SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 06: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 02/06/23

NAME/TITLE/JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWEE 06:
My name is [NAME]. I'm the deputy assistant inspector general for audits and inspections. What that means is that I assist the assistant inspector general for audits and evaluations in the field work, production, and publication of all of SIGAR's audits, inspections, and evaluations work. That means essentially anything that is related to gov-- generally accepted government accountability standards. All of that goes through my office and through me.

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Broadly, we do performance auditing, which is not the same thing as financial audits. We don't look at the amount of money being spent, if it was spent properly. We look at: was the program effective.

You know, whether a program costs $5 million or $50 million, it's our job to come in and assess – did it achieve what it was supposed to do, did it meet the benchmarks it was supposed to do. And later on, we then look at making an evaluative decision, you know, was it worth the amount of money that we spent on it.
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Doing performance auditing is not what I imagined it to be at all. You know, we're not following the dollars and cents to make sure that you spent-- you paid the credit card off in time, or you spent it on the right thing. We follow the dollars and cents in the sense of we're looking to see was the program effective, have we made a positive difference in the world.

Alternatively, if we're not making a positive difference in the world, we then make the recommendation to discontinue the effort and save that money, or redirect it into a way that can make a positive difference.

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CAREER HISTORY

When I was in school, I actually majored in finance and economics and public policy. And if you had told me I would be an auditor, I would not believe you.

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I came to work for SIGAR in April of 2012. In November of 2011 or so, one of my friends was actually in the Army in Afghanistan and he let me know that there was an interesting organization doing auditing work in Afghanistan. And he said maybe I should apply.

At the time, I was working for a Big Four accounting firm, creating transfer pricing reports, which is essentially an agreement with the IRS to pay a set tax rate // and that report sits on a desk or on a shelf for seven years until that tax liability is no longer statutorily applicable.
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Obviously, working in a private sector, I worked on a lot of-- I pushed paper, largely. I made reports and their whole-- their sole job was to sit on a cabinet, or in a filing cabinet for seven years until the company's tax liability was statutorily out of bounds.

Having done that for four years, I really wanted to do something where I was able to help people, where you're able to see the impact of your work.

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My mom's been on the school board as long as I can remember. And my dad was a volunteer firefighter until he got too old to do that. Both of them also work in health care, so there's a big thing about serving others and providing value to others and finding joy in that.

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Being able to go out and say, "I made that program better," or "I redirected those funds and now it's serving a higher and better purpose."

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I wanted to do something that was more meaningful and could have some real-world impacts, so I applied in November of 2011 to work for SIGAR. I came on board the first week of April 2012 for SIGAR as a program analyst. So over the last 11-plus years, I have worked my way from a program analyst, to a senior program analyst, to a senior audit manager, and now the deputy assistant inspector general.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

My first deployment to Afghanistan was in September of 2012. I went over with our business taxes team for about eight weeks at that point in time. It was my first time in Asia. It was not exactly what I expected.

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I think my first impression of Afghanistan was that it was like nowhere I'd ever been before.
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We would walk off the plane just like any other regular passenger. We would go through the immigration checks just like any regular passenger. We would wait for our luggage at the baggage carousel just like any other regular passenger.

Then we would walk out of the airport and into the airport parking lot to get into an up-armored vehicle. So a lot of that, to me, as my first time there, almost seemed like a "bizarro" world version of doing it in the U.S. All the steps are the same, but, you know, going down to the level of technology for how things are moving, or what's really going on. Everything was familiar but different.
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But landing there for the first time, I think I was open-minded to whatever I was going to experience. So I didn't really have any preconceived notions of going in. And in a lot of weird ways, it was the opp-- it wasn't what I expected, but it was also exactly what it was supposed to be.

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What I expected was a bit more of what you see in the movies. You know, you land, you're in a war zone, and things are dangerous, and, you know, there's explosions and things like that. None of that was my experience the first time in Afghanistan.

We ended up staying at what were known as "the villas" at the [U.S.] Embassy. So those are actually just outside sort of the inner wall of the Embassy. However, we were staying eight people to a room. The biggest issue for me, anyway, was eight people, one bathroom, no privacy, and everybody having different schedules.

Not only are you eight-and-a-half or nine-and-a-half hours ahead of time, everyone's very transient. So you were getting new roommates, you know, a couple times a week. They would be experiencing various forms of jetlag. So they would be up or asleep at different times.

So you really had almost no privacy. You had the one restroom, which is tough trying to coordinate eight people's schedules at a time. And then you had the lights on all the time. Because it was an eight-person room, the lights never shut off. So you had to be sure you had a good eye mask and hopefully some earplugs. But you still had to remember to set your alarm, otherwise you're not waking up in time. And you better catch it quick, because you don't want to wake everybody else in the room up at the same time.

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Over the last 11 years, the experience in Kabul had certainly changed from what it looked like in 2012 to what it looked like in my last trip there in February of 2020. You know, in some ways it got better. In other ways it got worse. It certainly got more restrictive.
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At certain points it seemed like I was going there every other week. But most of the time I would go for two to four weeks, two to six weeks at a time, depending on sort of what stage in both my career, my personal life, my professional life, as well as the needs of the agency and the needs of the audit. But at the peak I was going five times a year.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AUDITS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

When I was in Afghanistan, I ran the whole gamut of focusing on my own work, all the way up to, you know, managing everyone else who was over there on the audit side. I started at SIGAR as a program analyst. That is the-- the base person on an audit.

You know, if there is grunt work to be done, the program analyst does it. So I started only doing my own work papers, only doing my own interviews. I'd sit in the interview, I'd write up the interview. I wouldn't ask any questions in the interview. Then from there I worked up to, you know, asking questions, to leading the interviews, to designing the interviews, to obviously then leading my own audit teams and being in charge of folks. You know, having three, four, five, six people working for you over there.

You then not only have to look at the work you're doing and making sure you're staying on top of that, you also have to make sure that they're fully utilized and you're using their skills to the best of their abilities. And also making sure that they feel comfortable and safe.

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Shifting from private-sector to government auditing was very different. Not only were we looking at different things, we were also looking at it in a different context. Adding in the war zone, the contingency environment to that just stacks on another layer of difficulty.

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The biggest challenges are, number one, identifying individuals to talk to and who are willing to speak. One big part about going to the war zone is getting out there and kicking the tires. It's one thing to hear about a program in a conference room in Washington, D.C.

It's a whole 'nother thing to be out in the field in Afghanistan, sometimes literally in a field in Afghanistan, and observe the project in real life, talk to the folks on the ground who it's really impacting.

The hardest thing, like I said, is to find the right folks to talk to, find somebody who's qualified, who's knowledgeable, and most importantly willing to speak with you. Because it can be a personal risk for them to come and talk with us – despite the various whistleblower protection laws and things like that, both from a professional standpoint as well as from a personal security standpoint.

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Finding meetings, knowing who to talk to is always difficult. And getting to the meeting is difficult. Getting back from the meeting is difficult. And then that's all stacked on top of the various cultural differences between Americans and our Afghan counterparts, and making sure that you never did something to offend, or cause harm, or cause hurt, both during the meeting as well as in the reporting afterwards. Because the last thing we want to do is to report something or report it in a way that gets somebody hurt or makes them more vulnerable in-- while they perform their jobs.
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As far as I know, nothing we ever reported caused danger or harm to anyone. We were always very careful to, if it was deemed a security risk or we thought there may be, you know, a chance of it causing somebody harm, we would reduce the level of detail to a point where it would be impossible to identify the person or the organization reporting it.

That said, you know, reporting on things in a factual manner sometimes does bring negative consequences to people. Obviously, writing that a program should be shut down can bring negative consequences to that program and folks who rely on that program for their livelihoods.

A lot of folks, you know, were making good money, but they would have their professional lives tied up in these programs that we were then criticizing. So it was always possible that if you recommend a program get shut down – you know, $60, $70 million – that's lots of folks who may not have that income anymore, which can cause negative things. But at the same time, it's our job to protect the taxpayer investments.
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I think when I first got there, maybe even to this day, I think I've always been a little naïve to the risks. I always felt that there's a large staff of folks there who are paid to keep us safe. And if it comes down to a situation where we're not safe, it's their job to recognize that and make it safe for us.

Even to this day, I think in a lot of ways I've been naïve to the various risks. Especially as I saw the risk profile that the [U.S] Embassy would take transform over the years.

In 2012, we would go out in a single car, a single armored vehicle, with an Afghan driver, who may or may not speak English. So there would be communication difficulties there.

We would be responsible for setting up our own meetings with our Afghan government counterparts or the counterparts at the NGOs. So we would have to set those up. When we would arrive wherever the meeting was to take place, it would be our job to get ourselves out of the vehicle, into the building, find the right office.

Sometimes that would lead to us wandering around ministries, or other locations, trying to figure out who's the person we're meeting, where are they, making sure the meeting was on time. And then at the end, we would then have to use our Embassy-provided cellphones to call the car barn and have them send another vehicle back to get us.

There was nobody waiting for us whenever our meetings would end. So we would then have to end the meeting, call to get a ride, and then, in the meantime – Kabul traffic can cause up to 45 minutes or an hour delay sometime during rush hour – find a safe spot for the team to be.

You know, you didn't want to be out on the street standing there for 45 minutes to an hour waiting for the vehicle to come get you. So sometimes you would remain in the conference room where you were meeting. Sometimes you would talk to the folks and they'd give you a tour of the facility, some way to continue the time being productive. And a few times you just literally went and stood in the corner of the compound and, you know, tried to be unobtrusive.
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I certainly left it up to the security professionals to keep us safe. That said, you know, one thing they always said was, you know, "If you see something, say something." So in the vehicles it was always important to, you know, keep an eye out, to say, if you see something funny that, you know, that made your stomach turn a little bit, it was always very much communicated that you're supposed to say something. It's better to say something and have them already track it or know that it's there, than not say something and have it become an issue later on.

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You know, when you're the one leading the audit and the evaluation or the office, you're not just looking out for yourself, you know? I always would-- I always said, "I'm not going to send somebody to a meeting I wouldn't go to."

So I would just about always go to the meetings if I could. Sometimes obviously we'd have two or three meetings at a time, and you can't be in more than one place at once. But I always said I would never make somebody do something I wasn't willing to do.

And as I rose through the ranks at SIGAR, it became more and more important to really be willing to put myself into their shoes and make sure that they're comfortable with what I'm asking them to do. Because if, heaven forbid, if something did happen, you'd have to be able to, you know, understand why they were there, what was going on. And that they were comfortable with doing it. Otherwise, it'd be a-- and that burden got heavier over time.

As you're sending more people out to do things or the security situation in Afghanistan changed, you then become thinking more and more about the safety and security, not necessarily of yourself, but of the folks that you're responsible for.

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When I was over there, the main thing that kept me up at night was jetlag. But, on a more serious note, it's making sure that folks were comfortable and were going to be safe. There were lots of folks there whose sole job it was to make sure we were safe.

So I always had a lot of faith and comfort in their ability to do their jobs. But, you know, the night before your team leaves for a meeting and the night before you leave for a meeting, sometimes you do get a little nervous. Because you wonder, "Well, you know, what's going to happen?"

You know, every time leaving the gate you get a little thought in your head saying, "Well, you know, is this the last time we're leaving the gate?" Especially later on, as some of the security situation changed. And sometimes you'd get in a car and, you know, they're all up-armored vehicles, but sometimes you'd be in a beat-up-looking pick-up truck.

And they'd ask you, you know, to put a scarf or a hat on, so that way you're less visible. And when that happens, you-- all of a sudden you sort of get a feeling of saying, "Oh, this is serious." You know, if we're down to the point of trying to disguise passengers in a vehicle and use a vehicle that may not be traced, you know, to the Embassy, or may not look like all the other Land Cruisers at the Embassy, maybe there is something going on outside the walls that we really need to be careful about.

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There were a few instances where there were security issues either became apparent, or there was the high potential for a security issue. I remember one time in particular. I don't remember if it was 2017 or 2018.

But we had a meeting at the Government Ministry Information Commission. The G-MIC is what they called it. And then the very next day there was a large ambulance bomb that then blew up the G-MIC. So we were one day off of that one, or maybe it was a couple days.

But I remember that one very clearly saying, "Boy, we-- we were just there." And that kind of made it hit home. Another time, I was over there when the U.S. Embassy [Consulate] in Herāt got destroyed. We were actually supposed to fly to the Consulate in Herāt the day after it got destroyed.

We had our tickets and we had our meetings set up that we were supposed to go to. Obviously, with the building being destroyed, // the Consulate was evacuated back to the Embassy. So we were able to hold our meetings with the folks we were supposed to.

Folks were understandably distraught. The folks, you know, were-- tried to be as helpful as they could, but they were certainly going through something as well. Also in that time, our own employees, you know, they had a role in protecting the consulate afterwards.

So when they got evacuated back to the Embassy, we heard from lots of them about the different roles they played, you know, securing areas, searching for survivors. And then ultimately providing security and doing overwatch to make sure, you know, there weren't follow-on attacks or things like that.

And then lastly, in one less serious example-- we were-- I was sent up to look at a bridge. The U.S. was considering repainting the Friendship Bridge that connected Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. I was going up to the border anyway because I needed to talk about the collection of taxes and tariffs.

Since I was going up there anyway, it was suggested that maybe I go take a look at the bridge to see if it needs to be repainted. At the time, the Uzbek government had said they were going to repaint their half of the bridge.

The U.S. Department of Defense said, "Maybe we should use CERP* funds as a goodwill gesture and repaint the Afghan half of the bridge." I am not a structural engineer by trade. But I figured I could go up there, take some photos, get a look at the footings underneath the bridge, you know, then take those photos to a qualified expert who could-- who can really weigh in on saying, "Does this bridge need repair? Is it in good use?"
[* U.S. Department of Defense Commanders' Emergency Response Program]

We got up to the bridge and I'm preparing to walk on it, under it, around it. And I notice there is a small fence, a barbed-wire fence, only one or two strands of barbed wire on it. Looked pretty dilapidated. I said-- out of curiosity, I said, "Hey, why is this fence here?"

And they let me know that the fence separated us from the mine field. The Soviets had mined the base of the bridge when they left Afghanistan in the '80s. Nobody had come back to clear the mine field. When I asked, the answer was simply, "Well, they didn't leave a map."

So, unfortunately, I wasn't able to check the footings of the bridge – because, understandably, our folks wouldn't let me walk down there, nor did I want to walk down there to take some photos in an active mine field.
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I certainly don't think I ever let the concept of danger or my life being at risk enter my mental space. I think I was, and to this day continue to be, naïve to some of the risks that I was taking, that maybe we as a country were taking there.

But that said, there were lots of folks there whose job it was to keep me safe. And I feel like their professionalism very much kept us safe. And I never personally felt in danger. As far as I know, nobody ever wanted to hurt me, [NAME]. Folks potentially wanted to hurt [a] random American government employee.

But I think mentally being able to separate somebody trying to hurt me personally and somebody trying to hurt me – random, nameless, faceless U.S. government employee – provided a bit of a wall there that I've been able to sort of separate, you know, any thoughts of safety from what the danger could've been there.
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It's entirely possible that I'm willfully naïve. I'm an optimist by nature. So I strongly believe that what was supposed to work out would work out. And, you know, I'm still here today. So I think, you know, maybe my optimism was warranted. But I definitely think, you know, maybe it's a combination of

luck, the good skills of our professionals who kept us safe. As well as, you know, a little help from Providence upstairs.

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I think being able to do something that improves the programming that the U.S. offers to folks in need certainly makes any risk that we assume worthwhile. Being able to go out and provide recommendations and identify problems that improve the services we're delivering to Americans or-- or vulnerable populations overseas makes the risk worthwhile that it-- that it takes to get there.

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When I meet with an organization and they say they don't want to provide us the information, for whatever reason, we slowly work through their excuses one at a time. You know, we can't take off all of their excuses at once.

But if they say, you know, "It's-- the database is wrong." Or, "The information's not readily at hand," we can say, "Great. We'll alter our request a little bit, so that way you can provide us what you do have." If they then come back and say, you know, "Well, it's sensitive information. If it got released to the public, you know, it could cause harm to individuals."

We say, "Thank you very much. We share your concerns." And then we have a whole listing of different policies and procedures that we apply internally at SIGAR to make sure that personally damaging information doesn't come out. We don't want to put somebody's life at risk by including their name in a report, their organization in a report, their address in a report.

So we do have lots of ways of keeping that from the public eye, while still getting the information that we actually need. And then most of the time at the end of the day, sometimes they just have a misunderstanding of what our mandate it. They might believe that they're able to hide certain things from us, or something's outside of our remit.

But then, you know, pointing them back to the Inspector General Act or SIGAR's specific enabling legislation. We can then say: "Here are the facts. I understand that you have an opinion on, you know, where we should play, where our sandbox ends. Based off the IG Act, you don't tell us what the scope of our work is. We can have a discussion and a back-and-forth and come to a reasonable discussion-- reasonable decision. But it's not you telling us what we can look at."

You know, it's us saying, "These are what the laws say we can look at. And we're going to do our best to do that."

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Folks often would tell us – be it during an interview or a request for information, which is a more formal process where we ask for documents – say, "Hey, it's a war zone. This is why the overs[ight]-- I didn't go make that trip because, you know, it was unsafe to do so. Or the weather was bad."

So, we do hear lots of excuses – about either why information's unavailable or why certain oversight the agencies were supposed to do didn't happen. Or why the program didn't work out the right way. Oftentimes, you listen to it, and then you can go back and you can test the excuse against the facts on the ground.

Unfortunately for a lot of the agencies, you know, when they design their own oversight plans or when they design their programs, they're sup-- they're designing them to work in a war zone. If you're designing a program that can't work in a war zone, why are you trying to implement the program in a war zone?

And that becomes a part of the story of the audit or the recommendations right there, is saying, "Hey, you designed this for a peace-time operation. You're not in a peace-time environment. Why-- what was your decision process that approved this project to begin with?"

Other times, agencies have said, "Hey, you know, that paperwork's just not available. It's a war zone." And sometimes it's true. You know, back in 2014 when the U.S. wrapped up its ISAF mission and switched into the Resolute Support Mission, they closed a whole bunch of contracting offices in Afghanistan.

For whatever reason – I'd love to talk to the person who started this – all of their contracts were on paper, stored at the various contracting offices around Afghanistan. Not digitized – some was digitized, most of it wasn't. Like, if you wanted the entire contracting file, you'd have to go visit it, pull out, you know, cardboard boxes of files.

Eventually they did shift all of that paperwork to a U.S. Army base in Davenport, Iowa. So more than once, we'd have to go to Davenport, to then sort through, you know, warehouses of files to find what we're looking for. Why nobody digitized that stuff in 2012, 2013, 2014 is beyond me.

I'd love to chat with whoever-- whoever came up with that, and to really get to the bottom of it. Another example of when the war zone excuse actually did hold is USAID lost a whole lot of their contracting files when we evacuated the U.S. Embassy.

You know, they put it all on a hard drive, but the hard drive was corrupted. When that happens, you know, the contingency war zone environment is a valid excuse. A lot of times, though, it's they designed a program that wouldn't work in a war zone, and then that itself becomes a part of the audit or a part of the review of saying, "If you-- why would you ever design a program for a war zone that can't work in one?"

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BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE AUDITORS

The special training that we have really boils down to on-the-job training. Nobody comes into SIGAR, or I've never seen somebody come into SIGAR, or any federal IG, with the tool kit needed to be successful at the job. Almost 100% of it is learning on the job.

You come in as a curious person, as a detail-oriented person, and then you pick up everything you need to be successful along the way. Nobody-- we learn more and more about our programs in Afghanistan every day. Nobody came into the federal government – SIGAR in particular, Department of State, USAID, Department of Defense – nobody has the tool kit needed to be successful on day one. It is vital that you learn, each and every day, a little bit more about how to operate and how to conduct performance audits in a way that is timely and impactful.
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I think the number one thing that you need – to be able to audit effectively in a war zone – is curiosity. You have to be able to see something and say, "That doesn't make sense. Let me dig in more." You have to be able to take an answer somebody gives you – and dig in more.

You have to be able to compare things to folks said, and if they don't line up, dig in more. So having a natural curiosity will definitely prepare you for a successful career. You also need to be detail-oriented. You have to be oriented enough on the problem statement to understand when something doesn't make sense.

Or to be able to look at a sheet of paper, or an expense report or something like that, and say, "Well, this is different from what it used to be."

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Or sometimes in one of the more, again, not-- in a potentially humorous situation, you have to be able to look at large sums of money being spent and really be able to take this step back and say, "Does this make sense?" Being able to, from a common-sense perspective-- lots of times what makes sense in a boardroom in D.C. does not make sense out in the field in Kabul.

Other times, what makes sense in the boardroom in the Pentagon and what makes sense in the boardroom at USAID might independently make sense of each other. But when they're combined together, you get a program that's fully unworkable.

In one example of that, there was a pipeline connecting a natural gas field to Mazār-e Sharīf. The pipeline had been built in the Soviet times. It was about 90 kilometers long. At the time, the Department of Defense and USAID both had plans for that natural gas field.

The Department of Defense wanted to rebuild the pipeline so it could move more gas safely to Mazār-e Sharīf, where it was connected to a power plant and a fertilizer plant. USAID wanted to take that natural gas and turn it into electricity at the site of the natural gas field, under the thought that it's easier to move electrons than it is to move gasoline.

Unfortunately, until we came along, nobody had told them that they had opposite plans for the exact same natural gas field. So being able to look at a problem set in-- in a new way, and be able to take information from this case, USAID and the Department of Defense, and apply it together in a novel way and notice that there is a problem.

Sometimes the problem is that large and it smacks you in the face. And you don't understand how nobody saw it before. A lot of other times it's a lot more subtle and it requires some digging and the natural curiosity to either not take no for an answer, or not take the abbreviated answer you get the first time you ask the question as the whole truth.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL, AND WHAT COULD IT HAVE DONE BETTER OR DIFFERENTLY?

It's been said before, you know, we fought 20 one-year wars in Afghanistan. We also fought 20 one-year reconstruction programs. You know, folks would go to Kabul for a year, maybe two years at a time. Lots of times it was one year.

You would have a multi-week turnover process. But the new person always wants to put their stamp on something. And they might not remember that the project that you're advocating for now was tried a year before, three years before, and failed. And without sort of the institutional memory, or without an agency like SIGAR there to remind them, of saying, "Hey, we already tried this. It didn't work and here's why."

You end up fighting the same battle over and over and over again. And the regular churn of folks in and out of Kabul prevented any form of institutional memory that would remember the lessons and design a better project that could fit better, because everyone is really there – not everyone – lots of folks were there, you know, maybe to-- either because they were assigned there or, you know, to stamp their card so they could move on to a bigger or better assignment.

And while they're there, they're doing their best. But there might not be the institutional knowledge or the history to be able to really make the best decisions that the U.S. taxpayer and the Afghan people deserved.
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I think every agency is prone to that, to some extent. I do firmly believe, though, that, especially towards the end, SIGAR was one of the sources of institutional memory for the U.S. Embassy and the war effort in Afghanistan. We had multiple folks who spent two, three, four years, five years in Kabul in a row.

We have lots of folks who worked for SIGAR for 10, 11, or 12 years. And as you continue to build the expertise, just on the reconstruction of Afghanistan, you can become an authoritative source for what's been tried in the past, what's worked in the past, and what hasn't. But I definitely think that

keeping folks involved in the Afghan reconstruction for multiple years at a time was one of the best things SIGAR brought to the situation.

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I think the main thing – that I think we did it relatively well – is having qualified personnel on the ground. You know, there's no excuse for [not] kicking the tires. You know, sometimes you've just got to get out there and really see what's going on.

Having personnel on the ground in Kabul in various locations throughout Afghanistan is very useful. It helps you not only get to meetings faster, it helps you build local connections. You know, you know the contracting officer. You may know the program implementer, so you're able to go talk to them. It makes-- that is the number one. You also know the local context.

It all comes back to building up an expertise and the tool kit to be able to be successful. And having folks on the ground is definitely one of the most important things.

The other thing is really making sure that all parts of the agency work together. Like any government entity, we fall victim to certain silos, you know? I'm an auditor. I'm not in [the SIGAR] Lessons Learned [Program]. I'm not an investigator [in the SIGAR Investigations Directorate]. Sometimes we, like any agency, tend to keep information stove-piped, you know?

Everyone in Audits may know what's going on, but somebody over in Lessons Learned or in Special Projects could use that tidbit of information as well. Writ large, we're pretty good at sharing it. But there's always room for improvement. And I think that's definitely something that-- that we tell the agencies, is to be sure to share your information. You know, one-- the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing is no excuse. And I think that also applies to us.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

I think the main thing I've learned about oversight [is]: it's not "trust, but verify," it's "don't trust." Everything needs to be verified.

You know, it's-- I've said this for a few years at SIGAR: incompetence is a lot more common than evil.

Lots of times folks aren't stealing money. Or they're not trying to make a program fail. They're either not good at their job, or they're lazy and they're not doing what needs to be done.

But with-- I've almost never seen somebody make decisions out of malice. Obviously, our investigators who prosecute and arrest folks for theft and waste and things like that, they may see that more often.

But from an audit side, nine times out of 10, it's incompetence. They either don't want to do it, or they don't have the skill set to do it. But that could be just as damaging as someone willfully doing it.

You don't have to have malice in your heart to make a program go off the rails. Or you don't have to malice in your heart to make decisions that end up hurting other people, you know?

If you're providing emergency food assistance but you just don't care, so you buy a bunch of spoiled rice, or you think you can take a little bit off the top, you know, you're still hurting people at the end of the day.

Or if you're constructing a road and all of a sudden you say, "Well, you know, maybe we don't need to make the roadbed 11 inches deep. We'll only make it six inches deep." Well, all of a sudden after, you know, one winter and the road falls apart, folks aren't able to get to their jobs.

They're not able to get to the market. Or they're not able to travel to go see their families. So it's not necessarily evil that causes bad things. It's a lot of incompetence. And because of that, you really have to verify everything. Never take anything at face value, and keep digging.

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I think when doing oversight in a war zone, you're definitely going to experience times of helplessness, or hopelessness. Helplessness because schedules change all the time. Be it, you know, the meeting got canceled, or there's [a] security issue, or your flight home got canceled, or you're just sick of being there and you want to go home and see your family because you're missing a big life event.

So that's certainly something you're going to deal with. And it's important to obviously have mechanisms to get around that. The other side of hopelessness is, you know, after 13 years, 12 years of doing this, you've seen so much waste, fraud, and abuse that you do feel hopeless.

Sometimes you feel like, you know, it's an impossible mountain to climb. But, at those points you have to look back and see where were your successes. You know, if you got one bad guy off the street, that's one bad guy who's no longer hurting people.

If you got one program, you know, realigned so now it's better able to achieve the success, it's better able to feed folks, it's better able to de-mine an area. All of those are things that have, you know, concrete, tangible results that you can look back on – you know, when you were looking at the mountains of waste, fraud, or abuse, you can look back and think about your wins, you know?

Maybe what you did helped get an extra five acres of land de-mined. So all of a sudden, you know, folks are going be able to grow crops there, or build a house there, or go to school there, or walk through there, or any type of thing, that you have to remember the small wins when you see the helplessness and the hopelessness. And to really increase your own mental state, and also be able to come back and be more effective the next day.

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I think it's one of the best things you can do for your mental health, is to develop friendships with folks when you are in a war zone. It gives you-- when things get overwhelming, be it a security issue or just sometimes the helplessness and the hopelessness of the work that you're doing, it's important to have the escape valve to be able to go and complain to someone.

Or go get your mind off of it. Or go out to dinner with someone, just so you can feel like you were a regular person doing a regular job for a little bit of time. And I think that definitely helps your mental health. And, at the end of the day, it makes you better at your job, be it oversight or providing assistance, because you're able to come in with a more healthy mindset the next day, after you've had the opportunity to either vent or to bond with someone, and start developing lasting friendships.

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The most challenging experience on a deployment to Afghanistan is the separation from friends, family, and your life back home. Being gone for two, four, six, eight weeks at a time multiple times a year, sometimes with a short turnaround in between, makes it difficult to adjust from one way to another.

You miss birthdays. You miss parties. You miss events. On a more personal, you miss movie nights with your wife. You miss, you know, tucking your kids into bed. You miss the little things that, you know, make up the memories that you're going to have later on in life.

So it's not just the physical distance, it's also the time zone. It's either eight-and-a-half hours or nine-and-a-half hours different. Many times, I would be getting ready to go to work, you know, get out of the shower in the little containerized housing unit, and I would call my wife.

And, because she's getting ready to go to bed. And you can't even FaceTime because the internet wasn't good enough. So you can send a photo and wait a few minutes for it to go through. And you can text. You can make the phone call.

But you can't see them, live, you know, for weeks or months at the time. And that becomes the most difficult part. One rule towards the end my wife and I had was I wouldn't be gone for more than four weeks at a time. We didn't really care how many times in a year I would go, as long as it was only four weeks at a time, or less. That way you do have the time to come back and reconnect.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

I think that the collapse of the Afghan government and the withdrawal of the U.S. forces and the [U.S.] Embassy, and the rollback of a lot of the accomplishments the U.S. had made there, and the world had made there does put-- can put a bitter light on the work that we've done for the last, you know, as an agency, [for] 15 years.

That same time, I think it's important to remember that even if things were rolled back, and even if there are changes, we still made a lot of folks' lives better.

You know, you can look at maternal and-- the maternal health statistics, for example, or literacy rates. Or just looking at the infrastructure that's still there. And you can see that there is a lot of benefits and positive things that went on. And then also you can look at the way the war in Afghanistan changed America. I think a lot of folks in America are now much more aware of a region of the world they weren't necessarily sure of before.

Obviously, after the events of August 15th [2021], there was a huge evacuation effort. And I think you've seen lots of folks around the U.S. open up, you know, their wallets, their hearts, their minds, their homes to folks, and learning about new cultures, and learning about new people, and being able to demonstrate their generosity.

So I think all of those are positives and benefits. And I think it's important not to forget that – in the heartache and the loss that you may experience thinking about August 15th and what could've been different, and how things could've been done.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

I think I wish the public understood that we're there to call balls and strikes and to protect the taxpayer dollar. I think we do a pretty good job of letting the public know that. But we're not-- we as the agency are not the bad guy in the room.

It's our job to protect the taxpayer dollar, to improve the efficacy of the programs, to make sure that, you know, the tax dollars that that everyone's contributing to the federal government are being spent on worthwhile programs, and to stop folks, you know, from stealing. And I think it's very important to say-- to remind folks in saying, "Hey, we're here to help improve things. We're not here to shut down programs. And we're not here to be the bad guy. We're here to make things better."

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I think the biggest thing that we've accomplished in my 12 years at SIGAR has been to help shift the window of oversight. When I started – for a lot of projects in assistance the U.S. was doing, especially in Afghanistan, but, I also got the feeling, throughout the world – oversight was an add-on.

It was something you did to check the box. And now you see it becoming more ingrained into program planning from the beginning. The other thing that I think SIGAR has really pushed the window on is making sure that there's beneficiary-buy-in for projects.

That's something that you're starting to see in Ukraine that was certainly lacking in Afghanistan, as saying, "Hey, if we're going to be spending the money, we need to make sure that the folks we're giving this to want it, need it, can take care of it." And that is something that was missing from the beginning in Afghanistan. But I think SIGAR really pushed that window to make that a core concept in the systems now.

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If you look at programs and their efficacy and agency rules and regulations, there's so much more oversight now, written into the rule book, than there was back in 2009 when we started. It was always very annoying, that there's not a rule in the government rule book that says, "You have to do your job well."

Now, after years of SIGAR reports, we're getting closer to that. There are more ways to hold contracting officers, agreements officers responsible and say, "Hey, you should've known better, and next time please do better," is one of the major accomplishments that we've done.

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I think the best thing we've done is to build the institutional knowledge. We have a deep bench of folks who have worked in Afghanistan or in a war zone – be it Iraq and Afghanistan, or Syria – for years at a time. And they're able to bring their history and their knowledge to any problem, be it-- an inspection, an audit, a lessons learned report, and to really provide deep insights that other groups may not have.

The other thing we've done especially well is, as an agency, we have not taken "no" for an answer. Consistently, when a U.S. agency – be it [the U.S. Department of] State, Department of Defense, USAID, [Department of the] Treasury, or an international organization, to include the UN, the World Bank – have told us "No," you know, "Go play in your own sandbox. Get outta here." – we've consistently followed the letter of the law and said, "Based off our statutory authorities, we have the right to this information and the American people deserve to know the answer."

And I think being able to say-- push back and punch back as an independent organization and say, "We deserve this information. The American people deserve this information. We're not going away until you provide it to us."

Being independent and not answering to the head of the agency gives us that power to sort of be the thorn in the side of the powerful, which, you know, maybe an institutional IG wouldn't do. Because at the end of the day, obviously they are answering to the head of that agency.

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By pushing back against when agencies tell us "no" – which is something we do-- continue to do to this day. I have a meeting tomorrow, in fact, with the Department of State, to go over a place where

they told us no. Most of the time, it is a func-- in my opinion, it is a function of the ignorance of the other organization to what our mandate actually is, to what the statutory law actually says we're allowed to do.

Other times, I think maybe it's how they've treated their own internal IGs, and they're able to, say, push back on them to keep them out of certain areas. But those are-- by not taking "no" for an answer, we rely on our general counsel shop, and we rely on our mandate to say, "I appreciate your opinion. Here are the facts of the matter. If you won't give us the information" – eventually most of the time we would say we would go public.

Almost every time we were able to resolve the issues internally, you know, being able to come to a 90% solution.

You know, maybe we asked the question in a way where the org-- agency thought, "Boy, it's going to take forever to get this information." Or, "Hey, folks, the database just isn't run that way." In those cases, we're more than happy to work with the organization to alter our requests in a way that is administratively feasible, but still gets us the information we need.

On those handful of other times where the organization remains obstinate and does not want to give us the information, we have always been able to push through and get that information.

And most of the time then it seems like it's because they're embarrassed by what's going to come out. And I think that-- you know, saying, "Sunlight is the best disinfectant," is certainly the truth. The harder somebody fights to hide something, the more I want to see it. Because if it's not that the database isn't run that way, or it's administratively difficult to get to, what's the reason for hiding it?

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Agency-wise, U.S. government-wise, we did make a lot of lasting changes in Afghanistan that continue even now that, you know, we're no longer there and the Taliban's in charge. But things such as, you know, rural electrification and building roads and dams and things like that.

Those are improvements that last and help the common person, no matter who's in charge, you know? Enhancing irrigation systems helps the farmer pay their bills, no matter who's sitting in power in Kabul. So there is lots that the American taxpayer can still be proud of what we did in Afghanistan, even if our preferred government is no longer in power.

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I would say in a lot of ways public service is a gift. It allows you to go out and experience things you wouldn't otherwise experience, you know? Unless you work for the government, you're not going to a war zone. Maybe not everyone wants to do that, but it creates environments and experiences that enrich your life and make you a more interesting person. You know, the fabric then becomes that much more interesting of who you are and what you've done.

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I don't consider public service a burden. I ended up in public service through a series of choices. If I had the choices to do it all over again, would I have stayed at a Big Four accounting firm or would I have joined the government? I think I would've joined the government again.

I've seen places I never thought I'd see. I've talked to folks I never thought I would talk to. And I've done things I never thought I would've done otherwise. So I don't see it as a burden. There are definite increased risks and costs to being, you know, a public servant. But if I had to do it all over again, I would.

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