SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

SIGAR Oral History Project (OHP)

Interview 30: Edited Transcript

Interview Date: 10/16/24

NAME/TITLE

INTERVIEWEE 30:
[NAME]. Deputy inspector general, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

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JOB DESCRIPTION

My job, as second in command, was to oversee just about every aspect of the operation – personnel, quality of audit reports, work within the investigations – and make sure they're on-time with their products, lessons learned, and report to [NAME:] John Sopko* as the IG on what I've learned basically on a daily basis.
[* former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

CAREER HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:
And how long have you been with the agency? How long have you been in that role?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
I started with the agency 2012. And I've been there to today, which is, you know, going on 12 years or more. And, I loved every minute of it, actually.

INTERVIEWER:
Why?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Because it was an opportunity to look at some very important things that were happening in this country with terms of reconstruction: how the money was being spent, what kind of investigations we were conducting, if people were committing fraud, or abuse, or waste, or whatever. And it was a continuation of what I did when-- basically, what I've done my whole career with GAO* prior to this.
[* U.S. Government Accountability Office; formerly known as U.S. General Accounting Office]

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INTERVIEWER:
What did you study in school? What did you want to be when you grew up? And what was your trajectory that ended up bringing you here in the end?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. So, in college and graduate school, I studied political science and public administration. And I always knew I wanted to go into public service, because-- I know this is a cliché, but I was raised in the John F. Kennedy era, when he said, "Don't ask what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

And that just stuck with me my whole life. And I knew I wanted to go into public service, which was not an easy choice, because most of my family are professionals, doctors, dentists, lawyers. And I knew the path I was taking wasn't going to get me into that stratosphere, [LAUGHS] that they were in. And-- but, I made the right decision.

INTERVIEWER:
What part of the country are you from, [NAME]?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
I was born in south Philadelphia, grew up in south Jersey, and then moved down here when I got this job at GAO in 1974. And I've been in Virginia ever since.

INTERVIEWER:
Was there anything about where you grew up that encouraged you also to think about a career in public service?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Not particularly. I mean, Philadelphia was, you know, the heart of the independence of this country. But-- and I-- we were heavily into history in the Philadelphia area, because we could go see Betsy Ross' house, and we can go see the Liberty Bell, and that kind of thing. And I was always kind of a history buff. But mostly it was Kennedy that inspired me.

INTERVIEWER:
And that really resonated with you?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. It still does even today.
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INTERVIEWER:
You mentioned that your family, the history and professions took them to a different stratosphere. How did they receive your decision to pursue a career in public service?

INTERVIEWEE 30:

I think they looked down on it-- you know, at family gatherings and that kind of thing. We would joke and cut each other up. I mean, I'm from an Italian family. And that's what we do. We just joke, cut each other up, and, you know, have fun.

And-- but, you know, they were driving around in nice cars and I wasn't. So it was noticeable. But the interesting thing is, later in life, I gained all their respect. I mean, if you look at some of my Facebook posts from my relatives, or some of whom are gone, I mean, it really warms my heart to think what they've said, you know, "[NAME], I--" you know, "I respect what you've done.

"I understand your decision." You know, "I have so much respect for what you're doing." And, you know, and it really came home, finally, after all those years. Because I don't think people understood what public service was all about, at least people who are in a professional service. Like, why would you ever do that? You know? And I had opportunities to go into other businesses. And I just stuck with this.

INTERVIEWER:
What were some of the other opportunities?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
My family owned a business. And-- they wanted me to take it over. And I didn't particularly want to do it. And I didn't. And-- none-- actually, I have two brothers, and none of them-- one ended up being a doctor. And one ended up being a schoolteacher. But nobody took over the business.

INTERVIEWER:
May I ask you what kind of business it was?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. It was a string of hair-styling salons that my mother and father had put together. All I had to do was manage it, you know? But I didn't want to do it.

INTERVIEWER:
What did you study in school? Did you have this public service bug before you got to college? Were you thinking that way at an earlier age?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. Well, I knew in high school that's what I wanted to do, public administration. Well, actually it wasn't called that at that time. But political science, public administration. That's-- all my courses were geared toward that, from the very beginning. Yeah. I mean, I never diverted. I always, you know, knew what I-- where I-- I didn't exactly know where in government I would end up. I just knew I wanted to be-- I wanted to do public service.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you get a bachelor's in public-- political science? Or?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah, I had a bachelor's in political science and economics, and a master's degree in public administration.

INTERVIEWER:
And did you do that consecutively from college to the advanced degree in one go?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. Yeah. I mean, there was no break in between.

INTERVIEWER:
So you're done with getting your degrees. What was your first job?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Actually, my first job was with GAO.

INTERVIEWER:
You started right out of school with GAO?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
1974. I started right out of graduate school with GAO.
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When I got hired by GAO, it was called the General Accounting Office. Now it's the Government Accountability Office. [NAME:] Dave Walker, who was the prior comptroller general, changed the name, which I-- actually I think is a better name. And-- so, but everybody calls it GAO.
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Back in those days, you could apply to what they called mid-management level positions if you had a master's degree. And it just flooded the market, the government market, with your application.

And, I got a response really quickly from GAO. And I wasn't quite sure what GAO was all about. But when I did some analysis and research – I knew it was an audit agency, but – the interesting thing for me was it allowed you to look at all the other agencies in the federal government, from GAO's perspective.

And GAO was independent. It reported to Congress. It didn't report to the administration. I liked that, because I was more interested in working for Congress. And, you know, we did a couple interviews. And I got hired and started in D.C. in the summer of 1974. I had 38 years with GAO. I mean, today's world, people have 38 jobs, [LAUGHS] by the time they retire. I had 38 years with GAO. And, you know, it was gr-- just a great career.

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INTERVIEWER:

My understanding of GAO is that you have specialties, you have concentrations of expertise, and you work in those areas. What was your initial one? And what was the sweep of your coverage areas while you were there?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. So with GAO, they rotated you around to different agencies basically. So I—

INTERVIEWER:
These are inside GAO?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Inside GAO. You would-- you know, you would be auditing different agencies. But they wanted you to get a vast, broad sweep of basically the entire federal government.
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I worked at the Department of Agriculture, auditing the Department of Agriculture, Department of Defense, DOE-- just about – Justice, Treasury – all of them basically. I ended up as-- later in my career, when I was a GS-15, working in the DOE area.

And then I got promoted to SES. And I had taken over the DOE, Department of Energy area for GAO. And in that portion of DOE, I had the nuclear area, which covered nuclear nonproliferation, the spread of nuclear materials, nuclear energy, nuclear power, everything nuclear with Department of Energy.

And most people don't even know that DOE covers nuclear weapons, for example. But nuclear weapons, nuclear sabotage, nuclear security – all of that was under my portfolio. And it was at that time, the [Berlin] Wall had just fell. And, Russia had nuclear material basically all over the place.

And one of the United States' biggest efforts was to get to secure that nuclear material. So we spent a lot of money in Russia, securing nuclear material – and the former Soviet Union, not just Russia. And my job was to look at how we were spending that material-- or spending that money, and how good we were at securing that material.

I mean, I visited numerous – more than I care to even think about – nuclear power reactors in Russia and the former Soviet Union, climbed through them. Because we were basically upgrading their safety, because the Chernobyl accident happened in 1986.

And the Russians, you know, they thought-- when it was the Soviet Union, they thought they can't make mistakes, that everything they built was perfect and superior to anything the United States built. So they didn't even put what we call "containment structures" over their nuclear reactor.

So when Chernobyl exploded, radiation went all over the place, including the United States. And our reactors, our nuclear reactors, have a containment shell, a concrete containment shell over them. So, like, in Three Mile Island, when that accident happened, nothing-- nothing escaped to the atmosphere.
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So we were frantically trying to secure the safety of their nuclear reactors, so we wouldn't experience another Chernobyl. So there was hundreds of millions of dollars sent over there. And it was our job at GAO to look and see if that money was being spent correctly.

And in many cases, it was not. And one of my proudest achievements is we actually got the administration to change the way they were spending money in Russia, to be more effective and efficient, in regards to securing the safety of those nuclear reactors, and securing nuclear materials all over the place.

I mean, it was frightening. I mean, there was plutonium-- I walked into buildings with plutonium that was on windowsills. All you had to do was break the glass and steal it. And during that work, we talked to-- we went to many of the closed cities, which were their closed nuclear cities.

When the [Berlin] Wall fell, they discovered there were, like, 10 nuclear-- closed nuclear cities. Before that, we didn't even-- United States didn't even know how many there were. And only a few westerners ever got into those nuclear cities. And GAO was one that did.

And I've been to many of them. And I talked to many of the Russian nuclear scientists. Because before the wall fell, the Russian nuclear scientists used to be top of the food chain in society. When it fell, they were driving taxicabs.

And we were worried that they were going to go to North Korea or Iran and sell their nuclear knowledge, which in fact some did. And so we were come-- the United States was coming up with programs to employ these nuclear scientists, which some of the programs were absolutely ridiculous.

They were creating flower shops for nuclear scientists. And they would tell me, "I'm a nuclear scientist. I don't want to sell flowers on the street. I'm not going to do it." And we redirected those programs to something more sensible.

You know, there's a lot of brain power in these people, that needs to be harnessed and put to good use. And so I-- the programs we recommended were designed to do that. And the administration listened to us. And Congress listened to us. And I had-- I've testified over more than 50 times in front of the United States Congress, mostly about nuclear materials, and nuclear power, and nuclear security, and nonproliferation, and those kinds of issues.

INTERVIEWER:
So a very serious portfolio, a very broad portfolio, a very important portfolio. And you had it for a long time. Why did you decide to leave GAO? What were the circumstances?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, like I said, I was there for 38 years. And I was getting to the end of my career. And-- I had developed a staff of people in GAO, and they're still there today, to take this area over. I knew I wanted to move on. And the issue was not as hot as it was in the early to mid '90s.

And so I was ready to move on. And, out of the blue-- well, and I-- actually, I used to work with [NAME:] John Sopko* when he was up on the Hill, as a-- not directly working with him, but as an SESer from GAO, I would meet with him, because he was the general counsel for the committee. And we would talk about what work we wanted to do, what hearings we were wanting to-- we thought were necessary.
[* former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

INTERVIEWER:
And the committee was the [Senate] Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, PSI?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yes. [And later the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.] And we put on some damn good hearings. I mean, we-- I was up there with many of the representatives from the administration, you know, just duking it out on some of these issues.

Because, you know, they were the administration's, you know, core programs. And they didn't like criticism of them. And we were criticizing them heavily – to improve them, not just to criticize them. And eventually the agency realized that. And I had a great relationship with the agency officials. I mean, we would still issue scathing reports. But they agreed with them. And we worked together with them. And we never surprised them with a report.

INTERVIEWER:
And this is the Department of Energy?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
This is the Department of Energy, yeah. And, to this day, I still have relationships with some of those people who also have moved on.

INTERVIEWER:
So they understood that oversight had value?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
And did they always understand that, or did you have to encourage them to understand that?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You know, when they first got that message when they saw what we were recommending actually made sense. I mean, basically our recommendations are basically common-sense things to do, to fix the problem.

And, you know, sometimes the programs would turn around and become successful, based on GAO's recommendations. And a lot of times, I would work with them. I'd let them know what the report was

going to say, what we were going to recommend, ask them if they had any recommendations they would like us to include, how these recommendations would work.

And, recommendations are supposed to be economical. And you shouldn't impose huge costs on the agency. They should be easy to implement. And they should be common sense. And it takes an outsider to look at the program, to come up with those recommendations.

If you're working on a program day-to-day, you of course are immersed in the details of the program. And you can't step aside and see what's not working. That's what GAO did. We went in to all of these programs. We kicked the tires, and came up with what was wrong and here are solutions to fix them.

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My reports that I worked on at GAO and my portfolio at GAO was very high portfolio. I mean, it was making *NBC Nightly News*. It was making [CBS'] *60 Minutes*.

It was making newspapers all over the place. And, interestingly enough, the comptroller general became-- got notice of that. And, you know, he would-- we would have conversations about, "What's going on? How is this happening? Why are we getting all this press?"

And I said, "It's because of the issues. The issues are that important. And also, I'm working with the press." You know? Which is not what they train you to do in GAO. But during the years, I would get press calls. And some of those people, we would develop-- I would develop relations with.

And, you know, I'd let them know what we're working on, and when the report would be coming out. And then, you know, they would take that, and they would do stories with it or whatever. And eventually, if I was working with the Congress – which I always did, 98% of my work was with the Congress, congressional request – I'd link those two up, the press and the Hill.

Because they're the ones who want the publicity. And it was just a perfect marriage. And by doing that, it wasn't just the press, it's the impact you get out of that.
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My personal account, of how much money I saved with the GAO, is, like, over $8 billion. And we do a systematic counting of that, to verify – just about for everybody who in GAO leaves the agency, we sort of do that for, or they do them themselves.

And, I mean, you know, $8 billion may not sound like a lot in terms of what's being spent. But that's one individual. So, when you multiply that by thousands of individuals, then the savings start to add up.

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SIGAR HIRING/SIGAR MANDATE: 2012

INTERVIEWER:
So tell me how it came to be that you and your quote/unquote, "partner" – your casual partner in pushing forward these kind of oversight concerns, working with him in Congress – how the two of you came to work together on this agency. How did that come to be?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You mean [NAME:] Sopko?

INTERVIEWER:
Yes. So [NAME:] John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, previously general counsel on these influential congressional committees that did investigations of issues. How did the two of you team up to come here?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, it's interesting, because both of our personalities are results-oriented.
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So I was still with GAO. And [NAME:] John had left the Hill. And he went to work for a law firm. And, we weren't really that close. We only had a professional working relationship. I never socialized with him. But he knew my work. And he knew that the work I did at GAO was probably some of the best that was ever done.

And, you know, we had, like I mentioned, tremendous hearings, tremendous impact, that kind of thing. And we both said, "You know what? If our paths ever cross again, let's make sure we get in contact with each other and go from there."

And, out of the blue, I just got a call from him one day. And he said, you know, "I just got appointed the inspector general for-- the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction." And I said, "What the hell is that?"

And so then, you know, we met for lunch, and we talked. And I said, "Well, let me think about it." Because, you know, I'd planned on retiring from GAO. And I still wanted to do something, still wanted to do something in public service.

And this could be it. And so, we talked again. And, I did some research on my own. And I thought, "I'm not sure I really want to go to Afghanistan during a war, but this could be interesting, could be fun. And you could have a lot of impact."

And he offered me the position as his deputy. And I accepted. And that was 2012. And I gave my notice to GAO. And I was flattered that they asked me to stay. And I said, "No, I think I'm ready to move on." And they all said, "You're crazy. Why would you want to go to Afghanistan?"

And I said, "Well, it's a challenge. It's going to be interesting. And working with [NAME:] Sopko, who I know." And so I did. I left. And-- but not only did I leave, I took about 12 people with me from GAO. And, they weren't happy about that. [LAUGHS] Some of them are still here.

So, you know, part of my commitment to this agency is because of those people, who gave up their careers in GAO to come here and work for us. And I also hired [NAME:] John Goodman,* who was our security expert, a three-star general. I had great respect for him.
[* Gen. John F. Goodman, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)]

I met him through a friend. And we needed a military advisor. So we got him to come on board. And, you know, and [NAME:] John [Sopko] and I have been here since. I mean, we always thought when we would get here-- I mean, when he hired me, he said, "I can't promise you more than two years." And it's been two years, and then two years, and then two years. Then—

INTERVIEWER:
Now it's been 12 years.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
And now it's been 12 years. Yeah.
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INTERVIEWER:
So SIGAR began in 2008. You joined in 2012. When you joined SIGAR, you joined an agency that was already in progress. What was that like?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, it's, you know, it's interesting, because it felt like I was joining a brand-new agency. Because the previous IG didn't do well. I don't think that's any secret. And he was basically fired. So [NAME:] John, when he got here, he was learning what the hell the agency was all about.

He was, you know, basically drinking through a fire hydrant, digesting stuff. And when I got here, it was quite evident that the reports needed to be-- the audit reports needed to be revamped. [NAME:] John wanted to redo just about everything in investigations. And we kind of started over fresh actually.
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We met with several representatives on the Hill, including [NAME:] Sen. Claire McCaskill, who was, I think, instrumental in getting rid of the last IG. And she said to us, she said, you know, "You need to turn this agency around. We need to see, you know, audit reports that are meaningful, that have-- point out the problems with the reconstruction funding." And interestingly enough, she warned [NAME:] John not to be a press hound, she said, "Because it's the members of Congress who want the press, not the agency."

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INTERVIEWER:
You've touched on it, but I'm going to ask you point-blank. The SIGAR of 2008 to 2012 was arguably a different organization than the SIGAR of 2012 to 2024 and beyond. What were the exact conditions that prompted the Congress to create SIGAR in the first place in 2008?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, there was a concern that the money was being wasted that was going into reconstruction.

INTERVIEWER:
In Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
In Afghanistan. Unfortunately, they didn't create SIGAR until, what, 2008, 2009. Well, that's nine years or so after the money started rolling in. So, whatever our successes were in SIGAR, we have no idea what money-- what happened to the money prior to the creation of SIGAR, or how those programs were ineptly managed or whatever.

INTERVIEWER:
So who was doing oversight before SIGAR was created to [oversee] spending in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
I assume the agencies were doing the oversight – like USAID, DoD, and State, their IGs were doing the oversight. But apparently it wasn't good enough for Congress, so they created a special inspector general, which I think was a great thing for Afghanistan.

I mean, we focused solely on Afghanistan. And-- you know, we became the experts on Afghanistan. And, you know, in my career, I know, the same thing with GAO – you know, you'll get a lot of kickback and pushback from the agencies on the work you do.

But, in reality, we become experts on the programs we audit, to the point where we know [more] about what's going on in those programs than the agency does. And many times in GAO, if Congress wanted to know how an agency-- how a program was functioning, they would call GAO in, not the agency.

And they would tell us that. They would say, "I'm not wasting my time with the agency. I'm bringing in GAO. You [GAO] tell me how this program is operating." And we would know. We would be-- we are the experts on those things that we audit, because we have to study them like crazy.

We have to-- it's like cramming for an exam before you go testify before Congress. And you have to know facts, figures. You have to everything about that program. You live and breathe it. And that's why we became the experts on it.

INTERVIEWER:
When you joined SIGAR, how optimistic were you about the impact that this kind of oversight agency, with this special inspector general model – specialized in focus, broad in authority, independent in management – how optimistic were you that that model could have a positive impact on U.S. efforts, missions, programs, and goals in Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, I knew we would have a positive impact, but I knew it would not cover the whole problem of reconstruction in Afghanistan. As I mentioned, we only had-- we had limited resources. At our max, I think we had 209 people. And that included investigations, auditors, lessons learned, special projects, congressional, human resources.

I mean, 200 was the whole entire agency. There's no way you're going to look at $140 billion with those numbers. So I knew our impact would be limited, but it would be powerful. Because even though we didn't look at the whole amount, we served as a deterrence to people who might commit fraud, waste, and abuse.

They knew we were there. And we were very popular in Afghanistan with the ordinary folks who knew what was going on with their government. And the press here in the United States had a great respect for us. So, you know, every-- just about every report we issued got great press, which meant the Congress became aware of it, and as a result, we had dozens of hearings on these programs. And made positive changes.

But, you know, we don't affect policy that much. We can make recommendations and that kind of thing. But the policy in Afghanistan was made by the administrations, both Republican and Democratic.

So the best we could do – [LAUGHS] – is make improvements to the programs that were spending the money. We couldn't actually direct the outcome of the war or the outcome of the reconstruction effort. You know, we're just one player in this. But, you know, oversight's a very big player.

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INTERVIEWER:
In your role, you were responsible for operationally managing this agency with 200+ people. When you came into this agency, what kind of vision did you have for how you were going to manage this agency, doing this type of oversight, in a war zone?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You know, when I-- the day I got here, I asked somebody-- oh, and I actually said, "With all this money going to Afghanistan, it must be easy to come up with findings. It must be like shooting fish in a barrel." He says, "Yeah, it is, except there's no water in the barrel. It's just full of fish."

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Meaning it was easy to come up with findings. But as I mentioned, prior to coming here, I really didn't hear much about Afghanistan all that much, except, you know, superficially. I didn't see many IG reports on Afghanistan. And I knew there was a boatload of information out there that needed to be brought to the public's attention.

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INTERVIEWEE 30:
One of the first things I've asked-- I asked for when I first got on the job from our audit folks to try to get was a list of DoD contracts in Afghanistan. And I came on in 2012. [As] I sit here in 2024, I still don't have that list. We never could get a list of DoD contracts in Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWER:
How is that possible?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
That is a good question. How is that possible? I mean, there's a lot of data that we asked for that you would think would be at their fingertips and that we never got, or that we had to reconstruct ourselves and then give it to the agency, who thanked us for doing it, you know?

So, yeah, I mean, I've seen that throughout my career. Some-- sometimes you think the stuff that would have to be at their fingertips is not even there. So they don't even know how to manage their own program. But you would think a list of DoD contracts in Afghanistan would be something readily available. It wasn't.

INTERVIEWER:
And it wasn't that it was behind some kind of, you know, classified wall or other wall. It just wasn't available – and you never got a reason?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Never got a reason, never got a list. And no, the classification wouldn't matter, because we all have clearance. So yeah, that wasn't the issue.

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What I told [NAME:] John* was, "Give me audits. You stay out of it. Let me fix it." And that's what I did. And, I mean, basically, some of the-- we had very good people, but some of them were inexperienced. And of course I had 38 years of auditing.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

So I sort of knew what I-- we needed to do. And I refocused the audits on getting at what the facts were, what the findings were. Some of the audit reports were just like information reports. And who cares about that? You know? That's not our job just to provide it.

Our job is to go out and search for waste, fraud, and abuse. And so I redirected the audits to, you know, be stronger, harder-hitting, and more aggressive. And that's another point I want to make, is that we are one of, if not <u>the</u> most, aggressive IGs in the federal government.

We were right at number one or number two. I don't know who's more aggressive than us. And we're res-- [NAME:] John and I are both results-oriented. We don't really care about the fluff. We didn't really care about, you know, whose feelings we hurt.

We were there to get to the truth about how we were spending our money. You know? The only way the American taxpayer was really going to know how their money was spent was through some – in Afghanistan reconstruction – was through SIGAR.

And, you know, we were brutal about it. I mean, we were, you know, "Here's what you're going to do. Here's what you're going to look at." And, you know, no more information reports. We want findings. And, you know, if you need more training, we'll send you to more training.

So, I mean, in terms of vision, to me, it was always about results-oriented, about let's get to the truth. And the way you do that is through good auditing. And, you know, you don't come this-- another thing [NAME:] John and I worked on was – and this is with the investigators as well as the auditors – is: this is not a second job where you're going to kick your feet up on the desk, and relax, and collect a paycheck for your second-- you know, after retirement.

And there were people – I mean, I literally – there were people, when I walked in, had their feet up on their desk, reading the newspaper. And we got rid of those people. And we got rid of a lot of people from the first go around when we first got here.

I mean, people were pushing back. For example, I went to audits and said, you know, "Two reports a quarter is not satisfactory, is not reasonable. I mean, you've got enough staff to put out enough work more than two reports a quarter." "Well, what-- well, how many reports do you want?"

I said, "How about, like, 10 reports a quarter? That's not unreasonable." "Well, what do you want me to give up and do in place?" I said, "I don't want you to give up anything. I want you to do – at a minimum – 10 reports a quarter. You figure out how to do that, and make it the most top- priority work."

In other words, what are the most heavily funded programs? What programs talk about security? You know, where are the major weaknesses in any of these p-- you know, focus your work on top priority efforts, not fluff or information reports that nobody cares about and nobody reads. We lost a lot of people. I mean, people just quit. Said, "I can't do 10 reports." Guess what? They did 10 reports.

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SIGAR VISITS TO AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
How many trips did you personally make to the war zone, to Afghanistan?

INTERVIEWEE 30:

So I went five times to Afghanistan. Spent, I don't know, two weeks at a time, something like that. I would've done more, but [NAME:] John went, frequently. And we never wanted to overlap. Well, I think we took one trip together. Maybe that was our first trip.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

But, you know, if he was over there, I should be here in Washington, and vice versa. So, he did most of the traveling over there, although I did do a lot of traveling to NATO, and some other of our strategic partners. But five trips to Afghanistan. And I think four of those five I spent sometime on the ground with my arms over my head because of incoming and that kind of thing – which was different than-- my usual audit work at GAO.

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CONDUCTING OVERSIGHT IN A WAR ZONE: AFGHANISTAN

INTERVIEWER:
There are times in the setting of this war zone in Afghanistan when oversight work is life-threatening, or can be. Can you talk a little bit about the particular challenges that come from trying to conduct oversight in a war zone, in a conflict zone, a contingency zone – to use all the different terms? What are the challenges of doing this kind of work in that kind of place?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
There's a lot of challenges. And, even I remember when I first went there, I was going out the outside the Embassy to meet with various officials. And I had // investigators with me, both carrying sub-machine guns. And I thought, "Well, this has never happened before in my career."
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There was not a whole lot of trust with the-- some of the Afghan army. And, everybody was looking at everybody suspiciously. So you had that on your mind, your-- basically your physical safety. I mean, you know, I remember coming out of the palace and there were several Afghan guards there.

And we said to ourselves, "Are we going to get shot in the back?" And so, you know, that's on your mind. Then, it was dangerous to go to places.

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You know, just interviewing individuals in the or-- in the Afghan government. Sometimes you could go to the Department of Defense and other times there were alerts saying, "Everybody stay in the agency [U.S. Embassy]." So you could fly to Afghanistan with this whole agenda of interviews you had lined up, and by the end of two weeks, not have any of them, because of the-- you weren't allowed to get out of the agency [U.S. Embassy].

Sometimes they would be willing to come in to the Embassy, to interview [with] you. And the other difficulty was working through translators. Were they actually interpreting you as you want them to be, or were they, you know, modifying what you were saying and it came out differently?

You know, you always had to be aware of that problem. And we used a lot of interpreters. And it's-- you know, I just did diaspora interviews a couple months ago here in the United States, using interpreters. And it's tedious.

It makes each meeting twice as long as it should be. And you're really not sure if you're conveying what you want to convey, to these people you're interviewing. So it's a big challenge doing auditing in a war setting.

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Earlier, before I got there, and maybe once I got there in 2012, we were still able to get out a little bit, into the countryside, to go interview people, to go see constructions projects, that kind of thing.

But, I would say, by 2014, we couldn't do that anymore. And we had to hire a civil group in Afghanistan – I don't want to say their name – to do some of this work for us, because they could blend easier than we could. So, it was difficult to get hands-on information, to actually see the construction of some of these buildings they were building.

So we had to work through our Afghan partners to do that. And when-- and we tried to be as assured as we could that they were doing the actual work we needed to do. Because as part of our standards is we must ensure that what they're doing meets standards.

So we would give them geo-spatial watches, geo-spatial cameras. And they said if they were at a particular place, looking at a particular building, we could match it with the geo-spatial camera or watches they had. And they took pictures of what it was they were looking at.

And we knew there was a USAID project or a DoD project in that area, that kind of thing. And, so, whereas we would do that ourselves as auditors and investigators, we had to rely on other people to do that. So, we used this group for a long time, so we thought they were pretty trustworthy. And that's how we did some of our work.

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INTERVIEWER:
You mentioned that SIGAR's staff size was limited, which obviously consequently limited the scope of work that SIGAR was able to tackle. But you also talked about how SIGAR was able to extend its reach, by working through third parties. One, this third-party group in Afghanistan that you mentioned, but also I'm thinking about the financial audits and using other auditing entities to do some of the financial audits, as SIGAR did.

How acceptable within the oversight world of the U.S. government is it to use third-party extenders of an oversight agency's work? And then also, how do you safeguard that that work is being done to the same standard that the agency itself wants to uphold?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
It's not ideal. I mean, it's not ideal to have to work through third parties to do the work that you would want to do yourself. You want to crawl through those Soviet designed reactors like I did, so you can ask questions of what you see. You know, you have the person right there next to you.

You can, you know, question them about everything you see, you look at. And, you know, what's interesting is – and this is off-- maybe off-base here, though, but – in the '90s, Cuba was building a Soviet designed nuclear reactor. And we were worried.

The United States was worried that we could have another Chernobyl on our hands 100 and so miles off the coast of Florida. So I actually did the only audit that was done on that. And I went to the [U.S.] Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which is the agency that looks at-- on nuclear reactors, and approves them, approves the design of them all.

They actually had designs of this reactor, that I went over with them about how well it was constructed, where was its faults. You know, what could we do if something happens here in the United States. And it was an NBC [News] producer who actually got permission to go to Cuba and look at this reactor.

And we were on the phone. And I was looking at the schematics. And I was telling him what to look at. Now that's not ideal, but it was better than nothing. And we got actually a lot of information out of that. And it was the same thing in Afghanistan.

By GAGAS standards, which are, generally, government accepted auditing standards – you have to assure that the third parties you're working with are adhering to standards. And as I mentioned, like with the geo-spatial stuff, you have to-- in our financial audits, we have to review all the work they're doing to make sure it complies with standards.

And even though these are public accounting firms who are aware of, you know, what standards they need to follow, we had to assure ourselves that the-- what they were doing – met our standards. And so, every time they would issue a report, a financial audit on a company, we would have to review that report and basically go over it line-by-line, item-by-item, to make sure it met our standards.

And they usually did. They always did, I think. Because if not, we would get back to them. And, the same thing with auditing with a third party. They would-- we'd ask them to go out and investigate the construction of a building. We would tell them what to look for.

They actually had their own engineers. And we had engineers. And the two engineers would talk to each other. They speak the same language. And so that was our insurance that the weaknesses in the construction they were looking at were something that we would agree with. And, if there was an issue, we'd tell them to go back and look again. And they would. So, you know, there are safeguards in place, but it's never as good as being able to do it yourself.

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INTERVIEWER:
Now when you went [to Afghanistan], would you stay in-- within the Embassy compound confines, or would you go out in the field as well?

SIGAR MEETING WITH THEN-AFGHANISTAN PRESIDENT GHANI

INTERVIEWEE 30:
No, you would stay in the Embassy. But I did take trips outside the Embassy. We went-- one of the best ones was we went to the palace to meet with [NAME:] Ghani* and his advisors.
[* Ashraf Ghani, the former government of Afghanistan's president, 2014-2021]

INTERVIEWER:
[NAME:] President Ghani.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
[NAME:] President Ghani. One of our reports actually-- which was about fraud in the Afghan government, corruption in the Afghan government. And unbelievably enough, during that meeting, [NAME:] Ghani came to the meeting and-- [NAME:] President Ghani came to the meeting – with a copy of the report, which was dog-eared and had little things sticking out of almost every page where he had read it.

And we spent hours going over that report, like I would do with an agency official in the United States. And it just-- and I thought, "This guy is the president of Afghanistan. How does he have the time to spend hours with us, going over language in a report that he felt was unfair, or should be tempered, or whatever?"

And during that meeting, there was a huge explosion outside the palace. And it was funny, [NAME:] Ghani's advisors all got shaky and jumpy. And [NAME:] John* and I, I don't know, maybe because we were dumb, we didn't know what was going on, we just kind of said, "What's going--" you know, it didn't affect us that much.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

And it didn't affect [NAME:] President Ghani either. He just continued on with the meeting. But it was emblematic, I think, of [NAME:] President Ghani. It's like he was an academic. And, I think that wasn't that suitable for the position he was in. It just-- I just was shocked by the fact that he had time to read that report when his country's at war, and basically losing the war.

INTERVIEWER:
And the topic is fraud within his government.

INTERVIEWEE 30:

It was corruption. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Did he dispute any of the findings?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
He had, like, you know, comments on tone and that kind of thing. And he would defend things that he was doing. But not much in the report ever changed because of his comments, no.

INTERVIEWER:
Was he appreciative?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yes. He was very kind, very appreciative, very professional. I think he respected [NAME:] John and he respected SIGAR. So, yeah, I think he was appreciative.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you feel like that work made a dent in any way – in the former government, in one form or another?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
On the surface, but it never got down to the real corruption. I mean, you know, some of that stuff is so hard to find. And they're so sophisticated at it, that they made, like, surface improvements to the way the government was operating, but never got down to putting bad guys in jail. No. Which is frustrating. But, you know, I keep saying, if we weren't there, how bad would it have been? How much worse would it have been?

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

INTERVIEWER:
Can you talk about how much cooperation this agency got from the agencies that it was overseeing? And how did that change over time?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah, so I think in SIGAR, as opposed to GAO, the relationship with the agencies were more-- was more adversarial. And, a lot because, I think, you know, once we got here – [NAME:] John* and I got here – we started using the press a lot to publicize our reports, which is a perfectly legitimate thing to do.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]
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If it's worth publishing, it's worth publicizing. You get Congress's attention they act on stuff, otherwise nobody reads your report. But the agencies didn't like that. They didn't like all the publicity they were getting, because most of it was negative.

And, you know, in this position, I was deputy inspector general, so I actually didn't conduct the audit work. And, I think the staff-- you know, I wish I had more time to train them to work more cooperatively with some of their agency counterparts.

I don't think everybody was having a rough time, but a lot of people were. In fact, I would sit in on many of the meetings between SIGAR staff and agency officials to listen to both sides – because I would-- you know, I got into some of the audit work as best as I could, because I knew I'd be reviewing these reports and I wanted to know more about the programs.

And in one particular case SIGAR staff were actually yelling at the agency official, and I stopped the meeting and I said, "You-- this ends right now. You don't-- you're supposed to be working with these people cooperatively, not screaming at them as if they're lying to you."

And, I was kind of surprised, and I don't know how much of that occurred, but, I tried to instill in the staff that you get more with honey than you do with vinegar. And, you know, work with these people and they become-- they trust you.

And they-- if they have more trust in you, they're going to be more cooperative and you're going to get the information you need. And in the end, they're going to see everything you write before the report is issued. They're going to comment on the report, so, you know, there's not going to be any backstabbing or lying, all right?

They're going to see the work. But you don't have to be adversarial in every freaking meeting you go into, you know? These are people-- look, the agency people are just trying to do their job, and their job, frankly, is a lot harder than our job.

We're looking at what they've done. They're actually trying to implement something, and in this case in a war zone. So there's no illusions that that's an easy thing to do. What we're trying-- what SIGAR's job should've been was, you know, what is obviously going wrong here? What are the fixes that could be made to make this thing more successful?

And so, you know, I think here in SIGAR there was several reasons why the relationship was more adversarial. I think part of it was agencies themselves – particularly State Department – who never liked anybody looking over their shoulder, because they think they're the experts on these things, these-- some of these policies, and many cases they are.

Doesn't mean they're not making mistakes that could be corrected. So, you know, if I-- I wish one thing we could've done was have a more cooperative relationship with some of these agency folks [than] we did, because I think it would've meant-- it would've resulted in probably better reports – and more cooperation.

INTERVIEWER:
And then in the last couple of years, the issue of cooperation got to the point where there was actually some reporting by this agency to Congress about cooperation being a problem. Was that a low point, or was it a return to a previous low point? Can you put that in context for me?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
No, that was a low point. In fact, in my career I have never seen an agency sh-- I mean an administration shut down agencies, as I did in this administration [Biden Administration]. And it was appalling. I mean, they wouldn't talk to us, they wouldn't give us any information.

They basically said, "We're ignoring you." And you don't do that to an IG – especially Sopko* as an IG – because, you know, he's been around the block, he's worked on the Hill, he knows Congress. I've been with GAO for, you know, years.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

I worked with Congress for years. You know, your job is to respond to what we're asking, and they just shut us down. And it was appalling. I-- it was-- it lasted for about a year. And then they were getting-- the administration was getting so much negative publicity, and both Republican[s] and Democrats on the Hill were getting fed up with it, and it was obvious in the hearings that, you know, the administration was getting batted around. And eventually, that completely turned around. And USAID was much more cooperative, State was much more cooperative. DoD was out of the picture by then. But-- yeah, it was a really dumb thing to do.

INTERVIEWER:
So [to] what do you attribute that strategy-- what may have generated it? It was unsuccessful. what was the point of it?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
I just think it was naïve people who think they could've got away with it, you know? I just think they didn't want to hear any bad news from Afghanistan, and unfortunately, our reports were pointing out problems in the report-- in the programs that were going there. And I think somebody over there made a bad decision.

INTERVIEWER:
And the decision was basically to stop the flow of information to the overseer?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yes. Not even to have conversations with us. It was ridiculous. It was a bad government. It was a bad decision. And in the end, they apparently realized they made a big mistake.

INTERVIEWER:
It seemed that Congress didn't stand for that.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
No, Cong-- bipartisanship prevailed in this-- you know, even the-- and the Democrats as well as the Republicans were upset by this – and called the administration's feet to the fire.
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INTERVIEWER:
Those issues, to you, were not typical of cooperation issues that oversight agencies usually faced there.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
No, that-- that was atypical, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you think that it was atypical because it was this specific agency, this specific inspector general? Or do you think that it had to do with the fact that the oversight was about a war zone, and spending in a war zone? Or a combination of both?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
I'm pretty sure it was specific to SIGAR, because I had met-- talked to the other IGs, and they were-- they claimed they were not having the same access issues. And, you know, it was about Afghanistan, and about the war zone, and about the collapse of the government.

And the administration thought, since the troops weren't there, we had no role anymore, which is not-- we were never tied to the troop levels, we were always tied to the money. So, it took about a year of going back-and-forth before they realized they had made a bad decision.

INTERVIEWER:
And then it reversed and they began to cooperate again?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
And then it reversed, yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:
How important is the idea of trust when you're an overseer and you have an agency to oversee, and you need to develop a relationship with them? How important is the idea of trust?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
I think trust is key. You know, you're meeting with some-- you're meeting with agency officials and you're asking them about their program, which they have devoted their lives to getting, you know, implemented. And, you know, you're trying to figure out, you know, how's the program operating?

What's going right? What's going wrong? And what would help them make improvements to the program? That was our goal is, you know, not "gotcha" reports to the agency. Although it seemed like that was what we were doing sometimes.

It's not the "gotcha" thing. It's, "How can we make this work better for you and the American taxpayer, and achieve your goal of reconstruction, better?" I mean, that's what we were here for. And, you know, building trust is key to all of that.

I mean, you know, you've got to-- if you have built trust with the agencies, you're going to get meetings a lot quicker, you're going to get information a lot quicker, you're going to get the results you need a lot quicker.

Otherwise, they're going to blow you off. And they're going-- and in some cases that's what they did. And, it took a lot of, you know, fighting back to get back in there. So yeah, it's key to a work-- a good working relationship.

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INTERVIEWER:
In your role, did you have engagements with top officials in other agencies about the kind of findings that SIGAR was going to report? And, if you did, how did that kind of conversation go?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah, I always would meet with the head of the division, or the program, or the office where the program was emanating from to talk about our findings. It was not just at SIG-- at-- when I was at SIGAR but also GAO as well. And, you know, a lot of times they would raise the point, "You know, I understand what you're finding in your report, but do you realize the impact that this is going to have on our programs in Congress? I mean, it could, you know, damage the program, or--"

And I would-- I always felt that in-- that was interesting, because I thought, "Look, I'm trying to tell you that your programs aren't working, and that they need to be fixed. I'm not, you know, I'm not here to do "gotcha" or anything." And they-- but they would come back and say, you know-- and you know what, it wasn't even always just the people who were the political appointees.

Some of the lower-level staff in the agencies would say, "You're damaging our programs." You know, "It's going to have an impact on our programs and the funding we get from Congress." And I would always go-- say, you know, "That's why we're here. We're here to fix these programs. They're supposed to be impacted by Congress." And so, you know, a lot of that happened during my career.

INTERVIEWER:
So they would be angry?

INTERVIEWEE 30:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. A lot of them would be angry about what we were doing. They would be angry we were there. And, I mean, I've got screamed at, over the phone and in person, because of what our findings showed. And it was like, you know, "Dude, this is reality. Your programs have problems. You know-- I don't really-- from my perspective, I don't care if Congress stops your program if it's to stop it to fix it, you know?"

And, you know, I-- and what they're worried about is continuous funding, and they know our pro-- our work at SIGAR, at GAO, will have an impact on their funding. But to us, it was more important to get it right than it was to get the funding, so.

INTERVIEWER:
This may sound naïve, but if everybody's working for the government and they're trying to, you know, have positive outcomes, why would they be angry and screaming?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Because people build empires. You know, they-- in the agencies they think what they're doing is, you know, God's work. It shouldn't be held up to criticism. "Just give me the funding and we'll go out and do what we want to do."

That's not what happens, you know? There is something called oversight. And what we're doing is looking at whether that program is working, whether the money is being spent properly, and sometimes when it isn't, and we report the facts that it isn't, they don't like the message.

And, you know, it's a tough-- it's tough when that happens, but, you know, I don't feel sorry for them. We're here to look after the taxpayers' money. And if a program – year after year, after year, after year – isn't working, then Congress needs to do something about it. And the only way they know that is through our work, because the agencies sure as hell aren't going to go up there and tell them the program's not working, right?

INTERVIEWER:
So how often was the oversight regarded as the skunk at the garden party? And how often, if ever, was it regarded as, "Well, thanks for telling us. We appreciate that."?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You know, it varied. It varied on the program, [and] it varied on the individual.
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And we try to work with the agency, but, you know, facts are the facts. And if the facts aren't showing that your program's working, and if we report this Congress is going to cut your funding, so be it.

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SIGAR OVERSIGHT AUDITS/INVESTIGATIONS/RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS/LESSONS LEARNED: SUCCESSES?

INTERVIEWER:
So when you look back on your 12 years here, what things do you think of as the best successes that this agency has had?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, you know, we took-- we had an amazing staff. And they were dedicated. Many of them stayed in Afghanistan. And now I think what we did was wake the agencies up to the fact that some of the programs were just ridiculous and not working.

And, almost in every area – education, women's rights, housing, healthcare, just about all the major areas that we were funding – they never had any support, real support. They never did kicking-the-tires kind of support to see if those programs were working.

And they would have-- we would call it "happy talk," you know, about all the successes they're having. And then when we would go back behind their talk to see what supported that, there was nothing there. There was basically nothing there. They were just assuming their work was-- their programs were working.

And actually it pissed off a lot of Afghans, because they knew that was not true. They knew those programs were not working. They were in some cases just lining the pockets of Afghan officials. So I'm-- I think I'm most proud of the fact that we raised the awareness, I think, of the American people.

Because nobody was talking about Afghan[istan] – even while the war was going on, it just seemed like nobody cared, until SIGAR got in there and started reporting on some of these abuses. Then people started to care. You saw the press got involved. I mean, I really didn't-- when [NAME:] John* invited me to be his deputy, I never saw that much about Afghanistan in the news.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

You know, when-- unfortunately, when our soldiers were killed, you'd see an article about that. But you-- I never heard about reconstruction. I didn't know we were rebuilding a country. I thought we weren't going to do that, country-building.

And, when I got here, I thought, "This is crazy. This is crazy." In fact, when I first landed in Kabul, and I looked around, and I thought, "What the hell are we doing here? Do we think we're going to rebuild this country?" Do you know that when we first started, I mean, we actually built their buildings for their Department of Defense and other depart-- they didn't have any-- they didn't even have buildings for this.

You know, the [Afghanistan] Defense Department building was, I think, a billion-dollar building. It was ridiculous. And, some of the other things we found—all [the]-- buildings they were building out in the field that never were going to be used. We reported on those kinds of things.

But, you know, one of the things that you mentioned we're most proud of is: I think we saved lives. Because one of the posters we have around the office is, is that "Fraud Kills." And it's true. You know, it isn't just corruption or fraud, in terms of money stolen.

It actually took people's lives. And basically, you know, they-- for example, they said they were building these facilities that would prevent car bombings and that kind of thing. And the contractor was lying about what they were doing.* And we actually had our investigators go out to some of these sites, and see how poorly these things were constructed.
[* SIGAR's investigation of Afghanistan road culvert denial systems checked on work for which a contractor received funding – to place grates at either end of culverts under roads, to prevent the placement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) under the roads inside the culverts.]

INTERVIEWER:
And this was the culvert—

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Culverts, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
--investigation. It was [the culverts were] supposed to be sealed on both sides.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Right. And they were not. And, they – Taliban – were able to put explosives in there. And as trucks came by, I think, two military or two contractors were killed by that.

INTERVIEWER:
Because someone didn't do what they were contracted to do?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Exactly.

INTERVIEWER:
And if not for an oversight agency, perhaps there would be more than two fatalities.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. And I don't think there were any more after we issued our findings on that. And we actually had very brave people, our investigators, go out into the field and look at some of these culverts. And-- I remember they had to have—MRAPs*? Is that what they were called, I think? One in front and one in back. And the guy was crawling through the culverts, looking to see the-- how they were constructed and all.
[* mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles]

And that made some news. And that got some impact. And I think we saved lives because of some of this work.

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

INTERVIEWER:
What do you think are the characteristics that best prepare somebody to be in this type of work, conducing oversight in a war zone? What are the best skills? What are the best personality traits? What are the best talents?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, you know, you've got to be flexible. It's-- working in a war zone is nothing like, you know, just auditing a DoD contract or whatever, back here in the United States. As I mentioned, there's so many things you have to take in consideration.

You know, you're worried about your safety, for one thing. You're worried-- and in that-- you're worried about, you know, how can I conduct that work? You know, I can't get out of the Embassy, you know, I have to rely on third-party [organizations]. So you have to be flexible, and be able to deal with the different circumstances that are going to be arising, and you have to figure out how you've got to get that work done, under these trying circumstances.

So you have to be persistent. You have to be – reasonable. You have to have lots of patience. And you have to be able to figure things out – because it isn't easy to figure out how to do it. But-- you know, I would sit down with the staff on many occasions and work through things we could do to get the information.

You know, for, you know, example, in one meeting somebody said to me, "You know, I sent them an email six months ago and I haven't heard anything since." And I was like, "Well, how many times have you followed up?" "Never." "Well, you know, that's not going to work. You're not the most important thing in their life. You have to remind them that you're asking for information. And they've got a lot of demand-- the agency has a lot of demands on it, especially when they're fighting a war or reconstructing in a war zone."

So, you know, common sense plays a big role in all of this. And, so, you know, it-- it's-- again, you have to, you know, figure things out, you just can't sit back and think things are going to fall in-- findings are going to fall on your desk, because they're not.

WHAT DID SIGAR DO WELL?

INTERVIEWER:
What things do you think that this agency did well?

INTERVIEWEE 30:

From the-- an internal aspect, I think we treated our staff really well. You know, we did things that I've never seen done at any other agency. You know, we paid the student loans to the tune of $10,000 a year. And GAO was $3,000 a year when I was there.

We sent them to training. We looked after their needs. We looked at the-- after their professional development. And, first and foremost, we looked after their safety. I mean, that was most-- foremost in our concern with people who, you know, stationed in Afghanistan.

Whatever they needed, if we could provide it, they got it. And, I mean, John* was really clear about that, that "safety first," no matter what. You know, if things are bad over there, you know, forget about going out and inspecting a building, your life is more important.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

So I think, you know, we did-- we did that right. And, I think an aggressive approach was needed – in our auditing, in our investigations, and, you know, that had a lot to do with the adversarial aspect of relations between us and the agency.

But we needed an aggressive approach, because when John got here, basically he was given a mandate. "You've got to turn that agency around, or we're shutting it down." And, he said that many, many times. And that's the reason why, you know, I went to audits and said, "Two reports a quarter is not reasonable, and it's not satisfactory. We need more information for the Congress to act on these things, which means we have to do more work, which means you're going to have to work harder with, you know, the resources you have."

So they went from two reports to 10 reports a quarter. And then many quarters it was 14 reports a quarter. So, you know, we got it out of them. I mean, the-- we-- that's not to say we didn't-- we got rid of a lot of dead wood. A lot of dead wood.

Because, you know, we were on a mission. And, you know, the Congress made clear to John, you know, "We need more information coming out of your agency – and we need it faster, better, or we're shutting you down." And that was foremost in his mind.

And so that's why we took such an aggressive approach. And an aggressive approach not only with developing our staff, but with the agency as well, because we always thought we were on a two-year cycle. Within two years we're going to be shut down. Within two years we're going to be shut down. Within two years we're going to be shut down.

And, you know, I was thinking, "What am I going to do after SIGAR, you know?" But-- here we are, 12 years. But, you know, that was our mentality, that was our mindset: that if we only have two years, what's the most important thing we can focus on? How fast can we get it done? How much can we get done? And, it was high-energy and high-output.

INTERVIEWER:
It sounds like the tentative nature of the duration of the agency was also a driver.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
It was a driver, yeah. For John and I, for sure. And, you know, we couldn't deal with audit reports that took a year and a half. You know, we got it down to, like, to nine months, or six months. Financial audits came out a lot faster than the other reports.

But it took a while for me to work with the auditors to shorten their timeframes, which means, you know, if you need to reduce your scope, reduce your scope. That's fine. But we need, you know, shorter reports out faster, with good information in them. And we always had two years in our – in our mind – that we had, you know, to do as much as we could to give the Congress and the American people as much information as possible. In the two years we had.

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WHAT COULD/SHOULD SIGAR HAVE DONE BETTER/DIFFERENTLY?

INTERVIEWER:
What things do you think that this agency didn't do well, or should've done better or differently?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Well, I mentioned I think we could've had better working relationships with the agencies if we tried a little bit harder. I'll-- some of that I'll attribute to, you know, we were just bringing people on as fast as we could with-- and training them as fast as we could. But they didn't really-- some of them really didn't have a lot of experience in working in this area.

So the relationships between the agencies and SIGAR could've been better. I wish they were better. I think we would've had, you know, maybe better reports as a result of that. That's one thing.

The other thing is I wish could've looked at more than we did. You know, we were limited by our resources, and, you know, we look-- I would I think we looked at about $50 billion of the $140 billion. And God knows what went wrong with the rest of the money.

But, you know, we did what we were able to do in the time we were able to do it. So, you know, everybody's restrict-- nobody can do 100%. And, so, you know, I think with what we had we did a lot.

You know, I think we put out hundreds of reports, dozens and dozens of investigations. We did-- we did-- but, it was always-- it was high-ener[gy]-- and it was always more, more, more. Get as much of that out of our staff as you could. And, you know, I think they rose to the challenge.

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INTERVIEWER:
Was SIGAR adequately empowered to do this work?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You know, John* would say he would've liked to have-- I think he would've liked to have subpoena power, and-- but, you know, that wasn't going to happen. I wi-- you know, if we had, you know, more resources we could've done more.
[* John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]

Did we have the power to-- and were we sufficiently empowered? Yes, because we had the backing of Congress. And, you know, if something went wrong, we went up to the Hill to say, "We need your support here or there," and we always got it.

And, you know, the agencies were-- knew that. The agencies knew that we had strong support in Congress and that we were going to get what we needed to get for whatever it was we needed it for.

And we did. I can't think of an instance where we weren't supported on the Hill for something. And-- so, you know, our empowerment came from Congress, basically. And that was important for us to accomplish our work.

INTERVIEWER:
Was SIGAR budgeted enough, staffed enough, to be able to do what it was asked to do?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
For the amount of staff we had, yeah, we did have the resources we needed. Obviously, if we had more resources, as I mentioned, we could've done more. But-- you know, yeah, I think we had the resources we needed.

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WHAT ARE YOUR OWN LESSONS LEARNED?

INTERVIEWER:
If the U.S. had this to do all over again – somewhere else, sometime else – what recommendations would you make about how to do this – overseeing that war zone – differently?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You mean for reconstruction?

INTERVIEWER:
Let's say it's a similar situation, yes. What would your recommendations be about how to set something like this up the next time?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
O.K., if the question is, "How would we do what we were trying to do in Afghanistan better in-- in someplace else?" I would say don't do it. You went into, basically, a medieval country and tried to impose Western mores and Western reality on a country that didn't want it.

It was never going to work. We made some advances with women for 10 years, which were incredible. We made some advances in health, education. A lot of what we did, we could've done on, you know, maybe cheaper and better. But, [LAUGHS] we didn't.

But it's all gone now. The Taliban are in control. It's-- it sounds like it's worse than it was even before, when the Taliban were in power. So we never thought out what we were re-- in my view, my analysis of this is: the United States never thought out what it really was trying to accomplish with reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Was it to rebuild this country, with Western focus? That was never going to happen. You know, they call this place "the graveyard of empires." And why did we think we were going to have anything-- we would be different?

You know, it was well-intentioned. The United States is the most generous country in the world. And we give, and give, and give, to other countries. But, sometimes, we don't do it very smart. And this was not a very smart thing to do. We never thought it out quite-- exactly. So I wouldn't recommend we do this anywhere. I mean, again. I wouldn't-- that's not to say we shouldn't help other countries, but we should help them build the country they want, not the country we want.

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INTERVIEWER:
Are there any other lessons learned that you have personally, that you think are worth sharing for future generations that are going to try to work on this type of oversight – in that type of a setting?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You know, the one thing that comes to mind is, when we do this again somewhere else, you don't need to throw money at a problem, you know? The-- you know, as the saying goes, "we spent too much money, too fast – in a country that couldn't absorb it." And that is so true.

I mean, we could've done probably as much as we did with half the money – because about half of it was probably stolen. And, you know, more-- smaller, more discrete projects and programs, I think, would've done a lot more than all this endless amount of money we spent on some of these programs.

You know, [on] my first trip to Afghanistan, I met with a three-star general. It was right before Thanksgiving, so it was, you know, late in the month. And he said to me, "[NAME:] Gene, I don't know how I'm going to do this, but I have $1 billion that I need to spend by the end of the year, and I don't know how I'm going to do it. I know we're not going to give it back, because agencies never give it back to Congress."

And I – that was my first trip – and I said, "Well, what could we do to help?" And he said, you know, "Basically nothing. It's already been appropriated and I've been given my marching orders."

And I don't know what that guy ever spent the $1 billion on, but just multiple that by tens, and you can see how much the money was wasted. But he was, like, frazzled, like, that he didn't know how to spend $1 billion in, what, a little more than a month.

INTERVIEWER:
That is a fascinating detail. $1 billion in a month.

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah. That he had to spend by the end of the year, because "we're not giving it back."

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INTERVIEWER:
If it does happen again, if the United States finds itself in a position of once again trying to do some large-scale reconstruction – in a conflict zone, a war zone, a contingency zone – is this Special Inspector General model the best model for doing oversight under those circumstances, in your mind?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
I-- you know, I think the Special Inspector General model is a good model for a specific country like Afghanistan, or wherever it might go. The other IGs cover the world. They can only devote so many resources to a specific area. We devoted our entire agency to looking at Afghanistan.

We were-- we became the Afghanistan experts. We-- you know, we were focused. You know, we-- this was-- without thinking, we were able to, you know, come up with, you know, what audits we needed to do, what investigations we needed. We just didn't have the time and money and resources to do everything we wanted to do.

If you look at the audit plans we had, there was, you know, twice the number of jobs we could've done, if-- had we had the resources. So, you know, the-- I think the IG model is-- was really good. If we're going to devote $150 billion somewhere, you need "eyes on" – and you need to be focused on that. Otherwise, you're not going to ever get the complete picture of what's going on.

You know, in our work, we said many times, basically – we were looking at the military funding and what it was – we said, "Things aren't working, Congress."

We were not surprised. I mean, we didn't expect the fall to happen the way it did, but we were not surprised it fell. In many of our reports, we said, "We're losing." Basically, "We're losing."
We're-- you know, we have-- you think we have 135,000-- or 300,000 soldiers in Afghanist[an]-- in the Afghan army – no, we have "ghost" soldiers.

You probably have 135,000 soldiers, you know? There was a problem with ghost soldiers, there was a problem with money being siphoned off into other people's pockets, you know?

We knew this. We saw it. We warned the Congress. We didn't know it was going to fall like it did, but we didn't think it was going to be successful.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did SIGAR fulfill your hopes and/or your expectations about what it could do?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah, to an extent it did, yeah. I mean, I-- we always wish we could've done more. But I think we brought the problem – to the American people, to the Congress – the problem of wasteful spending, fraud, waste, and abuse. I think we made it loud and clear things were not going right in Afghanistan.

I think we were the only voice that was doing that – through, you know, our reports, our testimonies, our press releases, all of that. I think we made the world aware of what was going wrong in Afghanistan. Now, did they listen to us? In some cases they did – and some cases they didn't.

I mean, obviously, we didn't affect policy that much, but, I think SIGAR's a huge success. I think-- when you look at what we were able to do with the resources we had, I think: no, I don't care what our-- even our strongest critics can't say we didn't do what we had set out to do. And that was to make this issue front [and] center to the American taxpayer and to the Congress, as to what was going right and what was not happening right in Afghanistan.

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You know, there's, like, five components to oversight. One is taxpayer. Taxpayer must demand oversight over the taxpayer's dollars that are getting spent.

The second is Congress. Congress must hold agencies accountable for what they are spending, taxpayers dollars are spending.

Third are the agencies themselves. They must have oversight over their own programs. Right?

And then comes the IGs and GAO looking at if the agencies are doing what they're supposed to be doing in terms of oversight.

And then, the fifth is the press. The press must report these things, so the public knows what's going on and how their money is being spent. And-- all of that, working together, we've had tremendous impact.

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I think our reports, unbelievably, have gotten more press than any IG, I think, in this town. But that's because not only did we purposefully engage the press in our work, because – and I did that at GAO

obv-- you know, as I mentioned – but because, you know, as I used to say, if it's worth publishing, it's worth publicizing.

And we worked it into many of our speeches. Because if nobody reads a report, it's useless. And the only way you're going to generate enthusiasm in a report is if you see it in the press, or you see it on *NBC Nightly News*, or whatever.

Not only does that generate interest in a rep[ort]— it generates interest in Congress. Because Congress sees that. And they know their constituency has seen this on television. And they want to take action on it. And, that's why we even engaged the press so much – in SIGAR, and previously in GAO.

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AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL / AUGUST 2021

INTERVIEWER:
August, 2021, everything changed. The U.S. withdrew. The Taliban regained control of the country. How did that-- how does that impact your feelings about the work that this agency was able to do?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You know, the withdrawal and the collapse of the Afghan government, as I mentioned, was not a surprise to us. I mean, we knew things were not going well, and we reported that in our Quarterly Reports, in our audit reports, in-- you know, every public product we put out there had warnings in there about what was happening.

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INTERVIEWER:
You've participated in the recent series of direct interviews that SIGAR has conducted with Afghan refugees in various locations in the U.S. and abroad, the diaspora that's relocated to other countries. How do their voices, and what they are saying, inform your thoughts?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
You know, it-- it's interesting. The most touching thing is that they had so much faith in the United States. They really thought their future was changing and was going to be brighter. And they are in shock about what happened. They are in shock about the U.S. withdrawal. And almost every meeting I've had, with numerous diaspora groups ends in tears – with the Afghan crying about what happened to their country. What their future is like.
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How sad they are that they had to leave their country. And they really thought they had a future in Afghanistan, that things were going to be brighter. Women were having more freedom.

They were having-- their economy would be stronger. You know, people would be getting the education they would need – to be successful. And, like, all of those dreams were-- were dashed,

when the Taliban took over. And most-- mostly, all these interviews we had ends up in tears with people crying about their future.

They don't want to be in the United States, they want to be in Afghanistan. That's their home country. They want their children to grow up there. And, the other thing that was really surprising to me was how much they valued education.

Most of the people who come here that I've talked to want their children to be-- go to college and have a good education. And, they're having trouble assimilating into this country, as many of them don't speak English. It's difficult for them to get along in this country.

And they're grateful to be here and not be in Afghanistan, but-- it's-- they're facing a tough situation. Some of the scariest information I got from some of these interviews was that a lot of these people we talked to, some of them were with the ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces], some of them were generals, lieutenants, col-- I mean, officers in the military – and they said that a lot of people that got onto the planes never even worked for the United States, they just lived around the airport and saw the opportunity to get out of there.

Some of them carried guns onto the planes. Some of them were identified as bad players. They knew they were bad people, and they got into the United States. They-- so they're worried about that. The other main concern that they had was that some of the people who had landed here – in Houston, in Boise, Idaho, in some of these other big cities – they're going to join gangs, because they don't speak the language, they can't get jobs.

They're concerned that they're being radicalized – by ISIS and other terrorist groups. And this is their own people they're talking-- they have big concerns about what's going to happen to the youth that came over here and are, you know, living in poverty, basically.

And it was a big concern out of just about everybody we talked to, that they were going be rad-- some of these folks were going to be radicalized.

So, I mean, there's a mix of emotions. Some were very hopeful. Few. But most of them were-- [they] want to go back home to Afghanistan, and they know probably that's not going to happen in their lifetime.

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WHAT DID SIGAR AND YOU ACCOMPLISH IN AFGHANISTAN?

INTERVIEWER:
There's no shortage of commentators who are dissecting the U.S. experience in Afghanistan as a failure. This agency was set up to do oversight of U.S. spending, in the hopes that it could help prevent waste, fraud, and abuse, and perhaps also inform decision-makers so that they could make good decisions about how to proceed. Did the existence of this agency manage to move the needle – with

all the good work, all the substantive work, all the hard work, all the dangerous work that this agency did? At the end of the day, what's the legacy?

INTERVIEWEE 30:
Yeah, I think SIGAR mattered. I think SIGAR had a big voice in the programs that were going into Afghanistan reconstruction – how they were functioning, how they needed to be improved. I think we were a resource for people in Afghanistan to look to ensure that, you know, maybe corruption wouldn't be as great as it was, that somebody was looking at it all the time.

I think, here in the United States, Congress had a source of information that they know they could rely on, that, you know, there were many hearings they held, which resulted in, you know, the-- putting the agency's feet to the fire to make improvements in their programs.

I mean, that's essentially what we, you know, are here for – to try to improve programs, save money, have impact. And I think SIGAR did all of that. I think without SIGAR, you know, there would be so much information that the Congress and the taxpayer would never have learned about.

And, I wish they would've listened to our reports more. I wish they would've listened to our warnings more – because for us, the handwriting was on the wall a lot sooner than it was August 21st of that year. We kind of saw it coming.

And, you know, if we were listened to more – maybe, maybe – there could've been a little bit of a different outcome. But, you know, a think a big piece of the positive – whatever positive aspects there were – SIGAR had a hand in. And that is, like, you know, the programs that we were trying to do to improve the people's lives who were there.

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I think when the history of the Afghanistan War is written, SIGAR will be a huge part of it, because of we showed-- shone sunlight on the what was happening – on how money was being spent in Afghanistan.

I think SIGAR will be a huge part of the history of the Afghanistan story. And it'll be a positive story for SIGAR – because we were the only ones in there, screaming, you know, "Look what you're doing. Things are not going right here."

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Here in SIGAR, we say we've claimed $4 billion-- about $4 billion in savings. But we've only looked at $50 billion of the $140 billion that have been spent in Afghanistan.

And if there's one regret that I have about SIGAR, it's that we weren't able to look at more of that money. But we just didn't have the resources to do it.

And it was very difficult working in a war zone to audit what was going on in there. We couldn't get out. We couldn't kick the tires anymore. We, you know, we were able to do that in the beginning. But, as the war got worse and the situation over there got worse, we weren't able to do that.

So-- and then eventually, the administration stopped working with us. And that was even more difficult to get information, which was a dumb move on their part. But they eventually started working with us again. And so, if we had, you know, a bigger staff, we could've looked at more money.

If we had more time, we could've looked at more money. What bothers me the most is what slipped through our hands, is the feeling of the, "What did we miss?" You know? What did investigations miss? What did audits miss? Because we were working on something else, or we didn't have the right focus, or what. And, you know, I'm not sure we'll ever know.

I mean, I am proud of the work we did, and the money we've saved, and the programs we turned around to function better, and the bad guys we threw in jail.

But, I know we missed something.

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