SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 27: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 04/04/24

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 27:
My name is [NAME]. I am a Senior Program Analyst at SIGAR.

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JOB DESCRIPTION

I work in the Audits and Inspections Directorate, which means that we're conducting evaluations, inspections and audits of U.S. reconstruction dollars spent in Afghanistan, looking for instances of fraud, waste, or abuse of the American taxpayer dollar. We do a lot of audits, looking at various subjects and spending for U.S. reconstruction dollars – from anything to education, to counter-narcotics, and anything of the like.

INTERVIEWER:
And the overall aim of the Directorate and its work is what?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
To improve the spending and the effectiveness of U.S. taxpayer dollars in Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWER:
How long have you worked for the agency, and how long in that job?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I've worked at SIGAR since 2017. I began as an intern in 2016, and then got hired full-time in 2017, and I've been here ever since.

CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

So take me back into your professional history. What did you study in school? How did you-- what was your trajectory that brought you to this work at this agency?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. So, SIGAR was my summer internship between my junior and senior years of college. I went to Dickinson College and studied International Relations, with a focus on Security Studies, and the Middle East. International development I think was just something always in my blood, interest in helping people overseas, looking at different areas of the world and getting that exposure.

So when I was looking for summer internship opportunities, being from the D.C. area, not only was SIGAR a great location for family and friends, but also just really met the interests that I had for my future career.

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INTERVIEWER:
So where did that interest come from, that interest in international affairs, international matters, international relations? Where did that come from?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think a few places. One, growing up in the D.C. area, you're kind of embedded in international thought, politics, cultures, people, diversity. So from a young age, I was always interested in things outside of the D.C. area, outside of the country, just globally.

I was fortunate enough to travel a lot as a child and through my, you know, adolescence. And so I got to see parts of the world, and that really just sparked my interest to see more and do more, for different parts of the world outside of the U.S. And then I also come from a family of government workers. So, knowing the impact of what working at an agency like SIGAR or working for the U.S. government means, it inspired me to pursue a government career as well.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you give me a sense of the government worker history that's there?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
In terms of my family? My father is a career employee with the Department of State. In his earlier years, worked here in D.C. at headquarters, and before transitioning to the civil service overseas for six years. He's now retired.

My mother was also in the accountability community. She previously worked for the Government Accountability Office [GAO], before moving on to be the Deputy Inspector General at the Department of Transportation, and then serving as the U.S. Inspector General for USAID, Agency for International Development.

INTERVIEWER:
So, it's fair to say, it's in the blood?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
It's in the blood. Yeah. We're a big family of accountability. I think I learned what it meant pretty early on to be really good stewards of kind of the impact and the investment the U.S. has around the world. And knowing about the OIG* community was something that I definitely-- the acronym was in my ear from a young age, so it was a familiar place for me.
[* Office of Inspector(s) General community]

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SIGAR DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
When did you first go overseas to Afghanistan, and how did that come about? Did you join the agency wanting to be deployed to Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I joined SIGAR knowing it was a possibility to go to Afghanistan. I think it was a place I probably wouldn't have gotten to go by myself, or on my own. So the opportunity to go definitely was in my interest.

I was fortunate enough to join in July, 2017 and be over there as soon as the fall of 2017. So, I was staffed on a project, and fieldwork there required us. And I was excited and ready to go, and had a great first trip and returned one time again after that in 2019.

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INTERVIEWER:
So did you have expectations about what it would be like to arrive there? And then when you did arrive there, how different was the experience from your expectations?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. So I think that's an interesting question for me, for two reasons. One, I think, as a normal American spectator of Hollywood and film, I had a very different perception of what Afghanistan would look like, feel like, everything.

And so I went in obviously with that-- that idea. The second part of it though is that my parents both had government careers and had traveled also previously, my mother at least, to Afghanistan before. My father was stationed overseas with the [U.S.] Foreign Service, in Pakistan and in Iraq.

So the idea of traveling to more of a conflict zone was not totally something new for me. But going to Afghanistan and seeing it for myself, I was expecting something maybe more of the Hollywood version, regardless of what I had been told at SIGAR or by my parents, and was pleasantly surprised when I arrived.

INTERVIEWER:
So what was the Hollywood version, and what was the real version?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think the Hollywood version is obviously a place where there's war and chaos. You know, you may not come back. The idea that, you know, you're always living under threat, and there's just really no joy or no excitement or enjoyment there.

My experience was I met people, Afghans, who celebrated birthdays, who had weddings, who grew old, who had grandchildren. I mean, life goes on. And I don't think those stories make it to the big screen. And you don't see that there's moments of joy and happiness for them, not just suffering.

And that's not to say that that doesn't happen there. But being in Kabul and being in Afghanistan, and seeing dress shops, and seeing people walking, for food and shopping, and going out on Sunday outings, is just something that I don't think I would've expected to see, but was happy I did.

INTERVIEWER:
So, what was it like for you when you arrived? What was your living circumstance? What was the day-to-day? Did you feel prepared for your own set of circumstances that you had professionally when you were there?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. So I think you're never prepared for a situation like that. I had never spent any time on a military base or at an embassy overseas. So everything was a learning experience, but a positive one. I think my time at SIGAR preparing for the trip, working with my team and speaking to other team members and colleagues who had been, really helped me know what to expect, know what to pack, know what my day-to-day would roughly look like.

A lot of planning went into this trip. We had meetings, and it was very clear what our couple [of] days would look like. So that really did help outline things. And then I think, when I was there, my housing arrangement was living in blocked housing, with other people, but in kind of homey shipping containers, if you'll say.

But it was a nice way to live. I-- you know, I had just come from college not too long before then, so I was used to the dorm and the communal living. But it was nice to be around co-workers and be

around people and kind of get to experience more meals with them and day-to-day life of navigating the base.

CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AUDITS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
When you arrived in Afghanistan, how much auditing experience had you had prior?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Not much. Like I said, I joined in July. I was over there in the fall. I believe my first trip was in October. So not too much.
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Fieldwork is kind of the start of the whole auditing process anyway. I mean, there's some prep. There's some planning, of course, to any audit and some background research. And I had been able to do that when I joined. But this was really-- we were going there for this information. So this was an awesome time for me to start. July couldn't have been a better start date for me starting on that project and then being able to transition to Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWER:
And so when you arrived in Afghanistan, were you a full-fledged auditor?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I was a program analyst.
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In Audits and Inspections at SIGAR, we have auditors and analysts. Auditors deal a little bit more. They have different certifications that make them qualified to be a financial auditor, or work with more of some of the data-heavy experience.

An analyst kind of can do both, but mostly is looking at program evaluations. So understanding contracts and, you know, doing analysis of documents. So I started as-- in that role, as a program analyst. And so, while I did work on audits, I was an analyst on an audit – not technically an auditor, as are many in [the] SIGAR Audits and Inspections Directorate.
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INTERVIEWER:
So I'm thinking that, unlike other people that we've been interviewing, you really cut your teeth on your Afghanistan-- during your Afghanistan deployment. So you cut your teeth when you were in Afghanistan, doing this work essentially for the first time?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure, yes.

INTERVIEWER:
So you had a first experience of conducting this kind of oversight in a conflict zone.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Uh-huh (AFFIRM).

INTERVIEWER:
So you don't know any other alternative to that. I guess when you came back here, you were continuing to do things, you know, as they say, over-the-horizon. But your first experience was in a conflict zone.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure, yeah. That's definitely fair to say.

INTERVIEWER:
So what were your impressions of trying to do that work in a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think it was-- it was interesting. There was a lot of collaboration. I mean, being at the hub of it all, being on the U.S. Embassy base, in Kabul, you were working side-by-side with counterparts at other U.S. government organizations.

You know, Department of State, Department of Defense, USAID. And all of those together, I mean, we were sharing the same floor. We were eating in the same cafeteria. So there was really a sense of collaboration, and seeing familiar faces from the meeting you just had an hour prior, you know, eating next to you at the cafeteria.

So it was interesting, but I also think a point to take away was that there was a lot of engagement from Afghans there. We were lucky to have many local staff supporting the [U.S.] Embassy, which I know, to them, was a risk, coming and supporting the U.S. mission there.

But I think that was a critical part of the value of the fieldwork I walked away with, was knowing that we're not just having, you know, the American agencies and the American presence giving information, but we're working locally with staff. We're being able to get outside of the Embassy and, at that time, talk to some local Afghan government officials, and entities, to be able to collect information.

INTERVIEWER:
How often were you able to do fieldwork that took you out of the Embassy compound and into the country?

INTERVIEWEE 27:

It was limited, but still adequate. I think we-- I don't recall the exact numbers. But in the first trip, I know we did leave [the U.S. Embassy] compound at least three times – and then had-- and even the opportunity to go to another military site outside of Kabul, in Bagram, Afghanistan. So that was really a great trip, to kind of get my bearings and see more.

In 2019, we did not leave the compound that often. But still were able to have people come to the Embassy compound and meet with Afghans directly. So we didn't lose that kind of exposure and information.

INTERVIEWER:
So can you give me a sense of sort of the day-to-day, week-to-week when you're doing program evaluations for an Audits and Inspections Directorate, at an independent oversight agency such as this one?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. So I think it all-- you kind of have to start at the beginning. You are assigned a topic or a subject or whatever area of oversight we're going to be looking at. And you start to build your audit plan, your inspection plan, engagement and evaluation plan.

And how that really begins is setting out what are we trying to accomplish. What kind of research do we need to do to kind of have at least just a foundation on how to proceed? And so that's the first couple weeks, if not month or two, of your audit. You have a plan. You build a plan. And you start background research.

At that point, you're probably at a good spot to start reaching out to agencies, requesting information, making contacts, trying to figure out what you should be asking and what information you just need to start with. And then that kind of kicks off your fieldwork period.

And fieldwork is really-- depends on what era of SIGAR we're talking about. Pre-collapse, you know, fieldwork may have included a trip to Afghanistan or some time spent there or elsewhere. Now, post-collapse, post-COVID era, mid-COVID era, we are still looking at learning how to overcome some of the barriers to getting information from Afghanistan and finding effective ways to still do the-- still get the information we would've gotten during fieldwork – without being in the field, if you want to say.

And then once you're through the fieldwork phase, I mean, at that point, truly, you are starting some analysis and you are writing the initial, you know, versions of what the report will look like. But that-- after you exit that and you've stopped collecting information, then you're just [in a] heavy, heavy writing period.

You're developing statements of fact where we lay out, you know, these are just the hard facts. Then it gets a little bit more narrative with draft reports. And then eventually, to the final report. And all throughout the process, we're engaging with other U.S. government entities who are involved in the

evaluation or audit itself. And then they have time to comment. We're getting that information from them before publishing.

INTERVIEWER:
So give me a sense of some of the program areas that you ended up evaluating and digging into.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. So I've kind of been all over the map with what I've been able to look at. If you had told me in 2017 I would be working on a job looking at a hydropower dam in Afghanistan, I probably would've laughed. But that's the job I started on.

The first project was looking at the Kajaki Dam, a hydropower dam in Southern Afghanistan. I then moved onto a counternarcotics and counter-threat finance evaluation, looking at Taliban sources of revenue. And then I moved on to, post-collapse, the risks to different civil organizations and parts of Afghan society posed by the Taliban. And then I moved onto an education evaluation. And I'm currently now working on an evaluation of U.N. cash shipments to Afghanistan for humanitarian aid.

INTERVIEWER:
So that really is all across the spectrum.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
So tell me about that first job. You did not, I'm assuming, have any experience with that industry?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I did not.

INTERVIEWER:
What do-- how do you start?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Well, I'll tell you how I started. I signed up immediately for a hydropower training course, through one of the locally offered organizations that just gave me-- I think it was called Hydropower 101. And I went and I learned about transmission lines and generators.

And I just tried to get-- I mean, I was not expected to report on the mechanics of these. But I wanted to make sure, if I'm going into this, and we're talking about substations and power lines, I would at least know what that word was.

And, to SIGAR's credit, they supported me fully to be able to pursue some of that technical understanding, even if it wasn't necessary to understanding the audit, but being able to know the buzzwords and being able to be comfortable with the subject material. So our time was used efficiently and effectively in interviews and in inspections and evaluations.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you attempt to do that each time out, to figure out some preparational thing to do that would at least give you some kind of base vocabulary, base awareness of what that landscape and ecosystem were going to be?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. So in-- to the best of my ability, yes.
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So I went to the hydropower training so that I could get a base for that hydropower dam evaluation and audit. And then I did sign up for a U.S. Treasury-offered FinCEN* training, which took me through the processes and procedures for looking into counter-threat finance tools by the U.S. government. So that was a great support and foundation for my counter-threat and counternarcotics audit.
[* U.S. Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network]
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So FinCEN is the Financial Crimes and Enforcement Network, which is a branch of the U.S. Treasury that looks at money-laundering and financing domestically and internationally.
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And then we went into COVID, so trainings were mostly online. But since then, SIGAR has always supported my efforts to find out more information.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you come into the organization realizing that you needed to do that kind of preparation each time out? Or was that encouraged, or both? Was it a part of sort of the required internal agency procedure to do this work? How did it come about? It sounds like a very good idea. I'm just wondering where it came from.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think the culture of SIGAR really drives you to seek training, to pursue as much knowledge as you can that's relevant to the work you are or maybe will be doing. Of course, we are always required to do minimum training requirements for-- related to our auditing and performance evaluation capacity. But the subject-matter-specific ones have been always approved and encouraged, and shared within the agency, so that we are going in as knowledgeable and effective when we're assigned to projects.

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INTERVIEWER:
Tell me what it was like to go to the site in that first job.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
So, in the first job, we actually never went to the dam itself. It was in an area that wasn't easily reached or accessible, at that point. But we did get to speak with the Afghan national power entity that was managing and overseeing a lot of the power that was being transmitted from the dam, or hoped to be during the construction.

And so we really got a sense for the site. We got to see pictures, talk with them, talk with, at the time, the agency that had been handling [the] majority of the work on that. And it was a good overview, despite not being able to be on location.

INTERVIEWER:
How about for the second one?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
The second one, the counter-threat and counternarcotics audit, we did not get to-- I mean, there's no exact site to look at. We did do fieldwork for that evaluation. And in part of that, it was more just talks with U.S. government agencies and getting a sense for, you know, drug revenue on the ground.

But the site was Afghanistan. And we made it there. And it was really great to be closer to the source and have those conversations, versus just reading back here in D.C.

INTERVIEWER:
So give me a sense, when you were there the first time-- how many projects did you work on overall while you were there that first time?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
So I was never-- some people travel to Afghanistan and get to stay for long periods of time. I went twice on temporary-duty assignments, and they were both specifically focused on the job that I was traveling for.

INTERVIEWER:
I see.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
So, the first time was for this hydropower evaluation or audit of the Kajaki Dam. And the second was for the counter-threat, counternarcotics evaluation. So both were focused just on those projects. But

while there, obviously, you get to meet people and support other programs and projects or other people in the office. So it was a good exposure to more contacts.

SIGAR OVERSIGHT AUDITS: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
So what do you think the biggest successes were in the work that you did over your time, to-date?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think, on a very high level, the success is bringing light to what all is going on in Afghanistan. There're so many parts of reconstruction. And again, had you told me in the beginning that part of reconstruction was ranging from a hydropower dam, to counternarcotics, counter-threat finance, to education, and now to cash shipments of humanitarian assistance – you can't even imagine the scope of what is being done over there.

So I think the biggest success of SIGAR, and especially the Audits and Inspections Directorate, is shining a light on all the ways that you can support and assist and reconstruct a country. And, within each evaluation or project itself, I mean, we were able to also highlight the successes of those programs, and then find actual actionable-- find actionable processes forward for how to improve some of these programs, or make them more efficient for the taxpayer dollar to be spent.

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you think of some concrete examples of where that interaction produced something that you thought, "Wow, this is really-- this is why I'm-- this is the kind of thing I want to do"?
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INTERVIEWEE 27:
I will say that in terms of outputs that brought meaning to the work I did, I think seeing conversations in Congress, in major American media sources, about the risks to women posed by the Taliban, the risks to the education sector, health sector, journalists, I mean, people-- the people that I was able to meet and had welcomed us to Afghanistan, and being able to see that they're being talked about because of some reporting I did or SIGAR did, really made it feel like I made an impact.

I mean, you're sitting at a computer and you're writing these reports. And to you, they're important. And all you can hope is that somebody else does [view them similarly], especially not just for the effort you put into them, but for the importance of the stories being told.

So I always find it really impactful when I'm able to share a story told to me by someone there or someone living the reality, and that's // that's just getting attention, the attention it deserves.

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BEST QUALITIES FOR OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE AUDITORS/AUDIT ANALYSTS

INTERVIEWER:
Given the amount of time that you spent in this kind of work, in your opinion, what are the best characteristics, the best professional qualities, skill sets, and personality traits that qualify someone to do this kind of work?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. I think being in the inspector general community, at a place like SIGAR, you really get to learn a lot of integral skills that will help support you for the rest of your career. You become a great writer. A lot of our bread and butter is writing, and writing, and writing, and reporting.

And I think that's really important no matter where you go, moving forward. Personally traits, I think you have to be a good balance of analytical and diplomatic. Relationships are the name of the game. Our work depends on being able to talk to and gather information from other people.

So knowing how to establish those relationships, maintain them, and use them effectively and efficiently, is critical. But also, with that, you sometimes get too much information if you're not too careful. And so being able to switch your brain from gathering to sifting is really important in this industry.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT AUDITS IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN (cont'd)

INTERVIEWER:
So how were you received when you went and began to do the work of trying to build those relationships, in general, and also in some specific instances?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. So I would say my reception was-- was good. It-- people were very friendly in Afghanistan as well as in the D.C. area when we were going to conduct meetings. I think the community-- we're all aimed at accountability. There's a saying that, "No one likes an auditor," which is generally true, but I think everyone respects the mission of an auditor.

So there was always a very communal and friendly understanding – that we're both here for a goal, and that's to improve accountability and transparency and to be effective. And, as part of that, my approach at least was just to be as friendly and transparent with everyone, and saying, you know, "We want to do what we have to do to report this, but it's not about finding a bad news story."

It's good when we get a success, because we'd rather have a positive lessons learned than a negative one. But sometimes it takes a few negative ones to figure out how we need to be successful.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you encounter any negative reaction to you as a representative of this agency doing the oversight work that you were doing?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Personally, no. I never felt blocked personally, socially, or professionally. Did I receive some delays and pushback? Sure. And I think that is something that was maybe warranted and unwarranted at times. You know, sometimes other agencies are just inundated with information, and I might not be their top priority.

So there may be a delay, with a lack of communication about why that is. And there may have been some intentional delays. But I never felt-- I was never "iced out" in a cafeteria. I was never, you know, ostracized for my SIGAR affiliation. But I do feel like I worked pretty hard to keep up good professional relationships with people and be clear and transparent.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you think that there's something that you were doing that made it more likely that you could begin the relationship in a more positive interaction?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I don't think I made a conscious decision to do anything differently when approaching these. I think, upfront, I was clear about what my intentions were, and acted throughout my career at SIGAR thus far to be clear that I'm coming in to do my job, to collect the information.

My goal is to have the correct story – and nothing more, nothing less, nothing more dramatic or less dramatic, and reporting what we find accurately. And, of course, some people may find that not to be a good approach. But I've always been transparent with that. And I think in this community, you can appreciate accuracy and transparency, of all places in the government.

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ADVICE TO FUTURE OVERSIGHT-IN-A-WAR-ZONE AUDITOR/ANALYST CANDIDATES?

INTERVIEWER:
What advice would you give to a next generation of people coming up in this oversight category of work within the government, about how to do this, especially how to do it when the target area is a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
How to do it? I think you should be open-minded, and adaptable. This job has taught me-- I mean, the whole past seven years have been an up-and-down rollercoaster of learning, of adapting, of just growing my skill set. So I think adaptability is key.

And I think just also being open-minded. A conflict zone, like I said-- we're describing it by conflict, but there's so much more to Afghanistan. Again, there's a society of people that are celebrating things, that are having birthday parties and weddings.

And, you know, it's also just a society. It's not just a conflict society. So I think going in and knowing the impact of your work is actually impacting people, not just a war or a policy decision, is a really great way to approach it.

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WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

INTERVIEWER:
At the end of the day, what do you think this agency did well conducting oversight in a conflict zone?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think SIGAR was really effective at looking at a variety of aspects that go into reconstruction. Again, I think there's this idea that reconstruction may be limited to the physical building of roads, or maybe directly working with the government. But it involves so many other aspects of society.

And, in SIGAR's case, we really got to look at the ways that we were reconstructing livelihoods, people's homes, community centers, local, rural health care centers. And I think, had I not had the experience at SIGAR, as just someone from the outside looking in, I would not know how broad reconstruction can be, or should be, or is.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

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

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think-- and I don't know if this is a SIGAR-specific issue or if this is just an inspector general issue. I think there's a lot of investment and interest in new ideas, projects for reconstruction. What can we be doing? You know, the excitement over starting something new.

I think a lot of the work that we did is obviously retrospective. We're looking at how programs performed, if they were efficient, they were effective. And I think those lessons are read and taken in, but I don't know if they get the kind of interest that they should.

And I think SIGAR, on one hand, has done a wonderful job putting out our reports and sharing our message and really showcasing our work. But in another way, I don't know if we've been effective on getting across how important the retroactive and retrospective look on reconstruction and development is, to informing the projects that people are excited about, to informing the future of international development.

INTERVIEWER:
Are there any other things that, from your experience, here you would suggest might be worth another look?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I have some very procedural-- [LAUGHS]

INTERVIEWER:
That's part of this. No, it actually is. There's interest in that.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
I would say from the Audits and Inspections standpoint, I think that there's an emphasis on getting reports out quickly, which-- we always take the time to ensure accuracy. But the-- it makes the review process quite messy and quite chaotic.

I wish there was a way to streamline review, whether it be in a shared document with comments so we don't have a version control or, you know, here's edits back from five different people at the same time and we're compiling them. I think there could be a better effort to streamline some of the review process, that at least audits and evaluations go through.

But, at the same time, we have been able to meet, you know, quarterly output and goals for reporting, and teams are adaptable and they adjust, and they make it work. But I'm sure that there could be a more efficient way to doing that review process.
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I think that's always been everyone's biggest gripe is the review process, how it can be messy. And I think, personally, in conversations with other colleagues, I've heard people say that that's the one real pain of the report-writing process that everyone would love to improve. There just has not been an improvement.

But what I've seen, the upgrades to the technology of working collaboratively in Word now is a little bit of – at least to me –a newer feature. And so, if SIGAR had another three years, perhaps we would

all be working collaboratively. So I think it's kind of also a technology delay that has created this problem.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
August, 2021 things changed.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Yes.

INTERVIEWER:
The United States left Afghanistan. The country fell under Taliban control. How did all of that make you feel, given all of the professional work that you had done, into oversight of U.S. programs that were trying to help reconstruct the country?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Sure. I remember I was-- on that day, I was with some friends. And seeing the news alert pop up that the Taliban had taken over and government had collapsed, to me, was quite a sinking feeling. Many questions of, "How did this happen?" You know-- it was panic, honestly, of just trying to rack my brain of-- of all this.

And I remember friends being also shocked by the news. But for me, it was-- it really did feel closer to home. I knew the people I had talked to. I knew the intentions of [the former] Afghan government officials I had spoken with, of the-- my colleagues at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul that were local national staff.

I mean, everyone was really hoping for a better, democratic, non-Taliban future for Afghanistan, at least those who I had been working with. And so to hear the news that that wasn't successful, that their dreams and the work that they had been putting into it, and the risks that they had taken to get Afghanistan there, were now – like that – gone overnight, was heartbreaking-- and shocking, especially considering the flip side, of me knowing how much money and investment and time the U.S. had put into it of-- you know, the failure felt, for me as a SIGAR auditor, looking at these programs, as a U.S. taxpayer, and then as someone who had been close to the people that were really rooting for a different outcome.
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INTERVIEWER:
So did that affect your overall view of how successful the oversight enterprise had been?

INTERVIEWEE 27:

I think it's going to take more than reconstruction to have avoided the Taliban. I think there're so many ways to improve an approach to how we want to bring stability. And I could probably name a thousand ways that I've read, or seen, or heard that should've been done differently, or could've been done differently to manage the situation.

I think there's no value in asking "What if?" at this point. I think lessons learned are important. And we've published a lot of good ones. But we can't try and rewrite history. We can only move forward and figure out how to support and get the people that are really fighting for their freedom in Afghanistan, get them in a good place so that we can all hopefully strive for a future that serves the country well, and serves the world well.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

I think one of the biggest lessons learned – and it's really hitting me now as SIGAR is facing a future that's on the down slope – is that I think many people at, you know, these last two years were reading the tea leaves and saw that SIGAR and Afghanistan – writ large, within the U.S. government – is becoming a little bit of a thing of the past, or is on the decline.

But I have to say that these past two years I've done what I feel like is some of the most important work – work when people aren't looking, work when Afghanistan is no longer the buzzword in the news, in the newspapers, in the media. Now is when I think we're really seeing the impact of our investment.

You know, how durable was it? What are the lessons now – because before, we had a whole [U.S.] government structure there to watch it, to support it. When it was faltering, we were there to pick it back up and rebuild. Now, we're not.

And I think now more than ever is the time to keep your eye on Afghanistan – or whatever conflict zone that we're looking at – because, when left to its own devices, we'll really be able to see the true meaning and impact of the work that we did.

So I think the lessons learned here is that, even though things do naturally run its course, and policy decisions will happen as they will, if you really want to focus on how to sustainably reconstruct, you should be looking at what happens after it. Post-conflict management is just as important as pre- or active conflict management, of seeing how reconstruction is durable, if at all.

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I think post-collapse, post-2019, the work has been rewarding because it's really-- we're focusing on very vulnerable times for Afghanistan-- // my first evaluation after the collapse was looking at the risks to Afghan women, girls, education, health care, journalists, all of that.

I mean, those are critical points of Afghan society. And for me, to be able to put out a report that, accurately and rightfully so, gives some credit to how important those areas of Afghan society area and need to be protected, and hoping that my report gives them that time and that space and that coverage-- I mean, I can't even imagine what greater of an impact I could feel.

Again-- not to say that, you know, it's more or less impactful than other subject areas. My hydropower dam supplied water and energy to a lot of Afghans, and that's very, very important.

But seeing the transition of a historical event in Afghanistan, and being able to do something that I felt like protected the groups I was reporting on made an impact – that will resonate for me for probably the rest of my life.

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I think it's really important to emphasize that now is a very critical time to keep watching Afghanistan. And, like any other post-conflict, if that's what you want to call this era, but now when we're seeing disengagement is when we need people watching and seeing the durability of reconstruction or our presence, our efforts there.

So I think that's been a huge lesson. I don't think I would've learned that had I left SIGAR right around the collapse or shortly after, because I would not be able to really see what's been resilient there in terms of the investment we've made versus what hasn't been.

I think for SIGAR, I think a good lessons learned too is to educate and promote people to bring forward ideas for areas to look at in reconstruction. Some-- I mean, all of the jobs that I've worked on, all of the projects that I've worked on while at SIGAR were an employee's or colleague's of mine idea that they proposed to management, and built out and dreamt, and put in the audit plan and was adopted. And now it-- it served the next year of my life working on.

So I think that's a great lesson learned – is to motivate not just what's the hot ticket item in the news that maybe Congress or other people want to hear about, but some of the stories that we thought were just crumbs to be picked on have become really big stories for SIGAR, and I know for other inspector generals' Offices.

So, I think that's another really good lesson learned. Something that SIGAR did well was motivating ideas and collecting ideas from folks who have had quite a career in not just the OIG, Office of Inspector General space, but within SIGAR and Afghanistan.

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WHAT DO YOU WISH THE PUBLIC UNDERSTOOD ABOUT SIGAR AND ITS WORK?

INTERVIEWER:
What, if anything, do you wish that the American public would better understand about this agency, this kind of agency?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Off the bat, I think I would say I wish people would better understand that, while we do often publish not-always success stories, we love finding success stories. [LAUGHS] There's-- you know, we-- our reports may not always be // good news stories, but when we can see that a program is working well, personally, I enjoy being able to say, "This should be something we do in the future."
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INTERVIEWER:
That might be surprising to some people. Should it be surprising to some people that those working in the audit parts of an oversight agency such as this one actually are rooting to find good stories, good findings – programs that do work?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Well, I think-- I mean, you have to ask your question: what's the point of an inspector general? I mean, again, we-- our job is to find instances where money or, you know, investment should be spent differently or more efficiently, more effectively. But for what purpose?

And, for me, the purpose is to improve situations, improve investment, improve the U.S. approach to things – so that maybe one day we don't need an inspector general. I mean, I think there will always be ways to improve and to have more accountability. But, at the end of the day, we're here to find ways to make things better – so that we can fix the problems we identify now, later.

INTERVIEWER:
Why does it make you happy to find something that's working well?

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Makes me happy because I like to see that maybe we learned that from a lesson in the past, that maybe an OIG report from 10 years ago informed a change to a program, that now that change is working to remedy an issue that is no longer there, or was an issue before. And I think it's just a good news story.

I think when you look at a country like Afghanistan or other conflict areas, we usually have this idea that nothing's going to go well. And it's nice to have a story to say, "Well, some things are. And some things are being implemented correctly" – if we do find cases of that.

INTERVIEWER:
It also sounds like you're saying that oversight people, of any particular focus – be it auditors, be it lessons learned, be it research and analysis – even though they're looking critically to find the problems, it's O.K. that they're also possibly rooting for the U.S. government to succeed.

INTERVIEWEE 27:
Yeah. I'll speak for myself. I am a civil servant of the government, of SIGAR, and I like when I hear good stories in my day-to-day job. It's not always the case, but I, as an American taxpayer, would rather hear, "Your money's being spent well and it's having a positive impact," than, "It's not being spent well, and maybe we don't have a solution for how it will be. It's just going to take some time."

I mean, for me, that's not a good news story. Even though we've identified a problem, sometimes the solution isn't always clear. And I think SIGAR does a really great job of working with agencies to find and propose a solution. But if a solution's not even needed, if no problem is there in the first place, as an American taxpayer, I love that story. // And I think it helps the mission know how it's being successful or not.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
The final question that I'm going to ask you is what do you think you got to accomplish for the American public during your time working for this agency on this type of oversight work?
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INTERVIEWEE 27:
I think I was able to accomplish on behalf of the American public a really wide review of the ways in which the U.S. has been involved and has invested in Afghanistan.

I think it was really important that I got exposure to so many different areas of reconstruction, and was able to report on it and get that information out to the American people, to show them, again, the ways that we can reconstruct and rebuild and develop a country, and the ways in which our taxpayer dollars and investment make a difference, or at least are trying to make a difference.

I also think another way is that I've heard many times about, you know, "Well, what is U.S. investment really doing? What is the importance of it? Do they really know the impact?" And I think by sharing the stories that we've been able to put out in the reports at SIGAR, of noticing and sharing how Afghans recognize U.S. investment, is also a really important narrative for us to remember – about why it is important.

It's not just injecting money and building a road. I mean, there's signage and there's Afghans recognizing that that was America that did that. "That was the U.S. that helps me get to see my family

in another town now by building that road, or by giving me electricity to power a phone call or a FaceTime call." And I think that, for me, was something that I feel like I've accomplished for Americans – of making that information and that impact more accessible to so many people.

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