SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 15: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 08/16/23

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 15:
My name is [NAME]. I'm currently the Assistant Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. I am the AIG, Assistant Inspector General, for Audits and Inspections. That's my current role, though I've had several over the years.

JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWER:
And in a nutshell, what is that job that you have now?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Sure. So, my Directorate is the largest within SIGAR. // The Audits and Inspections Directorate conducts several engagements, whether they be performance audits, financial audits, inspections, evaluations. All of our work is conducted in accordance with applicable professional standards, be they the generally accepted government auditing standards or CIGIE* standards for inspections and evaluations.
[* CIGIE = Council of the Inspectors General for Integrity and Efficiency]

All of our work is to ensure that programs that are implemented by government agencies conducting reconstruction in Afghanistan are performed effectively and efficiently – in accordance with applicable criteria, that costs charged to the U.S. government are allowable and allocable. // And when they're not, we try to recover funds for the federal government.
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And, in cases where we can find areas for improvements, we make recommendations to those implementing agencies – be [they] State*, USAID, the Department of Defense*** – to either improve their programs in order to achieve intended outcomes, or to recover costs that were not charged to the contractor of the award agreement appropriately.**
[* U.S. Department of State]
[** U.S. Agency for International Development]
[*** U.S. Department of Defense]

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Anything you can imagine that the U.S. government would spend money on in Afghanistan – to make the lives of the Afghan people better, to build up the former Afghan government or the former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces [ANDSF] – anything that the U.S. government spent money on, to the tune of about $150 billion, was in our purview.

So, we would conduct a risk-based analysis to determine what programs we would look at over the course of a fiscal year, and conduct audits, inspections, evaluations, and financial audits – based on various risks, and then issue products and associated recommendations to improve those programs nationwide.

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CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
Give me the dates that you've worked for this agency and how long that totals to--

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Sure.

INTERVIEWER:
--in time.

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Yeah, I joined SIGAR when SIGAR was really in its infancy, and there was just a handful of people working when I joined in October or November of 2009. I spent about a week in our headquarters office // before I deployed to Afghanistan for the first time.

And I was over there in Afghanistan from November of 2009 through December 2010, and I actually left right before New Year's Day in 2011. And then, I took a bit of a hiatus, and I went to another agency – before the "siren song" of SIGAR came calling.

And I was only gone for about eight months, and I came back in October of 2011. And I held several positions, and, ultimately, I deployed again to Afghanistan in 2013. And I finished that tour in 2015. And I was the Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Inspections at the [U.S.] Embassy in Kabul, the senior audits and inspections representative in Kabul during that period.

I came back and assumed the position of Director of Special Projects. Had that role for a few years. Left again, to serve at the Department of Energy Office of Inspector General. And it wasn't long that I was there that SIGAR – in the words of Don Corleone – "made me an offer I couldn't refuse," and I returned once again – [after a] cross-country drive.

And I've been in my current position since July of 2019, so a little over four years in my current role. All told, what is that? I'd say probably minus a year-- 14 years, maybe-- 13, 14 years that I've been with SIGAR.

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INTERVIEWER:
So, you had two deployments to Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
I did, yeah. So, when I was a junior analyst, coming from the Government Accountability Office*, I deployed straightaway, and then I was a member of an audit team in Afghanistan. And then, I finished my tour there, still as just an analyst, but I was also an analyst in charge, so I was-- I had a promotion while I was deployed.
[* U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), formerly known as the U.S. General Accounting Office]

Then, I left and I came back, and I was a senior analyst, but then I was promoted to Senior Audit Manager, and I deployed again as Senior Audit Manager. And I was promoted to Deputy Assistant Inspector General while I was deployed that second time, from '13 to '15.

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you give me a sense of your trajectory from education through [your] earlier career? Did you always know that you wanted to be in auditing?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Uh-huh (AFFIRMATIVE).

INTERVIEWER:
Or oversight? Or did you not? And if you didn't, what else did you study, and how did your career take shape?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Sure. I attended undergraduate studies at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. A relatively small school, but it's a Division 1 school. It's about 16,000 folks. After I graduated, I knew I was either going to go to law school or graduate school. I just ha-- I hadn't really decided which one yet.

And when I visited Old Dominion University and they offered me a graduate assistantship, I decided to go there and pursue my graduate degree in public administration, because I knew I was either going to go into law or the public sector.
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INTERVIEWER:
How did you know that?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
I suppose just a calling. I was always intrigued by government work. I sort of fell in love with government work and politics at an early age. And you know, going back to watching early debates with Dukakis and Bush, you know? Like, those are some of my earliest memories, and I had just always been very interested and wanted to support [the] U.S. government, state government, local government, in whatever capacity I could.

And, you know, growing up, I didn't know what that would look like. But as I matriculated from undergraduate through graduate school, I knew that that's what I wanted to do and that I wanted to be involved in the federal government especially. Sort of-- that's sort of where I saw my calling.

And, it just so happened that while I was at Old Dominion, the wife of a gentleman that-- the husband of a woman that worked at the Government Accountability Office was a recruiter. And so, they did a recruiting event for [the] Government Accountability Office.

And I can remember going into my interview for the internship at the Norfolk field office. And the assistant director-- the GS-15 in charge of the office at the time, he asked me point-blank, you know, "Did you see yourself at GAO as a career? Is that something that you knew?"

I said, "You know, frankly--" – and I think he appreciated my honesty – "I had-- didn't know what GAO was until I started researching for this position. And seeing the breadth and scope of work that GAO did very much intrigued me." And so, you know, I got the internship.

And then, halfway through my second year of graduate school, I had a job offer. And I said, "Well, off to the races." And I spent a couple years at GAO, learning the ropes, going through their professional development program. And, at that time, the Iraq effort-- the Iraq reconstruction effort had started to wind down a little bit, but I had several colleagues that worked for the-- our sister agency, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction [SIGIR], and found it very rewarding.

And, you know – not to sound contrived, but – Iraq, Afghanistan, the War on Terror was one of the defining issues of my time, and of my generation. And, at that time, I was wearing a suit and not a uniform. And so, I wanted to support that effort in any way that I could.

And so, in getting involved with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction as it was just being stood up was very appealing to me. And so, you know, what I thought was going to be a one-year stint, with reemployment rights at GAO, has now turned into a 14-year career at SIGAR.

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That's how I fell into government work. But I think my passion for public service was always there. I can recall writing in high school about, "What do you want to be when you graduate," and-- from my high school honors English class. And, you know, it was about public service.

And so, I think my desire to be in public life and public service has always been there. I just never knew what form that would take until I got out of my small town and was exposed to my collegiate political science classes and my graduate-level public administration classes, where I determined that, you know, [in] state and local government you see your impacts a lot more, but in the federal government, when they hit, they mean so very much.

And so, you know, it was balancing on which kind of career path I wanted to take. And I just fell in love with federal government work. And, at GAO, I fell in love with the breadth and scope of federal government work, because once you begin looking at a DoD program, well, you-- there's infinite numbers of DoD programs you can look at.

And then, you expand that across the Cabinet agencies, and the amount and scope of work you can do is amazing. You know, I-- [doing] auditing and inspection work, and evaluative work, you know, we get to be students. And I love that we get to be students of the federal government and to find ways to improve it. And I think that's really meaningful work.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

When I moved from GAO to SIGAR, it was a very interesting time in my life, and I thought that I was going to come to SIGAR for a year. At the time, GAO – and they may still be; I just don't know – was very open to helping staff up SIGIR, and SIGAR, and offered reemployment rights.

And, at the time, I was a GS-11, I think, or a GS-- you know, somewhere between the -9 and -11 scale. They use a different pay scale. But, you know, I was relatively new to the federal government. And so, I thought of the opportunity as something that I would-- I'd never see again, potentially and something that I thought could be rewarding.

So, when I was negotiating with SIGAR about what my time with SIGAR would look like, I knew that I wanted to be in Afghanistan. I knew that I wanted to be as close to the work as possible. And so, they offered me the opportunity to deploy to the [U.S.] Embassy, right away.

At the time, the [SIGAR] office in Afghanistan was led by a former GAO-er as well. She had just left GAO a few months earlier than I, to start up the office in Afghanistan. So, while I didn't know her at GAO, I knew what generally accepted auditing-- government auditing standards looked like. I knew what was required of the work. And so, they trusted me to go over there and contribute to the team right away.

INTERVIEWER:
So that was your first overseas deployment, was it?
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INTERVIEWEE 15:

Yeah, so, I had done some temporary duty work, overseas with the Government Accountability Office. But, those were just, you know, week-long trips. And, in fact, the first time I traveled overseas was for work. The second time I traveled overseas was to deploy to Afghanistan for SIGAR. And it was an interesting experience.

INTERVIEWER:
So, when you first arrived in Afghanistan, do you remember what your first impressions were?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Terror. Horror. Like I said, SIGAR had only just been stood up, and there was only a handful of people in our office. And so, the agency at the time was really feeling its way through what it meant to deploy folks, you know? We had a couple [of] "read-aheads," about what to do, and what to look for, and things like that.

But traveling into a Third World airport for the first time, by myself – at the time, whatever, I was 26, 27, whate-- however old I was. And, I had never been to a Third World country, much less done it by myself. Much less one that was at war.

So, getting off the airplane, and I had these instructions, you know? "Go get your baggage, and then just walk out of the airport, and somebody'll be there with a sign." And I didn't know what to expect. I can read the words on paper, and then you do it yourself, and it was – walking out of the airport by myself into a war zone, just hoping that somebody's there to meet me – it was a surreal experience.

And, luckily, I think SIG-- whoever was holding my name on a placard at the time-- saw the look on my face and realized, "That must be our guy, because he does not look like he knows what he's doing." And so, I was-- I was quickly scooped up.
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Once you got to the [U.S.] Embassy-- at the time, it was in its infancy. If you go to the Embassy now-- if we were to go to the Embassy now, it's a different world. Back then, it was all containerized housing units. And the containerized housing units were used for offices.

And, you know, there were sort of mice- and rat-infested, and just – hovels. It was entirely different from what we experience now. And I think because of that, those of us that were there at that time, at the Embassy compound – really became a family.

I mean, it was-- we were very, very, very close. To this day, I have both people at SIGAR and throughout the Embassy community that I'm in close, close contact with – because it was a different world then, and we really had to rely on one another to get through it.

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The living and working conditions in Afghanistan at the time, in late 2009 through 2010, it was sort of segregated by your rank, if you will. And those of us on the lower end of the ranking system were in very small, containerized housing units.

Basically, if you can imagine a shipping container, with just metal walls, and some of them had bathrooms inside, some didn't. I was lucky enough to get one that did have a bathroom inside. Other colleagues did not have facilities that had bathrooms inside. They were called "wet" or "dry" "hooches." So, I was lucky-- I was a lucky one to have a wet hooch.

Our office was also a containerized housing unit. It was just several of them, sort of welded together with the walls knocked down so that you could walk from one area to another, from [SIGAR] Investigations to [SIGAR] Audits. And a lot of folks worked in those environments.

And then, later, about halfway through my deployment, they sort of-- the Embassy clarified how you could get into an apartment in one of the hardened units. And so, I got myself on a list that's saying, you know, "I'll room with whomever you would like me to room with. Whatever it takes to get out of this containerized housing unit and into a hardened facility to live."

And so, I ultimately was lucky enough to get into an apartment, in a shared apartment – you know, a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment – in a hardened structure, which allowed us to sleep a little bit better at night. Because, obviously, you know, there was indirect fire and things like that, and just things that would get you up in the middle of the night, and you'd feel a lot better about it if you were in a hardened structure than in a containerized housing unit. In terms of getting into the work-- that wasn't a problem.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AUDITS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

When I first arrived to Afghanistan from the Government Accountability Office-- so, I had cut my teeth at GAO. I knew how to do the work. I didn't know <u>what</u> jobs we were going to do. I didn't know what the topics would look like, necessarily.

But I knew, "Here's how we do the work. Here are the milestones we need to hit. Here's how we need to conduct-- complete our work papers." And so, I had a leg up, from somebody coming in from other oversight organization – because, frankly, SIGAR's largely, in the Audits and Inspections side, modeled after GAO.

It's just the way it was because that's where the leadership came from at the time, and where the leadership is now. It's where we all learned. And if you're going to learn how to do performance auditing from anybody, GAO's the best.

So, I knew the kind of work that we would do. And when I got over there, the kind of work that I was assigned to was on sort of how the U.S. government is supporting capacity development at-- within the Afghan government. So, "How are we developing capacity at their anti-corruption institution? How are we developing capacity at their supreme audit institution? What programs do we have that support those entities, and are they working effectively?"

And so, at the time, in 2009 and '10, it was a very permissive environment. It did not require anywhere near the level of security that anyone traveling probably after 2013 or so would have seen. We were able to walk to restaurants at the time. We were able to very easily go to [former government of] Afghan[istan] ministerial offices.

And we would just get dropped off and conduct our interviews. And then, when we would wrap our interviews, we would just call somebody to come pick us up. We'd stand outside, waiting in the street. The Afghanistan of just two years after that had significantly changed.

Everywhere that we went required armed security with us. You know, and that was, you know, after the buildup of U.S. troops, and some of the – potentially, I suppose – resulting turmoil that that may have caused.

And so, we weren't able to do our work in the same way as we did in those early years. Everything was a little bit more challenging, after a couple [of] just horrific bombings took place in the areas around what we called then the "Green Zone," where we were allowed to walk to and things like that. So, the environment just changed very, very significantly, over that period.
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Like I said, when I first arrived, we were going to Afghan ministerial offices to conduct our interviews and to perform oversight, routinely. We would have to occasionally do inventories of purchases and to make sure that the goods purchased by the U.S. government were where they were supposed to be and supporting the folks that they were supposed to support. And, at the-- we would just freely walk around Afghan compounds, and conduct those inventories. So, the environment change-- has changed a lot over the past 14 years.
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INTERVIEWER:
So, to put a fine point on it, so, how did it change – how did doing the oversight change as the security environment worsened and there became more risks attached to moving around? How did that change how you did the oversight work at that point?
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INTERVIEWEE 15:
After the security environment really started to shift in 2012, 2013 period, getting to the Afghan ministries to meet with the recipients of, for example, capacity development or to meet with recipients of small arms, to do small arms inventories – all of those movements became far more challenging.

Everywhere we went at that point required sort of an advance team. It required guns in the vehicles with us. It was for protection. So-- and it required those folks to stay on compound while we were there, as well. So, it was just a significant investment in time and resources to go anywhere.

So, it was challenging, but it also prepared us a little bit for the environment that we face today in the-- in the COVID environment, you know? We relied on folks that were there. We relied a lot more on phone calls, and emails, and less personal touch.

But luckily, we're able to build personal relationships to get to the places that we needed to get to, as well. We also leveraged our Afghan colleagues – because, while U.S. government personnel faced extraordinarily heightened security restrictions, and our bubble, if you will, shrank in where we could go, that didn't apply to our Afghan colleagues, who felt safe.

And we would never send our Afghan colleagues into anywhere that they didn't feel safe, and we worked hard with them on risk assessments to determine where they could and couldn't go and what they could and couldn't do. So, working through our Afghan counterparts, [we] largely maintained our access throughout the country over the years where our security presence decreased, and our bubbles decreased, and the places that we could go decreased.

We leveraged both geospatial imagery, technologies like Zoom, video-teleconferencing, and our Afghan colleagues that had far more freedom of movement – so that we could do our work in largely the same way, just with some augmentation.
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So, we didn't get out as much. Once the security situation really deteriorated, we just didn't get out as much. But our work didn't change. So, we-- at that point, we began to try to identify new and innovative ways that we could maintain our access throughout the country.

And so, at the time, I was a Senior Audit Manager and then Deputy Assistant Inspector General in Afghanistan, so it sort of fell on me to try to figure this all out. And so, working both with our general counsel here and our inspector general, we worked to identify Afghan civil society organizations that sort of shared our values, shared our goals.
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We did an inspection of a hospital in Gardez Province in Afghanistan, which was-- we couldn't get to. It was impermissible to us. But it was a multimillion-dollar hospital project that was-- that the U.S. government was funding to replace an existing hospital that was serving the population.

Well, this new hospital-- we couldn't get to it, but it was a big project, and we wanted to make sure that it was going to do what it was supposed to do, that it was there serving the population, that the Afghan government was running it, that it was serving the needs of the community.

And we worked with our Afghan civil society partners to develop an engineering assessment and a questionnaire about usage, that they could go out into the field and execute. And so, while they're in the field – Afghan engineers and Afghan analysts looking at this project – we're on the phone with them every day, making sure that they're looking at what we need to look at, that they're following the engineering plan to make sure that they're looking at the structural integrity of the facility, and that they're asking the hospital staff, "Are they getting what they need from the Afghan government? Are they serv-- is it meeting the needs of the people?"

And so, by developing an intensive engineering assessment methodology that they can execute, and, through close coordination, we're able to leverage our Afghan civil society partners to do the work that we need to do throughout the country.

And, that's largely how we built out our inspections program of the hardened infrastructure throughout the country – despite the impermissive environment: through our close working relationship with the Afghan civil society partners.

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Out in the field, out away from the [U.S.] Embassy, we relied heavily on the [U.S.] military for any movements. At the Embassy, and throughout Kabul, we largely relied on the State Department and Regional Security Office.
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If-- as a manager, I took it very seriously every time we went out, every time we put in a request. I didn't want anybody to ever get hurt. I don't know that I could ever [have] lived with myself. So, I knew that we needed to justify any request for any of our movements, because not-- we're not just putting ourselves at risk. We're putting lots of people at risk anytime we left any compound.

With that said, I think, you know, from – call it 2013 to maybe 2018 or so – I think it was pretty well-received. And I don't know necessarily whatever changed, but, you know, the Embassy started to "right-size," and I think using the right-sizing as an excuse really, frankly, for why we couldn't get out to do some of our work that we would have normally, in previous years, have been able to do: going to the [former government of Afghanistan's] Ministry of Finance and talking to them and things like that.

So, as much as security in the impermissive environment was a real challenge, from 2012, 2013 through 2017 to 2018, we were largely able to still get out. The [U.S.] Embassy footprint at that point was still very large. We still had a presence in many parts of the country: Kandahar, Jalalabad, and some other places. So, we were still able to get out.

But then, once the [U.S.] Embassy footprint and the [U.S.] military footprint <u>really</u> consolidated around Kabul, it became extraordinarily challenging to get out to do anything. Even just going to the presidential palace – which was in the Green Zone, which was not even a mile away from the Embassy – was extraordinarily challenging. So, leaving the compound at any time – in that period, in the latter years, immediately preceding the collapse – was very, very challenging.

INTERVIEWER:
How do you make decisions about when a movement outside the compound was necessary? What even do you use in that equation to figure out how to make those decisions?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
So, is the person willing to talk to us via any other modality? You know, there's a certain level of trust that I think is forged through interpersonal communications. And if we haven't had the opportunity to gain that trust, then that person may not be willing to speak with us over the phone or via email.

Certainly the investigator-- the investigators ran into this, too. They may not want to come to the [U.S. Embassy] compound. I think largely what we were able to do with our Afghan counterparts – with the Afghan government, with our Afghan government counterparts and the rec-- and sort of the beneficiaries, if you will, of U.S. reconstruction efforts – we could get them onto the compound, and meet with them there.

But some just weren't willing to do that. And depending on, you know, what we were trying to obtain and the information that we needed to get, if there was no other modality, then attempting to go outside of the compound was warranted, largely.

INTERVIEWER:
So, my impression is there's no formula for this. So, it pretty much comes down to professional experience, professional decision-making, balancing things out but also, probably, "gut-feel," too.

INTERVIEWEE 15:
All of that, yeah. I think that's very true. And, you know, we would put in these requests, when I felt they were needed, you know, as the senior within Audits and Inspections in Afghanistan, //
if we were requesting-- if I was coming in with the IG* on a temporary-duty trip, just for a short period, you know, if you wanted to go out to somewhere, you know, it's up to us to all talk about whether or not the risk is worth the potential reward, right?
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And then, there were some cases where I would feel one way and the Regional Security Office, for example, at State Department, would feel differently. And then, we would have to come together and meet about, you know, why they felt this location wasn't secure, was there another way to do it, yes or no, and to have a real dialogue with the security professionals that are responsible for executing the mission.

Because every time we step foot out of compound, it was a mission. And there, you know, there was talk about, you know, "Here's where to go if "X" happens and "Y" happens." And so, I don't think-- this is not-- I know nobody took those decisions lightly.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you feel that, overall, those in those positions understood the value of oversight and the need to sometimes, you know, deal with the extra work of staffing and managing a movement for an oversight entity, as opposed to, you know, other mission-critical things around either reconstruction or war-fighting?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
So, I think the-- IG Sopko* has always made it very clear that he feels that oversight is a mission-critical element at-- in Afghanistan reconstruction or in any reconstruction activity. I feel similarly.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

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Be it DoD* in the field or State Department in the [U.S.] Embassy in Kabul, it just-- it really varied. I think it-- it's largely personality-driven. I don't know that any of them would come out and say that they don't find it to be mission-critical.
[* U.S. Department of Defense]

I think-- if they were sitting in this chair, all of them would say, "Absolutely oversight's mission-critical." But I think it's very personality-driven.
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INTERVIEWER:
Was there a benefit to trying to forge direct relationships with individuals who were in those positions? Or were their deployments brief enough so that that really wasn't as helpful as it could have been?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Yeah, I-- you <u>needed</u> to build interpersonal relationships. I think the IG* found that to be the case almost immediately when he accepted the position. And he made it his policy that he was going to go to Afghanistan, to the extent that he could, every quarter – to meet with senior [U.S.] Embassy officials, senior USAID officials, senior DoD officials to try to forge those relationships, because we do rely on them for our life support and for our mission support.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And I echo that. And-- I think it-- we see it today in our COVID environment and our remote working environment. It's very easy to read a report, or to be a keyboard warrior and to just fire off messages, and to read a report and get angry about it and-- with no context.

And if you have no interpersonal relationship, and you don't feel that you can pick up the phone and say, "What's going on with this?" – in advance of any report that we may issue – that's a real challenge. And so, I think building those personal relationships so that, you know, when we do ask for something, when we do ask for mission support, when we do ask to go somewhere or do something, they take it seriously because they know that <u>we</u> take it seriously.

They know that we're not asking unless it's something that we need. And, you know, while, at lower levels, I think even lower senior levels – if you will, if that makes sense – there was a rapid churn. I think, at the leadership levels, at the IG level, and at the level where those relationships matter, there wasn't as much churn.

And so-- but if a person came into that position – whether it's State, or USAID, or DoD – and felt that oversight, in their mind, wasn't necessarily mission-critical, I don't know that any interpersonal relationship would ever overcome that. So, you would just kind of have to wait it out and hope.

But I think the IG, and I think I – and I hope – others did what we could to build some trust that what we were asking for was needed, and required, and mission-critical.

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The best part of my job is really improving the program effectiveness and efficiency of efforts to improve the lives of Afghans. But a second part of my job – that I really love – is that we get to sort of be life-long students.

When-- I can recall when I was an analyst in charge, when I first became sort of, like, a GS-13 Analyst in Charge, and was put in first-- in charge of my first engagement, you know, going to our en[trance conference]-- So, there're several steps in an audit process.

You initiate the job, you notify the job, and then you go to entrance conference. And then so sitting at an entrance conference, knowing that everyone in this room knows more about this topic than I do, I am the least informed person on this particular issue – and it's humbling, you know?

And so every job, you start very, very, very humble. And then, you learn. And you dive in. And, you conduct the audit work. You implement the project plan. And at the end of the job, you have [the] exit conference. And, at that time, you have to be the smartest person in the room, on this one very small subject, on this one micro thing that everybody else in the room, they've got purview over how many different programs. But this one very small thing, this one thing, I get to be the smartest in the room. I started off not knowing anything.

And that's what I love most about my job now, and as a manager, as a leader, is to see the folks that work with me go through that process, and evolve through that process because you're writing your notification letter and conducting the entrance. And it's like, "How am I going to do this? I don't know anything about this."

And then the work starts. And they learn, and they learn, and they learn. And then they develop a message. And then they create recommendations and they create findings. And they say, "Well, all they need to do is this little thing and implement this recommendation, and the program would better achieve what it's supposed to achieve."

And so watching that maturity over the course of an engagement cycle – whether it be, you know, six months, or eight months, or a year – is really, really rewarding.

And, you know, it keeps us all humble. And it keeps us engaged. And, you know, you're only ever one job away from working on something else. And so, if you hate your job now, get it out the door and you'll be onto something new. And you get to study something new. And, it's just-- just a really, really interesting job.

INTERVIEWER:
In just a sentence or two, just define for me what is an "entrance conference," in the context of the work?

INTERVIEWEE 15:

Sure. So an entrance conference-- basically, so we notify a job. "Hey, State Department, we're going to do this job, and here's what we're going to look at, and here's what our objectives are. We'd like to schedule an entrance conference." So what that does is it pulls in the team, team management, and the program managers from the implementing entity.

So State Department has its experts in the room from whatever bureau they represent. And we discuss what we plan to do, how we plan to do it, where we plan to go, and who we plan to talk to. And everybody from State Department hears that. They ask us any questions about our methodology or our approach, and come to terms. And then the team is off and running to conduct the engagement.

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INTERVIEWER:

In general, how were entrance conferences received by the participants who were part of the programs that were under scrutiny?

INTERVIEWEE 15:

Generally, entrance conferences are pretty easy. People don't get too rankled about auditors neces-- nobody loves when we walk into a room. But for the most part at an entrance conference, it's, "Oh, O.K.. We're fine," you know, from their side. We understand what we're doing. We're going to be fine. It's not a big deal. So the entrance conferences are generally pretty well-received.

Now, exit conferences is where-- and that's at the end of the job, where we present what our potential findings are and what our potential recommendations are. Those are the ones that can get a little bit more contentious, because that's when we're telling them, "Here's how you can improve your program." And no matter how constructive we intend to make that conversation, there are personalities that do not receive constructive criticism well.

And so, entrance conferences on a scale of one to 10 – 10 being the hardest – are usually about a two. Exit conferences, boy, they can really vary. They could be six to 10.

But they're never easy because our job is to find issues and make recommendations for improvement. In fact, in our authorizing legislation, it's to find issues and make recommendations for improvement. And so that's what we do.

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As an independent inspector general, it's incumbent on us to report hard truths to the agency, to the public, to Congress. It's our job to report truth to power.

And, when we see something that's going on, we don't pull punches. And we-- it's our duty. It's not-- it's our duty to report those issues.

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

INTERVIEWER:
What are the characteristics, the skill set, the abilities, capabilities, traits that make for a good member of an auditing oversight team doing this kind of work in a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Sure. I think, first of all, in order to be in this line of work, you need to be inquisitive. You really do need to be humble. And I think it's easy to say that, but a lot more challenging to execute.

Our work-- nobody's work is perfect, but our work needs to be as close to it as possible. We nee—and, in order to achieve that, our work is hyper-scrutinized by everyone. So if somebody's coming in, at a junior level, and they haven't been-- and their work hasn't been hyper-scrutinized – ever – I think they can-- they could find it to be very challenging.

I know early in my career, I certainly did. You know, I put all my effort into this thing, and I get it back from my supervisor, and it's just red lines to the point that the word "and" is the only word that's left remaining on the page that hasn't been altered.

And I, you know, take it to heart. Like, "What did I do wrong? I don't know if I can do this." And you can, you know? It's just a matter of, you know, it's not my product. I am not doing this. Everything that I do, even in my current role, isn't signed by me. It's signed by the inspector general.

And so <u>everybody</u> in this organization needs to be rowing in the direction of getting him something that he can sign his name to that we're all confident in. And that requires a lot of red lines and a lot of track changes – and making sure that everything that we say is fully supportable, and unimpeachable.

And so a lot of people really struggle with that. I think I talked previously about people-- some folks not being able to handle constructive criticism very well. And, if you can't, this job is very, very challenging for you. So being inquisitive, being humble, being able to be a part of a team – because all of our work is conducted in a team environment, so you have to be able to work clearly and cleanly within a team environment.

And the ability to be kind of flexible. I know a lot of people have this idea in their heads that auditors are just these "green lampshade" folks that sit in their corner and, you know, pound away on their calculator or keyboard. That's just not the case anymore.

It's just really not. You have to deal with people <u>every</u> single day, whether on your team or with the agencies. And so you have to be – "professionally pliable," I think is a good way to put it. And in terms of working in a contingency environment, <u>all</u> of those traits are just even more important.

Being pliable, because you never know what one day's going to hold, to the next. I think an understanding of sort of // the understanding of // the environment that you're in. And being able to behave and act appropriately.

I think people in their normal, everyday life go about things in one way. And then once you're in a fishbowl, it can really affect you. And so, I think having enough self-awareness to know whether or not you can live in an environment which is really a prison with the guns pointed in the opposite direction – I don't know if anybody can know that until they're in that environment.

But I think what's really important to do is, if you're in that environment and you're struggling, is to ask for help – because I've seen it. I've seen it hit a lot of people in bad ways – that have affected their lives in seriously negative ways. And so I-- because they didn't ask for help, when they're in a difficult environment.

The rub is that you just don't know how you're going to handle it till you get there. And it's dealing with any issues that arise from it once you get there that's really important.

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You're just very constricted in what you can do. You're around the same people every day. It's easy to lose sight of who you are as a person, and it's easy to lose sight of what you're there to do.

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Once you get over there, in a contingency environment, and you're restricted to the-- to a degree that you've never been restricted in your life, it can really wear on you.

And people find different outlets in different ways. I think people can get lost in their work. I think people can get lost in the gym. I think people can get lost in a bottle. And I don't know that any of those are right. And being able to maintain the proper balance of your life, and maintaining who you are is critical.

And, unfortunately, I think-- I don't "think" – unfortunately, I saw a lot of people go down the wrong road when they were in the fishbowl, you know? And as a manager, even when I was there, you know, having to take actions to address those issues because they didn't take actions to seek help, [it] was really challenging – because, like I said, when you're there, it's family.

I mean, you see the same people every day. Like, these people really do become very close. I became very close. And so dealing with those issues is really unfortunate, and really, really challenging. And, people knowing that there are ways to get help I think is really critical.

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I think the biggest challenge in conducting the work in a contingency environment or a war zone, versus doing it domestically, is that the-- that these are people that you see every day.

Normally here, if I'm conducting an audit of a USAID program, and I've got negative findings, I present those at entrance conference. I talk to them at entrance conference. I may have an interview, or 12 [interviews], with them over the course of a year.

And then I present those findings at exit conference, and I never have to really see that person ever again. In a contingency environment or a war zone, these people become your friends. I mean, these are people that you grow very, very close with, just given the nature of the Embassy life, or the forward operating base life. You see these folks. And so, having the work impact personal relationships is something that I don't think anybody really experiences here – stateside. But in a contingency environment, it happens frequently.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: AUDITS: AFGHAN DEFENSE FORCES' CAMOUFLAGE UNIFORMS

INTERVIEWER:
What were some success stories that have stuck with you that have made you feel that, you know, we did well?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Yeah. I think maybe the favorite job I've ever done, at SIGAR, came out of when I was director of Special Projects. And Audits and Inspections, they were taking sort of a 50,000-foot look at Afghan uniforms, and overall clothing requirements for the Afghan National Army and [Afghan National] Police.

And so, they didn't have the wherewithal, within the scope of that engagement, to drill down on one particular issue. And so, they spun it over to Special Projects. And it was, at the time, you know, it was a relatively small team. I think we had eight or 10 of us.

And so, the lead, the analyst in charge of that engagement and I were really it. We were the team. And so, you know, we looked at the-- why the Afghan National Army and the Department of Defense decided on this specific uniform for the Afghan National Army. Because it's-- you know, it was a weird sort of forest pattern that, you know, didn't responsibly match the environs of Afghanistan. And it just seemed odd.

So, what we found – after we dug in, and did some traveling, and uncovered some emails, and did our evaluation – was that, you know, it was a very "willy-nilly" procurement, that raised a lot of investigatory red flags. Ended up being a sole-source procurement, which also raises red flags.

The pattern was owned by one entity, when the U.S. government already had patterns that were not dissimilar, for which it wouldn't have to pay royalty fees. So, there was just red flag, red flag, red flag, red flag.

And, you know, so, we issued this report that said, "You know, here's how much we spent on this uniform, and here's how much we paid in royalties to have this pattern, and oh, by the way, it doesn't fit 95 percent of the countryside in Afghanistan, and it may actually make these people stand out more."

So, there's a lot of questions. And we kicked it to [the SIGAR] Investigations [Directorate] for additional investigation, on the fraud side. But what we found was that, you know, there wasn't a justification for it. Their-- the use of a proprietary pattern was clearly not necessary. And they probably overspent by about $70 million. And if they continue to do so, then they're going to overpay by another $70 million over the next 10 years. Something like that.

That report ultimately, then, led to, you know, a couple Congressional hearings. I had the fortune to serve as the lead author for those hearings – for the record, for the [SIGAR] Inspector General*. He's on the podium, and he's sitting next to one of the DoD representatives, and I'd just never seen anything like it.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

The DoD representative, you know, he'd get asked a question, and he said, "If it's in the report, it's accurate." You know? And it-- there-- no pushback at all on the panel, you know? It's just, "Yeah, yeah, I mean, it seems weird." And, so, DoD then, you know, they have to do a full investigation of what happened, and what it looked like, and yada yada.

So, you know, issuing a Special Project[s] report on our little team that changes the entire uniform of the Afghan National Army and saves tens of millions of taxpayer dollars – from a two-person Special Projects team, at "the little agency that could" was a pretty cool outcome.

And, that was the job that resulted in the Secretary [of the Department of Defense's] memo to the entirety of the Defense Department leadership about wasteful spending, and lackadaisical procurement.

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INTERVIEWER:
What was the difference between working on the Special Projects team and working in Audits and Inspections? How are those two categories of work different? What advantages were there to one over the other, or are there, to one over the other?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Sure. At the Special Projects team – when we had one; it's now been sort of folded into Audits and Inspections – I think the concept of it was right-on. And when the IG* stood it up, it was supposed to be, and ultimately was, sort of the "tiger team" that could take spin-off jobs.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

Because the way in which the Audit and Inspections formulae [work], you know, they go through a – at least with me – a risk assessment to determine what jobs are going to be on the FY24 plan or the FY18 plan, whatever it was. And those are the jobs that they're going to do. And they have objectives, and they notify them, and et cetera.

And so, if they identify an issue that doesn't fit within their audit objectives, they may have to initiate a new audit [and] start from the ground up so that they can fit in that tangential issue that didn't fit within their engagement. So, the idea was rather than do it that way, they could spin it over to Special Projects, who could launch a quicker evaluation or Special Project[s] report – but conducted in accordance with standards – of that smaller issue, that wouldn't require the amount of resource intensity that Audits and Inspections did at the time. It's just a more nimble group, sort of a tiger team.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: AUDITS: TASK FORCE FOR BUSINESS AND STABILITY OPERATIONS (TFBSO)

INTERVIEWER:
Are there any other examples of work that you think stands out as an example of the kind of effective oversight that an agency like this is able to accomplish, conducting it in a war or conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Yeah. I-- we spent several years, looking at the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations, which is a DoD enterprise.
[* aka TFBSO, U.S. Department of Defense]

INTERVIEWER:
And just in a nutshell, what was the purpose of that entity?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Sure. So, their goal, I suppose – and it-- I think it buttresses and sort of ruffled some feathers, because it's a largely, historically, a State and USAID endeavor, to build economic activity in the Afghan private sector and to bolster economic development.

And it was really-- it was really an economic development initiative within the Department of Defense – which, you know, I think many would say the Department of Defense is supposed to be out fighting wars. And to the extent that it can win hearts and minds at the micro level, through CERP* projects or things like that – O.K., that's one thing.
[* U.S. Department of Defense Commanders' Emergency Response Program]

But when you're spending hundreds of millions of dollars to do economic development, may be a little bit out of your wheelhouse. And so, I think that is part of the issue that the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations had-- was that, while potentially well-intentioned, this isn't the natural role of the Department of Defense.

And so, executing it in Afghanistan-- in executing it in Afghanistan, I think they ran into many, many challenges, not least of which was a lack of coordination with the State Department and USAID experts in these areas. And so, SIGAR, I think – rightly so – invested substantial resources, in both Audits and Inspections and Special Projects, to uncover the issues with Task Force for Business and Stability Operations.

You know, why it thought it would be a good idea to build a compressed natural gas gas station as a model, in Afghanistan, when it didn't work anywhere else in the country. // There were a litany of issues.

And I think that SIGAR's body of work related to Task Force Business and Stability Operations projects, as well as their work in extractive sectors, I—this sort of just ran the gamut, just sort of throwing arrows against a wall. I think it can really inform future reconstruction efforts about successes and failures in economic development by DoD. And there's quite a body of work about it.

INTERVIEWER:
Just as an aside, what does CERP stand for, and what are CERP projects?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Sure. So-- I think what DoD's done – both in Iraq and Afghanistan, to support local communities – is implement Commanders' Emergency Response Program [CERP] engagements, which are sort of micro-proj-- intended to be micro-projects sort of at the community level, to sort of win the hearts and minds of the local community, sort of as part of the counterinsurgency strategy.

You know, building a well here, building a culvert there, supporting this school, building this clinic. Sort of small-dollar things, at the local level, to foster cooperation and trust and to build a relationship with the local population – so that they don't want to shoot us. And that they support us in our efforts.

That's sort of what CERP was. And that was largely the extent of DoD economic development, the very micro level. Where, I think – some would say, and I think SIGAR's body of work has said – DoD got off the rails was by trying to take a national approach to economic development, which is, as I said, just not what they historically do.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: AUDITS: AFGHANISTAN PERSONNEL PAY SYSTEM

INTERVIEWER:
Any other examples of work that you either did, or managed, or contributed to that you think are worth mentioning?

INTERVIEWEE 15:

Really, just too many to count, you know? I-- one of the jobs that we issued, early in my tenure when I came back as Assistant Inspector General, looked at the Afghan personnel pay system.* This was the system that the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army were supposed to use to pay their people.
[* SIGAR 15-26 Audit Report
https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4015899/
Afghan National Police: More than $300 Million in Annual, U.S.-funded Salary Payments Is Based on Partially Verified or Reconciled Data];
[* SIGAR 15-54 Audit Report
https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4015911/
Afghan National Army: Millions of Dollars at Risk Due to Minimal Oversight of Personnel and Payroll Data]

You know, we came in and finally looked at the system, in its totality, and found that it was just manipulated and contained thousands of erroneous and-- erroneous entries and major data issues – that, you know, if the system had ever been implemented and overseen as intended, wouldn't have been there.

And it's just clear that the "ghost" soldier issues that the IG* had been talking about for years, you know, were validated. And so, you know, if DoD had taken that seriously in its implementation of the system and conducted the right kind of oversight, if the Afghan government had been honest in its use of the system, you know, maybe we'd have known that there, in fact, were not the 300-and-some-thousand members of the ANDSF that were purported and a lot of that money was just being pocketed.**
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
[** Afghan National Defense and Security Forces]

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One of my first jobs as a analyst in charge, we're looking at, you know, what's referred to as the Afghanistan Infrastructure Program. And it's funded by the Afghanistan Infrastructure Fund. And, part of the requirements were for-- part of the legislative requirements and the program requirements were for State and the Department of Defense – you know, they were supposed to work together on this program and implement this fund.

And so the whole idea of it was to be sort of "mega" Commander's Emergency Response Program – "mega" CERP – and to take counterinsur-- like, to spend tens of millions or hundreds of millions of dollars on counterinsurgency-type programs. Which were far exceeding what CERP would've ever spent money on. They just didn't have the authority.

So it was sort of "mega" CERP, if you will. And we were just looking at that job. And this is back in 2011, 2012. And even though they were supposed to cite what the counterinsurgency elements were and how they were going to measure it, and what the outcomes were, DoD just seemed to have no interest in actually doing that.

Their counterinsurgency plan, and associated outcomes for each individual program, is maybe a paragraph. I mean, it was a check-the-box exercise for them, in order to implement these massive projects. And so, you know, we saw things-- we saw them spending $40 million on short term electrical solutions in Kandahar, to keep the lights on in the hotbed of the Taliban – this birthplace of the Taliban – in order to gain some counterinsurgency benefits.

And their idea was, "O.K., well, we're going to spend this $40 million" – or whatever it was – "you know, just for a year while we build a power line down from Kabul to replace that system." Our report said, "There's no indication that you're ever going to get that power line done ever – much less, in the time that's going to be required, that you're saying is going to be required – to fund this bridging solution."

Well, they couldn't believe it. You know, "How dare you say that we're not planning for the insur-- our COIN*, counterinsurgency? How dare you say that we're not accounting for COIN appropriately and measuring COIN, and building programs that support COIN and all that?"
[* acronym for counterinsurgency]

And our report essentially said, "O.K., it's great. This-- maybe-- there are COIN benefits to keeping the power on in Kabul, or in Kandahar, for this year. But, when you turn them off, because you didn't complete this power line, is that counterinsurgency, or is that creating insurgency?"

And, you know, they looked at us like we had three heads. Well, two years later, they turned the power off in Kandahar. The bridge-- the power lines never got built. They're still not built, to bring power down from Kabul. And so, you know, building expectations without any real idea that-- they had an idea, but it was unexecutable, with zero evidence that it could possibly compe-- be completed in the time that they were saying it could be completed.

It was just totally unrealistic. And conveying that to the Department of Defense, it landed with a thud.

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We're not the ones that design programs. We're not the ones that design projects. We're not the ones that put forward the requirements and the milestones and the performance metrics associated with that.

We just balance against that criteria. And determine what happened, and what didn't happen, and why. So, I think, unfortunately, folks that are implementing programs in contingency environments often have a lack of contextual understanding, and then get upset when we point out that their project was unrealistic, in the way that it was conceived.

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When we have particularly sensitive reports, the [SIGAR] agency leadership – since I've been here – is supportive, but they ask you the tough, tough questions. You know, you better be able to defend your

work. And that's why I said earlier, you know, the kind of person that it takes to do this job, you have to have a thick skin, because you're going to be in a conference room, and you're going to be getting hammered with tough questions.

And especially if there's-- if it's a sensitive report, there may be a testimony around it, and the IG* has to go up and defend it, he's going to-- he's a former prosecutor. And you're going to sit at a table, and he's going to drill you and prosecute you alongside his general counsel.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

So just two lawyers going at you to make sure that you are buttoned-up and squared away, and that everything that we're saying in our report is indeed unimpeachable. Once you pass that test, they'll stand by you. And if you don't pass that test, you're going to have to go back and do more work so that you can pass the test. And that's the way it should be. You know, that's the way I treat my teams as well.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
What things could, should this agency have done differently, or better, in conducting this kind of oversight in a war zone?
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INTERVIEWEE 15:
I think one thing that the agency's struggled with is employee retention. And, that's been true since SIGAR was conceived in 2008. I think if, earlier on, we would have been more cognizant of the employee-retention issues, and taken meaningful action to address those – both with the Office of Personnel Management, Office of Management and Budget, and with our Hill stakeholders – we could've had better outcomes, both with personnel and timeliness and product issuance.

We had so much churn, for years – both at the staff level and in leadership level, and the middle-management level – that it's really hard to maintain continuity of operations. We've been able to do it, largely, but it was by hook or by crook.

I mean, we-- you know, we've had "to rob Peter to pay Paul," take people from this team to go to that team, and, you know, temporary promotions, and just do what we can. And I think, you know, if we'd had some of the incentives earlier on – like competitive status, or some knowledge about what would happen to us if the agency closed, or multi-year funding, just some indication of what the longevity of the agency would be – I think it would've really helped people to stay onboard longer.

And we would've been able to hang onto our talent and do <u>even more</u> work than we did. And, like I said, I think we've achieved tremendous outcomes for the size of our organization. But I think if there's a little bit more attention paid at the planning levels of the organization, for how challenging it is to keep young talent, especially <u>young</u> talent – I think we could've even done better.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line, what did you learn about Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 15:
It's a beautiful place, filled with great people. I think, you know, despite what you read, these people, they want a better life. They are dedicated and committed to achieving it. And, despite sort of the tone at the top – from, you know, some folks – about corruption in the Afghan government, and all the issues, and the litany of issues that we've experienced, and the harsh and horrible, repressive views of the Taliban, those don't represent the views of the Afghan people that I interacted with, and I interacted with a lot.

These are largely folks that are getting-- are sort of stuck in a constant civil war. And now there may not be guns blasting in that civil war, as there has been for the past 40 years. But it's just because the voices are being so harshly repressed.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
So after the collapse two years ago this week, the withdrawal two years ago this week, how has that turn of events affected how you think about the work that you do and have done?
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INTERVIEWEE 15:
I think it just makes me sad. It makes me sad that our work has pointed out so many deficiencies over the years, leading up to the collapse in the Afghan government and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, and it makes me sad the way that the federal agencies conducted their work, and the short-sightedness, and the constant rotations, and the lack of ownership – that we observed, from those federal agencies. And if there's a little bit more commitment to mission, overall, rather than commitment to the six months that they were there, or the year that they were there, I think that would have helped things immensely.

And so, when I look back on our work leading up to the collapse, I'm extraordinarily proud of it. I think we pointed out that this was a bit of a house of cards. I think we said as much in our reporting. And it just didn't get heard very well.

And, like I said, I don't know that-- I know that SIGAR's reporting, if everything that we ever said was taken to heart – I don't know that would have changed the outcome, but it could help. And so I look back on that period with sadness.

And I look back on the last two years, since the collapse on our work, and I couldn't be more proud that we've been able to continue our work and to respond to Congressional directives, and to nimbly adjust our planning, to respond to the emergent issues of our time.

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WHAT DID SIGAR ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
So, overall, has there-- what perhaps brings you to a moment, in the sweep of your entire career here, when you might've thought to yourself, "We really did well"? Is it one of the examples you already cited? Is it something else? If you had to pick the penultimate moment when you thought, "This is why I'm doing this."

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Wow. That's a big question.

INTERVIEWER:
If there isn't one, there isn't one. I just was curious to know if you ever had a moment like that.

INTERVIEWEE 15:
Huh. I would say-- because it's so rare, that when we get our recommendations included in legislation, that's probably about as good as it gets for an auditor. You know, we get the agency to concur with our recommendations all the time. But not always.

And sometimes when they don't, we raise it to the Hill. And sometimes when they do, we raise it to the Hill too, just to make sure that they take appropriate action. And so I can think of a few times when our work has resulted in legislative accomplishments. And that is really, really cool.

Less cool, but the cynic in me has to say it too, is when I get to say, "I told you so." And, there are times when, if the agency just would've taken us seriously – a little bit more seriously – when we issue our reports, who knows what could've happened?

You know, I don't think that any-- I don't think that SIGAR's reports, recommendations would've changed the outcome in Afghanistan. I don't believe that. But could it have helped, if we'd have been taken a little bit more seriously? I do believe that.

And, it's unfortunate that's where we're at now. But, you know, we issued a lot of recommendations about lack of capacity in the Afghan government. We issued a lot of reports about a lack of capacity in [the] Afghan National Defense Security Forces.

Issued a lot of reports talking about putting the cart before the horse and, you know, doing "X" when they had no indication that they were ever going to achieve "X." So how about we start with "A" – before we get all the way through the alphabet?

And-- you know, it's a sha-- it's tragic what's happened to Afghanistan over the past couple years. The repressive policies of the Taliban have really, really, really hurt the Afghan people. And if I could go back and do it all over again, I'd have done the same work – but I'd have shouted a lot louder.

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