

Ambassador Ryan Crocker Notes on Remarks

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The River Club

“A Conversation with Ambassador Ryan Crocker” Moderated by Ambassador Marilyn McAfee

Q. An Ambassador’s “*tool box*” is very limited. What did you find most effective and useful in accomplishing your objectives?

The most important asset is personal relationships. In the State Department funding is very limited. An ambassador needs to look for funds from other better financed agencies that comprise the Country Team. USAID and the military are two good sources. The military particularly appreciates ideas for good projects. They can do things quickly.

Q. As U.S. Ambassador you are the President’s personal representative, but you report to the Secretary of State and as was the case in Iraq and Afghanistan, you have a large in-country U.S. military presence with a four-star (general) in charge. How do you make that work?”

We had joint satellite conferences with the key players in Washington so we were always on the same page and decisions once made were clear. It’s a lot harder to coordinate and get decisions at the middle level. At the top it’s easy. The President decides and that’s it. It worked that way with two Presidents.

Q. The recent issue of Foreign Policy refers to “*militarized foreign policy*”. What is the best model? There is the Afghanistan and Iraq model with U.S. troops on the ground, then Libya with U.S. arms, air power and no troops and now Syria and Mali where we are reluctant to get involved in helping.

The U.S. should always be very slow about getting involved directly in other countries and carefully evaluate our objectives and the possible consequences of our action or inaction. But once involved we should not be hasty in withdrawing lest we leave an unsustainable or worse result. Sometimes it becomes “the least bad choice”. We are reluctant to send powerful arms to groups that might later turn them against U.S. interests, as was the case with the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. We are also seen by most of players in the region as unwilling to sustain the long-term actions required to follow through on our commitments.

Q. What about Iran?

Iran must be understood in the context of the now extant Persian Empire. Iranians see the Arab-Sunni dominated Middle East and wish to see Persian-Shiia predominance. It is a role they believe should be theirs as Persians with their long history in the region.

Q. Will they develop a nuclear weapon? If Israel is attacked the Iranians know we will respond. They are not stupid.

The greater danger is not what they might do with it, but the nuclear proliferation that would follow a nuclear armed Iran. The Saudis can't make a nuclear weapon, but they can buy it from Pakistan. That would put a hair trigger on nuclear war in the region.

Iran's influence in Iraq tends to be exaggerated. Iran does want influence in Iraq. It recoils from a U.S. troop presence on its borders in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Iraqi government now has Shia majority control. However, despite the religious commonality (Shia Islam) of their governments, the two countries fought a bloody, costly war. Iran even resorted to sending child-soldiers to the front to be martyrs. The conflict is not likely soon to be forgotten on either side.

Q. (from a Syrian doctor in the audience) Why is the U.S. supporting anti-Assad forces? Many in Syria don't support the Assad regime, but neither do they want the violence and killing that anti-Assad forces have unleashed.

Basr al Assad has led a brutal regime in Syria ruthlessly killing his own people. If professionals or business people in Syria not tied to the core of the regime and the killing wish to be spared later retribution, they should separate themselves now. That offer is still on the table.

Q. Talented, high profile players like Secretary of State Clinton and Ambassador Holbrooke (Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan SRAP) had a hard time having their voices heard. You had a longtime, personal relationship with President Karzai. That seemed to disappear amidst accusations by Karzai that there were U.S. led efforts to block his reelection. How did that all play out?

I knew Karzai when he first returned to Afghanistan as its leader. We spent a lot of time together often trying to figure out what in the world we were going to do next. On one occasion Karzai commented that a new flag was needed and proceeded to sketch one out on a paper napkin. He asked what I thought of it. It became Afghanistan's new flag. I don't think a lot of people remember all that Karzai had to do and put in place. Some thought yelling and strong-arm tactics were what was needed. This was not the Balkans. It doesn't work in this region. An effort was being made to block his reelection.

I was sent to Afghanistan with instructions from the President to restore the relationship with President Karzai. He and I might fight like weasels behind closed doors, but we agreed not to be critical of each other in public. That's a promise I always honored. Some of Karzai's public criticism of the U.S. was necessary public reaction to our actions such as civilian casualties in air strikes.

Q. Former Pakistani Ambassador to the U.S. Hasan Haqqani has written in Foreign Affairs this month that perhaps the relationship between our countries isn't tenable, that we have differing goals and expectations. How important is that relationship?

Pakistan is extremely important. Not only is it a very populous country of millions, but it has nuclear weapons that we must assure do not fall into the wrong hands.

The attack on U.S. personnel in Benghazi, including the death of Ambassador Chris Stevens who was a friend of mine and a dedicated professional, has been politicized. I think we're moving in the direction of considering no U.S. Ambassador to be expendable regardless of circumstances. I don't agree with that and think it's dangerous.

Frank Denton asked for Ambassador Croker's retrospective on whether we should have prosecuted the Second Gulf War.

That is an important question, and one that many have asked and most commentators have criticized. However, one needs to look back at where we were before the invasion and what could have been, had we not gone to Iraq. The sanctions regime was failing and most of our allies were weary of it. We would not have even been able to maintain the no-fly zone. Saddam showed the world how he could get around the embargo in his manipulation of the oil for food program. He had the will and much of the capability to once again become a regional power and a significant military power. He ignored the inspection regime and would have continued to do so. There was the distinct possibility of another arms race in the region, and perhaps even another invasion of Kuwait—at a future time when it would be much less likely that we could gather enough allies to care. Whatever one thinks of Iraq today in terms of democracy, it's a long way from the brutality of Saddam and his Ba'athist regime. The mistakes we made were mainly in what we did after we invaded. Until the "surge," we failed to take the range of actions necessary to put in place security, a proper governmental structure and all that it took to give Iraq the time to develop an effective polity.

Note: It's impossible to relay the impressive style Ambassador Croker revealed in his commentary. His keen intellect, deep experience and insightfulness regarding what he described as the "worst neighborhood in the world," was accompanied by a self-deprecating humility and a great sense of humor that made the session more like a conversation than a presentation. He was a standout guest.

-Ambassador Marilyn McAfee (Ret.) and Major General John C. Fryer, USAF (Ret.)