SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 24: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 03/11/24

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 24:
My name is [NAME]. And when I was with SIGAR from 2015 to 2018, I was the Assistant Inspector General for Forward Operations based in Kabul.

JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWER:
And what did that position entail?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
That meant that I was SIGAR's senior representative-- resident in Afghanistan. Very specifically, I was neither an auditor nor an investigator. Those are specialized functions. My job was to be, if you will, the political-level interface with the [U.S.] Embassy, with [U.S. Government] agency heads, with different parts of the Afghan government, and with senior officials in the U.S. military.

In basic terms, I was kind of a fixer. And I had to deal with a host of issues, sometimes mundane, dealing with staff-level challenges, sometimes political-level issues. And, in other respects, simply to support the IG* in every way that he required.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
And the duration of time that you just gave me, was that your total time with the agency, or did you work for the agency in other capacities, as well, prior?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
That was my total time with SIGAR. But, I'm a little anomalous in some other respects. I've spent nine years of my lifetime in Afghanistan. My first visit to Afghanistan was in 1959.
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My younger sister, in fact, was born in Kabul, which was always fun to tell my Afghan friends, that my sister is Kabuli. But as a professional, I was a [U.S.] Foreign Service officer for 32 years, and I went to Afghanistan in 2007 initially as the public affairs officer in the [U.S.] Embassy, the senior U.S. public affairs officer [on the] civilian side.

I did that for a year. While there, I started a project that [the] State Department, [and the] White House liked, and they kept me there for three more years. So, I remained in Afghanistan from 2007 to 2011 as part of the Embassy. I left for four years on a detail assignment to the Pentagon, where I was political advisor to-- foreign policy advisor to the chief of the National Guard Bureau.

And in each of those years, between 2011 and '15, I returned to Afghanistan with my four-star boss on troop visits, so I remained in touch. At the end of 2015, or mid-2015, I retired from the [U.S.] Foreign Service. And that was on a Friday. And Monday, I swore in, with SIGAR. So, I maintained contact with Afghanistan throughout all those years, and I came on board as Assistant Inspector General in 2015.

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INTERVIEWER:
When did your interest in [the] Foreign Service begin? What did you study, as you went through school? How did you come to pursue the type of work that you've pursued in your career?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
That's a great question. I grew up in a Foreign Service family. Throughout the-- my primary years, we actually had an extended tour in Washington. But when I was in junior high, we moved to the Philippines for six years. So, I did all of my teenage years in the Philippines.

I was always interested in economic development. As an undergraduate at Davidson College, I studied political science. Then, I did an extra semester in India. And then, I worked for two years in the Vietnamese refugee program in Southeast Asia, and Indonesia, and Singapore.

And then, I went to graduate school at Cornell [University], where I studied international agriculture and rural development, fully expecting to go into international development work. I had student loans. And, along the way, I had applied for the [U.S.] Foreign Service, and it turned out they accepted me.

So, I became, in 1983, a political officer, in the Department of State, not at all sure that I would find that rewarding, fulfilling. And I kind of told myself I'd give it five years, because it was a paying job. Thirty-two years later, after having a very diverse career, I retired.

Always interested in economic development work. I spent basically all of my Foreign Service assignments in developing countries, of one type or another: in Africa and Asia, a couple of tours in Russia, as well. So, my interests were broad and varied.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you have an opinion of this agency that has remained the same from prior to your working for it, and to through your working for it, and now?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Sure.

INTERVIEWER:
Or did it change when you joined this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Because I had been living and working in Afghanistan for four years with the Embassy, and very much involved in the interagency process, I already, at that time, had very strong opinions about – let's just call them weaknesses in – the way we were promulgating the war, and the civilian effort in Afghanistan.

I had a lot of thoughts. And so, the work of SIGAR was, naturally, quite interesting to me, because they were endeavoring to document what we were doing right, things that needed to be improved. And many of those things, I agreed with – quite strongly.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So, when you began working for this agency in Afghanistan, you were not a stranger to that country.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
You were – very familiar with it. What changed for you in terms of your country experience, if anything, when you made the transition from the State Department to this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Yeah. I went from being an insider to an outsider. I think that was one of the biggest changes. Also, given the time frame, when we first went to Kabul in 2007, the war hadn't entered the phases that it did later on. We still had a lot more relative freedom.

We could travel around the city. We could travel around the country – unescorted, for example. We drove in unarmored Embassy vehicles, with a local driver, to the airport and various locations. By the time I went back in 2015, much of that was locked down, so movement was much more restricted.

And I think one of the results of that was that the cadre of civilian officials who worked at the Embassy and for the U.S. government themselves were much more constrained in terms of their understanding of what went on outside the wire – their direct knowledge of Afghans and their lives. There were just-- it was just much more limited and much more constricted.

SIGAR, in contrast, our staff got out and about much more than many people in the [U.S.] Embassy – either using the resources of the Embassy and Embassy security, or resources of the U.S. military – quite frequently. So, SIGAR staff actually tended to have, I'd say, to many respects, a richer understanding of what was going on than many of our Embassy colleagues. Now, some Embassy people also got out, particularly more senior officials. But it was less common for more junior officials to get out. They were largely inside the fishbowl.

INTERVIEWER:
A few minutes ago, you said you went from being an insider to being an outsider—

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Yeah. Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
If you don't mind, tell me more about that.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
You know, an inspector general, the relationship with the powers that be, the military and civilian, is-- I won't call it a conflictual relationship, but it is a relationship that has a certain amount of friction. The civilian and military authorities are tasked with accomplishing something – documenting success, highlighting success – very often, trying to maintain political support for a mission where that political-- where doing so may be quite difficult.

The mission of an IG is to highlight areas that need further attention, that need improvement, or, in some cases, just absolute disasters. Necessarily, the work of the IG can cause embarrassment for civilian and military officials.

And the culture of the State Department, the culture of the military can be quite unforgiving for officers that fail in their mission, or are perceived to fail in their mission, or that create embarrassment. So, there's a dynamic tension between those on the inside and those on the outside, and we were on the outside.

So, it meant that you had to use your full quiver of diplomatic skills to build and maintain relationships across the board, and to help your interlocutors understand why the work that we were doing and tasked by the Congress with doing, in fact, serves their interests, as well, because sometimes they wouldn't-- they would feel differently about that.

INTERVIEWER:
But for you personally, cognitively, even psychologically, what was it like to go from being an insider to being an outsider? Was it like changing sides?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Actually, there's a different dimension that I think's even more important than the one you just mentioned. Ninety-- choose a number, 97 percent, 98 percent of the U.S. civilian employees assigned to Afghanistan remained in country for 12 months. They were one-year assignments, unaccompanied assignments for most people – [and they] involved personal hardships, and family hardships, and sometimes professional challenges.

So, the life cycle for a civilian employee there was really geared to this 12-month cycle.

SIGAR's staff, by comparison, tended to remain in-country two to three years on average, which was-- meant that-- as we engaged with our civilian counterparts, we tended to know a lot more about many things than they did.

Very often, we knew a lot more about the functioning of the Embassy than they did. In my particular case, I had already been there four years with the State Department, so by the time I joined SIGAR, I had been there a long time.

Our professional colleagues at a certain level – these were extremely intelligent, well-educated professionals. They don't like not being the smartest person in the room, the best-informed person in the room. And if you happen to have been there two, or three, or four years when they've been there two, or three, or four months, human psychology is such that they-- that there can be a standoffishness – and it makes people uncomfortable-- if you're saying things, you know, telling them, "Well, that may not work," or, "That's been tried," or, "That's been tried four times."

So, I think that's one function – not so much of the being inside or outside, but just being a short-timer versus someone who had more time on the ground. One of SIGAR's greatest strengths, as I noted, was our average time on the ground for our staff was between two and three years. The average time for the Embassy was barely over one year, and that was an enormous, enormous difference.

To be blunt – we'll talk more later, perhaps, about, you know, things SIGAR got right, things SIGAR got wrong – we had a very dynamic, feisty, combative inspector general.* This is no secret and no surprise. But John Sopko was aggressive and took his work very seriously, continues to take his work very seriously to this day.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

He grated [on] a lot of people. He got on their nerves. And so, I, as his senior representative in-country, very often was tasked with making sure that he had a complete and full schedule when he came to visit – quarterly, or sometimes more often – that people would see him, maybe people that

didn't really want to see him, but we had to make sure that he had everything he needed to do his job.

And so, I, as the senior representative, could sometimes leverage the fact that I had been part of the State Department and leverage my personal relationships, and other times, simply had to rely on, you know, normal diplomatic skills to say, "Look, guys, you need to do this. You have to do this. This is important. You can't avoid it. And if you want to get mad at somebody, get mad at me. I'll be here next week." You know?

So, it was an interesting and dynamic position to be in. Being on the inside, I understood how the State Department functioned much more so than most of my SIGAR colleagues, who came from the outside. Either they had come from the military, or law enforcement, or were auditors or engineers. Most of them had not been in this part of the government or had not served overseas in this way.

So, an Embassy itself is a very specialized institution. It has its own culture, its own dynamics. The rotational nature of the positions. There are lots of things that I understood through my own experience that many of my colleagues were learning, but didn't have as direct an understanding of.

So, again, I found myself very much in the middle – trying to maintain good relations all around, with the civilians and the military, with the ambassadors, and the section chiefs, and the agency heads. And being on the inside was beneficial. But, then again, I represented [on the outside, as a SIGAR representative], you know, the forces of darkness in many people's eyes.

INTERVIEWER:
I keep wondering, was it challenging – was it challenging to change perspectives from supporting the mission, looking for the bright sides to convey to the public, to looking for the problems within the missions that the public should know about, and the government should know about and maybe should try to pay attention to attempting to fix?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
It was extremely challenging. And all of our colleagues within our agency experienced this on a regular basis, particularly senior leadership, senior management.
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You will have heard others talk about, you know, jokingly but not so jokingly sometimes, about the annual lobotomy. That's something that, you know, we laughed about out there. But when almost all of the people assigned to the country are there for 12 months, you have to go back to the organizational, bureaucratic, institutional cultures that these individuals come out of.

These are [U.S.] Foreign Service officers. These are officers with USAID*, other assigned government agencies, in the military. And they're going to be there, in almost all cases, for 12 months. What that means, in a practical sense, is they're going to get one "efficiency report" during their 12-month assignment.
[* U.S. Agency for International Development]

They-- that efficiency report, in the case of the State Department, tends to come in April. Because of the State Department's annual rotations, most assignments, because of school year globally, most people tend to rotate during the summertime. So, during June, July, August, a whole new cadre of individuals would arrive at an Embassy, and Kabul wasn't exceptional in this regard.

And they would be there until the following summer. But the only significant documentation of their time there, their success or their failures, would occur in about April. Now, our colleagues in the [U.S.] military, in the civilian service, are highly skilled, committed, dedicated professionals, almost to a man and woman across all the agencies.

But they're also participants in this bureaucratic process. So, you would see a new group of people coming in in July and August with a very high degree of enthusiasm, a very high energy level, but they would all come in en masse. A new ambassador, perhaps. New deputy chief of mission. New agency heads. New section chiefs.

They would all arrive within the span of maybe eight weeks. Not all. There were a few exceptions. But for the most part, within the span of about eight weeks or so. So, everybody was new. So, nobody knew much more than anybody else, and they arrived with a mission statement, goals and objectives.

They had read the objectives of the U.S. Government, or their, particularly, agency or part of the military. And they approached it with vim and vigor. And you would see this run through August, September, October, November.

And then, you would notice that people were discovering that it wasn't as easy or as simple as they had been led to believe, or they thought, or they hoped. And the frustration starts sinking in, because the Afghan partners, despite their repeated pledges, and promises, and great initial meetings, nothing was actually happening. Nothing was being delivered.

Frustrations would start to mount. And then, it gets to be January or February, and, in the case of [U.S.] Foreign Service officers, they're bidding on their next assignments, because they're getting ready to go to Brazil, or to Poland, or to, you name it, another location.

And they're fighting hard to get a new position, and they're getting their one annual evaluation, which is starting to be drafted in March and April. And they want that evaluation to, very clearly and vibrantly, articulate their success.

And their boss wants the same thing, and their boss' boss wants the same thing. So, everything is geared towards explaining what they were there to do, and how well it was going – and they needed to have that down on paper, describing what a great job they had done.

And then, once that was done and signed, maybe end of April, sometime in early May, focus shifted entirely to, "Let's get the hell out of here as fast as possible before something terrible happens."

We saw essentially the same process with the [U.S.] military. They were on different rotations. They didn't rotate in normally as individuals. Some did, but the vast majority rotated in and out as units. And the military did a significantly better job of-- than the State Department, in terms of passing off functions and information between one unit, an exiting unit and the incoming unit.

So, they would have staff exchanges. They would do studies. They would, you know, do a lot of things to ensure that there was a knowledge transfer between the exiting unit and the arriving unit.

The State Department, by contrast, the cadre – if there were a hundred people going into Kabul, they would come from all parts of the globe – completely different.

So, they probably had never met each other. There was very little spin-up time. Their predecessor, in all likelihood, departed before they even got to post. Or if there was any kind of overlap, it was usually very brief. In the early years, there tended to be no overlap at all. There tended to be gaps. Later on, the State Department was trying to implement minimum overlaps of a few weeks. But even that was minimalistic.

So, again, the difference wasn't so much insider/outsider. It was old timer versus newcomer. And I think that was the facet that was-- it was hard being somebody who had been there a long time. There were relatively few State Department people that stayed two years.

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When I first arrived in Kabul in 2007, the Embassy had about 300 people. It was much smaller. By the time I left in 2011, it was around a thousand. And it went up somewhat from that before it started tapering off again a few years later.

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INTERVIEWER:
What did you encounter when you first went on duty for this agency in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Well, first, there was a strong team already in place when I got there. And because I was neither an auditor nor an investigator, because I had not had prior IG experience, I had a lot to learn. So, it was-- it was a steep learning curve.

I'm a quick study on many things, but there were good colleagues there. The heads of the various [SIGAR] units, the head of the investigative units, the audit units, were really solid officers. And they taught me a lot. And we ended up working very, very closely together, hand in glove.

My job, obviously, was not to just support the IG on his periodic visits but was to ensure that the auditors and investigators had the running room that they needed, were receiving the support that

they required from the Embassy and from the military. So, we had an extremely tight, collaborative relationship.

But I had a learning curve, you know? I think-- just as they had a lot to learn about the State Department and how it functioned, I had a lot to learn about how criminal investigations operate – how they deal with evidence, what matters to auditors, what the civil engineers are looking for, what they need to do their job, how long things take to be accomplished, how much they needed to get out and about around the country, or to buildings or project sites. You know, I learned a lot. But it takes time to do that, and, you know.

INTERVIEWER:
And how do you do that? How do you make your way through that learning curve?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Well, you just-- you just do it, you know, every day. And I go back to my State Department colleagues. Look, the officers that stayed there one year were were as smart as I was. A lot of them were smarter than I was.

They just were limited because they stayed one year. You could see those who stayed a second year became three or four times as valuable during their second year as they ever could have been the first year. I would say, I know that I was more useful to SIGAR after I'd been there a year than I was in the first year. I was learning.

You cannot accelerate that process of learning beyond a certain point. It takes time. And I think one of the greatest failures of the U.S. bureaucracy in Afghanistan was in continuing to allow this annual rotation to exist.

I mean, what it said to me, personally, and as a taxpayer and citizen, was: the U.S. government really didn't care that much about the mission. Because if it cared more about the mission, it would have approached it differently, but it was kind of a sideshow.

And in the early years, it absolutely was, relative to Iraq. It was starved for resources, starved. The military was starved. The civilian institu-- entities were starved-- starved. The State Department was starved. It really was an afterthought – until about 2009.

So, you know, it's often been said, but it bears repeating. Imagine if we had tried to fight World War II rotating all the generals out every year. Imagine if you didn't have, you know, an Eisenhower staying on task year after year and the other key leaders staying on task year after year. We tried to fight this war changing the leaders all the time. And that's quite apart from our political system, where, you know, different presidents come and go.

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INTERVIEWER:
Tell me what your job was like when you first started. What were the duties that you had? What were your day-in and day-out, week-in and week-out experiences?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Sure. Attended a lot of meetings. As the senior representative of SIGAR at the Embassy, I, of course, attended the [U.S.] Ambassador's senior staff meeting every week. I attended a huge number of meetings in various military offices, and organizations.

I met with a very large number of visitors who would come. I mean, we had congressional members of Congress. We had staffers, sometimes representatives of the media. Lots of people would come. And invariably, they would want to at least check the box of talking to SIGAR.

So, we would set up meetings and briefings, on a case-by-case basis, depending on who they were and what they were, what they were interested in. So, we spent a lot of time doing those things. We spent an inordinate amount of time trying to organize schedules.

It's very difficult to organize meeting schedules for visiting firemen with Afghan interlocutors. The IG* would come on a very regular basis. He would come at least every quarter. And we would spend probably the entire month prior to one of his visits trying to put together a very robust and comprehensive schedule.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

Maybe he would come for 10 days – once in a while, for as long as two weeks. So, it would be a major task to put together a full schedule, that would involve travel to different parts of the country, to military bases, to other cities, with the logistics and security that go along with that, as well as setting up the substantive meetings.

In a typical visit of the IG, we might set up 40, 50, maybe 60 meetings over the course of 10 days or two weeks. And these would involve members of the diplomatic community. We had a very robust relationship with the other major donors – the Canadians, the Brits, the Germans, the Scandinavians.

And we always set up meetings with those ambassadors, and very often organized dinners and special events for the IG. So, this was a lot of it. On a more mundane level, we had staff coming and going, so we had-- as our Forward Operations team, we had to secure their housing. We had to take care of their badging and their various arrival and departure procedures that are required by the Embassy.

We dealt with budget issues. We dealt with equipment. A whole host of things. At-- I think when I arrived, the team on the ground was between 20 and 30 professional staff, so it was a fairly large team. By Embassy standards, it was quite a large team.

It shrank, during the course of my three years out there. It was closer to 20, I think, when I departed. It had been significantly higher – maybe 40 or more – a year or two prior to that. But then, by the time I left, the Embassy was scaling down the civilian presence, so all agencies were encouraged to cut back.

SIGAR was always in this dynamic tension with the Embassy about our-- the size of our staff, arguing that we had an enduring mission, a separate mission, authorized by Congress. So, it was always pushing back on attempts to shrink SIGAR.

And of course, like I said, the Embassy wasn't always happy with the work SIGAR was doing, or the criticisms the agency was levying, or the observations we were making. And so, they would prefer that we weren't there sometimes, or that we were less capable. But, in fact, we were both there and quite capable. And that was fun.

INTERVIEWER:
Were there-- in addition to setting up visits, trips, security, budget issues, scheduling issues – were there other macro issues that emerged in terms of conducting the work of this agency in a war zone that are worth noting?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
You know, security is paramount. So, I had the primary responsibility to ensure the safety and security of our team, working very closely with the Embassy Regional Security Office, and Embassy management. But finding that line between what we needed to do, what we wanted to do, and what would be safe to do was, again, a decision we struggled with every day.

Because, every time we wanted to do a site visit, we had to weigh, "What are the relative risks versus rewards of doing this particular site visit? Is it worth it? What if something terrible happens? What if something as simple as a car accident happens, and a mob gathers if somebody gets hit and killed?" And that did happen in Afghanistan. Not with our staff, but with others.

"What happens if a bomb goes off? What happens if a site is attacked, while we're visiting?" So, we had to contend with all of these types of things. When you're in a war zone, the normal oversight activities have this added layer of risk and reward.

And I-- and, you know, often, we were contemplating-- an individual officer would want to do something, and I had to be in that group of people that was making policy recommendations, dealing with a headquarters in Washington – you know, deciding whether a particular activity was worth it. "How important is this?"

Or, if the IG was coming out, you know, "What would we recommend that he does versus maybe what he would like to do?" Sometimes, we would have to say, "You know, we didn't think that was a good idea."

More often or not, it was the [U.S.] military saying it wasn't a good idea, or they wouldn't support a particular movement, or the State Department saying they wouldn't, or in some cases couldn't, support a certain movement.

There was an occasion where I accompanied the IG on a visit to the 209 Corps, the Afghan 209 Corps* in Mazār-e Sharīf. Only a few weeks after our visit, there was a major attack on that Corps headquarters, and more than 200 Afghan soldiers were killed – one of the largest one-day losses, if not the largest one-day loss, that they ever had.
[* 209th "Shaheen" Corps, former Afghan National Army, 2004-2021, at Camp Shaheen, Mazār-e Sharīf, Afghanistan]

That was a site that we had been visiting two weeks prior, you know, with a sort of minimal security kind of situation. So, those risks were very real. And we couldn't ignore them. And the Embassy-- again, you know, doing their job – the regional security officers and Embassy management – they didn't want something terrible to happen to any member of the Embassy community, including SIGAR. So, we often had to negotiate those things. So, the being in a war zone was a real issue.

The other thing was-- I mean, to be blunt, you know-- there were generational challenges. We had a lot of very junior staff. We had some young staff that took life less seriously, perhaps, than they should have. So, we had occasional personnel issues to contend with, that weren't so different than what others in the Embassy faced, other agencies.

But, you know, we had our personnel challenges to work through. Sometimes people had to be sent home, from our agency as well as pretty much every other agency out there, because they did something boneheaded or dangerous. So, we dealt with all of these things.

I-- we worked long days. Because we were nine hours or so ahead of Washington, and because our work week – the Afghan work week – went Sunday through Thursday, and Washington, of course, is Monday through Friday, we pretty much didn't get a day off during the week.

Very often, [SIGAR] headquarters would like us to participate in video conferences or meetings that would occur at a convenient time in Washington, but it turned out to be rather late on our end in Afghanistan. The various heads of the units and I within the office out there often did not leave the office until 10:00, 11:00 at night.

And we typically worked at least six days a week and very often seven days a week. So, it was a busy, demanding schedule. And we tried to sneak in a few hours here and there when Washington was asleep. But it was a busy time. And being in a war zone, it was always a busy time. And we were interrupted constantly by the alarms going off and the occasional loud noises, and things would happen.

INTERVIEWER:
When you had to meet and discuss some of the concerns you were just describing--

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
--or any kind of meet and discuss, whether it was within the agency or with the Defense Department, or-- and/or with the State Department--

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Mmm.

INTERVIEWER:
--how would those meetings happen? Would they be in person? They're all kind of in a concentrated--

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. It was-- we were all-- we lived in a fishbowl, so we would meet all the time, sometimes in offices, sometimes, you know, around-- in the DFAC,* in the cafeteria, military-style cafeterias. We'd meet around meals. We would meet in any kind of social activities that were occurring. It was a very-- we saw each other all the time.
[* dining facility in U.S. Embassy compound, Kabul, Afghanistan]
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We had great relations with many of our State Department colleagues, as well, senior colleagues, many of the ambassadors who served, deputy chiefs of missions. The relationships varied with some. But others respected what we could bring to the table, and they understood the mission that we had. And, you know, we could sometimes agree to disagree. You tried to work it out.

INTERVIEWER:
As I'm listening, I'm struck by the idea of a paradox.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
We've had a lot of these conversations in which we've had a lot of observations about how conducting this kind of work in a war zone made things more difficult.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Uh-huh (AFFIRM).

INTERVIEWER:
And I'm struck by the paradox that the proximity of all the players to each other in this closed, secured community made it easier in some ways to meet, to have discussions, to have relationships. You saw these people. You knew who they were. It wasn't like--

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
--they were in, you know, another building, you know, four miles away, 10 miles away, several states away.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you talk about that a little bit?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Yeah, I think that's an important observation. I often describe the [U.S.] Embassy compound in Kabul as a combination between a minimum-security prison and a junior college campus. I mean, you ate in a cafeteria. They had recreational facilities in the fishbowl. But you saw everybody all the time in this fishbowl kind of environment.

Now, that changed a good bit over my years there. When the Embassy was smaller, with 300 people, and we had more ability to get out and about in the town, it was a bit different. Later on, everybody was compressed into the compound.

They were putting in containerized housing units and whatnot, and it was much more crowded. But, in the early years, it was a bit different. But we did have an active relationship with our State Department, USAID, and other agency colleagues, that was both personal and professional.

We saw each other all the time. The meeting schedule was intense. There were-- I mean, we had our sets of meetings, but the State Department was always having meetings, and the State Department and the [U.S.] military was always having interagency meetings.

So, there were meetings about every subject matter, whether it was security, whether it was some aspect of economic development. Very often, SIGAR would insert ourselves, at the table. We were always welcome – not always enthusiastically, but, you know, nobody ever turned us away. We joined lots and lots of meetings with the military and various State Department entities.

So, we did know each other. [PAUSE] However, there were these dynamics that were there. You know, people were on a different timeline. And I keep coming back to that. They're on a different timeline. They're looking at their next assignment.

They're looking at making sure that nobody gets embarrassed, that, somehow, they get that choice assignment someplace else – or any assignment someplace else. So, I think there was always this dynamic tension.

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INTERVIEWER:
This agency was reliant on some of the very same departments and other agencies that it was overseeing.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there a rub there? Was there a paradox of, "Well, we're asking you for help. We need you to help us do X, Y, and Z." Meanwhile, we're reporting somewhat critically on some of the things that you're doing?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
I don't really think so. With respect to DoD*, which was much, much larger than the State Department, we dealt with specific component parts, not always, you know, the political level of DoD. It was more logistics and support, whether it was in personnel or finance, processing paperwork and things like that.
[* U.S. Department of Defense]

INTERVIEWER:
And it didn't feel like an "us versus them"?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
No, no, no, no. Not at all. Not at all. They were providing IT support. They were providing all kinds of support. State Department-- at the Embassy level, the primary interface in this respect was dealing with the Regional Security Office, who would agree or disagree with our request to have movements of personnel, whether it was within Kabul or outside. They would do an assessment, and they would sometimes agree and sometimes say they can't support that movement.

INTERVIEWER:
But--

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Sometimes we could rely on DoD to support movements State Department wasn't able to do.

INTERVIEWER:
But you always felt that the answers that you were getting on the assessments were--

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Mostly objective-- mostly objective, yeah. I didn't think we were trying to be boxed out of things we wanted to do or needed to do. I would say, sometimes the State Department deputy chief of mission,

who was in charge of sort of Embassy security and movements – occasionally there might have been a sense that what we wanted to do really wasn't that important, priority-wise.

And I think maybe some of those were just honest objections, not just, "We don't want you to see the dirty laundry." I don't think it was so much that. I think it was we always wanted to do many more things than it was physically or logistically possible to do, given a competition for security and other resources.

So, sometimes, they would not want to support something, but either we could push back and get them to change their mind, or we could accept that decision, because we knew we were asking for more than was probably possible. So, not too worried about that.

No, we-- again, we had pretty good relationships. And when we had issues, we, generally, we could resolve them, or talk them through. Again, we're dealing with professionals, you know? We were professional. They were professional.

Understanding their constraints was always important, because, you know, they didn't want any American, whether it was an inspector or anyone else, to be injured or killed. They wanted also to feel like if we were going out to do something, that that was a legitimate mission.

They were having to say "no" to people within the Embassy all the time. Maybe USAID wanted to go visit a school or a hospital, and, you know, the deputy chief of mission would have to say, "You know, we can't approve this," or the regional security officer, "We can't approve this." It certainly wasn't us. We felt like we were treated equally, and given equal rights.

In fact, we had more rights than most other agencies because we could push back and point to our specific and special mandate. And because, very often, we relied on the military for support. State wouldn't-- you know, the military had the helicopters. They would take us someplace. And State might or might not be able to. So, we had-- we could sort of go left or go right, as the situation required.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
Were there moments when you found yourself thinking, "This was a success," from an oversight perspective, from the perspective of this agency? And that can be a moment when you felt like, "You know, this model is suited to what our tasking is," or it can be a moment when, you know, you were watching the way a particular investigative effort was unfolding.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Well, let me go back to structure. What was a success was when we had a visiting delegation. And I think it was a congressional delegation. And we were talking about the challenges of the rotational system within the Embassy and the military.

And I was able to say that, "Our average time on the ground is more than two and a half years, close to three years," and I was able to point to four or five of our staff that had been in Afghanistan four years or more. No other U.S. government agency in Afghanistan could do that.

So, I think that represented a significant success, in that it positioned us to understand and provide accurate, intelligent, and informed opinions and facts to those that needed them.

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I think the other thing that we did that was really significant was the contributions we were able to make to [SIGAR] the Lessons Learned Program. The Lessons Learned Program is really the documentary success for SIGAR to really lay out, in extreme detail, so many specific examples – topically organized, well-researched, well-written.

And we contributed, our whole team contributed to that effort. On a more regular basis, of course, we all contributed to the [SIGAR] Quarterly Reports, which was the constant regular updating of the Congress as to what we were doing, why it mattered, what we were looking at, what we thought was important. So, that gave Congress a constant stream of updated information on relevant topics. So, these were all successes.

Bureaucratically, we fought the fight with-- you know, with the host agencies: the Department of Defense, Department of State, the Embassy leadership. And that was, as I said before, sometimes we had to rely on our diplomatic skills.

Sometimes, we simply had to go back to the law, and say, "Hey, I'm sorry, but the law authorizes this, and we're going to do it." We had a very strong IG.* The IG was not afraid to take on all comers when it came to protecting the prerogatives of the agency, enforcing the law and our authorities.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And that's often necessary, so it's a combination of a strong, forward-deployed team, good senior management, forward-deployed as well as in Washington, and an unafraid IG willing to fight the fights that need to be fought, and cultivating friends on the Hill and in the media.

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

INTERVIEWER:
What are the qualities that make somebody good at doing this kind of oversight work in a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
First, you have to have a great deal of empathy for those that you're working with from other agencies. You have to understand their constraints, their bureaucratic prerogatives, their limitations. You have to know where they're coming from.

So, you know, rather than just critiquing and them criticizing them, you have to understand their bureaucratic limits and restrictions. So, that helps. Don't be an asshole. I mean, and there are plenty of those in these high-pressure, stressful environments. There are people that are just jerks. Don't be one of them.

You know-- these are brave Americans willing to sacrifice – personally, professionally, in a family sense, to be separated – to spend time in a war zone. We all had colleagues that were killed. You know, you understand the realities of this.

So, while we may argue, or debate, or disagree on certain points, we have to also understand that we're all patriotic Americans trying our very best to do the best we can for the country, for the taxpayer, according to, you know, the rules that we operate under.

And we are one large team. We have different roles in that team. But, you know, I found the very best senior military commanders out there understood and respected the role of the inspectors general. They understood-- and I'm thinking about several of the four-star commanders in particular that we had excellent relationships with.

They understood that we had a job to do. We had a mandate. They also understood that if things weren't going well, and we had insights that could help them in their leadership roles, that they wanted to know that. Every senior official wants to have a heads-up, particularly if things are going south during their time in command.

They may or may not be as interested about things that happened in the past or in the distant future, that might happen, but if something's going on – going wrong – right now – often, we had insights that the senior leadership didn't necessarily have.

The mid ranks don't always think it's in their interest, // so we could sometimes provide information to the ambassadors or to senior generals that they might not have received from other channels. So, that was very important.

You can only do that if you have a trusting relationship. And building that trust, investing in that trust, not being stupid, not being a jerk, you know, that-- those are very important things. And because we're-- we are working these accounts together as a team but coming from different places.

INTERVIEWER:
How widely do you think that view was shared within this agency's experience within Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
A sense of teamwork, or a sense of?

INTERVIEWER:
The idea that you have to respect the people that you're overseeing. The idea that you have to remember that they're all, as you said, patriotic Americans?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
I saw the IG,* on his visits and in his meetings with people, demonstrating a great deal of respect for the officers that he encountered and that he had meetings with. I think he understood their limitations and their challenges.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

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To the rank and file, it was a mix. Sometimes, an individual auditor or investigator might be frustrated that he or she felt like they were getting stonewalled. And that's when you push things up the chain of command. So, we worked through a lot of issues.

If people were frustrated, they weren't getting the support or the attention – or maybe just in the competition for resources, they needed some additional oomph, and additional support – we tried to provide that support. I was very proud of our teams.

I mean, I think they were professionals. I think they were very hard-working, very sincere, skilled in the work that they did. Only once in a while did we have, you know, personnel challenges and whatnot that, frankly, were not specific to SIGAR, that were fairly typical of a diverse Embassy environment operating in a fishbowl under, you know, extraordinary pressures.

WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

INTERVIEWER:
What things do you think that this agency did well conducting oversight in a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
I think we were very aggressive. And I think that was necessary to cut through the bureaucratic red tape. The IG* helped with this a great deal, because he's very aggressive, very persistent, very experienced in the ways of bureaucracy, the ways of the military, the ways of the State Department and USAID – not willing to accept superficial or inadequate answers.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

Again, I think that comes from experience. You have to know your interlocutors. You have to know their bureaucratic environment. You have to know what happened last year, and the year before, and five years before that. Very often, your interlocutors don't have the answers to those questions.

But, again, if you have an IG that's been in place for a dozen years, he has an enormous amount of institutional knowledge. So, I would say, in the future, ensuring that those that are selected for these key positions both arrive with an appropriate background that prepares them for the job, and then, you know, the longer they survive in the job, persist in the job, the more valuable they will become – which is the case with all of our staff, you know?

Everybody's better the second year, like I said. And if you have people that have been there three, four, five years, that is a resource that it's difficult to put a value on – if they can survive [LAUGHS] the hardships of doing it.

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SIGAR's great strength was more time on the ground. We had better relationships with our Afghan interlocutors than most in the Embassy did, than most in the military did. We had better contacts. We could call people and set up meetings.

We could invite senior Afghans to our little apartments on the Embassy compound, and they would come. We surprised people very often that, you know, they would see Afghan ministers walking around the Embassy compound. They didn't know they were there.

This kind of annoyed some of our State Department colleagues at times, because we had just gone on a personal level, invited our friends and colleagues to come have dinner. And it worked as well with the [U.S.] military. We had good relations with the military.

There was-- I had a very small apartment, a little one-bedroom apartment. And one night I had 10 general stars in my apartment. I had four U.S.-- I had three U.S. two-star generals and four brigadier generals all crammed in the apartment. We were on the floor, eating DFAC* food.
[* dining facility in U.S. Embassy compound, Kabul, Afghanistan]

And one of the ambassadors walked by. It was a senior officer in the Embassy. And, you know, expletive-expletive, you know, "What's going on here?"

We knew these people. We worked with them. We respected each other. We invited them over for dinner, and they all came, you know? And the Embassy sometimes couldn't accomplish that.

That was the result of relationship-building. And we spent an-- I wouldn't say an inordinate amount of time. We spent so much of our time building, and nurturing relationships.

Afghanistan is a relationship-based society. So, not just the U.S. military, but the Afghans. You know, if you're only there a year, they hardly bother to learn your name. I mean, I kind of felt that we-- at one point, we had such a rotation of U.S. military commanders, four-star commanders, that President Karzai in those years almost didn't even bother to know their names – that it was just, you know, "It's Tuesday. It's another American."

And so, if you were there that second year or the third year, as many SIGAR staff were, they got to know you. They got to trust you a little bit more. Not trust you like their family or their tribe. That's a different level of trust.

But they got to know you in a way that they typically did not get to know – or trust – most of the foreigners that they interacted with. So, we did-- you know, building relationships is something that we did, a lot. And I think, for any future-- IG operation in a future-- whether it's a wartime situation or a crisis situation, the ability to endure on task is probably one of the greatest things that you can bring to the table.

Keep the staff there. Do whatever it takes to keep the staff there. Incentivize them. Reward them. Pat them on the back. You know, do what it takes to keep them there – because that will be valuable not just to that particular future agency, but to the Embassy and to the U.S. government as a whole. I mean, I think we provided a broader service.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
Are there things that you think this agency could have done better, could have done differently conducting oversight in a war zone?
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INTERVIEWEE 24:
I think that when you're in a war zone, when you're in-- working on a national-priority challenge like Afghanistan, you cannot avoid involving yourself in the policy part of things. Not a traditional IG role, but honestly, if the State Department or DoD* persist in failing to make changes that are fundamental to the success of the mission, and you have specific information that says, "You know, if you keep rotating all your generals every year, you're going to fail," I don't see how you can not beat that drum even harder, blow those horns, and try somehow, creatively – you know, leveraging Congress, media, whatever it may be – to force policy changes that the bureaucracies seem incapable of making on their own.
[* U.S. Department of Defense]

Again, not the traditional role of an IG, in most normal situations. But we're talking about special IGs. We're talking about war zones. We're talking about the large issues, the really big issues for the United States. And those that are in positions of special responsibility, with special information, and knowledge, and experience gleaned from working these accounts, should be at the table somehow, even more aggressively.

And I think SIGAR did much of that. But I would say that, in the future, in a similar kind of situation, you know, I, in the positions that I held, argued as forcefully as I was able to – with the right kind of people, I thought, to consider more flexibility in assignment policies and things – and I came up zero.

So, I think it-- you know, it depends on others higher up the food chain pushing that, and finding the right secretary of state, or secretary of defense, or, you know, president, or-- you know, that will simply mandate, "We're going to do it this way. We need to do it this way."

"I don't want anybody serving there that can't stay two years." You know?

"If you're a colonel and you want to get promoted to general, you better sign the line that, you know, you'll stay there for two years. If you're a one-star general and you think you want to check the box to become a two-star general, you're signing on for two years."

"I don't want anybody there-- I'd rather have 50 percent fewer people, but have only those that can stay for two years."

And then, you have to have the managerial flexibility to make it possible for people to do that. Maybe additional leave time. Maybe more flexibility in terms of family issues and whatnot.

But I'd rather have a lot fewer people, who can endure on task. That's something that has to be handled at the agency level. And that's, you know, a matter of policy change that has clear implications for other parts of the system. There's a rollover effect on other assignments, and promotions, and things.

But only very senior leaders can make those types of decisions. You can't make them bottom-up. They really have to start at the top, and people have to say, "This is what we did there. That didn't work. We have to change it. It has to be done differently."

So, I think SIGAR could-- could fight that fight – because others can't do it, I guess.

INTERVIEWER:
As far as this agency is concerned, is there anything else that you think it could have done better, could have done differently, or got wrong?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
I think what it got right was documenting very effectively this U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. So, I'd focus on what SIGAR got right.

What they got wrong? I guess, indirectly, I would go back to my previous comment. I would say the fact that nothing changed in terms of the civilian and military assignment and rotational practices, despite SIGAR consistently highlighting that – well, certainly can't be considered a SIGAR success.

I mean, it's one thing if making recommendations, if they don't result in changed policy or actions, what was the point of the recommendation?

So, it's not that SIGAR has unilateral authority to change any of these things. But unless the recommendations actually resulted in policy change, how can you claim a success? You can beat your drum and say, "We called it right." So what? Didn't change anything.

And so, I think that maybe-- and I don't know how, but I think that's an area that I would want to reflect on and say, you know, "Were there-- were there other things that might have been done to actually accomplish change?"

"Why is it that, even though we were documenting every-- them doing this every single year, there was never a change in the assignment policies? Why is it that there was never a change in DoD or the State Department in this respect? Could we have done more? Could we have done something differently?"

"Are we hung up on the notion that that's not really our wheelhouse because that's policy, and we only make recommendations?"

You know, it's kind of weak to say we only identify what you've done, rather than observing a pattern of behavior and then feeling a responsibility to try and effect actual changes, because that's what it's all about.

You make recommendations to stimulate change. You can't just say, "Well, you ignored our recommendations. That's okay. We did our job." And walk away. I think there's a need for a more aggressive interface with the policy apparatus. And that can only occur at the very top.

And, you know, sometimes that means the president. Sometimes that means the secretary of state, secretary of defense. It's not going to occur at the level of a colonel or a one- or two-star general in the field. They don't have the authority to change anything. Even an ambassador's meaningless in those respects.

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In fairness, SIGAR didn't always get it right.

You know, there were times when maybe we were a little overenthusiastic, or maybe we had our own agency objectives that were different than State's objectives or [US]AID's objectives. We had to support the existence of the agency, vis-à-vis Congress.

You know, that-- we had our constituencies. We had to protect our budget. We had to ensure that there was belief that this agency should exist, continue to exist, continue to be funded and staffed.

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INTERVIEWER:
If you had it all to do over, and you were tasked with running Forward Operations for an agency such as this one in a war zone, how would you do it differently?
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INTERVIEWEE 24:
I don't know, for example, what I would have done different in the first year, because you start from wherever you are, and you have a steep learning curve. So, whether you start learning from the left or the right, you have a long way to go. And hopefully, you know, after a year or two, you have enough breadth of experience to be better off.

Each of us is going to start at a different point, but we have to get to a certain point, too. Each of us is going to be better in year two, in year three. What would I have done differently? *WHEW* [PAUSE]

I actually think we did a very good job. I mean, I am quite proud of the team that we had on the ground, the auditors, the investigators, the civil engineers, the accountants-- financial accountants.

I'm really quite proud of the team we had. I don't know if I would change anything significant in that process. We developed really strong relationships with our USAID and military colleagues. We leveraged those, I think, to good effect.

[I] believe we supported the IG* and his demanding, frequent visits. We got him the meetings that he needed, that he required. We did significant travel around, you know, all parts of the country. I'm very proud of the team effort, and it really was a team effort. Everybody was involved.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

I think, again, that the challenges that we-- that-- the constraints that we had and the challenges were sort of external to SIGAR, not things that we had much direct control over. Washington was deciding how many people would be there.

The White House was deciding, you know, how the conduct of the war would go, how many people would be assigned to the Embassy. When the drawdown came, decisions were made as to, you know, which agencies had to cut back, and we had to fight the fight to preserve our structure on the ground there, which we did quite successfully.

So, I'm very proud of the time that we spent. I think-- and-- in my own personal case, you know, three years on the ground there with a grueling schedule is a lot. I was separated from my family. We got frequent trips home and whatnot, but that takes a toll on anybody.

You know, there's a thousand and one things that you're not doing for your family and at home that-- because you're out there. So, you know, finding that work-life balance when you're making those sacrifices is a challenge. But I don't know that I would have changed anything in particular. That's about all I can say on that. And I'm proud of what the team did and how we did it.

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For future reference, any entity trying to do this type of work needs to ensure that they have a very robust forward-deployed team, good senior management leadership for that team, and duration.

Keep them in place as long as you can. And I would say be creative. Figure out whatever it's going to take to keep your people in place. In some cases, in some situations, that may involve spousal employment. In some cases, in some situations, it may involve more flexibility with leave situations, or dealing with personal situations.

In some situations, it may involve, you know, letting people go for three or four months and then come back for another year or two. Whatever it takes to keep people on the ground for as long as possible. That's going to pay dividends that we've seen, th[at] most of the other U.S. government agencies, the U.S. military can't do – if it's a war zone situation, if it's a hardship situation, with the typical one-year rotations.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
In August of 2021, when the U.S. withdrew and the Taliban took over, how did that impact you?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Heartbreaking. Even though it was foreseeable that things would not go well in Afghanistan, when it finally happened, it was wrenching, gut-wrenching.

I was involved with colleagues of mine late into the nights, working privately and independently on efforts to try and get Afghans out.

I was no longer working in a government position at that point, but we were writing letters of recommendation and communicating with people, and we had a working group going.

It tore me apart, tore me apart. And I must say, walking around the agency today, looking at the pictures on the wall – a lot of that, you know, comes back and is very emotional.

I think that the collaborative nature of the failure in Afghanistan, while that's very real, on a human level, an individual level, a personal level, we knew so many Afghans that we worked with, and respected, and had an excellent relationship with – honest, hardworking, decent people.

And I think especially of the women and girls – we had so many programs and things involving women and girls that had been offered. A kind of hope that didn't exist in Afghanistan before – and now which has been gut-wrenchingly torn away from them.

It was a horrible, horrible experience. But, again, we're outsiders. We're looking at it from a distance. They're living it. They're going through it every day and every day still.

And there were times I felt ashamed – at what happened, how it happened – and wonder if there were any other ways this might have – might have – gone forward than the way it did. So, yeah, terrible, terrible. It's still-- that still haunts me.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

One of my takeaways, after many years there and observing how the U.S. military, the U.S. civilian institutions, and the Afghans all interacted and functioned together: the failure in 2021 did not come as an enormous surprise.

And SIGAR well documented, thoroughly documented all the factors that laid the foundation for that failure. But I would say that our result was a collaborative failure. It really took the efforts of many civilians, many military officers, at very high levels, many Afghans – you know, a collaborative effort over a number of years to achieve this monumental failure.

It wasn't any one thing. It was no one individual. It was no one administration. But it was the accumulation of a lot of factors that led to a result that was almost inevitable – and which, in the final years, especially, SIGAR was documenting quite aggressively.

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INTERVIEWER:
Bottom line, what are some of the biggest lessons learned that you have about Afghanistan, about oversight, about oversight of reconstruction in a war-zone country?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Well, oversight doesn't ever solve the problems. Oversight doesn't establish the policy, despite what I said a few minutes ago. Oversight comes largely after the fact. Oversight can provide lessons learned. Oversight can inform policymakers going forward.

In some cases, oversight might be able to stimulate changes in direction in policy midstream. That, I think, is something SIGAR attempted to do – and, in some cases, successfully, over the years. But oversight can't compensate for bad policy decisions. I mean, that's just a fact, you know?
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Now, in this case, because SIGAR was documenting this for, you know, a number of years, there were many places along the way that policymakers might have been-- should have been well-informed by what SIGAR was saying in a way that might have allowed them to make different policy choices.

The weaknesses, the inherent weaknesses in the Afghan army and police were very well-documented for years – of corruption within those systems. "Ghost" soldiers, "ghost" policemen – well-documented. The inability and inadequacies of the Afghans to maintain and support their military, with no plan going forward as to how they would pay for it, and maintain it, and support it. These were well-documented years ago, and therefore could have informed different policy choices, you know, in the latter years of our involvement there.

But they didn't always result in changes in policy. So, you know, where the blame lies-- I mean, SIGAR can point and say, "Well, we talked about this. We wrote it." But didn't-- didn't change anything, in many instances.

So, again, I think that begs the question: can we do better in the future, in bringing, you know, the lessons learned and the lessons observed along the way, to fruition in terms of a better-informed [policy] and changes in policy?

But then, that gets very complicated because of the broader political spectrum, domestic politics. It's a big, complicated world, you know, and all these things. So, that is outside of SIGAR's lane. But, but, but: those, you know-- might there have been a different outcome if different decisions were made?

Yes, I think so. I think there were a number of junctures where different policy decisions could have been made that would have altered the end result. But those different policy decisions were not made, so, at the end of the day, I don't think SIGAR can claim that we were quote-unquote "successful" – in changing the course of history.

We can be proud of the work that was done, but, I guess, ultimately, the issue is: "Did we change anything?" And, "Will we change anything going forward because of this body of work?"

That's the great unanswered question.

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There's one other interesting statistic that's probably worth laying out there, talking about the bureaucratic imperatives – particularly of the [U.S.] military, because the military is blessed with resources that the State Department doesn't have, numerical and otherwise.

When I arrived in Afghanistan in 2007, in the ISAF, which is-- was the International Security Assistance Force, the NATO military force in Afghanistan, there were 10 general officer positions. There was a four-star commander, which was always an American.

There was a three-star deputy commander, which was, in those years, always a British officer, later a German position, but typically a British officer in the early years. There were, I believe, three major general, two-star positions. And then, I guess the rest, maybe five one-star positions.

They were not all Americans. Maybe six or so out of 10 were Americans, and the others were-- represented the Italians, or Germans, or Brits. That was in 2007.

When I left Afghanistan the first time in 2011, there were 98 generals in-country, 98. So, from 10 to 98 in four years.

Why is that? Well, the simple answer is the bureaucracy bloated and inflated. And the bureaucratic-- part of the bureaucratic answer is, if you're in the military, you want that ticket punched. You want "war zone command" punched. That was your-- that was a necessary prerequisite for advancement for many individuals.

So, the military tended to inflate its presence at the leadership level. With 98 generals came how many colonels, full colonels? There were-- I never got a full-- I counted the generals, so I know that number is good. It varied. Sometimes it was-- there were two or three civilian general equivalents on top of that, senior executive service, but 98 uniform. So, there were hundreds of colonels.

The State Department could never compete with that. The State Department had maybe eight, or 10, or a dozen senior officers – I was one [of them] – and then, a smattering of officers at lower levels. That meant bureaucratically, there was this incredible imbalance.

And the [U.S.] military very often wanted to do its own thing because it had its mass, and its objective, and its resources. The civilian side was always trying to organize interagency cooperation, interagency meetings. And the military – not to be too cynical about it – could throw colonels at that process, because they had a dime a dozen.

And they could-- I always felt they could completely absorb the civilian presence with about 10 percent of their force, almost like a bureaucratic holding action, while the mass of what they wanted to do just proceeded, around the country, in a variety of locations. And the civilians were kind of tied down because of this structural imbalance.

I mean, that's a bit of an oversimplification, but it wasn't uncommon to say we were being "coloneled" to death. And, there was just only so much time and space you could have for meetings. And the State Department had to both devise policies, execute policies, and talk about policies. The State [Department and] the [U.S.] military could divide those functions up. And that was a big challenge.

With respect to how the [U.S.] military functioned in Afghanistan, and how the [U.S.] civilians functioned, as well, I use the analogy that it was like we were running different races. The military and the civilian presence on these 12-month rotations, you can imagine a 400-yard relay-- or, you know, 400-yard relay race, where each runner goes a hundred yards and breathlessly hands the baton to the next one, and they go around and around in a circle, breathlessly handing the baton.

Those were these 12-month rotations. Everybody's running full speed, all-out, and passing it off to the next person, whereas the Afghans were running a marathon. And, you know, your mentality, when

this is your life, this is your entire future, not just, "This is my year that I'm here getting my one evaluation somewhere through that year," as opposed to, "This is my entire life."

And a lot of times, we discovered the Afghans weren't actually running that marathon. They were just kind of sitting on the ground, cross-legged, drinking tea, talking about maybe starting that race at some point. And there was a tension between the Afghans and the [U.S.] military, very often, where the military would say, "Well, I've got a mission statement. It's on a card in my wallet. Let me show you."

"Here it is. Here's what-- here's my objectives. I have to accomplish this. And if my Afghan partners can't keep up, well, by God, I'm just going to do my thing, because I have to. I have no choice." You know, "I'm going to proceed without them – rather than maybe being able to sit down, and drink the tea, and have the conversation, and imagine what it would be like if I was here for five years." As opposed to, "I'm here for a declining number of months from this point in time."

So, that structural disconnect between who they were, their culture, their situation and the way we were set up bureaucratically – both civilian and military – contributed to this collaborative failure.

And, you know, you can get into Afghan culture. You can get into the fact that they're survivors, that-- for an Afghan in a relationship with an outsider, it's always, "What can you do for me? What can you do for me today?" And, "What can you do for me during the daylight hours? Because somebody else can do something for me during the darkness hours, like maybe not kill me-- kill me."

"So, I'm going to deal with you in the daytime, and I'm going to deal with the Taliban at night." Or "I'm going deal with a different tribe or a different group" – in a very transactional kind of way that we had a hard time understanding and adjusting to.

I found with my Afghan interlocutors that, as the situation in Afghanistan started to deteriorate, and as discussion in the international community, specifically with the United States, turned towards, "When would we be departing" – after President Obama's Afghan policy review, which both plussed up the size of the force but also set an exit date, you know, for so many of the Afghans – it became, "O.K., how am I going to divide my time between my daytime job and my personal escape strategy?"

And you saw that percentage shifting. You know, less focus on the daytime job, and more focus on personal preservation, family preservation, "What am I going to do under these various contingencies?"

And so, you had this subtle – across the entire space – shift, as people spent more time thinking about, "How am I going to deal with the eventual things that are going to happen, versus building the institution that I work in – whether it's the ministry of health, or finance, or the military?"

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So, let me read-- I was thinking about this interview, and I came across something that I wanted to read to you--

INTERVIEWER:
Sure.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
--talking about constraints, that led to the end result.

One:
**** "An overly militarized response."***
We certainly saw that. Imbalance between the size and skill sets, very often, of the military and the civilian personnel.

**** "A diffusion of authority and fragmentation of command."***
We certainly saw that.

**** "Hesitation to change the traditional relationships of civilian to military leadership."***
Absolutely.

And number four:
**** "Agency reluctance to violate the conventional lines dividing responsibilities."***

INTERVIEWER:
Uh-huh (AFFIRM).

INTERVIEWEE 24:
We saw all of these things. Problem is, that was about Vietnam, and that's a RAND report from 1972.

INTERVIEWER:
The same problems.

INTERVIEWEE 24:
Exactly the same problems. RAND did a major study of Vietnam, and I think it came out in about 1975. And, you know, if you go back, and read that, and just super-copied out "Vietnam," and substituted "Afghanistan" in so many places, it would seem like the same report.

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It doesn't appear that we learned many lessons, or applied those lessons, or-- you know, we seem to repeat the mistakes. So, if we were doing this in Ukraine, starting now, with a large mission, I wouldn't have a high degree of confidence that we would, from the get-go, do many things very differently. And I'm very sorry to say that, but there isn't a lot of evidence that persuades me otherwise right now.

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I used to say that success in Afghanistan would require three things, like a stool. Three legs on the stool. It would require people. You needed a certain number of people. It would require resources. You needed money. You needed other resources. And it would require time.

And I think what the U.S. did, to our detriment, was we took the time element out of that equation, and we tried to compensate by overloading with more people and more money on both the civilian and military side.

Well, that's a three-legged stool, and if you take one of the legs out and say, "We're just going to compensate by adding more people and more money," it's not going to be stable. And, in fact, it fell over. It collapsed, because you couldn't take time out of the equation.

Personally, I thought we would have been much better advised to have a lot fewer people working on the problem, a lot less money being spent, because that fueled corruption, and we could say a lot more about that – and others will have said much more about that – and we'd allowed much more time, that would allow for a very traditional society to, at a more reasonable pace, begin to evolve in a direction that made sense.

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I mean, we said, basically, "We want to, in a short period of time, make Afghanistan a perfectly functioning, modern, democratic state with respect for human rights, and women's rights, and all these things are going to change."

We lost sight of any kind of realistic goals and objectives. And we somehow imagined – deluded ourselves – that we could accelerate the process, we could take time out of the equation, throw troops and money at the problem, and bring Afghanistan along in some miraculous fashion.

Well, we failed abysmally. And-- we just did. We failed abysmally. That was a huge policy failure. But it was a result of a lot of decisions by a lot of people. You know, it wasn't politically possible to stay longer. It wasn't politically possible to-- we should have-- we should have had a lot less money, a lot fewer people. And we should have imagined being present here for two or three decades, being in Kabul two or three decades.

Had we done that, we might have achieved a different result. The money that we threw at Afghanistan obviously fueled corruption. We threw-- so, "we," I say "we," but – the entire international community threw so much money at the Afghans that the relatively small number of trained and educated Afghans were receiving multiple offers of employment from different governments and different entities.

And they could just-- they could get fired from one job and hired by the Swiss the next day, fired from that and hired by the United Nations the next, at a higher salary each time. It was so easy to make money from us and to steal.

Rents – rent prices went through the roof. The price for services went through the roof. And we just kept paying, and paying, and paying, and paying, competing with ourselves in an international community. It was-- it was obscene. And we made it so easy for them to do, that that they did it, and they said, "Thank you very much."

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Going forward, SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program will be of paramount importance. I don't know that it will be utilized sufficiently, but I think as a historical record of what happened, what the results were, and perhaps why we got many of the results that we did, SIGAR has a real enduring value. So, I think the mission of the agency is absolutely critical. I believed in it back then, and I think these types of missions are extremely important. Still believe that.

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So, the challenge is not to write down the lessons and, as John Sopko* frequently says, you know, "These aren't lessons learned. They're lessons observed." We know the lessons. We just repeat them. And we repeat them because we structure ourselves for-- to become inefficient.
[* former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

We structured our response-- I'll say we structured ourselves for failure. And we accomplished it in a magnificent manner. You cannot win a war, you cannot understand another culture, another society, when you rotate everybody out every 12 months.

Before I went to Afghanistan, my last-- one of my last positions in the Department of State was-- I actually had the title of Deputy Chief "Knowledge Officer" of the State Department. Longer story as to how that came about, but I-- when I went to Afghanistan in 2007, one of my objectives was to see if we could strengthen our knowledge management within the Embassy.

I failed abysmally. I could not change the bureaucratic culture. I fought it. I made people angry. I did all kinds of things that-- that-- I-- I just didn't succeed. At one point, I had a nice sit-down lunch with the Director General of the [U.S.] Foreign Service, the chief personnel officer, who was an old friend and colleague of mine.

And we did this in Kabul. And I was trying to make the point that we needed to keep people there more than 12 months. But the State Department assignment cycle meant, because they did assignments about a year in advance, that by the time an officer arrived in Kabul in July or August, that officer's replacement was already named, and it was a roll-over-in-the-bed scenario. At the end of 12 months, that officer had to leave, because that officer's replacement was arriving.

Now, most officers who went to Afghanistan were a little wary of the thought of going to Afghanistan. They're leaving family. They're not sure what it's going to be like. Is it going to be safe?

And people would go there, and they arrive in June, July, August, and they stay two or three months. And a percentage of them look around and say, "You know, I like this work. This work is fulfilling. I'm starting to understand. I'd like to stay a second year." But by the time they decide that, in October or November, that option is foreclosed.

They weren't allowed to consider even staying a second year, because their replacement was already going into training. So, we had absolutely no capacity to fix the problem. If only 10 percent or 20 percent of the staff in the Embassy had stayed a second year, possibly a third year in a few cases, our overall production, and understanding, and knowledge transfer would have been significantly better than it was.

The [U.S.] military was the same, but I know the State Department very well in this respect. Because the State Department used a global assignment process, Afghanistan was not really treated any differently than Bolivia, in terms of assigning people in and out.

The only difference was, in most countries, assignments were for two or, in some cases, three years. In Afghanistan, it was for one year. But there was no bureaucratic flexibility to allow people to decide a third of the way through their assignment, or halfway through their assignment, or the last week of their assignment, that they could stay a second year.

There was no billet to put them into and no flexibility. And that intransigence, that lack of flexibility, was, I'm going to say, monumentally frustrating to me. And I utterly failed at-- when I was assigned there, not with SIGAR, in persuading the State Department that there needed to be another way to approach this.

So, I would say from an inspector's perspective, because I came into SIGAR, I arrived with all of these experiences and thoughts. And I looked forward to SIGAR being able to articulate, on a higher plane, [a] different platform, some of the things that I had observed – and maybe have more impact and effect.

I'm not sure that SIGAR accomplished that, despite highlighting the issue. You know, it depends on how purist you are about the role of an inspector general. Is an inspector general there to observe, and document, and recommend? Or is an inspector general a policy officer?

Now, traditionally, inspector generals stay away from policy. It's not their wheelhouse. I don't know if I-- if I'm comfortable with that personally, at this point in time. I think there are different types of inspector generals. There's an inspector general in an agency under sort of normal conditions.

You may have a special inspector general that presumably has different roles, and functions, and responsibilities. Maybe there should be a different way of thinking about an inspector general in a

wartime situation – or in the situation where the issue that's being inspected is of a higher order, a higher magnitude, a greater national interest.

I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all answer to that question. So, I hoped that SIGAR would be able to accomplish some of the things that I, as an individual [U.S.] Foreign Service officer, couldn't take on and couldn't accomplish. And, in many cases, they did have the types of dialogue at the policy level and with Congress that an individual couldn't have. I think SIGAR was very aggressive at this.

But I think we can go back and examine whether or not they changed anything – because the proof of the pudding is in what changed. And, up until the very end, that assignment cycle for both the military and the civilians in Afghanistan remained essentially the same.

It was 12 months – one annual evaluation. And, I would say, in the case of the military, you know, it's, I think, it's a very unforgiving promotion environment, professional environment. Every officer wants to be perfect, and every officer's immediate supervisor wants to be perfect.

And that supervisor wants to be perfect, and their supervisor wants to be perfect. And you have one evaluation that has to declare and state all the perfection. So, it really is a situation that is structured to mitigate against honesty and to mitigate against being candid about problems.

And you layer that on top of the fact that people have only been there a short time, and their bosses have only been there a short time, their actual depth of understanding may be quite limited. But then, there's this bureaucratic almost imperative to paint everything in the most rosy light.

And it's difficult to fight against that. It's not something that an individual can do. It's not something that a well-intentioned officer, very often, can do. They can try, but they tend to pay a price for it. It's an unforgiving system.
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Now, I have enormous respect for so many military colleagues that I've worked with over the years. I taught at West Point* for two years.
[* United States Military Academy at West Point, New York]

But there is, built into the system, an imperative for success. And that makes it very hard to acknowledge failure. And, at times, in the worst examples of this, we can see people just covering up and avoiding, you know, the grossest types of problems – and then hoping desperately to get that one good evaluation and get the hell out before they're tarred with whatever the issue was.

We saw it with buildings being constructed that weren't needed. We saw it with aircraft being purchased they couldn't fly. You know, SIGAR has a hundred if not a thousand examples that have been well-documented. And you ask yourself in each case, "How did that happen?"

Well, sometimes it happened because of these underlying bureaucratic dynamics and imperatives. So, the challenges that we saw in Vietnam we saw repeated in Afghanistan. And I'm not sanguine that

they will not be repeated if we had a similar mission in Ukraine, or the next-- the next one that comes along.

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The assumptions about how it would progress in Afghanistan were false from the beginning.

SIGAR went out and documented all of these things in great detail. And, you know, that-- that's on the record. And the magnificent set of [SIGAR] Lessons Learned documents and [SIGAR] Quarterly Reports will exist – as a marvelous resource, along with these and other types of interviews – for the future.

I'm not sanguine that the lessons will be learned – because they were right there from Vietnam, the same lessons, so many of the same lessons, and we didn't learn them.

What hope do we have that we will learn them after Afghanistan will be beholden to whatever political leadership is in power at that point in time, whatever their priorities are, whatever the competing agendas are.

And we haven't done anything to address the structural nature of how we assign people, assigning people to war zones for one year, civilian and military. It doesn't work. I mean, it-- they can accomplish tactical tasks, but for strategic understanding and advancement, that system will fail in the future, as it's failed in the past – unless it's changed.

What can SIGAR do about that? I would argue against sort of the traditional role of an IG, which is not to prescribe, not to be involved in policy. I think an agency like SIGAR needs to be much more active in policy advocacy, much more active.

I think it-- others may disagree, but I think it was a failure of SIGAR not to approach the State Department more often with a 2x4 – and insist on certain changes, to highlight the fact that you cannot fight a war with an annual lobotomy in your staff and personnel.

Now, I don't know how you do that. And it requires visionary State Department leadership to understand and want to make exceptions within the system – exceptions that are messy, bureaucratically messy, because it disrupts things around the world, and it disrupts the promotion process, the assignments process.

But there has to be a much greater degree of flexibility and accommodation. Honestly, if-- like I said before, if 20 percent of the people that served in Afghanistan had gotten down to the last weeks of their assignment and said, "You know, I'm willing to stay another year," the answer should have been, "Hell, yes."

You know, "We'll find a place for you. We'll move the pieces around somehow in this Embassy. We'll have an extra position in the Political Section, or an extra position in the Economic Section, for a year. We'll make some adjustments. We'll be flexible."

The system, bureaucratically, simply would not contemplate that. And, you know, this was one of the factors that undermined our prospects for success. I won't oversimplify and say it was the factor, but boy, it was an important factor, in my estimation.

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How we ensure that these lessons observed // you know, become lessons learned is a challenge that's beyond me right now. I don't know how it's going to happen, because it's all there. You can read it. You can study it. You can see it. But how do we avoid repeating it? Very, very difficult.

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INTERVIEWER:
What do you wish the public understood better about this agency, and an agency of this model for oversight?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
I wish the public would understand that this matters, that anytime the nation is investing tens of billions of dollars in a large enterprise, involving different agencies and complicated situations, that it's imperative that we have oversight.

And when multiple agencies are involved, it is sometimes imperative that we have special authorities that are cross-cutting. Agencies cannot always be trusted to enforce themselves. So, I think having an agency like SIGAR, that has special authorities that can both rely on different agencies for support, but that can rise above petty agency bureaucratic issues, is absolutely critical.

This is a modest investment in having an agency like SIGAR, but the costs of not having an entity like this can be very great. Now, and it's a little counter to what I said a few minutes ago, I think SIGAR has had many successes. And I think many problems were avoided and, along the way, many changes were made because of things SIGAR identified, problems and whatnot.

I hope, going forward, that from the start-- many of the lessons and excellent documentation that SIGAR has put out there will inform policy, and help contribute to better results. So, the public needs to understand the criticality of effective oversight.

And, you know, as John Sopko* frequently says, "Sunlight is the best disinfectant." And when you're dealing with difficult issues, complicated issues, shining a light on it, exposing the good, the bad, and the ugly is absolutely essential.
[* former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

WHAT DID SIGAR ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think this agency accomplished for the country, the United States, the American people, the mission?

INTERVIEWEE 24:
I don't think this agency was tasked with saving Afghanistan, or leading DoD or State Department policy. That wasn't the mission of the agency. But I think what the agency did was fight the good fight. I think the agency held accountable hundreds, if not thousands, of key officials over the years.

And made many others more aware that the decisions they were taking and contemplating were not going to occur in a vacuum, that they would be examined, they would be critiqued – and it mattered what they would decide to do.

So, part of it is trying to prove a negative. You know, "What didn't happen because SIGAR was there?"

And I suspect there are many, many things that didn't happen because SIGAR was there watching. Everyone knew we were watching. Everyone could read our reports. Everyone knew about the professionalism of our staff, and the dedication.

So, it meant that, you know, you had somebody looking over your shoulder. And if you, if you did something really stupid, or foolish, or – God forbid – illegal, you just might get caught. Our investigators caught a lot of people doing illegal things, and many of them went to prison.

So, I think the public needs to know that this watchdog function is essential. It is a modest investment relative to the huge national investments we make – in human life, in treasure, in some of these big, international enterprises. And we would be foolish not to have robust, well-authorized, well-staffed, well-supported oversight functions. SIGAR's a great example of that.

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