading north to fight the insurgency.

We decided that that couldn’t stand. We raided that place twice. Once, back last fall, and went in, we took over the – took over the bazaar. He fought for all of about 24 hours to hold it; took some – he took significant casualties and he retreated. We went into the bazaar. Any shop we found that had weapons or drugs in it we destroyed. Any shops that we found that didn’t have those kinds of things in there we left standing.

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We disrupted significantly his ability to resupply himself. And we saw that in the drop-off in fighting come the late fall. We went back in there late winter. We’re going to stay for a little bit longer down there now, disrupt him for a longer period of time, hopefully to disrupt the spring fighting season as it begins to emerge. He relies on Bahram Chah to move his – to move his equipment north and to move his very important drugs back out into the world – the world market.

I always tell a story about that fight back last fall to show you that, you know, all plans made by general officers are great plans. Perfect. Never have a problem with them. Colonels refine those plans and make them even better.

When we went to Bahram Chah, our plan was to attack the city because it was, in fact, a fort with a very traditional line of defenses. They had a large minefield laid outside. There was a – just a very narrow
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little valley you had to go up to get to the city that was heavily mined, protected on both sides by fighting positions. He was going to fight a very traditional, set-piece battle against us.

[26:11]

Key to our plan was to breach that minefield so we could flow forces through the – through the narrow gap and then get into the city to take it over. We laid out a very detailed plan. We were going to lay down a line charge against the mines. That’s kind of an explosive rope that goes off, kind of clears the mines; then you push a bulldozer, an armored bulldozer, through the – through that gap to clean the last of the mines out. And then the vehicles follow right behind that bulldozer. Bulldozer’s key, and key to this story.

Great plan. We were moving south. Our objective was to attack at dawn, at first light. So we had to – it was all timed very well. I was in one of the vehicles going south, just kind of just kind of watching this brilliant plan unfold.

About halfway down through the desert, 35 or 40 miles north of Bahram Chah, the vehicle holding my one bulldozer breaks down. Dead in the sand. I’m on the radio. Well, the general didn’t have any good ideas. The colonels were kind of getting a little bit confused and a little bit – little bit excited. And the lieutenant colonels were getting more excited, and the majors were really excited about this thing.

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So we – everybody’s talking: What to do? What to do? And in the middle of it we try to extract the vehicle. It breaks an axle. Now I’m seeing my meritorious-service medal disappear off into the distance. (Laughter.)

Right in the middle of it, a young lance corporal, an E-3, walks up to the vehicle, takes a look at the bulldozer, hops up on top, starts the bulldozer up, backs it off of the vehicle. He asks the gunnery sergeant, who was standing by, hey, Guns, which way? And the gunny pointed south. He turned the vehicle south, put the blade up in the air, kind of like John Wayne in The Fighting Seabees, and he headed south at about 3 kilometers an hour. (Laughter.)

And sure enough, as the sun came up over Bahram Chah, the bulldozer came up over the hills and we were able to execute our plan on time and very successfully. But I don’t want to say for want of a nail, but certainly for want of a lance corporal, that could have been a very long morning for me.

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Moving down to the Afghan security forces is – we talked about those a little bit earlier. I had the 215th Corps in my zone. We got there; they had concentrated on raising infantry units, basic infantry units. They had three brigades. They were spread out over the battlefield. We had – our forces were partnered down to the platoon level, at every level, with the – with their Afghan partners. We began to work with them very closely.

Like any unit, they had – they had trouble starting up. They had a high UA rate. And we looked into that, and we found that Afghan soldiers go over the hill for the same reason that U.S. Marines go over the hill: If they’re not getting paid regularly, if their facilities aren’t very good and if they don’t have a
regular leave policy to get home to be with their families, they simply decide that there’s a better living to be made somewheres else.

We worked with them to get a – get their pay straight. As amazing as it sounds, an Afghan soldier is paid by electronic means. He’s not handed cash. He has a – it’s transferred to his bank account. He has a plastic card just like we all have. He has to go to that – to a bank, transfer money from his account to his family’s account. And that was a problem.

So when working with the banking industry, we were able to get bank facilities – banking facilities set up at the Afghan army camps so that the soldier didn’t have to run home to pay his family; he could do it electronically. And that – and that, coupled with an effective leave policy, a fair leave policy that got everybody home at some point during their yearly tour, we dropped the UA rate down to less than 9 percent, which was – which was pretty good. And we began to see an army that was confident, was much more effective.

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And by the time we left – and they continue today – they conducted their own operations, as I said, in a semi-independent – they plan them, they deploy on their own, they execute the operations and they withdraw. And they’re not afraid to take on the enemy. The Afghan soldier’s a good soldier. He’s willing to – he’s willing to fight and he’s tough in the field.

The Afghan police forces – again, we have several levels of police force. The Afghan uniformed police: There’re about 7,500 of them now in the province. There’ll be more next year as we raise what they call the tashkeel, or the Manning document – raised slowly.

Numbers alone aren’t going to do it. We need trained policemen out there. We don’t need just policemen; we need trained policemen. So rather than surge 10,000 police all at once, we want to take it incrementally, by steps, so that when we put a policeman on the beat he knows what he’s doing.

That has worked out, again, well. We find police, and they’re like police anywheres in the world. There are good units, there are good precincts; there are certain others that need a little bit more supervision.

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But again, through the partnership program, we are finding – we are finding success. I knew I was doing all right when I went to Marja in March – and if I had my video I’d show you, but there’s one particular street crossing right outside the main bazaar that we had to fight for extraordinarily hard all summer. And you couldn’t cross that four-lane – that four-corner crossroads, you couldn’t cross it without having to duck from RPG rounds and small-arms fire.

Last time I visited Marja, there was now a police officer that stands there and directs traffic in and out of the bazaar. And he wanted to ticket me for jaywalking because I simply barged across the road against his little sign he was holding up. I tried to explain who I was, but it didn’t cut the mustard, I’m afraid. (Chuckles.) And so I think I have to go back there next month to pay my traffic fine.

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But again, the police are beginning – are coming online, taking more and more responsibility, manning their own checkpoints, manning their detention facilities, doing what police do, in a protect-and-serve mentality.

And is there still corruption? Yes. Is there still training that needs to be done? Yes. Do they still need to be partnered? Yes. But are they becoming more and more effective? Yes. Are they taking their responsibility for their own areas in places like Lashkar Gah? Yes.

In Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, a couple of events over the past year. In September we had a concert by the Afghan Elvis. Quite a concert. And the Taliban told us that concert could not go. They would not allow it to happen in public. They – it was going to be held in the football stadium where the Taliban used to conduct their public executions.

The Afghan police provided the inner ring of security. The Afghan army provided the outer ring. We stayed – we stayed home and watched. Ten thousand people showed up, enjoyed a very professional concert by a guy who lives in L.A., as a matter of fact. But he goes to Afghanistan for – to give – for entertainment, and put on a very, very good concert.

Right before we left we had a similar concert. We attracted 15,000 people for a female singer who came in second in the Afghan Star Search, kind of an Afghan Idol competition. And she performed in front of a mixed crowd of men and women, which is very unusual in Afghanistan. Once again, Afghan police provided their own security and the Afghan army provided the outer ring of security.

Perhaps most importantly, though, was the elections we held in September. We held the congressional elections that took place. Once again, we were – the Taliban told us that couldn’t happen, would not – they would not allow those polling stations to open, and they would kill anybody that showed up.

The stations opened at 7:30 in the morning, on time, and they closed 10:30 that night, again, on time. We closed no polling stations during the day; we took no indirect fire; and we only had several – one or two incidents up in some of the rural areas of gunfire, but that may have been over the election, as opposed to anything else.

Once again, Afghans providing their own security, planned by them, partnered with us – and I – and I sat down with them; we went through the security procedures. But again, Afghan security run by Afghans.

As you can see, the way ahead, continue to train them, continue to develop the army, especially their maintenance procedures. The army itself is fairly – is basically a light-infantry unit. There are no sophisticated weapons systems down there yet; very, very basic stuff. They move around in Ranger pickup trucks. They have some light weapons, which they can maintain themselves. And their radio communication is rudimentary but effective. Again, we’re not building a force, I believe, over there that they can’t sustain in the long run.
Again, I talked about the Afghan-led operations. This shows you the continuum. Again, they started small. They worked – they worked to more and more sophistication, but, more importantly, to more confidence. As I said, they are good fighters. They want to fight. They like to fight. Long as you – long as you support them well, you won’t have a problem getting them to go to the – to go to the sound of the guns.

Stability operations. This was – as you moved out of security, once you did your clear, then, of course, you moved into what I called stability operations. You’d probably call it development. I looked at development as being more long-term projects that might take some years to do. We worked on a more short-term basis.

We polled the people. We talked to the Afghan local governments: What do you need? We didn’t want to build football fields and, you know, bus stations if that’s not what they wanted. They didn’t.

What did they want? Number one, education. They wanted schools. That was the one thing they asked for immediately after the clear was over: Get us some schools. They understand that Taliban burned schools. They wanted them rebuilt. They knew what they had been missing.

And so we went on a fairly aggressive program of putting schools up, both structures that had been destroyed, new structures, and some temporary structures, such as tents. And the people came. Hundred and twenty-five thousand students in the – in the school system this year, 20,000 of them women, something unheard of under the Taliban.

Rudimentary, yes, but effective also. Again, the people understand what they missed. A generation of illiterates. They know what that means. Again, the story that I tell – and I don’t want to take too much time here, but a story that I tell is – I went around and visited one of the schools in one of the local villages. You know, they take you in, and the general’s here, it’s a big deal. We all – you know, we were all students at one time and knew, when a – you know, when a visitor came through and kids were all lined up.

But I went into the third-grade classrooms. So we’re talking about seven- and eight-year-old children. And they were all sitting there in rows. And they don’t have desks; they sit on the floor and work off their copy books. And, of course, the general comes in, so we – I got a song and a poem and – you know, and of course the headmaster’s very proud about showing off this facility.

In the back row were seven, eight, nine, 10 big boys, big young men – I’d say 15, 16 year old – you know, grown-up men. And this is a third-grade classroom now, seven- and eight-year-olds.

So I was talking to the headmaster and I looked back and saw these large young men back there, and I asked him if that was the football team. And – he didn’t get the joke either. (Laughter.) But he said nope. What they were were, they were young men who had – who had not learned how to read and write, who were illiterate, who wanted to learn how to read and write. And they were willing to come in and sit down in that classroom to do it.
And I thought to myself, you know, when I was 16, I would not have sat in a third-grade classroom. My pride would not have allowed me. But they understood.

And as we saw the – as we saw the students arrive at classes, we saw the parents make this investment in the future, I began to believe in the sustainability of what we were doing over there. Taliban threatened them, the insurgents threatened them. They said, we will burn the schools. We will kill the students. We will kill the parents that send the students to the schools. And yet the children came.

[00:37:04]

Some of the schools will hold three sessions a day because of the overcrowding. The teachers there – we have some trouble finding qualified teachers. But again, working that program. That’s what they’re looking for: education. That’s the long-term development, I think, that means the most to them.

In Garmsir, which is a relatively benign area, several months ago on Sunday night the insurgents came into one of the towns, burned the school to the ground. We didn’t know about it. We didn’t get a report on it.

Next morning, some parents showed up at our local outpost where we have some Marines and asked if they could borrow some tents. We gave them the tents. They took them out to the school grounds next to the still-smoldering embers, erected the tents, and school was on by noon the same day.

The shows you the commitment, I believe, that these folks are making. Again, as we dealt with some of the other local issues, health – again, working in rudimentary clinics – and I’ll talk a little bit about that when I get to the – one more slide here, and I’ll keep moving.

[00:37:59]

And again, infrastructure of roads was critical to them. If they ever want to have an economy that – where they can really work commercially, they’re going to need those road – that road system.

Governance, I’ve spoken about a little bit. I talked about the 2010 elections already. But once we had a good district governor in place and once we had a good provincial governor in place, Governor Mangal, we began to work on those district governments, again, to – they could be – so they could be representative of the people. District governors are appointed, but the district community councils are elected. Five of them are in operation right now. And what they do is they prioritize programs, they budget the money that comes into the district, they work with us to find out what is it that people want, as opposed to what is it, perhaps, that the Americans and the coalition think they ought to – they ought to have?

That’s Marja. That’s the district community election that took place. Once again, there’s 1,500 registered voters in Marja. Eleven hundred of them showed up for the election. Although it looks a little rambunctious there in the top picture, it was all very – all great spirits. No one bothered them. There were no shots taken at anybody.
The election went on. Twenty-five elders were elected to sit on the district council. And it’s fully operational at this time. And more importantly, perhaps, it now begins to get funding from Kabul. Money begins to flow down through the Afghan government to the local levels for projects the locals want to do.

[00:39:20]

I talked a little bit about Nimruz. I’ll just very quickly say this. Nimruz province was a different animal: a very low level of insurgency, a fairly decent police force, and a good – actually a good provincial governor that was in place and operating some schools and doing what provincial governors do. Very low population.

My thoughts there were not to make that a military operation but make – to make it a joint interagency operation. So we formed Task Force Nimruz, of civilians and military, I put a lieutenant colonel in charge, and he dealt with the governor down there on things such as you see: some improvements to some of the economic areas, some school improvements, a canal system that was – had badly deteriorated, those kinds of projects.

My intent was to turn that over to the civilians entirely. I didn’t think there was a military need to be there, other than perhaps some trainers with their local police – local police force. But other than that we thought it was probably the wave of the future, as things might look not – hopefully not-too-distant future.

[00:40:18]

Almost finished here. A huge part of the population of Afghanistan we have very little access to. That’s the females. Of course, everything that we operate with is carefully structured within the cultural norms of the Afghan society. That’s the way it has to be. The role of women in that society is quite different than the role of women, obviously, here in the United States and in the Western world. But you have to respect that. We were not there to change Afghan society. We were there to educate, we were there to work with, but not to change their bottom-line beliefs.

And also, Helmand province is a rural, farming community, quite conservative in its values, and, as I – and again, as I say, fairly illiterate. So again, you have to take all those factors into consideration. I had a very strong major on my staff. She’s a school administrator from San Francisco, a reserve officer. I made her my gender advisor. And we worked closely with our female engagement team, which were small units, four and five young female Marines and sailors, and put them out with our – with our combat forces to do engagement at the local level with females in the villages.

We had success in some places; we were a little bit tougher in other areas. Obviously, the more rural areas were perhaps a little less receptive than some of the more – some of the more cosmopolitan areas of the – of the village.

But anyway, we were able to engage an awful lot of Afghan women, people that we as males had no access to, absolutely no access to. And we did two things, I think, with the female engagement teams. The first one was to set the example to the Afghan men of what it is Western women do.

[00:41:48]
When they would come into the village fully combat-outfitted – helmets, flak jackets, carrying weapons, and they began to take some of that stuff off at the meetings and they saw their hair, the men – the Afghan men were amazed. The Afghan men were amazed that we had women issuing orders to males. You know, rank structure is rank structure. If you had a senior Marine who happened to be female, she gave orders to junior Marines that happened to be male. Again, a huge example to the Afghan men who saw that. That was kind of teaching by the indirect approach, I think, if you will.

More importantly was they got the – our female engagement teams got inside the buildings, got inside the compounds and were able to sit down with interpreters – female interpreters and talk to the Afghan ladies and see what it is they wanted.

Two things. They wanted health care and they wanted education. One, two. Across the board. And we would, again, then work with the village elders to provide those things. We were able to get some female doctors in town. We were able to get some female corpsmen out and about and do those kinds of things it was kind of – it was difficult to do, but it was – it was very, very, very worthwhile.

And again, we did have some females who sat on the provincial-council level. They were educated ladies who lived up in Lashkar Gah and did a good job. But again, our female engagement I think, again, opened up a very large section of the population we did not have access to, and provided us with some great insights as to ways in which we could be – we could be effective.

The other thing we worked out was freedom of movement. And when people talk about freedom of movement, generally they mean roads and moving people – moving people and goods around. And absolutely positively yes to that; the Afghan people are sociable. They like to travel, especially on their holidays, to visit their families, much like we do. We worked very hard at building roads, spent an awful lot of money putting in hard-surface roads. We got there, one hard-surface road, which was the Ring Road, that runs around Afghanistan, goes east and west; didn’t do us much good. So we worked very hard at hard-packing roads and building – repairing bridges and infrastructure, again, with our limited means to do so.

That had a huge impact down at the local levels. Once you got a road in, schools followed, commerce followed, and the people truly, truly appreciated it.

But the other piece of freedom of movement, I felt, was freedom of movement of ideas. How do we move ideas around? That’s how we’re going to change the – change that environment over there. I’ve already talked about the schools, which is our main focus of effort. As we dealt with the females, we tried to look for some ways in which we could educate them.

They’re not a – although they are in some ways not a very developed country, in other ways they’re very developed. And the radio’s a big, huge – everybody listens to the radio over there. So we put together a program, tried to teach women how to read by radio. We got some schoolbooks, we got some instructors, we talked to the females with the engagement teams and said, at this time on these days, there’ll be some classes taught.
The success of that operation is yet to be determined, but it’s a step at least, in which ladies who can’t leave the house are able to get some exposure to the education system. We will see – we will see if it works out.

The other thing was radio – or was cell phones. They’re very big on cell phones. Everybody has a cell phone over there. Works – it works great. Taliban controlled commercial cell phone towers through threats and intimidation, didn’t allow the – forced them to be turned off at 1800 in the evening, 6:00 for civilians, and not come on till the following morning, just as a show of power. We put in our own cell phone system, which allowed them to have 24/7 coverage and worked with the commercial companies to say, we’ll provide security for you if you keep those towers – those towers open. And we’re making good progress on that.

[00:45:24]

Just one quick story here. The – I know I’m about out of time. On the cell phone towers, I knew I was making headway when I went into a cell phone store in one of the villages; guy was selling cell phones and phone cards. And I went in and talked to him through the interpreter. And I said, how’s business? He said, oh, it’s OK. You know, it’s all right. Typical Afghan response: business could always be better.

And I said, well, how’s your cell phone coverage here in the village? And it was a fairly remote area. And oh, he says, it’s terrible. He said absolutely terrible. Well, I was shaken by that. I put all this effort into, you know, doing this.

And I said, what do you mean it’s terrible? And he says, well, when I want to call my mother in Lashkar Gah, which was about 50 miles away, I have to go out in my backyard till I get a good – till I get a good connection. So I asked him if he was a Verizon customer or something. (Laughter.) I said, my wife lives in San Diego. She spends half her time in the backyard trying to catch the satellite.

I said, you know, jeez – so sometimes expectation management’s the most important part of what you’re doing, I guess. (Laughter.) And I apologize for running over. I hope we have some time for questions. But again, I appreciate everyone’s attendance.

I have been accused of – perhaps of a bit of a – having a bit of a rosy regard. I do. I think things are better than what are reported over there. I will tell you that an independent survey not done by the Marines, not done by the coalition, that was done this – early this year showed that nearly 80 percent of the Afghan population in Helmand province, when polled and asked, what’s your number-one concern? Last year, overwhelmingly, security. This year, education. Over 65 percent of them said they had daily dealings with the government of Afghanistan at the – at the district level to resolve problems and to resolve issues. To me, that is – that is success.

[00:47:06]

And the last thing I will say as I close is to say that, you know, I know there’s kind of a thing in town that schools cost you three cups of tea. These schools didn’t. I had over 200 KIA. I had over 2,000 WIA. And the Afghan army and police force lost hundreds more than I did. I can tell you that we probably killed 10 to 1 of them. They lost a heck of a lot more soldiers on the battlefield than we did. But there’s a – there’s a price to be paid for what happened last year.
OK. With that, I thank you very much for your attention. (Applause.)

MS. MATHEWS: All right. Please do – yes, I know. I’m going to – because I think there are a lot of questions, let’s take three at a time, if that’s OK with you.

GEN. MILLS: Sure. Sure.

MS. MATHEWS: I’m sorry. And so if people will be brief. We’ll start with these three right here. And please do identify yourself.

Q: Thank you very much, General. My name is Judd Harriet (sp), a documentary filmmaker. My question takes you somewhat off your brief, but The Wall Street Journal this morning published an article saying that the Pakistanis are trying to push the Afghans away from NATO into the arms of a new coalition, Pakistan and China. Now, again, this is off your brief, but I would really like to hear your views on this –

MS. MATHEWS: Thanks.

Q: – perhaps maybe from Jessica as well.

[00:48:32]

MS. MATHEWS: OK. OK, thank you.

And right next to you.

Q: Yeah, General, Mark Thompson (sp), Time magazine. The Taliban commanders that were in your AOR, how many of those, to your mind, are flippable, and how many of them are incorrigible?

MS. MATHEWS: Thanks. Right here.

Q: Dennis Cooks from the Woodrow Wilson Center. You’ve given us the bright side, General. What’s the bleaker side? And then a second question: Could you tell us what the status is of the power up at the dam? Thank you.

GEN. MILLS: Regards – I’m sorry. Regards Pakistan. Slide over (a little ?).

Regards Pakistan – I really can’t comment on being pushed into a new coalition. I will tell you this. I will tell you that in the dealings I had with the Pakistani army, I found them to be very cooperative with us and to – and to be fully supportive of what we were doing. I talked about the fight down at Bahram Chah, which was right on the Pakistani border. We had to alert the Pakistani army to that – to that operation and ask for their cooperation in certain – in certain ways. They were forthright and quick about giving those – giving those assurances and providing that cooperation. Although I did not have Pakistani forces involved, we had significant permissions that we had to gain in order to conduct that operation.

[00:50:09]

I would say overall – again, and my dealings were very limited with the Pakistanis. They were, in fact, supportive of what we were trying to do along the border. There are – that said, you know, there was
no question that guidance was coming out of Quetta. There’s no question that there was a refuge for them in Quetta and that they were being directed at the – kind of at the two- or three-star level from that – from that area. Many of their lower-ranking commanders, the – I will say, for better – the colonels – would go back there frequently for consultations and advice. And we knew there was a flow of illegal weapons moving north out of those areas to fuel the insurgency in Afghanistan.

But I – again, from my limited observation, the Pakistani government was – and the Pakistani army especially, was supportive of our operations along the border, as long as we gave them plenty of notification and were open with them about our – about our – about our plans.

[00:51:15]

Regarding the reintegration process, the government of Afghanistan has a very robust reintegration program to bring insurgents back to their communities. I think it’s – it functions on two levels. The first level is a very formal system in which you formally present yourself to the Afghan authorities; you formally surrender your weapon; and then you are reintegrated through a system of education and jobs back into your – into your community.

That system has been slow, in all honesty, in taking off. But it – the structures there, it’s just at the – as of yet, I have not seen a flood of people coming over.

However, that said, at the – at the trooper level, at kind of the private through sergeant level, we are seeing, anecdotally, some pretty solid evidence of their coming back over to go back into their communities, be returned in a much more informal basis simply to be brought back to their families, given jobs back on the farm, and without a lot of bells and whistles attached that would attract our attention.

[00:52:18]

I remember meeting very early in my tour with the mullahs, who I talked to on a frequent basis in the province. They’re obviously men of great import and religious leaders. And after a long discussion, a nice lunch, one of them pulled – the leader pulled me aside and he said, General, he says, you understand about the – about the insurgency. He said, of the hundred percent, he said, there are probably 70 percent that come back to the – come back to their villages, come back to their homes and just simply drop their weapons and they just become – just lead a normal life. He said, there’s probably 20 percent that will take some form of formal reintegration. They have – they have blood on their hands and there’s – and it’ll be some kind of process to bring them back and then to watch them after that – after that takes place. And he said, there’s probably – be 10 percent you got to kill. He said, they’re just – they’re incorrigible, and you’ve got to kill them. And he was very forthright about it.

[00:53:09]

And I think probably if you look – when I look back on it after about a year, I’d say he probably had his numbers pretty solid.

The weaker side of the – what I talked about – and there is a weaker side, of course – first of all is that – is the counterattack that I talked about. I believe that he has to counterattack, he has to come back. Our job will be to figure out how he’s going to do that. I think we’re positioned very well over there to counter whatever he brings. But he’s going to – he’s got to do it.
Helmand province is the very heart of the Pashtun community. It’s where – that, with Kandahar province next door, is where the insurgency gets its roots and gets its feel. So psychologically it’s extraordinarily important to him. He can’t give that up.

But I think more importantly, like any commander, he needs – he needs resources. He’s got to fund his people. And we know he’s having problems. We’ve seen evidence that – local commanders having to sell their personal effects in order to pay their people. We have seen evidence that they’re running short of very critical military supplies, and he’s having problems bringing people – the $10-a-day Taliban, the young man who’s just simply working for a paycheck – and there are a lot of them in the Taliban – that he’s having trouble attracting those guys because he doesn’t have the cash to do it.

[00:54:25]

Why didn’t he have the cash? Because the drugs aren’t available for him to sell, that’s why. So he’s got to come back to places like Marja, places like Sangin, which are his – those are his Fort Knoxes. That’s where he’s got his money. His money grows in the ground. And it gets sprung up every year. And that’s why the drug trade is so important to him, and that’s why our interdiction efforts, in which we’ve seized hundreds of tons of narcotics, are very critical to the war effort, because it cuts him away from the one thing he needs, which is money. It’s fueled by that.

MS. MATHEWS: OK. Let’s take two right there and one over here. Let’s start right here.

Q: Hi. I’m Sid Standover (ph) with Inside the Navy. I was wondering if you could talk about whether MARSOC has brought any particular kind of capability to the fight in southern Afghanistan, and also if you could talk about any issues that you’ve been having with UAVs in terms of reliability, de-conflicting airspace, communication, and what kind of improvements do you think you could see there.

MS. MATHEWS: Thank you. And right behind.

[00:55:25]

Q: Hi, sir. Lieutenant Colonel Pete Gabriel, U.S. Army, retired. Thank you very much for your presentation. Spent a lot of time in Pakistan, but very interested about your dealings with corruption at the local level, how you deal with it, and also how you see things three to five years out with our potential pullback. Thanks.

GEN. MILLS: Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: And there’s one right here. Go ahead. No, right there.

Q: OK. Hi. Kinesha Marks (sp) from Asia Society, Washington. The female engagement groups seem to have really tapped into the female population, but what will happen after the U.S. exits Afghanistan? And will there be any programs to help women?

GEN. MILLS: Not going to make this easy, are you? (Chuckles.) OK.
Regards MARSOC – MARSOC has played a very, very vital role for us. And I could give you numerous examples. The special forces across the board – both U.S. Marines and the SEALs and the U.S. Army special forces and the U.K. special forces under us down in RC Southwest – played a huge role in disrupting the C2 capabilities of the insurgency. They in fact – very quickly, they gutted the C2 capability.

We got there, it was estimated the average regimental commander, battalion commander, whatever you want to call him, in the insurgency was about 35 years old. When we left, he was 23. And why? Because they’re – he’s – the rest of them are dead. What does that mean? It means they’re promoting younger and younger men to more and more – less experienced men into greater responsibility. That’s a weakness on his part.

[00:57:03]

The special forces were absolutely invaluable in us attacking the IED networks at the provider and maker networks level and taking those down.

One – and the other thing that MARSOC did for us very effectively, along with the other special forces, was to provide local village stability operations. We would put them into areas that were fairly – that were still being contested. And they would go into local areas, talk with the elders there, stay in the village, establish a safehouse, if you will, and then begin to recruit local boys to provide local police protection for the – both for the elders and for the village itself. And that became that expanding inkblot that you’ve heard so much about. It’s very critical that we do that. They’re good at it. They’re very brave men. They are in very, very dangerous situations. Many times they fight for the first 10 days on the ground until they kind of sort out who’s who. And then they begin to expand into more peaceful developmental projects which, again, turn that village over to the government of Afghanistan.

[00:58:05]

One of the things we do with that very early is to get the district governors involved, district chiefs of police involved so it has an Afghan face to it. We do not want a coalition face. We want an Afghan face out in the crowd.

Regarding UAVs, the only weakness is I could use a lot more of them. They were absolutely invaluable to us, both in our – in our campaign to take out the C2 and take out specific, highly valued intelligence targets. UAVs gave you great effort to do that. But the other thing the UAV gave you – not only did it have the full-motion video attached to it, and weapons systems – was the ability for very precise fires against very easily identifiable targets in an environment where civilian casualties were our number-one concern. We did not want to cause civilian casualties.

So with a UAV overhead, that good imagery that we could get, downlinked to the proper decision-makers, we knew the weapons systems we wanted were being applied against the targets we wanted at the time we wanted, when there was no threat to civilians perhaps being on the ground.

[00:58:59]

So the UAV, reliability was good, you know, about like any other aircraft, I’d say 80 to 90 percent reliability, up on a daily basis. Never an issue that would cause us to have operational problems.
Corruption – you know, corruption, you clearly identified the issue. Corruption is pervasive. It’s part of their – of the culture there. It’s something you have to work around – with, and hopefully by through example and by targeting and helping the people to develop a rule of law and a system of courts that can take that on, that they will change. In my personal opinion, that’s going to take some time. You’ve got to really change the concepts, and you got to change some – just some ways of doing business.

The price of Afghanistan, first, business practices, where you’re giving contracts to Afghan companies, Afghan workers. The great benefit there is you get money into the Afghan system and you’re getting employment, which is very critical. The bad side of it, flip side of it is that you, of course, are subjected to Afghan corruption tactics.

I think that we’re attacking that the best ways that we know how. I think that it’s – but is a long-term problems. It just needs to be – needs to be addressed. And you know, when you look at – it’s great to say you’re going to make Switzerland, but when you look at – you know, look at the rest of the world, you know, corruption’s not – it’s not an Afghan problem. It’s everywhere.

So you’re right, you’re absolutely spot on, but again, in the short term it’s something you have to deal with. You have to work your way around it.

[01:00:29]

Regards the female engagement teams, that’s a very good question. I appreciate that very much. They were extraordinary effective, as we said. I think the ladies in Afghanistan were at first surprised and then very pleased that we were dealing with them. And as long as we didn’t have men working that issue – we could never have done that – it was really interesting to see that part of their society open up to us.

And the female engagement teams, much like all of our developmental projects, all the things that we tried to work, to include the security piece, the – one of the fundamental planning criteria that you had to have was, we can’t disrupt them, so when we leave here we bring down, you know, retribution on anybody. We certainly are not going to turn – you know, we’re not going to start the league for women voters in Afghanistan this week, I got to tell you, OK? (Laughter.) I mean, what you can do is educate. What you can do is reinforce through personal – you know, through personal conversations. But to think that you’re going to empower the Afghan women overnight is foolishness, and it’s dangerous.

[01:01:40]

And so we didn’t – we never tackled that way. Our female engagement teams were carefully screened, carefully prepared. And when they went in, they were – they talked about how can we – what are some – what are projects we can do that are not entirely disruptive? And things like health care, very, very critical; midwifery. Tremendous number of Afghan women die in childbirth. Midwifery’s something you can teach relatively simply. NGOs do it all over the world. And it’s something we can leave behind and turn over to the U.N., places like that that can continue that operation.

But you’re spot-on. We’re not going to rebuild America (sic) and we’re not going to leave them in a dangerous position when we do, in fact, leave. And they all know we’re leaving.
MS. MATHEWS: I know there are more questions, and I’m – I do apologize. We’re already 15 minutes over our scheduled time. So I just would ask you to join me in thanking General Mills for an enormously informative – (applause).

(END)