SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 12: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 07/13/23

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 12:
My name's [NAME]. I'm the director of the Lessons Learned Program for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.
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I've been with SIGAR for 13 years. Before that, I was with SIGIR, the [Special] Inspector General for Iraq [Reconstruction], for two years.

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JOB DESCRIPTION

My job is to oversee the Lessons Learned Program, which is a little bit different than what you would find in other inspector general offices' oversight agencies. Typically, those agencies have an audit function, an inspection function, and then a law enforcement function that does investigations.
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We look at whole sectors rather than at projects and programs like a regular audit department would. So, my job is to lead teams that look at large-sector reports.
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We are a little bit of an internal think tank. We are-- we're researchers. And we analyze what went wrong.
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There's a lot of responsibility in it. I manage that by hiring some very smart people, and people who have opinions that are different than mine, people who think differently than me – and people who are absolutely dedicated to getting to the bottom and the truth of what happened in Afghanistan. And, I think they've done a pretty good job of doing that, and I'm very proud to have led that team.

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CAREER HISTORY

I didn't start off doing this kind of work. I started off as-- I mean, you go far enough back, I was a surfer kid who barely graduated from high school. But, anyway, I ended up doing a little bit better in

school. I graduated eventually from Harvard Divinity School, of all places, where I studied a range of topics, especially religious conflict. I got interested in religion and human rights.

And, after I graduated with a master's degree, I came down to Washington, D.C. and worked on the Hill. I got a job working for the House Committee on International Relations. I know now it's called the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Homeland Security.

And I think part of the reason I was following that trajectory was because, when I was in grad school, 9/11 had happened. And I think, like a lot of people at that time, they felt compelled to go do something. And so, I came down to D.C., worked on the Hill for a few years, and had talked to a former colleague of mine up on the Hill who had gone to Iraq and worked in Iraq.

And he said, "Hey, why-- you know, there's jobs in Iraq. If you're curious, you know, if you want to see what's going on over there, and not just report on it from the Hill, let me know." And so, I said, "O.K., let's go." And so, I went to Baghdad. I was mainly in Baghdad for about a year, 2006.
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I was working for a contractor, but I was contracted to the State Department and specifically the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office. So, I got to see reconstruction up close and personal. And it was-- my experience in Iraq was eye-opening and-- in terms of I saw a lot of well-intentioned people trying to do good work, but I also saw a lot of dysfunction.
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I always joke about my time there, because, in many ways, I-- just like a lot of my contemporaries out there, you know, we were young, and we weren't all that qualified to be doing the work we were doing. I know they were struggling at that time.
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This was before, I believe, the State Department was forcing people to go to these posts. So, they were trying to hire these contractors as body shops to just get people out there. So, I did some time out there. I'm glad I did. I got introduced to SIGIR while I was out there, because I was working in the office of the chief financial officer, and SIGIR was auditing. SIGIR was the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. So, it was sort of a precursor agency to SIGAR.
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That came about before SIGAR was created.
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The SIGIR auditors were coming to my shop to ask me questions. And, I ended up working with them to get to the bottom of some of the things they were looking for. And I found the process that they were doing very interesting.

They were the only ones who were asking some really hard questions. And so-- I didn't think much of it at the time. Afterwards, I left, I came back to Washington, and I worked as a contractor at the State Department for a while, where I worked on the Iraq Policy and Operations Group.

And then, a friend of mine went to work for SIGIR, and he called me and said, "Hey, would you like to come over and work for SIGIR?" And I thought, "You know, yeah, they did some great work out there. They're very honest, and they were-- they were telling a story."

And so, I said, "Sure." So, I went over and worked for SIGIR. And I was at SIGIR for two years. And I saw SIGIR was probably going to draw down. I got called by the director of [the] Research and Analysis [Directorate] from SIGAR, who invited me to come over and work on the Quarterly Reports*.
[* SIGAR submitted required Quarterly Reports to Congress from its creation in 2008 through its operational closure in mid-2025.]

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CAREER HISTORY: SIGAR

I only went to Afghanistan once for SIGAR. And I found that visit to be very similar to my experience in Iraq, although the difference // was that in Iraq, we had a lot of incoming coming in when I was there. So, there was-- it was a lot more-- there was more of a feeling of danger at the time.

When I went to Afghanistan, I didn't feel much. We got to the airport. We rode over to the [U.S.] Embassy in soft-skinned vehicles. And, basically, it was a pretty normal experience. You saw checkpoints along the way, but nothing major.

I know I had some other trips planned, but they never materialized. And once I became the director of Lessons Learned, a lot of times, it was the analysts that were going over there rather than me.
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I came over as an analyst. I mean, the technical title was "subject matter expert," and, I guess, at that point, I was starting to develop subject matter expertise in U.S. government reconstruction of other countries, especially in conflict areas.

But there was no [SIGAR] Lessons Learned Program when I came over. The only thing we had at that point that was even similar was the [SIGAR] Research and Analysis Directorate, which did the Quarterly Reports. So, we were doing research, and we were updating Congress on what was happening in Afghanistan, in terms of the reconstruction effort at that time.

In 2014, [NAME:] Mr. Sopko* created the Lessons Learned Program. And that was done-- I know he always talks about it was at the urging of a lot of generals and ambassadors who were saying, "Hey, these audits that you're doing are great, but what's the big picture? What's the 30,000-foot view?"
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

"And how do we take this great audit work that you've done, and turn it into something that is actually usable, that can change what we're doing, right now?"

And so-- I know Ambassador Crocker* and General Allen were both part of that conversation. // Ambassador Crocker was a former ambassador in Afghanistan, and General Allen was also a former commander on the ground in Afghanistan.**
[* Ryan Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2011-2012]
[** General John Allen, USMC (Ret.), former Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Afghanistan, and United States Forces-Afghanistan, 2011-2013]

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So, the IG* created it [SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program] in 2014.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
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Eventually, I became the deputy director for Research and Analysis, so I worked on the Quarterly Reports for many years. So, I got a lot of the institutional view of what Afghanistan reconstruction looked like.
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In 2017, I was asked to take over the Lessons Learned Program.

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I think that I had a reputation for hitting my deadlines, and for overseeing research that wasn't wrong, that we-- you know, we checked our-- we had a very disciplined approach to finding data and then fact-checking that data.

It was very rigorous. And I think that was the main reason, because of my ability to hit deadlines, or I would say my team's ability. It's not "my." There's no "my." But, my team's ability to hit deadlines.
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I was able to bring over some of the-- I think, some of the discipline from the Quarterly Report team and then bring that over to the Lessons Learned team in order to move things along.

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And we started putting out products very quickly. I think in the first two years, we put out, like, seven or eight products. And these are not small reports. These are 200-page reports, with a thousand end notes.

I mean, these are very broad. And some of those end notes are open-source research, government documents, or things where we've asked the agencies, "You know, can you give us this, give us that?" They include a lot of interviews that we've done with some very high-level people, but also the people who are the implementers on the ground, doing the work.

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Part of my job was to adapt the Lessons Learned Program, this unique research and analysis office, into something that aligned with the community of the Special Inspector General, so-- or, I'm sorry, the community of inspector generals. So, one of the things that if you're in the inspector general community, you fall under: CIGIE.
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CIGIE is the Council of [the] Inspectors General for Integrity and Efficiency. And so, they have certain standards that govern the way that offices of inspector general work. So, for instance, if you are doing audits, you would fall under "Yellow Book" or GAGAS standards.

If you're doing evaluations, which, in many ways, Lessons Learned fit more-- most closely – not exactly, but fairly closely – with the idea of evaluations. So, those are under these things called "Blue Book" standards. We implemented all those standards.

And basically, all those standards are: it's double-checking your facts. It's applying rigor to the process to make sure that you are accountable for what you are saying. So, we have taken this new con-- so, the challenge, in brief, is taking this new concept that had never been done before, or at least not to my knowledge, within an inspector general office, and then making it fit the model. And I think it does, actually, pretty well.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT "LESSONS LEARNED" ANALYSIS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

Lessons Learned looks at whole sectors. And, they look at that across many years, and they look at sectors that have the input of many different agencies. So, you know, for example, where an audit or-- an audit might look at a single program that USAID does, or a single project or program that DoD* does, we're going to look at a whole effort toward something.
[* U.S. Department of Defense]

So, a good example of that would be the Afghan Security Forces*, which was the largest amount of money that was spent in Afghanistan by the United States – so, building, training, equipping, and sustaining those forces.
[* Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)]

We weren't looking at it in terms of, "How did the program go that was getting airplanes over to their [Afghan] Air Force?" We weren't looking at, you know, "How are we building capacity or doing literacy training?" We were looking at the whole thing and how it came together.

So, one of the things that I think is really great about our program, and also great about SIGAR in general, is our ability to look at that 30,000-foot view at the whole thing and say, "O.K., we had a goal, and the broad goal was for us to be-- for the United States to leave Afghanistan with a sustainable, workable, successful government and security forces so we didn't have to stay there."

Looking at it through the 30,000-foot view, we saw cracks in it right away. We saw that we were not-- we were not hitting the benchmarks that we set out to hit. And so, because of that, we ended up with a failure.

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We've looked at corruption, the Afghan Security Forces, stabilization, gender equality. We've looked at private-sector development and the economy. We've looked at elections, counternarcotics, the monitoring and evaluation of contracting, policing. Just about every topic that you could think of, we've looked at it in some way.*
[* SIGAR Lessons Learned reports: https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Category/24949/]

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: LESSONS LEARNED: MEASURING OUTPUTS VS. OUTCOMES

The report that I think captured the entire challenge that we were facing in Afghanistan was the report called *The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly*. And that report was about M&E of contracting.*
[* https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4000132/the-risk-of-doing-the-wrong-thing-perfectly-monitoring-and-evaluation-of-recons/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-21-41-LL.pdf]
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"M&E" is monitoring and evaluation. And what that means-- it's a way to gauge the effectiveness of a project or a program. And so, oftentimes, it is something that is included in a plan for doing a project or program. The monitoring part is about collecting data about the program to see if it is working. The evaluation is analyzing that data to say, "O.K., is it having the effect that is intended?"
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M&E of contracting – even being a long-time SIGAR analyst, it didn't seem like a very exciting topic.

It's certainly one that's not going to, you know, wake up most viewers, especially compared to some of our other reports, like counternarcotics. However, M&E of contracting was ab-- got to the heart of where things were going poorly in Afghanistan.
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Think about it in this way. We would come up-- we'd have a theory of change. "We" – being the U.S. government – would have a theory of change about how things were going to-- how we're going to make things better in Afghanistan. And we'd create projects and programs around those things.

So, once you set those things up, then you start collecting data on those projects and programs to see if they're going well. Well, the problem is that some of the data we were looking at was about simple outputs – or inputs and outputs, you know? We were spending money, so, therefore, the program was working.

Well, maybe it wasn't. The question that the M&E report was doing-- or the one called *The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly*, was that it was looking at whether or not we were moving the needle, if you will, toward success – benchmarked against these high-level strategic goals that the United States had.

So, were we hitting those goals? In many cases, the answer was no. And just to give you an idea, for people who are watching this, the difference between an "output" and an "outcome": an "output"

would be something like, we're buying books for a school or we're building schools. Those are outputs. You know, we have a building. It's there. We have books. It's there.

The "outcome" is, "Are people becoming more literate? You know, are education-- are graduation rates increasing? And is this, over time, having some sort of effect on the economy?" Those are outcomes.

And we rarely measured outcomes. We often measured outputs. And they're easier to measure, you know? "We built a school. You know, we built this. We built that. We bought this. We bought that." They're easier to measure, so why not?
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The outcome was oftentimes too hard to measure, you know? Or I think sometimes, the outcome never looked good. It never was the outcome.

And so, you know, you have a program, and you're asked to oversee this program or implement this program. And you know the outcome is not looking good, but you're still continuing to do it, because that's your job. Your job is to do this thing that you've been put in charge of. So, the big lessons from that report was, you have to tie things back to the highest-level goals. And if you're not highe-- tying things back to the highest-level goals, well, then you're-- you are literally losing the forest for the trees.

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One of the things that the report we did found was that the agencies, in fact, do have some rather robust M&E policies in place. And so, if they were actually following their own policies, there would be-- there may have been a better outcome. And, in many cases, we found that they weren't doing that.

But I think the broader takeaway of that report was that you can, in essence, do a project or program absolutely perfectly. You can check every box that is on an M&E list and say, "O.K., this thing delivered all the things it delivered. It spent all the money it was meant to spend. And yet, it didn't do what it was intended to do. It didn't move the needle towards some high-level U.S. strategic goal." And that's-- that's why there's so much value-- I find so much value in looking at M&E.

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Outputs can be guaranteed. // You know, Afghan Security Forces. You know, the output is, "We delivered the hu-- the weapons. We delivered the rifles. We delivered the military vehicles. We delivered"-- you know, whatever these weapon systems were, we delivered that stuff. "Output, check the box, we're done."

One thing I always-- that always struck me – and this goes back to my earlier days as an analyst – was I used to look at all the systems for measuring the performance of the Afghan National Security Forces.* And those systems went through several different iterations.

[* Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)]

One was the "Capability Milestone." Another was the "Commander's Unit Assessment Tool." But they were always changing these assessment systems along the way.

But one thing that always was kind of the same between these systems was this matrix where you would have these areas that were set for improvement. So, think about it like this logistics, command-and-control. You take an Afghan unit of the Afghan army or Afghan police, and then you have a bunch of categories, and you're trying to improve those categories.

So, one category might be logistics. One might be command-and-control. You know, one might be sustainability. You're looking at those, and then you're saying, "O.K., you, commander, American commander, you're going out there" – colonel, lieutenant colonel, what-- or whatnot.

You know, "You're going to be working with this Afghan unit." Across the board for these categories – you know, logistics, and command-and-control, and sustainability – they're all red. You have one year during your deployment. You're going to make them yellow by the middle of the year. And before you leave, you're going to make 'em green."

Well, human nature, they were making them green. You know, that-- so, you would see this kind of, you know, almost a shark-tooth pattern over time, where you would have an Afghan unit, and you'd look at the various dimensions we're measuring.

They'd be going up, up, up, up, up, looking great. And then, the new person would come in. The new person would come in and say, "What are they talking about? These aren't green. They're not green at all."

We saw that with SIGAR's audit reports where SIGAR was looking at some of the highest-rated Afghan units, and then going back and checking on them a year later, and they're finding that the highest-rated ones, which were – at that time – called "independent," they'd go back and check on them a year later, and they'd find that they weren't independent.

And the reason why was because when they were-- once they were deemed independent early on, they said, "O.K., we can focus-- they're good. They're done. We can focus our resources somewhere else. So, let's pull these people, these advisers, out. And let's move them and focus on this other group that's just a mess. So, we're going to go help them out."

Well, the problem was-- is that as soon as you pulled them out, the Afghan unit that was independent started to regress. I don't know why. I mean, the-- there's ideas for why that happened. But, at the end of the day, they found that they had to continue to do this, to the point where the highest rating category stopped being independent and it started being "independent with advisors," which we asked, at that time, "Hey, doesn't this mean that you don't have confidence they could be independent?" And I remember someone at DoD saying, "No, it just means that they're independent, but they have advisors with them."

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Over the course of my career, // looking at the answers that we would get to [SIGAR] data calls-- every quarter, we would ask a bunch of questions to the people who were in Afghanistan. We'd get answers back, and you would also see the quality of those answers change, on a yearly basis. They would start off bad. They'd get a little bit better mid-year. And by the end of the year, they were pretty good. And then, they would fall back again. So, one of the benefits we have of SIGAR is being the holders of the institutional knowledge.
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The reason, I think-- you know, and I'm pretty sure this is the reason that you saw the responses over a year to questions about the reconstruction mission get better, and better, and better – was because you had people who were there, and as they spent time in-country, they understood it more. They were able to understand what was going on there.

But then, they would leave, and their replacement would come in. And, apparently, there wasn't a very good knowledge transfer going on. So, oftentimes, we would get responses after one person had left and another person had rolled in, we'd get responses to their ques-- to our questions, and we'd have to go back to them and say, "I'm sorry. That can't possibly be right, and the reason we know that is this."

And we'd send them information. So, at some point, the knowledge flow started going the wrong way to where instead of us asking for knowledge from the [U.S.] military, and State, USAID – mainly the military, in this case – we were informing them of what was going on.

I even had one person at one time-- we had looked at the DoD budget, and we saw that they were budgeting for a bunch of new types of aircraft that were going to go out to the Afghan Air Force. And we asked a question about that, that went out to the head of the command that was overlooking the Afghan Air Force.

For some reason, this person thought that we were-- that we, SIGAR, were sending those planes and equipment to him. And he said, "What are you doing? We don't need this stuff. We don't want this stuff. Like, my folks aren't trained on this equipment."

We said, "No, no, no, no. We're not ask-- we're not telling you. This came from DoD. This is part of their budget plan."

And, I don't remember hearing back on that, but it was just an interesting disconnect. And it did seem like, that there were people in the field who understood what was needed in Afghanistan, but somehow that was not getting up the chain of command.

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Doing Lessons Learned has been very challenging, because you are pulling information from so many different places, and you're on a tight timeline.
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It's challenging in that you've got to get the scope right. You've got to understand the topic.

I think before the collapse of Kabul, before the collapse of the Afghan government and the Afghan Security Forces, we were trying to do Lessons Learned reports in a way that offered recommendations. Basically, we knew that it was a living effort. We were doing reconstruction right now.

And so, when we were doing our Lessons Learned, we weren't just trying to capture it for the future, so historians could look at it, but we were also really racking our brains about what we could possibly say that would help implementers in the field change the way they do their work, in a way to where they are more successful. We were trying to help them be more successful.

This is why when we do our work, we also send a copy of the report early on to the agencies, because we need their feedback, and we want their feedback. If the agencies come back and they say, "Hey, you guys don't get this at all," well, then, the report's not useful.

We want them to come back and say, "Yeah, you get it. O.K., thanks. This is helpful." We also didn't want to box them in too much, so if you look at a recommendation from an audit or a inspection, it's very tailored, and it's very specific.

Lessons Learned recommendations were far more broad, because we wanted to make sure the agencies had the flexibility to adapt them, because all these things were adaptable.
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Many times, we've had leaders and officials from the agencies, who have looked at our work say, you know, "Yeah, you-- this was great. This was great. Thank you for this. We like it." I know, for some of our work, they've taken recommendations and actually rolled them into some of their strategy documents that they're working on.

We've also had people who didn't like our work, and didn't agree with it, and blasted it. And we have to take that very, very seriously. It doesn't mean we accept it, because I think in some cases, there was-- you know, people have-- are motivated, as part of their jobs – and I'm not saying this is good or bad – but motivated as part of their jobs to present the program that their office is doing or their agency is doing in a very positive light.

So, when someone comes around and criticizes it, they're saying, "Hey, you know, no. I'm going to come up-- I'm going to use my brain to figure out how to push back against what you're saying right now." And that happened.

And we would go back and say, "O.K., let's take a very serious look at this, because if they're right, we don't want to be biased. We don't want to have our own confirmation bias going on internally to

where we're in some sort of a bubble. We want the criticism." So, you know, we-- sometimes we would take it, sometimes we wouldn't.
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To set up a lessons learned program that is looking at a massive effort done by multiple agencies over many years, where billions of dollars are being spent, in a contingency environment, a conflict environment, and doing it in a way that is objective, it's fair, and it's valid –
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– one of the ways to do it is to do the opposite of conventional wisdom. And that is to actually have a lot of cooks in the kitchen. So, we start off in a Lessons Learned project, you know, we come up with some ideas.

Usually, that can come from two places. One, our analysts can look at things and say, "You know what? We're-- we think that this is the area we need to go to next, to help things." But, oftentimes, the IG would go overseas. He'd talk to people. He'd see things. He would hear things. And he'd come back and say, "You know, I think this area needs some attention."
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

We'd analyze it, we'd look at it, and we'd come up with a plan. "O.K., you know, what do we need to do to look at this area and start to examine it?"

The first thing you do is a literature review. And that is you go around, and you look at-- look for as much out there that's already been done: books, articles, scholarly articles. You look at the reports, all the audit reports that have already been done – not just by our agency but other agencies. And then, you start to-- you come up with a plan for research. So, you have all the open-source research, and then you also start doing interviews.

And when you're doing the interviews, it's very important to find a group, a large group of people who represent different interests. And it's also very good to be aware of your bias. And by that, I mean, // when you're going in to look at a problem, oftentimes, you'll already have in your mind an idea of where your research will lead you. But you have to be very, very aware of that bias to make sure that it doesn't necessarily lead you to where you think it's going to take you.
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You know, it's important to be very, very aware of any initial bias you might have. And that is-- you-- because we are analysts of Afghanistan-- we may have come to conclusions on other topics. So, when we're coming to a new topic, we need to be very much aware that that topic may not be the same as the one that we've drawn a conclusion on in the past.

One way to do that is through the interview process and making sure we interview people who have different opinions about a topic. But also within Lessons Learned, I would say we've really tried-- I have tried to not make the Lessons Learned Program an organization that has an institutional take on a topic.

We continue to have debates in the office and argue them out – and it's very enjoyable, actually. We have some very respectful debates about whether or not these efforts the U.S. government have done-- I mean, people have worked on this for years, so they feel passionately about it.

And some people in our office say, you know, "Hey, maybe the answer is we shouldn't have done this to begin with." There's other people saying, "Well, you know, some of this was worthwhile. We needed to do it." And we work together with those opinions and examining ourselves over and over again as we put together these reports.
And then, after we've kind of come to some sort of consensus internally, then the report goes out, and it goes out externally. Some of it-- sometimes, it goes to experts; we send it out for peer review. And sometimes, we send it out to-- well, we usually send it out to the agencies for their review. And, we get some of their feedback. So-- I think that's how you do it.
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You want a lot of cooks in the kitchen because you want a lot of different views of the work. // Because you don't want the work-- you don't want to be missing anything. // There may be some view that someone has that you haven't thought of. And maybe someone in Lessons Learned doesn't know what that is.

You know, a view can come from someone who says, "You know, I was on the ground in a place, and I saw something else," you know? Or, maybe it's from the Inspector General* himself. I mean, he oftenti-- he reads every one of our reports, and so he offers recommendations on them, as well – as do most of the senior staff.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

We have-- our Deputy Inspector General* spent, you know, 40-some-odd years with GAO. So, we have a lot of people who are looking at things through different lenses: former prosecutor, former long-time auditor, career GAO person. You have people that were interviewing in the fields who were actually doing the work, generals, ambassadors.**
[* Gene Aloise, former Deputy Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction 2012-2025; Acting Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction 2025-]
[** U.S. Government Accountability Office, formerly known as the U.S. General Accounting Office]

All these people have these different lenses that they're looking at the work through, and you want their input. You know, we're a small group. We-- I think we're pretty good. I think we usually get it pretty right because of what we're focusing on. But we're not going to hit everything.

And so, the more people you have looking at it, the better. That's not to say that when you're writing it, you have a hundred writers. You have a small group of writers, but then, once you get a draft, you want to share that broadly, and you want to look at what those recommendations are, and edits.

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In terms of finding the right people for a team, I always joke that I'm just intelligent enough to recognize high intelligence in other people.

And so, I always look for people who are smarter than me, and work hard, and are very dedicated to the job. And so, I would say that that's the key: finding people who are passionate about the work and are really go-getters. That's who we've hired, and that's who's been part of the team.

The original thought on the team, I think, was to hire the experts that were already experts. And there's benefit to that. I mean, they're coming in with substantial amount of knowledge. But they also have their biases, too, you know?

So, we weren't focusing so much on bringi-- we want the input of experts. But the team were actually people who are professional researchers, I would say. So, that's what we were looking at: people who are going to-- are good at collecting large amounts of data and then compiling that data for the important pieces of it, and also people who are very good interviewers. So, our team, I think, has become very good at interviewing.

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BEST OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE LESSONS LEARNED RESEARCH ANALYST CANDIDATES

To be an effective Lessons Learned analyst, or writer, I think-- I think you have to be curious. I think you have to have some passion for the topic – you know, whether that is U.S. foreign policy, U.S. development, U.S. security-sector assistance.
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To be good at the job of a Lessons Learned analyst, I think you have to be, one-- someone who likes to read a lot, and just absorbs material, reads books and also reads-- stays very current on what's going on, on your topic.

In addition, I think you have to have a very high level of integrity – because you want to make sure that you are fact-checking yourself over, and over, and over again. I think you have to be open-minded. You know, I think you have to realize that you may have opinions, but they may not be right. And that's hard for people to-- that's a hard thing for people to do, you know? And I think it's harder for people who's been experts for, you know, 30 years, than it is for an analyst who, you know, has been around for five years.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

I think SIGAR has done a great job at innovating to find new ways to present information and get it to the American people, and get it to Congress. When I worked on the Hill, I used to see inspector general reports fill the inbox of email, and, actually, paper reports. Back in those days, they'd actually be hand-delivered to your office.

And, you know, a lot of times, they weren't read, you know? Maybe a staffer would read them, maybe they wouldn't, but they may not end in something. So, one thing I think that the IG – Inspector

General [NAME:] Sopko* – that he's done that it is really important is that he took what we found – audits, Quarterly Reports, Lessons Learned reports, he took that work – where we found problems, we found challenges, we found areas that could be improved – and he made a big noise about it.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And I think some people criticize him for that. But, at the end of the day, it made a huge difference. He's probably one of the best-known IGs, for better or worse, in Washington, D.C.

But one thing I will tell you is that there's a lot of people who know about the problems in Afghanistan. They knew about them before they even-- before Afghanistan ended in failure. And I think a lot of that is because of [NAME:] John Sopko, because he went up there and said, "You know, I'm going to tell everyone on the Hill. I'm going to reach out to the media. And I'm going to make sure that what we found is getting heard." But he did that. And I'm happy he did.

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One of the things I'm most proud about [with SIGAR's] Lessons Learned [Program] was the fact that we, as-- we're a U.S. government agency, in an office within a U.S. government agency, that was not a cheerleader for the whole effort.

We weren't-- you know, we weren't looking to undermine it. We were just trying to tell the truth as best we could about it, and examine all facets of it. I mean, we did a lot of internal debating about how we were looking at these projects and programs.

We reached out to the broadest range of people we could find. So, we spoke to very high-level people. Generals and ambassadors, we talked to. People who were on the ground as contractors. We talked to people, Afghans themselves, who were part of Afghan civil society, to find out what their take was on what the U.S. was doing. And it told an interesting story, but not necessarily a good story.
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When I look at the-- at just the number of reports we've done, and the size of those reports. So, the number is not huge. It's 12. But then, you look at the scope of those reports, and it's pretty massive. I think, you know, we're talking, you know, thousands of end notes each, [and] you know, hundreds-- you know, it might be crossing over into [a] thousand, I'm not sure – but hundreds of-- at least hundreds of interviews.

And then, the amount of documentation we've looked at is just-- it's just massive. So, behind every report, the amount of the work papers, you know, that it takes to get reports out is also pretty sizable.

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I think early on, I started to feel like we were getting a good job, because we weren't just-- we were putting our reports out there, and then we were getting a lot of positive feedback from Congress and from the media on our work.

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It was on all the major news channels, but then you'd also see it on, like, Comedy Central, you know, on some show like that.

So, the IG's* idea about having a program that translated an inspector general's work into something that was digestible, and usable, and focused – and that people could read – actually materialized.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And when I started to see all that positive feedback coming in, and, really, some respected experts saying, "Hey, this was great." "Great job." You know, I-- we started to feel pretty good about that. And it's not just the experts, either.

A lot of the comments have come from people who are out there in the field, which, in many ways, is a lot better validation than even the experts, because, you know, there's a lot of experts out there. And, you know, that comes with its own problems of motivation, as well, you know?

People-- you know, you want to see things keep going if you're the expert in it, because if it goes away, then what the heck are you going to be the expert about anymore anyway? So, people who are in the military who said, "Yeah, that's exactly what we saw. You know, we saw these problems."

The people who were coming back from USAID and State and saying, "Yep, yep, yep, that's right. That's right." That's where I started to feel like a success. And I think the other thing that makes me feel very proud, for working for SIGAR, is the idea that we were the only government agency that was really saying, "Hey, this isn't working. There are problems here, and we may not be able to overcome those problems."

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

I can't really think of anything that we could have done that was too different. I have a lament: that I wish we'd been able to form better relationships with the agencies, and more collaborative. Some of that, I think, fell on us. And I think a lot of it fell on them, too.

I am biased in that, you know, I'm a SIGAR person. But, at the same time, I wish we had a better relationship. I certainly think, at an individual level, there were people in the agencies that I formed relationships with, who understood very much what we were doing, and believed in it.

And then, I think there was a institutional-level issue. And so, what's funny about it is that the pushback on SIGAR-- wasn't-- didn't seem to be-- didn't seem to change, depending on which political party was in office at the time. It has gone Republican, Democrat, Republican, Democrat, and yet, the relationships stayed just about the same, which I found very-- very interesting.

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This agency, SIGAR, has always bristled when data is not forthcoming. And you have heard the IG* be very vocal when there's information out there that's not being made public, and there doesn't seem to be a good reason for that. So, I think that one of the obstacles has been the lack of forthrightness.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And I don't think this is unique to the Afghanistan mission or anything like that. I think, you know, there is a "CYA" aspect to what people do in government. I've been-- I was a contractor at State. I know. I saw it. I've been action officer in-country.

So, you know, it-- I've see-- I've been on that side of it. You put markings on documents to make sure they don't get out. And I don't think you do that, necessarily, for nefarious reasons, but you do it to cover yourself, to make sure you're not going to get in trouble for something that went out the door.

I think a lot of that has happened, and I think that the-- one of the big obstacles to the relationship with the agencies was their culture of keeping things close, you know, and being very careful with releasing information.

And some of it, I can understand. But I think, in some cases, it went-- it was-- there wasn't an articulable reason for why information wasn't out there. And I don't think that SIGAR is an agency that had much patience for that.

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One thing I do remember about my visit to Afghanistan was a meeting I had which-- with a bunch of NTMA – that's the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan. [And] CSTC-A – it's the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan. They were kind of a co-located command.

I met with a bunch of colonels and officers at that Command, and talked to them a little bit about the work we were doing, looking at the Afghan Security Forces* and what we were trying to find out. And we were asking about the training. We were asking about the tools they were using to measure the performance of the ANDSF.*
[* Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)]

And I remember, afterwards, a colonel came up to me, and he said, "Hey, that was a great presentation. You know, it was really good information. Glad you're doing the work you're doing. But you got one thing wrong." And I said, "What's that?"

He said, "The Afghan Security Forces Fund [ASFF] that you talked about is not-- is not American money. That's actually Afghan money, so it's not." And I had spent the last couple years just looking at nothing but the ASFF, and I knew for sure it was a U.S.-appropriated amount of money.

It was U.S. taxpayer money, that was going to not just, you know, buy equipment for the Afghans. We were paying their salaries completely. And I told him as much. I said, "No, you know, I'm sorry, Colonel. You're wrong. This is American money."

And he said, "No." And finally, I think, it was a major or something came up and said, "Oh, actually, sir, you know, he-- I think the SIGAR guy may be right." I'm not sure if he ever believed me, but that was an interesting takeaway, that someone of that rank had that opinion about that amount of money, about that pot of money, because that pot of money was the biggest pot of money we were spending in Afghanistan. And someone out there didn't know that it was actually American money.

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When we were trying to offer recommendations in our reports for the way things could go, at that time, because reconstruction was ongoing, there was no option to say, "You know, hey, you need to-- maybe the only course of action here is to just stop what you're doing."

And so, because of that, I think we were really-- we really struggled to find recommendations that would help turn the ship, or make a difference – how, you know-- I mean, result in a positive, better outcome. And that has always been frustrating for me.

And I think the way we got around that as best we could was to make the recommendations really broad. Also, you know, we never-- we, SIGAR, never went back to the agencies with-- and hit them over the head with our recommendations, like we would do with an audit.

With a Lessons Learned Program recommendation, we would say, "Here they are. You know, good luck," [LAUGHS] rather than, "Did you implement it?"-- because you can do that with a project and a program. But, you know, everything-- with dynamic, large-scale efforts, it's a little tougher.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

When reconstruction was going in earnest, before the fall of Kabul, we were trying to rack our brains on ways to find solutions, or find ways that we could help implementing agencies adjust course to have a better outcome.

After the fall of Kabul, everything became different.
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I think now, we should be reflecting very much on the idea that possibly there were conditions-- actually, not possibly – very likely, there were conditions in Afghanistan that were beyond our ability and the ability of the coalition governments to address and fix.
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And I think, in many ways, there was a lack of understanding about what we were really getting into.
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I think there's a lot we did not understand about Afghanistan, and the Afghan people, and the dynamics at play there. It's very complex.

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In this job, I've learned a lot about Afghanistan, about the country – you know, about the people. But I learned the most about us, about Americans, from this job – far more than I've learned about Afghans – and how we do things.
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I know some of the people I work with are experts on Afghanistan, really. They know the country inside out and backwards. But, for me, it's been-- what's been the most eye-opening has been interacting with other Americans.

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At an institutional level, I think that there's been a lot of people who've been working, over 20 years, putting their lives at risk in many cases, to do this work – who did it with very good intentions.

But, you know, as they say, you know, the road to-- road somewhere is paved with good intentions. And so, you know, I have learned about us, that there are people who don't give a crap. There are people-- sorry. I learned about us, that there are people who don't care.

I learned that there are people who care very deeply. And I learned that there are-- you know, people-- there are people who just want to get-- do a job. And there are people who, you know, are just absolutely dedicated to a mission.

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I've always felt pulled towards public service. My father was in public service for a state government. He was also former [U.S.] Air Force, for a short-- for four years. He did his four years in the Air Force. So, public service was certainly a part of my family.

I was interested in the federal government, and doing work on that. But I think, you know, I had-- when I was in grad school, the world was open. I thought about doing a Ph.D. and being a professor of something unrelated. But then, things change, you know?
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And after 9/11, I felt like the only place for me was going to be part of this effort. And, certainly, my thinking has changed – over time, over 20 years – about it. I think I was much more naive early on. And I would say I look at the world with much more open eyes.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

When I saw Kabul fall, there was-- it wasn't surprising. You know, it-- it's depressing. It's depressing, because even though we're the office that was pointing out a lot of the challenges, and we became fairly pessimistic about our chances of success over there, when you actually see it fall like that, and you see this big effort that you've worked on for years and years – I mean, at least overseeing it – yeah, it's-- it grabs you.

I mean, I saw the pictures of the people on the planes. And, you know, you know what happened at the gates.
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You know, being part of-- seeing that unfold in history, it's-- it's-- yeah, it's hard.

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During my time with SIGAR, I've had a chance to delve into one of the biggest foreign policy issues of our generation, which was the reconstruction of Afghanistan. And especially having spent some time-- in Iraq, and being on the ground, and seeing how that's going, you know, I-- it's kind of come full circle – a depressing full circle, in many ways.

I was in grad school on 9/11. That changed the whole way America looked at the world. It put in motion things that are here and now. I'm sitting here because, you know, of 9/11, in many ways. That-- that's all how it happened. And, so, in some ways, there's been-- it's been somewhat cathartic, working for SIGAR, because you see the problems – and you recognize why we went to do this thing.

You know why we went there, and it was-- you know, Afghanistan was always seen as the righteous war versus Iraq, which was, you know, some people said was the-- you know, not the righteous war. But there's problems. And I think it's better to have candor and talk about what's going wrong, and the problems, and to honestly say, "Are we going to be able to do what we set out to do in the long run?"

And I guess I'm just proud to be in an agency that allows me to do that and actually say, you know, "No-- you know, we didn't accomplish what we set out to do." You know, people will say, "Well, we had so many wins." It's like, "Yeah, but it all fell apart. You know, how is it now?" You know?

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WHAT DID SIGAR ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

I suppose I wish that the public understood the nature of inspector[s] general, and in general. In general. So-- and [that] they understood the difference between a regular inspector general and a special inspector general.

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I believe the special inspector general model is particularly effective. And I think it's effective because you have one agency that's overseeing one, massive U.S. government effort of many agencies, billions of dollars being spent, and they're focused on it.

They're-- the people who work at SIGAR didn't stay at SIGAR, come on as analysts for a year, and then move on to look at aircraft carriers or go look at, you know, some food program in, you know, another country. They stayed on Afghanistan.

You know, I've been with Afghanistan for, what, 11 or 12 years. A lot of my colleagues have been with Afghanistan for years. And so, you know, special inspector generals have the ability-- have kind of a unique knack, I guess – I don't know if "ability" is the word – but they have a knack for keeping people and really diving deep into a topic.

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After the fall of Kabul, I think the real value of our Lessons Learned Program has been in the history, in capturing the history about it for other conflicts.

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Now we have a couple [of], you know, sizable losses for the United States: both Afghanistan, Vietnam. You know, I think if you look at them in the whole, these were massive efforts where good-intentioned people did their best, and yet, it failed. So, what does that mean?

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I hope that the Lessons Learned Program-- the work that the Lessons Learned Program has done – serves two purposes. One, I hope that it gets in the-- I hope that agencies use it in future contingency operations.

You know, we're-- there's other contingencies going on around the world. We know that. They're not all the same, and some of them may work.

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We've also just been getting a lot of requests from Members of Congress, to make sure that our lessons aren't forgotten. We've-- we got a letter recently from four senators to look at how the lessons from Afghanistan might be applicable to Ukraine.

Ukraine is obviously a very different country, but, certainly, there are going to be parallels not between Afghanistan and Ukraine, but between the U.S. and European interventions in those places and how they're coordinated – how aid is going.

And it's-- and we don't know how Ukraine is going to look, ultimately. It's very possible that they aren't interested in, you know, a traditional aid, or being handed money, you know? They want to decide their own future.

But, at the same time, there is-- there are going to be some interventions. We already know that. Money is already being spent there. So, I think, you know, making sure that we're spending money in the right amounts is important, certainly from a taxpayer standpoint.

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One of the things the Lessons Learned Program work tells us is that if things-- you need to deci-- you need to find the line for when you're going to adjust-- you're going to adjust your course.

So, if you're moving along, in doing an effort, and every year, your principal of your agency is going up to the Hill and saying, "Hey, things are going good. We're making progress. Things are fragile and reversible, so we've got to keep pressure on it, but they're also-- 'we're turning a corner.'" – and in year one, you're "turning a corner," and in year two, you're "turning a corner" – year three, and five, and 10.

When that happens, earlier-- early on, someone needs to make a call and say, "You know, I don't think this is working," you know?

And that doesn't mean you just throw your hands up in the air and walk away from it. Maybe it does, but maybe it also means, "Let's find-- let's figure out which efforts are just not going to work-- are probably not going to work, and let's focus on elsewhere."

Maybe the better thing is focusing on economic development. I'm not saying that's it, but maybe that's it. Or maybe it's just humanitarian efforts. And some of this stuff is you've got to let countries develop, you know, and become who they are naturally.

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We have kind of two camps, in Lessons Learned. And there's very few people, who aren't, you know, pretty skeptical – and a bit cynical, you know, especially after the fall of Kabul. But there are those who think that probably-- probably the best course of action is to not do these things in the future, you know? And // even those who have that opinion know that we-- you know, we may do it in the future.

And another camp who says exactly that, yes, there was many problems, but we're likely to do it in the future, so the best course of action is to set up the systems, develop the people, to ensure that we're ready the next time around.

And I think both of those make sense in some ways. I think the most important takeaway – and this would help, you know, ease my cynicism, to some extent – would be: the big takeaway is that I think it should always be on the table to not do something, to not take an action.

I think, oftentimes, we're – you know, we, as Americans – are very-- are prone to taking some sort of an action. And, in some cases, maybe we shouldn't take an action – or we should have better constraints, and not allow an action to go outside of the boundaries of its original scope. So, there's that.

But, you know, I got-- for those who think we need to prepare for the future, they're not wrong. I mean, these are politically-driven decisions, so it's very likely we'll end up doing something again.

It's just kind of two different ways of looking at it. So, I don't know. I mean-- yeah, I don't know.

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