SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 10: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 06/20/23

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 10:
My name is [NAME], and I'm a senior audit manager here at SIGAR.

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JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWER:
What is that job?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I am responsible for four or five audits, at any given time, to make sure that we get the audit work done correctly and it can get out the door and published.
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I work with the team to develop the methodology – the questions we're going to ask, the objectives for the job. And then, I work with them to write the job, to write the report – in a way that matches SIGAR's requirements.
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I started June 15, 2015, and I'm still working today.

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CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
What did you major in in school? What did you study in school? How did you become a GAO--

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Before GAO,

INTERVIEWER:
--officer?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
[Before GAO,] I spent a year at the Culinary Institute of America and studied to be a chef, managed restaurants. It wasn't really my thing.
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When I graduated from college, I went to-- came to D.C. and worked on the Hill for a [U.S.] senator from Louisiana for two years. I did a lot of little things. I was a legislative aide. I answered mail. But it was very fulfilling to be able to make a difference in somebody's life.

The one I remember the most is a man at-- wrote and said, "How do I get pill bottles that I can open? I have arthritis." And we were able to help him do that with his local pharmacy. So, that's how I started in public service, actually, was working on the Hill.

I worked for a congressman while I was still in college, and then I worked for a senator, and I realized, "This is exactly what I want to do in life." My little detour to cooking school? I realized that was not for me. And so, I went back to school so I could work in the federal government.
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I went to graduate school at Saint Louis University. I have a master's degree in public administration. And there was a local GAO office right down the street from my-- from Saint Louis University. And that's how I got into GAO.*
[* U.S. Government Accountability Office, formerly known as the U.S. General Accounting Office]
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In 1984, I joined GAO, the Government Accountability Office. I spent 30 years at GAO, focused on work related to the Department of Defense. The last 10 years of my time at GAO, I did contingency operations. So, that took me to Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq-- and Af-- I spent a year in Afghanistan for GAO. And that's how I met so many folks from SIGAR. And when I retired from GAO, I realized I was bored, so I just reached out and asked if they had a place for me here, and they did.
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I have a lot of audit experience, and the agency clearly felt that they could use someone with this amount of experience: 30 years of just doing audit work.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
How much time did you spend in Afghanistan for this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Oh, I would say it's just probably a month, a month and a half. But I never-- I was-- I made multiple trips, but they were always pretty short.
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I was going with my audit teams to make sure we got the information that we needed to complete the audit.

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INTERVIEWER:
What were your impressions of Afghanistan when you first served there overseas for GAO, and then again, for this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, when I first went in 2006, the security situation, of course, was much better. We could still go places outside of the [U.S.] Embassy compound. We could walk places. When I got there in-- I went between 2006 and 2012, probably eight times. And I noticed, over the course of those eight times, that it got-- the security got more intense, more important.

So, when I went back for SIGAR, the security situation was the worst I've ever seen it. And then, they started helicoptering us from the [Kabul] airport to the Embassy, which is about a five-minute ride, but it-- the security situation was so bad that they couldn't even allow us in armored vehicles from the airport to the Embassy. Which made it more difficult to get out and visit the organizations we needed to visit. So, that became a much bigger effort, to get out to visit, either the [U.S.] Army, the [U.S.] Air Force, the Afghan military.

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CONDUCTING AUDITS OVERSIGHT IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
The security situation became that challenging. How challenging did that make the oversight work?
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INTERVIEWEE 10:
Oh, it makes the oversight work much more challenging, because you need to-- it's better if you can see people face-to-face to do the oversight, to actually get their reaction from your questions. I think when you do it face-to-face, you develop some sort of a rapport. They're more likely to be more open, less concerned. So, it makes a huge difference if you can't go and actually sit in the room with them.
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When I first went [to Afghanistan with SIGAR] in 2014, it wasn't nearly as bad as my last trip there. But, still, arranging the rides, you have to get the regional security officer's permission to go. People from the [U.S.] Army, for example, were limited. They couldn't come to the Embassy. So, it did make it more difficult. We did, unfortunately, more things over a VTC [video-teleconferencing connection] in Afghanistan, because that's the only way we could communicate in some cases.
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We did it through video conference, even though we're both in the same country. We're in the same community. We're across the street, in some cases, from each other, but we can't go over there, and they can't come to the [U.S.] Embassy to see us.
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A lot of things were done digitally, even though we were "spittin' distance," as they say.
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When I was in Bosnia, we still went out in armored vehicles with full body armor. But things weren't as kinetic. The same thing with Kosovo. Things had sort of quieted down, but the U.S. was still there, sort of as the monitors. In Iraq– I was in Iraq many times, and in Iraq, periodically, you'd be able to go places, but then, in other instances when the security threat was raised, you had to do more of the video-conferencing. So, it can be difficult, but it can be done.
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There are some people who think that because you can't get around, you can't do oversight. But, especially now, with the advent of more remote, and virtual, you can certainly do oversight. It's not as good if you're not there on the ground, but you can even look at operations.

You can go to places where they're training people, with a-- not even a great camera. You can go with your phone, and you still see things. So, it's not easy. It can be complicated. But it's-- [it] definitely can be done, and it needs to be done.

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The difference, for example, between Afghanistan and Iraq – the people in Iraq have a higher education level. That's-- the people in-- many of the people we met with in Afghanistan or who are doing work for us in Afghanistan were-- lacked a basic education.

They're not stupid, by any means, but they lack a basic education. And, also, in many cases, I don't think-- I don't think the U.S. government demanded enough of the Afghans we were helping.

So, we-- you know, as an example, we would buy tables from Afghanistan. They would make them. But they never were usable, and we would just say, "Oh, well, that's 'Afghan good.'" And, so, I think there was that lack of demand that they meet our requirements. I mean, we're paying a lot of money, and they should be meeting our requirements for chairs, tables.
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INTERVIEWER:
And when you say, "It's Afghan good," I took that to mean, "Well, it's good – for Afghanistan."

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Right. And that, you know, we'll live with it. But it's-- honestly, sometimes, the tables were only two feet tall. (LAUGHS) It's a little hard to work at a table-- and then, we would just buy a new one. But we would never have-- there would never be the consequence of, "Oh, no, we're not going to take that table. You're going to give us our money back."
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The Afghans that I worked with-- when I was doing helicopter work, we looked at training of the Afghan Air Force. And the Afghans don't have-- sort of a sense of responsib-- I don't want to say responsibility. But, you know, they wouldn't go to class. There was never any-- there was no [negative] outcome. There was no consequence of not doing what they were supp-- they promised us they would do.

And, so, that makes not only oversight difficult, but it makes success difficult. So, when it's not going to be successful, I think, as a person who does oversight, it's hard to say, "Oh, yeah, we should keep spending the money."
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The electrical system. I did a job looking at the electrical system. I'm sure our inspectors have mentioned that they would go to a power plant, and it would be-- it would not meet the safety requirements. And, so, again, we wasted money there – building power plants that don't work.

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I think the biggest challenge to doing oversight work for SIGAR was the lack of cooperation between SIGAR, and – whether it was the DoD [Department of Defense] elements, the State Department elements, or the USAID elements.

I will say that SIGAR had a terrible reputation in Afghanistan. And people were reluctant to work with us because they thought that some of our reports were unfair and not necessarily accurate. And, so, they were-- they were hesitant to be cooperative.

INTERVIEWER:
And, given the role that you've had here, how did you feel about that reputation? Was it deserved? Was it not deserved? How did it come to be? How did you combat it?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think that there are-- there were cases where it was deserved, where-- I've looked at reports since I've been here where they were definitely inaccurate. And, I do think that the difference between some organizations like GAO and SIGAR is that GAO doesn't push stuff out. They don't do a lot of press.

And I believe that SIGAR does more press, which, then, there's nothing wrong with that. But some people perceived it as-- I think one IG told me from the [U.S.] Army that it was "yellow journalism." I think you can combat this on a[n] individual, person-by-person basis. But you-- it takes effort to chip through that sort of attitude.

INTERVIEWER:
Were there times when that attitude really was an obstacle to you trying to get work out the door, or done the way you wanted it to be done?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Oh, yes, there were definitely times when that kind of attitude was an obstacle. When they won't provide you the information, or they provide it to you piecemeal, or they know what you want. You may not have asked the exact right words. And, so, they, "Oh, well, we don't know what you're talking about." So, yeah, that attitude does make a difference.

INTERVIEWER:

And, so, when you were aware that you were up against that attitude, and it was an obstacle, what would you do?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, I think, in my case, it was easier for me to sort of overcome that, because I could talk about my work at GAO, and how I had been-- I had done this a lot. I had standards. I had-- because I still carry the GAO standards with me. So, I think that was helpful. And, occasionally, I would run into people, even when I was with SIGAR, that I had worked with at GAO. And, so, in the [U.S.] military, they knew who I was. And, so, it was easier – because they recognized me and they knew my work.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: AUDITS: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
Can you share with me sort of your most compelling experiences that you had in doing that work for this agency?
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INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think the most important and compelling report-- well, there are two of them. // I did work on the Afghan Air Force and building the Afghan Air Force. And I think that the points we made in several of our reports on the Afghan Air Force actually were proven true after the U.S. withdrew.

The fact that the Afghans, although we gave them all these helicopters, couldn't sustain them. They couldn't repair them. So, in essence, they're just very expensive lawn ornaments right now.
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The other report I'm really proud of is a report we looked at – USAID's emergency food assistance program, where their goal is to save lives. And, considering the activities and the turmoil in Afghanist-- the security situation, USAID has successfully met their goals to keep 18 million people alive during the last few years.

INTERVIEWER:
So, you are pleased to be able to report that one particular piece of audit work is showing that U.S. government did something right?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I am very pleased to be able to report that U.S. government did something right. We at SIGAR don't often have positive reports. And while every-- certainly, the [United Nations'/UN's] World Food Programme, who are doing-- the implementing partners-- USAID could have done a few things better – on the whole, this is one of the most positive reports SIGAR will ever issue.

INTERVIEWER:

So, that brings me to an interesting question. This is for people who may not have a deep understanding of what auditing and oversight are about. Is it that it's not just to point out problems but also to report on things that are working well?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Yes. We audit for a number of reasons. We audit to identify problems. We audit to identify problems that we can help the agency solve. And we also audit to highlight success stories so, in the future, agencies can replicate those success stories. It's sort of a lessons learned kind of process.
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Auditing to find success is a very important part of the picture, because we, as a government, repeat the same issues. I know that what I saw in Bosnia, what I saw in Kosovo, what I saw in Iraq, and what I saw in Afghanistan were actually very similar issues. So, to be able to hand to someone a report that said, "Well, you know, I saw this in Afghanistan. This is what fixed. This is what worked. Why don't you try it," saves us all a lot of time and money.
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INTERVIEWER:
So, have there been times when you've said to yourself, "You know, this is really messed up," while doing oversight in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
There are a number of times that I have looked at programs in Afghanistan and realized they are really messed up and they were just a mistake. I think the one that comes to mind first is the Commander's Emergency Response Program, CERP – where we spent billions of dollars on small and large projects through Afghanistan to employ people, to make the country better.

And the [U.S.] Army, who ran the program, never actually could figure out how to judge whether it was worthwhile or not. And, so, billions of dollars. Just, was it worth it? We don't know. And they don't know.
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When I looked at that program, I knew it was a mess. And I knew that the only reason they were spending money was trying to buy the hearts and minds, and whether it accomplished anything or not was actually secondary. And, so, it was definitely a waste of money.

INTERVIEWER:
So, spending the money getting a project done was the goal, and not being-- they didn't have the ability to determine whether it made a difference or not?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
They didn't care. They didn't track those programs. You got a program done, and you-- a particular project done – and then you moved on. And whether or not the bridge fell apart in six months was no longer important, because you met your goal of getting this project up and running. I actually had people tell me that. It didn't matter what happened in six months.

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INTERVIEWER:
Considering everything, has there been a moment or moments when you said to yourself, "Oh, wow, this is really good, you know? What we just did is good, and it's going to make a difference"?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think there are always things that you can see in your reports that are good, that are going to make a difference. Now, whether or not the agencies – whether it's State, or USAID, or DoD – actually follow through is a different story. But there are always parts of the audit that say, "You know, we-- if people did this, it would improve." And that's all I can ask for as an auditor, is to have done my job and pointed out ways that people, government can make-- be better for people.
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It's always exciting to have your work actually accomplish something, to have someone say, "Wow, we're going to change because of your work." I don't see that as much at SIGAR, because I think the agencies aren't open to actually change. But it can happen. It does happen. It happened more for me at GAO than it does here.

INTERVIEWER:
So, not open to change because it's SIGAR, or because it's other things, around the specific categories of things that SIGAR is looking into?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think because of the categories. I think, also, part of the problem is that we're making recommendations to people who are leaving – in Afghanistan, for example – in six months. They don't really care anymore. So, you get the report. You read it. You put it on the shelf. And you say, "Oh, my per-- the person taking my place will take care of it."

But the person taking your place has his own things he has to deal with, so things don't get accomplished. If you're working in a situation where people are [there] – for example, at the Joint Staff* – for a longer term, you can see change there, because the same person-- you're going to go back and see the same person year after year to make sure to follow up.
[* U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Department of Defense]

But, when there's the constant rotation in Afghanistan or anywhere, you know, in a war zone – it's a little more difficult to actually see a result.

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We recently completed a job looking at USAID's process for terminating contracts, which is, without a doubt, one of the most boring topics there can be. But, actually, USAID recognized they had problems, and they rewrote their orders to acco-- to make sure that they had corrected the problems we highlighted.

Recently, another one we did-- we looked at health-- two major health care programs in Afghanistan, and we reported that the mission oversight policies weren't working. And, just last month, they sent

us a response to the report and said, “We're going to change the oversight policies to--" again, “address your concerns.”

So, those are two things that are not really exciting, but to an auditor, it's really exciting to actually see something be accomplished.

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INTERVIEWER:
Have there been moments when individuals working for some of these agencies have communicated to you that, "Well, you know, I may not like all the scrutiny. I may not like, you know, the bright lights all the time. But what you did, you did professionally"? Has that happened?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Oh, yes. I think that happens more frequently, that people who you're auditing actually appreciate the work. It's particularly helpful, I think, that, if you don't wait till you get the report out the door, but if there's an issue that needs to be addressed, right away, you let those people know that: "This is a problem we see. These are perhaps solutions. We're not going to wait to-- a year to let you know it's a problem. We're going to tell you right now."

And, generally, when you do that, they are very appreciative of knowing what their problems are. They do want to fix them. You know, sometimes, you get the impression-- people can get the impression that it's a real adversarial relationship.

But, actually, between a competent audit staff and the agency, you can accomplish a lot, even if it's just back-and-forth on the telephone. And that makes all the difference. So, yes, you often get people say, "Thank you. I hated it while you were doing it, but thank you."

INTERVIEWER:
And how does that make you feel when you get that?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Oh, it's great. Anytime you get an agency to say, "We agree with you," it's just, like, the most exciting part of your day. It's what you've worked for, in my case, for 37 years. So, to get them to do that is really exciting. It makes it all-- it makes everything else worthwhile: all the turmoil, all the difficulties in getting a report through review. It makes it all worthwhile, because you've accomplished something that you can point to.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you ever have an experience working in the field in Afghanistan with SIGAR that drove home for you the risks to life and limb that can come with going over there to do this kind of work?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I didn't have that experience with-- I didn't experience the risk factor with SIGAR. But when I was there with GAO, one of my friends went out on a mission and never came back. She was blown up.
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And, so, that sort of put life and limb in perspective. Other-- several other times, we went to interview people in Kandahar or Camp Leatherneck with the Marines. When it was attacked, they died. They died in the-- so, you-- when you know people who die, even just someone you might have interviewed two weeks ago, it does put the risk in perspective.

I think, also, as I spent more time in Afghanistan, the "duck-and-covers" – the security situation – became much more-- we did it a lot more. There were a lot more-- I actually spent three hours with [NAME:] Mr. Sopko* in a hallway, because we happened to be there when the duck-and-cover went off. We sat on the floor and chatted for three hours. So, yeah, you get used to it – but you never take it lightly.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
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When you think about people who have died in Afghanistan, for example, you always know that they volunteered to go. They knew what the risks were. While you never wish a colleague or a friend to die, we're all going to die sometime. They knew what they were getting into. They were willing to accept that same risk. They knew they might die.

And, so, I think, while it's terribly sad, you just need to keep it-- in my-- this is-- they were doing what they wanted to do. This was important work for them. And, so, it's always there, in the back of your mind, but it doesn't – and it can't be allowed to – paralyze you to do your own work.
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To not be paralyzed because someone has died is-- you have to be a person who recognizes the greater efforts that we are trying to undertake. And the importance of your work. And you have to be willing to die for the work you do, because you've, again, volunteered.

No one forced me to ever go to Afghanistan. I volunteered to do this, knowing the risks. And you just need to keep that in your mind. And if you can't keep it in your mind, then, you need to not go to Afghanistan. And you could still work here, without ever going to Afghanistan. But if you want to be forward-deployed, you need to keep it in your mind that this could happen to you. And just make sure that, every day, you say to the people you love, "I love you," because you might not have a chance to do that again.
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When I first told my family I was going to Afghanistan for a year, they thought I was crazy. But, as I pointed out, I could just as easily get killed by a bus in Washington, D.C. I-- I think you just need to realize that everyplace you go in life, you take a risk.

So, you-- you can't be afraid. You can't be stupid, but you can't be afraid.

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

INTERVIEWER:
What makes the best candidates for doing this kind of work? What qualities, what skill sets? You know, what does it take to be an effective oversight person – particularly, auditor – in an unstable zone, a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
To be a successful auditor, it doesn't matter where you are. You need one basic skill. You need to be a curious person – who wants to know everything. You need, of course, good critical-thinking skills, good writing skills. It's important to be able to be a good interviewer, to develop a rapport with a person.

But you're not going to be a successful auditor if you're not curious. My friends all laugh at me because whenever they make a statement, I'm always auditing that. "But what do you mean?" So, they finally have to say, "[NAME], stop auditing me." It's that curiosity that's so important.
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I do think that another important aspect of being a good auditor is the ability to interview people and to get along with people. Accountants are often very introverted. Auditors who do oversight can't be introverted. They need to be able to work with people, and talk with people, and get people to answer their questions. Then, the other skills, of course, are writing, because it doesn't matter how good you are with the information. You have to get it to the public.
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As you're conducting oversight work in Afghanistan, one of the things you have to remember is, particularly if you're only there for a short period of time, you have to get every question you need answered in that short period of time, because you may not be able to go back and get the answers that you need.

And then, trying to get those answers through email, SIPRNet [Secret Internet Protocol Router Network], it may not happen. So, that's the most important thing. So, you have to really plan your audit steps – so that you know that whatever you got was what you really needed. There may be other things you'd like to get, but you have to have them sort of in an order that, "These are the five most important things I need to get my report out the door."

And then, you have to be able to find the people to talk to. But tha-- I think the planning is the most-- it's the thing that's different than if you were working here in the building, because if you're just going to the Pentagon, you can go over all the time, and annoy them over there.

INTERVIEWER:
So, it's kind of the lack of a second shot at information.

INTERVIEWEE 10:
The lack of a second shot at information is the biggest difference between working in the war zone and working in Virginia.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

INTERVIEWER:
What are things that you think that this agency has done particularly well in terms of conducting oversight in this war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think SIGAR has done a good job of having people on the ground-- and enough people on the ground to actually be effective and get work done. I think the inspections work that we've done on construction in Afghanistan is particularly meaningful, because it did point out and it does point out a lot of the problems that we've stumbled across, that-- the problems with construction and then problems that people aren't necessarily using-- Afghans aren't using what we've asked them to use or what we've given them to use. I think we've pointed out that that's a poor planning issue. Again, something for the future.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
What are some things that you think that this agency could have done better, could have done at least differently?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, we talked about the use of people in Afghanistan to help the teams that are here. I think – and this may be controversial, but – there's no sense of urgency here when I keep changing the dates on my reports and no one seems to care.

The only thing we focus on is getting something for the quarter. That was not my experience in the past. In the past, there were definitely dates we had to meet, and we couldn't miss them. And while it's a different situation because we're not getting a lot of Congressional requests here, but there's just that idea that, "Oh, well, another month. You missed the quarter? O.K., nobody-- just get it in the next quarter." So, there's a lack of urgency.

I also think they could do the report review process better. I think that we end up with all sorts of different comments that have to be-- so, for example, I might say, "The sky is blue," and somebody's going to say, "It's green." Now, I have to work those together even though they're equally important people here at the agency.

So, dealing-- the report pro-- and everybody knows this, that – the report review process adds months to our actual work. If we had a quicker one, we would get more work out the door.

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At GAO, particularly in the defense capabilities and management team, most of our jobs were driven by Congressional mandates or Congressional requests, with a definitely-- definite due date. We had a year. We had nine months. We had to get something to Congress by then. It might not have been a complete report. It might have just been a draft. But we had to get something out to them. We don't have that urgency here, generally.

INTERVIEWER:
And why do you think-- I mean, having been in the other culture and, now, being in this one, why do you think that is? What do you see as a reason for that?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, I think, in many cases, GAO is a known quantity. They're a known organization that will meet your deadlines.

INTERVIEWER:
I see.

INTERVIEWEE 10:
And it's not just focused on one area. It's not just focused on Afghanistan. So, I think-- I mean, GAO has a long history of over a hundred years, so that helps to build a culture between-- and the relationship between the Hill, the Congress and the organization.
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INTERVIEWER:
Any other suggestions for things that could be done better or differently?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I would suggest a better training program for our new hires. Unlike other special inspector generals, like they had for Iraq, who hired a lot of very seasoned people to do their work, we hire a lot of new people who've never audited before in their lives. And then, we need to train them.

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I had a lot of experience managing teams from afar. At GAO, my teams were all out of D.C. They were in Atlanta, Los Angeles, Norfolk. While not as far, you're still doing the same kind of things. You're calling people on the phone. You're doing video conferences. You go out to see them, as we did.

But, for the most part, actually, at SIGAR, my teams were never in Afghanistan without me. // It would have been helpful to have some folks in Afghanistan who were sort of what we used to call the "hunter-gatherers."

We could send them out. "These are the list of things we need. Could you please go get them?" And, then, we could use them, and we wouldn't have to send an entire team over to Afghanistan to get the information that we needed. So, that's what I found to be not difficult, but it would have been more

convenient. I think it would have worked better for the organization if we had had some people in Afghanistan just dedicated to helping the teams here in D.C.

INTERVIEWER:
Was that something you had at other agencies when you were doing this kind of work?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Yes. When I was at GAO, and I led the office in Afghanistan for a year, there were only three of us at any given time. So, our work was designed to, "Here are all the jobs we're working on that have Afghanistan components. You're going to be gathering the information, conducting the interviews, and then sending it all back to headquarters and the--" where they would then [synthesize] it and work with us to make sure we all had the-- we're on the same page.
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I just think it was the mindset when they set up. And, then, it didn't change.

But I don't know that anybody ever made a suggestion that they have a few people – not the entire group in Afghanistan – but a few people set aside, to be hunter-gatherers. I know when I asked about doing that, it was said, "Oh, we don't work that way." And I never asked again.

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INTERVIEWER:
What do you wish that the public could understand better about this agency, if anything, and the work it does?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I would hope that the public would actually understand there is an agency looking at Afghanistan, and trying to get a handle on what went wrong. People-- when I mention that I work for SIGAR, they don't even know there is a SIGAR. And, so, I think a better understanding of the work we do and how important the work is.

We didn't get that out to the general public. And that's important, because I think knowing that there's an agency like SIGAR would increase people's sort of confidence that there's somebody looking, and trying to keep problems at bay, and trying to make sure that the government writ large is doing their job and doing it efficiently. So, I just think we need more publicity.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you wish the public could understand better about oversight in general?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think-- I would hope that people would understand that oversight is not just-- and auditing is not just money, that we're looking at other, bigger prob-- not bigger problems, but different problems to make the system work better, make the processes work better.

I think when you say you're an auditor, people immediately think I'm adding dollars and cents, which I can't do. So, I-- that's what I would hope: that people would begin to understand that we do-- that we do performance audits, not just financial audits.

AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
So, I've asked this question [in] every interview. August of 2021, things changed in Afghanistan. Given the amount of time you've spent working for this agency and with its focus on that country, when the U.S. withdrew and when the Taliban became the new government, how did that make you feel in light of all of the work that you have been doing at this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think-- in August 2021, when the Taliban took over, it was a moment of-- I think I was not surprised, but I was very disappointed. I was disappointed that all the good things we had tried to do for all those years were just up and-- just disappeared.

But I also realized that that didn't mean that we would stop working in Afghanistan. We would just be working, as a government and as SIGAR, in a different manner. But we still continue to spend billions of dollars in Afghanistan, which means somebody has to look at that. And, so, that's our job, SIGAR's job. We just do it differently now. So, it was disappointing, but it was also reaffirming that we were still needed.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line, overall, what have you learned about Afghanistan, given all of these experiences?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I have learned-- about Afghanistan, I have learned that you cannot try to impose the U.S. values on Afghanistan. We have different values. We spent a lot of time being very concerned about corruption. Corruption in Afghanistan is different than corruption here in the United States. That's one thing I've learned. I've also learned that--

INTERVIEWER:
Before you go on--

INTERVIEWEE 10:
O.K.

INTERVIEWER:
--what-- how is it different?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, corruption in the United States is viewed as even minor, little things. You know, you give the policeman $10 so you don't get a ticket. That's corruption here. In Afghanistan, that's just the way they do business.

They recognize that that's part of the cost of doing business – is greasing people's palms. We may not like it, but that's how they work. And we have to, in some respects, understand that. I'm not talking about huge corruption, but it's those little things where, "Yeah, I'm going to pay you off so I can get through here, the traffic here." So, that's where I think it's different. They're used to greasing people's palms. It's the way the country works.
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I also learned that many people think that the Afghans are stupid. The Afghans are not stupid. They're very smart. They're very clever. They just don't have the same educational levels that the United States has, for the most part.

But they have survived in Afghanistan for well over a thousand years, so they must know what they're doing. We just, as a country, need to learn to respect that and not try to fit them into the United States mold. And I also learned the Afghans are very friendly people.
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INTERVIEWER:
And did they-- did they facilitate your work when you were – and you and your auditors – when you were trying to get things, did you find that, in general, they were welcoming of the scrutiny?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, generally, SIGAR doesn't look at Afghans. We look at the U.S. programs to help Afghans or facilitate Afghan success. So-- but Afghans who worked at the Embassy, for example, were very helpful in getting us the information we needed. Many times, they had contacts within the [now former] Afghan government, the Afghan ministries, that we would never have been able to have. So, they were helpful, our Afghans – both those who worked for SIGAR, those who worked at the Embassy – were very, very helpful.
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INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line, what have you learned about oversight?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
What have I learned about oversight? Well, I'm going to tell you, I haven't learned anything that I haven't learned before. I think with almost 40 years of oversight experience, there's nothing I haven't already come up with-- come against.

There's nothing I haven't dealt with before, so there wasn't really anything new. Which I think is the advantage of, maybe, hiring people with a lot of experience. I think it's helpful to those in our organization at all levels who don't have the same level of experience. I think sometimes if people would just ask me a question, I could answer and resolve their problem, but they don't.

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INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line, what did you learn about the special inspector general model of doing oversight in an unstable zone, a war zone, a combat zone?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
I think using a special inspector general model is a very good idea. The people who work at SIGAR are focused on Afghanistan. They have the opportunity to learn everything they can about Afghanistan, which makes the auditing easier. If you're in an agency – for example USAID's IG [Inspector General] – you're spread all around the world.

You don't have the time or the people to focus on a country like Afghanistan, which needed a lot of oversight. So, the special inspector general model works really well, because that's-- we can concentrate on things, we have more bandwidth, we can do more work there – because we can devote enough resources to do the work while other agencies who are more widespread can't do that.

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INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line, what have you learned about the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction as an entity, as an agency? Did it do a good job?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Did SIGAR do a good job? I think they did. I think when you look at the amount of work we've done-- other agencies, whether it's USAID, the State Department IG, DoD IG, they could not do nearly an-- the amount of work that we've done. They don't have the coverage for it. So, I think it's a good model, and I think we've done good work.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line, what did you feel that you have gotten to accomplish during your time at this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, while I've been at SIGAR, I think I've accomplished-- I've learned more than I did previously, because I had never done work with the State Department or with USAID. I was strictly a DoD [Department of Defense] person. And, so, I think it helps-- I've learned more about those particular agencies and how they operate. They're both very different from the Department of Defense. And, so, that was educational and eye-opening for me.

INTERVIEWER:

Bottom line, what do you feel that you and your teams have gotten to accomplish for the American people, given your oversight work in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 10:
Well, I think my teams and I have accomplished a lot. We had significant savings in our helicopter job – of almost half a billion dollars – which was significant and continues to be significant. I think we've improved processes that will make agencies like USAID work better, and smoother. And, hopefully, more efficiently, which will result in long-term savings. So, I think those are some of the things that we've actually accomplished.

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I believe – it sounds corny – that any American has a responsibility to make their country better. This is-- working as an auditor, working on the Hill, that's how I fulfill that responsibility, a responsibility to public service. If you can do public service, you should do public service. And that's why I've been doing public service since 1984.

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You're doing a job that needs to be done, and I'm a big believer in serving the American people. That's my job. That's what I do best. And, so, this is my way to serve the American people.

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