

CHILEAN MINERS RESCUE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
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WRIGHT: Today is August 2, 2011. This oral history is being conducted with Christopher Harris in Washington, D.C., for the NASA Headquarters History Office. Interviewer is Rebecca Wright, with Jennifer Ross-Nazzal. The interview is part of a series to capture knowledge about NASA's participation in the 2010 rescue of thirty-three Chilean miners. Mr. Harris is a member of the U.S. Department of State who served as the Chile Desk Officer during the time of this historic event.

We'd like for you, if you would, please, to begin today by sharing with us how you got involved and how the State Department got involved and, as well, NASA.

HARRIS: Thank you for inviting me. I guess I'll start with a little bit of context. I've been with the Foreign Service mostly serving abroad as a U.S. diplomat for about twelve years now, a bunch of different places, including Guatemala, was out in Russia, Armenia, Afghanistan, Serbia, then in the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Operations Office, and then in Chile working on the Chile desk.

The State Department's primary role when it's back in D.C. is to work with the embassies of the countries that we cover, to work as a focal point for any policy discussion or any communication, by and large, that's policy communication with foreign governments. As a desk officer in the State Department, in the case of Chile, because it's a medium-sized to smaller

country, there's just me, and then if someone else in the U.S. Government [USG] has a question about most aspects of Chile, I would be the first point of contact.

I'm also usually the first point of contact for the Chilean Government if they are looking for advice or assistance or information from the U.S. Government. That's how this all started. We have a very close relationship with the Chilean Government. It's a highly functional country with excellent governance. It actually has in the past—and I think will continue this year—to rate higher on the Transparency International scores than the U.S. The reason why I'm saying that is the nature of our relationship with Chile is much more of a cooperative partnership than a purveyor of aid or something along those lines.

That being said, in early 2010 in February, Chile suffered one of the largest earthquakes on record. We already had a multifaceted relationship in the sense that we had many, many different avenues in which we were cooperating with both the Chilean Government itself and with NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and with civil society. Then the earthquake happened, and a lot of those avenues which were already in place, the cooperation was deepened, contacts were deepened, and the level of trust between both our governments and between especially those who were working on emergency preparation and response were all that much more improved and deepened. That's the context for August of 2010 when the Chile mine accident occurred.

It was particularly interesting for me, because the day that the mine collapse was reported was my first day in the office. I was coming from the European Office for Regional Political-Military Affairs, so I was working NATO operations. I actually had just been working on the Pakistan flood relief, so in some senses I was already geared up. I was coming directly from a bunch of meetings on Pakistan flood relief to my first day in the office. I didn't have email; I

didn't know my Chilean contacts yet; I barely had any phone numbers to call, and the news flashes across the screen that this collapse has happened and that the Chilean Government is very personally engaged.

I don't remember if it was exactly the first day, but it was in the first day or two that I received a call from the Chilean Embassy, from their Ambassador, and also talked to their DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], saying, "We already have a lot of these connections in place from the earthquake. Thank you so much for your assistance during that time. We're looking at this situation. Let's think about ways in which we could cooperate and use some of your skills to help."

I think the idea of NASA came about because there had been—and I'm sure you've heard this more from [NASA] Headquarters folks, but it came about because we already had a relationship working with Easter Island as an alternate landing site for our [Space] Shuttles. We had some interaction with the Chilean Space Agency, which is quite a small operation—we're talking about a handful of people, pretty much—on a day-to-day basis, but there still was some communication there.

The Ambassador was talking about areas in which we could cooperate and mentioned that they had this guy from the Chilean Space Agency who within the last year had been at a conference with someone from NASA and mentioned the concept of NASA as one of the areas for cooperation. I jumped at that, and said, "Of course." I'm actually a bit proud of being able to make those connections pretty quickly; to say, "Of course," for remote medical care, engineering expertise, that type of stuff.

At that point there was a parallel or even a three-lane approach in getting NASA starting to spin up a bit as far as how it could cooperate. I had sent over a note, I think to a general

contact phone number or email, saying, “Hey, can I talk to somebody at NASA?” The Chilean Space Agency had had a couple of emails and had sent some emails. I believe also the Chilean Embassy had reached out to NASA directly.

The first interaction was with Al [Albert] Condes, which I’m not sure in response to which of those emails or phone calls. One of the fun parts about the job as a desk officer is even as a mid-level officer, you’re the only game in town. Al’s a great guy, and we established a quick rapport, but for me to get a call from a deputy administrator from another agency is a usual part of our day, but I was conscious of rank, and I think that one of the testaments to both NASA and to how this all worked out is how quickly we developed a team. “Let’s get the job done. Let’s work through the problems,” without a lot of the formalities that can take place in interagency cooperation. There was any number of papers and memos and agreements that we had to push through to get it going, but it was all done within a very collegial atmosphere, and I credit NASA in a big way for that, because that can slow our cooperation with other agencies.

Just to give a little background, before we started running with NASA—and I know that’s a primary interest for this interview session—we were working with a lot of other agencies. Almost immediately in some type of natural disaster, or in this case it wasn’t quite a natural disaster, but this type of disaster, we’re talking to USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development], which is really our partner agency or almost one body with two heads in the sense that the State Department and USAID work very, very closely together and are in many ways the same department or agency. They have the overseas office, OFDA, Overseas Foreign Disaster Assistance Office. So I was in contact with them right away.

I had been reaching out to Department of Defense [DoD] almost immediately because of their heavy-lift capabilities. We work with them a lot if we need to move something large. I

don't know what it might be, but almost immediately if we think we might be sending, we're talking to the Department of Defense about possibly using some of their planes. That came into play further on.

We ended up talking to the Department of the Interior and Department of Labor, because of mining expertise, pretty quickly, and as things developed, we talked to the National Institutes of Health. We also got calls from state mining agencies, from public-private entities like the lobbying groups for the mining industry. There were a lot of phone calls and a lot of other conversations going on which NASA started to plug into. I think, for the most part, we were working pretty much directly with them, with a little bit of DoD involvement when we were talking about possibly moving equipment.

Again, another piece of context. The Chileans are mining experts. They're engineering experts. Actually, if there's an area where their higher education tends to send specialists abroad, it's in engineering. So when they came to us, they weren't saying, "How do we deal with mines? How do we deal with mine disasters or collapses?" They were saying, "This is a unique circumstance. We have thirty-three people trapped way far underground. None of our normal procedures are working. We don't know how long they're going to be down there. We need help in a very specific technical area." That's where NASA comes in, remote medical care, remote nutrition, things that a space program, of course, would develop expertise in that other industries and other areas would not. I think that's a key point.

Are you talking to Chileans as well, or is this primarily from the U.S. side?

WRIGHT: From the U.S. side.

HARRIS: Okay. I would put in a plug. President [Miguel Juan Sebastián] Piñera [Echenique] can be a difficult personality in that he's very much a billionaire CEO [Chief Executive Officer] and he likes to make executive decisions. In this case that came very much to be a benefit in that he saw a situation where his advisors were telling him that he shouldn't get involved, that the chance for the survival was minimal, that it would be politically risky, because if he put his face on this rescue and it didn't go through, he would take a political hit. He pushed that advice aside, became very quickly personally involved in the rescue, mobilized all of Chile's substantial expertise in mining and rescue work, got a team up there immediately, found the money beyond this relatively small company that was involved in the mine and the mining operation itself—it became very quickly apparent that they didn't have the resources—and got his Ministry of Mining.

It sets the stage for the rescue effort in the sense that the Chilean Government deserves a lot of credit for very quickly responding to a crisis and doing so at some political risk. Even by the time we're talking about how NASA can help, they have an operation starting, they have people on the ground, they have medical professionals on site; their engineers are working out ways to come up with a way to rescue.

Again, how the State Department works, I'm a State Department Chile Desk Officer. We have a whole team of diplomats and experts sitting in Santiago [Chile]. I don't like to call myself a node because I think of the Noid from Domino's Pizza, but I'm the node for that embassy. You have the Chilean Embassy here in Washington and then you have the U.S. Embassy in Santiago, and I'm their primary information source. As soon as all this stuff is happening, I'm talking to them ninety times a day about what's going on on the ground and how

we could potentially help the Chilean Government, and they started talking to their counterparts in the Ministry of Health, in the Ministry of Mining about how we could help.

What came out of this, while we're also having conversations here in Washington with NASA, is what they're looking for is this particular medical expertise and engineering expertise just because they figure they don't know exactly how the engineering would plug in, but they know they need as much as they can get on the ground.

In a conversation with Al, I don't know from which side it initiated, he said it made the most sense to get a team down there as quickly as we could, not to lead an effort, but to plug in as an important new resource for the Chilean team that was already up and running and had people on the ground and going.

Again to NASA's credit, I don't think there's a whole lot of previous precedence for NASA being used as the instrument for, in this case, international "aid" is the wrong word, but along those lines. We work with the Department of Justice, who do police training; we work with USAID, of course, who runs the gamut of disaster and food relief and long-term democracy-building. NASA usually isn't someone that we're going to turn to as a primary international aid organization or agency.

That was a little bit of the cobwebs. We said, "Okay, we want to send a team. Okay. How do we do that?" We send people down for our own—this is NASA—for their own needs, their own cooperation, but usually not as a purely aid mission. Immediately you start having things pop up, like the lawyers all start moving and there's talk about liability, and we have to run down visas for everybody. There was a lot of work done in making sure that NASA was comfortable with the idea of sending down a group. Again, to NASA's credit, it happened much quicker than I was anticipating. I was hoping that we could turn it around in a couple of days. I

don't know if Al gave you the time. It's been about a year now. It seemed like two or three days, but I'm sure it was probably something like ten before we were able to get the team actually on a plane and down.

In preparation for the team landing, we have a political officer on the ground in the embassy in Santiago who works on environmental science, technology, and health. That's her portfolio. We were lucky enough to have someone who had just gone through all the coordination for the earthquake response, so she was geared in. Basically what we do is maintain contacts for things like this. We're talking to our Chilean counterparts all the time. I was able to talk to her, and said, "Hey, we have this team coming down." She immediately had all the people in the Chilean Government lined up to talk about how they would be received, what type of program they would have, who they would meet with, and how they would plug into the rescue effort.

We started going back and forth between her and the leadership of the embassy and the Chilean ministries with dates, all the logistics, dates, times, how they would get up to the mine site, where they would stay, who would provide translation. These things that you don't necessarily think of can really—the translation issue, for example, took a lot of time to figure out if the Chilean Government was going to pay for a translator or provide a translator; if they were going to fly him from Santiago and have someone meet up there. If they were going to meet up there, you have to have a professional translator in this case because you're talking technical terms and medical terms and that type of stuff.

I remember many conversations about who's going to interpret, where are we going to find someone with this level of interpretation. There are a lot of people in Santiago that we use. Again, it's a highly educated, highly functional country, but we're talking about several hundred

miles away, if not a thousand miles or whatever—Chile’s super long—up in the middle of this little desert mining town. There’s money for mining around, but it’s a lot more blue-collar than a white-collar super professional translator. I remember that being a sticking point that we worked through.

Also where they were going to stay, because all the hotels and everything up in Copiapó, again, not a big place. Everything was slammed. So, making sure that the Chilean Government could figure out where they would be housed. The guys were great. They said, “A tent’s fine,” but you need to know before you put them on a plane that they’re not going to show up and there’s going to be everybody running around trying to figure out what to do with them. That’s the worst-case scenario. Then we also had to get a special flight set up. Who was going to go with them?

We had them come down to Santiago. They’re received at the embassy. The embassy, for any type of direct government visit, really works as the logistics space. There’s a U.S. diplomat, usually a political officer, someone else from the embassy who sets up their meeting schedule. This goes for any official trip. We do it all the time for congressmen and other people, but it’s fun to do it for a more practical, I guess, event. Even when the team got to Santiago, they had someone who was assigned to them. We also had a press officer who was working with them closely because of the extreme press interests, both with the Santiago press and the world press, as you know.

They came into town, had a chance to brief a bit with the embassy folks, and then there was a series of meetings at the ministries. They talked to the Minister of Health and some people in the Ministry of Mining to get an idea of what the current status was with the miners, what the current status was of the rescue effort, and how they might be able to help. It’s also a really long

flight, so you're coming in without any sleep, so it's good to have a little bit of time in Santiago before going right into the event.

They flew up to Copiapó, again with—I believe it was with two embassy officers who went along basically to make sure that everything was taken care of, like what I do here, as the main interface with the Chilean Government. Our officers are fluent in Spanish, of course, so that helps. And also a press officer to help with press contacts. I forget exactly how long they were up in Copiapó. I think it was about two days.

WRIGHT: Yes. It wasn't long.

HARRIS: And then when they came back, they did an outbrief again with the ministries.

The other great part about this is even before they went down and continuing after they returned to the U.S., the beauty of modern technology is there were regular conference calls. There may have even been digital video conferencing, though I don't remember exactly. Constant emails back and forth with the contacts that they had established in Chile. I think that's really what I see as a great example for moving forward. The reason why we really wanted to get a team on the ground, even if they weren't doing all that much with their hands per se, was establishing those personal connections, again, which in some ways with the USG had already been established during the earthquake, but it's fun getting scientists with scientists and doctors with doctors, and they can have a whole conversation that, if it has to run through a lot of intermediaries, is not necessarily as productive. Getting face time with their counterparts and then being able to continue that via electronic communication later was great to see. I imagine a

lot of those friendships and those connections are still going, and if something else happens, it'll be a great way to plug back in.

WRIGHT: Let's go back to the part where you mentioned about these parallels, they're all going together. NASA's identifying their team, and these are based on requirements or requests that are coming in from the Chilean Government. Is that correct?

HARRIS: Right. It's part of that conversation. When we started talking to the Chileans here and then our embassy was talking directly to the ministries and the Minister of Health, we started saying these are the areas where they're looking for expertise.

I think I forgot to mention psychological impact of the events was a big one, along with the engineering and remote medical and nutrition. That's how the team was formed, was based off those requests.

WRIGHT: As you mentioned, there had been a meeting in Europe where the Chilean officials and the NASA officials had talked during this nations meeting. I'm curious if the State Department had received a request for help from Chile about this, would you have thought about going to NASA for these things if NASA hadn't already been contacted as well by the Chilean Government?

HARRIS: I think that we try to think as broadly as possible. It's hard to say. I would like to say yes because it seems so obvious as the idea was developing. We do try to think as broadly, maybe not on day one, but by day three or four, as we're responding to events, who can plug in,

which is why we were trying to talk to the Department of Interior. So, yes. There's this whole move, this whole almost clichéd saying about whole of government, but it really is hammered into our heads on the lower and mid level and even some of the guys who have been around for a long time in the State Department. Look, we're the central part. We don't have the resources and we don't have specific expertise, so you start talking. A lot of what we do in our relationships with other governments is what happened here. What do you need? You're a close partner. This is somewhere where we want to help. You have a lot of your own capabilities. What do you need?

For example, if something like this happened with the U.K. [United Kingdom] or some of our close European allies, yes, I think we'd be thinking NASA pretty quickly. Most often we're reacting to Haiti or less developed countries. Are we really going to get around to the level of expertise that NASA has, the very specific, very highly technical? Most times we're trying to make sure people have food and water and are out of danger. I think some of it is the specifics of this event, but I think, if anything, this event means that it's on people's minds to think more creatively about how we bring in other parts of the government to help in situations like this.

WRIGHT: In this event there was such an urgency because of a concern for the health of the miners that had been recently discovered that were still alive. Were there certain instructions that the State Department shared with NASA and/or the team going down, such as, "This is what you will do. This is what you won't do"?

HARRIS: I don't know about instructions. Before I forget, because I will forget if I don't get back to it, we were also talking about medical and psychological expertise. We were talking to

[U.S. Army] Special Forces psychological teams who were actually on call and ready to come at a moment's notice, but NASA actually moved a little bit faster and I think was a better fit. But I also want to mention DoD's willingness and the capabilities that they could have brought to bear. It ended up that they were a lot of overlap, so it didn't seem like it was necessary, but they were also talking on conversations and were there to provide some background.

As far as instructions, no, I don't think instructions. I think that working with AI and working with the team, they were very conscious of the fact that this is not a normal interaction for NASA. They were very open in asking us about context of our relationship with Chile and areas to look out for. We didn't give any specific instructions partially because our relationship with Chile is incredibly open and it's a very positive partnership, so there were very few things that they could have done that would have impacted negatively on our larger policy, especially since we're talking about guys with technical expertise who are responding to a direct request.

We were asking, in talking with media, that they don't go too broadly into subjects beyond the mine rescue, but I think they were asking to minimize media to a certain extent for that reason as well. It's not their main focus and in some ways can get in the way. So we just gave them context about what the relationship was like and encouraged them to go with their instincts as far as not taking on questions about Chile's relationship with Argentina or Chinese investment in mining in Chile or something like that.

WRIGHT: Apparently the NASA team was greeted with great admiration and adulation when they got there. The guys were giving them a hard time about being rock stars because of the NASA branding and logo and its reputation. What were the reports that you were getting back from your counterparts in Santiago about how things were going with the team once they started

moving through their mission there on the ground, because they started there in Santiago and then, as you mentioned, they went to the site and then came back through?

HARRIS: I would say first there is something to the NASA brand per se, which is it's seen as obviously above profit or in that sense, so you have people at the utmost levels of our scientific capabilities and medical capabilities doing it for something other than profit. I don't mean to hit that point too hard, but it's recognized. These guys are top-class. In Chile, too, around the world, it's a specialized group, and not all countries are able to invest in that way in science. So I think that reflects part of it.

The U.S. is very popular in Chile too. We got a lot of credit for a very robust but understated response to the earthquake where we really supported the Chilean Government's efforts to help its own people, which they did very capably with huge investment, but it was just such a large and devastating event that they needed help just because it was huge. And I think that's also how NASA was seen coming in as a very visible example of the U.S. responding as a friend when asked.

I bring that up because I think it's also a very good segue into a credit to the team. I think it's Dr. [J. Michael] Duncan who was the lead. They did a great job of recognizing both publicly and privately how on top of their game the Chilean doctors were and engineers were, how they were there to tweak approaches, but really didn't have to make drastic changes. Even though they were recognized publicly as rock stars, they worked very much as colleagues, and that's hugely appreciated from my angle, because there is this tendency, if you're not working a lot internationally, to lump whole regions or whole groups of countries together. In this case, Chile is a very capable place, so I think they were very appreciative of being treated like the

professionals that they are and with the skills that they are, and having these very experienced and technically proficient colleagues and partners coming in to help.

It really underlies our basic foundation of our relationship with Chile is that they are our partners and not a recipient of aid as if they were a developing country. I think the team coming in, being understated but very confident, very forward with their advice, but recognizing that it was plugging into the context of a lot of existing expertise went over great. All we heard back from our Chilean counterparts from the Minister of Health and the Minister of Mining, to the team up on the ground in Copiapó was, “Thanks for coming. These guys were really easy to work with, not afraid to get their hands dirty and get down in the mine site, and, if anything, wanted to keep out of a lot of the distractions that would come with the attention of the trip and get more to trying to save these guys’ lives.”

WRIGHT: When they got back, they didn’t stop working. In fact, they were in teams coming up with a list of recommendations that they filtered their way up. Tell us how that information got from NASA to Chile. Did it have to go through the State Department, or did it go directly to their counterparts?

HARRIS: There’s no requirement on that level. I think a lot of what we try to do is establish that connection and then monitor how that’s going to make sure there’s not sticking points or problems. They established a very effective direct connection with their Chilean counterparts.

That being said, I appreciated, especially with Al’s office, they made sure that I knew what was going on when people were talking the basic stuff that they were working through. It was really fun to get a [Microsoft] PowerPoint slide with a picture of the concept for the rescue

vehicle, for the Phoenix, so I have that somewhere on my computer, the first idea. Again, the NASA team was great at saying, “We didn’t design this, we didn’t build it, but we gave some ideas of what needed to be incorporated.”

I think the U.S. press started running off with, “NASA came up with the whole rescue thing,” and the Chileans grated at that a little bit, but not with anybody who was actually involved, because the NASA team and Dr. Duncan continued to be very gracious in talking about the cooperative nature of the interaction.

But, yes, we heard excellent things. I’m sure they would be welcomed back anytime they want to go down. There was a trip on schedule recently that I think may have been delayed now. I’ve been out of the office for a little while, but I think they might be going down there this fall for a follow-on.

WRIGHT: I know that based on what you’ve told us earlier and the information you sent me that you work with international issues all the time. How was this one different, yet how was it similar to other things that you have done?

HARRIS: I’ve primarily been working on Afghanistan, say, or Armenia or Pakistan floods, so I think there’s two things that are different. One is it’s nice to be working on such a positive story with such capable people on both sides. I don’t mean to be sounding like I’m waving the Chilean flags, but to have a country that was responding to the needs of its people or took that on first and is very capable, and then to have such capable people in another agency in our own government that we can then just plug together and then watch it work beautifully, in our work that’s a rare thing and a very positive thing.

I think how it differentiates, we often feel like we're banging our head against the wall on any number of issues if you're thinking Nagorno-Karabakh [War] between Armenia and Azerbaijan or Cyprus or Middle East or other current major problems, trying to establish good governance in Afghanistan or Pakistan. These are grinding, incredibly difficult projects or initiatives that are going to go long after I'm working in a certain area. For me to come in and say, "Here's a problem and people who have a very human need, and here's some tools that we have that we can help," and here's people actually using those tools and those relationships very effectively, and then the end result is better than anybody could imagine, and it's all within a contained period of my time working on Chile. I'll have that with me forever.

WRIGHT: That was a good-ending month, and then a lot of progress there in those last couple of months. You had mentioned some of the federal agencies that you reached out to. Were there other corporations or agencies, individuals that offered their help? And how did you manage to filter through those and not pass those on?

HARRIS: Some of the frustration, as something like this is developing and you only have one phone, is that you're not able to always recognize everybody's great intent to help, and you do triage requests for which you know the needs out there or as you're trying to figure out what the needs are. Sometimes it meant getting back to people two to three days later that I would have loved to talk to immediately. This goes from Boy Scout troops that were sending [Apple] iPods, to a company that was sending glowing earplugs that helped with the circadian rhythm for miners. We had local mining companies and state mining agencies that were offering their expertise. You look at how much time you have, what's going to actually do the most good most

quickly for helping the miners that were there. You grab that immediately and get it online, and then you go back later, usually pretty late at night, and call the other people back and say, “Thank you very much.”

What we ended up doing as it developed after a couple days is the Chilean Embassy set up a couple of people there who could take all the more peripheral—I don’t mean to say that in a bad way, but the stuff that wasn’t directly focused on getting these guys out. I could funnel the requests to a couple of their officers at the Chilean Embassy, who would then talk to the Boy Scout troop or talk to individual companies. There were some companies who wanted to send sanitary kits and some nutrition stuff. They could take it and work directly with their ministry and say, is this something we need? Is it going to get there in time? The first couple of days I was handling it all. After that, I would grab the things I thought needed to immediately get incorporated, and the other stuff I was able to hand over to my Chilean colleagues who would then work with them.

WRIGHT: Talk about the funding and how it worked from the State Department. You mentioned, for instance, finding a very professional translator to be able to work with this team when they got there to be able to handle everything they needed. That was one cost. Other costs that you might have incurred, is that part of what you have on standby, or was that special funding?

HARRIS: That’s the funny part; we actually have almost no funding. As you’ll see in the coming days, it’s an ongoing frustration because people don’t really know what we do, and we’re a

pretty low-cost agency because we're people. That's all we have. There's seven thousand Foreign Service officers in the world.

I think actually NASA picked up a lot of the costs, which, unfortunately, is often what we have to do. We have funds, direct funds, for humanitarian assistance, but we ran across a couple of triggers with this because of its unique circumstance. That's usually warehouses of food and water and inflatable boats that we can send to a flood, and they're already pre-purchased and there's mechanisms to release emergency money. When you're talking about an event where the Chilean Government itself is already investing seven or eight million dollars and NASA's sending a team of four or five people, but not bringing in major equipment, we found that you're really just talking airline tickets, hotel costs, and a translator. That still ends up being thousands of dollars, which in the scheme of things is very small, but if you're trying to scrape up a couple thousand dollars.

NASA was actually great in finding the travel money for those guys. The Chilean Government also picked up a good chunk. I don't remember exactly which, but it may have been hotels and the translator or something along those lines. The State Department itself in this instance didn't really have a mechanism to—but we do maintain an embassy down there, and we had a couple dozen people who could work on it.

WRIGHT: Did you have inquiries from Capitol Hill on what was going on and what agencies were being utilized to help with this?

HARRIS: There was some. Particularly Senator Harry Reid's office, I've talked to one of his main staffers a couple times. That particularly came up when we were trying to figure out how

to move the drill bits that the Chileans were contracting from Center Rock [Inc.]. He said, “If you can’t figure that out, let me know.”

A lot of that, we work very closely with the National Security staff, and they end up being a center point for—that’s the interagency hub, so we were making sure they were updated. They may have been calling above my level in the sense that I’m an action officer, so my bosses, part of their job is to take phone calls from congressional staff if I’m crashing on actually trying to get something done. They may have been talking to our assistant secretary.

There was a buzz of interest and there were lots of people who were checking in. Again, that was one of those things where this isn’t directly applicable to what I’m trying to accomplish. I remember Senator Reid’s call because he was offering something that would help the immediate response. There was regular congressional response, but I don’t remember a specific inquiry.

WRIGHT: This was such a small part of your time on the Chilean desk. It all happened very quickly. Were you recognized for those efforts of helping to have a positive outcome with the involvement?

HARRIS: Yes, but in a kind of typical State Department way, in that my State Department colleagues did recognize me. At the end of my tenure on the Chile desk, I got an award which in part was because of the mine rescue. Also we had a Presidential visit and a couple other things that were big, so it was stuck in there, but it was mentioned.

NASA was great. They gave me a plaque which has a picture of Chile from the Shuttle and a couple flags that flew in space, so that’s actually worth a lot to me because that’s a rare

thing to get. I didn't get to go to the [White House] Oval Office and get a medal, but that's not really what we do. What we do is find the people or set up the mechanisms so that people can use their skills to really step up as they did and be really hands-on to make things happen. We coordinate and we smooth the road, and I'm happy to have been a part of it in that way.

WRIGHT: What has to be the greatest challenge that you faced during that time period?

HARRIS: Lack of hours in the day, and funding. One of the biggest frustrations was the Chilean Government coming to us and asking us for this drill bit that, in the end, was the technology that broke through, and they were having a hard time moving it. I would love to have just said, "All right, we got it. We'll put it on a plane tomorrow." Huge back-and-forth with DoD about how much they were going to charge the State Department to send it down there, and then we're talking to different companies about how much it would cost, and then talking about chartering companies, but it was all restricted within this concept that we have very limited and specific pots that we can use for disaster relief or for this type of cooperation.

I felt like there were a lot of hours spent working around something where, in the scheme of things, it would have been nice to have been able to have emergency money that we could just allocate. But it worked out. UPS [United Parcel Service] came through with donating the plane and the carrier capacity to bring it down. But it took a lot of phone calls and a lot of other mechanisms in the meantime that led to dead-ends before that could get accomplished, and I think it probably delayed getting the rescue equipment down there.

WRIGHT: What were your thoughts when you learned that the miners were making it to the surface?

HARRIS: I was pretty confident at this point, once the NASA team was down there, once we had a holding pattern going where we knew that they were getting water, we knew that they had enough air, nutrition was good. There's always a concern that there will be another rockslide or something like that, but we got to a point where we knew geologically that they were pretty stable, we knew medically they were pretty stable, and then we started hearing all this great success with the drill bit. At that point it took away some of the tension because we were pretty sure that these guys were going to get out alive. It was just how long would they have to endure their situation. And especially once they were able to start communicating with their families, it was less concern that they would lose hope.

The fun part, though, was I was over at the Chilean Embassy and they put up a big screen outside. I got to be particularly close with one of the political officers over there, the Deputy Political Counselor who was kind of their point man. Being there and being with him, and we had a pisco sour, which is the national drink of Chile, and everybody's jumping up and down, and, "Chi, chi chi, le, le, le! Los mineros de Chile!" That was great.

Then I went back, and we actually had some friends in town and just stayed up watching every miner pop out. Even our friends, they'd been following it and they knew I was involved, so maybe that brought more of a tie-in, but I just thought it was great that people who had no concept of where Chile was, didn't really even know much about the country, recognized this as such a positive event. In a world that often focuses on the negative, to have something that was just without complication a good thing, I think really brought people together.

A miner would pop up, and it would be like the twenty-second miner, and you could still hear out your window that people were cheering in D.C., who have no connection with Chile. So that was fun. I had my little sticker. At the Chilean Embassy they have a sticker that says “We’re all good in the refuge, los treinta-tres.” I have that right up on my refrigerator, and I remember taking a picture in front of the TV with that. So it was neat.

WRIGHT: It was a good time, good memory.

HARRIS: Great memory. And now it continues, you know. We have the Smithsonian [Institution] exhibit.

WRIGHT: That’s what we learned today.

HARRIS: We have the opening event tomorrow. It opens on Friday, which is the anniversary. That’s fun. For once in limited humility—I don’t know, you’ll have to talk to my wife about whether or not I pull that off. It’s one of the rare times when that was an idea I had the day after the event. I went and had a celebratory lunch with Rodrigo Arcos, who’s the Deputy Political Counselor at Chilean Embassy, and he was my main guy. We were talking and I said, “We should do an exhibit. We should celebrate this. We should commemorate this cooperation.” It wasn’t just the U.S. and Chile; there were big international mining companies that gave millions of dollars’ worth of equipment and many other countries that were providing expertise.

It was just a neat thing, and the U.S. had a big role in it with NASA advising, but then just the fact that we have a company that just develops drill bits for rescue missions. That speaks

to something about how our country is put together and how our economy works. Our relationship with Chile was feeling we never thought it could get all that much better and it continued to get better, so this was this big moment, and we said we should find a way to continue celebrating this.

I think two days later, I called up the Smithsonian and pitched it to them, and they weren't sure because they didn't know if they had enough time to put it on. Then working with Rodrigo, we started trying to convince the Chileans to do it, and ended up going into a meeting with their Deputy Chief of Mission and saying, "Look. I have Smithsonian now on board if you guys send this stuff," and helping them raise money.

I'm really excited, because tomorrow the Foreign Minister of Chile [Alfredo Moreno Charme] is coming up and he's meeting with Secretary [of State Hillary Rodham] Clinton, who's going to make a couple comments about how positive—again, commemorating the event, but also this exhibit. Then the Foreign Minister will actually open it. It came around, the celebratory beer the next day and said, "We should do this," and being able again in a short period of time.

WRIGHT: And perfect timing for you that it happened before you're on the other side of the world.

HARRIS: Right. Again, it's very rare for us to see something that you're working on come to fruition. So that's fun. You should see it.

WRIGHT: I hope to.

HARRIS: Bring family.

WRIGHT: We'd like to do that. Well, I don't want to keep you too much longer. Do you have any questions? Is there anything else you can think of that we might not have touched on, some other significant contribution or challenge that you might have had to deal with?

HARRIS: No. I think, overall, it was a very positive event. I think the funny part was often when my colleagues, especially from offices I've worked at before, they were like, "Ah, Chile desk. You're going to go take it easy for a while." Then they'd see me walking out of the Department at 11 p.m. "What are you doing?" In this case we were doing something that I think was unique and very positive, so I'm glad to have been a part of it.

WRIGHT: Thank you, and thanks for being a part of our project.

HARRIS: Sure.

[End of interview]