SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 26: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 04/03/24

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWER 26:
My name is [NAME]. I am a special agent for the Special Inspector General for Afghan reconstruction.

JOB DESCRIPTION

INTERVIEWER:
And what does that job entail? What's the job description for that job?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I am a criminal investigator. I conduct criminal investigations on behalf of SIGAR into fraud, waste and abuse, corruption – involving U.S. government funds for reconstruction aid in Afghanistan.

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CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
And how long have you worked for this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I have worked for this agency for almost 13 years.

INTERVIEWER:
And all of that time was in this role?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

I want to take you back to your previous career experience before we talk about your time at SIGAR. So, tell me, how did you get to be in this professional line of work?
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INTERVIEWEE 26:

I went to college in Washington D.C. At that time my primary concerns were the political arena. I was a congressional intern. I worked on Capitol Hill throughout college, as a part-time worker and student.

I took my senior year off in college and worked for a U.S. Senate campaign, and then went back to school, and finally got my degree.

I transitioned into law enforcement. A few years after that, I was an analyst. And I got a taste of the law enforcement analyst world, and realized that special agents, especially special agents in the FBI, were really at the point of the spear for criminal investigations.

And I was encouraged to apply. I did. I was accepted and became an FBI agent in 1981. I went through that career as both an agent and a supervisor, and finally retired after 25 years as an FBI agent. I then went and worked in the intelligence community for four years, in an inspector general[’s office] there.

And while there, I was approached by SIGAR personnel who met me at an in-service – completely coincidental and random – and encouraged me to apply at SIGAR. And what really got me interested in pursuing such a job was the fact that it would involve foreign travel, and going off and doing something in a war zone for the first time in my career, something I always wanted to try to do in the FBI and never could. So that brought me to SIGAR in 2011.

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INTERVIEWER:
You had an interest in the political arena. And I imagine that was in the '70s, when you were working in Congress. What was it about that time or that set of circumstances that got you focused on the political arena in the country?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, I think a lot of people my age, the Baby Boomer generation, grew up in a very politically active and contentious time. The Vietnam War, Watergate, was all happening at that time when I was beginning college in the early '70s. And I was drawn to that.

And that's why I chose to go to school in Washington D.C. and work on Capitol Hill, which I did. And I enjoyed that. I was happy to do that. I was happy to be a working college student. I went to a university that was very serious about school. So my college was more of a work/study exercise.

There wasn't fraternity houses and laying around on the grass, throwing a frisbee. I was just being a worker and being a student at the same time, going to school at nights, working during the days. And I enjoyed that. But then I wanted to move on.
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INTERVIEWER:
What was it that made you turn your attention towards law enforcement?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, I knew some people that were doing it. I knew some people in the "law enforcement: federal agent" job category in Washington, having lived in Washington. I had roommates, while I was a young person, right after college and during college, who were special agents, not in the FBI, but in other agencies. And, listening to them, and thinking that might be something that would fit me. And--

INTERVIEWER:
Why?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
And I think it really did. And the reason why law enforcement, at least at the federal level fit me, was because I was-- I always consider myself somewhat of an introvert. And that was the kind of job where you can do your own work your own way. There wasn't a lot of direct supervision.

And it-- you needed your own initiative, and aggressiveness, to do the job. I really, really liked that. That was my favorite part of the job, frankly. And it's one of the reasons I stayed in the position. And I was able to kind of continue that way, less so with SIGAR, but still that same kind of independence, that any investigator has conducting a criminal investigation.
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INTERVIEWER:
If you were giving somebody a quick snapshot of what you worked on during your career at the FBI, what would you put on that list in terms of the highlights? Cases you worked on that maybe [were] publicly known, and things maybe that weren't.

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, the FBI tracks their agents into different categories of investigations. Some might be intelligence. Some might be counterterrorism, which are very important, and big priorities today. Not so much when I started. So I was tracked, if you will, into white-collar crime, which involved fraud.

And the number one criminal priority of the FBI then, and even today, is public corruption. Now "public corruption" means a lot of different things, whether it's a corrupt police officer or it's the president of the United States.

Many times, corruption involves the contracting side of government. Because that's where the money is. Contractors are known to have bribed government officials in the past. And so that was my specialty, which lent itself to work at SIGAR, frankly. And I think that's one of the reasons they probably chose to hire me – because I was categorized in the FBI as a public corruption/fraud investigator.

I was a supervisor in the public corruption unit at FBI headquarters. I was the supervisor of a public corruption fraud squad in the Washington D.C. area, where there's a lot of public corruption – because that's where the government is, and that's where the government officials are.

Highlights of my FBI career, I would say: I was the case agent for the Iran-Contra case. That was handled by a special prosecutor, known as special counsel, in those days. I had that position for six and a half years. That was a high-priority public corruption investigation, involving the highest levels of the U.S. government. I was detailed to the White House. I met presidents, past and future, and ev-- and present-- past, pres[ent] and future presidents in that position, believe it or not.
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I traveled all over the world working on the Iran-Contra investigation. Because it was a special investigation, so I couldn't use the FBI and other government agencies to support me, I had to do a lot of the work myself. And the other agents who were detailed to that team had to do all their own leads.

So if there was an interview in Hong Kong, which there was, I went to Hong Kong. And I ended up going all over the world, at least Central America and Europe, doing that job. And that was very interesting and rewarding.

I later became a supervisor in the field. And that was interesting for a couple of reasons. One, because I had a serial killer case – which are thankfully unusual, but very, very interesting – and even though very difficult emotionally, it was a very rewarding part. Because we did solve the case, and brought the person to justice and gave some comfort to the families.

It was a person that was abducting young girls – you know, pre-teenage age. So, of course the mental anguish to the families, and to the investigators, frankly, was quite high. So I was involved in that very, very closely.

I was also the supervisor in Fredericksburg, Virginia, when the D.C. sniper case was going on. And if you remember the history of that case, the first shootings outside the immediate Washington D.C. area were in Fredericksburg, Virginia. We ended up having three shootings in my territory, while I was a supervisor there. So, I was deeply involved in that case – working literally around the clock.

I would sleep in the office – not go home. It was, luckily, a short case. It was solved relatively quickly, thank God. And those two were apprehended. But I was deeply involved in that case. So those are some of the highlights of my FBI career.

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INTERVIEWER:
You told me that there was a part of experience that you were interested in, that you hadn't had in your FBI career. And that was that you'd never been deployed, assigned to a case that would bring you to a combat zone. So this agency presented that opportunity to you. Why was that appealing to you?
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INTERVIEWEE 26:
Working in a war zone was very appealing to me at that time in my career. I had already gone through a 25-year career with the FBI. Even though I had been assigned to work overseas, never for long periods. And I wanted to do that. It was difficult to do as a young agent, a father, a husband, having a family.

It's difficult to take long deployments like that when you're in that position in life. But once I was retired, I went to SIGAR right after my daughter's marriage. So I felt like I was in very-- it was a very good time in my life to get outside the box and do something different, while I was still young enough and had the passion to do that. So I really, really wanted to do that. And, luckily, I was able to do that.

INTERVIEWER:
So how long did you end up working for this agency in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I worked over six years in Afghanistan for SIGAR. I did it in two three-year groupings. I went in the-- in May of 2012. I stayed till the end of 2016. And then I went back in 2017. And I stayed till almost the end of 2020.

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So when you went there in 2012 for the first time, that was a brand-new experience for you, to be in a conflict zone working for the U.S. government in any kind of capacity. What was that like for you?

INTERVIEWEE 26:

It was a little scary. I'll admit that, even though I was used to being a federal agent and carrying a weapon all my life. It was still a war zone. There was still a lot of security concerns. And I remember landing for the first time in [the] Kabul airport, and getting a ride to the [U.S.] Embassy, which was only a couple of miles away.

But driving through the streets of a very, very poor-- I don't want to say backward, but certainly dilapidated – city, of a capital that-- I was not used to that, to seeing that kind of a lifestyle among people in a capital city, in the world today.

Very little infrastructure, very little electricity. No telephone poles, just mud buildings a lot of times in the middle of a capital. The streets were very rugged, and ripped up. I remember there were lots of horse-drawn carriages carrying people and goods as a primary source of transportation. That was a primary mode of transportation. That was very-- kind of shocking to me to see that.

And when our car would stop – even though there very few red lights in Kabul, I think only a couple still to this day – any time our car slowed down, people would mill around and little children would beg at the car windows. And there was so-- it was that kind of a very intense poverty-- unsecure environment outside the walls of that U.S. Embassy.

INTERVIEWER:
And was that different from your expectations of what it would be like?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Yes, it was. I had been to third-world countries or poorer countries, I had thought. South America, Central America. I had been-- but I've never been to Africa, Asia, the places where you see the really, really seriously poor countries. So that was a shock to me. And to see young children living on the streets, dirty, begging at car windows – that was just something I'd never seen before. And it was something I'd never experienced before.

CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
So you have significant amount of experience in your background of conducting criminal investigation work. What was it like to bring those kind of assignments with you into a combat zone, a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
After being there just a couple of months, I realized that this was going to be an incredibly difficult job for me and all of my colleagues, trying to conduct investigations in this environment. It was not only a war zone, and it was not only a place of abject poverty [but also] very little infrastructure or industry.

For example, there was very little if any railroads in the entire country. Even today, there are very little railroads. If you can imagine a country that's a large as Texas without any railroads. It has no ports. It's landlocked. It's very mountainous. It's very rugged terrain, very desert.

Most of the land is unusable for agriculture or anything else, other than maybe poppy. So that made it very difficult.

The security situation made it very difficult. We were allowed to drive because we were armed personnel. I had to take a driving test that the State Department required me to take. And I could drive in Kabul, and I did on many, many occasions. But I always had to have another armed-- they called them "shooters." We had to have a shooter in the vehicle with us, which mean[t] we both – both me as a driver and then my partner – had to be armed, with both pistols and with our automatic long rifles, which we did.

Sometimes we'd have an Afghan employee, to help us maneuver the streets. Because again, no street lights, traffic jams were horrible-- poverty, children running around on streets. No one's-- you know, there's very little order – civil order – on the streets of Kabul.

But the worst thing about it, as far as conducting these investigations, was the history and culture of corruption in that country. Everyone was accused of being corrupt, from the president on down. Whether that's true or not, it's hard to say. But everyone was certainly suspect of being corrupt.

And we heard over and over and over again – from Afghans, Afghans in the government, police officers, prosecutors that we worked with, judges that we worked with – who told us, "I can't do what you're asking. We cannot do what you want us to do. The system's too corrupt."

"They are protecting the people you want us to look into. We are not able to help you, Mr. Investigator." And that was the reality of the situation, unlike anything I ever experienced in my life in the United States as an investigator.

If I went to a prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's office or into the Department of Justice, they would help me. They would work with me. They were not corrupt. They were not demanding bribes from the defendants, or from the targets of our investigations. That was not the case in Afghanistan.

There were serious, serious impediments to conducting fraud investigations the way I did them in the United States, as an experienced fraud investigator for the FBI. For example, in the FBI the first thing you do is you obtain government records.

If there's allegations of wrongdoing in a government contract, you go to that contractor or to that agency in the U.S. government and ask for or demand the records, which I would get through a subpoena or other avenues. That was not available to us.

The Afghan government was new. And it was not sophisticated, did not have certified records readily available to us as investigators. In the United States fraud investigations, one would get a grand jury and compel people to testify. We did not have access to a grand jury.

We could not compel Afghan citizens who were the subjects of our investigations-- to compel to interviews or grand jury testimony. There were no grand juries. And we could not bring them back to the United States as a subject of a subpoena or a grand jury testimony.

So those were very, very difficult impediments. And then the last impediment, I think, is the lack of certified or proper and reliable, credible financial records. Afghanistan does not have a modern banking system. You cannot go to the local bank and serve them a subpoena and obtain quality financial records from the banks in Afghanistan.

The first private bank in Afghanistan was the Kabul Bank, which I believe was initiated, started in 2010. The very first private bank. That bank crashed and burned in a major scandal in which, again, through corruption of government officials and others, that bank dissolved and had to be completely rescued by the Afghan government with U.S. government funds.

So there was no place to go to get financial records. There was no place to go to get government records. And it was very difficult, if [not] impossible, to compel witnesses and subjects to testify to us. And I remember seeing all of this very quickly and thinking to myself, "How could there be a worse environment, for someone like me, who uses these instruments to conduct investigations, when they're not available to me?"

So it was a very difficult, I think, place to try to do those kinds of investigations. And I'll also add the the kind of investigations that were required, through the SIGAR mandate, were complex cases. Contract fraud, corruption are very complex cases – that are difficult to prove under the best circumstances.

In the United States they're difficult. But to then try to conduct successful investigations – in that environment, with no security, no grand jury, no financial records, no government records, and no way to compel someone to testify or be a witness – made it very, very difficult.

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INTERVIEWER:

I imagine that there was a moment, or moments, in which you and your fellow criminal agents for this agency put your heads together and said, "We got to game this out. We got to strategize for how we're conduct these investigations, given that we don't have all of the tools that we would have doing this work stateside." Did that happen? And can you tell me about how you all kind of reached a moment of, "Well, we need to pivot and do different things"?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, yes, we did. We did talk about that. We had a task force there. And we would meet with the task force. And I think every experienced investigator-- because we had a couple of other agencies that worked with SIGAR, at a much smaller percentage of personnel than we had, of course.

But we had people that worked with us. And we would meet and strategize about how to best go about that. And a lot of times we would rely on our partners that worked at USAID* or the Department of Defense to try to get us documents from their perspective of the contract process.
[* U.S. Agency for International Development]

That still left a gap. Because we didn't have the Afghan government documents, certified copies anyway. So we decided that we had to try to get documents in some other way. And we also decided that maybe the best thing we can do, since it's going to be difficult to actually convict an Afghan of wrongdoing, we're going to have to try to cut the contract off and save the U.S. government money.

And that was a priority, later, once we realized it was going to be difficult. I should also add one other thing that made the case-- case work and the cases difficult in Afghanistan for SIGAR. Unlike war zones in Iraq and other places, the Afghan and U.S. government agreed that their policy was going to be something called "Afghan First."

Afghan First was where they would try to award contracts to local Afghan companies. Because of Afghans' very, very small, meager, backward economy, they thought it was a way to build from the bottom up. "Let's hire Afghans to be our construction companies." "Let's hire Afghans to deliver the fuel to all military bases." "Let's use as many Afghan companies as we can."

In other war zones, that's not the case. They would bring in the big U.S. contractors. They would come in with 1,000 people. And they would do all the work. And it was easier to keep control of that from an investigator standpoint because you didn't have local government records to worry about. You just had that U.S. government contractor there.

We didn't have that. We had a lot of Afghan contractors. How do you prosecute them? Very difficult.

So we would try to discover the fraud, conduct the investigation, discover the corruption or fraud, and then stop the contract, put a halt to it, and save the [U.S.] Government money that would have gone

into illegal or corrupt activities by the contractor, and the government officials overseeing the contractors.

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We had one case in which a SIGAR agent actually testified in a criminal trial. I was present for that. It wasn't me. But I was a supervisor. And I witnessed it. I actually took photos of that. And that person was convicted in Afghan criminal court.

I believe it's the only time a U.S. government agent ever testified in an Afghan court. That person was convicted and sentenced. I forget the sentence. He was taking-- he was paying bribes to a U.S. military personnel at a fuel depot.

So the way the-- a lot of this corruption involving fuel was, the trucks would come to the-- there was a contract for the Afghan trucking company to deliver fuel to a U.S. base.

The trucks would come, full of fuel, to the U.S. base and then bribes would be paid to U.S. soldiers or whoever the contractor was, usually third-country people, who were actually at the bladder or at the tank where the fuel was downloaded.

And they would pay a bribe of a couple thousand dollars to say we downloaded, but really not downloaded the fuel. And then drive the fuel right out of the base and then sell it on the black market. So they got paid twice.

They got paid to deliver the fuel. They never delivered it. And then they got paid when they sold the fuel on the black market. That was a very common fuel corruption technique that we saw. This person was convicted of that. Then he was sentenced and sent to a jail. So we would follow up with the prosecutors and talk to them about that case.

And they said, "Yeah, well, now he's not really serving his time." In Afghanistan, it's kind of like a work release program, they described to us. Now in the United States, there's work release programs. And what they would do is a prisoner who had-- if he was—[if he] satisfied all the requirements, had a good record, and wasn't violating maybe internal prison rules, he could go to work for eight hours a day and then come back to the prison and spend the night.

The Afghans did it a little differently. They did it reverse. So they would come into the prison during the day, hang out for a while, and then go home and go to sleep. So that was the new prison term this person was given. So it's-- that kind of thing we saw over and over and over again. So even if you got the successful conviction, which was so very difficult, then it was corrupted down the road of the process. So very few people ever paid a really severe penalty. There were some. But not often.

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INTERVIEWER:
Were there moments, were there incidents, in which your personal safety was put at risk while you were conducting your criminal investigative work in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Yes. Not as much as you would think. I have a couple of stories. I think I was the only SIGAR employee to ever intentionally be shot at. And that happened, while I was in a vehicle, following the Inspector General of SIGAR out of a compound into the back door of the airport. Actually, very close to where the airport bombing took place at the Abbey Gate [in August 2021].

There's many gates into that airport. That airport was very, very large. And half of it was a U.S. military base. We were going to the U.S. military side of the airport compound, and we had a nervous Afghan driver, driving us trying to follow the lead car and security car of IG [NAME:] Sopko.*
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

Of course, principals get waved into places that the lower-level employees have to follow after the fact, whether you're a U.S. president or an inspector general. So while they were whisked through the gates quickly, we had to go through the typical protocols, which was going through serpentine-shaped Jersey wall, to slow down any approaching vehicle.

Our driver made some mistakes, didn't follow the sign properly, and warning shots were shot at our vehicle, landing right in front of the hood of our car. So it was warning shots, I like to think. But that was kind of exciting, knowing how vulnerable you really were now.

Because those would've penetrated our vehicle, and caused harm, if not death. And I'll never forget the young auditor, SIGAR auditor, was there, who was not a former FBI agent or-- didn't carry a weapon with her. And when she saw the first bullet glance off the Jersey wall in front of us in a very unmistakable, to me, round-- rifle round, she goes, "Oh, is that a firework?"

And I said, "No, that's not"-- I was in the front seat, but the driver-- I said, "No." And I told the driver to stop. And he saw, and he knew exactly what it was. He was a middle-aged Afghan man who was our Embassy driver. He stopped, and I said, "Back up."

And he had to back our vehicle up through that serpentine street of Jersey walls to get back to the initial entry point. And then we had to get out, wave our hands, identify ourselves, ask them please not to shoot us, we're really here on official business.

We're government employees. We're-- we're U.S. employees. So that was interesting. But I've known, during my time in SIGAR, three people – two of whom I considered friends – [who] were killed in

Afghanistan while we were all there. One is the-- was a young woman who was not in SIGAR but was-- worked at USAID.

She was in her early 20s. It was her first job. She was friends with the young SIGAR employees-- somebody I would see at the cafeteria. Somebody I certainly knew and would chat with, because she was friends with other young females that worked at SIGAR.

And these young women would hang out together and socialize, as you can imagine. And so I knew her. She was killed, by a terrorist event. I was, I think, pretty close. I don't want to say very close. I was pretty close to the senior U.S. military official who was killed in Afghanistan.

He turned out to be the highest-ranking U.S. military member killed in Afghanistan. He worked at CSTC-A.* He was the head of CSTC-A. We worked-- CSTC-A is the U.S. military's what we call humanitarian-- they're the USAID branch. They provided humanitarian aid to the Afghan government.
[* U.S. Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan]

They were not soldiers. They did not-- were involved in combat operations. They would build the roads to an Afghan base. They would build the Jersey walls for the Afghan base-- they would build stopg-- you know, they would build different kinds of infrastructure for the Afghan bases, so they would be more secure. That kind of thing. They would build buildings, for the Afghans.

That person was killed in a terrorist attack. While we were there, we saw him. It was not funny, but we saw him the day before, having lunch – because we'd have lunch together a lot of times. We had lunch with him the day before he was killed. The next day he went out, off-compound, to an Afghan facility, and was killed by a Afghan soldier who was posing as a soldier, but was really either Al Qaeda or Taliban. I'm not sure which. But he opened fire and killed this person, and others.

And so you knew that every time you left the base, you were in danger. And even in the base. We had bombings all the time. I-- you would wake up to large explosions. They'd seem like they were just feet away. They'd be a half a mile away, but the amount of explosives was so large that it would blow out our windows. And we had two SIGAR-- we had SIGAR employees on two occasions [who] were deployed to military bases, living there, while those bases were attacked.

I remember one time – this would've been in 2015 or '16. I was the director of the office. We were going to the Attorney General [of the former government of Afghanistan], to see him. And we were outside the compound, on the streets of Kabul. We were working there and our Afghan driver goes-- we were walking from the parked car across the street into the front entrance of the Attorney General's office, where they had Afghan guards positioned every 30 feet or what-- or so.

And our Afghan driver pulled us aside and said, "Hey, I know that-- that Afghan guy over there." He said, "He's-- he's like a killer. He carries a knife." You know, I'm thinking, "Well, that's great." And I had my sidearm, so I walked into the compound holding my hand on my gun, discreetly.

I had a suit jacket on-- in case this guy should take out a knife or do something and try to harm us. And when you were in places-- and again, I went all over. And I was in a lot of police stations, and I was in a lot of attorney gen-- you know, a palace.

When you were out in the street, or you were walking, and even in some of these buildings, it's open to the public. It's not secure. The U.S. Embassy was secure. The military base-- U.S. military bases were secure. The rest of the facilities were not as secure as you would think.

The Afghan culture allows for people to have disputes settled through either *shuras*, or tribal leaders would come. The-- that's part of the culture, is for you to come in and make your case to senior government officials.

So, for example, when I would go to the Attorney General, the Attorney General of the country [Afghanistan], I would walk into his office and I would go in there – I've been in there six or eight times – there would be 20 or 30 regular Afghan people, in there, wanting to see him, lobby him, whatever they're doing there.

And they are not being screened. They have-- there's no controls. Are they armed? I don't know if they are. Are they-- are they who they say they are? I don't know who they are.

You know, just like we didn't know who that soldier-- Afghan soldier who killed our American general [was]. We didn't know who he was. But he was there and he was dangerous.

So everywhere you went, there was danger. And you got used to that. And again, I carried a weapon everywhere I went. I don't know if it would've been effective. I hope it might have.

But it's pretty easy to take someone by surprise and shoot them or stab them. Especially when they're walking around and you can get them from any angle, or you can lay in wait. And so that was always on the back of your mind, I think for everyone.

That's how the USAID young woman was killed. She was delivering schoolbooks, I believe, to a school. They drove up, as I heard the story, they drove up to the wrong school or the wrong address and they said, "No, it's a few doors down." And they got out.

Instead of getting back in their controlled, relatively secure vehicles, they walked. And that was the mistake. By then, others heard about it. Bad guys found out about it, came over, and attacked them and killed her. So the danger was always there.

We worked all over the country. We had agents stationed in Herat, in Mazār-e Sharīf, in Kandahar, in Camp Leatherneck, in Paktika – several far-flung bases, out in really dangerous parts of Afghanistan. And, of course, in Kabul.

And we would drive in many of those places – in Herat, where they had a serious terrorist attack on the U.S. Consulate and almost destroyed it, and almost invaded it, and would've probably killed everybody. We had agents there at the time it happened who were protecting the Consulate.

In that city, we were allowed to self-drive, which means we could drive ourselves anywhere and everywhere. And not just us, but non-armed, non-federal agents. So if you worked for U.S. Department of Agriculture, you could self-drive in Herat. You could self-drive in Mazār-e Sharīf.

Is there danger in that? Sure [there] is, because they-- people would stop and have lunch at local restaurants. I did that. I did all those things. Did we sit in the corners? Yeah. Did we have weapons with us? Yeah.

But anybody could've walked in. And you've got-- go to police departments. They don't screen visitors in a police department. No one does-- even in the United States you might not even see that. So we were always exposed. It was good to be a former FBI agent. And it was good to be used to carrying a weapon and to be proficient in it. But no, there was danger. And I worried sometimes. I think everybody did. So.

INTERVIEWER:
How heavily did that weigh on you? How did you deal with it? Did you just have to put it – not out of mind, because you had to be aware of what was going on, but – did you put it, maybe, "out of worry?"

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think so. I think that's the only way you can really, you know, work in that kind of an environment. We were different. SIGAR investigators were different than probably anyone else at the Embassy in that way.

And I say that because, for example, the State Department had two agents for a while working in our task force-- Inspector General's Office from the State Department. USAID had agents working. But they didn't have the latitude. They didn't have the ability or the authority to travel like we did.

And so SIGAR was always going out and doing a lot of things. We're actually looking at crime scenes, that no other agency would-- would have done. We would have to get the U.S. military to take us out, which we did, with security teams. And take us out to the places where the fraud occurred.

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INTERVIEWER:
After all the time that you spent there, did you decide to go back the second time later on? Or did you always think you were going to go back the second time?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I don't know. You get burned out. And I was getting burned out. And I got burned out the second time. It is a difficult environment for a person. You know, another thing, too, a big problem over there was nobody stayed a long time. Maybe for that reason, maybe not.

You know, [U.S.] military, they do one year. Somebody said, famously, and it wasn't someone at SIGAR, but I think somebody else said, "It wasn't a 20-year war. It was 21-year wars." And that's true. Every year everything changed. Everything changed.

So, new senior leadership at the Embassy, senior leadership at the military. The USAID person that would walk away from you at the lunch cafeteria would be replaced and you'd have to start all over again. "Hey, I'm really not a bad guy. I'm with SIGAR. We're trying to do the right thing."

You know, it's-- everything was starting over again. But SIGAR's value, and this was a really smart idea, was to keep people longer. We had the only institutional knowledge. It was us. We were so much more-- we were so better at this than everybody else, because we had people there for so long. Nothing replaces just being on the ground. So-- but it is-- it does burn you out. And so, after three-plus years I left. And then I took a year off, and I went back. And I did another three years. And—

INTERVIEWER:
What made you want to go back?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I just enjoyed-- I enjoyed the excitement of it. I enjoyed living in that environment. It was really interesting. I got to travel. I got to do a lot of interesting things.

Again, I-- when that-- there was an agent who testified in the Afghan criminal court. I think the only one in the history of the U.S. government who ever had a U.S. military investigator, or a U.S. criminal investigator testify in a Afghan criminal court. I was there with a rifle at the back of the [courtroom]. Again, open to the public, standing there as security.

I-- who does that? Who-- what FBI agent can say he did that? What other law enforce-- you know, lifelong law enforcement agent was in a war zone, providing security while your partner is testifying – in a foreign language, by the way – in an Afghan court?

So-- and the defendant's family were all next to me. And I was always afraid one of them was going to stand up and shoot me, frankly – because they were all very, as you can imagine, very upset that their-- that their poor son was being prosecuted.

So it was the excitement. It was-- I felt like we were doing good things. And I felt it was important to do that. It was the end of my career and, at this point in my life, I wanted to do something meaningful. I didn't have to come back [to Afghanistan]. I could've stayed here.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: AFGHAN CONTRACTOR FRAUD CASE

INTERVIEWER:
What were the biggest success stories in terms of criminal investigations that you worked on in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, I think one of the biggest cases, and I'll mention the person by name because it's a very public case, and it received a lot of publicity at the time, was the case involving a Afghan contractor known as [NAME:] Hikmattulah Shadman. He worked in Kandahar.

And he was kind of the classic story of Afghan contracting during the U.S. government involvement. And why do I say that? Well, because remember, this was a very backward third-world country with no railroads, no infrastructure, no electricity for the most part, except for a few major cities.

And so it was-- it didn't have a business environment like we're used to, in other parts of the world. So [NAME:] Shadman was a young, very young teenage translator for the newly arrived U.S. government. But he was a smart guy and he was a hustler.

And he helped the [U.S.] military out quite a bit because he knew how to talk both languages, could work with the locals, could work with the [U.S.] military, get things done for them. And then he developed his own business and started supplying the U.S. military with supplies that they needed.

Foodstuffs, fuel, all kinds-- the U.S. military needs everything. Really, it needs everything to survive. And so he started a very successful-- they call it logistics companies. Companies that provide all of the little things the U.S. military needs to perform its duties over there.

Which, again, included providing humanitarian aid. Not just shooting and guns and bullets and tanks and-- but other things. The military does a lot of things in these countries. He built up hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of business.

And was committing fraud while he was doing it. And I won't get into all of the allegations, but [they] included bribery, and U.S. government officials were involved. There's allegations that they were turning a blind eye to his wrongdoing because he was making things go smoother.

One of the things we'd hear from the [U.S.] military is, "These people are too big to fail. We cannot go after corrupt contractors who are providing us with vital services, like-- and supplies – like fuel, like, arma-- like supplies for our people, so they can perform in the field better."

Water. Do you know how much wa-- there's no water systems in that country. How do people drink? We had 100,000 soldiers. How do they-- what do they drink every day? They drink bottled water. How the heck do you get enough bottled water for 100,000 people scattered over the size of Texas?

Tell me how you would do that. Trucks, contracting, people. That-- so you had to hire that, and hire that all out. There was no tap to turn on for anything. Your fuel, all of that had to be provided by these Afghans. So this person became very, very successful at a very young age.

And-- and even-- he was eventually prosecuted by the U.S. government. And we actually got a judgment against him and actually got money because he, probably on his part, foolishly used American banks.

Most Afghan contractors didn't. They used banks that we couldn't get at, like local banks or *hawalas*, or they would send money to places where we don't have MLAT* agreements to help get each other's money back, corrupt money back. So he was prosecuted.
[* U.S. Treaties on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters]

I had personally had a case on a similar individual. He was a young Afghan. He was bilingual. He was a teenager. // He worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who builds buildings. Humanitarian aid. They build schools. They build hospitals. They build buildings, universities. He realized, "Wow, there's a lot of money. They spend a lot of money here building buildings. I'm going to start a construction company."

Which he did. A very successful construction company. He was the most successful construction contractor the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had in Afghanistan. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wrote a newsletter touting this person's success. And we had a case against him in which he committed fraud on another contract.

And we ended up successfully prosecuting him. How? Only because, luckily for us, he immigrated to the United States under a special immigrant visa [SIV] and he became a U.S. citizen. And now he-- we could get our hands on him. And the U.S. justice system could get hands on him.

Unlike so many other contractors. He moved to the United States to California where he was successfully prosecuted, and sentenced, and served time in jail. So-- and that just happened a couple of years ago. So those were two big contractors.

One worked for the [U.S.] military, one worked for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers doing hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of contracting, and they were caught, and stopped. Now, how much corruption took place before that? Probably a lot, I would guess, given the history of their enterprise.

SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: AFGHAN RING ROAD CONTRACT CASE

I had a case in which they were building-- you talk about lack of infrastructure. Everyone says, "Oh, there's a ring road in Afghanistan. There's a beltway like in Washington. It goes all around the country. There's a big interstate highway all around."

Well, again, that was not completely true. Yes, there was a circular road that went around Afghanistan. But guess what? It wasn't all paved all around. It was not a complete road. It was not like the beltway around Washington, D.C. It was a combination of nice roads, terrible roads, dirt roads, through the mountains maybe not much of a road at all.

And so they tried to finish the ring road while I was there. And they had-- it's a huge, hundreds of millions of dollars contract. If you can imagine, again, how do you build a road without a railroad? How do you build a road without electricity?

How do you build a road through the mountains without infrastructure? How can you do that? Horse-drawn carriage? I mean, that's how backward this country was, when it came to big industrial projects.

So could we prosecute? We found the corruption. We found it. We worked the [former government of Afghanistan's] Attorney General's Office. They were relatively helpful. But this was a palace. They had a high priority. This was a palace favorite project. They didn't want to hear about it.

We finally convinced President Ghani,* personally, to stop that contract because of the corruption that we found in the-- Could we prosecute anybody? No. Not one person went to jail. Not one person was prosecuted under U.S. law. But we stopped a $100 million road project, to finish the ring road out in western Afghanistan.

[* Ashraf Ghani, the former government of Afghanistan's president, 2014-2021]

So those were big projects, that we intercepted, and I think prevented from being worse than they were. Couple people went to jail, in those three examples. Others didn't. Others are still probably

contracting to this day. I have no doubt about that. I know for a fact the road contractor's still working. So, he was never prosecuted locally.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: CULVERT GRATES FRAUD CASE

One of the celebrated SIGAR cases – again, small case, maybe-- on the-- you know, in the big picture a small case, because it was an Afghan company.

But an Afghan company was contracted to put grates over culvert openings underneath the road. Why? So terrorists don't put a bomb underneath the culver-- underneath the-- in the culvert, so when a vehicle drives over the culvert they ignite it and blow up the vehicle.

Well, we paid them. And they submitted paperwork saying they put the grates on, but they didn't put the grates on. We ha-- again, in the United States, 10 minutes, I get in my FBI car, drive over, take pictures of the grate, come back, go to a grand jury and prosecute the person.

We can't do that over there. We had to get a U.S. military-- it was literally an act of Congress to get us over there in this dangerous part of the country. Why was it so important? Because somebody did put a bomb in that culvert, and it did blow up underneath a U.S. MRAP.* It did kill a U.S. soldier.
[* mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle]

So this is important work. We did that. We ended up prosecuting that company, blacklisting them. I'm sure they thought it was a big slap on the wrist, but that was a success that was incredibly difficult – for a case that, in the U.S., you wouldn't even assign it to a senior FBI agent.

That would be something the rookie would do. "Go over and see if there's grates on a culvert because we paid money to have those grates put there." "Okay, I'll go over. I'll take pictures. I'll cer-- I'll get a couple witness interviews. I'll wrap it up and send it to the grand jury."

But over there [in Afghanistan], it was a major undertaking, and a successful one. So that was-- that was gratifying. Things like that. We did a lot of things outside the box like that, that no other agency did. And I'm proud of that.

And I think that's why SIGAR, I think, is successful, because we did do a lot of things like that. We did work with the [former government of Afghanistan's] Attorney General's Office. No one else did. No other agency went over there. No State Department people did that. No USAID agents ever did that. It was only SIGAR.
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So we were the ones. Everyone thought SIGAR was the FBI – because we were the big team member. We were the ones, I think, going outside the box, trying to be successful in this very difficult environment.

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INTERVIEWER:
In terms of your own experience, did-- were you heavily involved in either the culverts case or the fuel case or both?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I was the supervisor for the culvert case. So I was very involved in that. I did go out there, but we had a very aggressive and very good investigator. He was a former NCIS* agent, so he knew the military. And he knew how to be in a war zone.
[* U.S. Naval Criminal Investigative Service]

And he knew how to deal with that kind of a mission, which is to go out there with a team of sharpshooters and MRAPs*, and security personnel, and get to those places to [be] able to secure the evidence we needed for that case.
[* mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles]

So all the credit goes to that person. And he initiated that case on his own. And that's the kind of thing I think SIGAR should be proud of, is we had people like that that really were, you know, they were retired people that wanted to do a good thing.

This was their last chance at this kind of work. And I think a lot of them did very, very well. Was it perfect? No. Could we have done better? Yeah, we could've. But it was a very difficult place to try to conduct complicated investigations.

SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: FUEL THEFT CASES

INTERVIEWER:
And then what about the fuel case?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
We had so many fuel cases. I could stay here all day and talk about them. We had fuel cases of-- the entire fuel process in that country was corrupted. We had cases from the high to the low. They would steal the fuel at every stop of the process, every trick in the book.

For example, most of the contracts for the fuel deliveries allowed, because of the bad infrastructure-- and these trucks were not modern trucks that you see on U.S. highways today. They were old, dilapidated trucks that leak.

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In Afghanistan, fuel theft and corruption was the single largest crime problem we encountered. Fuel was stolen or corrupted in every part of the process. All of the fuel in-- used in that country had to be transported in. They didn't create their own fuel.

They didn't have fuel fields like in Texas, where you can refine your oil into gasoline. They had to get the fuel outside of the country and bring it in by trucks. Truck after truck after truck. You can only imag-- how many gallons of fuel do you think the U.S. government and the U.S. military and the Afghan government and Afghan military use on a daily basis?

I don't know how many thousands of metric tons it is, but it's a lot. And so, all over the country you had fuel trucks driving all up and down, delivering fuel to everybody. The fuel was stolen by the drivers. It was stolen at the fuel dump zone.

Usually it was bladders, big rubber bladders that would store it, because there were temporary tanks in bases to store the fuel in U.S. bases and Afghan bases. It was stolen there, by bribing the person not to really download, but take $100 or $500 and let the truck leave the base completely full again.

Or it was controlled and colluded through corruption of these senior four or five fuel companies, known as the Afghan fuel mafia, that controlled all of the fuel contracts in the country. Because the contracts were so large only the biggest companies could do it.

No mom-and-pop shop is going to supply enough fuel for the U.S. military at Bagram Airfield* or Kandahar Airfield or Camp Leatherneck or the-- or ISAF headquarters or RS*** headquarters in Kabul. These are huge bases. So they had big companies doing it.**
[* Bagram Air Base, aka Bagram Airfield, aka Bagram Airfield Base, located in the Parwan Province of Afghanistan, north of the capital city, Kabul – formerly the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, used by the U.S. military until U.S. withdrawal in 2021]
[** International Security Assistance Force]
[*** Resolute Support]

They would collude and set the price artificially high, together, and then co-- split the money amongst the other contractors, so everyone would get a piece of the pie, so the U.S. government was always overpaying for fuel. And then, once the fuel was awarded that contract, the fuel, as it was processing through the country, it would get stolen and corrupted.

And it was corrupted in every conceivable way. We had bases where the fuel trucks would have to wait in a cool-down yard before they're allowed to enter the base, so they didn't have any explosives on them. It was part of the security system.

So they would come to a parking lot 100 feet outside the front gate of a base, and sit there for two days. And then they'd be waved in, because by then any bomb or explosive could be found, or whatever. They would secretly download the fuel from their tanks then, into 50-gallon drums and 80-gallon drums, secretly.

There would be pictures-- people would take pictures of them. But they were off the base, so you couldn't go out there and arrest them for that. Then it would come into the base. They would bribe to download. "Only download half my tank. Here's $500."

People would do that. They'd take the half a tank back out and sell it on the black market. Once it was delivered, and it was delivered to an Afghan base especially, the Afghan base commanders would then steal the fuel, upload it again, take it out of the base, and sell it on the black market.

It was very, very lucrative. So you had storage tanks. Well again, who is watching the people with the storage tanks? Nobody. So the tankers come in. They say, "Here's 10,000 gallons," because that's how big a truck would be. And they really wouldn't download into the storage tanks.

Or they would download watered-down fuel. That was very common. Every trick in the book to steal that fuel, because fuel was "black gold." It was liquid gold. It was one of the few commodities in Afghanistan that had value everywhere.

Solar energy doesn't have value everywhere. But fuel does, because there are vehicles in Afghanistan. People need them to drive their personal vehicles and taxis and everything else. So fuel had value, unlike anything else. So everyone stole the fuel.

We had many, many cases on fuel. Mostly what we'd do is cut the contractors out. Cut them down, get re-awarded to different contractors, try to stay on top of it, try to monitor, try to have better inventory control. Very, very difficult.

We also had an experience that I think others were there and maybe could tell you about. We wanted to go after the senior fuel transportation contractor in the country. I won't mention his name. We had a meeting. It was a joint meeting of the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. military. We had the ambassador there. SIGAR was there as the-- and we were the fuel theft experts at the U.S. Embassy.

We were there. It was me and another person. We said, "We want to go after this guy. We want to stop him from doing this. He steals and he-- and we have all this evidence against him." The U.S. military official said, "Time out. That is not going to happen. That individual is too big to fail."

I'll never forget that. He said, "Too big to fail. If we stop his delivery of fuel"-- he was delivering to the Afghan military. He said, "If we stop delivery of that fuel to the Afghan military, within two weeks this country will collapse. You cannot do what you're want-- what you want to do." And we did not do it.

INTERVIEWER:
So you're sitting there. You hear this. And what was your first thought?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
This is typical Afghanistan. The-- this is something, as someone who's spent his life prosecuting cases in the United States-- can you imagine that happening here? Could you imagine somebody saying, "We can't prosecute a fuel company that's delivering to the Pentagon, because even though they're corrupt, we're not going to do it."

It's-- it's prepo-- it's-- it's unbelievable. We were so mad – and we were spitting.

But you also, as you asked me earlier, you-- we-- do you get used to the danger? Yes, you do get used to it. Do you get used to the constant corruption and roadblock, every time you tried something? Yeah. It's demoralizing. It's upsetting. You just-- you throw your hands up and go fight another day. What else can you do?

INTERVIEWER:
And that matter ended there.

INTERVIEWEE 26:
That matter ended there. We finally took action against that person about three or four years later. But we couldn't do it then. Nope.

INTERVIEWER:
And when you <u>were</u> able--

INTERVIEWEE 26:
True story.

INTERVIEWER:
-- to do it, when you <u>were</u> able to do it…?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
The U.S. government was already out of the country by then. He was no longer delivering fuel that the U.S. government cared about anymore. But when he was delivering valuable fuel to the Afghan

military, the Afghan security forces, we could not touch him, because he was-- it was, quote, "Too big to fail."

INTERVIEWER:
What was the result for him after that second time when you were able to proceed?
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INTERVIEWEE 26:
He was-- he was blacklisted, by the U.S. government, the big U.S. government. But we could not go after him. We knew he was corrupt. We had evidence against it. We had informants talking to us about it. We had everything we would've needed in the U.S. process, but we-- but we weren't in the U.S. We were in Afghanistan.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIONS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN (CONT'D)
SIGAR RELATIONSHIPS WITH U.S. AGENCIES

INTERVIEWER:
So we've done a lot of interviews in which other parts of this agency – auditors for example – have talked about what it's like to oversee other federal agencies that are doing reconstruction work in a conflict zone.

So, some of these previous interviewees talked about how these other federal agencies would have some resentment towards this agency for, you know, reporting on how their programs were working, for example. Some of the same agencies that you just mentioned, you describe as their criminal agents working hand-in-glove with you, here at this agency, to get investigations done.

I guess my question is, what were the tugs between this agency's oversight in other areas and then the need for cooperation with criminal agents from those same agencies? Did you ever feel any of that?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Certainly. We certainly felt the tug from the agencies that we looked at-- SIGAR looked at from a programmatic way – through audits, inspections, and things like that – who are simultaneously being investigated by the SIGAR investigators.

Let me just say up front, SIGAR was not popular at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. We were very unpopular. And again, that was very much different than what I ever experienced in my life. Now, criminals didn't like the FBI. But, typically, when the FBI came in to a place where a crime had been committed, people are usually willing to cooperate, and work together, and help.

That was not the case for SIGAR at the U.S. Embassy, frankly. We would have situations where – literally – we would take our lunch trays to sit down at a table. And a table full of people from another agency that we were providing oversight would get up, like in high school, and leave the table so they didn't have to be with us, socialize – you know, be seen with us – whatever the reason was.

That's how bad it could get. Many of the agencies disliked SIGAR, and would tell us that. And they might say things like, "We like you as people. But we don't like SIGAR. We don't like what you're doing to us. Every time we pick up a newspaper, every time we see a SIGAR report, you're criticizing our agency."

"We're trying to do work here in this difficult environment. And you're making our life more difficult. So, I'm not going to help you. I'm not going to cooperate with you." We saw a lot of that. Luckily, we did have investigators who didn't feel that way, and would try to get records, or get help from their parent agencies, to help SIGAR in our investigations.

Many times those same agencies were partners in our investigation. So they had equity as well as investigators. But SIGAR was not popular. That made the job very difficult. And SIGAR was not popular amongst the [U.S.] military either, for the same reason. The military was a big part of the SIGAR reconstruction [oversight] process.

That's something I learned. I didn't realize that, as a normal American citizen. I knew that USAID and the U.S. government provided aid all over the world. I didn't realize how much reconstruction and humanitarian aid was provided by the U.S. military. It's a great deal, especially in a war zone.

And SIGAR had oversight on that process. So when we come in and criticize a colonel, who very much wants to become the next general, and we're criticizing his program – that does not make us popular. And we came up to that a lot. I was yelled at, and browbeaten, on several occasions – by senior [U.S.] military-flag-officer-type people in Afghanistan – for the work SIGAR did.

I was the punching bag, not for something I had done, but what SIGAR had done, right or wrong. And, a lot of the [U.S.] military's attitude towards us was disdain, and distrust.

So let's get back to my job as a criminal investigator. I have oversight over U.S. military humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. So, if the U.S. military is providing fuel to a village, and it's being stolen, that's my job as an investigator to investigate. Now I have to go back to those same [U.S.] military officers, who don't like me, and ask their help. Because they have the records on how much fuel is being delivered and who is delivering it, and what contractor was being used and what did their inventory say, if they even took an inventory.

So, that's another thing that made the job very difficult. SIGAR was not popular because we were successfully and honestly and accurately describing many of the problems in the reconstruction process.

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INTERVIEWER:
Why was it the criminal investigators at these other federal agencies that SIGAR oversaw that were willing to put aside whatever conflicts there were with SIGAR, and help you – jointly, or just cooperate with your investigations – help you in the work that you were trying to do?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, I think in general, the law enforcement community is unique. It's its own separate culture regardless of where it is. So having been a lifelong – or at least certainly most of my adult life being in a federal agent position, working with not only other federal agencies, but state and local police officials – most police, law enforcement personnel have basic fundamental agreements, internally and externally, which is, "If there is a crime committed, let's work together and try to solve that crime."

So even though their parent agency may not agree with what we're doing, they will. And they do. And I never had a problem with any criminal investigator not being robust, and helping, and trying to do all they could. But they were also under the same kind of prejudices that we were.

It's very unusual, I imagine, to be a special investigator, criminal investigator for USAID, because they provide billions of dollars of aid all over the world, many in corrupt countries in which it's being stolen and corrupted. And then you have someone in your own organization trying to uncover that and expose it – which is embarrassing.

So I don't know how they go about doing it. But I can say that in our environment over there, we had a task force. We had other agencies helping us, not to the extent I wanted – and, frankly, that they should have, in my humble opinion. But we did have a task force. And those people did work with us and tried to help and did help. And I have no complaints about our partners, from the law enforcement community.

INTERVIEWER:
So it sounds that, because of the specific nature of the law enforcement community in general, those criminal investigative agents were able to set aside the sort of inter-departmental conflicts and focus on the actual criminal investigation work, whether it was across the boundary of your agency or not.

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Yes. I think that's true. And I think all agencies have, or should have, very, very thick and high walls separating their criminal investigators from the rest of their agency.

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INTERVIEWEE 26:

SIGAR had a very difficult time. Forget criminal investigation. SIGAR had a very difficult time getting records from these government agencies.

INTERVIEWER:
U.S. government agencies.

INTERVIEWEE 26:
U.S. government agencies, right. I mean, we had trouble with the Afghan government, but we had problems [with our own U.S. government]. We still do, to this day. We don't get coop-- full cooperation from these other government agencies, where we have legal mandate and jurisdiction over.

I'll give you one quick example. USAID was the largest producer of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. We were supposed to be looking at that aid. SIGAR personnel were not allowed to talk to anyone at USAID directly. The only way we could do it is if we went through their inspector general's staff, who then invited them to meet with their inspector general's staff.

And then we could piggyback on the general-- their inspector general's staff. So I couldn't even knock on the door and say, "Hey, look, we have an allegation of wrongdoing. Not by you, but in your program." Like I could in the U.S. if I had a case. I could go knock on any agency door as an FBI agent. I couldn't do that over there. We didn't have the buy-in from those other-- leadership of those other agencies. And to this day they still fight us.

INTERVIEWER:
Is it inevitable that they would?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think so, because I think every government agency has a resistance to criticism – self-criticism, negative reports. And that's really what SIGAR was there to do, was to look at and examine, assess, and then report on these various programs.

And many of them were failures, to one degree or another. And it should've been publicized. It should be publicized. If you pay for $100,000 worth of fuel, and you only get $50,000 – that's a failure. And I think it's a failure if anyone else does it. If you ran a business, and your contractor didn't give you all the fuel you paid for, I think you'd be a little upset about that. But these agencies don't want that kind of negativity or self-criticism.

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INTERVIEWER:
When you approached the senior leadership of the U.S. military with information from your criminal investigation about fuel theft information – incidents – what kind of reception did you get?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, many times, they did not want to hear about it – because they felt fuel delivery to the Afghan and U.S. military was so important that it could not fail. And if we were to prosecute or somehow restrict these contractors' ability to deliver fuel, the results would be so catastrophic that it would end the entire U.S. mission in Afghanistan.

The military runs on fuel. If there's no fuel, the military will not operate, and it will fail. And that was their big fear. So they had no-- there was no illusions in their mind that there was theft and corruption in the fuel industry.

Everyone knew that. No one denied it. It's what do you do about it. What do you do about it? In the U.S. we prosecute them and let the chips fall where they may. And then let another company come in and take over, fill the void. But you didn't have those other companies there.

It was a backward country. And it was a poor country. It didn't have 500 fuel delivery contr[actors]-- you know, trucking companies in that comp-- you only had a few. It was a big, big mission. Only a few could handle it. So if they were corrupt, they still had a go. And they did.

INTERVIEWER:
Without the alternative, the only avenue was to accept the corruption?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Accept the corruption. And that's what we did. I think that's what the U.S. government did. I think they do that probably elsewhere, too, I would guess. It was no secret that it was corrupt. There was no-- there was just-- it was-- it was reported, and publicized in so many different ways. Many, many Afghan commanders of these bases were prosecuted locally for stealing the fuel. Everybody stole the fuel. Everybody stole the fuel.

INTERVIEWER:
Sounds like a catch-22.

INTERVIEWEE 26:

It was a catch-22. And it was one of the ways that made life very, very difficult. I-- sometimes I would sit and think and-- while I was over there, I'd think, "If all of these conditions of crime were here, but we were in the United States, this would be so easy."

It was so easy. In the FBI, we used to say it was shooting fish in a barrel, if you worked public corruption in some historically corrupt city. And I won't name any, but they-- I think we all know some of the cities in United States just have this long history of corruption, where everybody's paying bribes to the local police officers – and you need a bribe to do anything. If you had that-- that's what we had over there. But we didn't have the infr-- you know, the justice system infrastructure to pursue a lot of the stuff.

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I will say this about the other agencies, and because this is personal to me and it bothered me very much, still does today:

The FBI is the largest law enforcement agency in the United States. It's not always the most popular, but it's the largest. They're very, very good at fraud, contract fraud, corruption. As I said earlier in this interview, the number one criminal priority in the FBI for the last 30 years has been public corruption, which includes contract fraud, contract corruption.

That was the biggest crime problem in Afghanistan for the United States government, during the 20 years we were in Afghanistan. During that time, the FBI provided very little personnel or resources towards the criminal investigation component of addressing the fraud and corruption in Afghanistan.

That bothered me. I couldn't believe it, as a former FBI agent, as a former public corruption supervisor. To think that the FBI is not going to fill the void with all of these billions of dollars going into this very corrupt country, why isn't the FBI in there with both feet, and dozens of FBI agents?

That never happened. Their priority was counterterrorism. They admitted that freely. They did provide some-- a few people early [on], not many. And when I say a few, I think two agents and a supervisor. So three agents and an analyst, I think, was the entire FBI component in Afghanistan conducting criminal investigations.

Whereas SIGAR probably had 20 of its own investigators. There's something wrong with that picture – that the largest agency provides three or four people, and a little bitty SIGAR special inspector general provides 20 investigators. Something's not right about that picture. Plus, we didn't have access to the FBI's resources as well as we should have.

INTERVIEWER:

It sounds that that's an unresolved issue in your mind, that you don't know the answers for why that was the case.

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I really don't understand that, because, as again, I was a public corruption supervisor at FBI headquarters, which means I supervised other field offices doing corruption. And I supervised foreign offices in various embassies elsewhere in the world. And they were working corruption cases, as they should have, that involved-- that were in-- within the U.S. federal, you know, criminal justice system. U.S. officials accused of wrongdoing, for example, the FBI would investigate that. But they didn't in Afghanistan. Their priority was counterterrorism.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you have any opportunities, given your previous experience at FBI, to relay those concerns into the FBI, by one means or another?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
We did. I think all of us did. We have a lot of former FBI people in SIGAR's investigation's team, higher-ranking than me. We did. We-- I was certainly very friendly with the senior FBI officials in Kabul, one or two of whom we hired to become agents for SIGAR after they left the FBI.

So we were-- we worked very closely with them. And we had a very friendly and good relationship. But they did not work the criminal cases that were there. And I think that hurt the U.S. government's effort. I don't know how it could not hurt.

INTERVIEWER:
So, you know, as somebody from the outside looking into this, the thoughts that come into my head are, you know, was it deaf ears? Was it [that] there were practical obstacles? Or were there political obstacles? Or was it all three?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I can't answer that question. I really can't. I have no idea. I'm-- obviously the counterterrorism and, I should say, the crime against U.S. citizens – kidnappings, bombings, victims of terrorism – that's a separate category. But those kinds of crimes were their priority.

What I think should have happened, in my humble opinion – because I did work for a special counsel, which was similar to a special inspector general, I worked for an entity in the Iran-Contra investigation, in which the U.S. Government or Congress created legislation to create an entity to have a specific job, just like SIGAR was created by Congress for a specific job.

When they created the special counsel law, they wrote in the statute, "Special counsel, you will do "blank." You have access to all the FBI agents, IRS agents, other personnel from other agencies, other resources of other agencies, to be detailed over to your team to work with you."

That didn't happen for SIGAR. SIGAR was created, but it wasn't given the authority to go into these other agencies and directly access their personnel and resources. So we had to do it on our own, as a separate entity, which is much more difficult than the way the special counsels were created.

When the special counsels started, the first thing they did, and I was there, was they took 18 FBI agents from three different offices and brought them into Washington and said, "You are now working for me. This is your job. You are no longer doing what you used to do in the FBI."

We couldn't do that. We had to hire our own people, bring in our agents – some were former FBI, some weren't – and then try to start from the ground up, and build an established team. I think it would have helped SIGAR if they had the ability to do that. And not just for the FBI. They could have gone into the IRS. They could have gone into DHS.* They could have gone into, more importantly, DoDIG, the DCIS*** team of investigators, whose entire portfolio is Defense Department contract fraud.**

[* U.S. Department of Homeland Security]
[** U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General]
[*** Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS), U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General]

Those people would have been very helpful – if we could have brought them into SIGAR immediately. We never were able to do that. We had to just try to hire here and there. Whenever they would leave their service, we would try to learn about that, and recruit them. Much, much more inefficient.

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INTERVIEWER:
Do you know if there was ever a top-level effort to see if you could sort of batch-recruit or batch-detailee people from those other entities – the FBI, DCIS – to bring them into SIGAR, to work on these kind of cases?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I don't know if that ever happened. But I would encourage that, if there's ever a new inspector general, special inspector general, I would recommend that as something that would be necessary, something that would be more efficient and get that new group up and running quicker, and have the resources of that agency behind it.

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BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE INVESTIGATIVE AGENTS?

INTERVIEWER:
What characteristics, what professional qualities, skill sets, personality traits does it take to do the job that you were doing, as part of this agency's work conducting oversight in a war zone, well?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, I think it takes experience and maturity, and-- which means old people like me. No, I think you need experience. I don't think it's the kind of job you want to give 22-year-old people right out of college.

I thought I knew a lot. And I-- you'd think I would, with my background. I didn't know anything about U.S. aid to these different-- I knew we gave it. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know anything about-- much about the military. My brother's in the military. I'm not. I've never been in the military.

The way the military operates. You need somebody with a broad experience, the maturity, to work without distractions, without kind of those youthful indiscretions that you might get with younger people, you know?

Because it was very disciplined. And I noticed that people with a good broad experience-- I wish I would've had a military background. I would've been better at the job. So, if you can find the prototypical person, [it] should be somebody with a good legal background, auditing background, hopefully military background, foreign affairs. Those kinds of experience levels are the kind, I think, [that are] needed to work in a war zone to do oversight.

INTERVIEWER:
What branch of the military is, or was, your brother in? And is there a history of public service in your family that you sort of followed?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, my father was like-- I'm a Baby Boomer. My father was in World War II. He was in the Navy – South Pacific. The kind of guy that would get mad if you bought a Toyota – that generation. My brother was in the Coast Guard, as an officer.

But he was an investigator type. You know, he did the things-- he would be working on the bridge that just collapsed in Baltimore. He was that kind of a guy, an engineer and a structural, you know, naval person. So it was in my family, the military background.

I'm sorry I didn't. I was of draft age during the Vietnam War. I wanted to go, believe it or not. I just wanted that experience. Maybe that was just, again, this youthful naivety. Maybe that would've gotten me either killed or completely ruined as a person. I don't know.

It did others, I know. Many-- some of whom I knew. But I never did. But, boy, I got thrown into the military environment very quickly over there. And I learned a heck of a lot in my few years with SIGAR about parts of the government I didn't know were out there. And to such a degree.

So, it was a tough-- it's a tough assignment for anybody. And I think SIGAR had some pretty darn good employees, really. And we had a lot of former military. We had a lot of former, you know, prosecutors. We had-- we had a g-- that's what you needed, was good experience.

If you went in there with people that were really, really smart at something else, they probably wouldn't be successful there, unless they had a broader background. Because these are unique cultures. The military culture is very unique.

The law enforcement culture. Working with a foreign government, so different than your own. The foreign affairs people, the Embassy people, they're people that I met over there. They said, "All we-- all we do is go from war zone to war zone. That's our thing."

These aren't-- these aren't military people. These are U.S. Embassy people. He says, "Yeah, I was just at the West Bank. Yeah, I'm going to go over to Bangladesh. Now I'm going to go over to the Congo. I was in Somalia. I was in Iraq." All of them. Everybody was in Iraq. I was never in Iraq. Those are the kinds of people that are successful – that have had that broad experience.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT WORK: INVESTIGATIONS: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
How successful did you feel overall about being able to pursue criminal cases for this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think-- I think we were successful, given the incredible impediments we had to conduct the cases against foreign subjects of an investigation that couldn't be brought into the U.S. for grand jury trial, witness prep, things like that.

Could we have been better? Yes, we could have done more. And I'm sure we can always self-examine and think of ways we could have done more. But without having a lot of American subjects, it was almost – I won't say impossible. It was very difficult to prosecute.

We did prosecute some people, using the Afghan Attorney General's Office. We did have some successful prosecutions, working with the attorney generals, which were the main prosecutors in that

country. We never worked with local police. The-- in that country, prosecutors were the investigators as well. Police were pretty much civil control duties.

But you know what happened many times in our successful prosecutions? They would just get corrupted after the fact. People would serve a sentence, but then be released from prison. We had one of those.

Or they-- their conviction would be overturned on appeal. That was very common. Everything was on appeal. Everything had another court to go to. And of course, in a corrupt culture, it's very easy to get to the right people, pay them off, and allow criminals to go free, not be penalized the way they should.

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INTERVIEWER:
So what was the overall batting average, as it would have compared to your batting average working stateside on public corruption cases?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
Well, the batting average in FBI public corruption cases is not as high as one might think, only because they're difficult. It's-- they are harder. And they take more time, frankly. And, in the FBI world, in the law enforcement world, everyone would make fun of each other because, if you were working drugs, you would work a case for six months, have wire taps, hear all about the drug activity.

Then you'd bring in a team of 50 SWAT team members, and you'd arrest 75 drug traffickers, from the street level all the way up, to the more senior traffickers. And then you would have all of those statistical accomplishments. "We arrested 75 people this week."

And they'd say, "What are you doing?" Well, I was on Iran-Contra for six and a half years. And I think we had 12 convictions, in six and a half years. That's about the FBI average. I think the average is one or two a year, depending on the case.

If you have a corruption case against a senior government official, it is not going to happen quickly, period. If you have a serious fraud or corruption case against a major U.S. government contractor, that is not going to happen quickly. They are going to have the best of defense attorneys. They are going to drag out the process, and defend their client to the nth degree. So, you don't have a lot of public corruption statistical accomplishments in the FBI.

So what did SIGAR do? I think SIGAR did pretty well. I honestly do. Others might disagree with me on that. But I feel pretty strongly about that. Considering the impediments we had. I don't have the stats

at my fingertips, [but] I can tell you this: I believe we saved-- we are credited with saving over $3 billion worth of contract money, which I think is the best priority for SIGAR to really try to accomplish.

Should we get more credit because we put an Afghan fuel truck driver in jail in Afghanistan? Is that some kind of big success matrix? No, I don't think so. But I think saving money is. And I think we saved a lot of money. And I think we deterred a lot of corruption.

Again, that's not, probably, quantifiable. But, certainly, people knew SIGAR was looking at them. We did have a lot of accomplishments when it involved American subjects of the investigation. SIGAR is still prosecuting Americans even to this day. But we didn't have a lot of cases against major, major U.S. corporations, which I think were involved and probably were defrauding the government.

And that's-- that's a shortcoming. And we should have figured out a way to do-- go about that maybe better – especially in the early days, when not as many Afghan companies were being hired.

When I first went to Afghanistan, there were still some of the big, big contractors in the country. And then they slowly left. For example, the Afghan government changed the security regulations. In the old days, till about 2014 or '15, U.S. government-- U.S. contractors could provide their own security.

And that was a big, big part of contracting over in a war zone, of course. If you're going to build a five-mile road, you've got to have security on all five miles or you're going to have IEDs planted in the bottom of your trestles, and in your culverts – which did happen. So once- then the Afghan government changed and required all security [to] go through the Afghan government and Afghan security companies.

So again, now we're back to having Afghan contractors providing the services to the U.S. government in its reconstruction projects. So, we lost that opportunity because we can't prosecute Afghans easily or if at all. And especially if they're financed and supported by powerful people in the Afghan government.

Again, it was a corrupt government. It was a corrupt culture. There's no way they're going to let millions and millions of dollars go to security contracts that they control without some of that money slipping out to powerful people. And that's what happened. We were not able to prosecute that. And I regret that.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

INTERVIEWER:
What did SIGAR do well conducting oversight in a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think the best thing SIGAR did was it made-- put everyone on alert that there was, for lack of a better phrase, there was a big dog in town now. And he was looking. And he was going to call it like it is. And I don't want to sound like I'm gratuitously complimenting my boss, because at this point in my life and my career it doesn't-- it's not important to me.

But I have a lot of respect for the IG,* and this is why. You asked me about my background working in politics. I worked in politics, that's true, for a few years. I used-- when I was in Afghanistan, and for three times, I was the acting director of the [SIGAR] office in [Afghanistan] -- so I wasn't just an investigator. I was a senior SIGAR official in that country.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And I would talk to ambassadors, and I would go to all the big meetings and all of that stuff. And people would come up to me because it was during the President Trump presidency. And President Trump had this reputation of being tough talker, and tell it like it is, and, you know, "If you're no good, I'm going to call you no good, and I'm not going to be-- play nice with you."

And everyone assumed our IG was some Trump appointee sent out there, some bulldog to come in there, and-- which was completely the opposite of the truth. He wasn't appointed by Trump. He was appointed before that, by a different president, completely unrelated to government, to-- President Trump probably didn't even know who the heck he was until later.

But that showed the independence, and it showed the image and the persona of our IG and SIGAR, in that, we're going to call it like it is. And, if this is screwed up, we're going to say, "It's screwed up." And, if this failed, we're going to say, "It failed."

Which no one else in the U.S. government, frankly, ever does. And I don't care [about] political parties. I don't care where you work. That's the truth. People do not want to criticize themselves. They do not take the criticism well. They don't want to hear it.

They're not going to help you criticize themselves, even though it's justified. And so SIGAR had that reputation of coming in there and calling it like it is, and calling it fair. And if it failed, say so. If it succeeded, then say so.

But don't come in here and sugarcoat – like everyone else always does. And I learned a lot being at an embassy. And I don't want to disparage other government agencies, but I had no idea about U.S. Embassy life, USAID, foreign aid, and how nice and gentlemanly it is.

And how no one wants to rock the boat. And no one ever wants to be negative. And no one ever wants to say it's not working. We have to feed the children. Well, if 50 percent of the money you're

using to feed the children doesn't go to the children, then just don't keep saying you're trying to feed the children when you're wasting all this money all the time.

And so-- but nobody ever says that. And then SIGAR came in and said, "Hey, wait a second. This isn't working. This is corrupt. This is no good. This didn't work. You paid $100 million. There's no building. There's no building at all. There's no road. You built a road. You said you built a road. There's no road."

Because no one was checking. No one cared. Everyone just threw the money out. And so SIGAR came in, I think, rightfully so, and was tough. And I think that's needed. I think we need more of that. I'd like to see a special IG for everything.

Because these agencies won't police themselves. And I say that whether it's the FBI where I was, or anywhere else. Agencies are just resistant to that kind of criticism and self-control or self-criticism.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
What should this agency have done differently?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think when the agency was created, they should've gone to the agencies that we knew we were going to have direct oversight on and would have to partner with. And [they] should have gone and worked out some kind of an arrangement where we had personnel directly assigned to us with the agreement of their senior leadership, and the buy-in by their senior leadership.

For example, foreign affairs experts, intelligence people from the intelligence community, FBI agents to work fraud, DCIS agent to work the Department of Defense. I think we should've had that as part of our components. Auditors from other government auditing agencies. We could've had those people, and those resources. We had to do everything ourselves.

INTERVIEWER:
What would it have done had you had that?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think we would've been much more successful – because we would've had access to the records right away.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
August 2021, things change very quickly. The United States withdraws. The Taliban assumes control of the country. Given all of your commitments to working criminal investigations as part of this oversight agency in Afghanistan, what did you think and feel when that happened?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
It was horrible. I had, and have, many Afghan friends, men and women, as I tell-- as I've met with hundreds of people from all walks of life. Not just Embassy employees that were Afghans, but outsiders that would come in.

I traveled all over the country. I met people in all over the country, all walks of life, from the high to the low. I knew people at the palace. I knew women who worked at the palace. I knew women prosecutors. I knew women members of parliament, many of whom called me the day it happened, begging me for help, for them and their daughters, knowing what was coming.

So my feelings were horror – incredible disappointment. Afghans are very good people. I had so many – still do – have so many good friends, good people, young. The younger generation was becoming westernized, and wanted to make the country better, and were doing the right thing.

And now to have these people in charge, and turning the country back to where it was before – which, as I said, a very poor, backward, undeveloped country. It's-- it's-- it's hopeless. I feel horrible. Especially for the women and the girls.

I-- I can't ima-- I have daughters. I have granddaughters. They can't go to school. They can't go out. You can't go to a park. You can't have a business. There used to be beauty salons. There used to be businesses run by women. We had women at the [U.S.] Embassy who worked with us, shoulder-to-shoulder. They were professional employees. What are they doing right now? It's horrible.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
What are your own lessons learned after your experience conducting oversight in a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think you have to have an outside entity looking at this thing, away from its parent agency or organization. I don't think it does any good to have senior [U.S.] military people assessing the

activities of the [U.S.] military, or senior State Department people assessing the progress of the State Department. Or senior USAID people assessing or evaluating its programs.

You have to have somebody objective, and completely independent of political influence and the influence of these agencies, which are very powerful influences. And so that's the only way. We are giving out millions and billions elsewhere, where we have the same conditions as we had in Afghanistan – right now.

Whether it's in the Middle East, or Ukraine, or in Africa – in these parts which are conflict zones, which are-- have a long history of corruption, which have lack of infrastructure, lack of education, lack of computer networking. All of those problems exist elsewhere, that they existed and-- and it hindered the U.S. government in Afghanistan.

You have to have independent oversight, truly independent oversight. If not, it's just going to keep going. I-- that's one thing I learned, and [it] disillusioned me – is how the U.S. government provides so much aid without any controls or oversight.
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I strongly, strongly believe that we need really, really stringent oversight. I-- it's just-- that's my life experience telling me that. And I say that about every agency. I'm not picking sides. I'm not picking political positions.

We need independent oversight. There's too much money going to too many places all over the world where we lose track. And it's shocking to the degree that we're not monitoring the aid. It's really-- it was so shocking to me. // We're just giving the money away and we're not [getting] enough oversight.

And the agencies won't do it themselves, because they don't want that negative publicity. Plus, a lot of-- another thing I learned which I didn't bring up. These international donors, like the World Bank and the UN, which I now know a lot about, they depend on public donations.

So the last thing they're going to do is say anything negative, or work with SIGAR – which they never did, by the way. And I still work with those agencies today. And they're very reluctant to do anything with us.

Because why? Because they don't want to say we're failing. Because they're depending on people to donate to UNICEF. Would you donate to UNICEF if there was a report that 50 percent of the UNICEF funds get wasted or get stolen by criminals in the countries? Probably not. Or you'd give less. So they're not going to do it. They're not going to publicize. That's why you need strong oversight.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
At the end of the day, what do you feel that you got to accomplish for the American public, conducting oversight in a war zone for this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 26:
I think we saved billions of dollars of money, on U.S. contracts. I think we did prosecute a good number of people for contract fraud – including Americans, some Afghans. And so I think we accomplished a lot. I think we had a presence that can't be denied.

I used to go to the [Afghanistan] National Procurement Commission meetings that were chaired by the president of the country. And I would go to that meeting every Sunday night as the senior SIGAR official. Two Americans went to that meeting: the head of CSTC-A*, which was the U.S. military that provided humanitarian aid, and the head of SIGAR. That's the power and the influence SIGAR had.
[* U.S. Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan]

We had a lot of influence and power. We didn't make the world perfect. We did not make Afghanistan Denmark. But we made it better. And under those terrible conditions, I think we did a good job.
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We were the only ones calling it like it is. And I'm proud of that. I'm proud to be part of that.

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