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U.N. Officials Say American Offered Plan to Replace Karzai

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As widespread fraud in the [Afghanistan](#) presidential election was becoming clear three months ago, the No. 2 [United Nations](#) official in the country, the American Peter W. Galbraith, proposed enlisting the White House in a plan to replace the Afghan president, [Hamid Karzai](#), according to two senior United Nations officials.

Mr. Karzai, the officials said, became incensed when he learned of the plan and was told it had been put forth by Mr. Galbraith, who had been installed in his position with the strong backing of [Richard C. Holbrooke](#), the top American envoy to Afghanistan. Mr. Holbrooke had himself clashed with the Afghan president over the election.

Mr. Galbraith abruptly left the country in early September and was fired weeks later. Mr. Galbraith has said that he believes that he was forced out because he was feuding with his boss, the Norwegian Kai Eide, the top United Nations official in Kabul, over how to respond to what he termed wholesale fraud in the Afghan presidential election. He accused Mr. Eide of concealing the degree of fraud benefiting Mr. Karzai.

Mr. Galbraith said in an interview that he discussed but never actively promoted the idea of persuading Mr. Karzai to leave office.

Mr. Galbraith's warnings about fraud were largely confirmed in October, when a United Nations-backed audit stripped Mr. Karzai of almost one-third of his votes, preventing a first-round victory and forcing him into a runoff. He was proclaimed the winner last month after his challenger withdrew, saying the runoff would not be fair.

But the disclosure of Mr. Galbraith's proposal to replace Mr. Karzai, contained in a letter written by Mr. Eide and reported in interviews

with United Nations and American officials, provides new perspective on the crisis in Kabul that enveloped the United Nations and the bitter feud between Mr. Galbraith and Mr. Eide.

The degree to which the United States should stand behind Mr. Karzai was vigorously debated in Washington in the fall, as the Obama administration pondered how to handle the disputed election in Afghanistan. Mr. Karzai is often criticized as being an ineffective leader in the battle against the [Taliban](#) who tolerates widespread corruption in his ranks. He has an acrimonious relationship with many American leaders.

Mr. Holbrooke said he was unaware of the idea. “And it does not reflect in any way any idea that Secretary Clinton or anyone else in the State Department would have considered,” he said.

Mr. Galbraith, a former American ambassador and an influential voice on Iraq, also came under scrutiny recently for his stake in an oil field in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Mr. Eide, who is set to leave his job as head of the United Nations mission in Afghanistan by early next year, said Mr. Galbraith’s departure from Afghanistan in early September came immediately after he rejected what he described as Mr. Galbraith’s proposal to replace Mr. Karzai and install a more Western-friendly figure.

He said he told his deputy the plan was “unconstitutional, it represented interference of the worst sort, and if pursued it would provoke not only a strong international reaction” but also civil insurrection. It was during this conversation, Mr. Eide said, that Mr. Galbraith proposed taking a leave to the United States, and Mr. Eide accepted.

Mr. Galbraith’s proposal would begin with “a secret mission to Washington,” Mr. Eide wrote last week in a letter responding to a critical public report of his work by the International Crisis Group, a research organization.

“He told me he would first meet with Vice President Biden,” Mr. Eide wrote. “If the vice president agreed with Galbraith’s proposal they would approach [President Obama](#) with the following plan: President Karzai should be forced to resign as president.” Then a new government would be installed led by a former finance minister, [Ashraf Ghani](#), or a former interior minister, Ali A. Jalali, both favorites of American officials.

In response to questions from The New York Times, Mr. Galbraith said that he never put forth any fully fledged proposal and said that he only considered an effort to persuade Mr. Karzai to leave so that an interim government, allowed under the Constitution, could be installed in case a runoff election did not occur until May 2010.

Mr. Galbraith said the United Nations never informed him that these discussions played a role in his firing.

“There were internal discussions,” Mr. Galbraith said. “I’m sure I discussed the crisis and I’m sure I discussed a way out. But that is an entirely different matter from acting on it.”

He said he never promoted the idea with officials outside the United Nations.

But according to a Western diplomat, Mr. Galbraith discussed his plan with Frank Ricciardone, the deputy American ambassador in Kabul. Mr. Ricciardone was subsequently alerted to Mr. Galbraith’s plan as well by Mr. Eide, the diplomat said.

A spokeswoman for the American Embassy in Kabul, Caitlin Hayden, confirmed that Mr. Galbraith had brought the plan to the embassy. She said that it was summarily rejected.

“Mr. Galbraith was outspoken within the diplomatic community about his concerns regarding fraud and its consequences, and raised questions about various alternatives to the elections,” Ms. Hayden said. “The U.S. Embassy discouraged consideration of theoretical alternatives to the constitutional elections process whenever they

were raised by any party, even while acknowledging flaws in the process.”

Mr. Galbraith and a senior United Nations official said that a staff member from Mr. Holbrooke’s office was at some of the meetings where the idea was discussed. But Mr. Galbraith says that he does not recall any communication with Mr. Holbrooke on the subject.

Vijay Nambiar, chief of staff to the United Nations secretary general, [Ban Ki-moon](#), said that he was aware of Mr. Galbraith’s proposal to go to Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) and develop support for the plan, and later learned of Mr. Karzai’s anger over the episode. Mr. Nambiar said it played a role in Mr. Galbraith’s firing.

“It was one of several factors,” he said.

Mr. Galbraith also says he never actually contacted Mr. Biden or his staff on this matter. James F. Carney, a spokesman for Mr. Biden, said in an e-mail message that one of the vice president’s staff members, Tony Blinken, did receive a call from Mr. Galbraith while he was still working for the United Nations in Afghanistan, but he did not say exactly when the call was made.

“Galbraith told Blinken that he had thoughts about Afghanistan and wanted to talk about them at some point. Blinken said he’d be glad to discuss them. However, the discussion never took place. Blinken has not heard from Galbraith since or received any information from Galbraith about his thoughts or ideas on Afghanistan,” Mr. Carney said.

Mr. Eide said the Galbraith plan caused strong reactions in Kabul. Mr. Karzai was “deeply upset,” he said. “I spent quite some time trying to calm down the accusations of international interference by talking to the president,” he said.

A spokesman for Mr. Karzai said he was not available for comment on the matter.

James Glanz reported from New York, and Richard A. Oppel Jr. from Kabul. Mark Landler contributed reporting from Washington, and Walter Gibbs from Oslo.