



Prepared Remarks of
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“18 Years of Reconstruction: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan”

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Thank you for that kind introduction, and thank you to the Maxwell School, Dean Van Slyke, and Professor de Nevers for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today about the work my agency – the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – or SIGAR – has done to identify waste, fraud, and abuse in the 18-year and \$136 billion U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan.

But the 600-pound gorilla in the room is of course, the peace agreement that was signed during my latest trip to Kabul on February 29th and the potential withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan within the next 14 months. SIGAR’s jurisdiction extends only to reconstruction and we were not a part of the negotiations and do not opine on warfighting or broader foreign policy. However, I can say that there is a great deal of cautious optimism, but also an acknowledgement that these are early days and only time will tell whether the Taliban live up to their commitments and how the intra-Afghan negotiations progress. SIGAR, in our 2019 High-Risk List to Congress, pointed out eight key areas of the reconstruction effort that U.S. policymakers needed to be mindful of if a peace agreement was reached, and now that we seem to be at an inflection point, we will continue to be mindful of the need to protect the taxpayers’ investment as events in Afghanistan unfold, because the risks we have identified do not magically disappear with peace.

In the meantime, in addition to SIGAR’s broader work, I would specifically like to discuss our lessons learned program. During my last visit here in 2016, I had the opportunity to discuss SIGAR’s very first lessons learned report, which examined U.S. anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan. Four years, six additional lessons learned reports published, and a *Washington Post* series later, I’m eager to discuss the successes and failures SIGAR has identified in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort.

I'm sure you all know that Afghanistan is one of the most corrupt and insecure countries in the world. Afghan security force and civilian casualties are at or near all-time highs, and to date, over 2,300 service members have lost their lives.

In addition to the Taliban threat, there may be as many as 20 terrorist groups operating in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, the most notable of which is the so-called Islamic State.

Because of the widespread security threats, for the past several years all U.S. civilian personnel arriving in Afghanistan have been required to fly via government helicopter between the international airport and the U.S. Embassy -- a distance of just three kilometers, because that stretch of road has been deemed too dangerous for routine vehicle travel.

And as if the daily threat of violent attack isn't enough to deal with, SIGAR and other agencies also face the challenge of working in one of the most corrupt countries on the planet. Afghanistan ranks 173rd out of 180 countries on Transparency International's most recent Corruption Perception Index, and 91 percent of Afghans surveyed state that corruption is a problem in their daily lives.

Reconstruction is a large, lengthy, and difficult undertaking for any country. But the pervasive insecurity and corruption plaguing Afghanistan have severely inhibited U.S. reconstruction efforts, and have made oversight of these efforts incredibly difficult.

SIGAR 101

But despite having one of the toughest oversight tasks of any agency in the U.S. government, SIGAR has achieved some significant accomplishments. But before I talk about SIGAR's specific oversight mission, many of you may be wondering what an inspector general is, what we do, and why we do it?

Don't feel bad if you don't know what an Inspector General does generally or what a Special Inspector General does "specially." You are not alone. As I have discovered over the last seven years in this job -- many members of the executive branch and Congress don't know either.

In 2008, Congress created SIGAR, the little agency with a tobacco-sounding acronym, to combat waste, fraud, and abuse in the U.S. reconstruction effort in

Afghanistan. Why? Because we were spending more money in Afghanistan on reconstruction than we spent under the Marshall Plan to rebuild all of Europe after World War II and Congress felt they needed a dedicated and specialized agency to protect the taxpayer's investment, which now totals over \$136 billion.

Like all other Inspectors General, SIGAR has both auditing and law enforcement responsibilities, but unlike the other 73 federal inspectors general, SIGAR is not housed within any government agency. This means we have the unique ability to conduct oversight on any federal agency that has played a role in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort. To date, we have published nearly 600 audits, inspections, and other reports that have resulted in cost savings to the taxpayer of over \$3 billion and convicted over 130 individuals for misconduct related to reconstruction.

As I mentioned before, our work also includes seven lessons learned reports, which is what I'd like to discuss with you today.

Being the bright Syracuse students you are, I know you follow the news, and likely saw the attention surrounding the *Washington Post's* series titled "The Afghanistan Papers," which was largely based on raw notes from interviews SIGAR had conducted for our lessons learned program and which were provided to the Post in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act.

In light of this attention, I would like to tell you about how our Lessons Learned Program came about, what it does – and does not – do and some of the major themes that we have identified throughout our seven reports that we hope will be useful to policymakers in future U.S. contingency and reconstruction operations.

The Genesis and Purpose of the Lessons Learned Program

Our Lessons Learned Program was initiated soon after my appointment by President Obama as Inspector General in 2012. At that time, SIGAR was producing audits and inspections that identified a number of common problems, including poorly constructed infrastructure, rampant corruption, inadequate training for Afghan soldiers, rapid increases in opium production...and the list goes on. But every time we presented our findings, I received the same questions from members of Congress, agency officials, and other policymakers, particularly "What does it mean?" and "What can we learn from this?"

It has often been said that Afghanistan has not been an 18-year war, but rather 18 one-year wars. And I was frustrated to see that none of the agencies involved were attempting to derive any long-term lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan.

In an attempt to get agencies thinking about lessons learned from U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, in March 2013, I sent letters to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, asking them to provide me with a list of their agency's ten most and ten least successful Afghanistan reconstruction projects and programs, along with a detailed explanation of how these projects and programs were evaluated and the specific criteria used for each.

The answers we received from the agencies were informative, but they failed to specifically identify each agency's 10 most and 10 least successful projects or programs. Nor did they explain how the agencies measure success and failure. Their inability or refusal to do so not only limited our understanding of how government agencies evaluated and perceived both success and failure, but also missed an opportunity to learn some lessons from past reconstruction projects.

These letters were meant to get the agencies to really think about what was working and what was not working in Afghanistan so that they could replicate successes and avoid repeating failures.

In some ways, the agencies' reluctance to list their successes and failures is understandable. As the old saying goes, success has many parents, but failure is an orphan. Nowhere is this truer than in Afghanistan, where success is fleeting and failure is common. That is all the more reason why it is crucial to be honest with ourselves and to recognize that not everything is successful.

In response to this repeated refusal by the agencies to be candid about their successes and failures, and at the suggestion of Members of Congress, and a number of prominent other officials, including Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General John Allen, SIGAR formally launched our Lessons Learned Program in 2014.

Our Lessons Learned Program, which is limited to looking at reconstruction, was not and never was intended to be a new version of the Pentagon Papers, or to turn snappy one-liners and quotes into headlines or sound bites. We do not make broad assessments of U.S. diplomatic and military strategies or war fighting; nor do we

address the broader policy question of our ongoing presence in Afghanistan.

Rather, the Lessons Learned Program is intended to produce unclassified, publicly available, and thoroughly researched appraisals of important aspects of U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, as well as make actionable recommendations for Congress and Executive Branch agencies to improve operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere – something you won't find in a newspaper article.

Our goal for the program and our reports is to turn “lessons observed” by SIGAR into “lessons learned” by policymakers, so that future reconstruction efforts are more effective and more effectively use U.S. taxpayer money to further American foreign policy and national security goals.

SIGAR's Seven Lessons Learned Reports & Key Lessons

In order for you all to understand the breadth of topics that SIGAR's lessons learned program covers, let me briefly discuss the seven reports that we have issued to date, all of which can be found on SIGAR's website in both full and interactive formats.

- Our first lessons learned report, ***Corruption in Conflict***, published in 2016, found that corruption substantially undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from the very beginning. The lesson is that anticorruption efforts need to be at the center of planning and policymaking for contingencies like Afghanistan.
- Our second report, published in 2017, entitled ***Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces***, revealed that the U.S. government was ill-prepared to help build an Afghan army and police force capable of protecting Afghanistan from internal or external threats. We found that the U.S. government lacked a comprehensive approach and coordinating body to successfully implement the whole-of-government programs necessary to develop capable and self-sustaining Afghan security forces.
- In April 2018, we published our third report, ***Private Sector Development and Economic Growth***, which found that early economic successes in Afghanistan were undermined by ongoing physical insecurity and political instability, which discouraged investment and other economic activity.

- Our fourth report, **Stabilization**, was published in May 2018 and revealed that we greatly overestimated our ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan, and that reconstruction programs were not tailored to Afghanistan’s operating environment, were hampered by unrealistic timelines, and successes rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops.
- **Counternarcotics** was the subject of our fifth report, published in June 2018. We found that no program led to lasting reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production—and, without a willing Afghan partner and stable security environment, there was little possibility of future success.
- In 2019, our sixth report, **Divided Responsibility**, highlighted the difficulty of coordinating security sector assistance during active combat and under the umbrella of a 39-member NATO coalition when no specific DOD organization or military service was assigned ultimate responsibility for U.S. efforts.
- And last Fall, our seventh report, **Reintegration of Ex-Combatants**, examined the five main post-2001 efforts to reintegrate former combatants into Afghan society. We found that successful reintegration was a key to peace but that our prior efforts did not help any significant number of former fighters to reintegrate, did not weaken the insurgency, and did not reduce violence.

In addition to these seven reports, we plan to issue two reports this year – one on elections in Afghanistan and another on monitoring and evaluation of U.S. government contracts. We also expect to issue reports on women’s empowerment in Afghanistan, and another on policing and corrections in early 2021.

So what have we learned? SIGAR’s experts have been able to identify six overarching conclusions from our lessons learned reports and SIGAR’s other work:

- Successful reconstruction is incompatible with continuing insecurity.
- Unchecked corruption in Afghanistan undermined U.S. strategic goals—and the U.S. helped to foster that corruption.
- After the Taliban’s initial defeat, there was no clear reconstruction strategy and no single military service, agency, or nation in charge of reconstruction.

- Politically driven timelines undermined the reconstruction effort.
- If we cannot end short rotations of personnel or what we call the “annual lobotomy,” we should at least mitigate its impact; and
- To be effective, reconstruction efforts must be based on a deep understanding of the traditions of the host nation.

“Box of Broken Tools” – Fact vs. Fantasy

Many of the U.S. failures in reconstruction have quite simply been the result of U.S. personnel on the ground in Afghanistan being given a “box of broken tools” to work with, making it impossible to accurately judge whether a program is actually achieving its objectives.

Agencies have frequently misled themselves – and by extension to the American taxpayer – about successes in Afghanistan. This is in part due to the short rotations of U.S. personnel in Afghanistan.

It is simple human nature that no one wants to admit that they did not accomplish their mission in Afghanistan during their six-month, nine-month, or twelve-month tour of duty, whether as a soldier or civilian.

Now I’m not saying that the men and women working for State, USAID, and DOD in Afghanistan are all intentionally misrepresenting progress with nefarious motives. But unfortunately, they are operating in a system that incentivizes showing progress, however ephemeral or fleeting, which may not actually be reflected in reality.

We have found that many of the claims that agencies have made over time do not survive scrutiny. For example, in 2014, the then-USAID administrator, stated “today, 3 million girls and 5 million boys are enrolled in school—compared to just 900,000 when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan.” But a subsequent SIGAR audit found that USAID had taken few, if any, steps to verify the accuracy of the enrollment data it was receiving from the Afghan government, even though independent third parties and the Afghan Ministry of Education had called the numbers into question. And because USAID education support programs lacked effective metrics, USAID could not demonstrate how U.S. taxpayer dollars had contributed to the claimed increase in enrollment.

The same USAID administrator also claimed that since the fall of the Taliban, “child mortality has been cut [in Afghanistan] by 60 percent, maternal mortality has declined by 80 percent, and access to health services has been increased by 90 percent. As a result, Afghanistan has experienced the largest increase in life expectancy and the largest decreases in maternal and child deaths of any country in the world.”

Yet, SIGAR’s audit of Afghanistan’s health sector in 2017, found that while USAID publicly reported a 22-year increase in Afghan life expectancy from 2002 to 2010, USAID did not disclose that the baseline it used for comparison came from a World Health Organization (WHO) report that could only make an estimate because of limited data. A later WHO report showed only a 6-year increase in Afghan life expectancy for males and an 8-year increase for females between 2002 and 2010—a far cry from the 22 years that USAID claimed. As for the maternal mortality claims, SIGAR’s audit found that USAID’s 2002 baseline data was suspect since it was from a survey conducted in only *four* of Afghanistan’s then-360 districts.

Likewise, a SIGAR audit of U.S. government programs to assist women in Afghanistan found that “although the Department of Defense, Department of State, and USAID reported gains and improvements in the status of Afghan women . . . SIGAR found that there was no comprehensive assessment available to confirm that these gains were the direct result of specific U.S. efforts.” And while State and USAID collectively reported spending \$850 million on 17 projects that were designed in whole or in part to support Afghan women, they could not tell our auditors how much of that money actually went to programs that supported Afghan women.

Another SIGAR audit looked into the more than \$1 billion that the United States had spent supporting rule-of-law programs in Afghanistan. Shockingly, we found that the U.S. actually seemed to be moving backwards as time went along. Our audit found that while the 2009 U.S. rule-of-law strategy for Afghanistan contained 27 specific performance measures, the 2013 strategy contained no performance measures at all. If you have no metrics for success, how can you tell if you’re succeeding?

While honesty and transparency are always important, when government agencies overstate the positive and overlook flaws in their methodologies and accountability mechanisms, there are real implications for public policy and public perceptions of the government.

As philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt once said, “If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that one believes the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.”

If U.S. agencies are not transparent and honest about successes and failures in Afghanistan, these problems will continue to persist – meaning many of you who end up working for the government, an NGO, or international organization in a future reconstruction or stabilization effort may end up facing the same skewed incentive structure that rewards quick reports of success without actual verification of whether the actual intended outcome of a project or program was achieved.

Inputs vs. Outputs vs. Outcomes

You might notice that, to paint a rosy picture of progress, agencies highlight things like the number of programs they operate and the amount of money they spend as signs of success. For the many of you who have taken a program evaluation course, you know that these metrics are not the proper indicators of success. SIGAR has found time and time again in our work that U.S. agencies frequently conflate inputs and outputs with actual outcomes. As a result, inputs and outputs do not accurately reflect success or failure, and cannot show the sustainability of a program over the long term.

Inputs and outputs are relatively easy to measure, so U.S. agencies are very good at measuring them. Inputs – such as the amount of money put on contract and spent – and outputs – such as the number of soldiers trained, schools built, or miles of road constructed – have often been cited by U.S. agencies to show progress.

Inputs and outputs however, do not sufficiently demonstrate how a program is meeting its outlined objectives. For example, do the soldiers we trained fight well? Have the schools we built actually improved education in Afghanistan? Have the roads we built increased economic activity? Those were the goals of those projects, after all. While measuring outcomes is more difficult than measuring inputs or outputs – outcomes are the only true barometer of whether a program or project is successful and contributing to the broader reconstruction effort.

For example, one of our lessons learned reports highlights that the U.S. has spent over \$18 billion since 2002 on equipment for the Afghan security forces.

But the report found that, despite all the money spent on hundreds of thousands

of weapons and tens of thousands of vehicles, the equipment was often given to the Afghans without the proper operating and maintenance manuals. And in some instances where the manuals did exist, they were in English.

In a country with a literacy rate of around 35%, it is difficult to find Afghan recruits that can read Dari or Pashto, let alone English.

How can you reasonably expect an Afghan Army unit to be successful if they don't even know how to operate and maintain their own equipment? By focusing on the delivery of the equipment, the U.S. was missing the fact that we had not given the Afghan security forces the tools they needed to actually *use* that equipment. Imagine putting an Afghan soldier in a combat situation with a gun that wasn't routinely cleaned or a Humvee that wasn't properly maintained. The consequences of overlooking long-term outcomes in this case could literally mean life or death

In our report on U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan, we looked at the effectiveness of alternative development programs, which aim to get farmers to grow licit crops instead of growing poppy for opium production. The report examined a USAID alternative development program that rehabilitated irrigation canals that would reach hundreds of square miles of farmland with the thought that increasing the amount of arable land would incentivize farmers to grow other crops besides poppy.

But when we examined some of these projects, we found that the improved irrigation systems actually led to *more* poppy production. Near one U.S.-rehabilitated irrigation canal, poppy production increased 119% in just two years. No wonder that despite the nearly \$9 billion that the U.S. has spent on counternarcotics efforts, Afghanistan remains the largest opium poppy producer in the world.

Without measuring the outcomes of their programs, USAID and other U.S. agencies were able to tout the amount of money they were spending and the amount of irrigation systems they were building without actually assessing whether or not these programs were reducing poppy production. They may have been better off planting the money in the ground and hoping that it sprouted trees for those farmers.

SIGAR's Seven Questions & Future Policymakers

While identifying problems is easy – especially in Afghanistan – the more important question is how these “broken tools” can be fixed. Answers to these problems

do not necessarily have to come from an Act of Congress or Executive Order. There are things that those of you who – your parents fervently hope – will soon be entering the workforce can do from the minute you start working in international development, diplomacy, or policy.

To combat some of these challenges, SIGAR has developed a framework for determining whether a development program or project is likely to succeed. We developed this framework with Afghanistan’s reconstruction in mind, but the questions are equally applicable to the broader development context and other areas of public policy decision-making. Congress, in fact, liked them well enough to put them into law.

We call them the “seven questions,” and they are as follows:

- Does the project or program clearly contribute to our national interests or strategic objectives?
- Does the recipient country know about it, want it, or need it?
- Has the project been coordinated with other U.S. agencies, with the recipient government, and with other international donors?
- Do security conditions permit effective implementation and oversight?
- Does the project have adequate safeguards to detect, deter, and mitigate corruption?
- Does the recipient government have the financial resources, technical capacity, and political will to sustain the project?
- Have implementing agencies established meaningful, measurable metrics for determining successful project outcomes?

If the answer to each question is “yes” – there is a better than even chance that the program or project will meet its intended objectives. As you go on in your future careers, you may want to be mindful of these seven relatively simple, yet critically important questions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Afghanistan is America's longest war, with over 2,300 American lives lost, and nearly a trillion dollars spent on warfighting and reconstruction. Tens of thousands of Afghans have also lost their lives, as have many civilian and military personnel from our coalition partners. But with the number of fragile states on the rise, it also is unlikely to be the last reconstruction and stabilization effort the U.S. undertakes – political protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

As Winston Churchill said, "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." While SIGAR's reports have often ruffled some agency officials' feathers because of the failures, missed opportunities, and bad judgement we have highlighted and identified, it is only by identifying mistakes and errors that you find the path to improvement.

The vast majority of the U.S. government civilians, soldiers, and contractors on the ground making these decisions were doing the best they could with the tools they were given in an unbelievably challenging environment. Nevertheless, SIGAR's work has consistently identified that the \$136 billion spent on Afghanistan's reconstruction by the U.S. could have been spent more wisely, cost-effectively, and achieved better and longer-lasting outcomes.

That is why oversight is mission critical. It may be easy to spend \$136 billion, but it is the height of foolishness to spend that much money and not attempt to learn from the things that inevitably did not work as intended, were counter-productive, or were flat-out failures. And without an organization like SIGAR watching over them, there is little, if any, motivation, for agencies – virtually incentivized by Congress to spend their entire budget every year – to highlight anything that might have possibly fallen short of its ultimate objectives.

So in light of the recent peace agreement signed on February 29th, let me conclude with another thoughtful observation of Winston Churchill after the allies' success in 1942 at El Alamein: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But its, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.