Transatlantic Diplomacy after 9/11: The U.S. and Norway
Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Benson Whitney
U.S. Ambassador to Norway, 2006-2009

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[Begin Transcription]

LEONG: Okay, so I'm LaiYee Leong with the Center for Presidential History, and I'm with former Ambassador to Norway Benson Whitney. Today is April 23rd, 2019. So, Ambassador, let's start at the beginning.

WHITNEY: Okay.

LEONG: A good place to start. How did you come to be appointed Ambassador to Norway?

WHITNEY: Well, I liken it to lightning striking because I was a political ambassador -- I didn't come from the Foreign Service -- so that means you have to find another way into a relationship with the president, who, of course, appoints you, about why they would do that. And I got on the radar screen for a couple reasons. One, I had worked for a couple of very important Senate campaigns. After I got out of venture capital I worked in politics, and the White House was very interested in the Senate [00:01:00] race in Minnesota, and so I got to know people like Karl Rove and Sara Taylor and Ken Mehlman, and these were all people very high up in the president's political operation. I just kind of knew them. In addition, I knew all the Senators from Minnesota, and then my dad had known President H. W. Bush, President 41, and had gone to school with him in high school at Andover, and then college at Yale. And so there were just a lot of touchpoints, and, honestly, when I was working politics, it never -- I ran the president's reelection campaign in Minnesota, and I think what distinguished me, probably, from other people was that I did two things: one, I literally got on the ground and worked 80 hours a week for the campaign; and I also raised a lot of resources for them. And I think I was probably the only person in the country that did both of those at the same time, and I think, you know, he appreciated that, but since [00:02:00] I wasn't privy to the discussion I can only guess.

LEONG: So how did you prepare for the role?

WHITNEY: Well, like many Americans, my understanding of what an embassy does and doesn't do, and the specifics of the relationship with Norway, is something I had to learn about. I did -- as I mentioned to you a little bit earlier when we was getting ready, I studied Norwegian very intensively, and ended up not being much of a success at it, but I did try hard. And I also would study about Norway, modern Norway, because the relationship is not about historic Norway. Minnesota is filled

with Norwegians. It is the most identifiable, that Norway and the Swedish is the most common sort of identity there, and so I had relationships, and I'd been to Norway, etc. But I tried to familiarize myself with a lot of different things, and learn about modern Norway, because that's your job. [00:03:00] My job was not historic Norway; it was modern Norway, and Norway was a very different place than even their ancestors in the United States really understood.

LEONG: So what were the priority areas that were identified when you went over to Norway?

WHITNEY: Well, some things came up after I was there, but before I went, in a large, 10,000-foot view, first of all, Norway is a neighbor of Russia, and anytime we have a neighbor of Russia, that is an important defense and intelligence relationship that the United States maintains. Secondly, it was, at that time -- I'm not even sure where it is now -- it was the third or fourth largest energy exporter in the world, so its importance with respect to its impact. At that time there was a lot of issues around -- actually, [00:04:00] it's reemerged -- the Russians cut off gas to the Ukraine, so we were very interested in gas flowing to Europe in a productive way so Russia couldn't sort of hold them hostage and control foreign policy of Europe through energy. That was important. We had a couple of internal things. One was the embassy had to be moved. It was in a very historic building, in a very historic place. No one wanted it to move but everybody needed it to move because it couldn't be secured properly, and after the attacks in East Africa, and so many people were injured, there was a huge move to evaluate embassies. So we had to move the embassy, and I spent a lot of time on that. Another one was the F-35 program. The F-35's made in Texas, I believe, by Lockheed Martin, and [00:05:00] they had never flown at that time. They were still in the design phase, but Norway was an international partner, one of the earliest partners, and they were making a decision first for all of these international partners, so it was important that that came out right. I'm pleased to say it did, but that was important. And there were

many, many, many different issues with a country like Norway. Peace and reconciliation: Norway is very involved. I hardly expected when I went to Norway I would learn about peace efforts in Sri Lanka, in Colombia, in Sudan, etc. That was somewhat of a surprise, but a positive one. So there are many issues. Let me just say this: Norway is known in the State Department for, they say, punching above its weight. It's only 5 million people but they play a very outsized role in international activities, partly because they're very rich right now, but partly because that's their [00:06:00] values and that is their sort of mentality.

LEONG: Now, you mentioned the F-35s but you didn't mention NATO, per se. What about Norway's role in NATO?

WHITNEY: In the broadest sense, a country like Norway, which is small, is very committed to international institutions. That's partly because that's the only way they really feel like they -- It's the way they think they can have the biggest impact, and so they're very devoted to NATO, not least because they were invaded by the Nazis in World War II and no one came to their rescue. They understood the importance of their own security to participate in multilateral things. So when NATO was set up Norway was an enthusiastic partner. They still are a very enthusiastic partner, and they are very pro-NATO. They have a much more complicated relationship with the EU but they're very pro-NATO. In my [00:07:00] time the big issue was Afghanistan, and NATO's role in Afghanistan. Right before it came there was the issue about NATO and Iraq, which was a difficult subject in Norway -- and we can talk about that, if you want -- but that had been kind of resolved. So we wanted Norway to play a big role in Afghanistan: a significant one in the military side, even though they had a small military; but also on the aid side. And so that was an important issue for my time at the embassy.

LEONG: Okay. Well, we'll certainly get to that but before we get there, just sort of to move along chronologically, what were your first impressions when you actually

got there, in terms of your interactions with individuals, with government officials, as well as the country, as a whole?

WHITNEY: Wow. It's a little hard to remember because it was a while ago, but, one was everybody was tremendously kind to me, and tremendously [00:08:00] generous with their time and their energy and their insights, because I had to go through a real learning phase. I had not been an ambassador, and I was not an expert in foreign relations. And if you wanted we could talk about the strengths and the weaknesses of having political ambassadors versus career -- that's a different subject -- but I did have a real learning curve, and everybody was extremely helpful. The great thing about the Norwegians is that they say what they mean and they do what they say, and that's very helpful. It saves a lot of time and energy. They can try to be subtle sometimes and not be as forceful as they actually feel, but they generally are not trying to set you off on wild goose chases about things that they don't care about. So anyway, people were very helpful to me. The diplomatic community -- I think one thing [00:09:00] Americans don't understand very well is that an American ambassador in a foreign country immediately becomes one of the most important figures in the country. Again, Americans, I don't think, for the most part -- I didn't totally understand that. But countries like Norway think a lot more about the U.S. than we think about Norway, and it's understandable in many ways but it's a fact. And so they want to get to know you. They want to have a good relationship. So on a social level, we knew lots of people in government, but also a lot of the local society and other people. We developed some great friendships there. I'm an outdoor person, which really fit Norway, because they have this thing -- you probably know, having lived there -- called *frilutsliv*, free outdoor life. And so everybody's out on the weekends [00:10:00] cross-country skiing in the winter, and it doesn't matter so much about the weather. And so I did a lot of backpacking in the mountains, and

a lot of skiing, and a lot of -- That helped my image quite a bit. But in any event, it was a good entry, frankly.

LEONG: Did anything strike you about their view of the U.S.? You mentioned that they think a lot more about the U.S. than we think about Norway. What struck you about their view of the U.S.?

WHITNEY: Yes, it's a complicated story, and it's true particularly in Norway. Norway, it is a core part of their psychology, about what happened in World War II, and about what happened with the Marshall Plan that saved their economy and set them off on a course of economic health and social health. And so they are very grateful to the United States for that. [00:11:00] And they respect what America accomplishes. They're not always comfortable with what we do, and they will tell you when they're not. There was a deep opposition to the Iraq War. And I think that there's a love/hate thing, and that the hate part is sometimes they will just assume bad motivation when we do something, the United States does something. They're very vocal about their criticisms and pretty short on their praise. I think those things are true. And there are a lot of caricatures about -- You would think that Norway, which knows the United States pretty well -- They're still filled with a lot of caricatures about kind of the fat, gas-guzzling, militaristic, capitalistic people, and just lack some subtlety sometimes. And so it's one of the reasons [00:12:00] I was very, very intent on exchange programs of all kinds, to send more Norwegians to the United States. And my best story was, one day, the State Department had a wonderful program that sent people on these -- I don't know what to call them -- seminars across the country, and they might be in the media; they might be in foreign policy; they could be in the economy; they could be in culture. And we would pick who would come. We invite them to come. So we pick this socialist politician from the Finance ministry, and I always interviewed them before they left, and for her being in the U.S. Embassy was like being in the Death Star. She was --

LEONG: Would this be Kristin Halvorsen?

WHITNEY: Yeah, it was someone who worked for Kristin. It wasn't Kristin herself, Kristin Halvorsen. It was one of her chief deputies. And so she came in, and we had a nice chat, but you could tell she was very uncomfortable. Anyway, she comes back, like, six weeks later, and she sits down. She goes, "Ambassador." She goes, "There are a lot of things I don't like about U.S. foreign policy, [00:13:00] but what an interesting country." Said, "I was just so surprised by the diversity of the people and the viewpoints. It was much more complicated than I had thought." And it was like, ta-da! That's exactly why it's important that we do that. So Norwegians love U.S., but they also can be very critical.

LEONG: Right. So just now you mentioned that they sometimes attribute bad motivations. What might those bad motivations be?

WHITNEY: Generally, they revolve around -- I'm trying to think of an example, but they tend to revolve around power, undermining -- Look, the United States has done a lot of negative things in the world. If you look at Central America, historically, and messing around in people's elections, and things like that have happened. And so I think that there's a concern that we [00:14:00] would be exploiting African countries, or poorer countries, or that the reason -- I mean the people who looked most negatively -- Like, we wanted the F35 because it made us rich, which, of course, is partly true. We wanted it for our economy. We also want them to be interoperable, as close as they could be with our Air Force and all our air assets in the world. So you don't have to look very far where you'll find kind of some suspicions and etc.

LEONG: How deep does that sort of slight misunderstanding go? Norway, as you know, of course, prides itself as being sort of a moral superpower.

WHITNEY: Yeah.

LEONG: To what extent is that perhaps a misalignment with U.S. interests and priorities?

WHITNEY: Well, it can be, because one thing about being a small [00:15:00] -- Makes you not fully responsible for some of the things that happen or don't happen, so it sometimes can be kind of complaining from the cheap seats about, what America is or isn't doing. It runs deep in the sense that I think their outlook is governed by a couple things. One, they are small, so of course they're looking for -- They don't like unilateral action. For example, Iraq for them was a unilateral action. We won't argue about whether it was or wasn't, but they kind of looked at it that way, and they don't like it when the U.S. does things internationally, unilaterally. And I think one reason is they can't do anything unilaterally, because it wouldn't matter; it wouldn't have an impact. So they're suspicious of that. They have a total cultural commitment to what they [00:16:00] call *dialogen*, dialogue. So dialogue is the value above all, that the first reaction to everything is to keep talking. But for the United States, at the end of the day, we can talk about that, our role in the world in the United States, but we're trying to get something accomplished so at some point we want to stop talking and start doing, and the Norwegians would go much further down that road. And so there are just very different cultural, kind of, and world outlook, that -- It's different. So it's deep, but it doesn't govern everything. Because, again, we work so closely on so many things. Their idea on dialogue, actually -- I can just remember a couple small things. Well, they weren't small at the time, but like Foreign Minister Støre, [00:17:00] they wanted to open up a relationship with Hamas, and they got way over their skis on this, because in the end of the day only Switzerland agreed with them about having -- and it was driven by this, oh, we have this new arrangement in the PLO and Hamas, and so we're going to support it, and dialogue is going to resolve. And no one else in the world really believed that, and no one really -- and we didn't, and it caused problems for us because it undermined what we were trying to accomplish. We were still trying to isolate Hamas. And, again, you could say that's bad or good, but most of the world was agreeing with us, not with them. But they felt that that

was their duty to promote the dialogue. They're interested, sometimes, in the grand gesture, too.

LEONG: I'm glad you mentioned the role of the United States in the world as a whole, because I'm curious to know where Norway fits into that. [00:18:00]

WHITNEY: Well, it fits most, particularly because Norway is a very good ally. For some of the reasons we already talked about, a couple things. One -- I'll just take a random one -- peace and reconciliation. We are wonderful partners with them in peace and reconciliation stuff. Since the Oslo Accords they have -- Again, it's related to the dialogue thing, but they want to make peace around the world. They're a very peace-driven nation, which is great, and we are too, until we're not, and we end up taking military action sometimes. But we made a fantastic pair in these negotiations, because Norway was the trusted interlocutor. They were the small country that was only motivated by the good to the parties involved, and so they could be trusted, and that was [00:19:00] important. On the other hand, they needed somebody that would actually, like, create the environment where you could drive peace, either the economic consequences, the military consequences. And the United States had the weight to try and make those things happen. So we had been very good partners in that, so in that way, they play an important role with us in the world. Another way is the multilateral institutions. We work very closely with them in NATO. We work very closely with them in the UN. I would say they are more UN-centric than we are, but, again, that's because they get credibility and power through that relationship, and it's more of a restraint on the U.S. -- some would say a good restraint, but nevertheless it's a restraint -- and sometimes, our leaders chafe against that. But there's just a ton of alphabet soup of international organizations, and Norway's really. [00:20:00] And the U.S. is involved in all of them. I would say that -- and, again, it's something most Americans don't, I think, appreciate -- I would say of things that happen in the world on an international basis, the United States is probably involved in 90% of

them. We're involved in a lot. And in doing that effectively, we need allies in order to help us accomplish what we want to accomplish. I strongly believe that a vast proportion of the time we are acting in the general interest of humanity. Not always -- sometimes we do things in our own interest -- but in order to accomplish those things you need people by your side doing it, and Norway has been a very loyal and positive partner.

LEONG: I'm glad you mentioned that, because I think Norway -- Of the people I spoke to, I got the impression that they thought that at least with the war in Iraq, for instance, which you also mentioned [00:21:00] that the U.S. really was going it alone, and not necessarily working with allies, and I think they sort of chafed at that, too. So by the time you got there, of course, it was 2006. That was somewhat behind you already.

WHITNEY: Yes.

LEONG: But did that in any way affect how things were for you when you got started?

WHITNEY: Oh, it did. President Bush was very unpopular. That's the reality. He wasn't popular in a lot of Europe, and Iraq was not the only cause but a big piece of that. And Norway had -- it came out in a bunch of different ways, the complications around [inaudible], and it was hard for Ambassador Ong, because he had the impossible job, essentially, of trying to persuade them to participate in the coalition. And at the end of the day I think there were 30 or 40 countries that did, but Norway wasn't one of them. They had a small [00:22:00] group, but when the Stoltenberg government was elected they immediately pulled that out. And so, again, as you said, that happened before I arrived. But the lingering part was there was a lot of anger about the Iraq War, and that lived through my whole time. I had to answer a lot of questions about Iraq, and about Guantanamo, and there was demonstrations, and there was real opposition. And, interesting: it didn't really have any impact on the government-to-government relations -- it didn't; that part

had been resolved, so there was nothing to talk about -- but it did have a big impact on public diplomacy. And so it's one of the reasons I dedicated a lot of myself to working outside the embassy, outside the government-to-government relation, and try and build [00:23:00] a better image for the U.S., and do a lot of public diplomacy to try and rebuild that positive view. I hope this isn't taken wrong. If President Bush was here I hope he wouldn't take it wrong, but given his unpopularity I decided that it was important for me to be popular, because they could dislike the president but if they liked me at least they'd make him listen more to what. So I worked hard with the press and stuff to try to create an image of an energetic person that cared about Norway, that cared about the relationship, that was willing to talk about anything. And I visited 60 or 70 cities and towns, and I did a lot of press, and that became a real focus, in part to try and rebuild that in a more positive way. I'm concerned that Wikileaks unwound a lot of that, which is very distressing [00:24:00] to me, but that was the goal. So it had an impact in that regard, about wanting to connect with the Norwegian people.

LEONG: Right. And do you feel like you succeeded? Before Wikileaks came out, do you feel like you were succeeding?

WHITNEY: You'd have to ask the Norwegians that. I think I set up. It partially would have happened, because the more time that went from the Iraq thing -- and it wasn't just Iraq. It was also the Socialists and the Labour were in government, and so they had a lot more negative things to say about the U.S. than a conservative government would have, and so we always had to deal with that. So they were always generating additional kind of -- I wouldn't say they were fueling the fire, but they weren't helping, sometimes. And so that had to be overcome.

LEONG: Let's talk a little bit about that, because that was interesting. So a Labour-led coalition came into government in 2005, so you got there early 2006.

WHITNEY: Yep.

LEONG: And so the fact [00:25:00] that the Socialist left was now in government, and for the first time, actually, right?

WHITNEY: Yeah.

LEONG: And you say, like, sort of complicated things. Can we go into a little bit more detail? How did it complicate things?

WHITNEY: Sure. I can give you some examples of reasons, but the impact was also related to the fact that, I'd say, Prime Minister Stoltenberg was -- and our cables, I think, reflect this -- he was much more interested in domestic affairs, and so he left pretty much all the international work to Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, who I worked an awful lot with. But what they had a tendency to do was to placate their domestic audience and their domestic party stuff by being sort of subtly, or sometimes not so subtly, [00:26:00] anti-American. They would say and do things that were placating their -- when they wanted to do something more conservative on a domestic thing, they would try to match it with something that would make people happier from the Socialist Party, for example. So they traded off, sometimes, their foreign policy in order to get what they wanted on the domestic front. The way they played it, maybe the best example was right when I was arriving Kristin Halvorsen, she was the Finance Minister, which is a very powerful position, and she suddenly, out of nowhere, announced that maybe there should be a boycott of Israel, which was very, very off U.S. policy. And this was like a five-alarm fire, because we did not want to get that started in Europe at all, or Norway. [00:27:00] And she was confronted about it, and her response was, "Well, I wasn't doing it in my role as a Minister; I was doing it in my role as a head of the Socialist Party." And I visited with her and Dan Fried, who was the Assistant Secretary for Europe, and said, "Madame Minister, there is no such thing. You are the finance minister, and what you say is the government saying it." And we came down pretty hard on it, and the government kind of -- I don't think Stoltenberg or Støre -- they didn't want her to say this, but stuff like that would happen. I

remember another case was Prime Minister Stoltenberg went to Russia and criticized missile defense. This was another big issue for the U.S. was trying to get missile defense installations in Poland and Czechoslovakia. And [00:28:00] he went and criticized missile defense in Russia, which was just bad behavior. You just don't do that to your ally, particularly on an issue like that, and particularly about a security issue like that, given our relationship with them. So there was a set of these sort of provocative things. Støre one day went to the university to give a lecture, and he put up a slide of President Bush with a "Mission Accomplished," the very famous picture of "Mission Accomplished," and he puts the slide up and he goes, "This is not the way to do diplomacy." And it was like, it's just gratuitous. And so, again, they were playing to some of their base, and so that did impact. But most of the time it didn't, but at times it did.

LEONG: What was your sense of the Stoltenberg government in terms of its foreign policy [00:29:00] priorities?

WHITNEY: That's a good question. I'm just trying to think back about how I would articulate that. It was consistent with what we want. They were very intense on peace in the Middle East. They were head of the Palestinian donors group, which gave them contact with a lot of -- and they were really -- Støre really wanted a big home run, and I think he thought that might be a way to get it. So they were very intent on that. I think they wanted to strengthen international institutions. I'm trying to think, because, something that Americans don't always appreciate -– of course we're in Norway, trying to get the Norwegians to do what we want them to do, and they have an embassy in Washington where they're trying to get us to do what they want to do. That's what diplomacy [00:30:00] is. It happens in both capitals, so it's not like only the United States is sitting there, trying to get what they want. Norway is getting what they want. So they had a bunch of trade issues. We have sort of a ridiculous restriction on whole salmon that somehow got past the Congress. They were trying to get rid of that. But it was a lot of negotiating

the war in Afghanistan, and mainly Støre wanted to be a real activist in the world. He wanted Norway to have the prestige -- and himself, I'm sure, to have the prestige -- as a real player in the world, and that was a lot of their agenda.

LEONG: So let's talk about the phone call between President Bush and Prime Minister-elect, at that time, Stoltenberg. There was apparently some miscommunication at some point. What was your recollection of what [00:31:00] actually took place --

WHITNEY: Yeah, this is a little awkward.

LEONG: -- or your knowledge?

WHITNEY: Well, what I can say is clearly President Bush called up Stoltenberg when they won the election. He was maybe the first person to call, made a point of it. He's always appreciated Norway, and it's a little country but he took the time. He calls to congratulate him, say, "We look forward to working with you," and that was despite the fact it was a Labour/Socialist election. And so he did that, and then, unfortunately, Stoltenberg goes to a press conference, and they asked him whether they talked to President Bush, and he said yes, and then he mischaracterized their conversation. I don't want to go any further than that, but he just clearly mischaracterized what he had said to the [00:32:00] president, and the White House was infuriated by it. They were just infuriated by it. And that was a problem for not necessarily Norway and the U.S. but the government and the White House. So I spent the next three years trying to get Stoltenberg a visit with the president, which would have been meaningful. It's good in Norway. They want to know you have that relationship. But given that, it wasn't going to happen, and the NSC put the kibosh on any presidential contact. And it was very unfortunate, and, to be honest with you, I don't think Stoltenberg did it intentionally, or he planned to do it. I think he got asked a tough question, and he answered it in the way that would make more people happy, and [00:33:00] I don't know he knew it was going to blow up into what it blew up into. It became a

serious and permanent issue. I think eventually he did get, maybe much later, maybe during Ambassador -- No. No, he never did.

LEONG: No, he never did.

WHITNEY: He never did. I was thinking because -- No, he didn't.

LEONG: Yeah, he got to see President Obama eventually --

WHITNEY: Yeah, he got to see Obama --

LEONG: -- because that was after --

WHITNEY: -- but he never saw President Bush, and that was why.

LEONG: -- President Bush. Yeah. Is that why he never got to see President Bush? Was it because of the phone call?

WHITNEY: Yeah.

LEONG: Yeah?

WHITNEY: Otherwise, look, they have many, many heads of state come to see the president, and Norway, as a good ally, would have been one of those, but the personal insult was more than his team. I never talked to the president directly about it. I [00:34:00] tried to influence the NSC, but I failed to do it, in saying, "Look, this was a mistake, but there's more to be gained here, and more to be lost, if you don't do this." But I was not -- My diplomacy failed with my own government. And it's one thing you don't appreciate as ambassador: part of your diplomacy goes backwards to your own government, and that is an underappreciated part of the job.

LEONG: Did you face pressure from the Norwegian government to try and set something up? Did they work hard on you for that?

WHITNEY: They'd ask about it. But I think they understood the problem. And I made it clear I was trying to do my best to help them, and I told them I would try to help them, but I didn't -- I could tell from the reaction that this was not going to be an easy -- It was going to be a heavy lift.

LEONG: What about your relationship with Mr. Støre? How would you characterize that? [00:35:00]

WHITNEY: We had a good relationship. I think he was always very accommodating for me to see him when I wanted to see him. He was a good interlocutor about issues, and he's very, very smart, and knows international issues really well, and has clear opinions, and we would agree sometimes, and we disagree sometimes, and I think we had a lot of good interactions. I don't think -- I think that he'd rather be talking to Secretary Rice than talking to me, if he could, partly because. Again, he sort of considered himself a big figure, and he is a big figure. He lost the election last time, but he is the head of the Labour Party, and I'd be surprised if one day he's not prime minister himself, and he's a good [00:36:00] politician. I didn't see him really in that role, and that kind of surprised me. The idea of Støre kissing babies and walking in parades just -- that's not the Støre I knew. He was a very dapper, sophisticated, well-read, intelligent, kind of academically-minded but very skillful guy. And so it was just sometimes he would -- He didn't always respect everybody else's opinion as much as I think he might have, but --

LEONG: Hmm. Can you be more specific about that? Were there specific incidents?

WHITNEY: No. Obviously, it was in the cable where I wrote a cable, and actually, in all honesty, I was responsible for that spec -- We could talk about the cable someday, because I didn't write all those cables, but nevertheless the one that was evaluating Støre and members of the government I did participate in, and I think I'm even responsible for the line about he's a very skillful, smart, intelligent person, [00:37:00] but one of his challenges is he always thinks he's the smartest guy in the room. And it was funny because after the Wikileaks came out about that I called one of my friends there, and he said, "I wouldn't worry too much about that. Pretty much everybody reads that and goes, yeah, that's pretty much Støre." He's a very self-possessed guy. And so occasionally, I can't remember specific errors

where he would -- He wasn't rude. That wasn't his style, but he wasn't very easy to persuade on things because he felt like he had the answer.

LEONG: Right. Well, I think it was in Wikileaks there was mention that the U.S. was perhaps a little bit annoyed with him and his activism with negotiations with Iran, and his activism in Cuba, certainly his activism [00:38:00] with Hamas.

WHITNEY: Hamas. This was the thing: he wanted to make a name for himself, and he wanted to make a name for Norway, and I think he also thought he could do some good, sort of the avenging peacemaker, to fly in. But it didn't accord with our policy. And sometimes he wouldn't tell us he was doing it, which in diplomacy is important. It could be a country's going to take a position you don't want, or they will do something you don't want, but for allies, good allies, it's important to tell your friends before you do it, so they're prepared to respond, rather than getting surprised with -- And so he did not talk about the thing about Hamas. He didn't talk about his overture in Iran, which was -- these are some of the most highly sensitive parts of U.S. foreign policy, so to have one of our allies freelancing on this was not [00:39:00] appreciated. It did not go well in Washington -- or in Oslo, for that matter -- when he would do that.

LEONG: Right. Was it mostly a matter of optics, or were there actually things going on that went deeper than that?

WHITNEY: He never got anywhere. He might have wanted to, but his overture about Iran was dismissed. His overture to Hamas was dismissed by everybody. And I can't remember what he did about Cuba. I forget -- I don't know what he said about Cuba, but anyway, we had a policy on Cuba, and it was one of isolation. Again, you could say that's the wrong policy, but it was our policy, so you just don't want people going and taking positions that's making our lives harder. So he did that some. But I would say, on a much larger scale of things, he was very helpful. We worked very closely on the High North issues, around [00:40:00] energy, and Russia, and legal boundaries, and we had a very good exchange about

that. They were very helpful in Afghanistan, with one exception: they wanted their troops there, but they don't want them actually to shoot bullets, which, in a war, is not as helpful as it might be, particularly because they're very good soldiers, and we're having to put our soldiers out there, and they want to be handing out food when we're fighting the battles. First of all, their own military wanted to do it; they were the ones saying that they would restrain them. So, we had a lot of push and pull around those issues, but we wanted them in certain places. They helped us. They do a lot of positive stuff that people don't see around international organizations, just an example. There was a new organization, a secretariat, to be set up for oil-rich [00:41:00] Third World nations, and the idea was to try to help them learn not to get the oil curse, which was the oil would destroy their economy and cause conflict and everything else. And we asked Norway to become the head of it, because they were an oil nation that had been hyper-responsible, both environmentally and in what they did with the resources, the benefit of the country, all that. And they immediately said yes and put up their hand, and they ran that, and I don't know what eventually happened to it, but it was a typical kind of thing where we could ask Norway to do it and they would.

LEONG: Now, you mentioned the High North of the Arctic, which is actually what I was going to move on to next. To what extent did the U.S. agree with Mr. Støre's sort of vision for the Arctic? Because that was really high on his policy priorities.

WHITNEY: It was very high, and I think we were very aligned on it, on the Arctic Council. There is an Arctic Council [00:42:00] of the seven or nine Arctic nations -- I forget -- but there were a lot of people that wanted to get into that group. The Chinese wanted desperately to get into that group, and -- I forget -- there are one or two other nations that were really putting hard. And we had the same alignment, that let's stick with the Arctic nations, not least of which we need to deal directly with Russia, and that's complicated enough, so let's not. So we worked with them on creating some observer statuses, and etc. There was a lot of

discussion. We had a pretty cooperative relationship. There was a very large oil development called Shtokman, which was in the Russian Sea, and they were kind of bidding on who would develop that for the Russians. Very peculiar, but the Russians have a gigantic amount of oil, and still over 30 years they've never developed any industry to actually get it, particularly the off-sea oil. So Norway [00:43:00] played kind of an interesting role in working with the Russians about how that field would get developed, and then that was important to us. We had some disagreements about some boundary disputes, of which the technicalities of -- there are people that spend their life trying to figure out who owns what in the Arctic, and, in their typical fashion, during my time there Russia took a sub and went down to the bottom of this certain place and planted this little tiny flag and declared sovereignty over whatever part of the Arctic that was. And immediately Norway goes, you can't do that. That's not how it's done. There's a tribunal that's trying to figure out the boundaries, and they're very rules-based, and so are we, so we agreed with them on that. We had a little bit of -- they have a very vital energy [00:44:00] industry, and they depend on a lot of international organizations, companies to work with them, including a bunch of American ones, and clearly that's the most important economic relationship that Norway has is in oil. That's producing all the wealth. And they had put certain amounts of land off-limits to exploration, and we were generally in favor of more open leases, and we were not in favor of prohibitions, and so we had some disagreements about that, but that's not unusual in the course of business. So I'd say we worked really well with them. One of my projects was in my first couple of months I went up to Svalbard, which is that archipelago that is under Norwegian sovereignty, but some 36 countries in the world have, like, mineral rights and economic rights to it. [00:45:00] The only people who've ever done anything are the Russians, who have some mines up there. But, unfortunately, a Russian fishing boat kidnapped a couple of Norwegian fish inspectors, so we worked closely on getting the Russians to respect the fishing

laws that Norway put in place. And so that's the kind of place where they appreciate it, because they can complain all they want but Russia's not going to really do much to accommodate them. But that's a really unappreciated part of the world right now, and is going to come into play at some point or other, between China and Russia and the United States and the other Arctic nations. I can almost promise you. Because of the sea ice that is melting there's opening transportation routes. The USGS says 25% of remaining world oil is there. Who would know? It's sort of a [00:46:00] guesstimate at best. So I'd say in the next 20 or 30 years that's going to become a point of increasing interest.

LEONG: Since we're talking about Russia, I want us to talk a bit more about that. So how were relations with Russia when you were ambassador, and did Norway play any role sort of in that mix?

WHITNEY: The general way I'd characterize it is Norway is not naïve about Russia. Historically it's interesting because Russia did invade Norway at the end of World War II, came down to Bodø -- I think it was Bodø, where they ended up -- and it's one of the only places they ever withdrew from. They actually left, which was great. But they have a very large, somewhat unpredictable neighbor, that they don't really trust. However, they have a border. They interact, [00:47:00] because of fishing and oil and all these things. So the way the Norwegians, at least when I was there, they wanted to be the good guy with the Russians, but they definitely want us to be the bad guy with the Russians. That's what they wanted most, is for us to be the hard person in the relationship, and Norway could be all nonconfrontational, which we didn't always. We understood the reasons for that, but sometimes it would have been helpful for Norwegians to stand up for the right thing to do, and sometimes they would. Again, dialogue becomes an excuse to not actually have to do anything. But --

LEONG: Again, can you be more specific? Were there specifics incidents?

WHITNEY: Well, the fishing thing I mentioned is a significant one. They were outraged [00:48:00] by it, but there wasn't much they could do. And so I think we did some satellite and other things to monitor the fishing boats, the Russian fishing boats, etc., and I think we ran some ships up there and whatever. One of the things, like they could have been, just a good example would have been missile defense. It actually was one of the most fascinating experiences I had in my time there was I got to sit in on a high-level negotiation between the Russians and the Americas on the missile defense system. They happened to hold a meeting in Norway, which means the heads of mission participate, just because it's in their country. So I sat next to -- I can't remember his name -- the undersecretary for disarmament. And the guy who was the Russian was a guy named Sergey Kislyak, who was quite famous, because he ended up the Ambassador to the U.S. and spent a good seven or eight years in the U.S. And it was just a fascinating experience [00:49:00] because it was clear from the beginning that Russians -- there was nothing that we could say. We were trying everything to persuade them that there was no malign intent. They said, "Well, you're trying to put these radars and missiles aimed at us, to intercept our missiles." And so our interlocutor would say, "Well, that's not correct. One reason it's not correct is the missiles that'll be placed you will have access to and be able to monitor. When you shoot off your..." We had physicists at the table, so the physicists said, "Look, when you shoot off an ICBM, these missiles couldn't catch them if they wanted to." There was literally no physical way it could do it. And they go, "Nope, you're trying to undermine our defense, and we won't allow it." And they were just trying to find every excuse not to do it. The reason I bring that up is because [00:50:00] it would have been helpful for the Norwegians to stand and say, "Look, this is good for peace. These are directed towards Iran, and the threat Iran hopes -- Iran's a threat to us. They can reach Europe. They can't reach the United States. So this is something we want." But they just wouldn't get involved, because they didn't want to alienate. They were

always worried about alienating Russia, because Russia, it's true, could cause them more problems than they could cause the Russians, and they were cognizant of that.

LEONG: So they were actually openly resistant, right? To the missile defense, for a while.

WHITNEY: Yes. Again, anything having to do with arms they're nervous about, particularly the Labour Party, and so the idea that we'd be adding missiles in Poland -- I think the missiles were in -- Yeah, missiles were in Poland, and the radars were in Czechoslovakia. I think that's the way it was. But, yeah, they were hostile to what we were trying to [00:51:00] accomplish, and that was a point of some disagreement.

LEONG: Yeah. So did you have to do some arm twisting? What did you do?

WHITNEY: Sure. Yeah, I had to go in, and I'd talk to the foreign minister. I don't remember exactly the conversation, but say, "We need your help on this. We're not trying to aim anything at Russia, and we're giving them every possible concession to assure them of that." We just don't believe that the addition of additional armaments is going to be the solution to the problem." And so politically they just weren't willing to do that.

LEONG: Yeah. But eventually you got what you wanted.

WHITNEY: They never -- from them?

LEONG: Yeah. Oh, maybe it was not when you were ambassador.

WHITNEY: Yeah, it may have been after I was gone that they supported it. But, again, Obama discontinued it, so it didn't matter. He abandoned the system, which I think was a terrible mistake because now we're trying to figure out about putting it back, and it would have been easier to do it then.

LEONG: Right. [00:52:00] Let's turn to Afghanistan. So, of course, Iraq was done with by the time you got there, but they were continuing their involvement in Afghanistan. Was that, were they -- Let me rephrase that. Were there any issues,

areas of concern, from the U.S. point of view, about Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan?

WHITNEY: No. The only thing that we wanted them to do was -- We had some disagreement about where they would deploy their special forces -- we wanted them to deploy in a certain place -- and we want them able to use their weapons. Because they were under an edict from Oslo that they could go out and patrol, but they could never use their weapons unless it was in self-defense of them, or the camp they had. It was a place called Maymana in northern Afghanistan. [00:53:00] So I guess there's two sides to it. On the military side, we weren't satisfied that they were doing all they could. They did send three F-16s. They did send 500 special forces, but the special forces weren't that useful because they couldn't be used as special forces, right? And we could have used that capacity. And that's a whole 'nother issue around -- a point of disagreement was about defense spending in Norway. President Trump is, from my view, wrong on many things, but he's quite right about the spending on NATO defense by the NATO countries. And, look, we spend 6%. If they can't spend 3% of their budget, country that they are, on their own defense, I find that hard to believe. And I used to give speeches on this when I was there. I went to the Defense University, and I'd say, "Look, at the end of the day the American people [00:54:00] are going to not be willing to subsidize your defense, so you're going to have to do your share." And, again, just politically they don't want to do it. So the fact that they can only deploy 500 people is kind of sad, because that's not very many, even if they're of very high quality. So we were disappointed. They were helpful in some ways, and the F-16s were helpful. On the aid side, they were very, very generous, and we worked very closely with aid, because Støre's idea was it wasn't bombs and bullets that was going to win; it was going to be converting the people with aid. And it may have turned out that neither was true, so I'm not sure in the argument. Who was right doesn't work because we were probably both wrong. So we disagreed about the

military part, and we were very much hand-in-hand on that, and they were very supportive of [00:55:00] Karzai, and at that point their relationship with Karzai was good. It all fell apart at the end, but it was good, and they had a good relationship. So that was a point of generally positive cooperation.

LEONG: I remember reading that Mr. Støre was advocating for more dialogue with the Taliban, even back then.

WHITNEY: Yeah. It was his starting point of departure on any foreign policy subject, and that's partly a cultural thing. That's probably a personal thing with him. And the answer is, it would be great to have a good dialogue with the Taliban, but it's a problem when they keep killing everybody. We're just not at that place yet where that's possible. And those kinds of things, I don't remember that position being a big issue. Sure, we're for [00:56:00] dialogue, too, but I don't know who we're going to talk to, so --

LEONG: So we seem to keep coming back to this issue of sort of a cultural difference in terms of approach to foreign policy. Did you get a sense that there was a difference in understanding of, say, the meaning of 9/11; that 9/11 meant something to us and that they, perhaps, perceived it differently, and that informed our foreign policy in a way that didn't inform theirs?

WHITNEY: I think that's true, but I'm not thinking they're the only country that maybe didn't have as much a reaction as we did, because, of course, it wasn't their citizens that was attacked. And at that point there weren't really many attacks in Europe. Terrorism really hadn't come to roost in Europe as it has now, and I think the attitude would have been different had that occurred, because there would be more sympathy [00:57:00] for how do we deal with this terrorism problem. In Norway, I think it's fair to say that they -- Now, it depends who you're talking to. Like, I had a very close relationship with Jørn Holme, who's the head of the PST, and that's the domestic security service, and then there is NIS, the Norwegian Intelligence Service, and Torgeir Hagen. And I had a very close relationship with

both of them, and Hagen clearly understood the threat. And the intelligence relationship between Norway and the United States is something that isn't talked about much, and, in a way, Norwegians don't want to talk about it, because they don't really want to know. But we are very, [00:58:00] very cooperative, and the head of the CIA then was Michael Hayden, and Hayden and Hagen had a very close friendship. And so twice I think I went in to see the head of the CIA with Torgeir. And he understood it, and he wanted his nation to play a role in trying to combat it, and he was worried about it in Norway, and we were worried about it in Norway. The government, the politicians, were not that concerned about it, and that was a problem for us, both internationally but also having to do with the defense of our embassy. Because one of my inside jobs, my jobs as a manager of the embassy, my job is to keep the embassy employees secure, and in that spot it was hard to do. But we had lots of disputes. Like, [00:59:00] we wanted to put two cameras on our sidewalk, pointing both directions, so the people inside could see what was happening on the outside, and they wouldn't allow it. They refused to let us do that. We were trying to get -- they did put a security person at the embassy, but they put him inside the fence, which means they really couldn't do much to defend the embassy because they were trapped inside the fence, and they wouldn't move him outside the fence. They wouldn't give us authority to build a saferoom, which we wanted to build inside the embassy for embassy employees. And so there was a lot of things. Some of this was their own law, and that constrained them, too, even when there were real examples of -- There was a guy named Mullah Krekar, and I don't ever know what happened to Mullah Krekar, but he was a very outspoken, radical Islamic imam, and he was making [01:00:00] very aggressive speeches, crossing the line as far as we were concerned, and, actually, as far as the government -- The intelligence service and the internal [inaudible] felt the same way, but they couldn't get -- they gave him asylum. So they wouldn't go through the steps to eject him out of the country, so he stayed

there for years and years, advocating violence, and they couldn't seem to do anything about it. And, to me, that's just a reflection of just not enough energy. They don't believe it enough. But so, yes, they did not react to 9/11 the same way we did.

LEONG: You were not only in Norway; I imagine you also traveled in Europe. Did you get a sense that the Norwegian point of view was pretty reflective of the European point of view in general?

WHITNEY: I wish I could give an answer to that but I just don't know. My guess is [01:01:00] -- as another way of putting it, you were talking about Støre and his outlook. He appreciated the Atlantic alliance very much, but he was a lot more comfortable with a European-centric view. He just felt more comfortable in the European milieu than he did with the Americans. I think that was true.

LEONG: How would you characterize that? When you say "European milieu," what do you have in mind?

WHITNEY: Well, I mean, they're generally very suspicious of the military, their own military or anyone else's military. They're social democracies. The United States is going to have this debate in the next two years about whether we want to live a more European model of government, and that will be an interesting discussion for Americans, but there is no question that Norway is a social democracy, and all that goes with that. And so therefore it [01:02:00] was just easier for him to talk -- The devotion to the multilayer organizations. Cause in comparison -- all countries are small compared to the United States, except for China, including Russia, but they don't act like it. But so, there is this tension, I think, that's there.

LEONG: Yeah, and speaking to this tension, when I spoke to folks over there something I keep hearing over and over is, the United States, because it is so big, and it is so powerful, sometimes it forgets it's so powerful, and that it does seem to behave a little bit like a bull in a china shop where it just kind of moves around and knocks things over and doesn't realize it's doing it, even.

WHITNEY: Well, I'm talking to Dr. Engel's class tomorrow, and one of the things I want them to understand is that there is this love/hate relationship with the United States, because they so deeply appreciate what we've done for the country. They understand that we carry a lot of weight in the world for everybody. They get all that. And [01:03:00] one of my theories, which is unproven, is that one of the reasons that some of the cynicism and suspicions of the United States is a reaction to our overwhelming power. Because if you're a Norwegian, look, you can't protect your own country. You're going to depend on the United States to do it, and they know it. There's no question about it. You're not going to be able to do anything else in the world without the United States. It's not going to happen. So, militarily, foreign policy, you are entirely dependent on the United States. Economically, the United States is the biggest economy in the world, and they deal with American companies on almost everything, and because we're a very innovative society they're buying our products all the time, and da, da, da, da, da. And then culturally, that's where the movies come from. It's where the TV comes from. It's where a lot of music comes from. And so I think that there's just sort of a, it's just a little overwhelming sometimes, and it irritates them. [01:04:00] I just think it's not they hate America, but just it irritates them. And so I honestly think that's part of the reason that there is a resistance against the United States. And, yes, we are a bull in a china shop, but part of it is that, A, we're the only bull; and, two, sometimes the china shop is set up by people not doing what they could be doing to make it less fragile. But there's no question the role we play, we are going to aggravate people, and lots of people. That's the way it is.

LEONG: Right. Do you get a sense, from your vantage point, that American diplomats, folks in the State Department, are kind of aware of that dynamic? Because one of the things I heard when I was in Norway was just sort of this annoyance that the U.S. diplomats don't seem to appreciate that some things just need to be done more delicately. So, for instance, Ambassador Vollebæk, who was

Norway's Ambassador to the U.S., told a story, an anecdote [01:05:00] about how he got called in to the State Department -- this was before your time -- and congratulated, because the troops that Norway had sent to Iraq -- no, sorry, it was Afghanistan -- had just done a successful bombing, and it was the first bombing that their troops had done post-World War II.

WHITNEY: Right, right.

LEONG: So, for them, it was a very sensitive issue. For the United States, it was "Hooray for Norway."

WHITNEY: "Yeah, way to go!" Yeah, well, that's true.

LEONG: And Ambassador Vollebæk said, "Please, don't put out a public statement."

WHITNEY: Yeah, exactly. Thanks for your thanks, but don't. That's Knut. That's very much like Knut. He is a smart guy. But, no, and that is correct, and that's why we don't share the same worldview. For us, we're trying to win a war in Afghanistan, and Norway knows it's not going to win the war in Afghanistan. All it's going to do is threaten the lives of their own -- and Støre wrote this about in his book, and I give him credit. [01:06:00] He attributed to me, although I don't totally remember the conversation. We had a famous walk in the woods after --

LEONG: I read about that.

WHITNEY: -- we were having trouble with our relationship, and I said something to the effect that, "I think sometimes that Europeans and Norwegians -- when you lose one guy in Afghanistan, it's on the front page of the paper, and the entire nation is devoted to the attention of that, and you've lost, like, a thousand people. And so we don't necessarily appreciate that that's what's happening to you." And I think that's a fair thing, but so is Knut's viewpoint. But American diplomats should be better than that, because, of course, part of our job is to understand what the domestic audience is going to -- If the government's doing something for you and it's awkward for them to do it, then don't [01:07:00] talk about it. Just take yes for

an answer and don't feel like you have to spike the football, which we're one to do. But that's why diplomats are there, frankly. And so that was a mistake. It just --

LEONG: With reference to that particular incident, I think Ambassador Vollebæk carried the day, that there was no public statement.

WHITNEY: I'm sure there wasn't. No, I'm sure they went, "Oh, right."

LEONG: So you mentioned President Bush's unpopularity.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

LEONG: What about Vice President Cheney? What about Secretary Rumsfeld? And, of course, Rumsfeld left -- about the time that -- No, he left after you became Ambassador, so he was --

WHITNEY: I think so.

LEONG: -- he and you overlapped a little bit.

WHITNEY: A little bit, but I didn't meet him then. I'd met him at some other time, but Cheney had the same role in [01:08:00] Norway as he has here, which is sort of the shadowy figure, pulling George Bush's strings. I think that was the same sort of thing there, so I don't think that was any different. And most of it was directed towards the president. I don't think they were as aware. They understood it, to a point, but that wasn't the central part of the conversation.

LEONG: So did the changeover to Secretary Rice make a difference, as far as you could tell? Whether in terms of turning a new page, or --

WHITNEY: Well, she was here the whole time I was there, so there was no change. She had been Secretary of State from the time I arrived to the time I left, so I hadn't known anybody else. She was a respected person, I think. When you get down to the secretary level, I think there's less understanding about -- she came to Norway once. [01:09:00] We had, I think, a good visit. I was trying to think of what it was. There was a joint press conference with Støre and Condoleezza Rice, and he said something that she didn't like. And she's so professional, but she immediately corrected him, and just kind of not in a hostile way at all, but just said, "Well, the

United States takes a completely different view of this," and blah, blah, blah. I can't remember what it was about. But I think Støre had strong respect for Secretary Rice, and why wouldn't you? She was a very strong, intelligent, capable person, and a very good Secretary of State. But the embassies and foreign policy is not a place you get gigantic [01:10:00] change. It just isn't. It's an incremental business, you know? Like, talking people into things, in ordinary human affairs isn't any different in international affairs, to some degree. Like trying to talk your husband or your wife into something isn't always successful, and that's true in international relations, as well, so you're trying to get increments of progress.

LEONG: Which were the agencies or officials that you worked most closely with back home?

WHITNEY: First, I'd start by saying that Norway was a perfect assignment for me in many ways, because, as it turns out, to me, it's best to be the ambassador of a small, very active country. The reason you want it to be very active is because if they're not, there's nothing to do. As I mentioned before, the United States is involved in [01:11:00] 90% of what goes on in the world, so your portfolio is, in part, related to the portfolio of that country, right? So they have no scope of action and activity. Neither does the embassy, because maybe you're trying to broaden it a little bit, but -- So being an active country is important, but a small one is better because Washington isn't managing the relationship over your head, which happens a lot. So if you were in Germany or China or Japan or some of these countries, what happens is that their defense minister is talking to your defense minister, and you're not in between. So in a small country, their attitude is basically call us if you need help, right? And they mean it: if you really need help, call us. But they're not looking to do everything for you. And it only [01:12:00] happened, like, once or twice my whole time there, but one of your questions was one of the hardest experiences I had; this wasn't the hardest but it was, in a way, the most awkward. But it was about Afghanistan, and I went in to see the foreign

minister, and I said, "Mr. Minister, the United States wants this and this and this, and these are the reasons, and we would very much appreciate your assistance in this matter." He listens to me, listens to me, listens to me, and then he looks at me, goes, "Hmm, that's not what Condi told me." And it was like, ugh. So I get a cable, like, three days later that he had talked to Rice, and I hadn't known it. So I went on a fool's errand when he'd been talking to the Secretary of State. So that's a perfect example about why you don't want to be in a place where this thing is happening over your head, because in the end you don't really know what's going on. You don't. But in Norway it wasn't so much. For the most part, he [01:13:00] would call up Secretary Rice every once in a while, but for the most part the relationship ran through me, and our embassy, and that made it much more interesting.

LEONG: And were you mostly in touch with Daniel Fried? You mentioned Daniel Fried earlier.

WHITNEY: Yeah, Dan Fried, or the different regional heads of different bureaus. Because, if we were working on something related to the Middle East, of course, that's not Dan Fried; that's somebody else. The stuff specifically around NATO and otherwise would tend to be Dan, who was a very -- He's really quite a guy. He was one tough customer. They put him in charge of Guantanamo, trying to get --

LEONG: That's right.

WHITNEY: -- people to take Guantanamo. That was a tough job. I don't think that was intended as a reward. But in any event, I always enjoyed working with him. He's a very effective person.

LEONG: So, to the subject of Guantanamo, since you brought it up: how often did that subject come up in your --

WHITNEY: Constantly. Well, because I spoke at so many universities that it would come up all [01:14:00] the time. And Abu Ghraib had happened, and so sometimes I'd walk into -- I remember walking into the University of Oslo, and some group

had, there were like 500 people in the hall waiting to hear me speak and answer questions, but out in the front hall they were reenacting Guantanamo, and naked people, and whips, and they were very upset about Guantanamo, and very upset about Abu Ghraib, and etc. So that was a live issue, amongst the socialists in particular, and so I did a lot of interacting around that. And I think you give credit to people who you think are willing to show up and tell you things, even though you may disagree with them, and Norwegians are like that. They do want to -- The dialogue thing is real, [01:15:00] so they do listen, which was great.

LEONG: How did you frame it in such a way that hopefully they understood? I'm assuming that you approached it in a particular way.

WHITNEY: I'm trying to remember what sort of the approach was. A part of it was a practical one, about you tell me what you would do with -- this wasn't so much about torture, because I couldn't talk about that. I wasn't really -- I don't -- You know, black sites, and there was rumors of that stuff, and there were Norwegian groups that were trying to check tail numbers of planes to see if the CIA were bringing people into Norway -- what do they call it -- extradition, where they would capture people and take them out of the government. But that stuff, that was very, very controversial, [01:16:00] and not the kind of thing that people in Europe liked at all, and they didn't. But I tried to say that, not Abu Ghraib, which is nothing you can do, but say there were people that breached their oath, and they did the wrong thing, and they will be prosecuted for what they did, and they should be, because they've caused huge harm, not just to those prisoners, who didn't deserve that treatment, but then to the reputation of the United States, and recruiting a bunch of jihadis who were going to wage war against us. So that was more easy to deal with. The thing about Guantanamo, and holding people permanently, and trying to explain what U.S. law was and international law was about prisoners of war, and how long they could be held, and it was a little bit

legalistic. And I don't think it ever satisfied them, but they respected you coming and [01:17:00] talking, anyway.

LEONG: So much earlier on in our conversation we talked about what the priority areas were when you first arrived in Norway. Did those change over time? Did anything happen over the course of your time as ambassador where things shifted and the focus changed?

WHITNEY: In the back of my mind I'll keep thinking about this. One thing as an ambassador, the government-to-government relationship is the core of it, of course, because the idea is that I get a cable from Washington, I march down to the -- and literally it was down the street; I could walk down to the foreign minister, or the state secretary, whoever I want to talk about, and give them, "This is what we'd like," and then I'd go back, and then a couple days they'd send somebody up to my office, and they'd say, "Well, this is what we're willing to do." That is a lot of it, but there are other really important parts of the job, and, for me, what became critical was [01:18:00] educational exchange. Because I discovered, which I didn't know, numbers of students in the U.S. had dropped by 50% from about ten years before. And, you having been with your husband there on a Fulbright appreciate this, but that's a catastrophic loss, particularly for allies. You need to -- all those people -- One of the things -- you asked about what I remember when I arrived -- is people saying to me, "Oh, I remember my time at the University of Minnesota," or "I remember my time going to visit in Houston." And those people had an understanding of U.S. that Norwegians that had never been to the U.S. didn't have. And going to New York and going to the Statue of Liberty is not really the -- you have to live in the society. And so, I got very, very serious about trying to change that, and also trying to encourage Americans to go to Norway, which [01:19:00] is equally important but harder to do, because Americans -- It's a pet peeve of mine, but I don't think you should be able to graduate from an institution of higher learning without spending, unless you have

some reason, a semester abroad, because that's part of becoming well-rounded in the liberal arts, or a well-rounded person. But any event, so I spent a tremend-- when you're ambassador you do a lot of stuff that is government to government that you're being asked to do, so you don't freelance on foreign policy stuff, but on your own time, you have the ability to develop causes, so that was an important cause to me. Another thing that I didn't appreciate, although it was there, was the embassy issue. It was much more complicated and difficult. There was a bunch of opposition to where we wanted to move the property, so we had to get approval from the City Council, and then we had to get approval from the -- And then there was a lawsuit, and we had to win the [01:20:00] Supreme Court, and it was very fraught. Very fraught experience. And so I spent a lot more time on that, and the part that mostly surprised me is that I had to spend a lot of time in Washington getting what's called the Office of Building Operations, OBO, in allocating the money for Norway, so if we got the property we could actually build the embassy. There was a lot of competition. There was, like, 27 embassies that had to be rebuilt, and so. But as far as foreign policy issues, there was no cataclysmic -- Afghanistan was going on. Iraq was going on. Russia was being its ever difficult self. The Iran issue, and their proliferation and sponsorship of terrorism. So a lot of that. The one thing that we spent a lot of time on that I didn't plan on was Sudan, because Sudan kind of fell. [01:21:00] The issue in Darfur had existed, but then President Bush became very, very intent on the AIDS in Africa issue, and, through PEPFAR[1] -- I think if you asked him what he was most proud of, that would be one of the things he'd tell you. But trying to get some settlement in Sudan, and eventually it led to breaking the country into two countries. But that was something we spent a lot of time I did not expect.

LEONG: Did you expect, going to Norway, that you would end up having to deal with issues elsewhere in the globe, as well?

[1] President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief

WHITNEY: No, I really didn't. That really surprised me. And we spent a lot of time on Sri Lanka, too, the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Obviously Sri Lanka's in the news right now, but this was a different dispute, and a much longer one, between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. And we didn't succeed. That was a failed negotiation, because eventually the Sinhalese government crushed the Tamils and beat them militarily, [01:22:00] at the loss of a lot of life. So it was sad that we were not able to be successful.

LEONG: So, just as a roundoff our conversation, what would you say was the high point, or high points, of your experience there?

WHITNEY: On a personal level, on sort of accomplishment, I ran across a memo that I had asked my DCM and political officer, I said grading us on our time there, about what they thought we did well and what we didn't do well, and I was proud of the fact that we maneuvered and dealt with the F-35 issue, that they chose the American fighter. And we put a lot of energy, and we had a lot of work to do with Lockheed Martin, which wasn't approaching this thing right. We had a lot of work to do, Norwegian government. The Defense Department wanted American planes but not all the politicians did, [01:23:00] so we had to put a lot -- So I was proud of that. I was proud about getting the embassy approved. And I was proud of the educational exchange work, because about three years after I left we'd gotten back to where we were the ten years before. I'm not sure if it's happened since, but that, to me, those were tangible accomplishments that were real high points for me. As far as experience, I'd say, just singular experience, one was participating in that arms negotiation was really a very funny moment, because I knew the Russian ambassador to Norway really well, and we played tennis together all the time. We had these very great -- they called them *supermaktduells*, the superpower duels. But anyway, I sit down at the table, and Sergey is sitting across from me, and there are two flags: there's a Russian flag (holds up left hand) and then (holds up right hand lower than left) this American flag. And I look at him, and I go, "Sergey,

that's kind of sad. I mean, really? Is that the best?" [01:24:00] He smiled. But anyway, being part of trying to make a major issue happen in the world was fascinating. Another one was going and watching the NATO nations meet, and I sat for a day with Victoria Nuland, and watched her dealing with it. It was mainly about Afghanistan. But those were just -- it's fun to feel like you're at the center of big things that are happening in the world. So those are some of the kind of personal high points.

LEONG: Sure. What about low points?

WHITNEY: I'm just trying to think of what that would be. I think a low point [01:25:00] was -- I like to think of myself as a can-do person, and at a certain point it became clear that we were not going to stop the Norwegian government for saying and doing these sort of off-the-chart things. And I kept thinking that I'd be able to get them to realize that the cost of this was high at the U.S. and in our relationship, and there was a moment I was, I remember -- I forget whether it was the issue around missile defense, but there was a point where I sat down with my team and I said, "We're not actually going to be able to change them, are we?" And everyone just said, "Nope, not gonna happen." So it was a disappointment, because I thought we could do it. I was just disappointed in our ability [01:26:00] to have an impact there. And I'm trying to think of another one related to foreign policy. Yeah, I guess that's the one that comes to mind most of all that was disappointing.

LEONG: Right. Now, the Wikileaks came out after you had left?

WHITNEY: What's that?

LEONG: The Wikileaks.

WHITNEY: Yes.

LEONG: The cables, they came out after you had left, right?

WHITNEY: Yes, I had left. It was about, I don't know, it was about a year and a half or more after I left.

LEONG: Right. So, of course, I don't have to remind you some of your descriptions of Norway were splashed all over the Norwegian newspapers, not always flattering.

WHITNEY: No.

LEONG: In fact, almost not all flattering at all. And that really generated some responses, on their part.

WHITNEY: Funny, I felt like a Greek play, or a Shakespearean play, where the person died in the last play and their voice sort of comes out of the side of the stage, because I had exited the stage but somehow my voice about everything that we'd [01:27:00] done was suddenly on the front page of the paper. And first of all, the media was very unfair in how they dealt with this, because they picked every negative thing that was said and splashed that up, and many times those things were accompanied by positive things, in the same sentence, but they refused to acknowledge that I had said. Secondly, it was all under my name, so even though I may not have written the cable, and may not have represented my exact thinking, it was, like, just me. It was as if I was the only person -- And that's the way it is: cables are written under the name of the ambassador, and I get that, but the lack of sophistication about this was sort of an institutional view was disappointing. And most disappointing was that a couple of -- and I think I wrote you this -- a couple of the media sources took the line that, a-ha, the president was faking it the whole time. He didn't really care about Norway and the relationship. He hated us [01:28:00] all and just never said it. And that hurt, personally, because I invested a lot in the relationship, and I love Norway. I love the people. I love the nation. I love what they accomplish in the world. And yes, I'm sure if you unearth their cables about me and Condoleezza Rice you would not find universal love and acclaim, because that's not your job. Your job is to put a balanced kind of description, and, secondly, sometimes write in a colorful way to attract the attention of the people that are reading it who have thousands of cables to read. So I was disappointed about that, and I was disappointed I wasn't able to respond,

because the State Department just begged me, and Ambassador White just begged me not to respond. Because I wanted to respond. I said, "Well, wait a minute. Just at least point out [01:29:00] that this is -- That's not fair to say I don't care about Norway. That's just not what the cables say, and that's not what's in my heart, and don't -- that's just a cheap shot." But they wouldn't let me say anything, so I just had to swallow it and take it, and that's always been an unhappy thing for me.

LEONG: Did you get the sense it was just the press trying to sell the news, or do you think that there was more to it? Did you get a sense of whether Norwegian officials, say -- of how they responded to that?

WHITNEY: Well, I forget. The only person I remember who responded was a guy named Espen Barth Eide. He was the Deputy Secretary of Defense, and I had written something about his -- the reality was that his boss, Erichsen --

LEONG: Yeah, Strøm-Erichsen.

WHITNEY: Yeah, Strøm.

LEONG: Anne-Grete, yeah.

WHITNEY: Anne-Grete Strøm. Anyway, she was like a community council leader in western Norway [01:30:00] and got drafted as Defense Secretary, which she knew exactly zero about. She was a very nice person, and intelligent, but I'm sitting there, trying to talk to her about missile defense, and so the reality was that Espen Barth Eide was the person who had the authority in -- And so, I wrote about her sort of lack of qualifications, and how he was really the power behind the Secretary. And after Wikileaks he did this public statement, "Well, Whitney is an amateur," and that kind of stuff, being dismissive of me. And it was a little irritating because we worked pretty hard together. But, of course, then they all run for their -- Their only interest after that was protecting themselves, so when people said something critical of them they had to defend. I don't remember Støre actually saying anything. [01:31:00]

LEONG: I actually mentioned it to him. I asked him --

WHITNEY: Oh, did you?

LEONG: Yes. Yeah, when I met --

WHITNEY: What did he say?

LEONG: I met him, and he said --

WHITNEY: I'm curious.

LEONG: I said, "What did you make of Ambassador Whitney saying these things about you?" And he expressed surprise. He said that he recalls his relationship with you as being perfectly good, positive.

WHITNEY: It was.

LEONG: Yeah.

WHITNEY: I mean, he's right. He can say he's surprised, but, again, the idea that -- I don't think the criticism -- We criticized their policy a bunch. The only personal criticism, I think, that was in there was that he thought he was the smartest guy in the room, so I guess he could be offended by that, even though he probably understands, himself, he thinks he's the smartest guy in the room. So I think he's feigning surprise, and I think he would also be -- And I understand why he would do that, right? I understand. And to be hurt -- But, again, I would suspect that if you unearthed his cables, he probably said, "Who is this Midwestern business guy? [01:32:00] What the heck does he know about foreign policy?" I imagine that that's in his cables to his own government.

LEONG: Did you ever feel like that was a handicap in any way, that maybe you weren't taken seriously because you were this businessperson from Minnesota?

WHITNEY: There's some of that. That runs to the whole issue about political ambassadors and career ambassadors. And my experience was that I met some incredibly wonderful foreign service personnel in my experience. And as a matter of fact, I think that your husband might have met John Byerly. He might have been Ambassador to Russia when he went to the -- I don't know. I meant to ask

him about that. But anyway, we met some wonderful, incredibly talented people. And there was some sort of okay people, and there were some real dead weight. And most of the world's like that, too, right? That's true [01:33:00] in businesses. It's true everywhere. The thing is that -- first of all, the argument is you should let the experts do it. They're the experts, after all. But the truth is the foreign service people come from all over the world. There aren't people sitting in Norway for 20 years, accumulating -- My DCM came from Uruguay. My political officer was in Asia somewhere. None of them knew anything about Norway, and so it wasn't like there was this accumulation. That's not how it works. They move their officers to everywhere in the world, so there is no quote-unquote "expert" who comes in and knows everything. Now, in some posts that's true, like China and Russia maybe that's true, but in almost any other post it doesn't matter. And the challenge for the Foreign Service officers is they, by the very structure of the Foreign Service, they don't [01:34:00] take risks. And that's an issue. They're very averse to risk, because the State Department only punishes people for failure; it does not celebrate them for success. So no one wants to do anything that's going to cause trouble. Me? What are they going to do to me? And so I was able to take some risks in some things. I remember doing some stuff around the F-35 that they're like, "Eh, I don't know," and I'd say, "Well, I think this is something that we should do," about going to the press, and doing an aggressive thing. There's an argument to be made that there are some downsides and there are some upsides. The downsides includes the fact that maybe the Foreign Service people go, "Well, what does he really know?" The truth is that no one in that embassy knew before they got there. They're studying the issues the same way I am. So it works sometimes. It doesn't work sometimes, but it doesn't work sometimes in the Foreign Service. I met some real [01:35:00] nincompoops who were ambassadors, who were career Foreign Service. So I don't have an answer, but I don't think it's going to change, so we need to make the best of it.

LEONG: So you said starting out that since President Bush wasn't the most popular person in Norway that you strived to be the popular guy in his place. Do you think you succeeded when you left?

WHITNEY: It felt that way, but I'm the wrong person to ask. The only people -- you talk to enough Norwegians, I guess, you probably asked about that, and I don't know. I had good relationships. I didn't know Bondevik well, but some of the -- like, Peter Gitmark, Jagland, Morton Wetland -- There was a state secretary named Liv Monica Stubholt. We became very close, and were [01:36:00] -- my sense is that I feel like -- I felt good about my time, and I felt like I had pushed the relationship in a positive direction, but one's own self-assessment of that isn't necessarily. I also want that to be true, so I can't say. You'd have to determine, but it felt that way.

LEONG: Yeah. If there was one thing you could do differently, what would that have been? Or was there anything like that?

WHITNEY: One is that an ambassador has kind of a fundamental choice: you can be an outside ambassador or an inside ambassador. And so the inside ambassador is managing the 180 people, and trying to get those 180 people to fulfill the mission of the mission, in all aspects -- whether it's secure the embassy, or supporting the political work, or whatever -- and that you can [01:37:00] manage your reviews, and your promotions, and your -- That reminds me: you asked me some of my most treasured time, and I forgot. One of the things I did that was one of the biggest honors of mine was to do the promotions ceremonies for the military guys that were there, and I got to do promotion retirement ceremonies as the head of the mission. And that was the greatest honor. That made me so happy to do that. I had never served in the military, and I hadn't been around the military much, and I just came to have such a deep respect for those people, and they really helped me do my job. But that just came to me when you mentioned it. Anyway, you can be an inside ambassador. You can be an outside ambassador, and spend all your time

out of the embassy, giving speeches, traveling, doing this. I very much chose to be an outside ambassador, and I left a bunch of the management to the DCM. And he did a perfectly good job, but there are certain things that only the ambassador can do. And I think I could have done more on keeping [01:38:00] the morale high in the embassy. We did some. I worked kind of hard at that, but I didn't do enough. Kevin, my DCM, was always having me doing walkabouts, so getting up from my desk when I was in the embassy, and getting up and just wandering around for an hour and saying hi to people. And I had great relationships with people but I didn't do enough of that. I have some regret about that.

LEONG: What about your assessment of the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Norway as you left them?

WHITNEY: I think that by nature you start from a strong foundation, because the physics of it are all positive. We share values. We share a desire to act in the world, and we share a desire to generally do good things. Norway sometimes takes this moral [01:39:00] superpower thing is a little grating, because it suggests that the rest of us are, just somehow morally defective because we don't do what the Norwegians do. But we share all those. And they're a democracy, and we're a democracy, and they're a country that's a free enterprise country, and we're a free -- So there are so many things that we -- the current of our relationship is headed the same directions. And I can't say what it's like for Ambassador Braithwaite now. They've had a conservative government for quite a while, and I don't know -- I didn't have that dynamic. I had a less friendly government. But even though that was true, those disagreements were on the margin. No one was saying, "We need to disconnect ourselves from the United States." No one was saying that, and no one would want to think that about Norway. People would be very upset if [01:40:00] that came to be. So there's too many things driving us together. So my guess is I hope I did some things to get it back on course, particularly in the area of public diplomacy, but that's pretty soft to measure. The student thing, I think,

matters, because if you can get another three or four thousand students a year going to the U.S. and coming back, as you know -- By the way, one of the things you do is you learn a lot about a country when you go to live in them. You just do. And one of the great gifts I found out is I'd learned a lot about my own country coming back, and that was one of the biggest surprises I had is that I'd learned as much about my country as I had about Norway. Because, one, I had to explain it a lot. I was sort of an explainer-in-chief in Norway, about our way of life, about our -- I gave just endless speeches on innovation, and immigration, and [01:41:00] obviously foreign policy, and other things, our education system. There was very much a lot of work on that. And I hope that that created a more positive atmosphere. But you have to keep working it. This is why you have an embassy, and you can only -- It's important to have a group of people and an ambassador whose job is every day to get up and figure out how do we make this work better. And that's really what an embassy and an ambassador is there to do. And in the case of Norway -- and I'll just finish by saying this -- Norway missed a U.S. ambassador for over three years. Terrible tragedy. Just disgraceful. And I have no doubt that probably harmed our relationship deeply, because if there's one thing an ally like Norway wants, it wants to be respected by the United States. It wants to be heard. It wants to be [01:42:00] respected for what they do, not necessarily agreed with all the time but respected, and only the ambassador can do that. Only the ambassador has the stature, in our system, and in their view, that can give them that respect. And I think I did a good job of that. That's the thing I -- if you ask me what I'm most proud of, I think that would be it, that they felt respected, until Wikileaks, and then I don't know what they think now.

LEONG: Well, I think I've run through my questions. Was there anything that I might have missed that you think is important to cover?

WHITNEY: We covered a lot of ground. It's been fun for me to relive some of my time there. It was a great experience, and it's fun to talk about it.

LEONG: Okay, well, in that case, thank you very much.

WHITNEY: Thank you. I appreciate it.

LEONG: Okay.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]