



Prepared Remarks of  
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**“The United States Mission in Afghanistan: A View from SIGAR John Sopko”**

Sanford School of Public Policy  
Duke University  
March 23, 2017

David, thank you for your kind introduction. I want to thank Duke University and the Sanford School of Public Policy for inviting me to speak here today. It's an honor to be invited to be here at the institution named after former Governor and Senator Terry Sanford who I had the great pleasure of working with. In particular, I want to thank David. There's an old saying in Washington that you never really lose a boss, you only gain more – and since I had the pleasure of working for David on the House Homeland Security Committee, I could hardly turn down his invitation to speak tonight. Just for the record though, I will note that my last and current boss have both been Presidents of the United States – so David's in good company.

**Introduction to SIGAR**

David asked me to speak about the current U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, and to keep my comments relatively short so that we have ample time for questions. First though, I want to briefly explain who I am and what my agency does. As David said, I'm the head of a little agency called SIGAR – the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. As one of over seventy Inspectors General in the federal government, it is my mission to identify waste, fraud, and abuse in government projects and programs, while also recommending ways to improve government initiatives and improve government efficiency.

Unlike other IGs, we are not housed within a single agency, and our jurisdiction crosses agency boundaries. That is because a multitude of agencies – from the usual suspects of the Department of State, USAID, and the Department of Defense, to agencies such as the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce, among many others, have had a hand in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort; and our jurisdiction covers any government agency supporting the effort. The need for holistic, cross-agency oversight was one of the primary reasons Congress created a special agency to monitor the

reconstruction effort.

The other reason comes down to dollars and cents – cents with a “c.” To date, over \$117 billion dollars have been appropriated for the Afghanistan reconstruction effort by the United States alone. That amount, adjusted for inflation, is more than the United States spent on the entire Marshall Plan after World War II, and does not include the actual costs of warfighting. Of that \$117 billion, over \$8 billion still remains to be spent, and the U.S. has committed to providing an additional \$5-6 billion a year through 2020. So Congress, in 2008, decided that they needed a truly independent pair of eyes monitoring this spending.

Since SIGAR’s establishment in 2009, we’ve published approximately 250 audit and inspection products, made nearly 700 recommendations, 84% of which have been addressed, and identified nearly \$1 billion in questioned costs and funds that could be put to better use.

SIGAR is also a law enforcement agency, and we have roughly 50 law enforcement agents who wear badges and carry guns, and who have arrested 105 individuals, resulting in 144 criminal indictments and charges and 109 convictions and guilty pleas. Our investigations directorate has also recovered an additional \$1 billion for the taxpayer in fines, restitution, recoveries, cost savings, and contract monies protected.

One of our special agents is even stationed at Fort Bragg, and works with the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Raleigh. Their work has resulted in the convictions of 14 military members based in North Carolina on charges including bribery, conspiracy, theft, and bulk cash smuggling. Sentences have ranged from 10 months to 15 years in prison. SIGAR and the U.S. Attorney are currently investigating about a dozen more North Carolina-based military members for illegal activity related to the Afghanistan Reconstruction effort. We’ve recovered \$27.7 million for the taxpayer just from our cases in this state alone.

Given our annual appropriation of just over \$57 million, I’d say \$2 billion in savings and recoveries is a pretty good return on investment.

### **What Went Right**

With that background out of the way, let’s turn to the situation in Afghanistan. I’m going to start on a positive note – not something I’m known for – and first discuss what’s gone right during our 15-plus years in Afghanistan.

The most obvious impact of the U.S. intervention and reconstruction effort in Afghanistan is that the Taliban are no longer in power, and al-Qaeda no longer has a stable safe haven in Afghanistan, and, while tenuous, democracy has thus far been

lasting, with one of the first peaceful transfers of power in Afghan history when President Karzai handed over power to President Ghani two years ago.

Health and education outcomes have generally been better in the past decade, although we recently released an audit questioning how much U.S. assistance actually contributed to some of those successes. While we know we built a lot of schools and hospitals, it's less clear whether and how they're currently being used.

Generally speaking, security is better throughout the country than in previous decades. Yet, this is admittedly a low bar, since the Taliban remain a resurgent force, along with a growing ISIS presence and the lingering remnants of al-Qaeda, among other terrorist groups.

### **What Went Wrong**

When I took this job in 2012, I was determined to highlight successes as well as failures – and SIGAR has done so – when the evidence demonstrated success. In fact, I was so intent on highlighting successes that I wrote the Secretaries of Defense and State, and the USAID Administrator and asked them to report to me on their 10 most successful projects in Afghanistan – none of them chose to do so, saying they couldn't really measure success between their various programs and projects. That should tell you a lot about how government works.

So, in light of that, what has SIGAR found that hasn't gone particularly well in the reconstruction effort? And I should add that many, if not all, of what I'm about to mention doesn't simply impact the effectiveness of our nation's efforts, but also the viability of the Afghan democratic state.

Without question, the top two challenges in Afghanistan are corruption and the lack of capacity of the Afghan security forces. And in many cases, the two go hand in hand.

Afghanistan was no doubt a corrupt country before the U.S. intervention in October 2001, but it now ranks as eighth from the bottom in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, in 169<sup>th</sup> place. This is an improvement from a year previous, where it was third from the bottom, but the countries Afghanistan can now claim it is less corrupt than are all popular corruption tourism hot-spots like Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, North Korea, South Sudan, and Somalia.

Last October, SIGAR released the first in a series of Lessons Learned reports. That report focused on the reconstruction effort's impact on corruption in Afghanistan. Among other things, our report found that the massive influx of U.S. aid, contractors, and military funding significantly compounded the corruption problem in Afghanistan.

Would corruption be bad if we'd never gone into Afghanistan? Most probably. Would it be this bad? Almost certainly not. We, along with other international donors, put too much money, too quickly, into too small an economy, with too little oversight – all of which contributed to the problem.

The capacity and capabilities of the Afghan security forces also present a major challenge, and will likely be the matter that keeps the U.S. in Afghanistan the longest. Over 15 years into the intervention, the Afghan security forces cannot stand on their own without continuing U.S. financial and operational support.

The United States has provided more than \$70 billion to build security forces in Afghanistan that can combat the Taliban and other threats since 2002, including billions to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police, and the Afghan Air Force. The U.S. contribution to the Afghan security forces not only pays for their salaries, but also their equipment, their training, their food, their fuel, their weapons, and their basing infrastructure.

During the 2016 fighting season, the Taliban did not achieve its primary goal of taking and holding a provincial capital – despite several attempts. Yet the best the 320,000 strong Afghan security forces could do was to constantly chase the Taliban around Afghanistan, retaking territory, including key provinces and cities, instead of conducting offensive operations against the insurgency in a deadly version of whack-a-mole.

Over 5,000 Afghan security personnel were killed in action in the first eight months of 2016 alone – almost double the number of Americans killed in action in Afghanistan in the last 15 years – so it is not for a lack of brave and willing Afghans.

But as I have found on over 20 trips to Afghanistan, and as many other observers believe, the combination of corruption and poor leadership in the security forces is the root cause of their ineffectiveness. Successive commanding generals of U.S.-Forces Afghanistan have stated that leadership is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, challenge facing the Afghan security forces.

Not long ago, the New York Times reported that the Afghan security forces have over 1,000 generals – more than the entire U.S. active-duty military. Oddly, unlike our military, there seem to be a dearth of colonels. People will bribe their way to a generalship; not so much to be a colonel. Others received their position through ethnic or family patronage networks.

In fact, on my last trip to Afghanistan, I was informed that the Afghan security forces currently have no standards or systems by which to identify, evaluate, and ultimately promote individuals of lower rank to general. President Ghani's senior advisor was

recently in Washington and said publicly that 90 generals had been fired – that’s a start, but there’s a long way to go – including the need to create a system for evaluating and promoting officers based on merit and not on who you know, are related to, or bribed.

As one example that caught significant headlines in 2015, the Afghan 215<sup>th</sup> Corps in the key province of Helmand disintegrated, requiring the NATO-led Resolute Support mission to rush advisors down to Helmand to try and overhaul the Corps’ leadership structure. The failure of the 215<sup>th</sup> corps, which seemingly caught everybody by surprise, was in large part due to the significant number of non-existent, or, “ghost” soldiers on its payroll and a resultant overestimation of its capabilities, for the simple reason that Afghan leadership believed they had more soldiers on the ground than they actually did. U.S. forces were deployed to help avoid a complete fiasco, and the commanding general was replaced for “poor leadership.” Unfortunately, his replacement was also replaced within just a few months, for again, “poor leadership.” There seems to be a theme here.

“Ghost” soldiers exist because names are either added – or never removed – from the Afghan payroll, and their salaries are pocketed by higher ranking commanders. When their commanders act in this way, how can we be surprised when 75 percent of all personnel losses to the Afghan security forces are due to soldiers simply walking away?

It is also a problem for the U.S. taxpayer, because we pay the salaries of Afghan soldiers and police, and we rely on numbers provided by the Afghan government to determine how much funding to provide. The current Resolute Support commander, General John Nicholson, is actively trying to tackle this problem, but the number of ghost personnel may go into the tens of thousands.

There is also documented evidence that the Taliban have instructed their field commanders to simply purchase U.S. supplied weapons, fuel, and ammunition from Afghan soldiers because to do so is both easier and less expensive than procuring them from other sources.

Sustainability is another area where U.S. and other donor efforts could have been conducted more effectively. During the height of the so-called “surge” the U.S. built a lot of schools, hospitals, and all sorts of other facilities as part of the U.S. counter-insurgency effort. Unfortunately, no one at State, USAID, or DOD ever considered how the Afghan government would be able to maintain these facilities after the U.S. withdrew. Many projects have been abandoned because the Afghans can’t afford the fuel to run the generator to keep the lights on, or the medicines in stock to make a hospital viable.

Perhaps one of the most glaring failures of the entire reconstruction effort has been the counternarcotics effort. The United States has spent over \$8.5 billion to combat opium production in Afghanistan. Yet 15 years later, opium production and cultivation are at near all-time highs, and eradication efforts have essentially collapsed, despite the fact that General Nicholson estimates that 60 percent of the Taliban's funding comes from the opium trade. Much like in many other countries, poor Afghans are going to grow the crop that fetches them the most at market, and in an economy as poor as Afghanistan's, with limited access to trade routes, opium is usually the most financially beneficial crop – even if you do have to put up with the Taliban taxing it and the occasional government official stealing it.

These are some of the major areas where the reconstruction effort has been, to put it kindly, less than successful. There's a category of things we've also found that, with apologies to David Letterman, I'll refer to as "Stupid Bureaucrat Tricks."

For example, the Defense Department spent over \$400 million to buy and retrofit 20 Italian cargo planes for the Afghan Air Force that turned out to essentially be death traps, barely flew in Afghanistan at all, and were scrapped at an additional cost to the taxpayer of over \$100,000. Even after the retrofit, the Defense Department had to assign test pilots to fly them to Afghanistan because regular pilots refused the task.

The Defense Department also built a \$34 million command and control facility at Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan for the Marine Corps. There was a slight problem, however. Even before construction started, the "surge" was over and by the time construction was completed, the Marines were abandoning the base. To their credit, several Marine generals tried to convince the Defense Department not to build what I consider the best built building I've ever seen in Afghanistan, but their entreaties were ignored. It now stands abandoned and empty, a testament to poor planning and accountability in Afghanistan.

Then there was the DOD task force that spent \$43 million to build a Compressed National Gas filling station in Sherberghan, Afghanistan. Unfortunately, there were no cars in Afghanistan that ran on natural gas – and there were no other filling stations. So the U.S. spent additional funds to retrofit the city's taxis to run on natural gas.

The same task force spent approximately \$6 million to transport and build the infrastructure to support a handful of rare Italian goats to breed with Afghan goats in an attempt to improve Afghanistan's cashmere quality. Many of the goats got sick and died, and the project director quit in frustration. And I'm not sure flying Italian goats into Afghanistan was exactly what the Founders' had in mind when they created a standing army for the United States.

USAID and the State Department have made their share of “stupid bureaucrat tricks” as well, including building hospitals much larger than the Afghans can afford to maintain, or, as we’ve more recently discovered, having the wrong GPS coordinates for many of the things we did build. My team was a little surprised to note that the U.S. funded an Afghan clinic that’s apparently floating around the Mediterranean somewhere, according to the GPS coordinates we were provided. At least one USAID official had a sense of humor about it – he jokingly asked me why SIGAR was criticizing his agency for pre-positioning resources ahead of the great refugee migration across the Mediterranean.

All joking aside, as a result of these and numerous other projects that SIGAR has been told about and located, or even just literally stumbled across, we developed seven key questions that should be answered before a foreign assistance project is undertaken. The questions, such as whether the recipient country wants it and needs it, have made it into the National Defense Authorization Act, at least for large infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. I hope, eventually, Congress requires that contracting officers implement them across the board and across the globe.

### **The Way Forward**

So where does this all leave us? There is no magic answer, unfortunately. As an Inspector General I do process, and not policy – it’s not my job to decide whether we should be involved in Afghanistan or not – yet there are some items that any observer can identify that will need to be addressed so that the Afghan state can stand on its own two feet.

As many of you know doubt saw, earlier this month the President released a preliminary budget that calls for significant reductions in foreign assistance funding. Again, budget decisions are policy decisions and not within my purview. However, I do think that with a new Administration and a new Congress, it is a good idea and opportune time to re-evaluate our efforts in Afghanistan and find out what’s working, and what’s not – whether that exercise is done out of financial necessity or simply in the interest of good governance. And it is long overdue for our policymakers to ask agencies some tough questions about what has worked and what hasn’t in Afghanistan.

One smart first step would be to do what SIGAR recommended years ago, which is for each of the three major agencies involved in the reconstruction effort – State, USAID, and DOD – to “rack and stack” their top and worst performing projects so they know where to invest further and where to cut their losses. Arguing, as one former USAID official did, that comparing their projects “would be like picking which of his children was his favorite” not only belies common sense, but does a disservice to the taxpayer and the reconstruction effort – this is not “Sophie’s Choice” – this is good policy that every

agency should practice.

Another step the agencies should take is to certify that programs have clearly defined objectives; measurable benchmarks; and sustainable end-states; these programs should also be subject to consistent monitoring, documentation, and accountability measures; they should also be coordinated with other U.S. entities, Afghan institutions and civil society, with other international donors, and with pertinent nongovernmental organizations.

Again, some or all of this may seem like common sense, but it's been amazing to me how little common sense has been applied to our reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. Oversight and monitoring of our projects isn't just important because I'm an Inspector General and say it is, or because of the amount of money we've spent, but if you can't oversee, monitor, and coordinate your projects, how do you know that they're contributing to the reconstruction effort and not inadvertently having the opposite effect?

To that end, the agencies should also explain what steps they have taken to prevent U.S. funds from being diverted to or unintentionally providing support to the insurgency operating in Afghanistan. This is particularly important given that the Afghan government continues to lose territory to insurgent groups, and no doubt U.S. funding is still going to some of those areas, which is probably giving credibility to the insurgents – and not to the central government or the United States.

Will any of this, on its own, ensure that the insurgency is defeated by the Afghan security forces, even with potentially enhanced support from the U.S. military? No. It may take years or, more likely, decades for the Government of Afghanistan to achieve military and financial sustainability.

Nevertheless based upon my nearly forty years of oversight experience, I can assure you that we will have little chance of success if we do not take the time to reassess the entire reconstruction effort, and ensure oversight is mission critical in Afghanistan.

At a time like this, I am reminded of the words of two great observers of government operations. The first, Winston Churchill who said that "it is no use saying, 'we are doing our best.' To improve is to change; and to be perfect is to change often".

And in the same vein, Will Rogers reminded us all that " I don't make jokes, I just watch the government and report the facts".