Women's Foreign Policy Group
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In Camouflage or Afghan Veil: A Report from the Field

Maxine Isaacs: Welcome everybody. I won‟t talk for very long. I want to welcome all the members and guests for being with us here tonight for an evening with the Women‟s Foreign Policy Group. We are delighted to have you here. For those of you who aren‟t members, I hope you‟ll join. We are very fortunate to have as our guest tonight Elisabeth Bumiller, the Pentagon Correspondent for *The New York Times*. She just recently came back from Afghanistan, and is doing amazing work with both Afghan women and American women, and the issues they face. I hope you enjoy your evening. Thanks so much.

Patricia Ellis: Maxine, thank you for your very warm hospitality and for opening your beautiful home to us once again. It‟s always wonderful to be here with the Board and all of you, so thank you so much again.

We‟re really excited to have Elisabeth back again. Not only—and I have to say this first—is Elisabeth a WFPG member, but she‟s a great friend of the organization, and she has been a speaker before. We had her here when she spoke about her book on Condi Rice, she moderated our event with Janet Napolitano, and has done many, many other important things for us, and we are extremely grateful. We are particularly excited tonight because we‟re dealing with a subject, Afghanistan, that is so much on everyone‟s mind, so much in the news and is so timely. And Elisabeth is just back—in fact she‟s been there a few times. Three times?

Elisabeth Bumiller: In this last year, four, I figured it out.

Ms. Ellis: And to do particular reporting on something that is a very interesting initiative called "FETs." It‟s women Marines who are part of the anti-insurgency concept, and they are charged with reaching out to Afghan women and she will fill us in on all the details. So, before I go any further I would like to recognize WFPG Board members who are here, in addition to Maxine: Mary Catherine Toker, Donna Constantinople, Ann Korologos, and Gail Kitch, and we are so pleased that they‟ve come out to support us. We have a fantastic board. Now getting back to Elisabeth, as Maxine mentioned she‟s currently the Pentagon correspondent who covered the McCain Campaign, was the White House correspondent, and covered many other beats. And before that she worked for *The Washington Post* in DC, New York, New Delhi, and Tokyo—so we are just really, really lucky to have Elisabeth.

Before I turn it over to Elisabeth I just want to mention a few upcoming events that you should not miss. The first one is November 1st, and we are honoring, for the first time, a woman corporate executive, Anne Mulcahy, who is the former CEO and Chair of Xerox. It's going to be a fantastic event and on that occasion we are launching another series, Women Shaping the Global Economy. We're very excited about the series, which we want to use to bring in government officials and other corporate executives. Then on December 6th, following on our wonderful Indian Embassy Series event in September, we're going to have out next Embassy Series event with the Embassy of the Netherlands, at the Residence of the Ambassador. The theme is Dutch Foreign Policy, and so please put that on your calendar. Lastly, just to repeat what Maxine said, if you are a member we hope that you will renew for 2011, and if you're not and want to learn more about it, this is a good time to do so, so feel free to speak to me or any of the Board members. You will not regret it, I can guarantee. So, without further adieu, I want to turn the floor over to Elisabeth Bumiller. Thank you so much for coming. Please join me in welcoming Elisabeth.

Ms. Bumiller: Thank you Pat, and thank you Maxine. It's a pleasure to be back in this unbelievable apartment. It's the first I've been here when it's been light out, so it's a wonderful view. Pat has asked me to speak for about ten or fifteen minutes and then I will take lots of questions. I'll just talk briefly about this one series I just finished for *The New York Times*. It was a three part series on this one unit of women Marines—female Marines as they call themselves. Forty young good women, very young—the oldest was 27. So, to cover these women is a humbling experience for me because many of them were younger actually than my daughter! [*Laughter*] and there they are with their assault rifles, you know, protecting me on patrol.

I got the idea about a year ago, I think I got it from Tom Ricks' column *Best Defense*, and I actually had seen a story in *The New York Times*, no—a picture in *The Times*, inside the A section last fall, and it was the most amazing picture. It was a picture of four young women with blond braids—one—two of them had long blond braids—they were in full combat gear, taking a break on patrol in Helmand Province. And it just said "Four Marines on break in Helmand Province", but all four of them were women and *The Times*' caption didn't even take notice—it was so politically correct [*Laughter*] it didn't take notice. That's an astonishing thing. I thought "What is that?" and then I saw it around that there was—there was this experiment that the Marines were engaging in Helmand Province. Helmand Province, I am sure this is a very informed crowd, but Helmand Province is the big—one of the big southern provinces in Afghanistan, a Taliban strong-hold, the bread basket of Afghanistan, and the center of the opium-poppy production, etc. And there's 20,000 Marines right there now, for a lot of the surge forces went after the first of this year.

But I got this idea and I checked around and I found that there was a unit of forty women Marines training at Camp Pendleton, CA—that's the Marine base there—just for this special mission to become part of Female Engagement Teams [FETs]. And the idea was that they were going to travel around, I mean go on patrols with all male infantry patrols. I am sure some of you know that women are not allowed to join the infantry or other combat branches of the military. But they were going to attach themselves to infantry units in Helmand and try and

engage—as they said—they were going to sit down in Afghan women compounds and homes and try and talk with them, gather information, help them with starting schools, starting clinics, child care, that sort of thing, because outside men have absolutely no access to Afghan women because of the cultural restraints, and the idea here is that you can't win over the population if you're only talking to half of it. And that is what was going on for the first basically 8 ½ years of the American strategy in Afghanistan.

So, for a tenth of this war there has been an alliance program in Iraq where women—military men were searching Iraqi women. There was a little bit of this in Iraq, and also in Afghanistan over the previous summer there had been a little pilot program where they had pulled women out of jobs as cooks and truck drivers and had put them into these teams; but they've had no real training and it was really an ad hoc kind of thing. But this group was the first group to be trained full-time to do this. So I went out last—in February and March to Pendleton as they were training and I went to one of their cultural—I went to a day and a half of their training and I sat in on their cultural awareness class, and I met them, and did a story about that and all the hopes they had. And as I was leaving I said "Well, I'll see you Afghanistan," and they took one look at me in my suit and I knew they thought, "Forget it!" [*Laughter*.] And for that reason when I wrote the first story, we had discussed at *The Times*, I didn't say first in the series because it seemed sort of, you know, suspicious, frankly, to say that we're going to be doing this again in Afghanistan. So, these three stories have run without any kind of explanation for why there's this, we just did it that way anyway.

And then I went over there in May—April/May—I guess the beginning of their deployment, it was a seven month deployment. The Marines only deploy for seven months because it's very intense. They really do live out in the middle of nowhere on these remote bases. They live in the dirt, and so they don't deploy as long as the Army. And so I said, you know there were these forty women. They were spread out over these 15 different bases in Helmand. So I basically said, "Tell me where to go. You tell me the best places to go."

So in May, I was in some really pretty stable areas. I was in Garmsir District, which is a success story now—a relative success story among the Marines in Helmand. I mean, I went to places where the shooting had essentially stopped about six months ago. There were still IED threats, they're still nothing near calm, but it was not bad. And I had a very good trip; I did a lot of—I was, you know, nervous. I have to tell you I'm not a war correspondent; this is not Dexter Filkins. [*Laughter*.] But I went on the patrols and it was very good trip. It was surprising the number of homes we got into. It was rough going for them because they were new at it and they had to go through the whole thing of "How many children do you have?" and "What's the biggest problem you're facing?" and "What can we do to help you?" So, their goals for these conversations, which would go on for a long time over tea and we would stand in these mud huts, was—well not huts actually they were compounds; there's more money there than you would imagine, in terms of relatively speaking—but the idea was to find out: "What do the husbands do for a living? What can we do for the village to gain friends and to make them think positively about us? What does this women's husband do and what do we know about what he does?" That kind of thing. So, there's a different mix of goals. There was a lot of helping children with medical issues. They would bring doctors to the village and then they would treat the children who turned up, and treat the women who turned up. So, that was a good trip.

But I went back last month for the end of their deployment, and this time I asked to go—I said I"d like to go to Marja—which I"m sure many of you know is the site of a major Marine offensive—in February. It"s a 75 square mile area, very fertile farming district, and again it"s the center of the opium, poppy production in Afghanistan, but the US is hoping to, in the next few years, plant wheat instead of poppy, but we"ll see how that goes. But I wanted to go there because first of all I had been told that, "It really isn"t as bad in Marja as you"ve heard," and that we"re making progress. That was what the military was saying. And, also, by that point a large number of women Marines had been moved to Marja because that was where they were needed. So, out of 38 who were in Afghanistan—of the 40—12 were in Marja. And I knew that was where the story was. So, with trepidation, I went and—it was, it was rough. What the Marines say is not so bad is different from what you and I would say is not so bad. And what I was struck by was that they were going out every day on these patrols and that the women were often getting shot at. We were shot at on one patrol. They were getting into fire-fights—they were—it was combat. And, so in the middle of trying to bring all this good, they were doing fighting just like the infantry, which raises a lot of questions about women in combat. But I think the amazing thing is to go there and see, and I mean as frightening as it is for me, and extremely rough conditions—we slept on these small patrol bases, they sleep way out in the middle of nowhere. So we would sleep in these small patrol bases of about thirty Marines. The Marines would often rent an Afghan compound from someone.

It's a remarkable experience. As frightening as it was, it"s an enormous privilege to be able to get on the ground and get out and see the war up-close. When I cover so much of the defense policy in Washington, I hear all this talking and press conferences back here. I mean there it is, it is one of the most amazing reporting experiences of my life to be able to do this. And what"s also striking is how the women were tasked to reach out to Afghan women. But it turns out, over these seven months, they are also really good at talking to Afghan men, and some of the Marine commanders—the males—the men would say to me, "You know, there"s something—when we have a Marine officer, you know one of our command officers that's a guy talking to an Afghan male, there"s too much alpha-male going on. There"s a lot of competition. But if you put a women in front of an Afghan male and that guy will start blabbing, and they won"t stop." [*Laughter.*] There"s less competition, less intensity, women are less threatening. And so the program, despite a lot of stress and a lot of frustration on the part of the women, has been judged a success. Right now there are 45 young women who have just left. The second team has just left Camp Pendleton and is now just newly arrived in Afghanistan. And the team I write about is actually just on its way back right now to Pendleton, it"s due to arrive back this week, Thursday or Friday.

Now the big question is, what does this mean for US strategy? Obviously this program is a drop in the bucket, and the best you can say is that it made a difference in some villages and some Afghan women"s lives. But in terms of overall, I don"t know. If you ask the Marines this, they"re very focused on their very narrow mission. They don"t like to talk very much about the war overall. There"s a sense, I think of, they call it lows. There"s a sense of frustration. There"s a sense that they don"t know exactly where this is going. They"re hopeful but they don"t really address the war overall. They don"t like to hear about drop in American support at home. They don't like to deal with that; they try not to pay attention to it. They care about their mission. And

some of them had seemed overall they were generally very pleased about it, but some of them—one women I had said that they would never do it again because it‟s so rough, especially in Marja. One of the young women I talked to, who was 22, had been on a patrol two weeks earlier when the friend—the Marine right in front of her was shot and killed. He was five feet in front of her on patrol. There was actually a sniper in this area. And she was the first one to respond to him, but couldn‟t save him, and it was obviously very harrowing and gruesome, and I first met up with her at his memorial service in one of these patrol bases in Marja. It was one of the first things that I did when I got there. And she just said to me, "I would never do this again." And she said, "I can take the rough living conditions, It‟s not that I don‟t trust this mission." But she said, "It‟s just that I can‟t stand to see guys like this getting killed. I‟m just too much of a girl to deal with this." A very honest expression.

And the last thing I‟ll say is that this just opened a huge question about women in combat. Mid-way through their unit‟s deployment, they were suddenly summoned back to Camp Leatherneck, one of their very large military bases in Helmand, which—they‟re pretty secure. It is very hard to do anything at Leatherneck; in this case it‟s 15,000 Marines. And they were summoned back and told that they were just going to wait it out and not do anything while there was a legal review done of their status, because it turns out that General Richard Mills—he was the commander of all the Marines in Helmand—had brought them back because the Pentagon had gotten a call from some Congressman, who is still unknown to me, who was questioning what the women were doing, because they really are out on the far edge of what is allowed for women in combat. And, after three weeks, the lawyers decided that, okay, the women were not supposed to go—meanwhile these are Pentagon policies, Pentagon directives, but members of Congress have in the past tried to limit the role of women in the military even more.

So, what they decided at this legal review was that (1) the women could not go on patrols that solely had the mission of hunting and killing the enemy—like the sole mission of the infantry, and (2) they could only have temporary stays on the combat outposts, where they had already been living for months. So, when the debate broke out over what was temporary, General Mills said, "Okay, its 45 days". As a result, the women stay at these combat stations for 45 days, and then come back to Leatherneck overnight for one night, and then they go out the next morning. That‟s how the military has done this. And in terms of, "you can‟t go on a combat patrol with the sole mission of hunting the enemy and killing the enemy"—well if they go on security patrols constantly and they get shot at, what‟s the difference? From a normal person‟s point-of-view you would say, "Okay, why do women want to be in combat anyway, why do they want to be doing this?" Well, they made their decision—these are ambitious young women, especially the officers who‟ve gone to Annapolis, who‟ve gone to the best military schools, and you need combat if you want to advance in the military. And, so right now they‟re in combat and they‟re getting no credit for it. And so there‟s an enormous sense of frustration. But that is a whole other long debate, and they‟ve come to the conclusion that the military is a long ways away from allowing women in combat and they'll just—they‟ll work within the guidelines. And that‟s all I had to say. I‟d love to take your questions.

Ms. Ellis: Great Elisabeth, thank you. [*Applause.*] I just want to recognize the Ambassador to the Netherlands who just joined us, thank you, and who will be hosting out next Embassy Series event, so thank you so much for joining us tonight.

I‟m going to open it up and I‟m going to get to everybody. I just want to start with the $64,000 question. You‟ve been on the ground, so what‟s your assessment of how the war is going? And also, is this program going to last? And what about, what has it done in terms of the relationship between the male and the female soldiers? Because, as they say, these women are making it more difficult. They resent it.

Ms. Bumiller: That‟s—that‟s a lot of questions. The first one is—the situation on the ground. You go to Afghanistan and you think that you‟re going to understand it and it just becomes more confusing. What I can tell you in Helmand, where I spent my time—and this is Marines, it‟s not the Army—I had certainly been in areas where—look, if you put 20,000 Marines in one province in Afghanistan it‟s going to get better in some areas, and there are clearly areas in Helmand where it is better. Nowa Garmshard, these are the success stories. These are areas where the fighting has generally stopped. The Marines are working with the locals on government. There are certainly parts where it is—there‟s no question it‟s—the security is better. But there are other places like Marja where it is still very much a mixed bag and there are some other places like where it is very rough. So, it‟s very mixed. I am beginning to see reports now coming out of General Petraeus‟ office that there is progress. You know something that‟s interesting to me, having to write about this, is how they are going to measure progress for this big Afghan strategy review coming up in December at the White House. So—what I can tell you, you know, I have seen areas where there are bazaars opening, there are schools opening, there are clinics that are being used. But the question is, and the Marines will say this themselves, "What happens when we leave?" They look at the Afghan security corps and their just not up to it yet.

In terms of the men, how they think of the women, well there‟s a lot of—it's a mix bag too. There‟s certainly resentment from the lower ranks, from the infantry who say, "They haven‟t had the infantry training we‟ve had." It‟s true, they haven‟t, because they can‟t go into the infantry corps, they aren‟t allowed. But they‟ve certainly had a lot of combat training. So, there‟s resentment that they are getting more attention than they deserved. You know, *The New York Times* is writing about them and not writing about the young guys in the infantries. And that there‟s also resentment too that when you‟re out on patrol with the FETs, as they call them, Female Engagement Teams—that‟s the military, they call them the FETs—you know, such classic military. That when you‟re on patrols with the women—you get word of an ambush, you would never go right into it like you would if it was all-male infantry, to try and kill the enemy because you‟ve got these women. On the other hand there‟s other men who say they would be—these women are terrific, they‟ve been tested, they‟ve been side-by-side with them in fire-fights, they‟re the best, they‟re tough as nails. So, I heard both. I actually heard both, so—I think that answers those questions.

Question: I have a questions about US policy in Afghanistan. We‟ve heard General Petraeus talk about giving up, packing up and giving up. And with Mr. Karzai now negotiating with the Taliban, and we know Taliban has policies against women, especially the issue of female education. What is the US obligation and where does female education fall in the discussion of US responsibilities.

Ms. Bumiller: Those are all good questions; I can‟t really answer them all. I don‟t know if education is going to be a measurement come December. I can tell you though that there are, as you know, there‟s a record number of girls in school in Afghanistan. It seems to me that if you‟re doing a story, then you‟d probably play that up as a success story. I can‟t tell you right now where the US is going to come out on women and the education of women in these negotiations. I don‟t where the Karzai government stands either. It's a huge worry, that‟s all I can tell you. Be concerned.

Gail Kitch: I‟m a member of the Board for Women‟s Foreign Policy Group. What it sounds like is what‟s happening, in terms of the military with women, we could [*Inaudible*] their culture wars here in America. Tell me, writing about the Afghan men talking to women and talk about what that‟s like in their cultural setting. So you have the women who otherwise, there they are off in a compound. But it‟s okay to talk to an American women and that secretly the men want to talk to the women. [*Laughter*.]

Ms. Bumiller: Well, I experienced this in India when I was there as well. You know, Afghan men tend to look at American women as sort of a third gender [*Laughter*]. Well actually, we could get into it, there‟s a number of African American Marines in this group of 40 women.

Ms. Kitch: They all have long blond hair.

Ms. Bumiller: Yeah, yeah—so there was a real mix—so the long blond hair. [*Laughter*] There are a number of African American in the group with I was going on patrol most recently. And they would always say "Ahh," and she would say "I know you‟re afraid of me because of my skin color." She was just very blunt about it. And then she would say "It‟s okay." And, but they were—it‟s a really different culture, than ours.

Ms. Kitch: But then how do they fit that in with the way they treat their own women? It‟s like it operates in a special—

Ms. Bumiller: It‟s a totally different. It‟s like they—the women—were there, we went to a village meeting, one of the days I was there. And it was all the male elders of the villages and the Mullah, because it was outside, was sort of outside the tent of the mosque. And it was all the Marine commanders and then they have the Female Engagement Team there, and so, they made a point in saying, "And this is our Female Engagement Team." They said, "We know that the community has needs for women, so we have brought our women here," is how the commander put it, the Marine Captain put it, and that was fine. The only thing that happened afterwards was that the mullah asked in the future that the women cover their heads, because they take their helmets off. In the beginning of this program the women were covering their heads when they took their helmets off. The first time we did this, I remember, we all took our helmets off and then covered our heads once inside. But then, by September they were saying "Eh—this is our culture." But I think for, like, Ashura—outside a mosque, they probably should then—I know that some of them were certainly doing it. They were just kind of playing it by ear.

But the Afghan men would sit down with these women and they would have tea, they would discuss, "We need a well; we need a pump for the well." They were very open. It was amazing;

they were totally astonished, because you could never tell that the Marines were women with their helmets on and all their battle rattle and stuff. So they would come in and they always had to have—they always had to ask permission of the male head of household before they could even come in "Is it okay if we talk to your women?" If you didn"t get permission that was a disaster—they would get in terrible trouble. But then they would take their helmets off, men were just astonished. They would say "Oh, you"re all women!" [*Laughter*] They were just flabbergasted. And then they go, "Oh, come in! Come in!" That was a really different vibe.

Ms. Ellis: What impasse does the fact that they have the first 29 Afghan women officers—did that play—

Ms. Bumiller: Oh the officers. I don"t know. They weren"t around. I didn"t see any; maybe they were in Kabul—

Ms. Ellis: A totally different orbit in other words.

Ms. Bumiller: I think that was up North, wasn"t that in Kabul?

Ms. Ellis: I"m not positive—they just graduated a class of them, and I was just wondering—no one talked about it over there.

Ms. Bumiller: Well no, not while I was there.

Question: Ann LoLordo from Jhpiego. Elisabeth, did the FETs—since they were talking to women, did they get any sense from the women that their husbands, or fathers, or uncles were supportive of their girls going to school? Did they get that kind of intelligence? And is there some hope from that—

Ms. Bumiller: Yeah, I think that maybe they were saying, you know, because a lot of times their men were still in the room when we were talking to them. They wouldn"t leave. And it was better if they left, but they wouldn"t leave. So the sense I had and again, as you know, a lot of this is what they think the audience wants to hear. But certainly the women wanted their children to go to school, and their daughters. And, as I recall, the men said the same thing, but—of course you"re going to say that. But, you know, I don"t think that—it seems logical to me. When you ask, "What do you need in the village?" They all say water and schools and, look, security is number one and then water and schools, and then doctors.

Question: And in follow-up, was it part of the mission for FETs to provide intelligence. They were asking about their husbands, and I was wondering how much would a woman really trust an American female Marine who"s asking about what her husband does?

Ms. Bumiller: Right—well the idea, in a lot of these places, they would go back again and again. They would develop relationships with these women. The time I was there most recently, it was a brand—they were going to the village for the first time. They were actually clearing the village for parliamentary elections last month and they were—securing that polling sites. So that was—that was cold turkey; they were going in their first. So right, why would you trust this

American woman who comes in, of course. But I think over time, a number of them in other areas had developed relationships with women and they were working with them on selling, you know the classic side of NGOs, selling projects, and doing stuff for the bazaar, and trying to recruit women as teachers, and things like that. So, but in terms of—and intelligence is a fancy word for information, especially you know, so they would—they would come back and the kind of intelligence they were gathering, which was a source of a huge report earlier this year by Michael Flynn about how bad intelligence gathering is in Afghanistan among the military because they're not looking for the right stuff, it's all about bad guys. That we need just basic stuff about the population. So they would gather a lot of that kind of stuff and this guy is a—

Question: A powerbroker in the village?

Ms. Bumiller: Yes, powerbrokers in villages and stuff like that.

Ms. Ellis: Who are the translators, the interpreters, because I think that's a key thing in terms of the trust.

Ms. Bumiller: Right. The interpreters were mixed. They obviously had to be women, and to find a woman who speaks Pashto who is willing to do this is virtually impossible. So, the two interpreters that who were with the teams I was with at the time they were both Afghan-Americans. One of them was a better Pashto speaker than the other; the other—one of them was a Dari speaker and so she was struggling with the Pashto. I think they were getting paid a pile of money, because it is so hard to keep interpreters. And there was a chronic shortage of interpreters because of how dangerous it is, how—not only is it dangerous, it was just hard physically, these twelve-hour patrols in 110 degree heat and the body armor and the—on and on and on. And so, but they—but some of the Marines were actually learning Pashto; some of them—a couple of them were doing pretty well. It was a more of a crowd pleaser more than it was translation—a little chatting and stuff.

Question: Paula Feeney, Cardno Emerging Markets. Richard Holbrooke is a Special Envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan for the State Department and for our country; he himself is a former journalist. And I'm curious about after this series that you've done, is there a feedback beyond just reading your articles? Do you ever have opportunities to meet with someone like Mr. Holbrooke and confer and share your observations with journalists? Or is he so far away from journalism now that that sort of thing would never happen? How did, some of what you're learning that you can't put in your limited articles, because they're limited by words? Is there any, what shall we say, face time with some of the people who should be—?

Ms. Bumiller: Yeah, a lot of us know Richard Holbrooke; I've known him a long time. I actually heard from him after this story ran; he sent me an email. But he talks to a lot of reporters; he talks to a lot of *New York Times* reporters, so I don't worry about his contact with us. [*Laughter*] The more serious question is what is he going to do about it? I don't know. And they've got this—the military has its program. He was excited to read about it, he said to me. I mean on one hand it was one of the, let's be honest, it's one of the—it was basically a positive story about this one group. So, and that's been few and far between in the press lately. So, I don't know what would go beyond that. I mean they have all sorts of programs they're working

on in Helman; these are very good. I've talked to him about their agricultural programs and their big program to try to get farmers to plant wheat. You go to Afghanistan and you meet people from the Agriculture Department who are over there and they are just—they're not just in Helman, they're everywhere doing all this kind of—doing major consulting with farmers about having better farms. There is a lot going on. So, I hope that answers the question.

Question: Nadine Hoffman, International Women's Media Foundation. Based on some of the things you were just talking about—you know, the difficulty of finding translators, as well as the conditions on the ground, and all of those other things—what do you think is the feasibility of scaling up something like this and how many, you said there are 40—

Ms. Bumiller: 40, yeah; now there's 45. They increased it for the next crew.

Question: And to what number, you know—

Ms. Bumiller: I think you could expand it. I think they were—I mean they have; granted it's by five, right? [*Laughter*] Will it go away? It seems to me not; I can't really predict, but it seems like this one worked and so despite all the problems and the tensions and stuff, it seems like women should be a natural part of counter-insurgency—it just seems obvious. But—you need a certain kind of women. These Marines all volunteered for it, and then they were screened. And I don't know how much—I never got a sense—of how hand-picked they actually were; I don't know how many applicants they got for these spots. You have to be, not only obviously combat ready but you have to be a certain kind of person to want to do this; sociable, focused, hard-working, somewhat idealistic actually from what I could tell from them. But you're right, the interpreters—and the interpreters not just a problem with women, that's a problem for the men as well.

Donna Constantinople: I wanted to ask a question—about whether you see this as a series? And does this lend itself to an element for soft-power that we would use in other parts of the world, women in military who can be trained as an almost career-path, if you will, if you're saying they're volunteering? And looking at other troubled spots like Pakistan, like Yemen, other places where we see emerging need to get in there, maybe earlier on than we've done here—it seems like with Obama saying he's pulling people out next July that this has been an exercise that's been fascinating but—

Ms. Bumiller: Where does it go?

Ms. Constantinople: Yes.

Ms. Bumiller: Well, I think there's a place for it. I mean, I'm not making strategy so I don't know what kind of troops we're ever going to have on the ground in Yemen or Somalia, but—that we acknowledge. But I think that—sure, I don't see why not. The army hasn't really done it. No, they have but this program has gotten a lot of attention. It's on the periphery, it's not a huge deal for them; they're looking at the war overall. This is on the periphery. This is something I just got really interested in for all the reasons that I did. So, it's not a central focus for them right now.

Question: I‟m Mary Coffman. I‟m a Professor at Northwestern University Medill Journalism School, which I know you know about. But, as a journalist, how hard was it for you to prepare yourself to go to a war zone? You said you‟re not a war correspondent—did you get any special training before you went there?

Ms. Bumiller: No, actually it is available but I didn‟t do it. It is available. I imagine a lot of people do it; I think people at *The Times* have done it. So I just—you have to be in good shape. You have to be in good shape and a lot of it‟s just following instructions.

Question: And how did you deal with your own personal fears?

Ms. Bumiller: I was terrified—I mean I was scared. I was scared. And the problem is that you—no story is worth that kind of risk, right? But the worst part is trying to calculate the risk and is it worth going on this patrol for this part of the story of not? And you don‟t really have any control, so that‟s the worst part, you sort of just dread the night before. Like the night before a surgery, the surgery is never as bad as the dread. That was the hard part, just the constant worry—and I didn‟t know that Marja was going to be as dicey as it was, I was kind of deluding myself. And again, the problem is too—that other correspondents do who‟ll embed you get all the way over there, it takes so long to get to the bases and then it‟s like, “You‟re going to sit on the base when they go on patrol?” Well, you know, or not. So that was the—once I was out it was a lot better. Once I was actually out and not thinking about what was going to happen; it wasn‟t as bad as thinking about it. But I‟m glad to be back. I‟m way too old to do this. [*Laughter.*] I believe when I was covering the story I was, for weeks, the oldest person anywhere until I would talk to the General; he was a little older than me. But—our wars are fought by twenty-year-olds, you know. And the company commanders, these guys, these Marine Captains who command a company of two-hundred Marines in life, literally, of course, in life and death situations, they‟re thirty and they seem a lot older. But everybody is really young. Battalion Commanders are thirty-nine, and that was a thousand Marines he was commanding.

Question: My name is Nancy Caiola and I also work for Jhpiego. We do health work in Afghanistan. What I am curious about is, did you see this really deep connection between the military work and the NGO work? And then the question is, I‟m sure these women had a fabulous experience at the end of the day and they‟ll probably never forget it, but—it was a short amount of time; they‟re young; they were in and out; it costs a lot to keep these troops on the ground, is this the right way to invest money? Does it even have any impact I wonder? And would it be better into put those resources into NGOs?

Ms. Bumiller: Well, NGOs hate security. That‟s the thing. NGOs hate security. There weren‟t a lot of NGOs in Marja because there‟s not enough security there. And there were very few State Department people there. And the State Department people—the ones I met were fantastic, and were basically doing government. So, I expect it‟s somebody else‟s decision; all I can tell is that realistically speaking, until there‟s better security, this is what we have, because there are no NGOs operating—I mean, I could be wrong, but I don‟t think there‟s a whole lot in Marja, and the other thing I didn‟t mention about security in the country is—actually this was in an article in *The Times* not too long ago—even while the US has most of its troops in the south, in Kandahar

on the eastern border with Pakistan, in huge other parts of the country, security has really deteriorated to the point where reporters near Kabul now can‟t leave Kabul. And that‟s what you hear from the NGOs as well. That‟s the long way of answering your question. Somebody should think about that. And yes, seven months is a very short time so how do you develop relationships? They were passing on—I don‟t think you‟d leave them there for years; it‟s not possible, given what they were doing every day. And they were trying—when their replacements came and they were taking them around, introducing them to the people they knew and stuff. There is a guy in the Marja district, a State Department guy who‟s been there for a long time who is really good.

Question: You talked about the interviewed woman that was asking about her husband. It would seem to me that some of them have husbands that have been killed or—could you tell us a little about that, what the percentages are of women who are trying to take care of their families on their own or ones who can‟t work or don‟t work?

Ms. Bumiller: I have absolutely no idea. I can tell you that the days I was there, the days I was there, most of the husbands were farmers. This was in the farming district. The bigger question is, how many of them were Taliban or Taliban supporters? Probably a lot. None of them were there when we were there, they‟re all out working the fields supposedly, but the Marines thought a number of them had just fled. So, I don‟t have any sense of—I know in one other part, the women Marines were working on a project, but I just don‟t know. Those are the kind of numbers that are really hard to find in Afghanistan, especially in areas like that. Even when I was in India years ago, that was a really hard number.

Question: My name is Erin Brannigan with the Department of Defense and in graduate school. When I was a senior at Georgetown, I almost went to Officer Candidacy School for the Marine Corps, and all the guys I knew who were signing onto that were being guaranteed whatever specialty they wanted, but they told me that none of them were available to me, and I would probably be doing more assistance. When I asked them what they meant, they said it would be moving trucks from one place to another, but it sounded like a waste of my talents and not enough action. So, do you think there is any hope of standardizing the patrol and putting a name on it, or would that attract too much attention?

Ms. Bumiller: I don‟t know. Maybe. It‟s a very small number, and that‟s the problem. It‟s maybe 35 women, so it‟s not like you can go into logistics and have a lot available, but I hear you. Captain Emily Naslund, who is the commander of this group, says—and she has been commander of the trucks platoon in Iraq, she had commanded 38 men and two women in Iraq and they drove trucks all over the country and she said, "Never again. I‟m not doing that again." And that‟s why she volunteered for this and got this, and she had her battles with the higher-ups about their role. She did say that it‟s going to be a long, long time in the Marines before they change the rules. The Marines, as you know, have a reputation of the most testosterone of the services and they‟re the fighters and she feels it‟s going to be a long time.

Question: I have a question on whether the female Marines have any discussions amongst themselves thinking about whether they might endanger the women and whether they could truly really express themselves when there are armed people in their home?

Ms. Bumiller: They had lots of discussions whether they might be endangering the lives of women by showing up, and that‟s why, in most cases, they always asked permission from the head of the household. They worried about that. They were well aware, they were also aware, and there‟s a funny story and quote from Captain Naslund who said that when they went to talk to this woman in this town, this village that they hadn‟t been to before, and she‟d been very nervous, and she said, "I‟d be nervous too with five chicks in my living room with weapons." They were well-aware that they show up and they look very scaring in their full battle gear. In some places, they would take—when I was in one district, they took off the body armor and everything, but in this village in Marja, they did not. They left their body armor on and they kept their body armor on because it was a riskier situation. So, no, they were not naïve, they were totally aware of the inherent barriers in this process, but they plunged ahead. You know, I was a reporter in India, I wrote a whole book about Indian women, and you‟re just always aware of the reporter, especially in an important culture, that there‟s a limit to what you‟re going to learn, and there‟s a lot of people telling you what they think you want to hear or telling you the opposite of what they told you the day before. It was interesting for me to watch them, because they were doing sort of—I mean, I hung back, I was just a fly on the wall. I couple of time I was asked questions. I hung back, but they were doing a lot of what I do, just in their own way. Of course there‟s limitations, but you‟ve got to get in the door, right?

Question: Jill Schuker, OECD. My question relates to—and I missed the beginning of your talk, so you may have mentioned it—I know there might not have been time for conversation and the focus clearly was on the job at hand, but I‟m curious as to what were the—of the policy debate that‟s going on back here as well as the change from McChrystal to Petraeus, the comments from Richard Holbrooke, and is there a sense of utility or futility that you got, or if it‟s very much just focused on, well, we‟re here now.

Ms. Bumiller: I‟ll address this in a different way. It depends on the officer, like Captain Naslund, who is commander of these women, and certainly the company commanders, the men who command, the captains and the Marines and the battalion commander, they are obviously aware of the policies. They don‟t know it like many people in this room know it, but they certainly are aware about the debate of what their work should be in Afghanistan. And, again, they were focused very much on their narrow mission of "I‟ve got to get security in Marja." The battalion commander said, and this is a guy who commands a thousand Marines, "When we came here we got shot at the minute we walked outside in the day, but now it takes a while before they shoot us. In July, there were 25 significant incidents a day, which was an IED attack or small arms fire or whatever, and now we‟re down to 5-10 a day. We‟re making progress." That‟s how they look at it. so, in terms of whether it‟s worth it I can tell you that when I was there in May, and this was right as the first troops were flowing in after Obama‟s decision, so it took them a while to start going in, and the first group that went in were Marines wearing their helmets. People were saying that this was a big shot in the arm for them that the President had supported them and they were getting more troops and now we‟re really going to resource this war and we‟re going to do something. There was less of that, I‟ll tell you, this time, because the troops have just stopped flowing in; Marja is dragging on; Kandahar—I‟m not sure what‟s going on in Kandahar, and so there‟s a sense that this is dragging on and dragging on and there‟s no more coming, and there‟s not this sense of we‟re totally going to do this. And in terms of

McChrystal, I wasn‟t there when that happened so I don‟t know how much that affected it; I don‟t think it would be good for morale to change commanders like that. I know Petraeus recently spoke to one of the female Marines and they were all excited about that and that they had gotten support from Petraeus and attention.

Question: Looking at the softer side of defense, what you describe in terms of our American Marines who are women working over there—is there any interest in the international community in other nations to try the same thing?

Ms. Bumiller: I know totally that Captain Naslund and her predecessor went to the Italian forces about doing this, and I know that Captain Henry also talked to the Canadians, or was it—I can‟t remember what country it was—to talk to them about it, but they were sort of embracing it. I don‟t know what they‟ve set up; I have no idea what they‟ve done at this point.

Ms. Ellis: The Dutch Ambassador would like to say something on this.

Ms. Bumiller: Maybe it was the Dutch who—I can‟t remember. But they were talking to other countries.

Ambassador Renee Jones-Bos: We‟ve had a team in [*Inaudible*] also in the south, which is a difficult province, and we‟ve been there from 2006 onward, and we‟ve had women in our military for years and particularly for the reasons you mentioned.

Question: I‟d like to shift to India after the last question. What can you tell us about what has changed for the women in India, since the President is going there, since you wrote the book?

Ms. Bumiller: Now you‟re actually getting out of my light, because I don‟t have answers as to how things have changed specifically. India has changed dramatically since we lived there in the 1980s, but—I was telling someone earlier tonight that when my husband and I were in India from „85-„88, the big question in India, which was then an afterthought in terms of US foreign policy, the US cared about Pakistan, the big question was "Is India going to make it?" That question has been answered over and over again, no problem here, and India has just become this major powerhouse economically. And when President Bush went there in 2006, it was the first time an American president had been there in ages. I remember saying, "Now every American president has to come to India. This is a stop that has to be made." In terms of women, you know, I certainly read in *The New York Times* articles by Lydia Polgreen and other reports from there, you know, there‟s still enormous poverty, I just don‟t have numbers at my fingertips as to how much has changed. I wonder if it‟s even gotten worse for women at the bottom rung. Many issues are still fuel, foder, and water for the poorest part of the population that‟s predominantly women. There has always been—certainly when I was there and now probably even more so—highly educated women in India from the earliest days of independence and that of course continues, especially among women entrepreneurs.

Ms. Ellis: Please join me in thanking Elisabeth, and thank you to Maxine for opening her home, and thanks for your great questions. Thank you. [*Applause.*]