SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

# SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

## Interview 14: Edited Transcript

### Interview Date: 07/25/23

**NAME/TITLE**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**My name is [NAME]. I am a supervisory research analyst at SIGAR at our Lessons Learned program. It's a stuffy way of saying that I lead a team of analysts, doing research on lessons learned in Afghanistan.**

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**JOB DESCRIPTION**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**So for this project, we've interviewed other types of SIGAR staff. There're investigators, auditors. Your your category is research analyst. Describe how that category is different, in terms of an oversight role, than those others.**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**The bread and butter of a typical oversight agency is audits and investigations. They look very narrowly at specific cri-- investigators look at specific crimes that were committed. And they try and hold those-- bring those people to justice.**

**An auditor will look at a specific program and try and understand, "Did the money go where it was supposed to go? Did the right people get paid? Did-- were the performance objectives met? And if not, why not?" And then, they'll come up with recommendations for how to do that better for that specific program, going forward, so that more money isn't wasted and/or more money-- the money that remains to be spent is spent more efficiently and productively.**

**In Lessons Learned, what we do, our research, we're more like a think tank inside an inspector general's office, where we do high-level research, we are-- our reports are multi-- are frequently hundreds of pages long, built on citations that run to the thousands.***
[* SIGAR Lessons Learned reports: https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Category/24949/]
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**Frankly, our work is more accessible to the public. Among most SIGAR products, ours is the most accessible, although that's certainly a relative term, simply because it deals-- we try and explain, just as we try and analyze.**

**And so those two things come in tandem so that we can present to the taxpayer, to Congress, to various people, // throughout the [Executive Branch] Administration, who may or may not have expertise in this particular area, what the problem was, what the U.S. government tried to do to fix the problem, and how it all went.**

**And then, we provide much higher-level reforms to, let's say, bureaucratic processes, or funding mechanisms, so that we can do this better, at a much higher level.**

**We're not looking at a specific program; we're looking at many programs, zooming out to try and understand not just why a particular program failed, or performed poorly, or well.**

**But, instead looking at the totality of them all, of an entire portfolio of economic development programs, and trying to understand and map out, "How can we do this better?" – from the strategic level, identifying the strategy, mapping out the strategy all the way down to how that cascades into programming.**

**And so we are not only the think tank, but I think we are the 30,000-foot view, of SIGAR, that I think is critical to any oversight organization, especially one with the statutory mandate to look across multiple agencies. But it is certainly the least conventional to have within an inspector general's office.**
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**INTERVIEWER:**
**How common is it for there to be a "Lessons Learned" [program] – a big, sweeping research perspective on these types of engagements within the oversight community?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I'm not aware of any other oversight organization, certainly government-funded oversight organization, [with] a dedicated lessons learned program. Occasionally, there will be reports that are titled, "Lessons Learned." They are frequently-- more often resemble just traditional audits that are just called, "Lessons Learned."**

**What we do, the aperture that we bring to the problem set, is frequently-- or seldom captured or-- seldom has an analogy in any other organization that I've seen that is certainly an inspector general's office, but even across other non-government-focused oversight organizations.**

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## CAREER HISTORY

**INTERVIEWER:**
**How did you get into this? And what is some of your trajectory, professionally, that brought you to this role and this agency? So I'd like to start with, you know, what did you study and what did you have, you know, aspirations to be in your professional life? And then, where did your path take you?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Sure. When I was in college, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. And then when I was a senior, I went to Israel-Palestine for the first time and became quite hooked on the nature of violent conflict, how it captivates, and motivates, and corrupts people on pretty much all sides of it, and realized that I didn't want to be a lawyer anymore. I wanted to focus on violent conflict.**
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**When I was in Israel-Palestine, I was struck by the way that violent conflict and grievance can completely eliminate rational thinking among the people who are belligerents in it, victims in it. And the helplessness of the human psychological components to being participants in that process fascinated me.**

**The way that people were swept up in it, both Israelis and Palestinians, the way that their arguments on both sides were often either circular but also filled with legitimate grievances, and that sense of being stuck in a problem that feels quite unfixable, fascinated me. Addressing problems that seem to have no solution is endlessly fascinating for me. And violent conflict is the centerpiece of, apparently, unfixable problems. That drew me in.**
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**And so I went to graduate school and-- for a master's in conflict analysis and resolution. I worked for various organizations, like the Carter Center, International Rescue Committee, Search for Common Ground, which is a peace-building organization.**

**And then, for about the last 13 years now, I've been mostly focused on Afghanistan. First, I deployed as a civilian advisor to the U.S. government to eastern Afghanistan during President Obama's surge, where I spent a better part of a year, maybe more, depending on how you count, and then, after that, consulting for various organizations still focused on Afghanistan, like the World Bank, U.S. Institute of Peace, and a British contract-- development contractor called Adam Smith International, where I continued to focus on the intersection of conflict and governance, how do you make a struggling government more effective, so that it can address violent conflict within its borders on its own, with less help, less in-- decreasing amount of help from donors, like the U.S. government.**
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**During my years focused on Afghanistan prior to my joining the agency, I was-- actually became aware of the agency's existence after I published a piece in *Foreign Policy* in 2012 or so. And someone in our [SIGAR's] public affairs office added my email address to our distro [SIGAR's distribution list].**

**And so, beginning in 2012, I started reading SIGAR reports pretty regularly for those four years. I was certainly attracted to the agency's honesty and eagerness for-- in keeping the U.S. taxpayer informed, the comprehensive approach to their analysis of what was happening on the ground, and that no one else really could compete with, because of SIGAR's access to those documents, and their statutory requirement that they receive those documents, and analyze them.**

**Then, there was-- it became clear, once the SIGAR Lessons Learned program stood out, that there was more of an appetite for people with my background, as opposed to auditors. And starting around that time, I started building relationships with existing Lessons Learned staff, including its first director, to**

**try and create a pathway for me to produce reports, like the one that I ultimately came onboard to produce.**
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**In the spring of 2016, I joined SIGAR. I joined SIGAR with the-- under the premise that I would lead and write a report on U.S. stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, a Lessons Learned report*, which was one of the ones that was first envisioned when the program started in 2015.**
[* https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4020331/stabilization-lessons-from-the-us-experience-in-afghanistan/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf]
**//**
**I joined to write a report, to lead a report on stabilization efforts on clearing and holding Taliban-controlled territory, and then making sure that the government was able to come in and provide the services necessary so that the population wouldn't be interesting in returning and having the Taliban return.**
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**I led the team that wrote that report that was published in 2018. Then, we-- I led the team that wrote the *Elections* report* that was-- that we spent most of 2018 through 2020 or so on. And then, we wrote the-- our same team wrote the report, called *What We Need to Learn***, which was sort of a 20th anniversary compendium of all of our lessons learned, taken together, that was published only two days after the Afghan government collapsed – by coincidence. But it was certainly helpful, from a visibility perspective.**
[* https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4000139/elections-lessons-from-the-us-experience-in-afghanistan/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-21-16-LL.pdf]
[** https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4000123/what-we-need-to-learn-lessons-from-twenty-years-of-afghanistan-reconstruction/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf]

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## SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

**INTERVIEWER:**
**How long were you based in Afghanistan in your previous roles?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**So I've spent probably 18 months in Afghanistan. There was a year, where I was deployed with the Department of Defense as a social scientist in the Human Terrain System.* And that was mostly in Nuristan and Laghman provinces in 2011. And then after that, I was in and out of Afghanistan with the World Bank, for long periods of time. World Bank, U.S. Institute of Peace, and Adam Smith International.**
[* U.S. Army Human Terrain System (HTS) program, circa 2007 to 2014]
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**INTERVIEWER:**
**How many times did you go to Afghanistan for this agency?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**

**On multiple occasions with SIGAR, I have deployed to Afghanistan for two-week stints, often two-to-three-week stints, to conduct research, to conduct interviews with U.S. officials, to commission research on the ground that we can't produce and conduct ourself.**

**So would go, meet with local researchers, and help them get started on their own-- on the research that we were commissioning for them to do so that we could collect interviews, and produce them, and incorporate them into our own reports.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**So just ballpark, five times, 10 times over the course—**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I think probably closer to five times.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**So did you have any different experience of going in country with SIGAR than you'd had when you were there for DoD [U.S. Department of Defense] and in other capacities?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**It was an extremely different experience, going to Afghanistan through SIGAR, simply because we fell under what's called, "Chief of Mission," which means we are anchored to the U.S. Embassy, and have to follow all of its security protocols, procedural protocols, and whatnot, which means-- the short end of it is we are on a very tight leash, understandably, in certain way-- in certain contexts.**

**But what it means is we basically can't leave the Embassy compound or certainly can't leave the "Green Zone." There's a few places that we can go for meetings. But for the most part, people come to us. And that creates an environment, where-- contrast that with my experience with DoD, where I was going out on patrols, it was-- you know, the security was-- the security posture was extremely different because I was embedded with DoD – with U.S. military – as they were going out on patrols and on remote military outposts.**

**So I was able to accomplish, in a sense, a lot more when I would go to Afghanistan as part of-- as a DoD advisor during the military surge, as contrast that with SIGAR, where I was on a very tight leash, I was mostly restricted to the Embassy compound, and had to conduct interviews on the Embassy compound.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**Did you find that frustrating?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I-- well, I found it limiting to be restricted to only-- to be restricted to the Embassy compound – because the kind of interviews you could conduct, the people that you could access, is reduced, because there are a number of people who either won't come to the U.S. Embassy compound because they're afraid of being seen talking to the Americans.**

**There are other people who are quite eager to be seen talking to the Americans. And that can be its own red flag, in certain ways. And, whereas when you have free rein to conduct research across the country or-- and by free rein, I mean just relatively free rein, compared to at the Embassy – there are a lot more opportunities to have spontaneous interviews with your average Afghan.**

**And those opportunities are far reduced because it's a much more controlled environment. And so the quality of the information you're able to collect is reduced and filtered because you are getting it through the prism of who can visit the U.S. Embassy compound, and what their motivations are for doing so.**

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

**I have led three major Lessons Learned reports in my time at SIGAR, with a number of other derivative products, like letters to U.S. senators and things like that, that take up a great deal of my time but do not have the sort of fanfare that the three very large Lessons Learned reports that I have led were a part of.**
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**Of the three reports that I led, one was on U.S. stabilization efforts.* The other was on U.S. efforts to support elections and democratic reforms in Afghanistan.** And the third was a report on our-- sort of our 20th anniversary report, which came out two days after the Afghan government collapsed, called *What We Need to Learn****, which was a compendium or a synthesis of all of our lessons and what they all, taken together, mean for U.S. efforts to rebuild conflict-effected environments.**
[* https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4020331/stabilization-lessons-from-the-us-experience-in-afghanistan/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf]
[** https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4000139/elections-lessons-from-the-us-experience-in-afghanistan/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-21-16-LL.pdf]
[*** https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4000123/what-we-need-to-learn-lessons-from-twenty-years-of-afghanistan-reconstruction/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf]
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**INTERVIEWER:**
**What are all the tasks that you do as part of that job?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Sure. So it starts by, often, conceiving of a problem, a research problem that-- where there is a shortcoming, in terms of our understanding – donors' understanding, the U.S. government's understanding – of a problem, where we see a gap that needs to be filled so that the U.S. government can be better equipped to manage that challenge, manage that problem.**

**So it often starts with a simple idea of, "We need to get better at X." And sometimes, that is a very strategic level. It's typically often a strategic-level concern, for instance.**

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**So from top to bottom, that often means what did-- trying to identify what the U.S. government thought of as its strategy, and how did it come to understand that strategy, how did it come to understand the problem. So a lot of it is: we are grading the U.S. agencies on their work.**

**We're not doing it [the work] for them; we're grading them, in many ways. Sometimes, that requires us to be innovative, and sort of analytically bold in trying to help them understand the scope of the problem that they're trying to tackle so that we can assist them in doing that better. So we identify it. We look at the strategy.**

**Then, we look at how that strategy translated down into operations, what are the various mechanisms for coordinating with other donors, for coordinating across different U.S. government agencies, and then how all of that coordination translates and sort of dominoes down into a collection of programs for how the U.S. government actually-- where the rubber actually hits the road, and the programs that actually help Afghans or help build services for Afghans so that they'll support their government, how to transform economies, how to reduce the prevalence of poppy in the country.**

**So all of these, what we do, we zoom out in Lessons Learned. We look at the strategy, down to operations, all the way down to programming and impact, how it actually affects people on the ground. And so that requires, on a day-to-day basis, identifying what documents do we have, what documents do we need to get that are U.S. government documents.**

**One of the critical benefits of SIGAR's comparative advantage is that we present documents to the world. We present analysis to the public, but we have-- we do that by collecting documents that no one else in the world has access to.**

**And so then, it's our job to analyze those documents. And they number in the many thousands of documents. And then, we conduct interviews with U.S. government officials, both current and former. So a lot of our time is spent identifying, "Who do we need to interview on who ran XYZ program 12 years ago? We have to go and track that person down."**

**Sometimes, the U.S. agencies – like USAID*, and State**, and DoD*** – have records of who that person was.**

[* U.S. Agency for International Development]
[** U.S. Department of State]
[*** U.S. Department of Defense]

**Other times, we have to get creative and use our own networks, and networks of networks to try and track these people down. So a lot of our work is reviewing documents. A lot of it is interviewing people who were actually involved in these key decisions at the strategic level, key decisions at the program level, and where the rubber hit the road, and then figuring out where all those gaps remain.**

**Once we've collected all the documents that we need, conducted all the interviews we need to do, we figure out, "Well, what's left? What still do we not understand that we need to understand?" based on outlines that we've created and research plans that we've created.**

**And then, we have to-- that is all just in the first-- of a single report. That might be in the first six months of the report production process, maybe first eight months. Then, we have to start writing it. So as the leader of a team of analysts, I then farm out assignments.**

**Previously, we-- I would have farmed out research tasks. Now, I'm farming out writing tasks. "You take this chapter." "You take this chapter on this subject." "You take this time period on this subject," until it all comes together and we've got a coherent whole that we can then present, and start refining, and get the support of the—State*, [US]AID**, and DoD***, typically, will review a draft of it. Then, we've got to adjudicate their comments. And so it's-- and then, we have to review it internally, as well.**

[* U.S. Department of State]
[** U.S. Agency for International Development]
[*** U.S. Department of Defense]

**And so there's a long, bureaucratic, frequently political discussion about what the report needs to be, what it needs to account for. And, infused with all that are the more substantive questions of, "Does it help-- will it help U.S. government do this better in the future, either in Afghanistan for many years or elsewhere?"**

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**INTERVIEWER:**
**Who makes the decisions about which topics are suitable, appropriate, necessary for Lessons Learned focus?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**It is a combination of demand-driven reports and supply-driven reports. So when Lessons Learned-- the Lessons Learned program first came about in 2015 or so, there was a collection of 12 reports that were envisioned to be produced. We prod-- we have produced many of them.**

**But over time, there were demand signals from Afghanistan, from-- commanding generals, from ambassadors, to say, "Hey. I know that you are looking at these other topics. What we could really use your help on is X,Y and Z topic." And so frequently, we have set aside some of the plans that we have put in place for reports that we envisioned to be most important, to be relevant for ongoing missions and operations in Afghanistan with the reconstruction effort.**

**So there were a few examples. One that-- of the team that I led-- was on elections, support to elections. When we first started the Lessons Learned program, the message that we had gotten from the Embassy, repeatedly, was that elections – the study of elections – was too sensitive for us to look at.**

**Around 2018 or so, the message we got instead was, "This was a critical area that the U.S. Embassy wanted our help to scrutinize." And so we did. And so in the absence of those demands-- the demand signal from the agencies, for where we could be most valuable, we produce our own reports with our own vision for-- based on what we-- the needs that we have identified are critical to fill.**

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**We are a whistleblower organization. And that makes a number of people very nervous speaking to us, because they think talking to us means they are betraying their institutional-- the institution that they work for. And that's certainly not the case, but it is, in fact, a challenge – to convince people that-- that the-- if they speak to is and tell us their perspectives, what they've been through, as a program manager, or as a captain in the military, that they are able to actually contribute to the larger mission of improving how we do this.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**And so how do you navigate that? Do you-- is it best accomplished through a sense of trust? Is it best accomplished through additional tools or strategies? How do you navigate that?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**A lot of it is in how you-- the way that we build relationships with our informants, it's a critical piece of this because, when we collect documents, they often don't tell the full story. So we have to have interviews that supplement the story that documents tell.**

**So we will reach out, often individually, to specific individuals who we think had a specific-- a critical vantage point, on the National Security Council or at ISAF* Joint Command in Afghanistan, and then try and un-- and help them see that what we are after is not-- we're not trying to draw blood, we're not trying to point fingers, but, especially in the Lessons Learned program, we are trying to understand the system that that individual works in, and the constraints that are placed upon them, as individuals, working within that system so that we can help identify solutions for that system because what-- there is a tendency, certainly, in the oversight community, to point at something and say, "That's broken. It needs to be fixed."**
[* International Security Assistance Force]

**What, I think, we do-- and I think we do it well-- is to identify the context in which poor decisions are made, and then help try and chart a path toward reform, in understanding how can – in the future – individuals like that feel motivated, structurally motivated, to make a different decision, what needs to change in the environment around them for them to make better decisions.**
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**Explaining this to people as we were building relationships with them is critical, so that they feel we are not trying to go for the "red meat" quotes and trying to embarrass them or their bosses, but really trying to explain to the taxpayer, explain to Congress what it is that they struggle with, what makes it difficult for them so that we can create much broader solutions, that account for those problems.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**If you can't compel people to engage with you, cooperate with you, you can convince them.**
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**INTERVIEWEE 14:**

**As part of our statutory authority, we are able to compel U.S. officials to speak to us. That is-- this is not a practice that I subscribe to, that I embrace, that I think is the least bit valuable. It is a tool available to SIGAR. I am aware that others at SIGAR use this tool to compel such interviews.**

**I do not believe they are useful because, in what we do, in crafting and identifying solutions to much larger problems than a single individual is responsible for, we have to-- we have to enlist their help. They have to want to be creative. They have to want to and be motivated to tell us what it is that they're struggling with and why the prob-- the decision that they made that was problematic had to be made.**

**And in order to convince them to do that, it has to be voluntary. And so the trick is convincing them that their voluntary engagement will serve a higher purpose, that we will be able to protect them, and that it is part of something much bigger than themselves.**

**That is not something-- a tool that you can-- a vantage point that you can solicit if you are requiring them to speak to you. On occasions, we will even-- we will ask the agencies, "We are interested in speaking to an official who works on X, Y and Z program."**

**That person is, you know, sort of thrusted upon us. They often have lawyers that accompany them. And so every question that we ask them is filtered through the idea, by them, that they will be judged by those lawyers, they will be held accountable for anything that they tell us.**

**And so the whole framing is completely different than if it is more, frankly, like an investigative journalism approach, where we are building relationships, where the people who are speaking to us are motivated to do so because of something bigger than themselves, bigger than us, with the hope of making sure that when we do this again – and I say, when we do this again – we do it much more effectively.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**So how successful was that approach-- has that approach been, as you've done it? What is the batting average – if I can use that kind of analogy – for success in convincing people of that argument?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Sure. We are able to be much more successful in convincing people to speak to us voluntarily, if the subject isn't especially politically sensitive at that moment. I will give a few examples. When we were doing our *Stabilization* report, from about 2016 to 2018, much of the stabilization efforts in Afghanistan had come to an end.**

**And so most of the people who we were talking to weren't-- were no longer working on stabilization programs. The idea was, "We're not doing stabilization in Afghanistan anymore." And that was very useful from—as [it] made it-- made our work far more productive and increased our success rate in soliciting interviews, because those people were not working on that particular issue anymore.**

**Contrast that with elections. When we started working on our elections report from about 2018 to 2020, Afghanistan was going through a major upheaval in-- significant upheaval from its own election cycle that made talking to people about elections more sensitive.**

**We were still able to be successful in that because we were able to convince them that there are going to be future election cycles, if not in Afghanistan, elsewhere, where there were-- there was a better need to understand, "How can you make programming more effective, as it relates to elections and building up support for democratic institutions in Afghanistan and elsewhere?"**

**So we were less successful, where the batting average for recruiting successful, voluntary informants was lower because [of] the political sensitivity-- these people that we were speaking with, many of them were working on elections at that moment.**

**However, we compensated by speaking to people who have worked on elections in the past, but were no longer working on it.**

**So there are ways around it, to get more information on how all of this works, if you're creative in doing so. The problem with that is that, in many cases, we-- if you are, let's say, an auditor trying to understand the nature of election-- electoral support in Afghanistan today, it doesn't do you a lot of good to look to interview someone who had the relevant job 10 years ago.**

**It is still extremely relevant to us in Lessons Learned because we are looking at the bigger system and the trajectory in which electoral assistance was provided over the course of the 20 years in Afghanistan. So some-- the-- our batting average was more successful in some cases than others, and it was usually anchored in the sensitivity of the topic itself.**

**Right now, for instance, there's-- it's far more sensitive because humanitarian assistance and what's going on in Afghanistan right now, where the Taliban is trying to co-opt or divert U.S. assistance, that is a very politically-sensitive issue.**

**So when we try and build relationships with U.S. officials to solicit information and their insight about that, even individuals who are keen to share with us are going to be extra cautious because of the politically-explosive nature of what could happen, if it turns out, if USAID and [the] State [Department] provide additional information, or were they to reveal that a considerable amount of that assistance is being diverted – that has significant political implications. And therefore, the willingness to have that voluntary relationship with us is hindered.**
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**When we reach out to an individual and say, "Hey. You have a fascinating job. We are actually looking at the thing-- at the topic that you spend-- what we suspect you spend much of your time looking at."**

**If they think that the topic is going to get them in trouble, if they think that the-- anything they tell us is easily traceable back to them, they're going to be much less likely to talk to us. We come up with solutions for protecting their identity, for protecting their information, so that they feel more comfortable speaking to us, but they can only go so far.**

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Conducting oversight in a conflict-effected environment is extremely difficult, primarily due to insecurity.
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In Afghanistan, in a place like Afghanistan, when you are trying to take the temperature of a population in a district or a province, either through polling or surveying, it is extremely difficult to be able to take-- walk away from that effort, and believe that what you have is truly representative of the population's perspectives. And that is often, we have found – I have found – due to insecurity.

When you go out – and I'll just give an example – when I would go out on a patrol with the Department of Defense, with the U.S. military, during President Obama's surge in 2010, '11, when you enter a village, and you are swarmed by a group of people, and you are wearing your sidearm, and you are dressed in combat fatigues, and you are surrounded by a combat patrol, the information that you get is going to be very different than if you have none of those things.

And that is not because, necessarily, people are afraid of you, although sometimes they are. It is also because there are perceptions about any time you get information from that group of people, the question is-- everyone in that group has to wonder, "Are the people around me going to tell the Taliban what I am telling U.S. forces, or this civilian advisor to U.S. force?"
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And the same is true at SIGAR. When you would try and conduct an interview with-- even an Afghan government official, the sense of endanger[ment]-- and insecurity that they might feel from providing information to us changes what they're going to tell us, or we were often told – and this was not just a problem for SIGAR, but for all U.S. officials – we are often told what we-- what they wanted us to hear.

This was either to get the next contract, or to ensure that that person remained in their job. And so you-- we always had to be wary of how insecurity filtered what these people were motivated to tell us, and what they were motivated to not tell us.

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INTERVIEWER:
You've talked about dealing with informants who accept your argument and decide to go along with it. "This is for the greater good. This is going to be for Lessons Learned. I have an obligation as a public servant." How do you deal with individuals and entities who choose not to go along with that argument, who either resist the argument, or treat you and your agency as a hostile interloper?

INTERVIEWEE 14:
There's not a lot that-- when we approach someone, there's not a lot we can do if they say no. A lot of it comes down to-- it's-- much of the way that we do this initial outreach is through cold emails, or an

**introduction from a colleague who says-- who can validate for our approach and that we're thoughtful and methodical and not out-- you know, we're not out for a hatchet job.**

**But in the times where we submit-- we write that cold email, we try and account for this. We try and make it friendly. We try and make it about, "It's us together," versus, "Them" – meaning them, the problem. You know, and we'll re-- that we're suggesting it's all one team.**

**When you get that resistance – either it comes in the form of not answering our emails, not answering our calls, which is fine – // we go through trusted individuals who can help us make introductions and navigate our way to that spot, so that when we do reach out to that individual, if we sensed he or she was going to be resistant to our approach, by gradually making our way to him or her through trusted agents, through trusted advocates of our work, of our product, it creates an environment where they're more likely, more willing, to speak to us.**

**But that's at an individual level, where we are trying to build relationships individually, with people who are involved in these efforts. There's the flip side of that is going directly through the front door of the agencies, which is where we've had more resistance, where when we ask for documents we usually get them – typically, historically – which is the-- a critical component to our work.**

**But when we're trying to build those relationships to look under the hood and get a feel for why certain decisions were made, why certain reforms have not happened, or why there's been bureaucratic resistance to certain changes, going through the front door has seldom been productive.**

**And because what you get is, at best, a hostile witness or, at worst, you have an environment where you are being told that your approach is wrong, or that it's-- you're creating an environment where you are endangering people in Afghanistan.**

**And so you get a much more combative relationship with the agencies when you go in through the front door, which is the traditional way that an oversight organization does. And that is a critical component for obtaining certainly those documents.**

**And so from a Lessons Learned perspective, we take the good and leave-- and leave off the bad. So we will go through the front door for those critical documents, which we need. We build relationships so that they can be willing and eager to share more documents with us.**

**Where that fails on certain areas, we have to go individually through agency officials. And sometimes they'll say, "Yes, I'm willing to talk to you, but I need to ask our general counsel's permission," or whatnot. And then sometimes we'll get a "yes," sometimes we'll get a "no."**

**But the best way to-- about-- dealing with that resistance is building relationships to demonstrate that you're not out for blood.**
**//**

**You know, "the rest of SIGAR is all about accountability. We are this weird little office within SIGAR that is interested in accountability in theory, but our primary objective is making you do your job better, empowering you to do your job better."**

**"What tools do you need differently? What do you need your bosses to do differently to make you do your job better?"**

**That is a much more successful approach, by virtue of our Lessons Learned lens, than coming in through the front door, and saying, "Show me your documents. I'm going to tell you your job." And so that humility is-- I think, has served us very well in building relationships with agencies and setting us apart from the accountability-- heavy accountability focus.**

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**INTERVIEWER:**
**Have you heard informants express how they were persuaded by that approach? And what did they say if they ever told you anything about that?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**The only feedback we get is, "Yes, I'll talk to you." I haven't heard, "You made me feel safe," or, you know, anything like that. It's just, I inferred this often because they-- often they'll express initial resistance, and I'll say, "How about we just have a phone call that's completely off-the-record and where I just explain the process to you?"**

**"And if you want to walk away then, you walk away then, no problem at all." Like, I'm constantly reminding them they can disengage, with no repercussions. They're not going to read about it in some, you know, letter to the agencies or letter to the press – that you refused to talk to us.**

**Your participation is completely voluntary. The voluntary nature of it is a critical component of it, because we believe you are a dedicated public servant, you face challenges, you make mistakes, just like all of us. We want to improve. That's all our goal is. And so it becomes critical to convince them of that.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**And so it seems to me that the relationship, by sort of necessity, the type of argument you're making, it becomes very personal – and about trust. Does it not?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Yes. It is much-- it is very much akin to an investigative journalist building a source network. That's really what it comes down to. But we are government officials, which clouds things, which makes it very difficult for us to use that frame.**

**And understandably, some of our informants will be reluctant to adopt that mentality and trust us the way they might trust an investigative journalist, because we can be FOIA*'d, for instance. That creates**

**real liabilities and real limits that we have to acknowledge up front with our informants to say, "We can protect your identity. We cannot protect your words." Right?**
[* Freedom of Information Act request]

**So your ideas, your words, those are-- could very likely be FOIA'd.**
**//**
**INTERVIEWER:**
**But, at the end of the day, it would seem to me that those who do choose to cooperate really don't have much to gain other than participating in the goodwill of, "It's the right thing to do, and hopefully it helps our government do better, you know, in the current situation and in future ones." Is that correct?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Yes. The only motivation for our informants is for the greater good. Many of them, it probably won't surprise you to learn, are tortured by a lot of the things they have witnessed, are bothered by the decisions that were made against their wishes.**

**Some of them have axes to grind, but very, very few of them do. Most come to us, or agree to speak to us in complete good faith, and with the idea that, "What I have seen troubles me, and I don't like it. I want it to be fixed for the future, for Afghanistan in the future, or more likely in other conflict-affected environments in the future."**

**"I want to help my government do better, and empower me, people like me, to do better." That is their mentality – 99 out of 100 times – that they feel not a sense of obligation to us as oversight professionals; they feel an obligation to influence and make sure their voice is captured in the lessons that historians and other practitioners take away from this war.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**So doing this kind of work no doubt there are standouts in your mind of entities and/or individuals who are non-cooperative. Can you give me some concrete examples? You don't have to name the entities or the individuals, but just in terms of a scenario, can you give me some concrete examples of when you really got pushback, and it made the work especially difficult? And then what did you do?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Sure. Well, rather recently – last year – we had a situation where when the Afghan government collapsed there was a question, a sense, among many of the agencies that, "We weren't doing reconstruction anymore and therefore we didn't need-- we, the agencies, don't need to cooperate with SIGAR – because it shouldn't exist anymore."**

**That appears to be their ar-- to have been their argument for some time. We took exception with that, for various reasons, that I don't really feel the need to go into. But it-- the crux of it is cooperation stopped, where we would ask for documents to try and understand what the U.S. government was doing in Afghanistan post-collapse, how was it working, was it effective – how are you managing the funds, et cetera, et cetera – and we got very little responses.**

**When we asked for interviews – either through the front door or in certain cases through the back door, through our personal networks – we got shut down. Even now, when we go through to implementing partners, it is clear that implementing partners contracted by State or USAID have been instructed not to cooperate with us because they take issue with our mandate, with our jurisdiction on the issue.**

**This has made doing this kind of work extremely difficult. And it has-- even when they are agreeing to cooperate – and they have submitted-- they have-- they provided documents more recently because some of this has-- some of this impasse has passed – even now, it is difficult to get interviews with individuals because of the political sensitivity of this.**

**There is a sense that, "Why cooperate with SIGAR if their jurisdiction is contested? Why risk that?" It's not just a risk of sharing information that is sensitive. Now it's a risk of participating in a process that is allegedly illegitimate, and ill-conceived and ill-founded.**

**And so there are new layers of risk, for an individual to come forward and be willing to speak to us. One way that we have adapted to this in Lessons Learned is we have expanded the aperture. So-- I'll give an example of it. We are currently undertaking a study to look at the challenges and best practices in going around the Taliban and sending our aid around the Taliban so that they can't benefit from it.**

**This has been U.S. policy, to not let the Taliban benefit from U.S. assistance, and so money is going directly to the Afghan people through various implementing partners. Because we have difficulty accessing how that is working in Afghanistan, we've broadened the aperture to be able to say-- so that we could say and ask, "Well, how are we doing this in other conflicted-affected environments?"**

**Because the lessons that we can glean from this – for Afghanistan – don't only have to come from Afghanistan. After all, this dynamic, where we had a government we were trying to avoid, only started very recently. It's important to look at an evidence base, a broader evidence base, that can yield equally important information that has deeper legs or-- or deeper waters than we have in Afghanistan.**

**So we're looking at northeast Syria. We're looking at Gaza. We're looking at places like South Sudan and Yemen, where organizations or governments that control patches of territory it has been important to the U.S. government to bypass them and send aid directly to the people through various implementing partners.**

**How is it going there? Maybe those places have lessons that they-- that we can learn and then apply in Afghanistan. So we adapt in ways like that, where we can still get reliable information that can help our government, our executive branch counterparts, without-- while still accounting for the fact that we're not getting as much information as we would like.**
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**INTERVIEWER:**

**How do you configure your team? You talked about these relationships being very personal. You know, you're making a case, "You can trust that I'm not going to use this. If you want to withdraw before we formally engage, you can." How do you build a team and a culture where you can feel that that is being universally deployed in the same way? In other words, if you're asking someone to trust you, you're also asking them to trust your colleagues over here, and over there. How do you build that, in a unit like this Lessons Learned unit?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I think the best way to do it and-- or the best way to build trust with informants across our network, across our team, is by building standard operating procedures. So having a template, as one example, having a template for what that initial email looks like that goes out the door to that potential informant that has all the necessary caveats, the necessary warnings about possible FOIAs, about, you know, "What we're after is not accountability. What we're after is [to] help you and your peers do your jobs more effectively, with fewer constraints."**

**All of those best practices need to be embedded in our standard operating procedures, from the initial email to what our interview protocols look like, all the way-- you have to build the institution, a research institution, and then make sure that people who are around you are adopting it and matching it.**

**And we've had to adapt those protocols, over time, as situations evolve-- and it has become very important to make sure that the people who are-- when you delegate, that they are adopting those warnings, those caveats, those protocols, and implementing those best practices. So you-- it's really not about trusting an individual. It's about building the institution that the individual then gravitates to and feels like they are a part of.**

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**What those warnings are, are typically things like, "This information could be FOIA-ed. We will do our best to protect your identity, but you should-- you should assume that your words might be publicly released, but with redactions in your interview notes, if and when it is FOIA-ed."**

**"But those redactions will be provided so that your identity continued-- can continue to be protected, in accordance with whistleblower protections and whatnot." So // some of the interview protocols are some of our most important institutions that we have built to create that trust. And as our-- when an individual comes and tries to approach us, and withdraw – as we have had occasionally – from the interview process, where we have to respect it.**

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**INTERVIEWER:**
**What about feedback? Once your reports are out in the world, // what kind of feedback, if any, do you get on these products?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**The feedback that we get when our report is published is typically quite positive. It's often a reflection of the fact that we are-- it's a fortunate position to be in that our role is usually the role of revealing things, and the American taxpayer, Congress, are quite hungry for revelations, especially on something that is widely perceived – certainly among knowledgeable observers – widely perceived to be going poorly.**

**Why is it going poorly? Well, SIGAR has answers. We have frequently been seen as the voice of having those answers – at least some semblance of those answers. And that puts us in the very fortunate position of our feedback is typically quite positive, from taxpayers, from the media, and whatnot.**

**The-- where our feedback is occasionally negative is from the agencies whose stories we're trying to tell. In Lessons Learned we have received, I think, more positive feedback because we do-- part of our mission is to try and capture that story-- the stories of the agencies – rather than simply point at a program and say, "That's broken. It needs to be fixed," we try and explain that broader context.**

**And that makes us more of a natural ally to them, though I wouldn't call the-- I don't think they would view us as an ally, but certainly more amenable to persuasion, more amenable to context and accounting for contextual issues. And we also have a process where in the report production cycle agencies will review our reports so that-- just-- the same way they would for any audit.**

**This is standard practice for IG* offices, where the-- they would review the report, provide feedback, and – whereas with an audit their comments would be sort of attached to the end of the audit before it's published – we make it important, we try our best to actually take their feedback and incorporate it into the draft before we publish it.**
[* Inspector General]

**Rather than simply tack on their perspective at the end, we try and change to make sure that our voi-- that their voice is captured in the document itself. So their feedback can sometimes be negative, but it's usually-- we-- in a good-faith effort, we try and incorporate what we hear from them, that either we are missing a certain perspective, we're not accounting for a specific program, and then they provide evidence of how that program or process was actually better than we're giving credit for.**

**That's usually the way that it goes, and then we incorporate it. So the feedback is generally extremely positive, by virtue of the position that we have in being the illuminator, for these issues. And it usually goes quite well, and we're able to build that relationship with agencies so that it is-- even when we say something that they-- or write something that they disapprove of or they think is wrong, they have an opportunity to help us get it right.**

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**We often feel pressure to get everything right that we produce. There is a particular pressure for [an] inspector's general office, where if we are essentially writing report cards of others, it is especially embarrassing for us to get something wrong ourselves.**

**And so there's immense pressure to make that everything we say, every fact is double- and triple-checked to make sure that it is accurate, that it is proportional to the moment. And so that-- with that pressure, comes a great deal of scrutiny that slows down our production cycle because there is that pressure to get it right.**

**But it also means that the flip side is that when we produce a report, it has a significant weight, one, because it is a U.S. government product, but, two, people know that the rigor that we apply to making sure that what we say is accurate is a reflection of what-- of the value that people have in our work, that it comes out and people put a much higher value, I think, on some of our products because of that rigor and of the amount of time that we spent and invest, particularly in Lessons Learned and getting those issues right.**

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## BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE LESSONS LEARNED ANALYSTS

**INTERVIEWER:**
**Do you have any special training, through your studies, that equips you to do this work?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**In graduate school, we certainly took many courses in qualitative research, quantitative research, that built a foundation for this kind of work. A lot of my best practices have come through trial-and-error over the years, swapping notes with colleagues, for trying to identify the best ways to collect reliable and interesting information.**
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**This has required a great deal of innovation, in terms of how we go about collecting information. I'll just give on example. In Afghanistan, it was very difficult, sort of as it was-- in-- through SIGAR, to collect-- to conduct interviews because people were reluctant to be seen speaking with you.**

**So when I was deployed as a DoD advisor in Afghanistan, I would often invite-- call elders – you know, community elders – and build relationships with them over the phone, because if they were to be seen speaking to me when we were out on patrols, it could create enormous problems for them, and backlash from the Taliban.**

**And so I would build relationships with them to try and understand what makes a community tick, by building that relationship over the phone with them and then eventually meeting with them when they're comfortable. But it creates this-- that is certainly not the textbook way of informing and collecting data in an environment like that.**

**And so having to create those adaptations to account for the fact that security is always in flux and that getting people to-- making people feel safe enough to speak to you and motivated to speak to you is an immense challenge, and that's the same thing at SIGAR.**
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**I think what makes for success in a role like mine or in Lessons Learned, in general, is a determination to keep asking, "Why?" When we're conducting interviews and someone tells us that "X,Y,Z" was a problem, we have to always ask, "Why?" And then, when their explanation comes out, you keep asking, "Why," over, and over, and over again until you've gotten to the heart of the matter.**

**And then when you've done that across multiple informants, many informants, in our case, hundreds, or when you are trying to reveal insights from-- extract insights from government documents, continuing to find out-- to understand why was that choice made, why was that particular item prioritized as a strategy.**

**Those questions, those critical components, come down to the ability and willingness to keep asking, "Why" – and not move on until you feel satisfied with the answer. Sometimes, that means you are unable to look at an aperture as wide as you had hoped.**

**But it means that whatever you do choose to look at is going to be far more revealing because you took the time to understand "why," on those critical questions.**

**So a lot of this traces back to designing an appropriate research plan and having appropriate research questions that allow you to find something meaningful, that can inform the policy-making process and inform the practitioners to do their work more effectively, but by continuing to ask, "Why," so that you can understand the real root cause of the problem.**

**And, often, that's not just conflict dynamics on the ground between different ethnic groups, but much more, "Why is it that the U.S. government operates the way it does," because so much of what we do is upstream. And, you know, if it deals with not what's happening on the ground in Afghanistan, but what our problems are, internally, within our governments, why we operate the way that we do, with the constraints that we do, why is no one addressing these? Asking those questions – and continuing to ask why – can help reveal where those critical reforms are, and how to go about implementing them.**

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## WHAT SHOULD THE PUBLIC UNDERSTAND ABOUT SIGAR?

**INTERVIEWER:**
**What do you wish the public could understand better about this agency, if anything?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**There are a number of misconceptions about the agency – that have been-- that we have constantly struggled to help the public and Congress sometimes understand – is that-- the first and foremost is that we don't oversee everything related to Afghanistan, that we just oversee the reconstruction component.**

**What reconstruction includes is often very confusing to the public. It certainly was for me when I first heard about the agency back in 2012 and tried to understand its mandate. There are-- I-- it's hard for me to imagine how that would go about being rectified.**

**But it is certainly a difficulty that future SIG*s will experience, where they are trying to explain to the public what their job is, and what it is not. And the public really struggles to understand that and then-- and that they will-- I imagine, they will continue to.**
[* Special Inspectors General]

**I don't think there's much else that I would want them to know about us. One thing that has come up again and again is we're called "brave" – because we're government officials criticizing the government. And it's strange. That-- that's a silly framing – but understandable, given that they don't really understand exactly what we do.**

**It's strange because we have-- the real bravery is in the IG Act, is in creating organizations like ours, so that we can hold [entities] accountable and help the U.S. government do better. That-- we have the enormous luxury of saying, for the most part, we're going wherever the evidence takes us, you know, with certain exceptions. And that really becomes important – and that's something that U.S.-- that I think the public needs to understand, and would want to understand.**
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**It is certainly important to me that our work is nonpartisan, that we follow the evidence wherever it takes us. I've been struck that that seems to be, over the last seven years, consistent across the organization – that we don't pull punches for political reasons.**

**We all have our political preferences. They are simply not-- they do not appear to be indulged, at all, in determining-- in formulating our findings and lessons and recommendations. It is simply just not a factor. This is one of the things that I think has made us so trusted across the U.S. government, especially in Congress, is that we follow the evidence where it takes us.**

**Now, that doesn't mean we aren't frequently used as political footballs, because the opposition – whoever is in control of different houses of Congress and the Administration – will use us however they see fit. Our objective is to simply be-- to provide the necessary analysis and data for-- and findings for where we think the evidence takes us.**

**How that is then used by the public, by Congress – it's really just not up to us. We are frequently in partisan battles, but we are never partisan ourselves. And so—but, by virtue of the work that we do, we find ourselves inserted into these very, very partisan discussions.**

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**SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: LESSONS LEARNED: STABILIZATION REPORT**

**INTERVIEWER:**

**How does it feel when the work is completed, and it gets showcased in that kind of public way? Is that gratifying? Is it satisfying?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Sure. So when the *Stabilization* report* was completed in 2018, there was a Brookings** launch event that involved General John Allen***, and Inspector General Sopko****, and then a follow-along panel immediately afterward that included myself and a number of other experts from Brookings, and Carnegie*****, and the U.S. Army, to get more technical on the subject matter, on the heels of the policy-oriented discussion between IG Sopko and General John Allen.**
[* https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4020331/stabilization-lessons-from-the-us-experience-in-afghanistan/; https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf]
[** Brookings Institution, Washington, DC]
[*** General John R. Allen, USMC (Ret.), former Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)]
[**** John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
[***** Carnegie Endowment for International Peace]

**Having your work seen in such a visible manner, having the recognition and the praise, after two years of putting in the time, is very gratifying, emotionally and intellectually. To see the work that you have provided, that you have created, that your team has created, resonate across such a wide cross-section of experts and government officials is very validating.**

**It also-- on the heels of that report in particular, it was especially gratifying because U.S. government agencies didn't just praise it; they adopted its conclusions. They-- our findings, our lessons were incorporated in legislation, in U.S. government integrated country strategies for Afghanistan, and across multiple different agencies.**

**We were conducting briefings routinely. And still, years later, I'm still briefing on that report. And that creates a remarkable sense of validation, that what you're doing is important, even if the ultimate outcome – "Are we going to be able to do this better because of your work?" – that question remains unknown, still.**

**But at least, the incorporation of your findings, and lessons, and recommendations across the U.S. government, and in legislation through Congress, is intellectually and emotionally rewarding. There is no doubt about it.**

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**INTERVIEWER:**
**What's the most satisfying moment you've had doing this work for this agency?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I think a big one, a big accomplishment for my team, has been reports that we have produced have led to changes in legislation. And one, in particular, is the Global Fragility Act, which was-- which recommended, in line with our recommendations, that the U.S. government has to build out long-**

**term strategies for conflict-effected environments – because doing this kind of work in conflict-effected environments takes a long time.**

**And so the strategies can't be 20 one-year strategies; they need to be one 20-year strategy or, at least, one 10-year strategy. And the Global Fragility Act came to this consensus, in part, because of input that we provided into that interagency decision-making process.**

**And that was a massive change, in terms of the way the U.S. government envisions the way to deal with violent conflict. Up until that point, there had been, at an individual level, everyone said things like this, but it had never really been documented and enshrined, certainly not in legislation, that compelled the interagency-- compelled the U.S. agencies that are involved in addressing violent conflict to think differently about this.**

**And that was, in large part, because of the work that we provided and the input that we provided into that process. That was a big sense of accomplishment, that we shared with many others. In those agencies, in civil society, we played a small but critical role, I think, as those others did, in creat-- in changing that consensus around what it takes to do this kind of work.**

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**WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?**
**WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?**

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

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I think what we have done exceptionally well is broadcasting our message. I have never encountered a U.S. government office that produces reports that is able to find its way into the media like we do, that is able to find its way into the hands of members of Congress the way that we do, and that-- in a way that we frame the issues and write them in accessible ways that make it so tempting for the media and for Congress and for the public to find them so compelling to talk about them.**

**It's a, I think, remarkable feat for a small organization to be able to have its message broadcast in such ways, and in such volumes.**

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**WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**Conversely, what things do you think that this agency could've done better or differently – or places where it might've gotten it wrong?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I think there's an interesting balance, between accountability and in helping the government do better. And one of the-- we have-- our general approach has been embarrassment is a significant motivator for reform. That is a general philosophy, certainly, that Inspector General Sopko has taken that I think is very compelling, and there is a great deal of truth to it.**

**I think there is a flip side to it – in that much of what we have studied indicates that the reason there has-- there was so much obfuscation and occasionally deceit in how this war was being prosecuted and how it was un-- the reconstruction effort was unfolding, much of it was because U.S. officials were afraid of being told, "It's going terribly. We're closing up shop," or, "You failed. Shut it down."**

**And that fear is a significant driver for that obfuscation. And that fear is created by oversight organizations, like us, that are hyper-focused on embarrassment and accountability, as opposed to what I think is an equally important parallel avenue of encouraging, learning, and experimentation.**

**In an environment like Afghanistan, you're not going to get it right the first time. There needs to be constant iterative learning. And if everyone's afraid of embarrassment, and if a member of Congress is waving one of our reports in the air and saying, you know, "Shame on you for doing X, Y, and Z," then that person is going to be completely motivated to not take any risks and not experiment at all.**

**And experimentation is what is required in an environment like this. They need the bandwidth, the flexibility, and the long leash to experiment a little bit. And that can't come if there, if oversight or organizations – SIGAR, Congress, many others – are hyper-focused on pointing at things, saying they're broken, and thinking that that is the crux of accountability.**

**I think working in conflict-affected environments requires a different, or at least complementary approach to what accountability is. And that is, instead of asking, "Why did you screw that up? Fix it." the question – the theoretical framing of the question – needs to be, "What have you learned, and how will you do it differently going forward?"**

**And if there's no bandwidth or latitude for asking those kinds of questions, then there will never be honesty. When assistant secretary of et cetera comes and testifies before Congress, they're going to say things that they think Congress wants to hear, that will make them be able to get off the stand as quickly as possible and not worry about their job security.**

**And if there's a more thoughtful approach to accountability, by people like us, by Congress, and others to say, "All right. You've got a little bit of time left. It's very important that you learn from what went wrong, and adapt. Tell me how you're learning and how you're adapting."**

**That is where the accountability needs to be. Not, "Did you get it right this time or not? If not, shut it down." That is, I think, an understandable but reflexive and somewhat immature conception of what accountability is, especially in a war zone, where experimentation and innovation is absolutely critical.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**Did SIGAR get the balance right on those things?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I don't believe anyone has ever gotten that balance right in-- certainly not in conflict-affected environments. This is a very difficult struggle, especially because members of Congress want-- they-- it's seen as too lenient among them to say things like, "Well, what are you learning?" It's seen as too accommodating. Their job-- they're structurally motivated and positioned to hold the agencies accountable.**

**It is-- it's a tall ask. It's a tall or-- it's very difficult to ask them to do, to say, "Be more thoughtful." Give them a little bit of latitude and see what they do with it. There's very few members of Congress, and very few oversight organizations [that] think that that is their role.**

**And so it's a re-framing of what accountability is, that is-- it's really seismic what that would take.**

**And no one is going to be honest – to oversight organizations, certainly not to Congress – not fully honest or thoughtful and nuanced about what their approach is, if they think they're going to be crucified for every word that comes out of their mouth. Every admission of a problem is going to translate to them being crucified.**

**For as long as that is the logical conclusion, there will be obfuscation. There will be problems like this.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**It almost sounds like you're preaching for an evolution – if not a revolution – in the way oversight is done.**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**I think the basic concept of oversight-- it's perfectly fine for oversight to be the-- its default position to be standard accountability, pointing at things and saying, "It's broken." There needs to be an-- a competing school of thought, espoused by many members of Congress, many oversight organizations, to balance that out.**

**And it-- I think it is certainly a revolution or an evolution. I think that you can see that within SIGAR, where you have auditors and Lessons Learned staff who are literally taking two different approaches but still talking about often the same kinds of programs. You can see it within our organization.**

**It's healthy. It's needed, where auditors are pointing at things and saying, "It's broken," and it's very embarrassing for the agencies, as it should be in certain cases, but you also need that complementary voice, people like us, who are in many cases telling the agencies or telling, you know, offices within those agencies, "It's not your fault."**

**"Let's look at the bigger-- let's zoom out and fix the bigger problem that is causing you to make your mistakes."**

**And you need that balance. And we can see it in SIGAR – I don't see it in many oversight organizations, I don't see it in Congress – where you have that balance. And it-- it's really just critical.**

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## AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

**When the Afghan government collapsed, that was [a] defining moment for the colossal failure of certainly 10 years of my work, and the 20 years of many, many others' work. And it was personally devastating. It was-- it demonstrated the futility of so much of what we tried to do, and what we did, both in those agencies, and even within SIGAR, that all the warnings that we provided for years were, for the most part, not heeded.**

**When the government collapsed, people were asking, "Well, how could this have happened?" And we had the answers, because we had been sharing those answers for many, many years – and it still didn't work.**

**So as someone who has worked for those agencies, I felt a colossal sense of failure from my role in-- in leading to that-- into that collapse. And as someone who worked for SIGAR, in an oversight capacity, I felt a colossal sense of failure for being completely unable to steer the ship toward something resembling efficacy.**

**INTERVIEWER:**
**You make it sound like you felt a personal failure.**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**Yes. Everyone who was involved in this mission should feel a personal sense of failure in their contributions, in their failures. Despite the fact that many of our decisions are shaped by decisions that were outside of our control, we all have ownership.**

**We all have responsibility for this, because if we don't, every single individual, even on the National Security Council, can punt and say, "Oh. I-- I was boxed in, you know? We-- you know, it was-- there were constraints that I couldn't account for." I think if-- by doing that, it's a copout. And we all have that personal responsibility at every level, both in the agencies, and within SIGAR.**

**We failed. They failed. We all failed together.**

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**When you watch the government collapse, the only consolation, for me personally, aside from the grief that I experienced for the Afghans that I care about, whom I've worked with – just for me,**

**thinking only about myself – the only consolation is that much of the work stands on its own, for future conflict-effected environments.**

**And that is the one thing that makes you think that my-- that makes me think my work at SIGAR is going to continue, it will have a legacy, and that it will-- it will have a remarkable shelf life, if we can simply keep it on people's radars.**

**So much of the sense of despair, just professionally that I felt – aside from everything, the far more important factors of what's actually happening to Afghans on the ground – but just for me, professionally, the sense of loss was remarkable.**

**It was 10, 12 years of my life that I've spent mostly doing Afghanistan work. But the one silver lining is that a lot of that work is going to be – or can be – extremely valuable, for-- as the U.S. government continues to do work in conflict-effected environments.**

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## WHAT DID SIGAR ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

**INTERVIEWER:**
**What do you feel that SIGAR got to accomplish during this time of doing oversight in Afghanistan?**

**INTERVIEWEE 14:**
**As the, I think, seminal voice on all things Afghanistan and the U.S. government, SIGAR has been in a position to be the authority on Afghanistan, such that it has a credible voice for dealing with violent conflict in the future for wars and reconstruction efforts like this.**

**My hope is that, either for places like Ukraine, or decades from now, there will be a National Security Council deliberation, where someone holds up one of our reports, and says, "SIGAR 15, 20, 30 years ago said that if we don't have A, B, and C already in place at the outset of this mission, it will fail. Well, look around. We don't have it. Therefore we shouldn't undertake this."**

**Something like that would be a massive accomplishment that, I think, only SIGAR is in a position to accomplish, more so than historians, more so than certainly practitioners, or policy advisors, or anything of that sort.**

**We are in a very strong position to be the voice of healthy skepticism that counterbalances people in administrations and in Congress, in the future, who will say, "The American can-do attitude will win out and we can do this. We can do whatever it is that we need to do – land war in Asia, we can do it." And that-- the voice of doubt and skepticism is ours. We have staked a claim on that, not because we inherently enjoy that position, but because it is so badly needed.**
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**I like to think – I do not know if this is true, but I like to think – that one of the things that I accomplished is I provided, and helped others provide, a quality of research on how donors respond**

**to violent conflict, and created a new appetite for that kind of information, whereas usually most data, most analysis about conflict, is about what's happening on the ground.**

**Very little of it is about what donors are doing in response to those conflict dynamics on the ground. And so it becomes very important for me professionally, I believe, to create that appetite, and that understanding for what analysis upstream could look like, what analysis of different donor institutions and how they box themselves in, and how they're uncapable of doing certain things and they have institutional blindness, and things like that, that-- analysis of that, of the donor response, is just as important as what they are responding to.**

**And I hope, I like to think, I've created an appetite – I've contributed to the creation of the appetite – for that kind of information, so that, when USAID and State and DoD are engaging in conflict-affected environments like this in the future, they think to themselves, "We don't just need research on who's killing who on the ground, and why, and why corruption is such a problem on the ground. But we need research on ourselves.**

**We need to understand why we-- what we can and can't do, and under what circumstances, so that we can be better judges of what we're going to do next."**

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