SIGAR

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
U.S. Senate

# U.S. Lessons Learned in Afghanistan

Statement of John F. Sopko,

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Chairman Paul, Ranking Member Hassan, Members of the Subcommittee:

It is a pleasure and an honor to testify before you today. This is the 24th time I have presented testimony to Congress since I was appointed the Special Inspector General nearly eight years ago.

SIGAR was created by the Congress in 2008 to combat waste, fraud and abuse in the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. So far we have published nearly 600 audits, inspections, and other reports. SIGAR's law enforcement agents have conducted more than 1,000 criminal and civil investigations that have led to more than 130 convictions of individuals who have committed crimes. Combined, SIGAR's audit, investigative, and other work has resulted in cost savings to the taxpayer of over $3 billion.

Although I have testified numerous times before Congress, today is the first time that I have been asked to appear before the Senate to directly address SIGAR's unique Lessons Learned Program and what we have learned from it. In light of recent attention, I am particularly pleased to have this opportunity to discuss some of our significant findings about the reconstruction efforts in what has become our nation's longest war. But before I talk about what our Lessons Learned Program does, I want to clear up any misconceptions that may have resulted from the recent Washington Post series by explaining what our program does and does not do.[1]

## The Genesis and Purpose of the Lessons Learned Program

As with everything produced by SIGAR, the Lessons Learned Program's mandate is limited to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Our Lessons Learned Program is 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 assess U.S. diplomatic and military strategies or combat activities. Nor are we producing an oral history of the United States' involvement in Afghanistan. More important, our Lessons Learned Program does not address the broader policy debate of whether or not our country should be in Afghanistan.

Our Lessons Learned Program produces unclassified, publicly available, balanced, and thoroughly researched appraisals of various aspects of U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Unlike the *Washington Post* series, SIGAR also makes actionable recommendations for the Congress and executive branch agencies and, where appropriate, offers matters for consideration for the Afghan government and our coalition allies. So far, we have made 120 such recommendations.

Put simply, we are striving to distill something of lasting and useful significance from our 18 years of engagement in Afghanistan. Considering the over 2,300 American service members who

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[1] On December 17, 2019, the *Washington Post* published a letter to the editor from Special Inspector General Sopko titled "Setting the record straight on 'The Afghanistan Papers.'" See Appendix I.

have died there and the $137 billion (and counting) taxpayer dollars spent on reconstruction alone, it would be a dereliction of duty not to try to learn from this experience. With our unique interagency jurisdiction, Congress gave SIGAR an extraordinary opportunity to do this work.

Moreover, the need for distilling lessons and best practices in Afghanistan is urgent – not only because a possible peace treaty is being seriously discussed, but also because most military, embassy, and civilian personnel rotate out of country after a year or less. This means that new people are constantly arriving, all with the best of intentions, but with little or no knowledge of what their predecessors were doing, the problems they faced, or what worked and what didn't work. SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program is a unique source of institutional memory to help address this "annual lobotomy."

Given this reality, it is understandably difficult for individual agencies to see the forest for the trees—and even if they could, such efforts have a way of sinking into obscurity. For example, shortly after I became the Inspector General, my staff uncovered a USAID-commissioned lessons learned study from 1988 entitled "A Retrospective Review of U.S. Assistance to Afghanistan: 1950 to 1979." Many of the report's lessons were still relevant and could have made a real impact if they had been taken into account in the early 2000s. Unfortunately, we could not find anyone at USAID or the Department of State who was even aware of the report's existence, let alone its findings.

The genesis of our Lessons Learned Program occurred almost as soon as I was appointed Inspector General in 2012. Early in my tenure, it became apparent that the problems we were finding in our audits and inspections—whether it was poorly constructed infrastructure, rampant corruption, inadequately trained Afghan soldiers, or a growing narcotics economy—elicited the same basic response from members of Congress, agency officials, and policymakers alike. "What does it mean?" they would ask me. "What can we learn from this?"

In an attempt to answer these questions, and to make our audits and other reports more relevant to policymakers in Washington and our military and civilian staff in Afghanistan, I asked my staff in 2013 to develop a series of guiding principles aimed at helping Congress and the Administration improve reconstruction operations. These questions—SIGAR's first attempt to develop lessons from the U.S. reconstruction effort—were incorporated by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2015 as a requirement for initiating infrastructure projects in areas of Afghanistan inaccessible to U.S. government personnel. They continue to inform our work:

- Does the project or program clearly contribute to our national interests or strategic objectives?
- Does the recipient country 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?

These questions were useful, and they remain relevant. But the agencies named in our reports complained that we were too critical. Our reports failed to put their efforts in context, they said, and therefore we were not acknowledging their successes. Accordingly, on March 25, 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 each provide me with a list of their agency's ten most successful Afghanistan reconstruction projects and programs, as well as a list of the ten least successful, 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 list or discuss each agency's 10 most and 10 least successful projects or programs. As my letter of July 5, 2013 noted, this failure limited our understanding of how government agencies evaluated and perceived both success and failure, which was critical for formulating lessons learned from past reconstruction projects and programs.[2]

It is perhaps understandable that agencies would want to show their programs in the best possible light—and it is certainly understandable that the private firms, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral institutions that implemented those programs would want to demonstrate success. Yet a recurring challenge to any accurate assessment has been the pervasive tendency to overstate positive results, with little, if any, evidence to back up those claims.

Unfortunately, many of the claims that State, USAID, and others have made over time simply do not stand up to scrutiny. For example, in a 2014 interview, the then-USAID administrator stated that "today, 3 million girls and 5 million boys are enrolled in school—compared to just 900,000 when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan." But when SIGAR subsequently conducted an audit of U.S. efforts to support primary and secondary education in Afghanistan, we found that USAID was receiving its enrollment data from the Afghan government and had taken few, if any, steps to attempt to verify the data's accuracy, even though independent third parties and even the Afghan

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[2] Copies of this correspondence can be found on SIGAR's website. See https://www.sigar mil/pdf/spotlight/2013-07-03%20Top%2010%20Response.pdf.

Ministry of Education had called the numbers into question. And because USAID education support programs lacked effective metrics, it could not show how U.S. taxpayer dollars had contributed to the increased enrollment it claimed.

In that same interview, the then-USAID administrator said 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." However, when SIGAR issued an audit of Afghanistan's health sector in 2017, we 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 from a survey that was conducted in only four of Afghanistan's then-360 districts.

Likewise, a SIGAR audit into 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 or accountability mechanisms, it has real public policy implications. The American people and their elected representatives eventually start asking why, if things are going so well, are we still there? Why do we continue to spend so much money?

While it may not be as headline-worthy, in the long run, honesty gives a development undertaking a far better chance at success: People can understand it will take time, patience, and

continued effort to make a real difference. If there was no SIGAR, one may wonder how many of these discrepancies would have ever come to light.

In some ways, I would argue that 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 other words, for honest analysis, failure may be an orphan, but it also can be a great teacher.

It was in response to this refusal by the agencies to be candid about their successes and failures, and at the suggestion of a number of prominent officials, including Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General John Allen, that SIGAR formally launched its Lessons Learned Program in 2014, with the blessing of the National Security Council staff. The Lessons Learned Program's mandate is to:

- Show what has and has not worked over the course of the U.S. reconstruction experience in Afghanistan

- Offer detailed and actionable recommendations to policymakers and executive agencies that are relevant to current and future reconstruction efforts

- Present unbiased, fact-based, and accessible reports to the public and key stakeholders

- Respond to the needs of U.S. implementing agencies, both in terms of accurately capturing their efforts and providing timely and actionable guidance for future efforts

- Share our findings with policymakers, senior executive branch officials, members of the Congress, and their staffs

- Provide subject matter expertise to SIGAR senior leaders and other SIGAR directorates

- Share our findings in conferences and workshops convened by U.S. government agencies, foreign governments, international organizations, NGOs, think tanks, and academic institutions

By doing so, SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program also fulfills our statutory obligation, set forth in the very first section of our authorizing statute, "to provide . . . recommendations on policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness [of reconstruction programs in Afghanistan] and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations." SIGAR is also required to inform the Secretaries of State and Defense about "problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operations and

the necessity for and progress on corrective action."[3] In addition, the Inspector General Act authorizes SIGAR "to make such investigations and reports . . . as are, in the judgment of the Inspector General, necessary or desirable."[4]

## How SIGAR's Lesson Learned Program Works

The Lessons Learned Program team is composed of subject-matter experts with considerable experience working and living in Afghanistan, as well as a staff of experienced research analysts. Our analysts come from a variety of backgrounds: some have served in the U.S. military, while others have worked at State, USAID, in the intelligence community, with other federal agencies, or with implementing partners or policy research groups.

As the program was starting in 2014, our Lessons Learned team consulted with a range of experts and current and former U.S. officials to determine what topics we should first explore. Based upon their input, we decided to focus on two areas of the reconstruction effort that had the largest price tags: building the Afghan security forces (now more than $70 billion) and counternarcotics (now about $9 billion). We also chose to examine a crosscutting problem that SIGAR already had plenty of experience in uncovering, and which senior officials consistently urged us to tackle: corruption and its corrosive effects on the entire U.S. mission. The fourth topic was private sector development and economic growth—because we know that a stronger Afghan economy is necessary to lasting peace and stability, and without it, U.S. reconstruction efforts are largely unsustainable.

The topics of other reports have sometimes flowed logically from previous reports. For instance, our 2019 review of the tangled military chain of command, *Divided Responsibility*, had its origin in what we had learned two years earlier in our report on reconstructing the Afghan security and national defense forces. Other report topics come from brainstorming sessions with groups of subject matter experts and information my staff and I glean from our frequent trips to Afghanistan. For example, our latest lessons learned report, on reintegration of enemy combatants, as well as our soon-to-be-released report on elections, were specifically suggested by the prior Resolute Support commander and the outgoing U.S. Ambassador in Afghanistan.

SIGAR's lessons learned reports are not drawn from merely anecdotal evidence or based solely on our personal areas of expertise. Our Lessons Learned Program staff has access to the largest single source of information and expertise on Afghanistan reconstruction—namely, the information and expertise provided by other SIGAR departments: our Audits and Inspections Directorate, Investigations Directorate, the Office of Special Projects, and our Research and

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[3] National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008, Pub. Law No. 112-181 (Jan. 28, 2008), § 1229(a)(2).  A similar mandate that applies to all inspectors general is contained in Section 2 of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended.  See 5 U.S.C. App. 3, § 2

[4] Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, § 6(a)(2), 5 U.S.C. App. § 6(a)(2).

Analysis Directorate (RAD). For example, RAD is responsible for compiling the quarterly reports we are required by law to submit to Congress. It serves as our in-house think tank, collecting and analyzing vital data on a quarterly basis to keep Congress and the American public current on reconstruction in Afghanistan. To date, SIGAR has produced 46 publicly available quarterly reports, which provide detailed descriptions of all reconstruction-related obligations, expenditures, and revenues, as well as an overview of the reconstruction effort as a whole. SIGAR's quarterly reports constitute the largest and most detailed collection of data and analysis on reconstruction activities in Afghanistan, and are viewed by experts both in and out of government as the go-to source for information on reconstruction. SIGAR's quarterly reports were the first to question the accuracy of various claims of progress in Afghanistan, ranging from the accuracy of Afghan troop numbers to the number of children actually attending school to the state of the Afghan economy.

Our Audits and Inspections Directorate is another extraordinary source of information and assistance to our Lessons Learned Program. Since 2009, SIGAR has issued 374 audits, inspections and other reports, and has more auditors, inspectors, and engineers on the ground in Afghanistan than USAID OIG, State OIG, and DOD OIG combined. In a unique innovation, SIGAR also has a cooperative agreement to work with an independent Afghan oversight organization, giving SIGAR an unparalleled ability to go "outside the wire" to places where travel is unsafe for U.S. government employees. SIGAR's auditors and inspectors determine whether infrastructure projects have been properly constructed, used, and maintained, and also conduct forensic reviews of reconstruction funds managed by State, DOD, and USAID to identify anomalies that may indicate fraud.

Our Investigations Directorate conducts criminal and civil investigations of waste, fraud, and abuse relating to programs and operations supported with U.S. funds. SIGAR has full federal law enforcement authority, and pursues criminal prosecutions, civil actions, forfeitures, monetary recoveries, and suspension and debarments. SIGAR has more investigators on the ground in Afghanistan than any other oversight agency. Our investigators regularly work with other law enforcement organizations, including other IG offices, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the FBI, and others. Major investigations conducted by the Investigations Directorate include contract fraud, diversion of U.S. government loans, money laundering, and corruption. A very significant part of this work has been focused on fuel, the "liquid gold" of Afghanistan. The Investigations Directorate has provided valuable information to our Lessons Learned Program analysts, a prime example being the *Corruption in Conflict* report.

Lastly, our Office of Special Projects examines emerging issues and delivers prompt, actionable reports to federal agencies and Congress. This office was created in response to requests by agencies operating in Afghanistan for actionable insights and information on important issues that could be produced more quickly than a formal audit. Special Project reports cover a wide range of programs and activities to fulfill SIGAR's legislative mandate to protect taxpayers and have proven useful to the Lessons Learned Program. For example, its examination of programs

run by DOD's now-defunct Task Force for Business and Stability Operations was a major impetus for the Lessons Learned Program report on *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth*.

While the documentary evidence in our lessons learned reports tells a story, it cannot substitute for the experience, knowledge, and wisdom of people who participated in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort. For that reason, our analysts have conducted hundreds of interviews with experts in academia and research institutions; current and former civilian and military officials in our own government, the Afghan government, and other donor country governments; implementing partners and contractors; and members of civil society. Interviewees have ranged from ambassadors to airmen. These interviews provide valuable insights into the rationale behind decisions, debates within and between agencies, and frustrations that spanned the years. The information we glean from them is used to guide us in our inquiry, and we strive to cross-reference interviewees' claims with the documentary evidence, or if that is not possible, with other interviews.

We all owe a great deal of gratitude to these individuals for their time and effort to voluntarily help our program. They agreed to discuss what they did and saw and gave their honest opinions of what worked and didn't including many times admitting that they could have done a better job themselves. Their candor and insight were a tremendous asset to our efforts and should be appreciated by every American even if their contributions were not ultimately quoted in our reports.

Our choice of which interviews or quotes to use is based on our analysts' judgment of whether it captures an observation or insight that is more broadly representative and consistent with the weight of evidence from various sources—not whether it is simply a colorful expression of opinion. Lessons Learned Program analysts must adhere to strict professional guidelines regarding the sourcing of their findings, in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation (commonly referred to as "the Blue Book.")[5]

While some of our interviewees do not mind being quoted, others have a well-founded fear of retribution from political or tribal enemies, employers, governments, or international donors who are paying their salaries. These persons often request that we not reveal their names. Honoring those requests for confidentiality is a bedrock principle at SIGAR, for three reasons. First, it is required by law—specifically, by the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended.[6] Second, there are obvious humanitarian and security concerns. Finally, without the ability to shield our sources,

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[5] The Blue Book standards can be found at https://www.ignet.gov/content/quality-standards.

[6] Section 7(b) of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, prohibits SIGAR from disclosing the identity of a source who provides information to SIGAR. Section 8M(b)(2)(B) of the Act prohibits SIGAR from disclosing the identity of anyone who reports waste, fraud, and abuse.

we simply would not be able to do our work.  In fact, at our last tally, more than 80 percent of those interviewed for the Lessons Learned Program reports requested their names not be disclosed. [7]

Another important part of the quality control process used by SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program is an external peer review. For each of our reports, we seek and receive feedback on the draft report from a group of subject matter experts, who often have significant experience working in Afghanistan. These experts are drawn from universities, think tanks, and the private sector, and often include retired senior military officers and diplomats. Each group of experts is tailored to a particular topic, and they provide thoughtful, detailed comments.

Over the course of producing any one report, Lessons Learned Program analysts also routinely engage with officials at USAID, State, DOD, and other agencies to familiarize them with the team's preliminary findings, lessons, and recommendations. Our analysts also solicit formal and informal feedback to improve our understanding of the key issues and recommendations, as viewed by each agency. The agencies are then given an opportunity to formally review and comment on the final draft of every report, after which the team usually meets with agency representatives to discuss their feedback firsthand. Although Lessons Learned Program teams incorporate agencies' comments where appropriate, the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations of our reports remain SIGAR's own.

Once we have a draft of a report, it is sent to the agencies under review to get their feedback and clarify points of confusion. Our purpose here is not to avoid all points of conflict with the agencies we write about, but to make sure we are presenting issues fairly and in context.

When our reports are published, our next job is vitally important: getting the word out. We have no intention of producing reports that would suffer the same fate as that well-informed, but sadly unread, 1988 USAID report our staff discovered in Kabul. Until our findings and recommendations circulate widely to relevant decision-makers and result in action and change, we know we are not producing lessons learned; we are merely recording lessons observed. Each of our reports is the subject of a major launch event, usually at a research institution or think tank, designed to draw attention to reach policymakers, practitioners, and the public. Our reports are also posted online, both as a downloadable PDF and in a user-friendly interactive format.

Our analysts follow up by providing lectures and briefings to civilian and military reconstruction practitioners, researchers, and students at schools and training institutions worldwide. Our reports have become course material at the U.S. Army War College; our analysts have lectured

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[7] The Washington Post has mischaracterized its lawsuit against SIGAR.  The Post is suing SIGAR in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia under the Freedom of Information Act, not to obtain copies of SIGAR's interview records, but to obtain the names of the people who were interviewed who requested confidentiality. Section 7(b) of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, prohibits SIGAR from disclosing the names of those who provide information to SIGAR and request anonymity.

or led workshops at the Foreign Service Institute, Davidson College, the National Defense University, Yale, and Princeton. A more extensive discussion of our ongoing outreach program and the successful use of the reports by U.S agencies is found in the next section.

## What We Have Accomplished: Seven Lessons Learned Reports

To date, the Lessons Learned Program has published seven reports. Two more reports—one on elections in Afghanistan and another on the monitoring and evaluation of U.S. government contracts there—will be published in the early part of 2020. After those, we expect to issue a report on women's empowerment in Afghanistan and another on policing and corrections later in 2020 or early 2021 at the latest. Following are brief summaries of our published reports, the full versions of which can be found on SIGAR's website.[8]

- *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, published in September 2016, examined how the U.S. government understood the risks of corruption in Afghanistan, how the U.S. response to corruption evolved, and the effectiveness of that response. We found that corruption substantially undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from the very beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. We concluded that failure to effectively address the problem means U.S. reconstruction programs will at best continue to be subverted by systemic corruption and, at worst, will fail. The lesson is that anticorruption efforts need to be at the center of planning and policymaking for contingencies. The U.S. government should not exacerbate corruption by flooding a weak economy with too much money too quickly, with too little oversight. U.S. agencies should know whom they are doing business with, and avoid empowering highly corrupt actors. Strong monitoring and evaluation systems must be in place for assistance, and the U.S. government should maintain consistent pressure on the host government for critical reforms.

- *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, published in September 2017, examined how the U.S. government—primarily the DOD, State, and the Department of Justice—developed and executed security sector assistance in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2016. Our analysis 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 and preventing the country from becoming a terrorist safe haven. U.S. personnel also struggled to implement a dual strategy of attempting to rapidly improve security while simultaneously developing self-sufficient Afghan military and police capabilities, all on short, politically-driven timelines. 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 a capable and self-sustaining ANDSF.

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[8] https://www.sigar.mil/lessonslearned/

Ultimately, the United States—after expending over $70 billion—designed a force that was not able to provide nationwide security, especially as the force faced a larger threat than anticipated after the drawdown of coalition military forces. The report identifies lessons to inform U.S. policies and actions for future security sector assistance missions, and provides recommendations to improve performance of security sector assistance programs.

- *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, published in April 2018, examined efforts by the U.S. government to stimulate and build the Afghan economy after the initial defeat of the Taliban in 2001. While Afghanistan achieved significant early success in telecommunications, transportation, and construction, and in laying the foundations of a modern economic system, the goal of establishing long-term, broad-based, and sustainable economic growth has proved elusive. The primary reason, the report concluded, was persistent uncertainty, created by ongoing physical insecurity and political instability, which discouraged investment and other economic activity and undermined efforts to reduce pervasive corruption. Other reasons were the inadequate understanding and mitigation of relationships among corrupt strongmen and other power holders, and the inability to help Afghanistan to develop the physical and institutional infrastructure that would allow it to be regionally competitive in trade and agriculture. Two of the report's major recommendations are that future economic development assistance, in Afghanistan or elsewhere, should be based on a deeper understanding of the economy and society, and that needed governance institutions be allowed to proceed at an appropriate pace.

- *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, published in May 2018, detailed how USAID, State and DOD tried to support and legitimize the Afghan government in contested districts from 2002 through 2017. Our analysis revealed the U.S. government greatly overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan as part of its stabilization strategy. We found that the stabilization strategy and the programs used to achieve it were not properly tailored to the Afghan context, and successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops and civilians. As a result, by the time all prioritized districts had transitioned from coalition to Afghan control in 2014, the services and protection provided by Afghan forces and civil servants often could not compete with a resurgent Taliban as it filled the void in newly vacated territory.

- *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, published in June 2018, examined how U.S. agencies tried to deter farmers and traffickers from participating in the cultivation and trade of opium, build Afghan government counterdrug capacity, and develop the country's licit economy. We found that no counterdrug program led to lasting reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production—and, without a stable security environment, there was little possibility of success. The U.S. government

failed to develop and implement counternarcotics strategies that outlined or effectively directed U.S. agencies toward shared goals. Eradication efforts ultimately had no lasting impact on opium cultivation, and alienated rural populations. Even though U.S. strategies said eradication and development aid should target the same areas on the ground, we found—by using new geospatial imagery—that frequently this did not happen. Development programs failed to provide farmers with sustainable alternatives to poppy. Two positive takeaways are that (1) some provinces and districts saw temporary reductions in poppy cultivation, and (2) U.S. support and mentorship helped stand up well-trained, capable Afghan counterdrug units that became trusted partners. We concluded, however, that until there is greater security in Afghanistan, it will be nearly impossible to bring about lasting reductions in poppy cultivation and drug production. In the meantime, the United States should aim to cut off drug money going to insurgent groups, promote licit livelihood options for rural communities, and fight drug-related government corruption.

- *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance Efforts in Afghanistan*, published in June 2019, 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. The report explored the problems created by this balkanized command structure in the training of Afghan army and police units, strategic-level advising at the ministries of defense and interior, procuring military equipment, and running U.S.-based training programs for the Afghan military. Its findings are relevant for ongoing efforts in Afghanistan, as well as for future efforts to rebuild security forces in states emerging from protracted conflict.

- *Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, published in September 2019, examined the five main post-2001 efforts to reintegrate former combatants into Afghan society, and assessed their effectiveness. We found that these efforts did not help any significant number of former fighters to reintegrate, did not weaken the insurgency, and did not reduce violence. We concluded that as long as the Taliban insurgency is ongoing, the United States should not support a program to reintegrate former fighters. However, the United States should consider supporting a reintegration effort if certain conditions are in place: (a) the Afghan government and the Taliban sign a peace agreement that provides a framework for reintegration of ex-combatants; (b) a significant reduction in overall violence occurs; and (c) a strong monitoring and evaluation system is established for reintegration efforts. If U.S. agencies support a reintegration program, policymakers and practitioners should anticipate and plan for serious challenges to implementation—including ongoing insecurity, political instability, corruption, determining who is eligible, and the difficulty of monitoring and evaluation. Broader development assistance that stimulates the private sector and creates jobs can also help ex-combatants to reintegrate into society.

## Impact of the Lessons Learned Program

To date, SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program has offered more than 120 recommendations to executive branch agencies and the Congress. To the best of our knowledge, 13 of those have been implemented, and at least 20 are in progress. In evaluating these numbers, it is important to note that some recommendations can only be implemented as part of *future* contingency operations; and some recommendations rely on outcomes that have not yet happened, such as an intra-Afghan peace deal. Going forward, SIGAR plans to work closely with agencies to get periodic updates to the status of its lessons learned recommendations.

Congress has already taken action on some of these recommendations. For example, Section 1279 of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act calls for the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development to develop an anti-corruption strategy for reconstruction efforts. This amendment is in keeping with a recommendation in *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*.

Additionally, the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act includes amendments related to two recommendations from *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.* Section 1201 of the Act required that during the development and planning of a program to build the capacity of the national security forces of a foreign country, the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State jointly consider political, social, economic, diplomatic, and historical factors of the foreign country that may impact the effectiveness of the program. Section 1211 required the incorporation of lessons learned from prior security cooperation programs and activities of DOD that were carried out any time on or after September 11, 2001 into future operations.

The Lessons Learned Program has also had significant institutional impact. Staff from the *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces* report participated in the Quadrennial Review of Security Sector Assistance in 2018, and the report was cited by the NATO Stability Police Center of Excellence in its Joint Analysis Report. SIGAR Lessons Learned Program staff contributed to—and were explicitly recognized as experts in—the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review, the first interagency policy document outlining how the U.S. government will conduct stabilization missions. The acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations later instructed his entire bureau to read the report. During Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's testimony before the United States Senate, Senator Todd Young asked him to respond in writing indicating which of the report's recommendations he would implement.

Each of our reports has led to briefings or requests for information from members of Congress. The lead analyst for the *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces* report testified before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform in 2017. At the request of the chairman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, our analysts compiled a list of potential oversight areas relating to the train, advise, and assist mission in

Afghanistan and to appropriations for the Afghan Security Forces Fund. In September 2018, after publication of the *Counternarcotics* report, the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control wrote a letter to SIGAR requesting an inquiry into the U.S. government's current counternarcotics efforts, including the extent to which a whole-of-government approach exists, the effectiveness of U.S. and Afghan law enforcement efforts, the impact of the drug lab bombing campaign, and the extent to which money laundering and corruption undermine counterdrug efforts.

Prior to the publication of *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, SIGAR Lessons Learned Program staff participated in a multiday session convened by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, on reconstruction-related activities in Afghanistan. They also participated in a failure analysis session led by the Secretary of Defense and run by the Joint Chiefs of Staff; this session was used to help develop the president's South Asia Strategy in 2017.

In addition, Lessons Learned Program staff have given briefings on *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces* to the Commander of U.S. Central Command, the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, National Security Council staff, the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, the Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Commander of the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan, and multiple U.S. general officers in Afghanistan. Our analysts have given briefings on the *Stabilization* report to the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Stability and Humanitarian Affairs, DOD's Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Group, the U.S. Army's 95th Civil Affairs Brigade, senior officials responsible for stabilization in Syria at the U.S. State Department's Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs, and high-ranking officials at USAID.

At the request of the State Department's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations, SIGAR analysts drafted a memo on the business case for deploying civilians alongside the U.S. military on stabilization missions. The Deputy Assistant Administrator for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Affairs at USAID said the report is already affecting stabilization efforts and planning in Syria and elsewhere. Lessons Learned Program staff who worked on the *Reintegration of Ex-Combatants* report have heard informally from contacts at USAID and State that the report has been well received and is seen as a resource for future policies or programs related to reintegration.

Our reports have also assisted NATO and other coalition partners. Following the publication of the *Divided Responsibility* report, NATO hosted an all-day event on the topic of the report at its headquarters in Brussels. The team lead from the *Reintegration of Ex-Combatants* report also briefed officials at the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development on the report in November 2019.

SIGAR Lessons Learned Program staff who worked on the *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth* report participated in a closed-door roundtable with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's senior economic advisor focusing on recent reforms in Afghanistan's economic governance.

Following the publication of the *Stabilization* report, Lessons Learned Program staff briefed the senior United Nations Development Programme official responsible for stabilization efforts in Iraq, and answered requests for briefings from Germany's Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Although not a complete list of our staff's activities, suffice it to say that the Lessons Learned Program has created for itself a reputation as a reliable source of expertise and analysis on our nation's longest war—the first step in the process of learning from our successes and failures.

## Key Lessons from SIGAR's Ten Years of Work

Now the question becomes: after all this, what enduring lessons have we learned? Here are a few overarching conclusions from our Lessons Learned Program and SIGAR's other work:

- **Successful reconstruction is incompatible with continuing insecurity.** To have successful reconstruction in any given area, the fighting in that area must be largely contained. When that happens, U.S. agencies should be prepared to move quickly, in partnership with the host nation, to take advantage of the narrow window of opportunity before an insurgency can emerge or reconstitute itself. This holds true at both the national and local levels. In general, U.S. agencies should consider carrying out reconstruction activities in more secure areas first, and limit reconstruction in insecure areas to carefully tailored, small-scale efforts and humanitarian relief.

- **Unchecked corruption in Afghanistan undermined U.S. strategic goals—and we helped to foster that corruption.** The U.S. government's persistent belief that throwing more money at a problem automatically leads to better results created a feedback loop in which the success of reconstruction efforts was measured by the amount of money spent—which in turn created requests for more money. The United States also inadvertently aided the Taliban's resurgence by forming alliances of convenience with warlords who had been pushed out of power by the Taliban. The coalition paid warlords to provide security and, in many cases, to run provincial and district administrations, on the assumption that the United States would eventually hold those warlords to account when they committed acts of corruption or brutality. That accounting rarely took place—and the abuses committed by coalition-aligned warlords drove many Afghans into the arms of the resurgent Taliban. The insecurity that resulted has harmed virtually every U.S. and coalition initiative in Afghanistan to this day—discouraging trade, investment,

and other economic activity and making it harder to build the government institutions needed to support the private sector. In the future, we need to recognize the vital importance of addressing corruption from the outset. This means taking into account the amount of assistance a host country can absorb; being careful not to flood a small, weak economy with too much money, too fast; and ensuring that U.S. agencies can more effectively monitor assistance. It would also mean limiting U.S. alliances with malign powerbrokers, holding highly corrupt actors to account, and incorporating anticorruption objectives into security and stability goals.

- **After the Taliban's initial defeat, there was no clear reconstruction strategy and no single military service, agency, or nation in charge of reconstruction.** Between 2001 and 2006, the reconstruction effort was woefully underfunded and understaffed in Afghanistan. Then, as the Taliban became resurgent, the U.S. overcorrected and poured billions of dollars into a weak economy that was unable to absorb it. Some studies suggest that the generally accepted amount of foreign aid a country's economy can absorb at any given time is 15 to 45 percent of the country's gross domestic product, or GDP. In Afghanistan's weak economy, the percentage would be on the low end of that scale. Yet by 2004, U.S. aid to Afghanistan exceeded the 45 percent threshold. In 2007 and 2010, it totaled more than 100 percent. This massive influx of dollars distorted the Afghan economy, fueled corruption, bought a lot of real estate in Dubai and the United States, and built the many "poppy palaces" you can see today in Kabul. Another example of unintended consequences were efforts to rebuild the Afghan police—a job that neither State nor DOD was fully prepared to do. State lacked the in-house expertise and was unable to safely operate in insecure environments like Afghanistan; the U.S. military could operate in an insecure environment, but had limited expertise in training civilian police forces. Our research found instances where Blackhawk helicopter pilots were assigned to train police, while other soldiers turned to TV shows such as "NCIS" and "COPS" as sources for police training program curricula. SIGAR believes that Congress needs to review this tangled web of conflicting priorities and authorities, with the aim of designating a single agency to be in charge of future reconstruction efforts. At the very least, there should be a comprehensive review of funding authorities and agency responsibilities for planning and conducting reconstruction activities.

- **Politically driven timelines undermine the reconstruction effort.** The U.S. military is an awesome weapon; when our soldiers are ordered to do something, they do it—whether or not they are best suited to the task. One example of this was DOD's $675 million effort to jumpstart the Afghan economy. DOD is not known for being particularly skilled at economic development. Frustrated by the belief that USAID's development efforts would not bring significant economic benefit to Afghanistan quickly enough to be helpful, in 2009 DOD expanded its Iraq Task Force for Business and Stability Operations ("TFBSO") to Afghanistan. TFBSO initiated a number of diverse and well-intentioned, but often speculative projects in areas for which it had little or no real expertise. For

example, TFBSO spent millions to construct a compressed natural gas station in Sheberghan, Afghanistan, in an effort to create a compressed natural gas market in Afghanistan. It was a noble goal—but there were no other compressed natural gas stations in Afghanistan, so for obvious reasons, any cars running on that fuel could not travel more than half a tank from the only place they could refuel. In the end, the U.S. taxpayer paid to convert a number of local Afghan taxis to run on compressed natural gas in order to create a market for the station—which, to SIGAR's knowledge, remains the only one of its kind in Afghanistan. My point here is not to hold DOD up to ridicule; it was simply doing the best it could in the time it had with the orders it was given. The real problem was a timeline driven by political considerations and divorced from reality, implemented by an agency that lacked the required expertise and had little to no oversight.

- **If we cannot end the "annual lobotomy," we should at least mitigate its impact.** I assumed my current post in 2012. I'm now working with my sixth U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, my sixth NATO and U.S. Commanding General, and eighth head of the U.S. train, advise, and assist command. Some 80 percent of the U.S. embassy departs each summer and most of the U.S. military assigned to Afghanistan is deployed for a year or less. The lack of institutional memory caused by personnel turnover in Afghanistan is widely known. Even so, the U.S. government continues to routinely defer to the on-the-ground experience of deployed personnel to assess progress and evaluate their own work. The result is assessments that are often considerably rosier than they should be, or totally irrelevant—for example, when trainers were asked to evaluate their own training of Afghan units, they gave themselves high marks for instruction—a metric that had little to do with reflecting the units' actual battlefield readiness. The constant turnover of personnel in Afghanistan highlights the need for more rigorous oversight and scrutiny, not less.

- **To be effective, reconstruction efforts must be based on a deep understanding of the historical, social, legal, and political traditions of the host nation.** The United States sent personnel into Afghanistan who did not know the difference between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and who lacked any substantive knowledge of Afghan society, local dynamics, and power relationships. In the short term, SIGAR believes Congress should mandate more rigorous, in-depth pre-deployment training that exposes U.S. personnel to the history of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, at the very least. In the long term, we need to find ways of ramping up our knowledge base in the event of future contingency operations, perhaps by identifying academic experts willing to lend their expertise on short notice as a contingency emerges. There is also a dearth of staff at U.S. agencies with the vital combination of long-term institutional memory and recent experience. In the case of Afghanistan, we should listen more to people who have developed expertise over time—most notably, Afghan officials, who have greater institutional and historical knowledge than their U.S. counterparts.

## Matters for Congressional Consideration

In addition to the prior list of key lessons from SIGAR's work, at the request of committee staff, we have also compiled a list of six recommendations for immediate consideration for the Congress.

1. In light of the ongoing peace negotiations, the Congress should consider the urgent need for the Administration to plan for what happens after the United States reaches a peace deal with the Taliban. There are a number of serious threats to a sustainable peace in Afghanistan that will not miraculously disappear with signing a peace agreement. Any such agreement is likely to involve dramatic reductions of U.S. forces, and with that comes the need to plan for transferring the management of security-related assistance from DOD to State leadership. DOD manages some $4 billion per year in security sector assistance to Afghanistan, and State is wholly unprepared at this moment to take on management of that enormous budget. Any peace agreement and drawdown of U.S. forces raises a number of other issues that could put the U.S.-funded reconstruction effort at risk. As SIGAR reported last year in its High-Risk List report, these include—but are not limited to—the capability of Afghan security forces to conduct counterterrorism operations; protecting the hard-won rights of Afghan women; upholding the rule of law; suppressing corruption; promoting alternative livelihoods for farmers currently engaged in growing poppy for the opium trade—and, not least, the problem of reintegrating an estimated 60,000 Taliban fighters, their families, and other illegal armed groups into civil society.

2. To ensure Congress and the taxpayers are properly apprised in a timely manner of significant events that pose a threat to the U.S. reconstruction mission in Afghanistan, Congress should consider requiring all federal agencies operating in country to provide reports to the Congress disclosing risks to major reconstruction projects and programs, and disclosing important events or developments as they occur. These reports would be analogous to the reports publically traded companies in the United States are now required to file with the Securities Exchange Commission to keep investors informed about important events.[9]

3. In light of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and decreasing staffing, there will be a natural tendency for U.S. agencies to increase their use of on-budget assistance or international organizations and trust funds to accomplish reconstruction and development goals. Congress should consider conditioning such on-budget

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[9] Every publically traded company in the United States is required to file annual and quarterly reports with the SEC about the company's operations, including a detailed disclosure of the risks the company faces (known as "10-K" and "10-Q" reports). Public companies are also required to file more current 8-K reports disclosing "material events" as they occur, *i.e.*, major events or developments that shareholders should know about.

assistance on rigorous assessments of the Afghan ministries and international trust funds having strong accountability measures and internal controls in place.

4.  Oversight is mission critical to any successful reconstruction and development program in Afghanistan. The Congress should consider requiring DOD, State, USAID, and other relevant executive agencies to ensure adequate oversight, monitoring and evaluation efforts continue and not be dramatically reduced as part of a right-sizing program, as witnessed recently by State's personnel reductions at the Kabul embassy. Without adequate oversight staffing levels and the ability to physically inspect, monitor and evaluate programs, Congress should consider the efficacy of continuing assistance.

5.  The Congress should consider requiring U.S. government agencies supporting U.S. reconstruction missions to "rack and stack" their programs and projects by identifying their best- and worst-performing activities, so that the Congress can more quickly identify whether and how to reallocate resources to projects that are proving successful. The ambiguous responses to SIGAR's 2013 request of DOD, State, and USAID that they identify their best- and worst-performing projects and programs in Afghanistan indicate that the agencies may not routinely engage in the self-evaluation necessary to honestly evaluate what is working and what is not.

6.  The Congress should request that State, DOD and USAID submit a finalized anticorruption strategy for reconstruction efforts in U.S. contingency operations. This requirement was part of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, which set a deadline of June 2018 for the strategy to be submitted to various congressional committees, including this one. In December 2019, State told SIGAR that the strategy "is still under development." Further, the NDAA language did not state that anticorruption is a national security priority in a contingency operation, or require annual reporting on implementation. The Congress should consider incorporating these elements into its renewed request to agencies.

## Conclusion

As anybody who has served in government knows, when you undertake an effort such as our Lessons Learned Program, you will inevitably gore somebody's ox. The programs, policies, and strategies SIGAR has reviewed were all the result of decisions made by people who, for the most part, were doing the best they could. While our lessons learned reports identify failures, missed opportunities, bad judgment, and the occasional success, the response to our reports within the U.S. government has generally been positive. It is to the credit of many of the government officials we have worked with—and, in some cases, criticized—that they see the value of SIGAR's lessons learned work and are suggesting new topics for us to explore.

Our work is far from done. For all the lives and treasure the United States and its coalition partners have expended in Afghanistan, and for Afghans themselves who have suffered the most from decades of violence, the very least we can do is to learn from our successes and failures. SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program is our attempt to do that, and in my opinion, its work will be our agency's most important legacy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.

## Appendix I – Letter to the Editor



# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

**Letters to the Editor** · Opinion

# Setting the record straight on 'The Afghanistan Papers'



U.S. soldiers attend a training session for the Afghan army in Herat, Afghanistan, on May 2. (Jalil Rezayec/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock)

By **Letters to the Editor**

Dec. 17, 2019 at 3:46 p.m. EST

The Post's "Afghanistan Papers" project attempted to shine a light on problems in the United States' longest war and the $133 billion U.S. reconstruction effort.

I'm intimately familiar with those problems. The agency I lead — the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) — has a long record of uncovering waste, fraud and abuse of taxpayer dollars in Afghanistan.

Over the years, media organizations around the world have reported our findings far and wide. Poor planning. Pointless spending. Corruption that corrodes Afghans' confidence in their government. "Ghost soldiers" on the rolls of the Afghan security forces. Rampant theft of U.S.-supplied fuel — much of it winding up in the hands of insurgents who kill Americans. The list goes on.

But the Afghanistan Papers fell short in several respects when it comes to the labors of the men and women of SIGAR, some of whom work under often dangerous conditions in Afghanistan. I am compelled to correct the record:

The Post claimed SIGAR offered anonymity to sources it interviewed in its Lessons Learned Program "to avoid controversy over politically sensitive matters." SIGAR withheld names of confidential sources to protect them from retaliation and because we are required to by law: the Inspector General Act of 1978. Protecting confidential sources is a bedrock principle at all U.S. law enforcement and inspector general offices, including SIGAR. Moreover, it's a necessity: Often a witness will provide important evidence of government waste or fraud only if his or her identity is protected, something that reporters and news outlets should well appreciate. Ironically, The Post is suing us in federal court demanding that we reveal the names of the confidential sources of the Afghanistan Papers.

The Post's series also claimed, "To avoid controversy, SIGAR sanitized the harshest criticisms from the Lessons Learned interviews." That's absurd. We've been criticized for many things. Avoiding

controversy is not one of them. A simple Google search reveals hundreds of articles, spanning years, detailing how SIGAR routinely speaks truth to power and exposes mismanagement of reconstruction programs, often provoking the ire of generals, ambassadors and other high-ranking officials. Many SIGAR reports and the controversies they provoked have been covered by The Post.

The series also criticized some of our Lessons Learned reports for their "flat, bureaucratic jargon." SIGAR is an inspector general, not a newspaper. It's one thing to turn a snappy quote into a headline. It's another to produce painstakingly researched and referenced reports to Congress and the executive branch bureaucracy under strict professional standards. SIGAR makes recommendations for fixing problems and discusses them in depth in our Lessons Learned reports and audits.

Allegations that we pulled our punches and sat on key interviews, including those with Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, a top Afghanistan war adviser to two presidents, and Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who oversaw intelligence in Afghanistan and served as President Trump's first national security adviser, are unfounded.

The series didn't say that we provided the Flynn interview to The Post in December 2017 and the Lute interview in March 2018. If The Post believed these interviews were so important to the public's right to know, why didn't it publish them when it got them?

That said, the Afghanistan Papers is an important contribution to public discourse about the war in Afghanistan. But it is not a "secret" history. SIGAR has written about these issues for years, including in seven Lessons Learned reports and more than 300 audits and other products. So have a number of brave Post journalists reporting from Afghanistan over the years, including former longtime Kabul bureau chief Pamela Constable, as well as journalists from other news outlets.

Taken together, all of our contributions — from reporters, SIGAR staff and those who aided SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program — can lead to a better understanding of America's longest war.

For an even deeper dive, I recommend SIGAR's quarterly reports to Congress and the seven Lessons Learned reports published so far, available online at www.sigar.mil. Spoiler alert: We plan to publish several more Lessons Learned reports in 2020.

**John F. Sopko, Arlington**

*The writer is the special inspector general for*

*Afghanistan reconstruction.*