SIGAR

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

SIGAR Oral History Project:

“Conducting Oversight in a War Zone”

DECEMBER

2025

December 3, 2025,

Since Congress established the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in 2008, the agency has sought and reported the observations and analysis of nearly a thousand sources to inform its independent and objective oversight of Afghanistan reconstruction projects and activities.

Over the last 17 years, the sources of information for SIGAR's investigations, audits, inspections, research and analysis, lessons learned and other oversight work have included current and former officials and leaders in the U.S. government and military, and in the former Afghanistan government and military. They have also included personnel in other governments and militaries participating in NATO-led missions of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support (RS), as well as in the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and many subject-matter experts.

The knowledge, experiences and perspectives of these sources have been invaluable to SIGAR's mission of reporting independent and objective facts and truths to the U.S. Congress and to the public.

Until now, however, SIGAR has not reported the observations, analysis and perspectives of another group of sources with broad, long and deep experience and institutional memory about oversight in Afghanistan: SIGAR's own oversight professionals.

To accompany the release of our final report (SIGAR *Forensic Audit Final Report: Seventeen Years of Reconstruction Oversight (*https://www.sigar.mil/Reports/Article-Display/Article/4346415/), the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) is publicly releasing materials from SIGAR's *Oral History Project: Conducting Oversight in a War Zone* (https://www.sigar.mil/News/Category/24910/ https://www.sigar.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/4345933/).

SIGAR initiated its Oral History Project to record the accounts and insights of past and present SIGAR personnel about their oversight work. SIGAR's Office of Public Affairs interviewed more than 30 SIGAR personnel about their experiences helping SIGAR identify, report, and prevent waste, fraud and abuse involving U.S. spending in Afghanistan during the agency's existence, from 2008 to 2025.

The interviewees include SIGAR criminal investigative agents who pursued fraud cases involving U.S. government contracts and funds, auditors who inspected and evaluated U.S. programs and projects, as well as research analysts and other subject-matter experts who tracked and examined bigger-picture issues. They also include forward operations managers who managed SIGAR's work in Afghanistan, and

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senior leaders who ran the agency and its directorates in Washington, D.C. Most of these individuals conducted oversight work in Afghanistan during multiple deployments.

The interviews convey their candid observations regarding the specific challenges they encountered conducting oversight in a war or conflict zone for this agency, what worked well and what did not work well, and their recommendations regarding what the U.S. might consider doing differently, if and when it seeks to create oversight of future U.S. spending in such areas.

SIGAR is releasing both video and transcripts of the edited versions of these interviews. This document provides brief highlights from each, and details about how to access the full edited interviews and transcripts, today and after SIGAR sunsets and ceases.

SIGAR has produced and is releasing these internal oversight lessons learned about SIGAR's oversight in Afghanistan to help inform the work of current and future U.S government public servants, and the public. These interviews and their transcripts are a resource for anyone interested in learning from them, especially those with roles in the Departments of War (formerly, Defense), State or Justice or in oversight agencies – who work in war or conflict zones, or may work in them in the future.

These interviews contribute to an objective history of U.S. efforts for Afghanistan's reconstruction, and can help inform future generations of U.S. government, military and oversight personnel who may confront similar circumstances and challenges in the future.

Gene Aloise

Acting Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Arlington, Virginia

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SIGAR | SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

Introduction: SIGAR OHP

SIGAR's Public Affairs team produced the *SIGAR Oral History Project: Conducting Oversight in a War Zone* to record the perspectives of past and present SIGAR personnel who conducted oversight work on Afghanistan reconstruction.

The project includes 33 video interviews with current and former SIGAR oversight professionals, conducted from 2022 to 2025, at SIGAR's offices in Arlington, Virginia and elsewhere.

SIGAR OHP Interviews

The 33 interviews consist of the following (some interviews reflect more than one category):

* 10 interviews with SIGAR Investigative Directorate personnel
* 09 interviews with SIGAR Audits and Inspections Directorate personnel
* 07 interviews with SIGAR Forward Operations personnel
* 06 interviews with SIGAR Senior Leadership personnel, including SIGAR's General Counsel
* 03 interviews with SIGAR Research and Analysis Directorate
* 02 interviews with SIGAR Lessons Learned Program personnel

SIGAR OHP Interviews: Excerpts

This document provides one-page excerpts from each of the 33 SIGAR OHP interviews, to convey a sense of each interviewee's perspective and voice.

The edited video interviews and transcripts are publicly available. See p. 5.

Each SIGAR OHP interview begins with information about the professional biographical background of the interviewee, as well as an account of how and why the interviewee joined SIGAR.

SIGAR is not including the names of the interviewees in this document, but all but one of the interviewees identified themselves by name. SIGAR is withholding the name of only one of the interviewees in this release, a former SIGAR criminal investigative agent, at that individual's request.

SIGAR Public Affairs edited all the OHP interviews, for length and clarity. Each edited interview is between 30 minutes and approximately two hours in length.

SIGAR OHP Interviews: Highlights

Highlights from accounts in the SIGAR OHP interviews include:

* the SIGAR official managing SIGAR's Forward Operations in Afghanistan describing the last days and hours before U.S withdrawal from the country in August 2021, as that official scrambled to secure SIGAR's offices and burn documents and other materials [OHP Interview #02]

* two SIGAR criminal agents stating that senior U.S. government and military officials blocked criminal investigations of prospective defendants deemed too "politically exposed," or "too big to fail" [OHP Interviews #3, #26]

* multiple accounts describing how various obstacles made prosecutions of perpetrators of criminal fraud in Afghanistan challenging and difficult, particularly if the individuals were Afghan citizens [OHP Interviews #3, #5, #13, #16, #26, #29, #31, #32, #33]

* a SIGAR criminal investigative agent recounting the dogged detective work that helped the U.S. government pursue and prosecute a defense contractor delivering half the fuel to U.S. military in Afghanistan – resulting in one of the largest tax evasion cases in U.S. history [OHP interview #33]

* multiple accounts describing how a SIGAR investigation uncovered and halted a life-threatening fraud – relating to a contractor's failure to install measures to prevent the placement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in culverts under Afghan roads, a failure which contributed to the deaths of two U.S. soldiers [OHP Interviews #02, #15, #26, #30, #31]

* SIGAR's investigation of a U.S. Department of Defense procurement contract that spent approximately $500 million to acquire used G222 aircraft from Italy – that never flew, and sat parked and overgrown with weeds at Afghanistan's airport in Kabul, until discarded as scrap metal – resulted in no criminal or civil consequences [OHP Interviews #29, #31]

* SIGAR used a "suspension and debarment" program" to prohibit 1,000 previously approved contractors from receiving additional U.S. Government contracts for Afghanistan reconstruction – many because of poor performance and others because of links to terrorist groups [OHP Interview #31, #33]

* SIGAR auditors determined that the U.S. had paid for uncompleted or unneeded construction projects or items [OHP Interviews #07, #09, #10, #20]

* SIGAR auditors continued to conduct oversight of complex programs and projects in Afghanistan, even after the U.S.' and SIGAR's withdrawal from the country, as U.S. spending continued [OHP Interviews #06, #07, #10, #15, #20, #27]

* SIGAR's Audits and Inspections Directorate and Research and Analysis Directorate examined the pay system the U.S. created for Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, ultimately determining that the U.S. was paying for non-existent "ghost" soldiers – a problem that contributed to inaccurate reporting of Afghan troop numbers [OHP Interview #25]

* SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program compiled professional, big-picture, deep-dive analyses of complex topics, such as why the former Afghan government and its military collapsed so abruptly in August 2021 [OHP Interviews #12, #14]

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* how SIGAR senior leadership reorganized SIGAR in 2012 to meet the expectations of the U.S. Congress for independent, objective and effective oversight [OHP Interviews #30, #31]

* a SIGAR criminal investigative agent chose to testify against a criminal defendant in Afghan court, one of the only U.S. agents to do so [OHP Interview #05]

* how SIGAR criminal investigative agents used specific strategies and techniques to cultivate informants in Afghanistan [OHP Interview #05]

* how SIGAR auditors prepared themselves to become knowledgeable about specific programs and projects and conduct effective oversight of them [OHP Interviews #06, #07, #09, #10, #15, #20, #27, #28]

* how civilian SIGAR oversight personal adapted to the often-primitive working and living conditions in a conflict zone like Afghanistan, whether in metal containers on the U.S. Embassy compound in the capital city, Kabul, or elsewhere in the field [OHP Interviews #05, #18, #19, #20, #28]

* SIGAR oversight personnel experienced direct rocket, bomb and other attacks on or near their workplaces at U.S. facilities in Afghanistan [OHP Interview #04]

* why independent and objective oversight by an independent and objective oversight agency is necessary to hold U.S government agencies and officials and contractors accountable for their activities and spending [OHP Interviews (various: see end-of-interview sections)].

SIGAR OHP Interviews: How to Access Video/Audio/Transcripts

Video and transcripts of the full edited OHP interviews are now publicly available. Transcripts are available on the SIGAR website link below. Videos are available at the link below.
After SIGAR ends, the transcripts and videos will be available and accessible at the other online locations below – for viewing as videos, listening as podcasts, and/or reading as texts:

Transcripts: https://www.sigar.mil/News/Category/24910/
https://www.sigar.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/4345933/
Videos: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDTk-LZ3aK2_zs-zRAam-iJJz1_-xva3g
Transcripts: https://digital.library.unt.edu/explore/collections/GDCC/
Transcripts & Videos: https://press.westpoint.edu; https://mwi.westpoint.edu

The following pages contain two lists of the interviews – one by category/title (p.6) and one by number/title (p.8).

After the lists are one-page excerpts from the transcripts of each of the interviews, by number, to convey a sense of each interview's contents, and voice.

The compelling personal recollections in these interviews convey some of the challenges U.S. government officials may face relating to future oversight of U.S. spending and activities in war and conflict zones.

SIGAR Public Affairs
October 2025

SIGAR OHP Interviews List / by Category

SIGAR Senior Leadership

30 **SIGAR Deputy Inspector General; Acting Inspector General**

31 **SIGAR General Counsel**

13 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Investigations**

15 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Audits and Inspections; Special Projects**

25 **SIGAR Director, Research and Analysis Directorate**

12 **SIGAR Director, Lessons Learned Program**

SIGAR Forward Operations (Kabul)

24 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Forward Operations**

02 **SIGAR Forward Operations Director/Investigative Agent**

08 **SIGAR Forward Operations Director**

28 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit; Forward Operations Director**

23 **SIGAR Human Resources Specialist; Forward Operations/HR**

18 **SIGAR Management Analyst, Forward Operations/Management and Support**

19 **SIGAR Management Specialist, Forward Operations/Management and Support**

SIGAR Investigative Directorate

13 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Investigations**

01 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Investigations**

03 **SIGAR Assistant Investigative Special Agent-in-Charge**

04 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

05 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

16 **SIGAR Prosecutor (aka "SIGPRO")**

26 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

29 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

32 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

33 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

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SIGAR Audits and Inspections Directorate

15 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Audits and Inspections; Special Projects**

06 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Audits and Inspections**

07 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Audits and Inspections**

22 **SIGAR Deputy Director, Financial Audit Team; Senior Audit Manager**

10 **SIGAR Senior Audit Manager; Audits and Inspections**

20 **SIGAR Senior Auditor, Audits and Inspections**

27 **SIGAR Senior Program Analyst, Audits and Inspections**

28 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit; Forward Operations Director**

09 **SIGAR General Engineer**

SIGAR Lessons Learned Program

12 **SIGAR Director, Lessons Learned Program**

14 **SIGAR Supervisory Research Analyst, Lessons Learned Program**

SIGAR Research and Analysis Directorate

25 **SIGAR Director, Research and Analysis Directorate**

21 **SIGAR Deputy Director, Research and Analysis Directorate**

17 **SIGAR Special Advisor**

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SIGAR OHP Interviews List / by Number

01 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Investigations**

02 **SIGAR Forward Operations Director/Investigative Agent**

03 **SIGAR Assistant Investigative Special Agent-in-Charge**

04 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

05 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

06 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Audits and Inspections**

07 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Audits and Inspections**

08 **SIGAR Forward Operations Director**

09 **SIGAR General Engineer**

10 **SIGAR Senior Audit Manager; Audits and Inspections**

12* **SIGAR Director, Lessons Learned Program**

13 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Investigations**

14 **SIGAR Supervisory Research Analyst, Lessons Learned program**

15 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Audits and Inspections; Special Projects**

16 **SIGAR Prosecutor (aka "SIGPRO")**

17 **SIGAR Special Advisor**

18 **SIGAR Management Analyst, Forward Operations/Management and Support**

19 **SIGAR Management Specialist, Forward Operations/Management and Support**

20 **SIGAR Senior Auditor, Audits and Inspections**

21 **SIGAR Deputy Director, Research and Analysis Directorate**

22 **SIGAR Deputy Director, Financial Audit Team; Senior Audit Manager**

23 **SIGAR Human Resources Specialist; Forward Operations/HR**

24 **SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Forward Operations**

25 **SIGAR Director, Research and Analysis Directorate**

26 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

27 **SIGAR Senior Program Analyst, Audits and Inspections**

28 **SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit; Forward Operations Director**

29 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

30 **SIGAR Deputy Inspector General; Acting Inspector General**

31 **SIGAR General Counsel**

32 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

33 **SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator**

[* Note: SIGAR OHP Interview 11 not included or released, at interviewee's request.]

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SIGAR OHP Interviews: Excerpts / by Interview

OHP 01 SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Investigations

It's very difficult doing investigations in a war zone. It's not impossible, it's just difficult. It takes time. It takes the understanding of the simple things that you can do in the United States are going to take more time. You're going to have to think about it."
//
There are several investigations that I could bring up that, every day, that was forefront. You know, we're trying to provide these soldiers, these airmen, these marines, sailors, with what they need.
//
I think the most important example that I can think of…[of a SIGAR] investigation over in Afghanistan was…the "culvert denial system" [investigation]. It's an investigation that's closed… We paid a contractor to put a framing around these culverts, these metal rebars around these culvert openings… this was to prohibit anybody, any insurgent, to get into the culvert and put explosives, or an IED in. [It's] supposed to have rebar on it.
//
And one or two of the culverts exploded, and there were…some soldiers that were killed, maimed.
//
When you hear that, you get a hollow pit in your stomach. It's just like, "How could this happen? How could people be so cavalier?"
//
I remember…when one of the culverts blew up. But, at the time, we did not know the reason why. It was just another example of a horrific action that killed our troops. And it wasn't until maybe a few months later that…our agents received information that explained, "This is probably how it happened."
//
And what we found out in the investigation is that the contractor would just take the same picture of the same location, the same culvert, and he would send it in to the contracting officer. // The company actually only prepared or did the culvert denials on a very small number, and then what they would do in order to get paid is they'd have to take a picture of the finished product, and then had to have a geotag – so that the contracting officers could say, "O.K.," I know that you finished this portion of it. // The contracting officers never checked or verified or did anything.
//
And some of the comments were, "We just-- we were busy." "We didn't know what we were doing." "We didn't have the experience." "We couldn't get out there, so we just took the contractors' word for it."
//
The bulk of the roads, the majority of the roads, the culverts…weren't covered. They didn't have denial systems. // When some soldiers went over it, there was an IED in there, [it] blew up – and killed some of them, and maimed some of them.

Once SIGAR Investigations [found] out about this, we had to have the military, and we had one of our agents that had to walk along this road, to try to check to see whether the culverts had the denial system on it.
//
And I think that goes to why it's important to have oversight in a war zone. Because if you just simply say, "Well, we took the contractors' word for it," or, "We took the agency's word for it," this is what can happen. // We're asking these contractors to do something for us, to protect the military... And if you don't do it right, people can die. // You need those checks and balances, in a sense. You need an agency that can do this oversight, that says, "This is not right. And this is why we're here."

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OHP 02 SIGAR Forward Operations Director/Investigative Agent

When I arrived at the [U.S.] Embassy and saw that island that's been created by the U.S. government, I thought there was a disconnect. I thought the reality inside the walls is absolutely different from the reality outside of the walls. // [Some] staff and personnel never left the wall, never stepped outside of it.
//
Every summer there is a complete rip, complete turnover of staff at the [U.S.] Embassy, for the State Department, for USAID, and in all sections. The institutional knowledge would jump on the plane with them and depart country.
//
And then the "good idea" fairy would come in behind 'em. Many times over the years, I would be involved in meetings where…I would blow the dust off of a PowerPoint presentation or off of papers that I had written to demonstrate to this new staff member why that idea wasn't going to work.

Now this isn't a negative on them. Kudos to the State Department, USAID, and all sections within the Embassy. I witnessed some of the most incredible decisions. I witnessed and I had an opportunity to be involved in meetings with some of the smartest people I'd ever been around in my life. Everybody wanted to do the right thing. But you have multiple lanes of effort that reset every summer.
//
I think over the course of 20 years while we were in Afghanistan, there were two things that were neglected. No one wanted to talk about it. Number one was ***corruption****. And [the other] number one was* ***counternarcotics****.*
//
One drives the other. The amount of money that's produced through narcotics efforts in that country. We built – as a government, the U.S. government – we built the best irrigation system in Afghanistan.
//
And what did we find over the years? By producing that product and spending millions and millions of dollars, that they produced the best poppy plants in the world.
//
You have the [Afghan] farmer that's producing a cash crop. In Afghanistan's case, it's poppy to get the opium. And then what're you going to do with the money? Well, I guess the best part about opium is it has a shelf life of forever. So you take kilos of opium. You put 'em up on the shelf. And now you have a savings account. Well, you're not going to sell it, because you don't want to sell it.

You're not a drug trafficker; you're a farmer trying to raise a family. One of your children takes ill. They need medical care. Your son wants to get married. You as a father are responsible for paying for that marriage. Well, I need to go to my savings account.

Go to the closet, pull down a kilo of opium or dig it out of the ground, wherever I happen to be stashing it, walk down to the local bazaar, sell it. Now I have cash. We fly my children [to] whatever country they need to, India or Turkey to get the proper medical attention they need. And we pay for the greatest wedding our sons have ever seen. We continue to produce poppy to do just that.
//
We as a country turned a blind eye. We didn't fail to identify it. SIGAR's products identified this early on. // The Taliban made money and continue to make money off of narcotics trade. // But we did not want to address narcotics in Afghanistan. I have been told when asked, "We don't want to upset the farmer. We need the votes. We don't want to change the culture in that manner." We just turned a blind eye. It was sitting right there in front of us the whole time, and we did nothing about it. And we kicked the can. We kicked those two cans down the road as long as we could. And unfortunately, both of 'em came back to bite us.

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OHP 03 SIGAR Assistant Investigative Special Agent-in-Charge

Working in a war zone and trying to do the best job you can do to try to make sure that the investigations were completed, or could proceed, it became very difficult sometimes when you're working with the military leadership, and the U.S. leadership… Because they're looking at it from one level plane. I'm looking at it at another. I'm trying to get an investigation done. They're looking at it on: What impact is that going to have to my relationship with the Afghan government?

And so we had a lot of butting of heads… where we would just tell them, absolutely, "What you're doing is wrong. And you're impeding a good investigation." Or they would tell us we can't do the investigation.
//
Sometimes it was very tough in that… it would look at a politically exposed person. And so, with the [U.S.] ambassador or with the [U.S.] military generals, who had direct connection with the Afghan government, they didn't want that to proceed because, if it goes against them, against that politically exposed person, then that's going to hurt their relationship with their counterparts.
[See transcript for full context.]
//
Those were some of the hardest times, because you knew what needed to be done. But you were prohibited from doing it. It didn't happen very often. The times that it did happen were when we were looking at financial targets that had made millions of dollars from the U.S. government. And those usually had connection all the way to the palace in Afghanistan. [See transcript for full context.]
//
It was very frustrating for me because of the fact that I knew that we could get them. I knew that we could bring them to justice, in that either getting them sanctioned by the U.S. government, or getting them judicially prosecuted in Afghanistan.
//
We're doing what we're mandated to do. We're looking at trying to take this person off the battlefield, or take this person out of the equation where they're stealing U.S. dollars, U.S. government dollars, or coalition dollars.

Those persons, if they're connected to anybody in the government, in the war zone government, then that creates a challenge, because now those that you're dealing with in the U.S. or coalition side is going express or going come down on you, and ask you, first of all, "What's the investigation? Give it to me-- everything you've got – right today. And tell me where you're going to proceed. And then I'll tell you whether you can proceed or not."

That was a challenge. And that to me was something that would tear your heart out, if you've put your-- all these man hours in, and the investigators worked so hard, and then you have to go back and tell them that, "Well we're not proceeding with that one."
//
They would want those politically exposed persons not to be investigated. And that was a challenge, and that was very, very tough. Because we had the information to take those people down. And we weren't allowed to proceed with it.
//
These people making this kind of money, they didn't just take this money and hide it under their blanket. They put in banks. They made ties to the insurgency, because they all had to make that money, that charitable contribution. And so that equated to more bullets, more RPGs, more mines, improvised explosive devices – paying more fighters. We saw that. We saw that on our level. Why they couldn't see that on their level-- or they, maybe they-- I know they saw it. I know they knew that it was happening. But why they could make that determination that it wasn't as beneficial as we thought it was? [It] was tough.

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OHP 04 SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator

I've used the words "the rule of six." If you think it's going take one day here in the United States, it may take six days overseas, whether you're in Iraq or Afghanistan. Or it may not ever happen. It's easy to do an interview in Texas. You call the guy up, and you go visit with him.

In Afghanistan, it's extremely difficult. You have the security problem first. Can you go off the base to interview a subject, a witness of the case? Or do you have to bring them on the base? And the things that are required to bring a person on the base, for safety and security, because you don't want somebody coming in and harming you or others.
//
When I arrived in Afghanistan, Forward Operating Base Salerno was known as "Rocket City." I did not know that when I got there. And within the first day, the alarms went off, the "duck-and-cover" alarms. They're very loud.

I knew what to do. Basically, it's you lay on the ground, because these huge rockets come in, from about three to four miles away. And you don't where they're coming from or where they're going to land. So, within days, rocket attacks were on a regular basis, two to three a week.
//
On June the 2nd of 2012, we had some folks come down with the Army CID to visit. They were doing an inspection of their folks that we worked with, our partners down there. And we decided to go to lunch. And we gave these individuals, they had come from Virginia, all the way there to do their inspection—gave them a choice of the barbecue tent or the main dining facility.

And they wanted to go to the barbecue tent, which probably saved our lives. About noontime on that Friday, a truck bomb carrying about 2,500 pounds of ammonium nitrate drove up to the gate, back on the South side of the base, and it exploded. I was in a tent, that collapsed on top of us.

There were six of us at the picnic table inside the tent. We were the southernmost point, and it blew us all into the wall. I got up, opened the door, and I could smell ammonium nitrate. You could smell the fertilizer. I knew what it was. You could probably see about 20-25 meters, and it was just pure darkness.
//
Said a prayer. I said, "I am not dying here." We proceeded for the next 10 minutes to get involved in a firefight. Getting back to the office, RPGs were being launched down the road. // That afternoon and evening, there was about 800 folks that had concussions. We lost heroes that day – individuals, contractors, Afghans, military service people that went to respond to this.
//
In June of 2013, they finally closed the base down. So we did basically an accounting with our SIGAR agents, with the military of, "What's left over here? How are we going to get this out of here?" Because there's millions of dollars in these Conex boxes. So we did basically a "Storage Wars/Conex Box"[reality TV episode], and they tagged them all, and we opened them up. And we went through them, and we found millions and millions of dollars. Stuff that had been there for-- since 2004. And it was brand-new, but it was in a Conex box, because they kept reordering, and then they would redeploy. Other units would come and go, and it would show up months later, or never show up.
//
So the things that they had built – the millions of dollars they had spent – were bulldozed down with D9 Caterpillars. And then given back to the Afghans.

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OHP 05 SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator

First reaction when I landed in Kabul – // I looked around, and, honestly, I looked, and I said, "WTF." Like, "What-- what did I do here? Why did I do this?" I had a pretty good life as a special agent back in New York… And it looked kind of raw.

When I got to Bagram, it was-- it was even worse, when I got to Bagram Airfield. It was very challenging. So, my gut reaction was, "Oh, boy. This is-- this is going to be tough. Can I get back on the plane and go back home?" [LAUGHS] But, that said, of course I would never do that. And [I] persevered.
//
We were able to travel, self-drive. So we had an up-armored vehicle, and you were allowed to travel with you and a partner, as long as you were both armed with long gun, and handgun. // You could drive throughout the whole province, and we worked closely with the judges and the prosecutors there in town.
//
You're a target when you're driving through-- in the city with all the traffic. And they have spotters all over the place, the bad guys. They'd look for patterns and they'd look for cars – like, similar patterns daily. So they'll try to identify who were the U.S., who were the NATO guys, what cars were they driving? So if you don't change your pattern, you can be a target, you know, the next time you come through.
//
Once you got out on the field to the smaller bases, combat outposts, or forward operating bases, it was difficult to travel within that area. So if it was a highly kinetic or volatile area, you'd have to get the Army to take you around. And, that would typically be some kind of convoy with two, three MRAPs, four MRAPs – mine-resistant, armor-protected vehicles, those big trucks you see. You have to travel with those, which was a lot of manpower, so it was tough getting around.
//
It was also challenging, meeting with people. Where do you meet with them? Like, some people wouldn't want to come to the base to meet with you because they might be spotted. And if they're spotted approaching a U.S. facility, they're finished. // You'd have to try to find a way to go see them. And that could be challenging because it could be highly insecure, it could be really risky, going there, logistically. It could be a place that's just too dangerous to go there. // So you'd have to be creative and try to find some place where you could meet the guy, he would be safe, but you would be safe, too.
//
People over there could be compromised very easily. // My group and the guys I worked with, we worked a lot with informants, so our cases were informant-heavy. They were driven by good informants. We had to recruit a lot of people out there, bring a lot of people in who were kind of new to us. So there was an assessment process. You had to kind of size them up and determine…are they valuable? // Is there any security risk with them?
//
So we'd have to make a decision. Like, "What's the risk of bringing him in without searching him? We want the information. We know… he has valuable information to further our cases." But, at the same time, "How big a risk is he?" Is he the type of person who's going to come in and maybe be wired up with // a VBIED, like a vest with an explosive device?

So, it was very stressful in that respect. But luckily, we usually guessed right. And the person came in without incident. But you always had that high stress, not knowing. You know, is this the day that you're going to guess wrong?

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OHP 06 SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Audits & Inspections

Over the last 11 years, the experience in Kabul had certainly changed from what it looked like in 2012 to what it looked like in my last trip there in February of 2020. You know, in some ways it got better. In other ways it got worse. It certainly got more restrictive.
//
I would go for two to four weeks, two to six weeks at a time…at the peak I was going five times a year.
//
I think the number one thing that you need to be able to audit effectively in a war zone is curiosity. You have to be able to see something and say, "That doesn't make sense. Let me dig in more." You have to be able to take an answer somebody gives you – and dig in more. // You also need to be detail-oriented. You have to be oriented enough on the problem statement to understand when something doesn't make sense. Or to be able to look at a sheet of paper, or an expense report or something like that and say, "Well, this is different from what it used to be."
//
Lots of times what makes sense in a boardroom in D.C. does not make sense out in the field in Kabul. Other times, what makes sense in the boardroom in the Pentagon and what makes sense in the boardroom at USAID might independently make sense of each other. But when they're combined together, you get a program that's fully unworkable.

In one example of that, there was a pipeline connecting a natural gas field to Mazār-e Sharīf. The pipeline had been built in the Soviet times. It was about 90 kilometers long. At the time, the Department of Defense and USAID both had plans for that natural gas field. The Department of Defense wanted to rebuild the pipeline so it could move more gas safely to Mazār-e Sharīf, where it was connected to a power plant and a fertilizer plant. USAID wanted to take that natural gas and turn it into electricity at the site of the natural gas field, under the thought that it's easier to move electrons than it is to move gasoline. Unfortunately, until we came along, nobody had told them that they had opposite plans for the exact same natural gas field.
//
Sometimes the problem is that large and it smacks you in the face. And you don't understand how nobody saw it before. A lot of other times it's a lot more subtle and it requires some digging and the natural curiosity to either not take no for an answer, or not take the abbreviated answer you get the first time you ask the question as the whole truth.
//
Folks often would tell us – be it during an interview or a request for information, which is a more formal process where we ask for documents – say, "Hey, it's a war zone. // I didn't go make that trip because it was unsafe to do so." // Unfortunately for a lot of the agencies, when they design their own oversight plans or when they design their programs, they're supp-- they're designing them to work in a war zone. If you're designing a program that can't work in a war zone, why are you trying to implement the program in a war zone? // That itself becomes a part of the audit or a part of the review of saying, "Why would you ever design a program for a war zone that can't work in one?"
//
Incompetence is a lot more common than evil. Lots of times folks aren't stealing money. Or they're not trying to make a program fail. They're either not good at their job, or they're lazy and they're not doing what needs to be done. // I've almost never seen somebody make decisions out of malice. Obviously, our investigators who prosecute and arrest folks for theft and waste and things like that, they may see that more often. But from an audit side, nine times out of 10 it's incompetence. // But that could be just as damaging as someone willfully doing it. You don't have to have malice in your heart to make a program go off the rails.

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OHP 07 SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Audits & Inspections

I was sitting with a group of Afghan educators…mainly women. // One Afghan educator, who was located in the hinterlands, said, "You know, you throw these millions of dollars and I don't even know what that is. Just give me $5,000 for this one program and I'll do more good for you in my little area, my little district, than you could ever imagine."

And I'm like, "Why isn't somebody listening to her?" // And that struck me because I don't think we did. I don't think we even asked the Afghans. // I saw this in in Iraq, too. Like, we would build a hospital that by any measure, any Western measure, would just be a phenomenal facility. But they don't even have the nurses and the doctors that can work the equipment.
//
I saw this one health clinic that we built. And I personally went there. And it was two floors and…it was supposed to have electricity and running water. Well, the water didn't work. And so, they were running a hose from the stream that they had up to the hospital. And they were washing newborns off with this.
//
And there was one…what looked like to me an x-ray machine. Very sophisticated. The doctor, he sat us down. And he was educated by Afghan standards. He said, "I don't have anybody that can work this." I'm like, "So, they just plunked it in here and didn't teach you how to--?" He says, "No. It was just-- one day I got here and it was there." And so, you see that, but multiply that a thousand times over in bigger facilities and other facilities.
//
I don't think we, as government, took into consideration how difficult it is to oversee programs in a war zone. // For example, the agency that is providing the funds, they have to oversee the program. I mean, we oversee the overseers – our agency as auditors. But they couldn't get to the sites, the respective sites, and oversee the construction or the development of a program or anything like that. And so, we would say to them, "Well, how could you possibly know what's going on with your program, when you're not out there and you're not able to take a look at it or supervise it?" // And I just don't think they ever got that. And they kept doing the same thing wrong, over and over.
//
So, it makes you wonder, …we do the same mistakes…what does it take for us to learn to not spend. // I just-- I don't know what it takes for us to learn.
//
I think it should be consequences. People should lose their jobs. // I also think there should be…more levers or strings attached to the funding. For example, I'll give "x" amount of funding if you can then prove that you did "y" amount of good. And that good has to satisfy me. And if it does, you get more. If it doesn't, you don't. We don't have that.

It's almost like the program's already out there, and the money is obligated before anybody really pays attention to what anybody's doing. And I don't understand that, why we do it that way.
//
They want results. They want it fast. They think the best way to do that is just to shovel money at something, which I think is a Western way of doing things, is – the more money the better. But it's not.
//
When we left there in August of 2021, // you heard a lot of stuff on the news. // I felt, as I was watching these shows, a lot of vindication – because a lot of them would mention my agency and say, "Well, they've been telling you this for years, and nobody listened." "That this was the way it was going to end up, and nobody listened."
//
What we were saying was accurate.

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OHP 08 SIGAR Forward Operations Director

When I was in-country, it didn't take me long before I felt that we were selling things to the people that were willing to buy them from us: concepts, ideas, ways of doing things – that just weren't going to be sustainable. I eventually came to know that they weren't sustainable.
//
There were a couple of times when I was on visits with John, John and I knew for a fact that we [SIGAR] were doing something that was worthwhile. One was a visit to the soybean processing factory in Mazar-e-Sharif. It couldn't have been clearer to all of us that made that trip with John to Mazar that that was such a boondoggle, that what was being done with soybeans and the soybean processing plant, that our calling it out was absolutely the right thing to do. // It was a project that I believe USAID had initiated. The Department of Agriculture, I think, had something to do with it as well.*
[John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]*
//
Afghanistan is an agrarian country, relies on agriculture, both to sustain itself, and hopefully, they thought, to have some export that they might be able to use that would supplant opium as its major agricultural product. [Opium] was bad because…it was corrupting agriculture. It was making people more vulnerable rather than helping them sustain themselves and have a product they could sell.

So one of the ideas was that they would plant soybeans everywhere that opium had been grown before. Nobody bothered to figure out whether or not they had anything reasonable they could do with the soybeans once they grew them. Some thought was that they could feed them to their livestock. But that wasn't the culture of animal husbandry in Afghanistan, to feed them something like soybeans. That would've taken a major cultural change in order for them to do that. So that was kind of a bust.
//
Then they thought, "Well, we'll get them to make bread out of this, but we're going to turn it into flour in order to do that." And of course, …nobody bothered to try and figure out whether Afghans would eat naan that was made from soybean flour.

Because when they actually produced naan from the soybean flour that they made at this processing plant, no one would touch it because it tasted like cardboard. And we know that for a fact because John and I tasted some of the naan that was made from soybean when we visited up there.
//
We toured the processing plant, and what we found were bags and bags and bags of American soybeans that had been exported from the United States by the National Soybean Growers' Association, to kind of jump-start this plant. But they couldn't get anybody to grow soybeans. So now what we were doing was we were having the Afghans process American soybeans in Afghanistan to feed Afghans soybean naan that they wouldn't eat.

Even the guy that was responsible with the project in his office when John and I were sitting there…was almost embarrassed to discuss with John Sopko how this project had been initiated, and where it was going. And he was proud to show us the equipment, and proud to show us everything that was going on with the people that were working this equipment. But, [as] we walked out, I think all of us that were on the visit with John just kind of looked at each other, and threw up our hands up, and went, "Wow."
//
What SIGAR has accomplished, by performing its mission in Afghanistan, in the way that it did, and by producing the product that it did, and by presenting that product in the way it has, to decision-makers up to this point, [is that] it tells a history, an objective history, that is reliable, and from which lessons can be taken that…ought to inform all of our engagements of a similar sort in the future.

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OHP 09 SIGAR General Engineer

Responding to fraud allegations was a very important role that SIGAR had. // And I think SIGAR had this unique role to be an independent agency that whistleblowers could contact and be taken seriously. We would follow up on it.
//
I think the most significant work with [the SIGAR] Investigations [Directorate] that left an impression on me was when we did the investigation of the Marriott Hotel. // It started out as a contract that the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, which was a branch of the U.S. government, funded.

This hotel was supposed to be right next to the [U.S.] Embassy [in Kabul], so that visitors and diplomats in the peaceful Afghan future could come to the Embassy and it would be a place for diplomacy. // [This hotel was] a stone's throw from the Embassy. // It was a little bit taller than some of the Embassy buildings.

The outside appeared to present a finished product. On the inside it was unfinished, lacked everything necessary for occupancy.

I'd never seen anything like it before, where here's a shell of a building, that was used to get 100 percent of the money for that contract. And yet the inside looked like, anywhere between, // 20 percent complete in some areas with half-constructed walls, no flooring, no electricity anywhere in the facility. So walls not even complete in the rooms that were supposed to be the hotel.
//
It was misrepresented by the contractor as being ready for a soft opening, ready for occupancy – and nothing could've been further from the truth. // The contractor had received all the money for the project. And it was nowhere near completed.
//
No oversight is the cause for those kind of situations going undetected for so long. And I think just not having eyes on the ground, // this is was a case study for what happens…when an agency would just accept reports of things being done – even third-party reports [by inspectors] that had not visited the site.
//
The investigators and I had worked a lot to confirm the allegations. We looked at documents that showed reports [that gave] false impressions that were intentionally communicated. // We were able to say with confidence, "This was misrepresented. There's supposed to be rooms here. This was misrepresented to be ready for occupancy." It wasn't. So I think it just enhanced the fact of how deceptive the contractor was…the shock of seeing how the inside just looked like a bombed-out building. I'd never seen anything like it before. // It was not habitable at all. // It wasn't even safe, really, I think, as a construction site. // So it really was an eye-opening [experience], provided a lot of fuel for going to OPIC and asking for accountability, and exposing how much money had been totally wasted on that project.
//
No eyes on the ground. There may have been paper oversight, but no site visit oversight. And that's what counts. // There's only so much self-reporting that a federal agency is going to do on itself.
//
Without SIGAR doing that kind of work to publicize – not just discover and expose, but publicize – the misuse of funds, the fraud, there would have been less accountability, and it would continue to happen because there would be no consequences for that.
//
There's no way you can fix every construction problem, every corruption problem in a war zone environment. It's going to happen even in the best of environments. // But, in a war zone, the extra effort to stop the corruption is essential to stop the fraud, and the waste, and the abuse of taxpayer dollars.

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OHP 10 SIGAR Senior Audit Manager; Audits and Inspections

There are a number of times that I have looked at [U.S.] programs in Afghanistan and realized they are really messed up and they were just a mistake. // We spent billions of dollars on small and large projects through Afghanistan to employ people, to make the country better.
//
Billions of dollars. Just, was it worth it? We don't know. And they don't know.
//
They didn't track those programs. You got a program done, and you – a particular project done – and then you moved on. And whether or not the bridge fell apart in six months was no longer important, because you met your goal of getting this project up and running. I actually had people tell me that. It didn't matter what happened in six months.
//
In many cases, I don't think the U.S. government demanded enough of the Afghans we were helping. // As an example, we would buy tables from Afghanistan. They would make them. But they never were usable, and we would just say, "Oh, well, that's 'Afghan good.'" // That, you know, we'll live with it. // And, so, I think there was that lack of demand that they meet our requirements. I mean, we're paying a lot of money, and they should be meeting our requirements for chairs, tables.
//
Honestly, sometimes, the tables were only two feet tall. It's a little hard to work at a table-- and then, we would just buy a new one. But we would never have-- there would never be the consequence of, "Oh, no, we're not going to take that table. You're going to give us our money back."
//
We audit for a number of reasons. We audit to identify problems…that we can help the agency solve. And we also audit to highlight success stories so, in the future, agencies can replicate those success stories.
//
Auditing to find success is a very important part of the picture, because we, as a government, repeat the same issues. I know that what I saw in Bosnia, what I saw in Kosovo, what I saw in Iraq, and what I saw in Afghanistan were actually very similar issues. So, to be able to hand to someone a report that said, "Well, you know, I saw this in Afghanistan. This is what fixed. This is what worked. Why don't you try it," saves us all a lot of time and money.
//
I think the biggest challenge to doing oversight work for SIGAR was the lack of cooperation between SIGAR, and – whether it was the DoD [Department of Defense] elements, the State Department elements, or the USAID elements. // People were reluctant to work with us because they thought that some of our reports were unfair and not necessarily accurate. And, so, they were hesitant to be cooperative.
//
It's particularly helpful, I think, that, if you don't wait till you get the report out the door, but if there's an issue that needs to be addressed, right away, you let those people know that: "This is a problem we see. These are perhaps solutions. We're not going to wait to-- a year to let you know it's a problem. We're going to tell you right now."

And, generally, when you do that, they are very appreciative of knowing what their problems are. They do want to fix them. Sometimes, // people can get the impression that it's a real adversarial relationship. But, actually, between a competent audit staff and the agency, you can accomplish a lot, even if it's just back-and-forth on the telephone. And that makes all the difference. So, yes, you often get people say, "Thank you. I hated it while you were doing it, but thank you."
//
Anytime you get an agency to say, "We agree with you," it's just, like, the most exciting part of your day. It's what you've worked for, in my case, for 37 years.

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OHP 12 SIGAR Director, Lessons Learned Program

There was no Lessons Learned Program when I came over. // In 2014, Mr. Sopko created the Lessons Learned Program. // He always talked about [how] it was at the urging of a lot of generals and ambassadors who were saying, "Hey, these audits that you're doing are great, but what's the big picture? What's the 30,000-foot view? And how do we take this great audit work that you've done and turn it into something that is actually usable, that can change what we're doing right now?"*
[John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]*
//
Lessons Learned looks at whole sectors. // Where an audit might look at a single program that USAID does or a single project or program that DoD does, we're going to look at a whole effort toward something.
//
One of the things that I think is really great about our program and also great about SIGAR in general is our ability to look at that 30,000-foot view at the whole thing and say, "O.K., we had a goal, and the broad goal was for the United States to leave Afghanistan with a sustainable, workable, successful government and security forces – so we didn't have to stay there." Looking at it through the 30,000-foot view, we saw cracks in it right away. We saw that we were not hitting the benchmarks that we set out to hit. And so, because of that – we ended up with a failure.
//
The report that I think captured the entire challenge that we were facing in Afghanistan was the report called "The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly." And that report was about M&E of contracting.
//
M&E is monitoring and evaluation. // It's a way to gauge the effectiveness of a project or a program. // The monitoring part is about collecting data about the program to see if it is working. The evaluation is analyzing that data to say, "O.K., is it having the effect that is intended?"
//
It was looking at whether or not we were moving the needle, if you will, toward success. Benchmarked against these high-level strategic goals that the United States had. So, were we hitting those goals? In many cases, the answer was "no."

The difference between an "output" and an "outcome": an output would be something like we're buying books for a school or we're building schools. // You know, we have a building. It's there. We have books. It's there.
//
The outcome is, "Are people becoming more literate? Are graduation rates increasing? And is this, over time, having some sort of effect on the economy?" Those are outcomes. And we rarely measured outcomes. We often measured outputs. And they're easier to measure. // "We built this." "We built that." "We bought this." "We bought that." They're easier to measure, so why not?
//
The outcome was oftentimes too hard to measure. // You can, in essence, do a project or program absolutely perfectly. You can check every box that is on an M&E list and say, "O.K., this thing delivered all the things it delivered. It spent all the money it was meant to spend." And yet, it didn't do what it was intended to do. It didn't move the needle towards some high-level U.S. strategic goal.
//
The big lesson from that report was you have to tie things back to the highest-level goals. And if you're not tying things back to the highest-level goals, well, then – you are literally losing the forest for the trees.

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OHP 13 SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Investigations

What's really essential is the effective relationships that…a tiny little organization like SIGAR is able to maintain with its partners. // We have, for the most part, all former law enforcement – federal law enforcement – officers. // This enables them to, first, start up the relationship with the DEA, or the FBI…Secret Service – a number of law enforcement organizations. And it also enables a "reach-back" to those organizations, by those…that have retired from those law enforcement organizations. That was critical to our success.

//

SIGAR over the years has received probably an excess of 4,000-5,000 [SIGAR] Hotline complaints, mainly in Afghanistan, [but] the fact is we've only opened 20 percent or less of those as actual investigations. // There's a lot of stuff that comes in that doesn't necessarily need our attention.

//

SIGAR's investigations, for the most part, were longer-term and required several years of persistent criminal investigation, then sent to the United States, packaged to the United States.

//

The number of criminal violations that were identified and under day-to-day work were considerable. // The docket was fairly large, dealing in the main with those areas charged with fraud, waste, and abuse – and corruption being a big part of that fraud and waste. So the number of cases that we had presented a problem from the standpoint of just having enough agents to attend to them.

//

The prosecution of the work was likewise frustrating. // If we were to investigate a crime that was committed by Afghans, out of an Afghan company with no association or nexus to the United States, at the end of that investigation, there was nowhere to bring it and to charge it. We were frustrated by that.

//

We decided…to provide the details of those investigations to our Afghan counterparts in the prosecution office in Afghanistan, to see if justice could be served through their courts. // Much to my dismay, the courts are conducted much differently than the United States in Afghanistan. The differences – in the terms of punishment and, quite honestly, corruption of those courts – resulted the end result not meeting up with what an individual had been responsible [for], and the crimes that they had committed.

//

The individuals that SIGAR charged in Afghanistan with the United States nexus, a much different story. And we had the ability to conduct our investigation in Afghanistan, charge it in the United States, and it would be prosecuted from either Washington, D.C. or from a venue that made sense to the particular crime and person that we were charging.

//

There were restrictions from the Afghan side as to who we could talk to, or who we could meet with, and just the safety issues of not being able to go to a residence, knock on a door, and chat with somebody, concerning their knowledge of a person or an event that could be useful in the course of an investigation.

//

I believe that in Afghanistan, our batting average was probably less than 50 percent. The crimes that we identified, the crimes that came to us through a [SIGAR] Hotline complaint, or from an informant, or from a partner agency – it wasn't that we couldn't resolve that crime and figure out who'd done it. The problem was having access to get out there and to find that information. In the United States, that's not a barrier. In Afghanistan, it was clearly a barrier. So, the success rate that is enjoyed in the United States, considerably higher than what would be experienced in Afghanistan, in the war zone.

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OHP 14 SIGAR Supervisory Research Analyst, Lessons Learned program

I think what makes for success in a role like mine or in Lessons Learned, in general, is a determination to keep asking, "Why?" When we're conducting interviews and someone tells us that XYZ was a problem, we have to always ask, "Why?" And then, when their explanation comes out, you keep asking, "Why," over, and over, and over again until you've gotten to the heart of the matter…the real root cause of the problem.
//
We are a whistleblower organization. And that makes a number of people very nervous speaking to us, because they think talking to us means they are betraying the institution that they work for. And that's certainly not the case. But it is, in fact, a challenge to convince people that, if they speak to us and tell us their perspectives, what they've been through – as a program manager, or as a captain in the military – that they are able to actually contribute to the larger mission of improving how we do this.
//
When we collect documents, they often don't tell the full story. So we have to have interviews that supplement the story that documents tell. So we will reach out, often individually, to specific individuals who we think had a specific, a critical vantage point – on the National Security Council or at ICF Joint Command in Afghanistan – and then try and help them see that what we are after is not-- we're not trying to draw blood, we're not trying to point fingers, but, especially in the Lessons Learned program, we are trying to understand the system that that individual works in, and the constraints that are placed upon them, as individuals, working within that system so that we can help identify solutions for that system.
//
There is a tendency, certainly, in the oversight community, to point at something and say, "That's broken. It needs to be fixed." What, I think, we do…is to identify the context in which poor decisions are made, and then help try and chart a path toward reform, in understanding how can – in the future – individuals like that feel motivated, structurally motivated, to make a different decision; what needs to change in the environment around them for them to make better decisions.
//
In crafting and identifying solutions to much larger problems than a single individual is responsible for, we have to enlist their help. // They have to want to, and be motivated to, tell us what it is that they're struggling with and why the decision that they made that was problematic had to be made. And in order to convince them to do that, it has to be voluntary. // The trick is convincing them that their voluntary engagement will serve a higher purpose, that we will be able to protect them, and that it is part of something much bigger than themselves. That is not…a vantage point that you can solicit if you are <u>requiring</u> them to speak to you.
//
The whole framing is completely different than if it is more, frankly, like an investigative journalism approach, where we are building relationships, where the people who are speaking to us are motivated to do so because of something bigger than themselves, bigger than us.
//
Many of them…are tortured by a lot of the things they have witnessed, are bothered by the decisions that were made against their wishes. Some of them have axes to grind – but very, very few of them do. Most…agree to speak to us…with the idea that, "What I have seen troubles me, and I don't like it. I want it to be fixed…for Afghanistan in the future or more likely in other conflict-affected environments in the future." "I want to help my government do better, and empower me, people like me, to do better."

That is their mentality – 99 out of 100 times.

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OHP 15 SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Audits & Inspections; Special Projects

Anything that the U.S. government spent money on, to the tune of about $150 billion, was in our purview. We would conduct a risk-based analysis to determine what programs we would look at over the course of a fiscal year, and conduct audits, inspections, evaluations, and financial audits – based on various risks, and then issue products and associated recommendations to improve those programs nationwide.
//
There're several steps in an audit process. You initiate the job, you notify the job, and then you go to entrance conference. And then so sitting at an entrance conference, knowing that everyone in this room knows more about this topic than I do, I am the least informed person on this particular issue – it's humbling, you know?

And so every job, you start very, very, very humble. And then, you learn. And you dive in. And you conduct the audit work. You implement the project plan. And at the end of the job, you have exit conference. And, at that time, you have to be the smartest person in the room on this one very small subject, on this one micro thing that everybody else in the room– they've got purview over how many different programs – but this one very small thing, this one thing, I get to be the smartest in the room. I started off not knowing anything. And that's what I love most about my job now, and as a manager, as a leader, is to see the folks that work with me go through that process, and evolve through that process.
//
I think maybe the favorite job I've ever done, at SIGAR, came out of when I was director of [SIGAR] Special Projects. // We looked at why the Afghan National Army and the Department of Defense decided on this specific uniform for the Afghan National Army. Because it was a weird sort of forest pattern that didn't responsibly match the environs of Afghanistan. And it just seemed odd.

So, what we found – after we dug in, and did some traveling, and uncovered some emails, and did our evaluation – was that it was a very "willy-nilly" procurement, that raised a lot of investigatory red flags. Ended up being a sole-source procurement, which also raises red flags.

The pattern was owned by one entity, when the U.S. government already had patterns that were not dissimilar, for which it wouldn't have to pay royalty fees. So, there was just red flag, red flag, red flag, red flag. // So, we issued this report that said, "Here's how much we spent on this uniform, and here's how much we paid in royalties to have this pattern, and – oh, by the way – it doesn't fit 95 percent of the countryside in Afghanistan, and it may actually make these people stand out more."

So, there's a lot of questions. And we kicked it to [SIGAR] Investigations for additional investigation, on the fraud side. But what we found was that there wasn't a justification for it. The use of a proprietary pattern was clearly not necessary. And they probably overspent by about $70 million. And if they continue to do so, then they're going to overpay by another $70 million over the next 10 years. Something like that. That report ultimately, then, led to a couple congressional hearings.

So, issuing a special project report on our little team that changes the entire uniform of the Afghan National Army and saves tens of millions of taxpayer dollars – from a two-person Special Projects team, at "the little agency that could" – was a pretty cool outcome.

SEE p.5, "SIGAR OHP Interviews: How to Access Video/Audio/Transcripts"

OHP 16 SIGAR Prosecutor (aka "SIGPRO")

Handling any prosecutions based in Afghanistan requires understanding of how corrupt the system there was, how widespread corruption was, and how poor the record-keeping there was, both-- primarily by the Afghans, but also by NATO and the U.S.
//
The crux of the problems of working as a prosecutor in a combat zone is that, as a prosecutor in the United States, you are used to having authority. You can serve grand jury subpoenas on people, and they have to show up. You go to banks, and you get the records. When you're dealing with other government officials, they understand that criminal prosecutions are important and take priority.

When you're in a combat zone, none of that is true. You can't subpoena people into any place because there's no [place] to subpoena them into. You can try talking to other people, but they have other things going on. And in a combat zone, the people fighting the combat take priority. You don't. And that's different from being in the United States, and you have to accept that. If you can't accept that, you shouldn't be there.
//
In a normal situation, you would expect that the records would be kept and the records will be in the normal places that records are. // In a combat zone you may not have that. Or you're certainly not going to have it in the same way. And I think naturally enough, the people that are handling the combat – you know, like soldiers – they don't think that keeping their proper records, and keeping them in the proper place, and having them available whenever, you know, some stupid lawyer from the States wants to see them, they don't think that's really a real high priority. And you can't blame them. // You have to expect that, and not be frustrated by that, and not give up the investigation. // You have to realize that sometimes the records simply aren't going to be there…and you aren't going to talk to people in a timely fashion.
//
So there are times when you have to decide, well, this case simply isn't going to be made. And you have to, you know, decide you're going to cut the cord on something and move on to the next one. You're not going to win this case. It's not going to happen. Drop it and move on. And that's quite different from the way you would approach things in a normal prosecutor's role.
//
There were a lot of investigations, by SIGAR, into larger-scale fraud and corruption, by people in the Afghan government or in the Afghan military. And a lot of those investigations were really well-done. But a lot of them did not lead to prosecutions. At least, they didn't lead to U.S. prosecutions. And [there were] a couple reasons for that. One is that to make a case there, you would need a lot of Afghan witnesses. And we did not want to be bringing a lot of Afghan witnesses to the United States. Secondly, although a lot of the money was American, a lot of the money was actually sort of-- was given by the U.S. to the Afghan government, then being stolen by people from the Afghan government.

That's not as easily prosecutable as money being stolen directly from the U.S. government. So a lot of those investigations, it is my understanding, led to information being given to the Afghan government that could have led to Afghan prosecutions.
//
The record of the previous Afghan government in prosecuting internal corruption was very poor, remarkably poor.

SEE p.5, "SIGAR OHP Interviews: How to Access Video/Audio/Transcripts"

OHP 17 SIGAR Special Advisor

I was born in Afghanistan. I spent time in refugee camps in Pakistan, went back to Afghanistan, came to the U.S., studied, finished all schooling, went back to Afghanistan, and then came back to the U.S.
//
One of my main responsibilities as special advisor…was to find, identify, verify, and connect sources to SIGAR senior leadership as well as different directorates who are looking into different projects on Afghanistan. // My job involved listening to the Afghan side, the Afghan stakeholders and reporting their concerns, their take on issues to the senior leadership, but also vice versa. And,
//
My main focus has been trying to answer the, "So what," of what we do, and how Afghans see the work of this agency, for publishing a report, or indicting someone, or if we are going after a case that takes forever and there are a lot of questions.

People need to understand, "Why is that the case?" So, I've been trying to help people understand that side of the argument in addition to being this connector between the agency as well as the stakeholders in and out of Afghanistan.
//
For example, …after [the] fall of the Republic [former Afghanistan government]. Obviously, you wanted to get a better understanding of what led to that collapse of the Republic. And I was trying to help all the report writers within the agency, not only to get to the bottom of things but also finding those voices – be it the former Afghan government officials, or civil society members, journalists, or anyone who was involved somehow in Afghanistan, or in the cause of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

So, I was reaching out to them actively and trying to convince them to tell their stories, tell their stories in their own ways. And, obviously, there were some resistance, in several instances. And my argument to them was, like, you know, "Hey, we're going to tell the story of Afghanistan and why the Republic failed. And you have an opportunity here to tell your story. And if you don't, someone else will tell it on your behalf, so just use this opportunity."
//
Oftentimes, you would find the Afghan side very frustrated because of the way we were doing things.
//
Oftentimes, it happens that we prosecute someone, like our investigators will spend resources, and time, and years just to be able to prosecute without even caring where that guy came from. And the perception sometimes in the Afghan community was, like, "Oh, because he was a Pashtun or Tajik. That's why he got selectively prosecuted while all these bad actors are running free without SIGAR even bothering to look at them." So, it has always been the case, among some Afghans. And I've tried to, explain our limits and our limits of what we can and what we cannot do.
//
I think it was instrumental for me to be able to go there, listen to them, listen to their concerns, and find a way to channel that to the people involved in those projects or issues within our agency, whether it was the front office or a senior analyst doing a very technical report on some aspects of the Afghan reconstruction.
//
It has to be systematic when it comes to listening to the conversation that is happening about you in places that are not comfortable or familiar to you in the first instinct. So, having those representatives, having those ears and eyes on those grounds is key and vital, I think.

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OHP 18 SIGAR Management Analyst, Forward Operations/Management & Support

I've been at SIGAR since 2008. // I've been here since the beginning,
//
I joined the military first…[U.S.] Army…enlisted full-time. // I was a Logistics Specialist. They call it Supply Property Officer, Supply Clerk, different terms they had for it.
//
Did six years active, got out, joined the National Guard of Virginia, Virginia National Guard. During that time, I had got a job at SIGIR, the Special IG for Iraq. Worked there for a couple years…Same job. Management analyst. // Then I got deployed to Kuwait with the National Guard. So that led to my departure [from] SIGIR. Did my year and a half in Kuwait. Came back to the States. The same contractor I worked for at SIGIR told me about this job here at SIGAR.
//
I went [to Afghanistan] the first time [for SIGAR] for a year, between the year 2012, 2013, and then spent some time there again in 2014 and 2015. // Three different times.
//
I have traveled a lot in-country. So during that time, I think we had…four operating bases that we worked out of. I did a lot of travel in between Kabul, and Bagram, and Kandahar, and Mazar [Mazār-e Sharīf]. And I've been to all of them. // It ranges from, "We've got to buy these guys a car battery and bring over there" to, "they have IT issues." They may have housing issues or-- so they'll send me over there to help them get through whatever their issue was at the time.
//
Definitely brought me back to my military days…the living conditions. I would say staying on the [U.S.] Embassy is definitely a perk. // Bagram…is a military base. So it definitely-- you have a lot of soldiers walking around. And it feels like a military base. // So definitely, it felt like I was kind of back in the military again. // It wasn't necessarily a struggle for me. It was something that I was kind of used to. It was actually what I expected coming in.
//
I've definitely been on flights where, let's say, I make it to Herat, but I can't leave because there was a rocket attack. So things get canceled all the time without notice.
//
So you've always got to be prepared. So even if I had decided I'm going to go there for a day trip to help out with whatever issue, I would pack for multiple days – because, if an attack does happen, I'm pretty much stuck there.
//
When I got to the [U.S.] Embassy, Embassy life is a lot better. You know, I had my own bathroom inside of they call it my "hooch," so to say. // It was like a container – like, probably you would see in the back of a 18-wheeler type container. It probably is about 12 or probably about 20 feet long, seven to 10 feet wide. Just enough room to have a bed. There was a bathroom in the back, a little desk you could sit down on in front. Very small.
//
I've been in combat zones as a soldier. So I've stayed in open bays of 40 people. And, just to have my own space and my own bathroom and own time – I was perfectly fine with that. // From a soldier perspective, I was happy. I mean, I couldn't really ask for anything more.

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OHP 19 SIGAR Management Specialist, Forward Operations/ Management & Support

I've gone on four trips to Afghanistan. // I don't think anything really fully prepares you to when you get to Afghanistan. Everything that they've told you, and taught you, or everything that you read, or went to your safety briefings doesn't really sink in until you're actually in it.
//
I don't think anyone can really fully prepare you for what you're going to see in Afghanistan. // Everyone tries to tell you what to do or what you're going to expect. But once you go there, it's completely different. It-- it's a culture shock.
//
You know you're going into a war zone, but you know you're fully safe and on the U.S. Embassy [compound] in Kabul. However, you just don't know what that means. And it starts from the very beginning once you're on the plane. I mean, you are-- we never stepped foot at the airport in Afghanistan. I mean, we are picked up off a tarmac. There's a person at the clipboard that gets you right off of the plane. Everyone who's going to the U.S. Embassy gets escorted right off of the plane, and helo-ed – helicoptered – from Camp Alvarado to U.S. Embassy Kabul. So just that alone was a culture shock.
//
I didn't know what I was going there to do. // It was-- it's basically doing logistics. // I was in charge of-- if you were to come and be asked to go to Afghanistan for our agency, I'm the person that does all the paperwork, gets you your CHU [= "Contained Housing Unit"]. A CHU is a closed-- it's a crate that is made into an apartment that people live in. // I think the old school teams called it the "hooch."' And we called it "the CHU."
//
I had a "wet" CHU. A wet CHU means that there is a shower or a bathroom inside the CHU, versus a dry CHU, which is, you would have-- everyone on that floor would go to a communal bathroom. // It wasn't bad. I mean, I had a TV. I had a bathroom. I had a microwave. I had a fridge. I was fine.
//
Forward Operations was in charge of making sure everything that you need to be allowed to come into Afghanistan prior to that, and then everything that once you're in Afghanistan, we make sure that you have your meal card, and your CHU, and all the paperwork, and your badging. And we pick you up from the helicopter. So literally anything and everything logistically was all done by Forward Operations.
//
We made sure you got your pay, you got your hazard pay, // we did all of that for them. And we did all of the email, the communication process for all of that, as well as if you needed to renew your visa and all that stuff. It may not seem like you needed it. But I think the people there that are there for a year – they were pros – but did they need to worry about that stuff? // We don't want the people that are coming short term to have to worry about all of these hoops and stuff. // I don't want them to worry about anything other than their meetings, their audits, their investigations. I don't want them to have to worry about any of the logistical stuff.
//
Going over there – it's just harder. Everything is harder. Everything requires way more effort. And a meeting isn't the same like having a meeting here. I mean, it takes a week's worth of planning. And just going to the ministry, a weekly meeting that you're planned to do, requires four trucks, and 12 detailees. And, you have to submit paperwork well in advance. Things like that. You know? So it's just not as easy as it is here.

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OHP 20 SIGAR Senior Auditor, Audits and Inspections

For someone that wants to do auditing in a war zone, I think first you have to understand you're going to be in a war zone. Auditing is fine. You might like auditing. But you've got to remember you're in a war zone. // Anything can happen. So you've got to really understand that. // You've got to be careful that you don't get too comfortable.
//
When I first got there, // they were building a hotel next to the [U.S.] Embassy. And I remember looking at that. And, I mean, it was so close. It was like, …looking across the street. Because, I mean, the Embassy wall is there, but right on the outside of the Embassy, as soon as you went out the Embassy, you were in the middle of Kabul.
//
They were building this hotel right next to there. // I came out [of] my room. You're looking right…at the hotel. And I'm going, "That's crazy." Well, that same week that I got there, that's when they attacked the Embassy from that hotel. And I was sitting, thinking myself, "What have you gotten yourself into here?"
//
One place we went – it wasn't a school, but one of the other facilities – we went back and that ground had shifted and you had cracks…in the building. // The cracks in this building about a foot, I'd say, wide. I mean, very wide – to where it was no[t], like, little cracks you could fill up with some putty or something. I mean, you had to condemn the building. // There was a big engineering flaw with that.
//
We went to the KMTC, to Kabul Military Training Center. And when we went in, they were building it. // Your politicians or whatever, their people came over. And the price kept going up, because they'd seen something else that they wanted. And they put it in there on to the contract. They kept having contract changes. // The money was getting too out of hand on it, so we had to stop that.
//
There's things like, // did they really need that – because we wrote it up – they had gooseneck faucets. The Afghans didn't know how to use it. So they were trying to pump them. They thought it was a pump. And so they were breaking that. So we had to recommend a different type of faucet for that, because they didn't know how to use it.

Some of the toilet facilities we were getting was…U.S.-type of stuff that they weren't accustomed to, so they were putting rocks down in the toilet. You looked at what they were used to and that was a building with a hole in the ground.
//
So you look at it and you say, what we gave them, did we need to give them to that level, to U.S. government-level? Could we have given them something kind of little lower, that they would be able to maintain?
//
One place we went to, we went to, // they had – what was it? – 10 generators. These things…they were huge. // Each generator had to have been about, oh, three, four feet wide and about maybe six to eight feet tall. And I asked the guy. I said, "How many of these do you need?" He says, "Oh, we only need two. We only needed the one and maybe one for a backup."

And so, of course, we wrote that up. And we were saying: it was a waste.

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OHP 21 SIGAR Deputy Director, Research and Analysis Directorate

I am the deputy director of the Research and Analysis Directorate, here at SIGAR. // One of the pivotal roles that the Research and Analysis Directorate plays is providing that 30,000-foot view of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan.
//
Our first and primary responsibility is putting together and publishing a Quarterly Report to the United States Congress and to the American people. // The "Status of Funds" section of the Quarterly Report might be the authoritative U.S. government source of information on how U.S. funding has been appropriated and spent in Afghanistan. It is a whole-of-government view of financial spending in Afghanistan.
//
I think it's a heavy responsibility and one that is very important, not only for the history of Afghanistan, but [also] for Congress, and decision-makers, [and] policymakers. // When historians look at this conflict and the U.S. involvement in it, they will be able to see, methodically, a quarterly snapshot of the goings on in Afghanistan. // We are providing that snapshot, the most current up-to-date snapshot of all the information that is available on Afghanistan at the moment.
//
The front lines are a tremendous amount of research, open-source and from U.S. government agencies, supplemented with classified work – as needed, as necessary. // It comes with a lot of experience, and a lot of long hours, tight deadlines, where people are working 12, 14 hours a day, if not more, under strict deadlines.
//
There's a lot of writing, a lot of rewriting, a lot of discussion about what we're seeing, the trends, trying to analyze things in a coherent way, and compare that to previous years, previous quarters, and predict, at least, internally, what we may be seeing in the future to help guide our future research efforts and the questions we ask of U.S. government agencies.
//
Our interactions with U.S. government agencies take place several times over each quarter. We ask the agencies a fair amount of questions. We're asking for data that…they are uniquely situated to provide to us, made all the more important since we are no longer on the ground in Afghanistan. Some of that interaction has been contentious, some not.
//
The Research and Analysis Directorate has had a fairly good relationship with most of the agencies on the ground. And we're trying to, in a sense – and this is SIGAR-wide – pry information out of the agencies to help inform Congress and the U.S. public. That's not always easy. There's a lot of information that agencies don't want to provide. // And they will only answer, sometimes, the information – as tightly as the questions that we're asking for are written – that's what they will provide. // They are not always so forthcoming. And we have to, sometimes, go back and forth with them, several times, in order to get the answers we're really looking for.
//
The biggest challenges are mastering the information. There's a steep learning curve. // We delve into the minutiae. And to master that minutiae takes a long time. // It takes time to learn, and understand, and to be able to see patterns, trends, problems, challenges, and successes, in the U.S. reconstruction effort. // One of the things that SIGAR has is a lot of institutional memory. // We have a lot of people who have that institutional memory, that can put things into context that other people don't have, other agencies don't have. // And that kind of sets us apart from some of the other government agencies.

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OHP 22 SIGAR Deputy Director, Financial Audit Team; Senior Audit Manager, Audits & Inspections

As an Operation Enduring Freedom veteran, I was like, "Don't let this be another Vietnam." And it has turned out to be very much that.
//
The fall of Afghanistan. What happened in Afghanistan was very challenging...very hard. // It's not what any of us wanted. Especially, though, of us veterans who served there in uniform and lost friends.
//
Afghan reconstruction: what wasn't wasted? What real benefits have come from it? // That's a hard question to answer.
//
We issued audits. Some of them were pretty hard-hitting, and some had large questioned cost amounts. But here we are in 2024. Afghanistan's fallen to the Taliban. And, you know, that raises some real heart-wrenching questions about whether any of it was well-spent money, properly spent, or impactful.
//
I'm at the end of my career. And so, I feel like I can draw from a fair amount of experience of oversight. You know, having been in it for 20-some years, 30 years of federal experience in April, I'm concerned that…so much money was spent in in Afghanistan.
//
Seldom do we say, "Why are you doing this program?" // I think in the oversight community, we're too apt to just accept, "Oh, we're going to do this sort of program. That's probably O.K. // They're the technical experts. They probably know better." And so I think there should be a little more appetite for questioning the bigger picture.
//
I think we have been saying the right things, all the way along. But we've met a lot of headwinds trying to basically tap down our message.
//
What happened in the end in Afghanistan…does validate many of the recommendations that we have been making all along.
//
We find problems. We report them to the agencies that made the awards. They're disinclined to make-- to take any action on it. "No, they're our partners."
//
Contracting and grant officers may be a little too invested in their own awards to objectively determine whether all costs charged to the government are allowable. Are they looking at the government's best interests, or ensuring that their thing – the awards that they've created, the programs that they're nurturing – are continuing to get more money?
//
It's very important to have an authorized IG like SIGAR to perform that oversight across all the breadth of the federal government, not burdened by these difficulties of working across agency lines.
//
We've told the truth about Afghanistan, even though people didn't want to-- didn't all want to hear about it. And, I think that that's important, because I think that our kind of work instills faith in government: that government can look at itself and report what's going on – faithfully, honestly, dispassionately, objectively. And I think that that's SIGAR's major accomplishment.

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OHP 23 SIGAR Human Resources Specialist; Forward Operations/HR

I was the operations or the admin person in Afghanistan for SIGAR. // I was in Kabul for four years – almost two of that with the Department of State and two with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.
//
I was hired through SIGIR, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. // I was hired through SIGIR for SIGAR. // We relied a lot on SIGIR in the beginning. Because they had the knowledge. They knew how to get things, how to hire through DoD [U.S. Department of Defense]. They knew the steps. We learned a lot from them. And they were very supportive in the beginning.
//
Most of the time we were involved in…getting housing ready for staff that would come from headquarters. // There was, in those days, a big flow of people coming and going from headquarters to Kabul. And we had to worry about things like cell phones, their housing and how they would eat, where would they go. And then most importantly, how they would get to the other provinces – especially, the auditors and criminal investigators.
//
One of my main roles there was to be focused and prepare the IG's trips. Those were very intense. // He wanted to go everywhere. // So I had to work hard with the military and Department of State. Because Department of State would provide transportation and security for the IG…and the military had to approve the trips and allow them to go in certain places. [See transcript for full context.]
//
When my assignment ended there…when returning from Afghanistan, the [SIGAR] Assistant Inspector General for Management and Support asked me if I'd like to stay at the agency. There was an opening in human resources [in SIGAR's Arlington, VA office]. And I said, "Yeah, absolutely." // I knew everybody, first and last name, I knew what everybody did and where they were. And, by then, I had enough knowledge to also be helpful to our people in Afghanistan.
//
So I had this [from] both sides. I knew what life was like in Afghanistan and all the hurdles that people had to go through and all the difficulties. And now I'm in headquarters trying to be their voice here.
//
Life itself could be very challenging in Afghanistan. And for people on the compound, it was like being in a…small prison, because you were confined. And there were guns everywhere protecting you. But it was kind of difficult. You couldn't move. You couldn't go to places. // Some of our investigators and auditors were going out there to places…putting their lives at risk.
//
The first advice I would give [to a future agency doing similar oversight work] would be: to try to send at least some people who have done it before. That will help acclimate the others that are new to the war zone. And to people who are new to this kind of situation, I would say, "Don't commit for a long term. Go first for one month. See if you can take it. It's completely different environment. If you can take it for one month, then maybe you're ready to commit for one year. Or maybe you just want to commit to another three months and see how things go."
//
Some people go there and they thrive. // Some other people really have a hard time. // It's not for everybody. Some people can't get used to the confinement. Some other people don't get used to the rules. Some people can't handle the explosions going around. // You have to learn to live with the sirens and the "duck-and-cover" announcements. // It depends on how you can handle this kind of stress.

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OHP 24 SIGAR Assistant Inspector General, Forward Operations

When I was with SIGAR from 2015 to 2018, I was the Assistant Inspector General for Forward Operations based in Kabul.
//
I was SIGAR's senior representative resident in Afghanistan. // I was neither an auditor nor an investigator. // My job was to be…the political-level interface with the [U.S.] Embassy, with agency heads, with different parts of the Afghan government, and with senior officials in the U.S. military. In basic terms, I was kind of a fixer. And I had to deal with a host of issues, sometimes mundane, dealing with staff-level challenges, sometimes-- political-level issues.
//
I, as the senior representative, could sometimes leverage the fact that I had been part of the State Department and leverage my personal relationships and other times, simply had to rely on, normal diplomatic skills to say, "Look, guys, you need to do this. You have to do this. This is important. You can't avoid it. And if you want to get mad at somebody, get mad at me. I'll be here next week."
//
Being on the inside, I understood how the State Department functioned much more so than most of my SIGAR colleagues, who came from the outside. Either they had come from the military, or law enforcement, or were auditors or engineers. // I found myself very much in the middle, trying to maintain good relations all around – with the civilians and the military, with the ambassadors, and the section chiefs, and the agency heads. And being on the inside was beneficial. But…I represented, you know, the forces of darkness in many people's eyes.
//
An inspector general, the relationship with the powers that be – the military and civilian – is…a relationship that has a certain amount of friction. The civilian and military authorities are tasked with accomplishing something – documenting success, highlighting success –very often, trying to maintain political support for a mission…where doing so may be quite difficult.
//
The mission of an IG is to highlight areas that need further attention – that need improvement, or, in some cases, just absolute disasters. Necessarily, the work of the IG can cause embarrassment for civilian and military officials. And the culture of the State Department, the culture of the military can be quite unforgiving for officers that fail in their mission, or are perceived to fail in their mission, or that create embarrassment. So, there's a dynamic tension between those on the inside and those on the outside.
//
It really is a situation that is structured to mitigate against honesty and to mitigate against being candid about problems. // There's this bureaucratic – almost imperative – to paint everything in the most rosy light. And it's difficult to fight against that. It's not something that an individual can do. It's not something that a well-intentioned officer, very often, can do. They can try, but they tend to pay a price for it.
//
There is built into the system an imperative for success. And that makes it very hard to acknowledge failure. And, at times, in the worst examples of this, we can see people just covering up and avoiding the grossest types of problems – and then hoping desperately to get that one good evaluation and get the hell out before they're tarred with whatever the issue was. We saw it with buildings being constructed that weren't needed. We saw it with aircraft being purchased they couldn't fly. You know, SIGAR has a hundred if not a thousand examples that have been well-documented. And you ask yourself in each case, "How did that happen?" Well, sometimes it happened because of these underlying bureaucratic dynamics and imperatives.

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OHP 25 SIGAR Director, Research and Analysis Directorate

I'm the director of the Research and Analysis Directorate. // We produce SIGAR's Quarterly Report. // The Quarterly Report is mandated in our authorizing language. We are required to report on all the funds being appropriated and disbursed in Afghanistan, and to give an update on so-called "reconstruction," which we have interpreted [as] sort of an update on what the U.S. in doing in Afghanistan every quarter.
//
I have traveled to Afghanistan as part of this role. But I traveled to Afghanistan long before this role. The first time I went to Afghanistan was in 1992, // traveling with the mujahideen, with a photographer, and writing about women – Islamism and women, in Afghanistan.
//
What we do with the Quarterly Report is…we come up with a list of questions every quarter for the agencies that are working in Afghanistan. And we ask them to answer these questions so that we can report on what they're doing in that given quarter.
//
We are not auditors. And we are not investigators. The background of the people who work in the Research and Analysis Directorate is journalism, academia. We are subject-matter experts. Our focus is on Afghanistan, more than accounting. Although we do have one CPA who works for us who does all of our funding reporting-- which is very important. // Because it's the only place where-- all the monies that are appropriated for Afghanistan are collected and where you can see exactly where it's been spent.
//
We use a lot of open-source reporting – that's public. // [But] our biggest source is the data call [with each federal agency we contact]. // And then we've also done some primary reporting of our own. // A lot of things that we were able to uncover – that were going wrong with the war, with the reconstruction effort – if we hadn't been there, nobody would have been looking at that.
//
We did…a big report on what's called the Afghan Pay and Personnel System, APPS. // DoD commissioned [it as] this enormously expensive, computerized, biometric pay-and-personnel system.
// We discovered…that the system // was not really working the way it was intended to work and was overestimating the number of [Afghan] soldiers, so that there were many more on the books than were actually present. And it could be gamed. // The problem with the overestimation of the number of…people on the rolls wasn't just that we were paying more salaries. But [that] everything else that we were buying and ordering for the Afghan defense forces was being based on those estimates. And they were overestimating. // We were the only ones who could have done it because we were getting those quarterly reports about the troop levels, the strength levels. And we could see that it was impossible [for it to be] as high as it was.
//
Now we know that that was correct and that…it was overestimating. And second of all, we know that this has been a terrible, terrible problem now that we left. Because…all that data is in the hands of the Taliban now, and it's being used to persecute the former members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.
//
The biggest thing I wish people understood is that our job is not just to find fault with what the U.S. government is doing in Afghanistan. It's not the job of any special inspector general to simply poke holes in what the U.S. government is doing. But it's to make our policies and programs more effective. And that was what we were really trying to do.

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OHP 26 SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator

After being there just a couple of months, I realized that this was going to be an incredibly difficult job for me and all of my colleagues trying to conduct investigations in this environment. It was not only a war zone, and it was not only a place of abject poverty and very little infrastructure or industry.
//
The worst thing about it – as far as conducting these investigations – was the history and culture of corruption in that country. Everyone was accused of being corrupt, from the president on down. Whether that's true or not, it's hard to say. But everyone was certainly suspect of being corrupt. // We heard over and over and over again – from Afghans in the government, police officers, prosecutors that we worked with, judges that we worked with – who told us, "I can't do what you're asking. We cannot do what you want us to do. The system's too corrupt. // "They are protecting the people you want us to look into. We are not able to help you, Mr. Investigator." And that was the reality of the situation, unlike anything I ever experienced in my life in the United States as an investigator.
//
The kind of investigations…required through the SIGAR mandate were complex cases. Contract fraud, corruption are…difficult to prove under the best circumstances. In the [U.S.] they're difficult. But to then try to conduct successful investigations in that environment, with no security, no grand jury, no financial government records, no way to compel someone to testify or be a witness – made it very, very difficult.
//
Unlike war zones in Iraq and other places, the Afghan and U.S. government agreed their policy was going to be…"Afghan First." // They would try to award contracts to local Afghan companies. Because of Afghans' very, very small, meager, backward economy, they thought it was a way to build from the bottom up. "Let's hire Afghans to be our construction companies." "Let's hire Afghans to deliver the fuel to all military bases." "Let's use as many Afghan companies as we can." In other war zones, that's not the case. They would bring in the big U.S. contractors. They would come in with 1,000 people. And they would do all the work. It was easier to keep control of that from an investigator standpoint because you didn't have local government records to worry about. You just had that U.S. government contractor there. We didn't have that. We had a lot of Afghan contractors. How do you prosecute them? Very difficult. So we would try to…conduct the investigation, discover the corruption or fraud, and then stop the contract, put a halt to it, and save the [U.S.] government money that would have gone into illegal or corrupt activities by the contractor, and the government officials overseeing the contractors.
//
In Afghanistan, fuel theft and corruption was the single largest crime problem we encountered. // All of the fuel used in that country had to be transported in. They didn't create their own fuel. // They had to get the fuel outside of the country and bring it in by trucks. // The entire fuel process in that country was corrupted…in every conceivable way. // We had cases from the high to the low. They would steal the fuel at every stop of the process, every trick in the book. // Fuel was…"liquid gold." It was one of the few commodities in Afghanistan that had value everywhere.
//
We wanted to go after the senior fuel transportation contractor in the country. // We said, "We want to go after this guy. We want to stop him from doing this. He steals and we have all this evidence against him." The U.S. military official said, "Time out. That is not going to happen. That individual is too big to fail." // "If we stop delivery of that fuel to the Afghan military, within two weeks this country will collapse. You cannot do what you want to do." And we did not do it. // Do you get used to the constant corruption and roadblock every time you tried something? Yeah. It's demoralizing. It's upsetting. You just-- you throw your hands up and go fight another day. What else can you do?

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OHP 27 Senior Program Analyst, Audits and Inspections

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 counter-narcotics 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 worked] on an evaluation of U.N. cash shipments to Afghanistan for humanitarian aid.
//
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…being able to know the buzzwords and being able to be comfortable with the subject material.
//
I would say my reception was good. 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, "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.
//
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 was never iced out in a cafeteria. I was never 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.
//
I think upfront, I was clear about what my intentions were…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.
//
I wish people would better understand that, while we do often publish not-always success stories, we love finding success stories. // 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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OHP 28 SIGAR Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit; Forward Operations Director

There's a lot of excitement and mixed emotions getting yourself there, a lot of preparation. You've got to go through two weeks of training, driving training, medical training. You've got to get your will in place. You know, you've got to-- all this stuff.
//
It can be a shock, to some people. // You are confined. You are confined. You cannot walk out that gate. // You've got to be O.K. with having limited food, limited amenities, not being able to get outsi[de], out the door, being O.K. with being locked down. // Rules, you know. There's rules, rules, rules, and you've got to be O.K. with that.
//
At least 16 different times I got to get out [of Kabul and went to the provinces] in my two years there, which is quite a bit. I counted I think at least – I was in about 10 different provinces. // Mostly you're going to get-- you'll get a bed and a mattress. So you have your sleeping bag, and that's what you lay out there. And I used to carry in my sleeping bag I had this little, like, a military camouflage pillow. // You just rolled your sleeping bag and then…I had my little sheet and pillow. That's how you slept.
//
To brush your teeth you had to use a bottle of water. You didn't want to use that water… You know, [it] could have contaminants in it. // There was so much you had to think about.
//
It was very stressful. // You looked for normality wherever you could, and it could be in the simplest of things, you know, it really could. // Somehow you're able to compartmentalize things, I guess. // I don't know how else to describe it. You just say, "O.K., I've got to work. I've got to get this done."
//
One thing about oversight in a conflict zone, you've got to have agile oversight practices in place. You can't always follow your traditional, conventional methods. You've got to think outside the box. You've got to think differently.
//
You're working with so many different people, and things are not going to always go-- it's just not simple. It's just-- it's a very difficult way of doing audit work. // You're dependent on resources, being able to do that. So you can't get frustrated. You can't expect structure. Nothing is cookie-cutter. So you've got to be flexible and agile. And you've got to have the drive and the will to want to do it.
//
We still need standards. We've still got to follow professional standards. We still need to have criteria, you know, or how we're going to benchmark against whatever we're going to say. We still want to make sure we have good quality control in place before a report gets issued. But do we have to follow every single teeny step along the way like we would a full-blown audit or a full-blown evaluation? And, no, you can't. You've got to get things done quicker. So to get things done quicker, you look for ways you can streamline that process.
//
We were using unconventional ways to do our work. And we weren't just waiting for eight months to go by to issue reports. We got a lot of communications out, through other types of collateral products, I'll call them. It wasn't just an audit report. // We got letters [out], we got inquiries out. We got special alerts, safety alerts. We had special project reviews. We were all over the place. But…we had that authority to be all over. // I don't think a lot of people were used to that kind of audit oversight.
//
A lot of times they were-- they didn't want to hear the message that we had. Some of our reports upset them, and upset officials at the [U.S.] Embassy.

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OHP 29 SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator

Failure wasn't an option. So, whether it be in DOD [the Department of Defense] or [the Department of] State, [or] the general who's overall in charge of Afghanistan – when it's time for him to leave, he's not going to report to his successor on all of his failures. He's going to report to him on all of his successes. And so on and so forth. And so, again, it's like no one wants to tell the emperor he doesn't have any clothes on.
//
The G222 was an aircraft, was originally an Italian cargo aircraft. // In 2008, the U.S. Air Force contracted with the U.S. subsidiary of an Italian company, to refurbish these retired Italian cargo planes – refurbish 20 of them and send them to Afghanistan to be the backbone of the Afghanistan mobility fleet.
//
These are old aircraft. // In some cases, 20, 25 years old. The Air Force had received assurances from the company that parts were not going to be a problem. Well, [as it] turns out, parts were a problem. And so between corrosion, between parts, between other refurbishment issues, // they couldn't be sustained. And so the Air Force, rather than pouring additional money – it already at this point had spent $500 million on this program – the Air Force decided to cancel it.
//
We spent $500 million on this failed program. // Those aircraft // the 16 in Afghanistan, in 2014 were sold to the DoD-- I forget the outfit. But returned to scrap. The U.S. government got $34,000 for the scrap metal from the aircraft. That was our return on that investment.
//
The real culprit here was that the U.S. government – [the] Department of Defense – believed that this program was something we needed to make happen immediately. And so the normal safeguards // that would normally be used, if it were not a war zone – were overcome, let's say, // for expediency. "We need-- // the Afghans need this yesterday. They need these aircraft tomorrow." And, // "we don't have the time to go through the normal bureaucratic checking and balances."
//
It's a war zone. Everybody wants to support that. We want to support our troops. We want to make sure // they and our Afghan counterparts have all the tools they need. So I think, from a positive standpoint, we're all on board with that, that we want-- we hope that happens. // If the Air Force folks who put this in motion were here in the room, they'd-- I think they'd say they hope that happened – because they knew that the safeguards that we normally put in to make sure it happens weren't going to-- there wasn't enough time // to put them in place.
//
The G222 matter is an excellent illustration of what can happen in the procurement in a war zone. Everyone wants to this to be successful. But [in] the wanting of it, the people – like the gentleman I mentioned who's done this work before – they're viewed as naysayers and not on board with the program. And so they get pushed aside – because we need to help our troops. And, ultimately, we didn't help our troops as much as we could have.*
[a retired Air Force civilian working for a U.S. Defense Department agency engaged in new acquisitions, who went to Italy to assess the aircraft, and recommended against the procurement]*
//
There are…problems of waste, fraud, and abuse – that could have been identified through more detailed oversight – not after-the-fact oversight, because by the time SIGAR gets involved, it's already done. By the time we do a criminal investigation, the crime has already occurred. The best oversight is that which is done that maybe prevents that from happening.

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OHP 30 SIGAR Deputy Inspector General; Acting Inspector General

My first trip to Afghanistan I met with a three-star general. It was right before Thanksgiving, so it was late in the month. And he said to me, // "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 said, "Well, what could we do to help?" And he said, "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, that he didn't know how to spend $1 billion in – what – a little more than a month.
// He had to spend by the end of the year, because "we're not giving it back."
//
I knew we would have a positive impact, but I knew it would not cover the whole problem of reconstruction in Afghanistan. // 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.
//
Our job is to go out and search for waste, fraud, and abuse. // 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 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.
//
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. // 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.
//
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. // From my perspective, I don't care if Congress stops your program, if it's to stop it to fix it."
//
People build empires. // In the agencies they think what they're doing is 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."
//
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?
//
We try to work with the agency, but 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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I think what we did was wake the agencies up to the fact that some of the programs were just ridiculous and not working. // 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," 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.
//
One thing we could've done was have a more cooperative relationship with some of these agency folks [than] we did. // I think…it would've resulted in probably better reports – and more cooperation. // I think trust is key. You know, you're meeting with agency officials and you're asking them about their program, which they have devoted their lives to getting implemented. And you're trying to figure out, how's the program operating? What's going right? What's going wrong? And what would help them make improvements to the to the program?

That was our goal…not "gotcha" reports. // 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 building trust is key to all of that.
//
If we[']d 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?" 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, 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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OHP 31 SIGAR General Counsel

One of our big successes was our Suspension and Debarment program. In order to get a government contract, you have to be an approved contractor and considered eligible for a government contract. By suspending them and debar[ring] them, you prohibit them from receiving government contracts from the United States.
//
We suspended and debarred a whole lot of bad contractors, many for bad performance or non-performance. Others because they were actually Taliban or other terrorists, and making money from U.S. projects, which was ridiculous.
//
We suspended or debarred almost 1,000 people or/and companies, over that course of that 12 years. //That was a major success, a very aggressive program that was run out of the general counsel's office. //That was a real accomplishment. We got rid of bad contractors. That's a good thing.
//
The biggest individual successes, the ones that were worth probably the most amount of money, were // where we attached the assets…
//
Early on…we did something unique that nobody had ever done before. // We had attached the assets of an Afghan who we had—[we] were criminally investigating for stealing money. In fact, we attached some $70 million in bank accounts. And, that was highly controversial.
//
Basically, you freeze their assets and they can't take them. And in fact, it's the first step towards confiscating the entire amount from the bank account, so which we were able to do, even though the banks were outside the United States, because they had – it's a legal thing – but they had legal relationships with banks in New York City.

And we were able to serve the papers on the banks in New York City, and thereby attach the assets and so forth. It was $70 million, I think. So that's important because that's money that ultimately I think we got $50 million of it. And that goes immediately to the U.S. Treasury. So that's not theoretical savings. That's cash on the barrelhead…and it's always a pleasure when you can do something like that.
//
We had another one where we recovered $40 million. I mean, that's $90 million worth [$50 million + $40 million]. You know, that's a lot of money.

But there were other bigger ones. We stopped a program where they were going to buy Black Hawk helicopters for the Afghans. It would've been totally absurd. They didn't know how to fly them. They had no means of repairing them at all, or maintaining them. And that was something like half-a-billion dollars. I mean, that's a pretty big win, because we got the whole program canceled – just because we exposed it before it ever-- before the money got spent, thank goodness.
//
Some of our best tips came from very high-level people who-- you know, most Americans want to do the right thing. And some of those people are generals and ambassadors. And sometimes they don't have the power to do the right thing. But if somebody like SIGAR comes along, suddenly maybe there's somebody who can get those things done. So we've had tips from people at the highest levels, at things that we ought to look at. And they actually resulted in some of our biggest stories out there, some of our biggest accomplishments. // The sources are anonymous. Absolutely. We'll never disclose the names. In fact, very

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few people at SIGAR know who some of these people are. I mean, I know – I suspect – that there are some maybe John and I are the only ones who know who they are, and we're not going to say. So that's that. And we're not going to give any hints either.*
[John Sopko, former Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2012-2025]*
//
The significance of that legislation [that created SIGAR and gave it authorities] was that it created a wholly independent special inspector general. And the key to that is that SIGAR is not housed within one particular agency. We are not under the control of, let's say, the Secretary of Defense, or the Secretary of State, or the Administrator of USAID, or any other agency.

We exist as a sort of a separate agency by itself, which is very unique. But that gives us the freedom to do things that other IGs don't have. And I can go into chapter and verse about other IGs and why they're not independent, but they aren't. So we're not afraid of anything.
//
The second thing, the advantage that we had, was: statutorily, // the only person who can remove the IG [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction] is the president of the United States. And that's it. To us, and somebody who's dedicated to oversight and doing vigorous oversight, that's probably the best feature of the entire statute right there.
//
But it also specifies – it requires the agencies to cooperate with us. And without that, we wouldn't be able to do very much. So that's a really, really important provision. Those are the two biggest things about it, is the independence and the requirement the agency must cooperate with us.
//
We don't have any enforcement powers at all when it comes to agency activities. We can't make them do anything. We can make suggestions, and that's it. But what we can do is embarrass them into it. And publicity is the thing they hate most. I mean, they like it if it's positive, but they really don't like it when it's negative. And you'd be surprised at how things can turn in your favor when you start publishing this stuff, and you're candid about it.
//
The agencies do not like to answer to anyone. They especially don't like to answer to an independent IG because the independent IG, namely us, is going to publish what they find. And they really resent that.
//
The arguments against publishing are generally along the lines of, "It will hurt-- it's not in our national interest or national security interest to publish this stuff." That "the enemy, whoever that is, will make use of it for their own reasons."
//
Usually, most government employees want to do the right thing. I mean, they don't want to waste money. And they certainly don't want to engage in fraud. I mean, in fact, fraud is actually a very small percentage of what we encounter. Mostly, there are bad decisions being made, which result in waste. And sometimes people don't know they're making bad decisions. They think they're making the right decision.
//
It's extraordinarily important to have nonpartisan oversight, in our opinion. // And, you know, that's hard to do. And the reason it's hard to do is because it's hard to pick individuals who are immune to that partisanship.

One of the advantages that we've had at SIGAR, in my opinion – and I'm being very candid about this – is that the IG, the deputy IG and I don't care whether we get fired, O.K.? And that's very unusual. // We're

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much older, and much more experienced – and recklessly self-confident that we'll get another job somewhere.

So we don't really care…about what the agencies think or how high the heat gets turned up. And that's very rare in government. // So we do what needs to be done and what we think is the right thing to do.
//
Fearlessness is an important part of the job. I think that's the single most important thing.
//
The general public needs to know that somebody's watching over their money. You need to have faith that somebody is taking a look at government spending and is trying to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse. And I think that's good for our country.

OHP 32 SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator

When I was interviewed, they were interviewing for criminal investigators for Afghanistan and for the U.S. And at that I specified that I wanted to stay in the U.S., based on my previous experience. I've already been over there. // I don't want to go back at this particular time. But I was open to it if the needs of the agency dictated that.
//
I was well-aware and familiar with SIGAR from my tenure in Afghanistan. So I said, "Oh, this is a great opportunity. It's a great fit." And so that's how I was aware of it and was excited to take the position. And I came on board I think it was, like, a month after I retired in June, retired from the FBI. And I came on board in June of 2012.
//
With SIGAR, one of the first cases that I worked, I kind of carved out a niche in that I formed a partnership with the agents from various agencies who worked in the Southern District of Illinois at U.S. TRANSCOM, which is [the] U.S. Transportation Command.

And those agents were trying to stand up a task force concerned with all the cargo that was going to and from Afghanistan and those contractors who were responsible for transporting that cargo in and out of Afghanistan. Because what they were finding was it was wrought with fraud.

And they were excited to have me on board, because of my prior experience in Afghanistan. In addition to that, SIGAR had agents on the ground who weren't just there for a few months. So we had a presence there that they could rely on to cover those leads and get things done. So it was a win-win situation. We formed a really strong partnership.
//
One of the things that I understood and also most of my counterparts understood, [was] the difficulties of travel within Afghanistan. You know, those cargo carriers had insurmountable circumstances at times…There were issues there as well, because you had the Taliban. And the Taliban were known to request bribes and attack cargo caravans.

So it was a really, really, really tough environment. But also, one of the challenges we found [was] that-- there was very little oversight in terms of these cargo carriers. And because of that, the fraud was rampant in terms of what they-- some of the pricing and the overcharging for the U.S. government.
//
We worked some great cases against some of the major transporters that transport cargo in and out of, everywhere in the world. And we were able to recover over that time period, actually over about three years, between $200 million and $300 million, which was substantial. And it really made a difference, in my opinion, in terms of our effort to thwart fraud and contract corruption.
//
I think that SIGAR did a tremendous job in curbing some of that waste, fraud, and abuse. But I think that we're-- I don't know the percentage that we stopped. But I'd venture to say that we probably only scratched the surface, to say the least, in that regard.
//
The public thinks the government's big. And the government is big. But SIGAR is-- it's a very small entity that made a big difference. I think the public would, you know, be astonished to know that SIGAR constitutes a couple hundred people. // I think the public would be impressed that this is-- a very efficient operation that yielded a lot of results. They got their benefit out of SIGAR.

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OHP 33 SIGAR Investigative Special Agent; Criminal Investigator

I made four deployments to Afghanistan during the course of my tenure here with SIGAR. //
I went there to interview potential witnesses in all of my cases. // Our objective was to track down the witness and interview them, in the furtherance of the investigations. // The whole level of danger, that was kind of foreign to me – in the sense that it was an ongoing struggle over there, and I think the idea of something going wrong was kind of heightened.
//
When you went to Afghanistan, there was always the threat. We used to say in the [SIGAR] Investigations Directorate, "If something's going to go wrong, it's going to go wrong in Afghanistan." And, when you're told that before you deploy, you'd better have your game face on.
//
I was brought in to SIGAR in 2016 to initiate Foreign Corrupt Practices Act cases – FCPA cases – briberies, extortions, things like that. // I met with DOJ officials right away, and I said, "This is who we are. This is what I plan on doing. Are you O.K. with this?" And they're like, "O.K., yeah, whatever." So I said, "If you come across any type of case involving the Department of Defense or anything involving Afghanistan, we'd like to know about it." And I got calls. So I initiated two or three cases within the first six months of being here. // One case leads to another case, leads to another interest, leads to another person of interest, leads to other leads.
//
Every case that I initiated was FCP-related – every case. // FCPA cases…are not easy cases. They're very complex. // The [U.S.] Government allows a certain amount of bribe activity to take place overseas. And it's very difficult to get past that allowance. And the dollar-figure cases that we were working in Afghanistan – we were able to substantiate FCPA criminal conduct, but the dollar value of those cases was not large enough to prosecute here in the United States.
//
It was very difficult to develop an FCPA case where you were going after, say, a contractor who had bribed somebody for $3 million to get a $500 million contract. Really hard to do that. I was going after contractors who were bribing Afghan government officials for visas and things along those lines, business licenses. We proved those cases. But the DOJ here in D.C. was reluctant to want to prosecute those types of cases.
//
I realized that if you're going to work a good overseas case, it better be big. It better be big – because you're going to develop a lot of resources to work that case. You're going to spend a lot of time on those cases. It's not going to be an overnight success, by any stretch. It's just going to take time and patience. And, in government circles, that's hard. That's difficult – because they want results.
//
In 2016, we saw an opportunity on an entity that had skated and got away with it. // [In this] current case, we're talking hundreds of millions [of dollars]. [It's] been ongoing now for about five years, six years. // I call that "the Mother Lode Case." That's the case that['s] really – just really fascinating. // One thing led to the next to the next to the next to next. It's fascinating. It's just incredible.
//
[Afghanistan reconstruction] was all about the money, and the contractors made a lot of money. And a lot of Afghans made a lot of money. Our job was to try and prevent that. I think we did to a degree with what we had. It's very complicated, but it is what it is.
//
My goal throughout my career has been to effect change. I might not get the home run, but I don't care. These companies know that we came after them – and we got 'em. And now they have to change. And they're better for it. There's no doubt about it.

SEE p.5, "SIGAR OHP Interviews: How to Access Video/Audio/Transcripts"

APPENDIX I - ACKNOWLEDGMENTS (as of September 2025)

Philip J. LaVelle, Executive Director of Public Affairs
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