Prepared Remarks of
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"Afghanistan Reconstruction: Lessons from the U.S. Experience"

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Thank you for that very kind introduction. And thank you all for coming today. I have to admit, I was reviewing the event schedule, and while I'm not quite sure what "mulled wine" is, I'm glad today's event isn't competing with the Member's Christmas Drinks gathering – even I may have skipped my speech for that event.

It is an honor to speak here at Chatham House, one of the world's most influential think tanks, and the one with the most recognizable name. Despite the tobacco-flavored acronym my organization goes by, I must say I'm glad we're not referred to by the name of our building – somehow "Crystal Square Arcade Two" just doesn't have quite the same ring to it as Chatham House.

But in all seriousness, I am here to talk about a decades-long effort that has cost exorbitant sums of money and that many people have questioned the merits of – and no, I'm not talking about the third runway at Heathrow.

No, rather, I am here to talk about Afghanistan. It's not news to any of you that the war in Afghanistan is America's longest continuous military engagement – and our most expensive reconstruction effort. The costs to the American taxpayer for the reconstruction effort alone have now exceeded $120 billion, far more than any similar past effort we've undertaken, including the Marshall Plan, even when adjusted for inflation.

It has cost the United Kingdom a great deal as well – and more poignantly than simple dollars and cents. More than 2,200 American soldiers and over 450 British military personnel have lost their lives in Afghanistan.

I am here today to talk about SIGAR's lessons-learned program, but let me first give you a little background on who we are and what my agency does. The United States Congress created SIGAR in 2008 because they recognized that the reconstruction effort

in Afghanistan needed greater oversight, and that by its very nature, was a whole of government, and a whole of governments, exercise.

SIGAR is in many ways a unique agency in the United States. We are charged with ferreting out waste, fraud, and abuse in the reconstruction effort. To enable us to do so effectively, Congress made us a wholly independent agency – not housed within any federal agency, unlike the vast majority of other Inspector General offices.

The second critical decision that Congress made was to give us broad jurisdiction over every facet of the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, which for the United States includes the work of not just the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, but also the Department of Justice, the Department of the Treasury, and even outliers such as the Department of Agriculture.

I know that sounds like a lot of bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo, but our independence and broad jurisdiction are critical to the ability of our roughly 200 auditors, investigators, and other professionals to do their jobs, whether they're stationed in Kabul or in the U.S.

But more to the point of today's event, our ability to look across agency jurisdictional boundaries gives us a unique vantage point to examine the entire reconstruction effort. It may be a bit surreal to have an American standing here talking to a British audience about lessons learned in Afghanistan – after all, your experience in Afghanistan began at a time when the United States was so young we had just elected the first president who was born a U.S. citizen, the utterly unforgettable Martin van Buren. And the names of the places that my staff has worked…Kabul…Kandahar…Helmand….would be just as familiar to Dr. William Brydon, immortalized as perhaps the lone survivor of the British garrison's long, disastrous march to Jalalabad in 1842, as well as Harry Flashman, George Fraser's fictional protagonist of the Flashman novels.

Much like our penchant for appropriating British popular culture, America now finds itself following in Britain's footsteps as we enter the sixteenth year of our own Afghan adventure. But with a new strategy outlined by the President, now is the time for us to ask what we have learned, how we can do it better, and how we, the UK, and other countries can apply these lessons to similar future endeavors.

SIGAR is the only entity with the authority and capability to look at U.S. and coalition efforts in Afghanistan in a truly holistic way. General John Allen, a former U.S. commander in Afghanistan, and Ryan Crocker, a former U.S. Ambassador to both Afghanistan and Iraq, raised this issue with me shortly after I was appointed to this post in 2012. They told me that SIGAR was the only government agency that could come up with cross-agency, cross-government lessons learned to benefit the ongoing effort in

Afghanistan and future reconstruction efforts.

This struck a chord with me because while SIGAR was finding waste, fraud, and abuse nearly everywhere we looked in Afghanistan – from the $488 million worth of aircraft that couldn't fly, to the navy the U.S. bought for a landlocked country, to the buildings the U.S. paid for that literally melted in the rain – I was constantly asked, but what does it all mean?

I was also frustrated that the inability of U.S. government agencies to derive any long-term lessons in Afghanistan and adjust their operations accordingly was largely because our military and civilian personnel rotate out of Afghanistan after a year or less. What I call the "annual lobotomy" is not a new problem, but it does mean, as many have said before, we've fought 16 one-year wars in Afghanistan, each, I might add, with their own PowerPoint slide deck.

The encouragement I received from former and current government officials, along with the fact that it seemed like I was introduced to a new U.S. Ambassador or Commanding General on every visit to Afghanistan, convinced me to establish SIGAR's lessons learned program. This enables us to answer the question of "what does it all mean?"

We've published two reports so far, with several more on the way. The first, on anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan, noted the lack of an interagency strategy between State, USAID, and the Defense Department to combat corruption in Afghanistan. And it doesn't take a leap of faith to presume that if we weren't coordinating internally, our government certainly wasn't coordinating with our coalition partners. While diplomats were chastising the Karzai regime for its unethical behavior, the military was busy paying off warlords in areas where development agencies were trying to improve governance.

Our report also highlighted the fact that international donors, led by the United States, simply put too much money, too fast, into too small an economy that could not absorb it. This manifestly increased the opportunities for corruption in a country where the illicit economy hardly was in need of an accelerant.

Our second lessons learned report, released this September, focused on coalition efforts to build the Afghan security forces. Among the key findings was that the U.S. and our coalition partners initially paid scant attention to the need to build indigenous security forces, and by the time they realized they needed to do so, they were completely unprepared to undertake security sector assistance programs of the size and scope required in Afghanistan.

The report found that the U.S. also failed to acknowledge and compensate for coalition

staffing shortfalls and national caveats that relate to the trainers, advisors, and embedded training teams that other governments provided. Some countries are simply more reluctant to put their troops in harm's way than others, and that needs to be taken into account.

Given the UK's current role assisting the Afghan Interior Ministry, one finding that may be of particular interest is that the development of the Afghan National Police was seriously inhibited by the fact that the U.S. military, with little idea of how to train a civilian police force, was forced to do so because U.S. police-training capabilities largely reside in civilian agencies that can't, or won't, operate in non-permissive environments.

Of course, lessons learned do no good if they're not taken into consideration during planning efforts. That is why, even prior to the report's publication, I briefed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, our country's highest-placed military officer, on our findings, as well as other senior military leaders in the United States, Afghanistan, and at NATO headquarters.

Not so long ago, SIGAR was more likely to take incoming fire from the U.S. military than praise, but in recent Congressional hearings, both the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs emphasized that SIGAR experts had served on their "failure analysis" team during the development of the new U.S. strategy. The annual defense policy bill, which was just adopted, includes a requirement that State, USAID, and the Department of Defense develop a joint interagency strategy to combat corruption during reconstruction efforts – a direct outcome of our first lessons learned report.

Matters such as stabilization efforts, private sector development activities, and counter narcotics efforts are the subjects of reports currently in development, and I hope to be back soon to share our findings from those as well.

We do not have all the answers. We may not even know all the questions. But, as a temporary agency, SIGAR's lasting legacy will perhaps come from our lessons learned program if our findings and recommendations can help future governments avoid some of the pitfalls that we've all witnessed in Afghanistan. If we succeed in that effort, we may bring benefit to not only the taxpayer, but to our soldiers, diplomats, and development professionals in Afghanistan and beyond.

Thank you, and I look forward to your insights and questions.