SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 21: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 02/26/24

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 21:
My name is [NAME]. Most people call me [NAME]. I am the deputy director of the Research and Analysis Directorate, here at SIGAR.

JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWER:
And what does that job entail? What are your responsibilities?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Manage a team that our first and primary responsibility is putting together and publishing a Quarterly Report to the United States Congress and to the American people. We also put together, every two years, for the new Congress, a "High-Risk List" – of the areas of reconstruction and U.S. assistance that are at great high risk for fraud, waste, abuse of taxpayer funds.

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CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
How long have you worked at SIGAR?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I started at SIGAR in 2011, so almost 13 years.

INTERVIEWER:
So before we talk about your career at this agency, I want to go back in time, a little bit, and ask you about the trajectory that brought you to this kind of work and to this agency. So, when you were growing up, what were you interested in? What kind of things did you study in school? Where did you go, after high school?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
When I was around 10, I had an uncle who gave me a sage piece of advice that always stuck with me, which was, "Read *The New York Times* every day, because that way, you'll be able to hold a conversation with anyone about any subject at any moment."

And at 10 years old, I didn't really internalize that right away. But my parents did have a subscription to *The New York Times*. I started reading it every day. And I became interested in foreign policy, and, well, foreign policy. And so I studied that in school, when I went to grad school.

INTERVIEWER:
Where did you go to college first?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I went to Yeshiva University in New York. Studied economics, have a degree in economics. And then several years later, I moved out of New York and went to Georgia State University for grad school, and studied international relations. And got my degree in 2000 from Georgia State, and then worked in-- local politics-- or state politics – Georgia State politics for the Democratic Party of Georgia.

Did that for a few years, and then was given the opportunity to work on Capitol Hill, for a member from Georgia at the time – he's no longer there – and worked [for him] as a military legislative assistant. And he was on the Armed Services Committee, so I did his Armed Services Committee work, his military work, his foreign policy work, and whole host of other domestic issues.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you come from a background that had military service, either your previous [family] generations, or other people? Well, how did you get into that role, for military affairs research for your Congressman?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
That's a good question. My grandfather served in World War II. My father was in the [U.S.] Army Reserves, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. But that was the extent, really, of the military service and history, from our family.

I don't know exactly what drew me to foreign policy and international relations. I think it was the power dynamics between nations, and then studying developing countries in school, and how they transition from, you know, development to developed – again, power dynamics, military might, and that whole geopolitical relationship.

INTERVIEWER:
So, tell me about your transition away from the world of politics and the Legislative Branch [of the U.S. Government].

INTERVIEWEE 21:

It was a great transition, [LAUGHS] something that I really welcomed. I think the Executive Branch – working for the Executive Branch – [is] sort of like "the adults in the room," and-- where you're not beholden to politics. You are policy-centric, policy-focused, which is what my interest has always been.

Even though I worked on Capitol Hill, I never liked the absolute quest for power that you saw in the halls of Congress. At the time, it was bad. Now, it's even worse. And so, to move away from that and to be strictly policy-driven is of great interest and very satisfying.

INTERVIEWER:
So tell me about the first steps away from that previous environment and towards this one.

INTERVIEWEE 21:
It's very simple. It was a very simple transition. My boss lost his election, in the Tea Party wave in 2010. And someone I used to work with, a former colleague of mine, was working at SIGAR as an auditor – initially, as an auditor, and then [in] Congressional Relations.

There was an opening in Congressional Relations. He thought of me. I interviewed for the job, and took it. I never really thought I would go back anywhere near-- in fact, I promised myself I wouldn't go anywhere near the halls of Congress again.

But alas, I did, in the early days. My boss at the time, who hired me, she was writing the Economic and Social Development Section of the Quarterly Report. And she wanted to transition away from that aspect of her job. And I was very happy to take it, because research analysis was really right up my alley. And so, I took over that first quarter in 2011. I took over part of that role from her, and then took it over fully, thereafter.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

At the time at SIGAR, the two directorates were linked. You had-- we were known-- the Research [and] Analysis Directorate was known at the Information Management Directorate, IMD. And they are the ones who did the Quarterly Report, all the same roles as what the Research and Analysis Directorate does now.

And that was attached to the Congressional Relations Directorate. That eventually split off, when IG Sopko* came onboard. And I fully transitioned to IMD, [the] Information Management Directorate, and now the Research and Analysis Directorate.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And I started out, in those early years, as the economic and social development subject matter expert. Worked on all the Quarterly Reports and, eventually, transitioned to the Deputy Directorate, senior—

well, first the senior subject matter expert, and then the Deputy Director of the Research and Analysis Directorate.

INTERVIEWER:
So how good a fit is this work for you, your interests, and your skills?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I think it's a perfect fit. And I don't say that lightly. // I really enjoy the role I'm in right now. And I especially enjoy it because of where I came from and the roles I undertook before. I like to say that, you know, we were on the front lines – doing all the grunt work and, you know, getting our hands dirty in the data.

And I think, because of that, and because of all that experience, and the long hours, I was able to transition into this role much easier and much more effectively – because I know what my team has to do, and what they do. And I am so appreciative of it. And I'm able to guide them and advise them because I was there. I did that job. And it's made, I think, my relationship with them, with my team, that much better.

INTERVIEWER:
So this agency and through those two Directorates has had very important responsibility, which is keeping the Congress informed about what is going on in that country [in which] we have mounted such an effort to try to do reconstruction and also humanitarian activities and efforts. How heavily does that responsibility fall on the people who do that work, such as you, as you were and now in a higher role?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I think it's a heavy responsibility, and one that is very important, not only for the history of Afghanistan, but-- and for Congress, and decision-makers, policymakers, but also for the archives. When historians look at this conflict and the U.S. involvement in it, they will be able to see, methodically, a quarterly snapshot of the goings-on in Afghanistan. And that's, I think, vitally important – as a lessons learned, as what to look for, avoid, emulate in the future. And I take pride in it. And I know our team takes a lot of pride in our work.

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INTERVIEWER:
So we've talked to people working for this agency in a variety of roles, from criminal investigative agents, to auditors, to engineers, to criminal prosecutors, to lessons-learned analysts. And now, speaking with you about the [Research and Analysis] Directorate that you're part of, what's the significance of the kind of work that your Directorate does within this larger picture of this agency? // What does RAD bring to this picture that the other parts of the agency don't do?

INTERVIEWEE 21:

That's a great question. I think one of the pivotal roles that the Research and Analysis Directorate plays is providing that 30,000-foot view of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. Whereas audits and evaluations are high-- are usually very specific in their scope of what they're looking at and analyzing, and the [SIGAR] Lessons Learned Program, for example, is providing a broader view of a long-term view of a certain issue area, we are providing that snapshot, the most current up-to-date snapshot of all the information that is available on Afghanistan at the moment.

And it's been a tremendous resource for our other Directorates and for SIGAR, at large, [for] doing their work – because some of their information that they're working with, because of their limited scope or because of their broad, you know, years-long process to produce a specific report, we have the most up-to-date information to provide to them for use in their products. So it's less dated than some of the information they've originally received from the agencies.

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INTERVIEWER:
You mentioned a few minutes ago, the idea of understanding, because you had done it yourself – the grunt work, being on the front lines of doing this kind of work. I wonder if you could just sort of describe for me what is involved in this kind of work, you know, what is the grunt work? What are the front lines of this work?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
It is-- the front lines are a tremendous amount of research, open-source and from U.S. government agencies, supplemented with classified work – as needed, as necessary, a lot of background information, where you can help put the information you're seeing in front of you into context.

And that doesn't happen right away. It comes with a lot of experience, and a lot of long hours, tight deadlines, where people are working 12, 14 hours a day, if not more, under strict deadlines. And we have never missed a Quarterly Report production deadline, since we started.

And we take a lot of pride in that. And that-- because people are working hard and take their work seriously, there's a lot of writing, a lot of rewriting, a lot of discussion – about what we're seeing, the trends, trying to analyze things in a coherent way, and compare that to previous years, previous quarters, and predict, at least, internally, what we may be seeing in the future to help guide our future research efforts and the questions we ask of U.S. government agencies.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So in your time with this agency, have you had the opportunity to travel to Afghanistan? If so, how frequently, for how long did you go?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I traveled to Afghanistan once, for about a week, for several meetings, and to just get a feel for the situation on the ground. Our Directorate, the Research and Analysis Directorate, has had more opportunities to go. I have always tried to provide my staff the opportunity to go first, before me, because they were very keen on going, and-- or they were on a specific mission to gather certain information, and have certain meetings. So I always felt it was more important for them to have those opportunities than for me to go.
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INTERVIEWER:
What were your impressions, when you went for that week?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Well, you're basically relegated to the U.S. Embassy compound, the ISAF* compound. I liken it to an open-air prison, in a sense. You're not allowed off the grounds, and, unless you have, you know, cleared it through U.S. security, and have security accompanying you, and have all that, you know, worked out ahead of time.
[* International Security Assistance Force]

Personally, I always felt that there was nothing that I wanted to do that was worth putting U.S. security personnel at risk for me or for these meetings. So I opted not to go back, unless it was something I felt was really worthwhile.

And they were worthwhile-- as I mentioned, there were worthwhile reasons to go, and objects of information that-- targets of information that we wanted and needed – that the research and analysis team was going. I didn't feel like I needed to go, as well, and have that added person and that added responsibility for U.S. security.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN (cont'd.)

INTERVIEWER:
My understanding is that there is a significant amount of interaction with the different federal departments and agencies that have been working in Afghanistan. Can you give me a sense of that kind of interaction – how much, how in depth, how often? What does that look like?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Well, our interactions with U.S. government agencies take place several times over each quarter. We ask the agencies a fair amount of questions. We're asking for data that only-- that they are uniquely situated to provide to us, made all the more important since we are no longer on the ground in Afghanistan.

Some of that interaction has been contentious, some not. We have had a fairly-- our-- the Research and Analysis Directorate has had a fairly good relationship with most of the agencies on the ground,

you know? And we're trying to, in a sense – and this is SIGAR-wide – pry information out of the agencies, to help inform Congress and the U.S. public.

That's not always easy. There's a lot of information that agencies don't want to provide. There's a lot of back-and-forth with them. And they will only answer, sometimes, the information-- as tightly as the questions that we're asking for are written – that's what they will provide.

So I'm always trying to make sure that our questions are written in a way to elicit the best response from the agencies. They are not always so forthcoming. And we have to, sometimes, go back and forth with them, several times, in order to get the answers we're really looking for. That takes place, again, quarterly. And, you know, we try to have established good re-- you know, ongoing, good, professional relationships with them.

And the State Department recently has offered to us the opportunity to speak offline about what they're seeing on the ground, and not-for-attribution, which I think-- which is the first time they've really ever offered that to our Directorate, the Research and Analysis Directorate. We are planning on taking them up on that offer. And hopefully, that will help inform future questions and further lines of inquiry, to help keep the U.S. public informed.

INTERVIEWER:
That was offered without solicitation or with solicitation?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Solicitation from SIGAR, at large, part of the ongoing relationship that the State Department has with SIGAR – that did not come from our Directorate.

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INTERVIEWER:
What constitutes a typical [SIGAR] Quarterly Report? What things are you digging into and reporting to the Congress about, in terms of Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Our Quarterly Report has changed over the years, as the situation on the ground in Afghanistan has changed. // It typically started out with an essay on an issue – you know, a timely issue, something that was relevant, at that time, whether it was security, education, health, status of women, those types of things.
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Then, we would dive into the security situation in Afghanistan, which wasn't good [LAUGHS] for the history of our investment there.

Also, the bulk of reconstruction funds, at the time, went towards training, building up-- training, and equipping, and building up the Afghan security forces. So a lot of time and effort was devoted to security issues.

Then, we had governance issues that we discussed. And that was, you know, helping Afghanistan build democratic governance, democratic coalitions, providing public services to its people – on the national, sub-national, local levels.

Then, we got into economic and social development, which was, I think, the largest of the written sections in the Quarterly Report. And I'm a little biased, because I used to write the Economic and Social Development section. So it's near and dear to my heart.

And that had to-- that dealt with economic issues, GDP, currency evaluations, banking, all the things that go into, you know, economic analysis, and then, also, social development, which encompassed education, health, human rights, the power sector, extractives – trying to think what else – [a] whole litany of development issues in Afghanistan.

Then, we also are mandated, by law, to provide information on what the other U.S. government agencies are doing in Afghanistan, their own IG[s']* reporting – that took up another section. We talked further about SIGAR work, and then statutory language, et cetera.
[* inspectors general's]

That's the basics of what the Quarterly Report was. Now, we do still-- you know, after the collapse of the Afghan government and the fact that the U.S. is no longer on the ground in Afghanistan, we have transitioned to the new realities.

And so while we may have an essay, we are also providing up-to-date information on the status of what the U.S. is spending in Afghanistan during the quarter, so what is going on during U.S. assistance now. Then, we have an entire U.S. assistance section, which goes into further detail.

The first portion is more of a synopsis-- the first portion of what's going on in Afghanistan now is more of a synopsis, that kind of supplements or replaces any essay that might be in there. Then U.S. assistance, how the money is being spent in Afghanistan, program by program.

And then, we have Recent Developments, which kind of incorporates all of the previous sections that were in the Quarterly Report. And it-- where it's not broken out specifically as security governance and economic and social development.

Obviously, we're not doing security. We-- we're not working with Afghan security forces anymore, so we're not spending money on that. And we're not-- the United States doesn't recognize the Taliban at this moment, as the formal Afghan government, so we're not providing any assistance to the de facto authorities.

So recent developments kind [of]-- incorporates the rest of the development in U.S. assistance programming – in health, education, which still goes on. And people don't understand that what was considered reconstruction – traditional reconstruction included development at that time, in the before times – it's still happening now.

The-- there are a lot of programs still going on, funded by USAID and the State Department, that are continuing today, in these areas, in agriculture, and, again, health and development, education, and some other areas. So "Recent Developments" are kind of a catch-all for the rest of development in U.S. assistance programming going on.

We also talk about the status of women, and the deteriorating human rights record of the Taliban authorities, life under the Taliban. We talk about security, as it relates to terrorism, terrorist organizations, attacks. We talk about economic issues.

Admittedly, a lot of it's truncated, compared to what it used to be in prior years. The information is not flowing as freely and where the United States isn't providing as much assistance as it used to. But programming is still going on. There's a lot of money still being spent in Afghanistan. And I think we play-- continue to play a very important role in informing the public about what's going on.

INTERVIEWER:
And how long did the Quarterly Reports generally run, both when they were at their biggest and now? These reports are how long?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I think, in the olden days, in the earlier days, the Quarterly Reports were upwards of 200 pages. Now, I think they are more in the realm of 130, 150 pages, depending on the quarter. So it shrunk, considerably. And we are trying to reflect the realities on the ground, and be kind to the readers.

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SIGAR has a history of documenting the information we find out. That is one of our main roles, as an inspector general, as an impartial arbiter of information. And we come across information, sometime-- you know, from agencies, provided to us, that are very, well, uncharacteristically truthful.

And we often publicize that information, because we feel it's an obligation for the people to know. Sometimes, the agencies don't like that, or it didn't-- or it slipped through their vett-- own vetting process, because they didn't really intend for this information to become public.

And that has caused agencies angst, at times. And so that has created friction between us and agencies-- or where agencies have provided us information and we have interpreted it a different way than they interpret it. And they don't agree with some of SIGAR's findings over the course of our time.

And, again, that has caused-- that has caused friction between us and the agencies. And it is not our job to be friends with the agencies. We are an independent organization mandated to provide truth. And we speak truth to power. And so I think agencies are also mandated, by law, to cooperate with us.

That level of cooperation has, you know, ebbed and flowed over the years. And I think having conversations, even not for attribution, is very helpful to-- for everybody – to discuss issues, for, you know, line-level analysts to talk to their counterparts at the different agencies and have, you know, meeting of the minds, and to see different perspectives that aren't always borne out by written responses.
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INTERVIEWER:
In the world of journalism, you know, you have categories of not-for-attribution. You also have categories of off-the-record. What happens if a department or agency shares something that this agency feels the public should know, but it was only provided under a heading with some restriction on it?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
In those moments – and there have been more than a few – IG Sopko* has determined it appropriate to raise those issues in the public sphere, sometimes directly with Congress, sometimes, you know, with the power of the press. And that has caused some conflict with the agencies who have not appreciated that approach.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

But, again, our role as an agency is to provide information to the people. And we have tried to go-- in some cases, tried to go back with-- you know, to the agencies. And this happens, actually, quite often.

With some responses that they provide us in the Quarterly Report, some of it is categorized as "sensitive but unclassified" – where, if that information is provided to us with that categorization, we go back to the agencies and, with how we have written up this information in the Quarterly Report.

We always give the agencies an opportunity to vet our drafts, to either offer comment, offer clarity, make corrections of something we have interpreted incorrectly. Or, in those kinds of cases where they've categorized things where we would normally not make it public, we've written it up in such a way to make it easier for clearance.

And we've asked them for-- to clear this information as written, or if they have suggestions on how we might make this information public that doesn't jeopardize any sensitivities. We have had, also, cases in years' past, where the Defense Department has provided us information.

We have cleared it through them, gotten approval through the vetting process, we've gone through our regular production cycle, and have published the Quarterly Report, only for the Defense Department to come back and retroactively classify information. We've had to destroy – in one instance, at least – we've had to destroy published, written, you know, printed Quarterly Reports.

But they're-- you know, sometimes, there have been information that, at the time, have been already sent out to Congress and embargoed copies. And they've retroactively classified information. They caused a lot of problems.

And, I think, in one case, after a lot of back-and-forth with IG Sopko and our general counsel, they subsequently declassified it again – so no harm, no foul. But we have always provided agencies an opportunity to vet our information. And that is not just for the Quarterly Report. That's for every product that SIGAR produces that uses agency information.

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INTERVIEWER:
To make sure that I understand, this experience with this agency was the first time that you had any responsibility for any kind of substantive reporting about the way our policies were impacting developments in a country that the U.S. was involved in, correct?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Correct.

INTERVIEWER:
So doing that work when a conflict zone is involved, a war zone, a place where there [is] combat, how does that make the work more challenging?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Security is a huge issue for all types of oversight work, not just for our work, but for any-- for implementing any development projects. So this applies to all implementing U.S. government agencies, from the Defense Department, USAID,* State, Treasury.*****
[* U.S. Agency for International Development]
[** U.S. Department of State]
[*** U.S. Department of the Treasury]

Treasury was heavily impacted for their programming. I don't think-- you know, of course, Treasury wasn't nearly as involved in this reconstruction effort in Afghanistan as the other agencies. But I remember distinctly them having to cancel, push back a lot of their advisory work because they just-- it wasn't safe enough for them to go.

For USAID and the State Department, they had a hard time implementing programs, over-- and overseeing their own programs, because of the security situation. So they couldn't go out physically, often, to go and see the work on the ground of what they were paying for.

So they had to rely on their own implementing partners and their own implementing partner reporting, which is never as good as kicking the tires on your own.

It affected SIGAR's work, as well. While our people, who are in country, were able to get out with security protection, their own work-- our own oversight work was hampered by it. As far as the Research and Analysis Directorate and getting information from the State Department or from implementing agencies as a whole, and the Defense Department, if they couldn't get out and they didn't have good insight into what was happening, that affected the quality of their responses that we were-- of the questions we were asking them.

So it all trickles down. Security is everything.

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INTERVIEWER:
In the whole sweep of your experience, doing this kind of work for this agency, what were some of the challenges that you faced in trying to do that work?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Well, I would say, first and foremost, the biggest challenges are mastering the information. There's a steep learning curve, when you first come onboard, especially a country you're not that familiar with, in-depth, as we are now.

We delve into the minutiae. And to master that minutiae takes a long time. And you, in the beginning, lack institutional memory. That's one of the things that SIGAR has, is a lot of institutional memory. We have a lot of people here.

And this is a little – I'm going on a tangent – we have a lot of people here that have been with SIGAR for a long time, you know? I'm here almost 13 years. We have a lot [of] you know, people who have that institutional memory, that can put things into context that other people don't have, other agencies don't have, we have, historically, had less turnover than the other agencies.

And you might have heard IG Sopko and, maybe, some other SIGAR employees talk about the "annual lobotomy" that a lot of U.S. government agencies had in Afghanistan, where annual rotations took away a lot of that institutional memory. And so, you know, we have carried that, for the most part. And that kind of sets us apart from some of the other government agencies.

So getting back to your original question about overcoming challenges. Really, time. It takes time to learn, and understand, and to be able to see patterns, trends, problems, challenges, and successes – in the U.S. reconstruction effort.

So that was one. I would say another huge challenge for us in-- I'll speak for our group, you know, the Research and Analysis Directorate – would be getting to a sweet spot with the agencies, you know. One of our major sources of information come from the agencies themselves.

We ask what we refer to as "data-call" questions, could-- you know, like RFIs, requests for information. And, in the beginning, there was-- we were getting-- we were in quite in a groove with those agencies, in the types of information we were asking and the types of information that they would provide.

And over the years, we have established some sort of understanding with each other [about] the types of information we're looking for. We have at-- you know, provided a little background

explanation of why we're asking certain questions of the type of information we're trying to get, and to work with those agencies, the best way forward to get the information we're asking for.

Again, I've mentioned this earlier, that there is a lot of tension between the agencies and SIGAR – overcoming some of that tension, coming to some mutual understanding, where they understand the-- why we're asking the questions, why-- what type of information we are trying to provide Congress and the American people.

And once they see our motivation is not to attack them, but to help shed light on their successes, on their challenges, of what it takes to implement programs in a combat zone, I think we have a better relationship with them. And over time, over the years, we've gotten better information out of them.

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There was one time where we were trying to get specific information from the Defense Department about the status, the categorization of Afghan security forces, the quality of the Afghan security forces. They used to be rated in certain categories. And for a while, the Defense Department was providing us that information.

And then, when the information was not so flattering, they started to hide behind the classification aspect of it. They said it was classified – not by them, but by President Ghani,* at the time-- and by their na-- by Afghanistan's national security advisor.
[* Ashraf Ghani, the former government of Afghanistan's president, 2014-2021]

So it wasn't DoD* classifying it. They were doing it. This information came from the Afghans, themselves. And the Afghans were classifying it. We obviously pushed back on that, went back and forth. And for a long time, we were not getting that information anymore, which was a key metric in how Congress was viewing how the war was going.
[* U.S. Department of Defense]

And so we were not able to provide Congress with that information that they desperately wanted. That was-- I don't even remember if that was eventually overcome. I know IG Sopko went to Congress with this information, went to the Secretary of Defense with this information, if I recall correctly, trying to pry this information that was previously unclassified to us, again.

Especially as the [former government of Afghanistan's] security forces were collapsing, that information, I don't believe, was ever provided to us again. And that's-- you know, and the issue of transparency, and accessibility, and oversight – that, you know, we weren't able to fulfill our mandate because one agency was hiding behind the classification of information.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
What were some of the successes that marked the kind of work that your group did within this agency? Were there moments when something worked out a certain way and you thought, "We did well"?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
We've had a variety of challenges, getting the Quarterly Report out on time, most of it external, some of it internal. We have overcome data challenges. We've overcome administrative challenges. And we've always gotten-- we've always hit our production deadline.

We've always met our mandate, by law, to get the report out. Very proud of that, because some of these challenges were almost insurmountable – to getting a report out in a timely manner.

We have also had a lot of success. We've gotten a lot of good press from our Quarterly Reports.

I don't think there's much that the agencies can really argue with our reporting. And so we have received very good reviews from Congress – held up as, you know, our reports have been held up in hearings, have been referenced in Congress, on the floor, in floor speeches.

We've gotten great press out of it. Researchers have looked at it. And it's been great resources for analysts outside of the U.S. government, who look into this kind of work. So we take a lot of pride, and consider those successes.

Getting the information out there and people using that information, that is a success. Other successes have been our other flagship product that we produce every-- for the new Congress, every other year, "High-Risk Lists." That's modeled after the [U.S.] Government Accountability Office [GAO] reports.

And we have created our own. // And I think that has also met with great reviews, been very helpful to policymakers, and offer questions for policymakers, at the end of each section, that we've identified at high risk, questions for policymakers to consider, moving forward.

And so, if it makes a difference, if it helps move policy-- again, we don't advocate certain policies. That's not our role. It's out of our lane. But we can offer questions for policymakers to consider, that lead them into a certain direction that-- and if it-- if that changes policy, all the better.
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There have been aspects of our reporting, both in the Quarterly Report and the High-Risk List, that have changed-- that have made it into legislation in Congress, that have been, you know, made into law. So I think those are tremendous successes.

INTERVIEWER:
How does it feel when that happens?

INTERVIEWEE 21:

It's validating. It's affirmation that the hard work we're doing makes a difference, that we're on the right track, that our analysis is sound.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

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

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I think SIGAR's dogged pursuit of the truth is something we've done really well. We, as an independent agency, aren't beholden to anyone else. We're beholden to Congress and the American people. We're beholden to truth. We're not beholden to an agency's interests.

So I think we've done really well in getting the truth out to people. And what we have gathered, especially in the Lessons Learned Program Directorate – and that has come out in *The Washington Post,* that what the American people were being told, over time, was not necessarily accurate and truthful.

It was a spin on information that the Admin-- that previous Administrations wanted the narrative to be. Clearly, that narrative has been exposed by our work. And that's a good thing. We've done that really well, being able to speak to people, to getting information, not accepting narratives by certain interest groups, whether agencies or otherwise, to drive the stories out there, to-- you know, to drive the history books.

I think, as one person at a think tank, I heard on a podcast recently, said, "If more agencies were reporting, doing the type of work SIGAR was doing, and reporting the truth that SIGAR was," he would have more confidence in his government than he does.

And that, just hearing it, you know, just hearing it as, you know, a member of the public, I kind of took pride in that as well. I thought, again, validating for SIGAR's work, that we speak the truth and that information is getting out to the people.

INTERVIEWER:
How important is nonpartisanship, the lack of politics, to SIGAR being able to do this kind of work and have that kind of review result?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Oh. I think it's imperative. I think if we didn't have the latitude to just follow the truth and were beholden to a political party or political interest, we would be worthless. That's one of the things I'm-- one of the main reasons – not "one of" – it is the main reason I am grateful to work for the Executive Branch and not the Legislative Branch [of the U.S. Government] anymore, is because of those politics and the dynamics, the power-politic dynamic on the Hill.

It is crucial to doing good, independent, objective work. Without it, you couldn't do it.

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I think the [SIGAR] Quarterly Reports to Congress are the gold standard and, again, provide the best snapshot of real-time information that the people can get.
//
We've done over 60 Quarterly Reports. We've honed our skills. We provide the most up-to-date information available.
//
I think the "Status of Funds" section of the Quarterly Report might be the authoritative U.S. government source of information on how U.S. funding has been appropriated and spent in Afghanistan. It is a whole of government view of financial spending in Afghanistan.

And we know, and have heard from the [U.S. Congress'] Appropriations Committees, more than a few times, of how grateful they were for all this information in one place. And even the Appropriations Committees didn't have this holistic view of how U.S. money was allocated, appropriated, dispersed in Afghanistan.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
What could/should this agency have done differently, have done better?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
One thing that comes to mind is we are blessed. Because of our good work, we are blessed with a wealth of information. We have collected, over the years, a lot of data. Some of it is a little unorganized. And a lot of it is stovepiped. And I think that SIGAR could do still, as we-- or could have done a lot better-- // SIGAR could have done better in sharing information between Directorates, so it wasn't so stovepiped. I think that's an inherent problem in all organizations, public or private, communication. And I don't think, internally, we communicated as well with each other over time, as we could have or should have.

INTERVIEWER:
And what do you think the reasons were for that? Are they the typical reasons that you will find in organizations or was there something specific to how this particular agency was organized?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Again, I think it's inherent in all organizations. I don't think there was anything nefarious in it. I think it's just a byproduct of having so much information that wasn't logistically or coherently stored in a certain way that it was accessible by all.

So every Directorate obviously organized and stores their information how it best fits their work and is helpful to them. I kind of exclude [the SIGAR] Investigations [Directorate] because a lot of their work is very sensitive, and can not be shared or should not be shared, during an ongoing investigation.

But even with Investigations, we have-- they have gotten a lot better, in recent times, of sharing information they have that can be used publicly across [SIGAR] Directorates. Again, I don't think it's anything too nefarious, I think it's just-- we have such a volume of information that needs to be sorted, that needs to be organized, in a way that's most helpful to everyone else. And I don't think that was done over time.

And also, people and different Directorates are busy doing what's in front of them. Everyone's on deadline. Everyone's got milestones to hit. And sharing of information takes more time, more effort and doesn't happen.

I-- maybe, I'm biased. I really try-- I try, personally, and I try it, Directorate-wide, in the Research and Analysis Directorate, to share information, not only amongst ourselves, but with the other Directorates. If I know – and I do this, I did this regularly – if I know a [SIGAR] Directorate – Audits, or Lessons Learned – they are working on something specific, on a specific product, a specific, you know, research area, and I have information that I think will be beneficial to them, I reach out to them and share the specific information.

I don't always know, or I didn't always know, what people are working on, but when I did, I always, tried to share that information and still do. And I-- and we do this with high-side information, classified information that we come across, that can be shared, in secure facilities. And we did this, you know, with publicly available information or information that we get from the different agencies.

I think information-sharing is vital. It's like any relationship – communication is key. No different here. And try-- I think it helped, I think it was appreciated. And I think if someone was going to set up another oversight agency, they should consider how best to organize their data that could benefit everybody.

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BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE RESEARCH ANALYSTS

INTERVIEWER:
What kind of qualities, professional qualities, skills talents, but also personal characteristics, equip someone to do this kind of work that you do well? What's required?

INTERVIEWEE 21:

Well, I will speak to that from our specific Directorate. So as far as the Research and Analysis Directorate and the type of work that we do, I think it takes someone of personal integrity in their own lives, and people who take professional pride in their work.

There are no "9-to-5"-ers in our group. We work – similar to typical staff on the Hill – we work till the job is done. We don't clock in and clock out at certain times. If the-- if it requires us to work late, weekends, holiday weekends, we do it.

We've done it without complaint. I would say a majority of holiday weekends that are provided to the federal government, we don't-- we work on, because we have to, because we are deadline-driven.

So it takes someone who is not afraid of long hours, hard work, work that is scrutinized not just by-- you know, internally by our Directorate, by myself and by our director, but also by the [SIGAR] front office.*
[* SIGAR senior leadership]

So you need someone who can separate the personal from professional, who can take public criticism or critiques of their work, and always strive to be better.

And we are blessed, over the years, with great people, smart people, people who I'm just blown away by. You know, you always want to work with people better than yourself. It just elevates everybody. And I am just constantly impressed with the people that have worked on our team and continue to work for us. I am so lucky to work with highly-motivated, smart, educated people who are willing to do great work and do whatever it takes to get the job done.

INTERVIEWER:
And the people who work in your Directorate and do this kind of work people who come from a similar background to you, in terms of their academic interests, in terms of their expertise?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I think everyone's taken their own paths to get to where we are, but I would say almost everybody who has worked for our Directorate has a graduate degree, at least. And // some have, you know, different backgrounds, business backgrounds, a lot of foreign policy backgrounds, a lot of people who have moved on to work at the State Department or other areas of federal government.

But I would say we were all-- I would say almost everyone was driven by the same love for development work, policy work. And some people were driven, you know, because they're-- you know, have close ties to Afghanistan. And no matter the-- no matter what our differences and backgrounds are or were, you know, we've all met to meet the same goal.

Very proud of our work, very proud. We have a great team. And I could not be luckier, working with the people I do.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
You've worked here for a long time. In August of 2021, the entire big picture of reconstruction changed. When the collapse occurred, when the U.S. withdrawal occurred, how did that make you feel about the work that you had been doing and continue to do?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
Well, from a personal perspective, seeing the government collapse was troubling, just for the Afghan people, themselves. All the hard work, everything that the U.S. government did to help make the lives of the Afghan people better – and they did – that went away, or that was immediately impacted and effective. And who knows if Afghans will ever recover from this?

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In terms of the work, it was an, "Oh no," moment. "How do we provide oversight in this new environment, where we have no access, anymore, to developments on the ground, where we can't "kick the tires," where our agencies that we relied on don't have boots on the ground, [so that] they can oversee, directly, their ongoing programs?"

You know, the development work didn't stop. The reconstruction, as it was defined earlier, included development work, programming. That programming was still ongoing. It was paused for a little while by the State Department and USAID, as they figured out how to move forward, themselves.

No one knew how this was all going to shake out. Everyone needed to take a step back and see how their work was going to be impacted. And SIGAR was no different.
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We didn't know how we were going to proceed with doing oversight work without a presence – a U.S. presence in Afghanistan.
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Ultimately, we know now, there's a lot less information. The types of information we're asking of agencies are a little bit different.

They don't have the insight that they once did. They don't have-- they cannot verify the information as they once might have. So that affects all types of information that we get and all the data we get. I mean, SIGAR faces similar problems of verification of information.

We have worked around that and, you know, through third-party-- through third parties, helping us provide oversight on the ground. But it is a problem. It is a huge problem. How do we effectively protect taxpayer dollars from a distance? And that is something for policymakers to really think about before the next time we-- the-- it is decided to enter into another contingency operation.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
What were your lessons learned about Afghanistan?
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INTERVIEWEE 21:
Afghanistan is a very nuanced country. There's nothing clear about it. And doing oversight in that type of environment was also nuanced. // There are different factions in Afghanistan with different interests. I don't think the United States was prepared in going into an environment they didn't fully understand.

They didn't know the players. They didn't know the tribal loyalties. They didn't know when they were being taken for a ride. They didn't know how best to effectively deal with the challenges they were facing. It was new for the United States and, quite possibly, I don't think they have learned the lessons-- I don't think the United States has learned the lessons that they should before they move into another similar situation.
//
I've learned that there's no clear answer to Afghanistan's problems. I don't think there's a clear way to provide oversight in combat situation. I think that SIGAR, because we've been focused solely on Afghanistan for so long, it's come the closest of any other U.S. government agency, in doing this type of work under these conditions – or under the conditions that were Afghanistan.

I think there's still a lot to learn. There's still a lot to learn and there's still a lot to-- you have to be flexible. There's a lesson to be-- you have to be flexible in your approach. If your approach isn't working, you have to be flexible enough to see it, and to pivot, and to be humble enough to change course.

The idea of sunk costs really shouldn't apply, when it comes to this kind of work. You just don't throw good money after bad, pursuing a certain direction, if it's not working. I think we were able to do that in our work. When we see something that didn't work, we tried to figure out a way that it would work.

If we were coming up against roadblocks, we tried to get around it, in the best way we-- you know, in the best way, tried to figure out the best way to do that. Again, the-- one of the benefits of SIGAR's work is that // we've been solely focused on Afghanistan for a really long time. We don't have competing priorities. We're not beholden to anyone. We can be honest with ourselves. And I think we were able to do that, for the most part.
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INTERVIEWER:
What did you learn about conducting oversight in a war zone, a conflict zone, a combat zone?

INTERVIEWEE 21:

I think it takes a lot of persistence. I think doing oversight in a war zone takes a lot of persistence. You have--

INTERVIEWER:
And that's on top of oversight already taking persistence not in a war zone.
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INTERVIEWEE 21:
There are a lot of challenges that may not be readily apparent. So to be able to identify that, to be able to be inquisitive enough to be unsatisfied with what's first presented to you, and to doggedly pursue new directions and verification of information, is a good lesson to be learned from this. If you care about your work, if you care about the truth, you will not accept everything at face value.
//
You continue to pursue the truth.
//
I think a lot of agencies don't want things they're not proud of or trying to hide come-- from coming to light. And so I think-- so in several instances, they have tried to push a narrative, push a public narrative and try to hide information from our-- from SIGAR doing its oversight.

And it was imperative for us, as an oversight agency, to see through that, to identify that, see through it, and to get to the truth. // Be skeptical, and don't accept, you know, information that's being provided to you, necessarily, and try to get to the truth. The truth is everything.

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I think it's incumbent upon us at SIGAR to admit that doing development work in a combat zone is inherently fraught with challenges that, perhaps, cannot be overcome. There will be, by definition of doing this work in a war zone – fraud, waste and abuse of taxpayer funds, a certain level. What level is acceptable, you know, is up to Congress and public opinion.

But admitting that up front goes a long way. The agencies would be very frustrated with some of our reports, because they didn't feel that we gave them the leeway, you know, and to afford them the leeway that was due to them, you know, working in such difficult circumstances.

Again, it's not for me to decide, you know, who was right and who was wrong in that situation, but it definitely caused a lot of problems. And, you know, that's-- one of the good things about letting the agencies vet the information that we-- our draft reports across the board at SIGAR – was not that we always-- you know, we didn't necessarily change our reporting based on their vetting comments.

If something was inaccurate, of course we would, you know, correct any inaccuracies. But it gave the agencies an opportunity to give their side of the story and a fair reflection of their views. And, again, they didn't always agree with our final products.

And, you know, if you look at the audit reports, or evaluations, or any-- we, at the end of those reports, you know, we have the agency comments in full, so the reader can see what the agencies wanted the public to see, you know, to view – as their context for the information that they provided.

So I think that's helpful, gives all sides of the story and, again, let the reader decide or the policymakers decide how they want to take that information and to move forward with it.
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I don't think we've ever fully overcome that problem with the agencies. I think that's still hanging out there. And I think it underlies, ultimately, our relationships with the agencies.

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When you're doing development work, admittedly, in a war zone, it is very difficult to implement programs. It's very difficult to prevent fraud, waste and abuse, and diversion of funds.

And I think the United States has learned that the hard way and very clearly, if the United States is ever going to get into another contingency operation like this again, hopefully, they take a look at SIGAR's work and use that as a basis for implementing new programming.

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Afghanistan is changed, perhaps irreparably, you know, for the near- to medium-term, at least as far as U.S. Government involvement goes. I think that agencies have adopted some SIGAR recommendations on oversight. But as a whole, // in the future, I don't expect policymakers to fully learn the lessons we've been trying to convey, desperately been trying to convey to them.

INTERVIEWER:
Why?

INTERVIEWEE 21:
I think people have short-term memories and hubris. And another contingency, they will-- people might think don't apply-- you know, the same lessons don't apply.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
At the end of the day, bottom line, what do you feel that you and this agency have gotten to accomplish for the American people?

INTERVIEWEE 21:

I think we've been able – and I think SIGAR has been able – to provide the American people a fuller accounting of how their money is being spent, how-- where it succeeded in Afghanistan, where it failed in Afghanistan.

And not to call out the agencies and to place blame – although there's plenty of blame to go around for the challenges in Afghanistan – but to have that fuller accounting, so this doesn't happen again, to prevent fraud, waste and abuse of U.S. taxpayer dollars, and to bring it to light when it's happening, // to show the America people, you know, when their money was well-spent and when it wasn't, and hopefully, for policymakers to be more judicious in how they allocate and spend money on these types of programs.

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INTERVIEWER:
What is your expectation that the lessons that SIGAR has tried to convey will be learned by future iterations of the U.S. government?
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INTERVIEWEE 21:
I don't hold much confidence that future iterations of Congress will learn the lessons. If history has taught us anything, it's that we have not, as a country, learned lessons from the past. We have, in certain small areas that have made its way into legislation, where we have been looking into different aspects of how money is spent.

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I'm very proud of the work that SIGAR has done and that the Research and Analysis Directorate has done. We have played, I think, a pivotal role in this agency, as the agency's flagship product – that has produced, consistently, of high quality, on-deadline and is very valuable, I think, for the American people and policymakers to put the Afghanistan assistance effort into context.

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