

Speech delivered by Eugene Aloise, Deputy Inspector General, on December 9, 2022, at the Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you about the key lessons SIGAR has learned from the 20 years the United States and its allies spent trying to reconstruct Afghanistan. First, a little bit about SIGAR. SIGAR stands for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. As one of over 70 Inspectors General in the U.S. federal government, it is SIGAR's mission – and the mission of SIGAR's over 130 staff – to identify waste, fraud, and abuse in government projects and programs, while also recommending ways to improve government efficiency.

The reason Congress created SIGAR in 2008 comes down to dollars and cents. To date, the U.S. government has appropriated over \$146 billion U.S. dollars for Afghanistan's reconstruction since 2001. That amount includes humanitarian assistance but does not include the amount the U.S. spent on warfighting. The U.S. Department of Defense has reported that its obligations for both warfighting and reconstruction amounted to nearly \$850 billion.

Over the past 13 years, SIGAR has issued over 740 audits and other reports, and made over 1,200 recommendations to federal agencies to recover funds, improve agency oversight, and increase program effectiveness, saving the U.S. taxpayer approximately \$2.3 billion. In addition, SIGAR's criminal investigations have resulted in 167 criminal convictions and over \$1.6 billion in criminal fines, restitutions, forfeitures, and civil settlements. Importantly, SIGAR is the only Inspector General in the U.S. government with a dedicated lessons learned program. We have issued 12 comprehensive sector reports useful not only in Afghanistan, but anywhere reconstruction is undertaken in a conflict or post-conflict environment. These reports provide in-depth analysis on a range of topics including anticorruption, stabilization, economic development, gender equality, security sector assistance, and monitoring and evaluation. SIGAR also issued five congressionally requested evaluations this year, most recently concerning the fall of the Afghan government and risks to the Afghan people post- the Taliban takeover.

What I will talk about today are the lessons we have drawn in our reports, and, in particular, three reports that have come out since the fall of the Afghan government last year. The first is a report that was literally issued the day after the government fell on August 15, 2021. It covers what SIGAR at that point saw as the most important lessons to be drawn from 20 years of Afghanistan reconstruction and that apply to other conflict areas around the globe. The other two were evaluations requested by the U.S. Congress and concern the reasons for the collapse of the Afghan security forces, and the collapse of the Afghan government. Together, these three reports distill SIGAR's understanding of the top 10 lessons to be learned for future U.S. and allied reconstruction efforts. (And by the way, one of our lessons is that although the U.S. government often says it will never undertake another reconstruction effort, it almost certainly will. Some would argue that another one is already underway in Ukraine.)

But first, what has the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan involved? Over 20+ years, the U.S. government has appropriated the more than \$146 billion I've already mentioned trying to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil

society. As I said, this is separate from the hundreds of billions of dollars the U.S. Defense Department spent on warfighting, during which 2,456 American troops and 1,144 allied troops were killed and 20,666 U.S. troops injured. These extraordinary costs were meant to serve a purpose—though the definition of that purpose evolved over time. At various points, the U.S. government hoped to eliminate al-Qaeda, decimate the Taliban movement that hosted them, deny all terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan, build Afghan security forces so they could deny terrorists a safe haven in the future, and help the civilian government become legitimate and capable enough to win the trust of Afghans. Although there were successes – the Afghan government and its allies did manage to hold off the Taliban for 20 years, and a generation of Afghans, especially women and young people, benefitted from improved health, education, and welfare – we can safely say now that the U.S. and its allies failed to achieve their goals in Afghanistan despite a massive expenditure of blood and treasure.

Here are the most important reasons that we found for that failure.

1. The U.S. government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent, realistic strategy for what it hoped to achieve.

The challenges U.S. officials faced in creating long-term, sustainable improvements raise questions about the ability of U.S. government agencies to devise, implement, and evaluate reconstruction strategies. Throughout the conflict, the United States continually revisited the most fundamental of strategic questions—most prominently, who America’s enemies and allies were, and exactly what the U.S. government should try to accomplish. While the initial strategy was tied to the destruction of al-Qaeda, it grew considerably to include defeating the Taliban, an insurgent group deeply entrenched in Afghan communities, and then expanded again to include ousting corrupt Afghan officials who frequently undermined U.S. efforts.

Meanwhile, deteriorating security compelled the mission to grow even further in scope. U.S. officials believed the solution to insecurity was pouring ever more resources into Afghan institutions—but the absence of progress after the surge of civilian and military assistance between 2009 and 2011 made it clear that fundamental problems were unlikely to be addressed by changing resource levels. The U.S. government was simply not equipped to undertake something this ambitious in such an uncompromising environment, no matter the budget.

After a decade of escalation, the U.S. began a gradual, decade-long drawdown that steadily revealed how dependent and vulnerable the Afghan government really was. U.S. strategies had consistently articulated the goal of building stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable governance institutions in Afghanistan. In the end, the United States resoundingly failed.

2. The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan. As a result, timelines and expectations were unrealistic, and spending was quickly—and wrongly—conflated with success. These dynamics increased corruption and reduced the effectiveness of programs.

The U.S. reconstruction experience in Afghanistan could be described as 20 one-year efforts, rather than one 20-year effort. U.S. officials often underestimated the time and resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan, leading to short-term solutions like the surge of troops, money, and assets from 2009–2011. U.S. officials also prioritized their own political preferences for what they wanted reconstruction to look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve given the constraints and conditions on the ground.

Early in the war, U.S. officials denied the civilian mission the resources necessary to have an impact. Illustratively, Afghanistan received about \$67 in annual per capita assistance in the first 2 years of post-conflict U.S. aid; by comparison, Bosnia—another recent post-conflict setting—received \$249 in annual per capita assistance in a 2-year period following hostilities there.

As security deteriorated and demands on donors increased, so did pressure to demonstrate progress. U.S. officials created explicit timelines for completion of the mission in the mistaken belief that a decision in Washington could transform the calculus of complex Afghan institutions, powerbrokers, and communities contested by the Taliban. By design, these timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and forced reckless compromises in U.S. programs, creating perverse incentives to spend quickly and focus on short-term, unsustainable goals that could not create conditions to allow for a victorious U.S. withdrawal. As former U.S. National Security Council “war czar” Douglas Lute put it, the prevailing ethos was “spend, spend, spend.” Rather than reform and improve, Afghan institutions and powerbrokers found ways to co-opt the funds for their own purposes, which only worsened the problems U.S. programming was meant to address. When U.S. officials eventually recognized this dynamic, they simply found new ways to ignore conditions on the ground.

Meanwhile, consecutive U.S. presidents expressed their desire to draw down the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. In the years leading up to the Afghan government’s collapse, this drawdown occurred in full view of the Afghan government’s inability to address instability or prevent it from worsening. As SIGAR reported, the single most important factor in the demise of the Afghan security forces was the U.S. decision to withdraw its troops and contractors in Afghanistan through the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. This agreement and the subsequent U.S. withdrawal destroyed the morale of Afghan security forces.

3. The U.S. government failed to appreciate how corrosive corruption was to its goals in Afghanistan, and how its interventions contributed to, rather than alleviated, endemic corruption.

In Afghanistan, tens of billions of dollars injected into the Afghan economy, combined with the limited spending capacity of the Afghan government, opened the door to widespread corruption. The amounts also exceeded the oversight capacity of the U.S. military and civilian agencies due to insecurity and an inability to move about the country, staffing shortages, lack of contract management expertise, and numerous layers of subcontractors

who were beyond the reach of contract monitors. U.S. officials often could not ensure a project was completed sufficiently or at all.

The saga of Kabul Bank illustrates the extent of the problem. In 2010, that bank—Afghanistan’s largest—nearly collapsed. Bank Chairman Sherkhan Farnood admitted that the bank operated as a massive pyramid scheme: Hundreds of millions of dollars had been fraudulently lent to fictitious companies in transactions that benefitted politically connected Afghan shareholders who never paid back those loans. U.S. government funds for Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police salaries regularly moved through the bank, which used the money to cover customers’ withdrawals, concealing the bank’s steadily diminishing reserves. Meanwhile, deposits by ordinary Afghan citizens were used to fund the fraudulent loans. Two of the principal beneficiaries of the fraudulent loans were Mahmoud Karzai and Haseen Fahim—the brothers of President Karzai and Vice President Marshall Mohammed Fahim, respectively. Ultimately, the extent of the theft was estimated to be roughly \$982 million. Most of that money has never been recovered.

Anticorruption eventually became a priority, at least in theory: Starting in 2009, U.S. officials began mounting a more energetic response. That response, however, ran up against deeply entrenched, corrupt networks, and an Afghan government resistant to meaningful reform. U.S. policymakers tended to believe that fully confronting the corruption problem—for instance, by taking a hard stand against corrupt acts by high-level officials—would impede their ability to achieve security and political goals. But in the long term, this was a false choice: Corruption grew so pervasive that it ultimately helped erode what scant legitimacy the weak, centralized Afghan government might have had, contributing to its collapse.

4. Many of the institutions and infrastructure projects the United States built were not sustainable.

Reconstruction programs were intended to serve as a foundation for building the necessary institutions of government, civil society, and commerce to sustain the country indefinitely. Every mile of road the United States built and every government employee it trained was thought to serve as a springboard for even more improvements and to enable U.S. funding to eventually end. Yet, not long before the Afghan government’s collapse, nearly 80 percent of Afghanistan’s \$11 billion in total annual public expenditures were covered by donor grants.

Why did all the U.S. money poured into the country not result in a better return? Partly, because the U.S. government often failed to ensure its projects were sustainable over the long term, as SIGAR has repeatedly highlighted. Billions of dollars were wasted as projects went unused or fell into disrepair. For example, in 2021 SIGAR reported that the United States had spent nearly \$7.8 billion on capital assets in Afghanistan, including buildings, transmission lines and substations, roads and bridges, motor vehicles, and aircraft. Of that total, \$2.4 billion—nearly 31%—was spent on assets that were not being used as intended, remained unused, or had been abandoned or destroyed.

Demands to make fast progress incentivized U.S. officials to identify and implement short-term projects with little consideration for the Afghan government's capacity to fund and sustain them long-term. U.S. agencies were seldom judged by their projects' continued utility, but by the number of projects completed and dollars spent—outputs vs. outcomes. Over time, U.S. policies emphasized that all U.S. reconstruction projects must be sustainable, but Afghans were often unable or unwilling to take responsibility for them. In response, the U.S. government tried to help build Afghan institutional capacity, but those institutions often could not keep up with U.S. demands for fast progress. Even when programs achieved short-term success, they frequently did not sustain because the Afghans who would eventually take responsibility for them were poorly equipped, trained, or motivated.

5. Civilian and military personnel policies and practices thwarted the effort.

The U.S. government's inability to get the right people into the right jobs at the right times was one of the most significant failures of the mission. It is also one of the hardest to repair. U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain. Some Americans assigned to be police advisors were helicopter pilots and received little formal training in policing. The training many military advisors received was not even Afghanistan-specific. With such a training deficiency, some police advisors turned to television shows like "Cops" and "NCIS" desperate to become more familiar with policing. When the U.S. military recognized in 2009 that it did not have enough civil affairs teams to build infrastructure in contested Afghan communities, it tried to mass-produce these teams by shortening training requirements and by taking chemical warfare response personnel and turning them into civil affairs units.

Meanwhile, every agency experienced what SIGAR called "the annual lobotomy" as staff constantly rotated out yearly, taking with them their institutional memories. This left their successors to start from scratch and make similar mistakes all over again, directly affecting the quality of reconstruction. There were often not enough staff to oversee the spending, and certainly not enough who were qualified to do so. This was particularly true for civilian agencies, such as State or the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which should have led the effort but were unable to meaningfully perform that role. By the end of 2011, more than 20% of all USAID personnel stationed overseas were working in Afghanistan—and the agency still fell short of meeting the U.S. government's average ratio of dollars spent per contracting oversight officer. The better-resourced Department of Defense filled the void, but this created tensions with civilian agencies that often had different ideas about how to conduct reconstruction.

6. Persistent insecurity severely undermined reconstruction efforts.

The absence of violence was a critical precondition for everything U.S. officials tried to do in Afghanistan—yet the U.S. effort to rebuild the country took place while it was being torn apart. For example, helping Afghans develop a credible electoral process became ever more difficult as insecurity across the country steadily worsened—intimidating voters, preventing voter registration, and closing polling stations on election day. In remote areas where the

Taliban contested control, the Afghan security forces were unable to make sufficient gains to convince frightened rural Afghans of the benefits of supporting their government. The long-term development of Afghanistan's security forces likewise saw a number of harmful compromises, for example, in the way police were trained, driven by the immediate need to address rising insecurity. The danger meant that even programs to reintegrate former fighters faltered, as ex-combatants could not be protected from retaliation if they rejoined their communities. Toward the end of the conflict, civilian U.S. officials could not even venture outside the Kabul's Green Zone to supervise reconstruction projects.

7. The U.S. government did not understand the Afghan context and therefore failed to tailor its efforts accordingly.

Ignorance of prevailing social, cultural, and political contexts in Afghanistan significantly contributed to failures at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Effectively rebuilding Afghanistan required a detailed understanding of the country's social, economic, and political dynamics. However, U.S. officials were consistently operating in the dark, often because of the difficulty of collecting the necessary information. As a member of former International Security Assistance Force Commander General Stanley McChrystal's assessment team observed, implementing an effective counterinsurgency campaign requires "a level of local knowledge that I don't have about my own hometown."

The U.S. government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions; trained security forces in advanced weapon systems they could not understand, much less maintain; imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means; and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers of supporting women and girls. As a result, U.S. officials often empowered powerbrokers who preyed on the population or diverted U.S. assistance away from its intended recipients to enrich and empower themselves and their allies. Lack of knowledge at the local level meant projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it.

8. Foreign aid does not necessarily win hearts and minds.

The United States believed that economic and social development programming would increase support for the Afghan government and reduce support for the Taliban insurgency. For example, economic growth was seen as a key driver of security, based on the assumption that a robust economy would keep young men in the workforce and out of the insurgency, create confidence in the government, and generate revenues that would enable the Afghan government to deliver services.

However, the theory that economic and social development programming could produce such outcomes has thin foundations. As far back as 2010, a report summarizing expert views concluded that there was "a surprisingly weak evidence base for the effectiveness of aid in promoting stabilization and security objectives." Referring to this and several other studies, a 2011 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report echoed this conclusion, stating, "The evidence that stabilization programs promote stability in Afghanistan is limited. Some

research suggests the opposite, and development best practices question the efficacy of using aid as a stabilization tool over the long run.” In recent interviews, multiple subject matter experts and U.S. officials doubted the effectiveness of service delivery absent good security and governance. As a former senior advisor to President Ghani, told us, “Building latrines does not make you love Ashraf Ghani.”

The kinds of services the U.S. government sought to help the Afghan government deliver were unnecessarily ambitious and not tailored to the environment. The prevailing belief was “that more government is better government,” in the words of one expert. While improvements in the delivery of healthcare, formal rule of law, education, and agriculture services may have helped many Afghans, the Coalition and the Afghan government sought to provide Afghans in contested areas an array of high-quality services that went well beyond what the Taliban had provided and required a level of capacity and legitimacy far beyond what the government could offer, particularly in the time allotted.

9. U.S. indecision over whether to stay in, or leave Afghanistan confused the Afghan government. Meanwhile, the U.S.-Taliban agreement for the U.S. to withdraw emboldened the Taliban.

A history of U.S. indecision on the issue of withdrawal, each instance of which ended with the United States still in Afghanistan, contributed to a belief among Afghan government officials that the United States was not serious about actually leaving. At the same time, the U.S.-Taliban agreement gave the Taliban confidence to wait out a withdrawal, while seeking a military victory.

As early as October 2001, President George W. Bush expressed a desire to quickly exit Afghanistan by putting the United Nations in charge of the country’s administration. However, deteriorating security, particularly between 2005 and 2006, caused the U.S. and international mission to shift away from peacekeeping. By the end of his presidency, President Bush contemplated implementing a fully resourced counterinsurgency campaign in the face of spiking violence—a decision he left to his successor, President Barack Obama. During his presidential campaign, Obama had repeatedly called for a renewed focus on the “just war.” But his commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan had limits. In December 2009, he announced a time-bound, 18-month surge of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, after which, he stated, “our troops will begin to come home.” Nearly 6 years later, in October 2015, President Obama announced that the United States would halt its military withdrawal from Afghanistan and keep thousands of forces in the country through the end of his term. Before he was elected president, candidate Donald Trump publicly expressed in no uncertain terms his opposition to remaining in Afghanistan. Yet in August 2017, he increased troop levels and expanded the U.S. military’s ability to conduct operations and support the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

In February 2020, the U.S. signed an agreement with the Taliban that was nominally conditions-based. But the Taliban, in essence, declared victory. Within only a few months, the group initiated its offensive against the ANDSF, testing the agreement’s strength and

boundaries. By April 2021, it was clear the Taliban were confident they could defeat the Afghan government on the battlefield, according to a public U.S. intelligence assessment. Eventually, they believed, the U.S. “puppet government” would fall. Afghan elites and politicians, on the other hand, saw the fact that the United States had supported Afghanistan for 20 years and that Afghanistan had been highly dependent on external support for much of its modern history, as proof that they had no need to prepare for a future without such support. Their inability to imagine a counter-scenario prevented the Afghan government from preparing for a U.S. withdrawal. Former Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Laurel Miller colorfully described this phenomenon as “the unfathomability of ‘what do we do when the Americans leave?’”

10. U.S. government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is the process of determining what works, what does not, and what needs to change as a result. Conceptually, M&E is relatively straightforward, but in practice, it is extremely challenging. This is especially true in complex and unpredictable environments like Afghanistan, where staff turnover is rapid, multiple agencies must coordinate programs simultaneously, security and access restrictions make it hard to understand a program’s challenges and impact, and a myriad of variables compete to influence outcomes.

SIGAR’s body of work, which has touched every major reconstruction sector – health, education, rule of law, women’s rights, infrastructure, security assistance, and others – paints a picture of U.S. agencies struggling to effectively measure outcomes and impacts while sometimes relying on shaky data to make claims of success. In the end, the absence of periodic reality checks created the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly: M&E judged projects that completed required tasks as “successful,” whether or not they had achieved or contributed to broader, more important goals. Where strategic or programmatic evidence bases were weak, M&E was ill equipped to pick up on that weakness. Where performance indicators were poorly selected – or even irrelevant, M&E was unable to credibly establish whether objectives had been met. Where the problems projects were trying to solve were too large and complex (such as corruption or even the war itself), M&E was far too positive. On top of all of that, despite uncertainty about what worked, impact was rarely assessed. At times, it was simply assumed.

In July 2021, just prior to the Afghan government’s collapse, SIGAR wrote that optimistic assertions of progress were endemic. We expressed skepticism towards statements made by commanding generals over the years, all of whom asserted that the capability of the Afghan security forces was improving. We noted that we were then witnessing the purest monitoring and evaluation exercise to date: Whether the Afghan government could prevail on the battlefield. It did not, and the rest is history.

We’ve covered a lot of ground. In conclusion, I’d like to take you back to that fateful day nearly 16 months ago. On August 15, 2021, former President Ghani boarded a helicopter and

fled the country. With that, the two-decade long U.S. and allied effort to transform Afghanistan came to a close. Whether a different outcome could have been achieved in Afghanistan is a question for history. For now, what stands out most is the significance of the tragedy that unfolded over 20 years. Before the Afghan government's collapse, SIGAR had identified approximately \$19 billion of waste, fraud, and abuse in our published reports and closed investigations. But lives lost – the more than 3,500 American and allied service members and the tens of thousands of Afghans – were the far greater cost. If there is one overarching lesson to be learned from the totality of this tragedy – call it “the lesson of lessons” – it is that any future reconstruction mission similar in scale and ambition to that in Afghanistan is likely to be difficult, costly, and defined by the very real possibility of an unfavorable outcome.