Prepared Remarks of
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"Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan, 2002-2017"

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Peter, thank you for the kind introduction. And thank you, New America, for hosting today's release of SIGAR's fifth lessons learned report, *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* which examines our more than 16-year effort to combat the narcotics trade in Afghanistan.

We believe today's report represents the most comprehensive, independent government assessment of counternarcotics programs in Afghanistan. It is the product of over two and a half years of work and based upon extensive research, including interviews with more than 80 current and former officials, academics and researchers with many years of on-the-ground experience in Afghanistan. It also incorporates our staff's review of previously undisclosed official documents and the unique use of geospatial imagery to better understand and evaluate the impact of hundreds of projects in Afghanistan.

The result, which comprises 223 pages of narrative and graphics, is available online at our agency website, www.sigar.mil in both PDF and interactive formats. SIGAR is, to my knowledge, the only IG office that produces such interactive publications, which have broadened our reach to an audience that prefers to access news and information in a condensed format developed for smartphones and tablets.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program was launched in 2014 at the suggestion of the former U.S. and NATO force commander in Afghanistan, General John Allen, former Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and others. It is intended to draw upon SIGAR's oversight work and that of other agencies to extract larger lessons to improve outcomes in Afghanistan and, where appropriate, in future contingency operations that may face similar obstacles.

SIGAR is, I must add, uniquely positioned to undertake that work—a fact that General Allen and Ambassador Crocker reminded me of when suggesting a lessons-learned initiative. The 2008 statute that authorized SIGAR made us a truly independent oversight shop, not based in any federal department.[1] As such, we are the only agency with the mandate to examine all aspects of the Afghan reconstruction effort, regardless of departmental boundaries.

Producing this lessons-learned report on counternarcotics has been a major task for our agency. Why did we do it?

First of all, because our enabling statute requires us to make recommendations on improving government operations. And, secondly, because narcotics production and trafficking are a serious threat to public health, law enforcement, and the stability and sustainability of the Afghan state which has been the ultimate goal of our seventeen-year engagement there. As UNODC, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, has noted, Poppy cultivation and opium production threaten sustainable development, foster political instability, and help fund insurgent activity.[2]

NO SILVER BULLETS

I know first-hand how serious the fight against narcotics production and trafficking can be. As a former federal prosecutor with the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section of the Department of Justice, and as an investigative counsel for the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on

Investigations, I have seen the drug business up close here on the streets of the United States as well as in the jungles of Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia. Likewise, during my more than 20 trips to Afghanistan, I have seen fields of poppy throughout the countryside as well as the countless drug addicts on the streets and under the bridges of Kabul.

I mention the U.S. and other countries' narcotics problem to point out a critical fact. Even in wealthier and more developed countries—where the cultivation and production of drugs play a smaller role in the economy than they do in Afghanistan—combatting the drug trade is no easy or simple task. One thing we and Afghanistan have in common is that our wars on drugs have been long and not very successful.

That is a key message today: fighting drugs is not easy, especially in a war zone, amid larger failures in the reconstruction effort, and with partners who cannot or will not take on the corruption and violence that narcotics fosters. The corollary message is that we must do a better job if we want to mitigate the ways that the drug trade undermines our goals in Afghanistan.

THE NUMBERS SPELL FAILURE

Consider the hard facts. From fiscal year 2002 through FY 2017, Congress has provided $8.6 billion for counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan.[3]

Put that $8 billion on one side of the balance scale. Then put these facts on the other:[4]

- Opium cultivation in Afghanistan jumped by 63 percent from 2016 to 2017, to a record high of about 328,000 hectares. [That's about 1,265 square miles, or more than twenty times the land area of Washington, DC.]

- That record opium crop could support production of up to 900 tons of export-quality heroin.

- The value of 2017's opium output was between $4.1 billion and $6.6 billion, or equivalent to 20 to 32 percent of Afghanistan's entire gross domestic product.

- Opium poppy production has become so engrained in the livelihood of many Afghans, that it may provide the equivalent of up to 590,000 full-time jobs—a number substantially higher than the entire strength of the Afghan army and police forces.[5]

- The amount of opium seized over the last *ten years* is equivalent to about 5 percent of the estimated opium production in 2017 alone.[6]

To put it bluntly, these numbers spell failure. And the outlook is not encouraging. SIGAR noted in its April 2018 report to Congress that the Afghan government has been slow to implement an effective counternarcotics strategy, and that the U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID, does not intend to plan, design, or implement any new programs to address opium-poppy cultivation.[7] The U.S. military and federal civilian presence in Afghanistan is far below the 2011 peak, further constraining our ability to conduct counternarcotics programs.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's narcotics sector continues to fuel insurgent violence and foster corruption throughout the Afghan government. The opportunity to profit from the opium trade has resulted in alliances between corrupt government officials, drug traffickers, and insurgents. Opium has been described as providing "the economic glue which binds together political coalitions."

On the other side of the struggle, last November, U.S. and Afghan forces began air strikes against drug labs that process raw opium into morphine and heroin, in what DOD terms an "air interdiction campaign."[8]

General John Nicholson, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, has said 60 percent of insurgent financing may come from the drug trade. While it is good that USFOR-A is focused on cutting off this financing, time will tell if bombing labs is an effective, cost-efficient way to do that. Labs can be set up in three to four days, and any civilian casualties from the strikes could further alienate rural populations. Moreover, while all agree that money from the drug trade helps fund the insurgency, experts differ on the amount. Therefore interdiction operations—whether on the ground or by air—need to be based on robust intelligence.

DISAPPOINTING CONCLUSIONS

To be fair, we must note that the counternarcotics struggle in Afghanistan has achieved some positive results. Some provinces and districts have achieved reductions in poppy cultivation, although temporary. And U.S. support and mentoring has helped stand up well-trained, capable Afghan counterdrug units that became trusted partners. But these outcomes fall far short of being strategic game changers.

As our new report documents, other results loom larger, and are deeply disappointing. SIGAR's key observations include these:

- First, no counternarcotics program from 2002 to 2017 led to *lasting* reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production. I repeat: no program. Last year's record-setting opium numbers are testimony to that. *Perhaps* cultivation and production figures would have been even higher without the counternarcotics programs, but their overall impact has been negligible.

- Second, eradication efforts had no lasting impact, and were not consistently conducted in the same geographic locations as development assistance. This was at times a recipe for deeply alienating farmers, who often borrow money to plant their crop. Destroying their crop without setting them up with other income and

leaving them in debt is not a good way to build support for the Kabul government or for the foreign presence.

- Third, alternative-development programs were often too short-term, and failed to provide sustainable alternatives to growing poppy. At times, programs even contributed to increased poppy production.

- Fourth, until the security situation improves, there is little possibility of significantly curtailing opium poppy cultivation and drug production in Afghanistan.

That last observation cannot be overemphasized. It is simply unrealistic to expect significant progress from counternarcotics efforts without being able to exert reasonable and persistent levels of control over land area and transportation routes.

NOW WHAT?

I take pride in the research and analysis that underlie these conclusions, but I certainly take no pleasure in relating them today. The human suffering, criminality, corruption, and financial support to the Afghan insurgency tied to narcotics pose an existential threat to the whole costly effort to reconstruct and stabilize the country. We can catalog and diagnose failures, but we must go further and propose ways to work smarter toward our objectives.

Our report goes into considerable detail on these measures and I believe the panel will be discussing them in more detail shortly. I will summarize a few of the most important recommendations:

- First, the United States should outline a strategy that directs U.S. agencies toward shared, prioritized goals, and the U.S. ambassador should lead the implementation of the strategy. Goals should be integrated into larger U.S. security, development, and governance

objectives. This sounds obvious, but our counternarcotics strategy has not been officially updated since 2012, parts of it have been overtaken by events, and whole-of-government activity and coordination have been seriously lacking.

- Second, elements of that strategy should be implemented together on the ground. If the U.S. government is going to pay for eradication in a province, that activity should be collocated with longer-term development assistance—and focused in areas of Afghan government control. This would increase the chance of achieving lasting reductions in poppy cultivation, and would reduce the risk of alienating rural communities.

- Third, our support for Afghan counterdrug units should be tailored to the Afghan government's demonstrated ability and willingness to also support those units, and to target senior drug traffickers. The United States and its Coalition partners cannot win Afghanistan's fight against narcotics on the Afghan government's behalf. Progress will depend in part upon political will in Kabul, and upon adequately staffed, trained, motivated, and effective units in the Afghan security and judicial institutions.

- Fourth, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan and the commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan must closely coordinate on implementation of the counternarcotics strategy. Because there is an increased chance of success in more secure areas, it is important that the counternarcotics effort is integrated into wider security plans and strategies.

Our report has much more detail and analysis on these matters. In fact, it contains, in addition to a historical record and assessment of U.S. counternarcotics programs in Afghanistan, 13 key findings, 11 lessons to be applied in situationally appropriately ways to counternarcotics programs, and 13 recommendations, of which three are Afghanistan-specific.

As you can tell, I have merely scratched the surface of this report, so I encourage you to consult the full document to read more on your area of interest. In particular, I would direct you to a key piece of this report: its innovative use of geographic information system imagery that help us understand whether different programs were coordinated on the ground, and what impact they had after 1 year, 3 years, 5 years. GIS imagery enables researchers to, for example, measure areas under opium cultivation, note the effects of improved irrigation systems, check on the results of eradication efforts, and extract other useful information. I believe this dimension of the report makes an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of how to better monitor and evaluate U.S. foreign assistance.

CONCLUSION

It would be presumptuous and delusional to claim that any set of lessons and recommendations will stamp out narcotics production and use. As this report makes clear, there are no silver bullets when it comes to eliminating the drug problem in Afghanistan. But if we cannot cure, we must mitigate. We must mitigate in ways that reflect realistic timelines and goals, and do not repeat past failures.

As President Garfield once said, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.” The findings of today’s report may be a bit depressing, but in the long run, we need to face the facts and build upon them to improve the future. The findings, lessons, and recommendations of today’s report go a long way toward delineating a smarter and more effective path forward. Some of them may be controversial and there may be some opposition to them. But as another great president, Woodrow Wilson, said, “if you want to make enemies, try to change something”.

This report tries to change how we approach the fight against the opium epidemic in Afghanistan and I am proud of and grateful to the skilled professionals in our Lessons Learned Program who worked on this report over more than two years. They include program director Joe Windrem,

and lead analyst Kate Bateman. Thanks also go to research analysts Matt Bentrott, Nikolai Condee-Padunov, and Matthew Rubin, and to graphic designer Olivia Paek and editor Elizabeth Young. I would also like to thank Dr. David Mansfield, who has worked on this issue in Afghanistan for nearly twenty years. His contributions have been invaluable to this report.

The team's analysis is persuasive and their recommendations are valuable. We urge Congress and the Executive Branch to review and consider appropriate official action. Equally important, we urge experts and opinion leaders such as you to lend your voices to the call for a better strategy to combat narcotics both in Afghanistan and around the world.

Thank you. I welcome your comments and questions.

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[1] Public Law 110-181, Section 1229.

[2] *UN News*, "Record-high opium production in Afghanistan creates multiple challenges for region and beyond, UN warns," https://news.un.org, 5/11/2018.

[3] SIGAR, *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan, 2002–2017*, SIGAR 18-52-LL, 6/2018, vii. The $8.6 billion total includes about $7.3 billion for programs with a substantial counternarcotics focus, and about $1.3 billion on programs with a counternarcotics component.

[4] Except as noted, the following points are from *UN News*, "Record-high opium production in Afghanistan creates multiple challenges for region and beyond, UN warns," https://news.un.org, 5/21/2018.

[5] William Byrd, *Disease or Symptom? Afghanistan's Burgeoning Opium Economy in 2017*, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 11/2017, p. 1.

[6] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 4/30/2018, p. 187. The data cited in the quarterly report express the seizures as totaling 463,342 kilograms; that figure has been converted to 510 U.S. or "short" tons here. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2017 Opium Survey estimated Afghanistan's potential opium production approximately 9,000 metric tons (9,923 short tons). U.S. government estimates for 2017 were slightly higher at 9,140 metric tons (10,075 short tons).

[7] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 4/30/2018, p. 180.

[8] U.S. Air Force Brigadier General Lance Bunch, "DOD Press Briefing by Brigadier General Bunch," 12/13/2017.