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The Day Embassy Kabul Forever Changed:

Remembering the 1979 Assassination of Adolph “Spike” Dubs and The Dismantling of the American Civilian Mission in Afghanistan

by Katherine Brown

At 8:40 a.m. on February 14, 1979, the United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph “Spike” Dubs, walked out of his residence in the Shahr-e-Naw neighborhood of Kabul and took a backseat in the black Cadillac waiting for him. His driver, Gul Mohammad, then took off for the U.S. Embassy, the American flags waving.¹

Moments later, Mohammad stopped the Cadillac at an intersection. A man dressed in a police uniform approached the car and ordered Mohammad to roll down the window. Dubs encouraged Mohammad to cooperate.

Five minutes later, Ambassador Dubs would be held hostage in Room 117 of the Kabul Hotel. Four hours and 20 minutes later, he would be dead.

The assassination of Ambassador Dubs 32 years ago today has rarely been referenced since we re-engaged with Afghanistan in late 2001. However, it was a catalyst for the suspension of the on-the-ground development and, ultimately, diplomatic missions inside Afghanistan before September 11th. Details about the tragic event and its aftermath illuminate Embassy Kabul’s struggle to maintain a policy that both recognized Afghanistan’s significance to U.S. national security interests and supported the Afghan people, despite their increasingly despotic and Soviet-leaning government. It is a vital piece of diplomatic history to remember as we prepare for a decreasingly militarized U.S. mission beyond 2014.

Dubs arrived at Embassy Kabul in the summer of 1978. A former Deputy Chief of Mission at Embassy Moscow, he was known as a specialist in Soviet affairs and was only the ninth U.S. Ambassador to serve in Afghanistan.² At 58, he was entering his fourth decade in the Foreign Service. “I think he had a lot of compassion,” his daughter Lindsay told the *New York Times* on the day of his death. “I think that was his motivation, at the bottom, for joining the Foreign Service, a desire to see a peaceful world.”³ Dubs oversaw a U.S. mission that had given over \$500 million in foreign assistance to Afghanistan since 1950. The U.S. Agency for International Development mainly administered large-scale infrastructure projects (i.e., roads,

¹ United States. Dept. of State. “Death of Ambassador Dubs: Statement by Gul Mohammad, Chauffeur to the Ambassador Regarding Kidnapping of Ambassador Dubs.” 14 Feb 1979, 16:30 Zulu. Declassified; Lippman, Thomas W. “Envoy’s Slaying Leaves Friction in Afghanistan.” *The Washington Post*. 17 February 1979. p. A19
² Lynton, Stephen J. “Ambassador Dubs: Eager, ‘Knew Post Was Tough’.” *The Washington Post*. 15 February 1979. p. A21.
³ Binder, David. “Slain Ambassador a Career Diplomat: Dubs Developed Soviet Expertise in 30 Years’ Foreign Service—Took Kabul Job in ‘78.” *The New York Times*. 14 February 1979.

dams, and power plants) but aid was also intended to stimulate the economy through educational programs and agriculture subsidies.⁴

In Washington, however, the provision of development aid for Afghanistan was contentious. The United States had long accepted Afghanistan's place within the USSR's sphere of influence as an unavoidable fact.⁵ However, in 1978, Afghanistan's loyalties to the USSR began to ossify. On April 27, 1978, Nur Muhammed Taraki's *Khalq*, pro-Soviet faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took power in a bloody coup and quickly established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.⁶ Soviet advisers increasingly populated the Afghan government's offices and Taraki's brutal rule intensified as he and his deputy, Hazifullah Amin, tried to crush a countryside insurgency and eliminate the elite, intelligentsia, and religious establishment.⁷

In Kabul, the U.S. mission tried to promote a humanitarian tone. There was a growing sense that Afghanistan was central to regional stability and to U.S. national security; Dubs argued vehemently to keep America's options open in Afghanistan.⁸ He did not want to drive Afghanistan towards becoming a Soviet satellite, military or otherwise, and argued for limited but continued engagement there.⁹ He believed that if the U.S. were ever to help the majority of Afghan people, the mission had to find a way to work with the host government, however deplorable it was, on areas of mutual concern.¹⁰ Providing aid was a viable way to foster a connection with the Afghan people and to give them hope for an alternative to *Sovietization*.

From the beginning of his tenure, Dubs led a mission with high morale. For the majority of U.S. government officials outside of Afghanistan, Kabul was one of the least desirable places to serve as it was a third world, remote, and puzzling country. But for the few who served there, it was the best-kept secret in the Foreign Service.¹¹ The approximately 150 diplomats and aid workers felt a strong sense of purpose inside Afghanistan. They also saw Kabul as an incredibly home-oriented place for them and their families: housing was generous, the American School was excellent, and they had their own hospital with American medical staff. The diplomats and aid workers often extended their two-year tours. However sinister the political scene in Kabul was becoming, members of the official American community valued their work and their lives there.¹²

That winter morning, the man in a police uniform opened the Cadillac door and held a gun to the back of Mohammad's neck as three more men entered the car, cramming Dubs in the middle of the back bench seat. Assuming it was a legitimate police operation, Mohammad asked if he should drive to the Ministry of Interior.¹³ But they ordered him to drive to the Kabul Hotel.

⁴ Cordovez, Diego and Selig S. Harrison. 1995. *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*. New York: Oxford University Press. p.15

⁵ *Ibid*, p.15

⁶ Jones, Seth. 2009. *In the Graveyard of Empires*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. p.15-17

⁷ Goshko, John M. and Richard M. Weitraub. "U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan is Kidnapped, Slain in Shootout." *The Washington Post*. 15 Feb 1979. p. A1

⁸ Taylor, p. 57 ; Cordovez and Harrison, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid*, 33

¹⁰ Taylor, James E. 1995. "'The Murder of Ambassador Dubs, Kabul, 1979,'" In *Embassies Under Siege: Personal Accounts by Diplomats on the Front Line*. Maryland: Potomac Books. p. 57

¹¹ Interview with Bernard Woerz; September 11, 2010.

¹² Wankel, Doug. Personal Interview. 27 July 2010; Woerz, Bernard. Telephone Interview. 11 September 2010.

¹³ United States. Dept. of State. "Death of Ambassador Dubs: Statement by Gul Mohammad, Chauffeur to the Ambassador Regarding Kidnapping of Ambassador Dubs."

Once they arrived, three of the men pulled Dubs out of the Cadillac. With the pistol still on Mohammad, the man in the police uniform said, “Go back to the U.S. Embassy, tell them that their ambassador has been arrested.”¹⁴

As Dubs was dragged to Room 117 on the second floor of the hotel, Mohammad rushed to Embassy Kabul to report that four men had arrested the Ambassador. The embassy staff was shaken and confused. Dubs had fostered his relationship with Deputy Prime Minister Amin, meeting with him 14 times since arriving in Kabul.¹⁵ A threat to the U.S. mission had never been communicated.

Dubs’ deputy, Bruce Amstutz, immediately called Amin’s office. Amin did not pick up the phone but his staff seemed genuinely shocked and categorically denied that the Afghan government was involved.¹⁶ The men who had taken Dubs were likely part of an Islamist, anti-government faction. They mistakenly believed that holding the U.S. Ambassador hostage would give them some kind of leverage with the pro-Soviet Afghan government.

For an agonizing four hours, a key group of embassy officials raced to keep their boss alive. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who rushed to Foggy Bottom at 12:15 a.m., exchanged messages with Amstutz in Kabul through a clumsy and tedious cable system operating on a 15-minute delay. The phone lines were too faulty for them to speak in real time. Vance’s instructions to implore the Afghan government to show restraint with the kidnappers and negotiate were desperate and ultimately, futile.¹⁷

Two embassy officials, James Taylor and Bernard Woerz, traveled from ministry to ministry to convey Vance’s instructions for the Afghan government to negotiate with the insurgents who had taken Dubs and to not ambush the hotel room. Amin would not meet with Woerz or respond to any calls from the Americans; he was too busy visiting with the Iraqi Foreign Minister who was in town.¹⁸ The Foreign Minister seemed receptive to Taylor’s petition, but he had little power within the Afghan government. The Police Commissioner absolutely refused to see Taylor.¹⁹

At the Kabul Hotel, four more embassy officials—Charles Boles, Bruce Flatin, Jay Freres, and Doug Wankel—stood immediately outside Room 117 with the Afghan police, making anxious pleas to them to show restraint and negotiate.²⁰ The Afghans consulted regularly with at least four Soviets on the scene, who did not identify themselves, but appeared to be advisers to the Police Commissioner. The police told the Americans that the insurgents wanted certain political prisoners released and would kill Dubs if their demands were not met by 1:00 p.m.²¹

At some points, it seemed as if calm would prevail at the Kabul Hotel. By noon, however, the hallway outside Room 117 was teeming with armed Afghan commandoes who were

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cordovez and Harrison, p. 34

¹⁶ United States. Dept. of State. “Apprehension of Ambassador Dubs.” 14 Feb 1979. 0500 Zulu. Unclassified.

¹⁷ United States. Dept. of State. “Kidnapping of Ambassador Dubs: SitRep No. 8.” 14 Feb 1979. 07:27 Zulu. Declassified.

¹⁸ United States. Dept. of State. “Kidnapping of Ambassador Dubs: SitRep No. 9.” 14 Feb 1979. 08:20 Zulu. Declassified.

¹⁹ Taylor, 60.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

preparing to ambush the hotel room; one Soviet adviser helped them put on their vests.²² Outside, snipers were in fighting position on a rooftop next door, their automatic rifles aimed at the room's window.

At about 12:45 p.m., the police told the Americans it was time for them to “rescue” the Ambassador. They had no choice, they said. They were nearing the 1:00 p.m. deadline. The Americans made another plea for restraint, saying that Amstutz was still trying to contact Amin to decipher a plan to ensure Dubs' safety. But a police officer replied that their order to strike had come directly from the Afghan Prime Minister.²³ Afghan commandoes then took position in front of the room as three Soviet advisers moved to the hallway balcony; one made hand signals to command the snipers outside.²⁴

Feeling powerless, Flatin radioed Amstutz at the embassy. “There's nothing we can do from here,” he reported.²⁵

Then, the four Americans watched in horror as both the snipers outside and police commandoes inside launched a fusillade of heavy, automatic gunfire into Room 117. The assault lasted for 40 seconds. It finally ended on the Soviet advisers' signal.²⁶ Another round from a single caliber weapon was fired before the police exited the room unscathed. The Americans then rushed into the room with a stretcher.²⁷ The thick smoke burned their eyes as they walked through puddles of water from the shattered pipes. They found Dubs tied to a chair, his head slumped to the right.²⁸ A single caliber shot had hit his forehead above his right eye. A heavy caliber round had also hit his chest and another round struck his left wrist.²⁹ Dubs was dead, as were the insurgents.

The exact details of how and why Dubs was killed were never confirmed. The Afghan government stonewalled the U.S.'s ongoing efforts to complete an independent investigation. All of the insurgents who had kidnapped Dubs were dead and could not explain first-hand their motive. After the doctor at the American Hospital performed Dubs' autopsy, he concluded that he had died of at least 10 wounds from a small caliber weapon—at least five from a .22-caliber weapon.³⁰ None of the weapons the Afghan police reported finding on the insurgents in the room, however, were .22 caliber weapons.³¹ It was likely the second round of gunfire the Americans had heard that killed him. Dubs' staff believed that the police had been instructed to eliminate any possible opponents of the Afghan government and all witnesses in the room. Likely, Amin or Taraki—whomever had ordered the ambush—feared that Dubs had learned too much while in captivity.³²

²² United States. Dept. of State. “Kidnapping of Ambassador Dubs.” 14 Feb 1978. 05:20 Zulu. Unclassified; United States. Dept. of State. “Death of Ambassador Dubs.” 14 Feb 1979. 14:40 Zulu. Declassified.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Taylor, 56

²⁸ United States. Dept. of State. “Death of Ambassador Dubs.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Taylor, 66; United States. Dept. of State. “Murder of Ambassador Dubs: Preliminary Conclusions: SitRep No. 14.” 14 Feb 1979. 09:50 Zulu. Declassified.

³¹ Taylor, 66.

³² Ibid.

In the hours and days that followed, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan offered no official apology, which worsened the ambiguity of the situation.³³ The U.S. mission, once a vibrant place with a strong sense of purpose in Afghanistan, now felt a deep sense of vulnerability.³⁴

Dubs' assassination also led to the very policy he had vehemently argued against. In Washington, Senator Clairborne Pell, a Democrat from Rhode Island, led the congressional charge for the White House to cut off all U.S. aid to Afghanistan, downsize the embassy staff, pull out the roughly 35 Peace Corps volunteers in the country, and refuse to appoint a new ambassador until the Afghan government apologized for its role in Ambassador Dubs' death.³⁵

While traumatized by the violent death of their boss and enraged by the Afghan government's refusal to take responsibility for it, Dubs' staff objected to a transformation of the U.S. mission's purpose and operations in Afghanistan. In a cable, Amstutz reiterated Dubs' belief that Afghanistan should not become a destabilizing factor for the region and that aid should continue. We "know that there are Afghans outside the regime and some perhaps within it who value a...U.S. presence in Afghanistan," he wrote. "Our...aid projects have been directed at meeting basic human needs and serve to demonstrate that the U.S. continues to have humanitarian concerns about impoverished Afghanistan and its people."³⁶

But on February 23, 1979, President Carter ordered U.S. aid to Afghanistan to be substantially reduced. In addition to the Afghan government's negligence, Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had believed that the assassination was also due to "either Soviet ineptitude or collusion."³⁷ While some small humanitarian projects underway for Fiscal Year 1979 would continue, the entire \$15 million allocated for Afghanistan was no longer available. All development aid scheduled for Fiscal Year 1980, which would have amounted to \$17 million in development and \$310,000 in military aid, was eradicated.³⁸ Covert aid then began to define U.S. engagement with Afghanistan. In March 1979, after a violent, three-day uprising in Herat the CIA sent the White House its first proposal to aid the anti-Communist Afghan rebels.³⁹ On July 3, 1979, Carter authorized the CIA to begin operations against the Communist Afghan government and its Soviet aides.⁴⁰

After the "Dubs affair," the official American community in Afghanistan, once amounting to approximately 150 civilians, steeply declined and then slowly dwindled to zero.⁴¹ The USAID mission shut down. Diplomats' families were evacuated. The Peace Corps volunteers in the provinces were sent home. When the Soviets invaded Kabul on Christmas Eve

³³ United States. Dept. of State. "Kidnapping of Ambassador Subs: SitRep No. 11." 14 Feb 1979. 08:40 Zulu. Confidential.

³⁴ Taylor, 63

³⁵ Hoagland, Jim. "Pell Urges Full Cutoff of Afghanistan Aid in Wake of Dubs' Slaying." *The Washington Post*. 23 February 1979. p. A22

³⁶ United States. Dept. of State. "Senate Amendment on Aid to Afghanistan." U.S. Department of State.

³⁷ Quoted in Jones, 16.

³⁸ "U.S. Slashes Afghanistan Aid." Associated Press. 23 February 1979.

³⁹ Jones, p.16-17.

⁴⁰ Coll, Steve. 2004. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York: Penguin Books. Gates, Robert. 1996. *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*. New York: Simon and Schuster. p.146

⁴¹ "U.S. Tells Families to Quit Afghanistan." *The Washington Post*. 24 July 1979. p. A4

1979, only 48 diplomats remained at Embassy Kabul.⁴² The mission's purpose was to be a "listening and reporting post" as covert military aid increased, fueling the Mujahadeen's insurgency against the Soviets. In 1985, humanitarian aid to Afghans supporting the resistance began through a USAID "mission in exile" in Pakistan.

Once the Soviets were defeated in January 1989, however, the dozen diplomats who still worked at Embassy Kabul were evacuated. Five years later, the USAID mission for Afghans stopped, just as the Taliban began its rise. Embassy Kabul would not reopen until December 2001 and Dubs' successor would not be named until 23 years after his death.

After September 11th, diplomats who had served at Embassy Kabul in the 1970s (at least two who had tried to save Dubs on Valentine's Day 1979) and 80s--and those who had aided Afghanistan from Pakistan in the 90s--began to come back. A new generation of diplomats and aid workers followed their lead. The U.S. mission operated under the conviction that the suspension of development aid, on-the-ground support, and attention for Afghanistan had contributed to state failure, which created a vacuum for thuggish rule, fundamentalist ideals, and a safe haven for al Qaeda. While the United States and much of the international community were gone, the Afghan people had gone from Marxism, to chaos, to fundamentalism—with war defining every transition. Development and security now seemed symbiotic; and a sense of moral obligation to help the Afghans, again, was palpable inside the embassy space where Ambassador Dubs' portrait still hung.

The assassination of Adolph "Spike" Dubs is a horrific episode in American diplomatic history. Today we remember his life, the bravery of the men and women who served under him, and the ongoing risks civilians take in Afghanistan. But the aftermath of Dubs' murder is also a reminder of the centrality of the U.S. civilian mission in Afghanistan to current counter-insurgency and long-term reconstruction efforts. Embassy Kabul staff is currently made up of over 1,000 officials representing 13 agencies and is powered largely by the convictions that Dubs and his staff held in 1979: Afghanistan's stability is in our national security interests and the provision of development aid is vital to this stability.

The population-centric COIN strategy is making considerable advances in expanding the Afghan government's writ and building a viable Afghan security force. However, the civilians are the linchpins for maintaining this progress and achieving U.S. goals in Afghanistan and the region, as they will be there long after our troops draw down to help the Afghan people develop their nation. Ensuring that the civilian mission does not dissolve but strengthens with time is essential. Creating the conditions for civilians to effectively advance reconstruction and stability operations beyond Kabul and without military support should be paramount to every decision moving forward.

Katherine Brown is a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University and an Adjunct Fellow at the American Security Project. She served as an official at Embassy Kabul from 2003-2004 and was a research fellow at the Counter-Insurgency Training Center at Camp Julien from May-June 2010. Katherine is also a Fellow with the Truman National Security Project.

⁴² Ibid.

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