Title: Outpost – Life on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy

Location: University of California, Washington Center, 1608 Rhode Island Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20036

Date & Time: October 22, 2014, 6:30pm-8:30pm

Speaker(s): Ambassador Christopher Robert Hill, Dean of Josef Korbel School of International Studies, Former Ambassador to Iraq, the Republic of Korea, Poland, and Macedonia.

PILPG Author(s): Hussein Bazzi

Event Summary:

Ambassador Christopher Robert Hill opened up the event by speaking broadly about his memoir that he was promoting. He discussed the motives for writing his memoir, which included his wife’s encouragement. He also mentioned that the style of his memoir was not dense and reads as if he was speaking. The memoir focuses mostly on his time in Iraq, the Six-party talks during his time in Korea, and his role in the peace negotiations in Bosnia and Kosovo.

He talked extensively about problems and difficulties he encountered while he was in Iraq. According to Ambassador Hill, there was a disjunction between Iraqi and American expectations. The major lesson he wishes other Americans and Foreign Service offers can learn from him is that he, as well as other Americans, are in no position to tell someone who should be their leader. One can only give their modest opinion and present options. He also discussed that going into Iraq, Americans were blind to the sectarian dimension of the state’s politics. After the invasion and removal of Saddam Hussein, Iraq was turned from a Sunni-led country to a Shiite-led country. After attempting to have the Shiites be more inclusive to Sunni leaders, instead, their reaction was being bitter towards the atrocities and hardships Sunnis imposed on them before. Prime Minister Nouri Al-
Maliki did not want to work with Sunnis. Ambassador Hill also had problems of Iraqis telling each other things different than what they told him.

In all, Iraq taught Ambassador Hill that the success of a democracy is not about majority rule. Rather, it is about how you treat the minority that makes a real democracy. Iraq is divided on a sectarian issue that dates back 1300 years. He also talked a bit about the Kurdish situation and mentioned his opinion that complete independence is not in their best interest. He believes remaining a part of Iraq with autonomy and the Peshmerga Army is better for them economically and politically. Ambassador Hill wrapped up this portion by talking about how many Americans look at the Middle East as only an Arab-Israeli problem, or a democracy-dictatorship problem, but in reality, issues are centered on a sectarian problem.

Ambassador Hill then focused his shift to the Republic of Korea. In his opinion, Korea is the most important U.S. ally in East Asia. The most pressing issue during his time in Korea was the six-party talks as a result of the North Korean nuclear weapons program. The major strategy in those talks was to look for cooperation in the region on the side of Chinese to get North Korea to stop nuclear ambitions. The major difficulties he discussed included having different interests than China, as the United States was not a neighbor to Korea like China, as well as talking with the North Koreans, who were difficult people. Specifically, Ambassador Hill detailed that he had to work through talking with individuals he thought were war criminals. He had to narrowly tailor his speech and actions to his objective. The important thing was not to get distracted by his dislike for the North Koreans.

Ambassador Hill closed by making general remarks about his ideas and criticisms of American foreign policy. In general, he thinks America has lost its way as a world leader. He believes democracy promotion is best for human rights and America is correct in that respect. However, he stated that beating countries over the head as the world’s policemen is not the best way to go about promoting democracy.