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Prepared Remarks of
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"SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program and Lessons from the Long War"
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Thank you for that kind introduction.

It is a pleasure to speak to you today about what my agency has learned about our nation's largest reconstruction effort and what it means to you and our country about the transparency and accountability of what has become America's longest war.

Since my appointment by President Obama as the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction or SIGAR nearly eight years ago, I have presented testimony to Congressional committees on 23 occasions and spoken in public gatherings such as this nearly 100 times. I have found it useful to start with what I call the "3W's" – Who we are. What we do. And why we do what we do.

And, don't feel bad if you don't know what an Inspector General does generally or what a Special Inspector General does specially. You are not alone, as I have discovered over the last seven years -- many members of the executive branch and Congress don't know either.

In 2008, Congress created SIGAR to combat waste, fraud, and abuse in the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. Why? Because we were spending more money in Afghanistan on reconstruction than we spent under the Marshall Plan to rebuild all of Europe after World War II and Congress felt they needed a dedicated and specialized agency to protect the taxpayer's investment, which now totals over $136 billion.

Like all other Inspectors General, SIGAR has both auditing and law enforcement responsibilities but, unlike the other 73 federal inspectors general, SIGAR is not housed within any one government agency. This means we have the unique ability to oversee any federal agency that has played a role in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort. To date, we have published nearly 600 audits, inspections, and other reports that have resulted in cost savings to the taxpayer of over $3 billion and convicted over 130 individuals for misconduct related to reconstruction. This includes seven lessons learned reports, which I'd like to take a moment to discuss.

The Genesis and Purpose of the Lessons Learned Program

You may have heard about our Lessons Learned Program with the *Washington Post*'s publication of what they have called "The Afghanistan Papers."   In light of the attention, I am pleased to have this opportunity to clear up any misconceptions about what our lessons learned program does and does not do.

As with everything produced by SIGAR, our Lessons Learned Program is limited to looking at the reconstruction of Afghanistan. It is not and never was intended to be a new version of the Pentagon Papers, or to turn snappy one-liners and quotes into headlines or sound bites. We do not make broad assessments of U.S. diplomatic and military strategies or war fighting; nor do we address the broader policy question of our ongoing presence in Afghanistan.

Rather, our Lessons Learned Program is intended to produce unclassified, publicly available, and thoroughly researched appraisals of important aspects of U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. And, unlike the *Washington Post* series, our reports make actionable recommendations for Congress and Executive Branch agencies to improve operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Our Lessons Learned Program had its genesis soon after my appointment as Inspector General in 2012. It became apparent to me that the problems we were finding in our audits and inspections—whether it was poorly constructed infrastructure, rampant corruption, inadequately trained Afghan soldiers, or a growing narcotics trade—elicited the same basic response from members of Congress, agency officials, and policymakers alike. "What does it mean?" they would ask me. "What can we learn from this?"

In an attempt to answer those questions, in March 2013, I sent letters to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, asking them to provide me with a list of their agency's ten most and least successful Afghanistan reconstruction projects and programs, along with a detailed explanation of how these projects and programs were evaluated and the specific criteria used for each.

The answers we received from the agencies were informative, but they failed to specifically identify each agency's 10 most and 10 least successful projects or programs. Nor did they explain how the agencies measure success and failure. Their inability or refusal to do so not only limited our understanding of how government agencies evaluated and perceived both success and failure, but also missed an opportunity to learn some lessons from past reconstruction projects. I highly recommend all of you to go to our website, www.sigar.mil, to read those letters –since they show how much better off we would be now in Afghanistan if the agencies had

gone through the effort to "rack and stack" their programs back in 2013.
In some ways, the agencies' reluctance to list their successes and failures is understandable. As the old saying goes, success has many parents, but failure is an orphan. Nowhere is this truer than in Afghanistan, where success is fleeting and failure is common. That is all the more reason why it is crucial to be honest with ourselves and to recognize that not everything is successful. In other words, failure may be an orphan, but it also can be a great teacher.

In response to this repeated refusal by the agencies to be candid about their successes and failures, and at the suggestion of a number of prominent officials, including Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General John Allen, SIGAR formally launched its Lessons Learned Program in 2014.

What We Have Accomplished: Seven Lessons Learned Reports

To date, the Lessons Learned Program has published seven reports. Two more reports—one on elections in Afghanistan and another on the monitoring and evaluation of U.S. government contracts there—will be published this year. And we expect to issue a report on women's empowerment in Afghanistan and another on policing and corrections in early 2021 at the latest. I will very briefly discuss the seven reports we have issued to date, all of which can be found on SIGAR's website.

- Our first lessons learned report, **Corruption in Conflict,** published in 2016, found that corruption substantially undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from the very beginning. The lesson is that anticorruption efforts need to be at the center of planning and policymaking for contingencies like Afghanistan.

- Our second report, published in 2017, entitled **Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces**, revealed that the U.S. government was ill-prepared to help build an Afghan army and police force capable of protecting Afghanistan from internal or external threats. We found that the U.S. government lacked a comprehensive approach and coordinating body to successfully implement the whole-of-government programs necessary to develop capable and self-sustaining Afghan security forces.

- In April 2018, we published our third report, **Private Sector Development and Economic Growth**, which found that early economic successes in Afghanistan were undermined by ongoing physical insecurity and political instability, which discouraged investment and other economic activity.

- Our fourth report, **Stabilization**, was published in May 2018 and revealed that we greatly overestimated our ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan, and that reconstruction programs were not tailored to Afghanistan's

operating environment, were hampered by unrealistic timelines, and successes rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops.

- ***Counternarcotics*** was the subject of our fifth report, published in June 2018. We found that no program led to lasting reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production—and, without a willing Afghan partner and stable security environment, there was little possibility of future success.

- In 2019, our sixth report, ***Divided Responsibility***, highlighted the difficulty of coordinating security sector assistance during active combat and under the umbrella of a 39-member NATO coalition when no specific DOD organization or military service was assigned ultimate responsibility for U.S. efforts.

- And last fall, our seventh report, ***Reintegration of Ex-Combatants***, examined the five main post-2001 efforts to reintegrate former combatants into Afghan society. We found that these efforts did not help any significant number of former fighters to reintegrate, did not weaken the insurgency, and did not reduce violence.

Impact of the Lessons Learned Program

To date, SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program has made nearly 120 recommendations to executive branch agencies and the Congress, some of which have already been acted upon. For example, both the 2018 and 2019 National Defense Authorization Acts contained provisions derived from our lessons learned reports.[1] SIGAR Lessons Learned staff also were asked to participate in the DOD Quadrennial Review of Security Sector Assistance in 2018, and program staff contributed to—and were explicitly recognized as experts in—the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review, which is the first interagency policy document outlining how the U.S. government will conduct stabilization missions. In addition, many of our reports are now part of training

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[1] Section 1279 of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act calls for the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development to develop an anti-corruption strategy for reconstruction efforts. This amendment is in keeping with a recommendation in *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan.* Additionally, the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act includes amendments related to two recommendations from our 2017 report, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan.* Section 1201 of the Act required that during the development and planning of a program to build the capacity of the national security forces of a foreign country, the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State jointly consider political, social, economic, diplomatic, and historical factors of the foreign country that may impact the effectiveness of the program. Section 1211 required the incorporation of lessons learned from prior security cooperation programs and activities of DOD that were carried out any time on or after September 11, 2001 into future operations.

programs for the military and the Foreign Service.

Suffice to say that the Lessons Learned Program has earned its reputation as a reliable source of expertise on our nation's longest war.

Key Lessons from SIGAR's Ten Years of Work

But what enduring lessons have we learned? Here are six overarching conclusions from our Lessons Learned Program and SIGAR's other work:

- Successful reconstruction is incompatible with continuing insecurity.

- Unchecked corruption in Afghanistan undermined U.S. strategic goals—and the U.S. helped to foster that corruption.

- After the Taliban's initial defeat, there was no clear reconstruction strategy and no single military service, agency, or nation in charge of reconstruction.

- Politically driven timelines undermined the reconstruction effort.

- If we cannot end short rotations of personnel or what we call the "annual lobotomy," we should at least mitigate its impact.

- To be effective, reconstruction efforts must be based on a deep understanding of the traditions of the host nation.

Hubris and Mendacity

But there is another important lesson we have learned from our ten years of work in Afghanistan. We need a transparent government that provides the facts not only to Congress but also to the long-suffering American taxpayer.

Since I became the Special Inspector General I have noticed that our agencies have not been honest with themselves nor with others. What I have publicly described as "a strong odor of hubris and mendacity" surrounds the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. There seems to be an ingrained incentive to report progress – no matter how fleeting – and an inability or unwillingness to admit failure. No one wants to be the person who says they didn't accomplish their mission during their tour in Afghanistan. As a result, senior officials may not always receive candid reports from the field.

This was apparent in my over 20 visits to Afghanistan where I observed a disconnect between what I was being told and what I was actually seeing. Rosy reports of "progress" did not reflect the reality I saw on the ground.

It is perhaps understandable that agencies would want to show their programs in the best possible light—and that private firms, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral institutions that implemented those programs would want to demonstrate success. Yet a recurring challenge to any accurate assessment has been the pervasive tendency to overstate positive results, with little, if any, evidence to back up those claims and to downplay any problems or failures.

Unfortunately, many of the claims that State, USAID, and DOD have made over time simply do not stand up to scrutiny. For example, in 2014, the then-USAID administrator, stated "today, 3 million girls and 5 million boys are enrolled in school—compared to just 900,000 when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan." But a subsequent SIGAR audit found that USAID had taken few, if any, steps to verify the accuracy of the enrollment data it was receiving from the Afghan government, even though independent third parties and the Afghan Ministry of Education had called the numbers into question. And because USAID education support programs lacked effective metrics, USAID could not demonstrate how U.S. taxpayer dollars had contributed to the claimed increase in enrollment.

The same USAID administrator also claimed that since the fall of the Taliban, "child mortality has been cut [in Afghanistan] by 60 percent, maternal mortality has declined by 80 percent, and access to health services has been increased by 90 percent. As a result, Afghanistan has experienced the largest increase in life expectancy and the largest decreases in maternal and child deaths of any country in the world."

However, SIGAR's 2017 audit of Afghanistan's health sector in 2017, found that while USAID publicly reported a 22-year increase in Afghan life expectancy from 2002 to 2010, USAID did not disclose that the baseline it used for comparison came from a World Health Organization (WHO) report that could only make an estimate because of limited data. A later WHO report showed only a 6-year increase in Afghan life expectancy for males and an 8-year increase for females between 2002 and 2010—a far cry from the 22 years that USAID claimed. As for the maternal mortality claims, SIGAR's audit found that USAID's 2002 baseline data was suspect since it was from a survey conducted in only four of Afghanistan's then-360 districts.

Likewise, a SIGAR audit of U.S. government programs to assist women in Afghanistan found that "although the Department of Defense, Department of State, and USAID reported gains and improvements in the status of Afghan women . . . SIGAR found that there was no comprehensive assessment available to confirm that these gains were the direct result of specific U.S. efforts." And while State and USAID collectively reported spending $850 million on 17 projects that were designed in whole or in part to support Afghan women, they could not tell our auditors how much of that money actually went to programs that supported Afghan women.

Another SIGAR audit looked into the more than $1 billion that the United States had spent supporting rule-of-law programs in Afghanistan. Shockingly, we found that the U.S. actually seemed to be moving backwards as time went along. Our audit found that while the 2009 U.S. rule-of-law strategy for Afghanistan contained 27 specific performance measures, the 2013 strategy contained no performance measures at all. If you have no metrics for success, how can you tell if you're succeeding?

While honesty and transparency are always important, when government agencies overstate the positive and overlook flaws in their methodologies and accountability mechanisms, there are real implications for public policy. The American people and their elected representatives eventually start asking why, if things are going so well, are we still there? Why do we continue to spend so much money?

Unfortunately, I have also seen examples of agencies changing the narrative to avoid reporting bad news. For example:

- **Over-classification:** The increased use of classification in the last few years to avoid public reporting of the most useful information to measure the status of the conflict, including data on Afghan casualties, security force attrition, and performance assessments. This data was previously unclassified and included in our publicly available quarterly reports to Congress.

- **Withholding information:** This is a constant problem going back to 2013 when USAID tried to prevent SIGAR from providing Congress with USAID's assessments of the ability of Afghan government ministries to responsibly manage U.S. taxpayer funding because USAID feared the assessments were "embarrassing".

- **Changing metrics:** The military has continually revised the metrics used to evaluate Afghan troop training and readiness to make it easier for them to show progress. Eventually, the metrics and their results were classified altogether.

- **Exaggeration:** In addition to USAID's exaggerations I've previously mentioned, we have also seen repeated claims by the military that they're "turning the corner" in Afghanistan, even though the war has been, at best, a stalemate for the last half decade.

- **Willful ignorance:** For years, DOD reported on a quarterly basis the number of districts and population under Afghan government control and claimed that this data was the single most important metric for measuring success or failure for measuring the competency of the Afghan security forces.   In March of last year they informed us they were no longer collecting this information, saying it was unreliable, and no longer a useful assessment tool. Perhaps not surprisingly, this

coincided with a negative trend line.

To paraphrase what the famous political theorist Hannah Arendt once said, possibly the most important consequence from this mendacity and "happy talk" is that when "everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer" in regards to Afghanistan.

Matters for Consideration

So what needs to be done right now to improve operations in Afghanistan and combat institutional hubris and mendacity?

1. Congress must ensure that the Administration has an actionable plan for what happens "the day after" any peace settlement. There are a number of serious threats to a sustainable peace that will not miraculously disappear with the signing of a peace agreement that need to be addressed.

2. To counter institutional hubris and mendacity and to ensure the Administration honestly advises Congress and the American people in a timely manner of significant events that pose a threat to our mission in Afghanistan, Congress should consider passing legislation requiring federal agencies to provide regular reports to Congress disclosing risks to major reconstruction projects and programs as they are identified. This requirement would be analogous to the reports publicly traded companies in the United States are required to file with the Securities Exchange Commission to keep investors informed about "material" events.[2]

3. In light of the security situation in Afghanistan, there will be a natural tendency for U.S. agencies to increase the use of on-budget assistance or international organizations and trust funds to accomplish reconstruction and development goals. SIGAR's experience with this approach raises serious concerns about fraud and waste. Congress should condition on-budget assistance on rigorous assessments of the Afghan ministries and international trust funds to ensure they have strong accountability measures and internal controls in place.

4. Oversight is mission critical in Afghanistan. Congress should require the Administration to provide adequate oversight, monitoring, and evaluation

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[2] Every publicly traded company in the United States is required to file annual and quarterly reports with the SEC about the company's operations, including a detailed disclosure of the risks the company faces (known as "10-K" and "10-Q" reports). Public companies are also required to file more current 8-K reports disclosing "material events" as they occur, *i.e.*, major events or developments that shareholders should know about.

capabilities. Without adequate staffing levels and the ability to physically inspect, monitor, and evaluate programs, Congress should reconsider the efficacy of continuing assistance in Afghanistan.

5. Congress should require U.S. government agencies to "rack and stack" their programs and projects on an annual basis by identifying their best- and worst-performing activities so that the Congress can more quickly identify whether and how to reallocate resources to projects that are proving successful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SIGAR's work is far from done. For all the lives and treasure the United States and its coalition partners have expended in Afghanistan, and for the Afghans who have suffered the most from decades of violence, the very least we can do is to learn from our successes and failures. SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program is our attempt to do that, and in my opinion, its work will be our agency's most important legacy.

As anyone who has served in government knows, when you undertake an effort such as this, you will inevitably gore someone's ox. The programs, policies, and strategies SIGAR has reviewed were all the result of decisions made by people who, for the most part, were doing the best they could. While our reports identify failures, missed opportunities, bad judgment, and the occasional success, the response to our reports within the U.S. government has generally been positive. It is to the credit of many of the government officials we have worked with—and, in some cases, criticized—that they see the value of SIGAR's work and are suggesting new topics for us to explore.

But more importantly, it has been the positive response of many members of Congress and the overwhelming support of the average American that has been most helpful to protect and encourage our efforts. For that, I thank them and also you for the opportunity to talk about our little agency. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.