

**THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS: COSTS AND BENEFITS
OF AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL SPENDING
OVERSIGHT AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
OF THE

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
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THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS: COSTS AND BENEFITS OF AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2020

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL SPENDING,
OVERSIGHT AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT,
OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:35 p.m. in room 342, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Rand Paul, Chairman of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Paul, Hawley, Hassan, and Sinema.

Also present: Senator Lee

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR PAUL¹

Senator PAUL. I now call to order this hearing of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management.

Last night I flew to Dover Air Force Base with the President to honor two soldiers who were killed this week in Afghanistan, America's longest war. We honor their bravery and patriotism. We honor their commitment to their country and to their fellow soldiers. But frankly, they deserve better.

Our soldiers deserve better from their elected officials, from us. Congress needs to do its duty and decide whether to continue America's longest war. Congress needs to debate what the mission in Afghanistan is today. Congress needs to vote on whether to continue the war in Afghanistan. One generation cannot bind another generation to war, and should not.

We now have soldiers fighting who were born after the 9/11 attacks. We need to reexamine what our mission is in Afghanistan. Our brave young men and women in uniform deserve at least as much.

On December 9, 2019, the Washington Post published a series of investigative reports known collectively as the Afghan Papers. The Afghanistan paper series is based, in part, on some 400 interviews conducted by the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, SIGAR, between 2014 and 2018. U.S. Government officials who had been responsible for the conduct of the Afghanistan War in some capacity, both military and civilian, sat with SIGAR as part of their Lessons Learned Program, which is intended to

¹The prepared statement of Senator Paul appears in the Appendix on page 41.

show what has and has not worked over the course of the U.S. reconstruction experience.

I look forward today to speaking with SIGAR's John Sopko to discuss the work in greater detail, to clarify SIGAR's mission, and to provide some important additional context about interviews obtained by the Washington Post.

As for the substance of the Post's reporting, it is extraordinarily troubling. It portrays a U.S. war effort severely impaired by mission creep and suffering from a complete absence of clear and achievable objectives. Sadly, for those of us who have followed Afghanistan closely, these reports only serve to confirm our worst suspicions. For years it has been my view that the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan amounts to a military presence without a mission. We have no achievable end state nor have we aligned ends, ways, and means to support a non-existent theory of victory.

I have repeatedly raised these concerns and have repeatedly tried to force Congress to confront the Afghanistan issue in a meaningful way. In September 2017, I forced a vote on an amendment to sunset the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for the Use of Military Force within 6 months. That amendment was defeated.

In this last year, Senator Udall and I introduced the Afghan Service Act that would sunset the 2001 authorization over a year and require the Department of Defense (DOD) to produce a plan to have an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan and also give a \$2,500 bonus to our servicemembers who have been deployed in the Global War on Terror.

I have been outspoken about winding the war down. But what the Afghan Papers makes crystal clear is that doing nothing is no longer an option for any Senator or Member of Congress with a conscience. The Costs of War project Brown University estimates that since 2001, the U.S. Government has spent just under \$1 trillion in appropriated taxpayer funds in Afghanistan. That's \$50 billion a year for almost 20 years.

The obvious question is, what has that \$1 trillion bought us? What do we have to show for it? Did \$1 trillion make Afghanistan more stable? Did \$1 trillion make our military more capable of deterring peer competitors? Did \$1 trillion move us one step closer to victory? What legacy costs await us in the future?

But beyond the immense physical costs lie the even more difficult questions about our continued presence in Afghanistan. The servicemembers who have deployed to fight in the war in Afghanistan, many of whom have deployed several times, including two of my staff, have paid a tremendous price. Some 2,400 have laid down their lives and another 20,000 have been wounded, often grievously. How do we honor their sacrifices?

Ambassador Doug Lute will also join us today. Ambassador Lute was an advisor to both President Bush and President Obama on Afghanistan. In his 2015 SIGAR interview, he says, quote, "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan—we didn't know what we were doing."

What has changed in Afghanistan since 2015? Anything? Have we learned what we are doing yet?

In 2019, U.S. forces dropped more munitions in Afghanistan than it has in any year since 2006, when the Air Force first began keep-

ing track. Are we killing the Taliban? Are we trying to bomb them into the negotiation table? What is our mission?

As for the prospect of some sort of negotiated settlement with the Taliban, we will also be joined this afternoon by Ambassador Richard Boucher. One of the key lessons learned that Ambassador Boucher discussed in his interview was that, quote, “We have to say good enough is good enough,” and, quote, “We are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable.”

What is in the realm of achievable with respect to our durable peace in Afghanistan? Is the U.S. military presence there helping or hurting the process?

Finally, we will hear from retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis. A combat veteran who was awarded the Bronze Star for valor in Afghanistan in 2011, Colonel Davis went public with his concerns about the war effort in Afghanistan while still on active duty. His testimony will remind us that while much of the reporting in the Afghan Papers is new, the fundamental problems are not.

These are the sort of difficult questions that Congress needs to begin grappling with, and I am hoping to start that discussion today.

With that I would like to recognize Ranking Member Senator Maggie Hassan.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR HASSAN¹

Senator HASSAN. Thank you, Chairman Paul. Thank you for holding this hearing. To Mr. Sopko and all of the witnesses today, thank you for your testimony, and let me also thank you for your extensive service to our country.

Sadly, this hearing comes a little more than 2 weeks after a deadly plane crash in Afghanistan claimed the lives of two airmen, including U.S. Air Force Captain Ryan Phaneuf of Hudson, New Hampshire. Just this weekend, two U.S. soldiers were killed and six others were wounded in combat operations in eastern Afghanistan. These losses serve as painful reminders of all the men and women in uniform in harm’s way in Afghanistan and certainly around the world.

In October, I traveled to Afghanistan to meet with our military and diplomatic leaders, as well as with the leaders of Afghanistan. The goal of the trip was to evaluate the situation in Afghanistan, to ensure that Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorist groups who threaten our country, and to conduct oversight of the longest war in the United States history.

The trip was both inspiring and eye-opening. We saw examples of key successes from our nation’s campaign in Afghanistan. We also saw the effects of the missteps during the course of this 18-year war.

In the weeks after this trip, the Washington Post published a series of articles on confidential transcripts of interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. These papers, known as the Afghanistan Papers, helped bring to light several troubling trends.

¹The prepared statement of Senator Hassan appears in the Appendix on page 44.

Chief among these concerns is the failure of successive Administrations to establish a realistic long-term strategy that defines our mission in Afghanistan. The oft-repeated mantra from Afghanistan veterans and analysts sums this up the best: We have not been fighting one 18-year-old war in Afghanistan. We've been fighting 18 one-year wars.

We must learn from these mistakes. We must establish a real long-term strategy for Afghanistan that effectively leverages our military, diplomatic, and developmental efforts toward a goal of ensuring that Afghanistan can stand up its institutions to secure itself and combat terrorism.

We must also not forget that the ungoverned vacuum in Afghanistan in the 1990s gave space for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda to build a global terrorist network that killed nearly 3,000 Americans in the worst attack on U.S. soil since World War II. Leaving Afghanistan before their government is capable of resisting al-Qaeda, Islamic State of Syria (ISIS), or any other terrorist group could prove to be a grave mistake that could leave us less safe for years to come.

Developing a strategy, however, is just the first step. We must provide resources to carry out such a strategy, establish realistic benchmarks for success, and then Congress must hold our government accountable for meeting these goals.

While the Afghanistan Papers reveal that mistakes were made along the way, my trip affirmed that significant progress has been made to help keep Americans and Afghans safe, secure, and free. We owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces, the State Department, and the intelligence community (IC) for this progress.

Our briefings with General Miller, Ambassador Bass, and meetings with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah made clear that United States and allied efforts have and continue to reduce terrorist groups' ability to use the country to launch attacks. Groups like al-Qaeda, the Haqqani network, and even ISIS' Afghanistan affiliate still threaten the United States, but our continued counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan has worked to degrade the capabilities of these threats and minimize their ability to launch attacks on U.S. soil.

Aside from our successes fighting terrorism, one of the most poignant parts of our trip was hearing about progress advancing the rights and freedom of Afghanistan's women. Under the Taliban, women were oppressed, subservient, and treated as property. Today women in Afghanistan enjoy more freedoms than ever before, serve in the Afghan Cabinet, and are building the backbone of a more resilient and stable Afghanistan.

Throughout my trip, including even in neighboring Pakistan and in India, women shared with me their fears about what would happen if the United States left Afghanistan without a strong infrastructure in place to protect these gains. Their message was simple: if the United States leaves today then everything Afghanistan's women have gained will be lost. I would add that some of the women in Pakistan felt that their safety and security would be impacted as well.

We need to establish an achievable strategy for Afghanistan. We must define our objectives and goals and appropriately resource them, and we must hold the Federal Government accountable for its adherence to that strategy. It won't be easy, but as my dad, a World War II veteran, used to say, we are Americans and we do hard things.

I hope that this hearing can be a step forward in this difficult but critically important work, and thank you again, Chairman Paul, for having this hearing.

Senator PAUL. Thank you, Senator Hassan, and I want to be clear from the outset. Our goal of this hearing is to find a way to move forward. I want to find a way to end the war. It is not to cast aspersions on any of those who may have given their opinion. That is what we want from people in government who gave their opinion. Really, if anyone is at fault here it is Congress. It is not the people who might have been telling us all along there were problems with the mission or lack of mission. It is with us not listening. This is a problem, to let a war go on and on and on without Congress ever voting on it.

Our first panelist today is Mr. John F. Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Mr. Sopko was sworn in as Special Investigator in 2002 and brings over 30 years of oversight and investigations experience to the position. Under Mr. Sopko's leadership, SIGAR's work has uncovered billions in wasteful spending and mismanagement of certain aspects of the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. Mr. Sopko.

**TESTIMONY OF JOHN F. SOPKO,¹ SPECIAL INSPECTOR
GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION**

Mr. SOPKO. Thank you very much, Chairman Paul and Ranking Member Hassan, and other Members of the Subcommittee.

Congress created SIGAR in 2008 to combat waste, fraud, and abuse in the U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. So far we have published nearly 600 reports, inspections, and audits, and have saved the taxpayer over \$3 billion, as well as convicting over 130 individuals for misconduct related to reconstruction.

Although this is the 24th time I have presented testimony before Congress, today will be the first time I testify before the Senate about our Lessons Learned Program and what we have learned from it. I would like to pause for a second to second what Chairman Paul said. We owe a debt of gratitude to Ambassador Lute, Ambassador Boucher, Colonel Davis, and the over 400 other individuals who volunteered to provide information to our Lessons Learned Program. Without their assistance we would not be here today. Without their assistance, and admitting sometimes failures that occurred, we would not know what lessons we should learn from this experience.

Senator PAUL. Let me just interrupt for just one second. All of these witnesses did not have to come. They volunteered to come today to give us advice.

¹The prepared statement of Mr. Sopko appears in the Appendix on page 46.

Mr. SOPKO. That is absolutely correct. They did not have to cooperate with us either, but they did, and I think we again owe them a debt of gratitude.

Because of the recent press attention, I am really pleased for the opportunity to clear up some misconceptions from the Washington Post stories. First of all—and I must repeat this because there are some people who still think we issued a report in early December—SIGAR did not issue a Lessons Learned report. We have issued seven of them but we did not issue one in December.

Rather, the Washington Post stories were, as the Chairman noted, based upon raw interview notes that we have provided to the Washington Post over the last 2 years pursuant to an official legal FOIA. As with everything else produced by SIGAR, our Lessons Learned Program's mandate is limited only to reconstruction. We don't assess the diplomatic or military strategies of the U.S. Likewise, we are not opining on whether we should be there or not.

Rather, we are the only U.S. Government agency that is focused on conducting an independent and objective examination of our reconstruction efforts, and we are applying strict professional standards from the Council of Inspector General. Unlike the Washington Post, we have made practical recommendations to Congress and the Executive Branch agencies for improving operations in Afghanistan.

Here are six overarching conclusions from our Lessons Learned Program that I leave for your consideration.

The first one is that successful reconstruction is incompatible with continuing insecurity. Second, unchecked corruption in Afghanistan undermined our strategic goals and unfortunately the United States contributed to that corruption. Third, after the Taliban's initial defeat, there was no clear reconstruction strategy and no single military service, agency, or nation in charge of reconstruction.

Fourth, politically driven timelines have undermined the reconstruction effort. Fifth, the constant turnover of personnel, or what we euphemistically called "the annual lobotomy," has negatively impacted reconstruction and continues to this date. Six, to be effective, reconstruction efforts have to be based on a strong understanding of the historical, social, legal, and political traditions of the host nation.

In light of a request from your staff, we had a couple recommendations for you to consider right now. Particularly in light of the ongoing peace negotiations, and in order to protect the advances we have made over the last 18 years, Congress should ensure that the Administration has an action plan for what happens the day after peace. Second, to ensure that Congress is aware of serious problems in a timely manner, it should require agencies to provide regular reports disclosing risks to major reconstruction programs as they occur.

Third, in order to protect the U.S. taxpayer, Congress should condition future on-budget assistance on rigorous assessments of the Afghan ministries and international trust funds' internal control. Lastly, oversight is still mission critical in Afghanistan. Congress should require the Administration to continue adequate oversight

and monitoring in evaluation capabilities going forward, no matter what the troop limit is.

Our work in Afghanistan may be far from done, Mr. Chairman, but for all the lives and treasure the United States and its coalition partners have expended, the very least we can do—and I am glad you here are starting that process—is to try to learn from our successes and failure there. That is SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program and that is our attempt to do so.

I am happy to answer any questions now.

Senator PAUL. Thank you. As you were talking about the corruption and then also how we go about reconstruction, I was thinking—I think it was in Ambassador Boucher, some of his interviews—he was saying, we make the decision when give money to foreign countries to make sure it all comes back to us. Basically everything has to be built by the United States. That's what we do with our weapons, everything, and then we sell it as work projects for the United States. But there's not as much value added.

We will let him speak for himself, but I think one of his ideas is that we should have funneled some more of the money through government entities. Then the question is, if they are corrupt, how do we do that?

What do you think of the idea of more money over time having gone through their government and the problem of their corruption?

Mr. SOPKO. I agree with the Ambassador that we could have spent more money in Afghanistan. We actually had an Afghan First policy for a while, to use Afghan corporations or companies or individuals for some of the work. We have not done an audit on that. I do not know what the percentage breakdown is.

But the concern we have is if you give it directly to the Afghans, and there is nothing wrong with that and it actually could help the Afghan government develop some capabilities, you have to make certain that there are some protections in place, some internal controls. In the past, we have not seen that. Our job is to caution Congress before you do it, consider the outcome if you give the money with no controls.

Senator PAUL. Right. I am not suggesting it is the answer. I was just interested in your opinion on it.

The other remarks that some have made was that there was so much of it and there was so much of a flood of it, as a percentage of GDP, that it was inevitable it was going to be wasted. We broadcast a lot of the things you put out, the \$90 million hotel across from Kabul that was never completed, a contractor runs off with the money, a \$45 million natural gas station, which I am sure nobody is using because no one has a car that runs on natural gas, that was supposed to cost half a million and it ended up costing \$45 million, and these examples.

It is the nature of the game. Government, even in our country, is not very efficient either, so I am not so sure we have done the best for them. The other question is, maybe we cannot actually make reconstruction work and we are not very good at nation building. Maybe we should not be in the business of that. That is another question that may be broader than your mission.

But what is our military's mission? When I ask soldiers they tell me, "Yes, I thought we were going to go kill the enemy and defend our country," and they are kind of for that, but then they are not so excited about being policemen or working on roads, guarding road crews building roads or something for the people. I do not know that there are any easy answers but I know we cannot keep doing the same thing.

With regard to corruption, over the timeline, not only your timeline and preceding, do you think there is a clear direction that is headed toward less corruption, or do you think it is still a significant problem? People talk about these warlords who are more concerned with their own pockets than they are really with general welfare. Better? Worse? What is the direction we are heading on corruption?

Mr. SOPKO. Some improvement, not a lot, and I can refer to Ambassador Bass in one of his farewell addresses to the Afghan government. He basically warned them that if they do not get their act together on corruption they are not going to get further support. We have been asked—and this is one of the areas where I think Congress has been very effective by listening to our reports—they have asked us three times to go in and do an assessment of the anti-corruption capabilities of the Afghan government, and we are in the process of doing the third one.

Our concern is that the Afghan government has been pretty good at checking the box, but is there a political will to actually bring the big fish, the big corrupt, politically important people to task? There is a major problem we have identified before, and it continues, but we are going to try to do it.

Some improvement, but I cannot say we are happy, nor is the State Department or the Administration happy with their anti-corruption capabilities.

Senator PAUL. It has been going on so long, and this is not the first time we have been in some sort of reconstruction effort that you have got to wonder. Everybody has got a new idea for how we are going to tweak it, make it better, new rules, or the bigger question, whether or not we should be in the business of trying to create nations.

We, or at least I, on my Committee, probably a year or so ago, had seen these horrifying reports of Afghan generals having underaged male sex slaves. We put an amendment in, in my Committee, to say that they would have to certify that this was not happening, to each different military command in the Afghan army, in order to get U.S. money. My amendment was defeated overwhelmingly because they said it would be too hard to do that. Is it really? If you cannot have any rules considering this horrendous practice, is there any hope, for doing it?

But to so many up here it is more a concern with shoveling the money out, and if the money we gave did not work, we need more, I tend to be skeptical of the whole process.

But I do appreciate your work. I think that it is very important that we have inspectors general throughout government, but particularly in overseas spending, which is so distant from us that it is an ordeal and a hardship just to get there to see if it is being spent wisely. We tried to go see the gas station and the military

command said it was too dangerous, that they might risk lives, and we did not really want to risk lives. But we should not be building things in places where we have to risk lives to even go see it. They are not going to see it either, so we have no idea if it is even still there. I do not know if your people have been able to go.

But we do appreciate you trying. I think the lesson from the Afghan Papers is really let's bring this to a head, not what people have said but what are people saying now and where do we go from here.

With that I would like to recognize Senator Hassan.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you, Senator Paul. Mr. Sopko, I would like to start by following up on what you did at the beginning of your remarks just now, which is framing the Afghanistan Papers in the context of SIGAR's project titled Lessons Learned. Can you describe for us what your goals were when SIGAR started the Lessons Learned project and how you worked to achieve them?

Mr. SOPKO. Our goals actually came about as a result of questions I received almost from the beginning of my job back in 2013, from Members of Congress such as yourself. We would present these reports and show waste, fraud, and abuse, and Congressmen and their staff were asking me, Senators were, "So what does it mean, Mr. Sopko? You keep coming in with another horror story. What does it mean? What does all of this mean?"

Actually it was General Allen, who at that time was head of our troops in Afghanistan who said that the military will do lessons learned, but is the State Department doing a lessons learned on this 18 years? Is the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)? Is anybody going purple? Is anybody looking at the whole of government, because this is a whole-of-government exercise.

We went to the National Security Council, which was the only organization that could have looked at the whole of government, and they basically said, "Go at it. We are not doing it, because we are not going to do it again." Well, that may be true. We know people were planning to do something like it in Syria, but it was important we were going to be in Afghanistan to try to do that.

What we tried to do in each of these reports, and my colleague over in Iraq, the SIGIR, actually did one massive report on lessons learned. What I thought, and my colleague suggested, that we break it down into easily—although I would not say they were easily, bitable morsels, because they are about 150 pages each—but it is particular issues that experts told us you had to address.

The first one was corruption. Then it was about training the military. The third one was on economic development. We went through a whole series, and as we were doing this, Members of Congress and members of the Executive Branch said, "Well, here are some other issues you should look at."

Senator HASSAN. Right.

Mr. SOPKO. Actually the last one we did, which was on reintegration, that was recommended by General Nicholson and by Ambassador Bass, because they said, "This is a topic we are going to have to do something about, reintegrating the Taliban, and we do not know how to do it, so try to develop that." We are doing something on elections too, that was recommended by both of them.

That is how the process came about.

Senator HASSAN. OK. It is fair to say that you all feel, it is my impression that the production of these Lessons Learned reports really factor into the broader mandate of the Office of Special Inspector General.

Mr. SOPKO. Oh yes. That is part of our job, is to make recommendations on how to improve.

Senator HASSAN. OK. Thanks. As I mentioned, last October I led a delegation to Afghanistan and other countries in the region, and I met with you as part of my preparations for the trip, and I thank you for that meeting, and was impressed to see the extensive work your office has done to provide accountability for the United States' ongoing engagement in Afghanistan.

Upon visiting I was encouraged to see that the American presence in Afghanistan had helped inspire some economic growth, had provided invaluable access to resources and infrastructure, and certainly, as I mentioned in my opening, elevated the status of women and girls.

Most importantly, the American presence in Afghanistan has helped to ensure that Afghanistan does not revert to a safe haven for terrorists who may again launch attacks against the United States or our allies. Mr. Sopko, while we are rightly focused in this hearing, and we should continue this focus, too, on what went wrong, I also want to know what went right. Are there particular gains that resulted from the United States' presence in Afghanistan that stand out to you, and how can we encourage the implementation of SIGAR's recommendations to continue to find success in Afghanistan?

Mr. SOPKO. I think in certain areas we have seen gains, and that is why we do not want to risk them now by moving too quickly without thinking about our next step. The gains dealing with women and women's issues, I think is one of them. I agree with you. I have not met an Afghan woman yet who trusts the Taliban, so they are very worried.

Senator HASSAN. Yes.

Mr. SOPKO. Now again, I am basically talking to Afghan women in the major cities, and most of the women in Afghanistan still live a very dangerous and very precarious existence out in the countryside. That is something to remember. The gains we have made have been mostly in the cities.

Senator HASSAN. Right.

Mr. SOPKO. We have made some gains in health care, not as much as probably a lot of the press releases have said, but we have made gains in health care for the Afghan people. We have made gains in education for the Afghan people, again, not as much as I think some of the press releases have said, but we have made some.

We have also made gains with the Afghan military, particularly their special forces, although there is some concern that they are being overused. They are being burned up.

Senator HASSAN. Right.

Mr. SOPKO. We have made some gains with the Afghan air force. Again, they are being burned up. We are using it up a lot for a lot of their work. We have made some gains. I think on anti-corruption we have made some gains. Not as much as we would like or the

U.S. Embassy would like, but we have made some gains. So there are areas where we have seen progress.

Senator HASSAN. Let me follow up a little bit. I thank you for that answer. As the Lessons Learned project and the underlying Afghanistan Papers reveal, the United States lacked both a short-term and long-term strategy from the beginning of our armed conflict in Afghanistan. After 19 years and nearly \$1 trillion spent, our large-scale combat operations have dwindled. Our humanitarian and diplomatic missions have taken precedence, including attempts to reconcile with the Taliban.

However, I worry that without a robust interagency approach from the Department of Defense, the State Department, and USAID, the United States will continue to spend taxpayer dollars without clear goals in mind.

Has your office been able to determine a defined interagency strategy for the United States' continued presence in Afghanistan, and what, in your view, and based on the work of SIGAR, is the number one thing that we can do to improve the U.S. position in Afghanistan?

Mr. SOPKO. There is an overarching strategy that was announced by President Trump early, and I think it is about a year or two ago. The difficulty we have, and we have been asking, is how do our individual programs support that strategy?

Senator HASSAN. Right.

Mr. SOPKO. The overarching goal is to have lasting peace, to have a peace treaty there which is fair and just to everybody. But we have a problem saying the anti-corruption strategy, the money we are spending in that area and all of that, how it supports it, and that is what we keep asking for and we have not really seen that yet.

Senator HASSAN. OK. Thank you. I do have more questions but I—

Senator PAUL. We will come back to you and then we will finish up.

One of the things that I was thinking as we went through that I think is perplexing to people, is people over here tend to see things as sort of black and white, good and bad. The Afghan government has done amazing things for women. There is a woman ambassador from Afghanistan. It so much different. It is night and day. It is hard for us to imagine why communities are actually voluntarily choosing the Taliban, and it is hard to argue that it does not happen. There are parts of Afghanistan that are not being bludgeoned to death. They are voluntarily choosing the Taliban over some local warlord.

I think when we first went in we were trying to defeat the people that attacked us. It was war. When you have war you do not always wait for Thomas Jefferson to be your ally. You take the nearest ally that hates your enemy and you may work with them. We worked with a lot of people, but that is the problem with staying at war and going into nation-building is we still have some of those allies that are tribal fiefdoms involved in the drug trade. There were accusations that even the president of Afghanistan, for many years, Karzai, that his brothers were corrupt, in the drug trade, in the construction trade, and different things.

With these accusations how do we go about it? The thing is then, it would be a much more dramatic step. Do we depose the local warlord? Do we inflict some form of democracy on these people? It is not easy. I do not know if you have a perspective from where you sit on why people voluntarily choose the Taliban and how we would make it otherwise.

Mr. SOPKO. Mr. Chairman, I think you have hit one of the conundrums. It is a wickedly difficult problem. That is why we focused first, and I think that is why the generals and Ambassadors told us to focus on corruption, because corruption is not only a criminal justice issue. It is a security issue.

What you are seeing is a lot of the Taliban recruits are coming from Afghans who are upset about the corruption they see in the government, and they are not getting the services. What they see is an American contractor or an American contract going to some warlord who is stealing their property, abusing their women, their wives, or their children, or whatever, and they cannot get justice. That is the difficult thing.

We, in our Lessons Learned report on corruption warned about this. I will use an old phrase that I remember my family telling me. If you go to sleep with dogs, you will wake up with fleas. We should have thought about that when we made some very big mistakes about joining with these organizations.

The answer is to slowly—and we cannot do this overnight—work with the government of Afghanistan to try to clear out some of these problem, corrupt officials. I go back to our Lessons Learned reports and what we have learned, and that is you cannot ignore corruption until 8 years or 10 years after the exercise. Now we are into that problem. How do we dig out of it? I think this is where it is going to take time.

Senator PAUL. Senator Hawley.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR HAWLEY

Senator HAWLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Sopko, good to see you again. I enjoyed sitting down with you, I guess it was a couple of months ago now, and talking about some of your reports. I wish it were under better circumstances.

Let me follow up with you about some of the things that we talked about then, because I have to say—as you pointed out to me when we met, what has been published in the press about the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, our strategy in Afghanistan, is actually a small fraction of what your office has been publishing and trying to draw attention to for years. I think the work your office has been doing is very important and what you have documented, I think, would be and should be startling to the American people. Certainly it is to me.

Let me ask you this. Do any specific trends lead you to believe that the Afghan security forces will one day be able to hold off the Taliban and prevent al-Qaeda or ISIS from using Afghan territory to stage attacks on the U.S. homeland?

Mr. SOPKO. That is the \$64,000 or \$64 million question. I cannot answer that. I really cannot. We have looked at our training of the Afghan military, and as I mentioned to you, most of the indicia of measuring success are now classified or we do not collect it. I can-

not tell you publicly how good of a job we are doing on training. So \$64 billion has gone for training and assisting the Afghan military, and I cannot tell you or the American people, and that is in part because we allow the Afghan government to classify what I can tell you and what I can tell the taxpayers. It is very difficult.

Senator HAWLEY. If I could just clarify that point—the metrics, how we measure success when it comes to the Afghan security forces, like how we measure success with our Afghan strategy as a whole, continue to shift, right? We have changed those.

Mr. SOPKO. Absolutely.

Senator HAWLEY. We and the Pentagon and other Administrations have changed those over time. When one metric does not appear to show success, then we shift to a different metric. When that does not show success then we shift to a different metric. Is that fair to say?

Mr. SOPKO. That is absolutely correct. We did that three or four times with the metrics on that. Every time we looked at it, they changed it.

Senator HAWLEY. I have to say that I have posed this question to our military leaders and they have given me the same answer that you have just given me, which is, they do not know.

Let me ask you this. What specific data points would you want to see to be confident that Afghan security forces actually have a shot at becoming self-sufficient?

Mr. SOPKO. I would go back to that—again, I am not an expert on security. I am just a simple country lawyer. I came from the Midwest. I came from Ohio, close to the Kentucky border, Mr. Chairman. You would ask a simple question, if you were buying a house, show me your progress on it. I think one of the progress questions we would ask the Afghans is how many people do you control? How many of your citizens are under your control, and how much territory? That is now not relevant, apparently. It used to be; then it is not.

I would also come in with the same metrics we would use to rate our own soldiers and our own airmen, and see if those are being applied. This is not rocket science.

The other question is, how many Afghan soldiers do we have? We are still trying to figure out how many we are paying for. How many Afghan police are there really? We do not know.

This is not rocket science, but apparently it is all secret, classified, and I cannot tell you what the results are. I would be happy to go into more detail. We have a whole list of everything that has been classified, and it keeps growing. The latest one was looking at the Afghan special forces, which is fantastic. We have put a lot of money in that. But the number of independent missions that the Afghan special forces are doing has gone down.

Now I am not a betting person, but I will bet you that next quarter that database will be classified, because every time we find something that looks like it is going negative, it gets classified or it is no longer relevant.

Senator HAWLEY. I would like to underscore that point, because I think that is really significant. You are saying that the metrics that we have used to measure success or progress, when it comes to the security forces, when it comes to the Afghan government,

every time they show negative progress, reverse progress, in your observation they either are abandoned or they become classified. Is that correct?

Mr. SOPKO. That is correct.

Senator HAWLEY. How are we going to measure any progress? How is the public or this Congress, which is supposed to be performing oversight, how are we going to measure any progress if we do not have any access to data or metrics?

Mr. SOPKO. That is the point we have been trying to make over the last 5 or 6 years.

Senator HAWLEY. Let me ask you a question about the economy. Our integrated country strategy for Afghanistan says that development of a functioning Afghan state requires a growing Afghan economy. Makes sense. But do we have any evidence that the licit, the legal Afghan economy is, in fact, growing on a consistent and sustainable basis?

Mr. SOPKO. Actually, the evidence is probably going the other way. I think one of the ways to look at this is to look at the largest export from Afghanistan, and it dwarfs the licit, the legal economy, and that is narcotics. Narcotics is now anywhere from I think up to \$2.1 billion is exported in narcotics from Afghanistan. The licit, the legal economy, is only \$875 million, and one of the few growth areas in the 18 years we have been there is narcotics.

Senator HAWLEY. Let me ask you about the trend lines with the Afghan state, broadly. Can you point to any trends that cause you to believe that the Afghan government, the State, will be able to stand on its own in the near future?

Mr. SOPKO. The trend which is most optimistic is that the National Unity Government has recruited a lot of young, brave, intelligent recruits to their government. Many of them are Western trained. They are eager to do something and try to help. That is a positive.

The negative is that that is going to take time to change, to change the way the government is working. The real threat to the Afghan government continuing is the fact that over 75 percent of the Afghan government's budget is paid for by you, me, and the other allies. Without that 75 percent, the Afghan government and all those brave young Afghans will be out of work.

Senator HAWLEY. Can I just say, I know my time has expired, Mr. Chairman, so I will just say, in conclusion, thank you, Mr. Sopko, for your terrific work. Thank you for doing this work.

I was just in a hearing this morning, the Armed Services Committee, on this subject, where we were told again by a panel of experts, many of them from the Pentagon, who have done tremendous service, by the way, so no personal criticism of them. But we were told that we needed to be patient, that we just needed more time and more investment, that it was worth it. My view is, if we cannot show any progress on any metric—we have invested \$1 trillion, we have lost thousands of lives—I do not understand. The American people have been hugely patient. I do not see what is going on here and I do not think anybody really knows what we are doing.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator PAUL. Thanks, Senator Hawley, and Senator Hassan has one final question.

Senator HASSAN. A quick question and then we have had a vote call and we are going to talk logistics in a minute. But I did not want to wrap up this portion of the hearing without talking about one of the revelations in the papers about taxpayer dollars pocketed by contractors and subcontractors. I do not want the American people to think that this is only Afghan contractors and subcontractors. There are U.S. contractors and subcontractors. As money for development, security, goods and services is doled out it makes its way through this web of contractors and subcontractors. As a result, only a fraction of the total value of the contract reaches its intended target, such as helping the Afghan people reconstruct their war-torn country.

For instance, in discussions with Afghan Ambassador Richard Boucher, who will be testifying, he said he discovered that often only 10 to 20 percent of an expensive development contract actually ends up in Afghanistan. Can you discuss this phenomenon, and quickly, have there been successful measures for capping contractor overhead costs in development and security contractors, and what suggestions do you have for us?

Mr. SOPKO. I agree with Ambassador Boucher, and we have seen that problem where the main contract just keeps getting cut, cut, cut, cut, and then very little is left for the Afghan subcontractor. That is one reason why a lot of the buildings and roads were not properly made because there was no money to do the contract. We have not done an audit on it so I do not know significant. This is more anecdotal information.

The answer is probably to do that type of audit, see how bad the problem is, and try to come up with capping amounts. But we have not done that. We have not been asked to do that.

The thing to keep in mind is that we did have an Afghan First program at one time to recruit and hire Afghans. I do not know how effective that was, and again, we have not been asked to audit that.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator PAUL. I think we are going to try to go ahead and hear from Ambassador Lute and then we may have to do the questions afterwards, if he is willing to stay for a little bit. We will go vote and come back. But thank you, Mr. Sopko.

Mr. SOPKO. You are welcome.

Senator PAUL. Our second panelist this afternoon is Ambassador Douglas Lute. Ambassador Lute's most recent government service was as the U.S. Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization from 2013 to 2017. Prior to that, Ambassador Lute served on the National Security staff in both the Obama and Bush White Houses, where he helped coordinate and oversee the war effort in Afghanistan and South Asia.

Ambassador Lute retired from active duty as a Lieutenant General in the U.S. Army in 2010, after 35 years of distinguished service. Ambassador Lute.

TESTIMONY OF HON. DOUGLAS E. LUTE,¹ FORMER UNITED STATES PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE TO NATO AND SENIOR FELLOW, PROJECT ON EUROPE AND THE TRANS-ATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP, BELFER CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

Mr. LUTE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Madam Ranking Member. Thanks for this opportunity to appear today to discuss the war in Afghanistan. In this statement I will briefly outline my views on the vital U.S. interests at stake, the current situation, and one potential way forward. These are in response to the Committee's questions to me.

In my view, the only vital national interest at stake in Afghanistan is to counter terrorist groups that have the potential to strike the United States, its citizens, and its treaty allies. Indeed, this purpose mirrors the original purpose of our intervention just weeks after 9/11, in 2001, and it remains the core reason for our effort over the past 18 years. Of course, we have other less than vital interests in Afghanistan as well, and this Committee may wish to discuss those. But the essential purpose in Afghanistan remains to counter terrorism.

In my estimation, we have largely already achieved this counterterrorism objective. al-Qaeda is much diminished in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with most of its senior leaders killed, and those who remain, marginalized. The threat from al-Qaeda and its affiliates is actually greater elsewhere, outside of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, including Yemen, Somalia, and in pockets in Syria.

There is a branch of the so-called Islamic State in Afghanistan, but I have seen no evidence that it presents a threat to the United States directly, and it is under pressure from the Afghans, including, ironically, from the Taliban. This potential threat should be monitored, but I do not think it is existential today.

The situation today is a stalemate in at least three dimensions. First, the security situation is stalemated with neither the Taliban nor the Afghan government, with our support, able to significantly change the control of territory and population. In rough terms, the government controls the major population centers and the Taliban controls much of the countryside, especially in the Pashtun, south, and east. There is little either side can do to alter this security stalemate.

Second, Afghan politics are stalemated, with the final results of the September 2019 elections still not revealed, and the main political factions unwilling to compromise.

And third, the ongoing talks between the United States and the Taliban are not moving forward, largely because the United States has insufficient leverage and the Taliban are unwilling to make the compromises we are demanding for fear of losing cohesion among their ranks. We are stalemated on all three fronts.

Sustaining this stalemate is very expensive. Most significant, Afghans are dying and suffering more than at any time since 2001, including an increasing number from United States and Afghan government operations. The United States retains about 13,000

¹The prepared statement of Mr. Lute appears in the Appendix on page 69.

troops in Afghanistan, joined by about 6,000 from our allies and partners. While our casualties are much reduced from the U.S. peak of operations in 2010 and 2011, we lost more than 20 soldiers last year, to include some just most recently, as mentioned in opening comments. This troop presence costs about \$50 billion a year a significant opportunity cost given the other demands the Pentagon faces.

Afghanistan also receives one of the largest U.S. economic assistance packages. It is among the largest in all of the world. Today's stalemate is expensive.

My main point today is that the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is simply out of alignment. Strategy can be defined classically as the alignment, over time, of ends, ways, and means. Mr. Chairman, you mentioned this in your opening Statement. Ends are our objectives, what we are trying to accomplish; ways are the methods, the techniques of achieving those objectives; and means are the resources required. When these three elements are aligned, in classic terms, a strategy is viable.

My view is that in Afghanistan we have narrow counterterrorism objectives that can be achieved by alternate methods that do not justify the expensive resources we are committing today. Our strategy is out of alignment. U.S. objectives have rightly narrowed over time since the peak in 2010 and 2011, and today these objectives have been significantly achieved. But we still persist using largely unproductive methods and committing outsized resources, all to sustain a manifest stalemate at considerable cost.

This Committee asked for some thoughts on the way ahead, and I will try to be brief as my time expires. I recommend the United States prioritize not the military campaign but the politics and diplomacy required to move toward compromises that end the war in Afghanistan.

More specifically, a comprehensive political outcome requires compromises among the Afghan political elite to reform and govern inclusively. It requires compromises in the ongoing talks between the Taliban and the United States. It requires sustained diplomacy to secure support from Afghanistan's neighbors, especially Pakistan and Iran, and others including Russia, China, India, and the Gulf States. This is a major political diplomatic effort, a campaign that needs to be undertaken.

U.S. economic support to Afghanistan should be conditioned on progress by the Afghan government. It is not today conditioned. It is unconditional. In the talks with the Taliban, the United States should focus narrowly on our counterterrorism objective, and ensure verification that any deal is implemented as agreed.

Afghanistan's neighbors must understand that while we have narrow interests, their own security interests are at risk unless Afghanistan stabilizes.

Finally, the United States should engage our allies, who have supported us now for 18 years in Afghanistan, to support this main political diplomatic effort, including by extending economic assistance only to an inclusive Afghan government.

At the same time, to continue to secure our vital interests, the United States should develop alternatives to the current counterterrorism methods, including enhancing the most capable Afghan

security forces—Mr. Sopko mentioned the Afghan special forces—and intelligence gathering that does not rely on a costly U.S. troop presence. There are techniques and procedures for intelligence-gathering that do not require 14,000 U.S. troops on the ground. Offshore basing for U.S. forces should be considered, for example, in bases in the Persian Gulf, and we can talk about that more if you would like.

What I am describing differs from the current approach that aims indefinitely to support unsustainably large Afghan security forces and the Afghan government that struggles to be inclusive and combat corruption.

These adjustments, both political and military, can bring U.S. strategy into alignment, sustaining our vital national interests while dramatically reducing the costs of U.S. troop presence. In short, we can do better than sustaining the current stalemate.

A final note of caution. There is the potential outcome to this war that is actually worse than the current stalemate. An uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal in the absence of the kind of political and diplomatic progress I have outlined here will likely lead to Afghan civil war.

The Afghans have seen this before, after the rapid withdrawal of the Soviets after 1989. The civil war would likely lead to the collapse of the Afghan State and an irresistible opening for transnational terrorists to widen their reach. These are exactly the conditions that defined Afghanistan in the years prior to 9/11.

Thank you, and I am ready to respond to your questions.

Senator PAUL. We will probably take about a 10-minute break to go over and come back but if you have time to stay we would love to ask some questions.

Mr. LUTE. Great. I am here.

[Recess.]

Senator PAUL. All right. We have two votes done and we will have to break again in about 30 minutes, but we will see what we can do and get through here. I think Senator Hassan is coming back and we will see what we get from others coming back.

I appreciated your testimony and I think too often, we really do not discuss the exact mission, and you were very precise that what you think the mission should be is counterterrorism. After 9/11, it was also very precise. It was 60 words, and the 60 words were basically go after those who attacked us or aided and abetted those who attacked us, and the Taliban was included in that, and I think that's a reasonable interpretation.

We went on, though, and the media and everybody else dumbs this thing down and says "and associated forces" and then they talk about everybody in Mali being included under 9/11 proclamation. Well, "and associated forces" is not in what we voted on, and it became this interpretation. Now we are in Mali, Somalia, you name it. We are in 30 or 40 different countries because of 9/11. But I like the way you made it very specific.

The other thing that I think we have had as a problem of overall discussion of foreign policy is we are, in many ways, governed by a platitude, and the platitude is if we do not attack them over there they will attack us over here. We have to fight them over there or we have to fight them here. I think that is simplistic.

I think it may be sometimes true. I think there was a great deal of intelligence that bin Laden had international aspirations, dating back to some of the other bombings, and there was a discussion in 1998, and that is all sort of history. But, there was at least some evidence.

I think that is why the question, to me, is important. You say that al-Qaeda is greatly diminished, and I agree. That is what most of the reports tell us, if we are going to be objective about it. It is not a big presence. ISIS is really not a big presence in Afghanistan either. The question is on the Taliban, a big group and it sort of has a name.

I guess the direct question is do you see them as a threat? Are there rumors of them plotting to fly to New York or to fly to the United States, or do you see them more as a regional player that wants domination of where they live?

Mr. LUTE. It is even more narrow than that, Senator. The Taliban are not regional. They are very specifically Afghan. They have never threatened or committed an attack outside of Afghanistan itself. There is no transnational feature here of the Afghan Taliban. They are Afghans. The Afghan Taliban leaders are largely outside of Afghanistan because of our presence. They are in the tribal areas and in the Pakistani city of Quetta. But all they really are fighting for is to return to Afghanistan, and be part of the political equation.

Senator PAUL. The question that leads to is, not everything is black and white. There are different varieties and factions of the Taliban. There are some we think that might be modern enough to discuss, some maybe not so much. The question is whether the ones we are talking to have operational command of the ones we want to stop.

I am a big fan of Zalmay Khalilzad and I think he could be a great person to try to get through this, and he is in the process of negotiating. But I even told him that I was worried—and I am somebody who wants negotiation, and this probably was not enough. He was negotiating when we had a cease-fire between us and them. It is better than what we have, but, if they are not going to quit killing the Afghan government for 120 days or those soldiers, I am not so sure if it is enough. That is when things broke down and they ended up having another attack that killed some on our side as well as the Afghan government. And for goodness sakes. I cannot believe it is so hard to even get a 120-day cease-fire from all parties, where nobody shoots at anybody for 120 days, which makes me pessimistic to it.

The other complaint I hear from the Afghan government or their representatives is they say, “Well, if you are going to negotiate with the Taliban they will never negotiate with us,” and there is some truth to that argument too.

What are your general thoughts, just sort of about negotiating with the Taliban, how it hurts the ability of the—forcing the Taliban to negotiate with their government, et cetera?

Mr. LUTE. A couple of thoughts. First of all, I have a lot of confidence in Ambassador Khalilzad. I do not know of another American as qualified as he is, both in terms of a deep understanding of the region and Afghan politics. He speaks the languages. He is

an Afghan American, after all. If anybody can do this, it is Zalmay Khalilzad. I applaud him for taking this on as he has, for really the last 2 years.

I do believe that the Taliban political committee members resident in Doha—so these are Khalilzad's counterparts, his negotiating counterparts—are true representatives of the Taliban leadership. The most compelling reason is because of the recent prominence of Mullah Baradar, who was at one time a founding father of the Taliban, very close to Mullah Omar in the very early days of the Taliban, who over the last decade or so, largely been held in Pakistani custody. He was released by the Pakistanis and now leads the Political Commission in Doha.

Baradar is a credentialing, an authenticating of the authority of the Political Commission, Khalilzad's counterparts, that I think is very important. I think they are connected in a meaningful way to the Afghan Taliban leadership, and I think that a deal that they agree to will be adhered to by the Taliban.

The last thought on this point. The Taliban are probably the most politically cohesive of all the players in Afghanistan today, to include, by the way, the western Coalition, which has its political divisions as well. But they are not perfect. They also have internal Afghan Taliban political crises themselves.

The Taliban's number one fear is that some sort of a deal, to include potentially a cease-fire, will fracture their movement and will cause the hardliners among the Taliban and those who are more willing to seek a compromise solution to divide. They are very carefully, jealously guarding their internal cohesion, and that is one reason they have not agreed yet to a cease-fire.

Senator PAUL. Right. But as far as the goal of it, do you think the goal is enough just to have a cease-fire with them, or, with the problem still being they are still killing the Afghan government? Why should it be so hard? To me, a cease-fire for 120 days seems like that is nothing, and you reassess after 120 days and you try to get more agreement.

Mr. LUTE. The problem here rests with this issue of internal Taliban cohesion. They are concerned that if they agree to a country-wide cease-fire, for something like 120 days, that their fighters literally will go home and not come back. That sounds like good news to us. It is not good news to the Afghan Taliban political leadership. That is the problem. They see a cease-fire as a potential existential threat to their cohesion, so they will not do it.

My advice, my preference would be to take whatever steps, small steps we can take toward our objective and begin this process, and see it as a series of stages or steps rather than perhaps overreaching and trying to get too much at once.

Senator PAUL. Right. Then I have one more question and we will move to Senator Hassan. You conclude by saying an uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal in the absence in a kind of political and diplomatic progress would likely lead to civil war. I like a lot of what you say and then I hear that and it worries me a little bit. I know you are sincere in what you believe will happen, but to me it is kind of like there kind of is a civil war. That is what is going on, and so could it be worse? Yes. Could it be better? I don't know. Will the Afghans step in and fight more valiantly or more significantly when it is

them that have to do it, and it is no longer us? And I think they are doing more of the fighting now.

But the question is, when I hear that—and I know you are sincere and you would like to make progress—but when I hear it then I hear, oh God, we haven't done it in 19 years and how many more years is it going to take to get to what you call a political and diplomatic process and having it be coordinated so it does not go into chaos.

How do we get there if we have not gotten there in 19 years? What would it take for you to be happy with it, and then does that still mean 5,000 troops, 2,000 troops? Could we get down to where we only have enough to protect a base with an embassy on it, or something? What do you mean by that?

Mr. LUTE. The answer goes to some of the points I tried to highlight. First of all I think we have to prioritize the politics and the diplomacy. I do not think we are there yet. For the first time over the last couple of years we actually have U.S. military leaders admitting that there is no military solution to this. That is a sea change from where we were when I was in government five-plus years ago.

That is important, but it is not yet enough. I would ask Ambassador Khalilzad, does he have every resource he needs to pursue a negotiated settlement? The inspector general mentioned that Ambassador John Bass has now left Kabul after 2 years of service. He has not been replaced. I do not think there is a nominee to replace him. Who is running the embassy in Kabul?

Is there an interagency process here in Washington? Madam Ranking Member, I think you mentioned this notion of who sits above this in Washington. Is there a process by which the State Department, the Defense Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, take on the lessons that the inspector general has highlighted and does something with them? I do not know. I am outside the government now, but it is not apparent to me that there is such a process.

There is a lot we could do that would actually empower Khalilzad's efforts and bring us closer to a negotiated settlement.

I think, without going on overly long, we also have to be very clear with the Afghan government. I do not think we have been clear enough that the vital support that we provide, 75 percent of their Federal budget is provided by us and the other international donors, that our support is not going to continue unless they make progress on corruption and inclusiveness. Frankly, they have not done enough.

I think there is a lot we can do with the politics of this situation, and frankly, I believe we can sustain the counterterrorism mission from outside Afghanistan. That is contrary to a lot of military advice this Committee would hear, but we do it most of the rest of the places around the world. We do it in Somalia. We do it across the Sahel. We do it in North Africa. We do it in Syria, to some extent. Each of those cases is a little different. But when we need to, we have the counterterrorism capacity, to get the terrorists we need to get. It should not be any different in Afghanistan.

Senator PAUL. Senator Hassan.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you, and we are, I think, facing our next vote, so I want to thank you, Mr. Lute, for your considerable and expert service and testimony and your willingness to be here.

I am going to boil this down to asking you, I think, what is a little bit of a “please sum up” question, which is, given your experience and perspective here, what should Afghanistan look like when the United States eventually withdraws our military presence, and with that in mind, what do you think it would take for us to get there? You have answered some of that, but I just thought I would give it to you that way.

Mr. LUTE. The fundamental thing that is missing right now is a political agreement between the Afghan political elite in Kabul, largely based in Kabul, and the Afghan Taliban, that comes to a power-sharing arrangement so that the Afghan Taliban are sufficiently satisfied with their war aims, that they are willing to come to a power-sharing arrangement.

What does this mean in practice? It means, that they are going to control many of the rural Pashtun areas that they now control. The hard reality here is that they have persisted for 18 years because they have political traction, and they are frankly more closely aligned with the political culture in some of these rural areas than the Afghan government. They are not going away—it is time we recognize that—and they should come to a power-sharing arrangement.

Senator HASSAN. I will add, and I would hope with some understanding of honoring the rights of women that have made some progress over the last 18 years.

Mr. LUTE. That is, I think, where the monitoring arrangement would have to come into place.

Senator HASSAN. Yes.

Mr. LUTE. There will have to be some conditions and some benchmarks and some verification.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you, and that is all I have.

Senator PAUL. Your opinion that we need to have a political agreement—we are pursuing that, the Taliban and mostly us now, but Taliban and eventually the Kabul government. Do you think this is now the accepted position throughout whatever we would call the military establishment? You said the opinion has changed now, but do you think that is the accepted opinion?

Mr. LUTE. I do.

Senator PAUL. Thank you very much for not only your long career but for giving us advice. We would like to periodically talk to you again, both privately and publicly, about this, and we appreciate you coming in.

Mr. LUTE. Happy to help in any way. Thank you.

Senator PAUL. Our third panel will feature Ambassador Richard Boucher. Ambassador Boucher retired from the State Department in 2009, as a career Ambassador, the highest rank that can be achieved in the U.S. Foreign Service. Ambassador Boucher’s State Department career saw him serve as Ambassador to Cyprus and as Counsel General in Hong Kong, as well as a 5-year period as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. From 2006 to 2009, Ambassador Boucher was Assistant Secretary of State for South

and Central Asia, where he formulated U.S. policy in the region, including Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Thank you, Ambassador Boucher.

Our fourth and final panelist, who will also be on this panel, will be Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis. Since retiring from the Army in 2015 after 21 years of service, Colonel Davis has written extensively on Afghanistan, the Middle East, American foreign policy, and grand strategy. Colonel Davis gained national notoriety in 2012, when, as an active duty soldier, he published a lengthy report detailing the disconnect between the U.S. military's lofty rhetoric and the conditions he had experienced firsthand on the ground throughout Afghanistan. We will start with Ambassador Boucher.

TESTIMONY OF HON. RICHARD A. BOUCHER,¹ FORMER UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR TO CYPRUS AND SENIOR FELLOW, THE WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, BROWN UNIVERSITY

Mr. BOUCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to be here to testify today after almost 19 years. The Subcommittee has determined that we think carefully about what lessons we can learn about our involvement in Afghanistan but also about the use of military force and how to build stability in foreign lands.

At the State Department I was involved with Afghan policy from 2000 to 2009, whether a spokesman or eventually Assistant Secretary. Since then I have to say I have no connection to the U.S. Government, no access to any information but what I read in the press. But I am glad to see that the Washington Post published the Afghanistan Papers series. I do not agree with many of their characterizations but it shows that there are a lot of people who were deeply involved, who were thinking very carefully about what we can learn from the experience.

The first thing to remember is this was a war of necessity. We were attacked for the second time on 9/11 by al-Qaeda. Prior to that, we had had diplomatic efforts and sanctions, including United Nations (UN) sanctions, to try to dislodge them from Afghanistan, but that was not successful, so we had to do something about them.

The second thing was right from the start we knew that our exit strategy was to help the Afghans put in place a government that could maintain control of their territory, and it could prevent groups like al-Qaeda from coming in and re-establishing themselves.

In 2002, we focused on helping the Afghans build a government, a government that would balance all the different interests there. We knew there were warlords. We knew the experience of the 1990s, when everybody was fighting everybody else in a horrible civil war, and the goal was to bring people together in a democratic structure and create a certain level of stability.

Afghanistan's history tells us that governments worked best when there was a loose central government that coordinated a lot of regional and ethnic players. Revolts happened when the central government tried to impose modernization or impose itself from the

¹The prepared statement of Mr. Boucher appear in the Appendix on page 71.

top. One has to be very careful trying to bring change to Afghanistan.

At first we operated with a balance of power among leaders, but progressively we built up more and more of a central bureaucracy. Rather than trying to rebuild Afghanistan from the bottom up, we tried to do it from the top down, and we sent our aide workers, our nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), our technical personnel, our advisors, and our accountants, to provide a series of programs, a series of ministries, and a series of bureaucracies that were much like the one that we knew in Washington. People in the provinces and districts saw a government in Kabul that was distant, it was ineffective, and it was corrupt, and the Taliban stepped into that gap.

I tell a story about Governor Sherzai in Nangahar in 2006, who told me, "I need five schools, five dams, and five roads." I said, "Why?" He said, "I need the dams for irrigation, I need the roads for the farmers so the farmers can get their crops to the market, and I need the schools so the kids do not go to Pakistan and get educated in the radical madrassas." And I said, "Yeah, but why five?" He said, "I have this tribe, this tribe, this tribe, this tribe, and I need one for everybody else."

At the time, I thought that was a terrible idea. It was a bad strategy for national development. But thinking back I think it was a great strategy for stabilization. He had a strategy for stabilization. We tried national development. In the end, what we really needed was stabilization.

We also should remember something that you cited before, that the Afghan Finance Minister told me, 80 to 90 percent of the money disappears before it gets to Afghanistan. Why is that? It is not corruption. Yes, Americans have stolen money too. But, we hire a contractor who hires a subcontractor who hires a bunch of consultants who hires a bunch of security personnel who flies in airplanes, et cetera, et cetera. By the time you get somebody on the ground in Afghanistan receiving a benefit, it is a very small portion of all those billions and billions of dollars that you have allocated for the purpose.

We focused on big, centralized projects rather than on local people who needed roads, dams, and schools. There were successes. We talked about some of them—girls in school, declining infant mortality, and roads. We built a lot of programs and buildings, trained a lot of Afghans, but we did not build stability into the system.

The failure is not just because we focused on central rather than local levels. Fundamentally, if the goal is to build an Afghan government that can provide security and development for its people within its territory, then the Afghan government has to deliver the benefits, not some U.S. Government employee or some U.S. contractor.

Over time, we did begin to qualify some ministries and Afghan programs like the solidarity program for U.S. funds. We spent more money from the Afghan reconstruction trust fund than the World Bank administers that tends to put more money into local governance. But overall we failed, and still fail, to build stability, because we failed to empower the Afghan government to deliver the benefits of governments to Afghans at the local level.

Now local level financing means there is going to be leakage, corruption. It is a society that is fractured, and like many fractured developing societies there is corruption. But we need to work out different methods of spending, incentives for achieving results, rewards for good governance and information, and a tolerance for losses that would allow us to work through the government, not around it. We will lose some of our money in a system like this, but frankly, I would rather see it lost in Afghanistan than spent on high-priced foreigners before it even arrives in the country.

I tried to emphasize local government at the time, but I have to say I was caught up by the machine, the triumph of hope over experience, and one of my regrets is I did not push harder on this when I was in power, or in the halls of power.

A few words on Pakistan. Pakistan is obviously a key player. I do not think any country has lost more men, women, and children, suffered more attacks since 9/11 than Pakistan. When our goal was to get al-Qaeda, our cooperation was excellent. Over time, as we move from a focus on solely al-Qaeda, to the Taliban, to other groups, our interests and Pakistan's interests began to diverge. Rather than acknowledge that divergence, acknowledge their interests and negotiate, we have tried again and again, without success, to dictate what Pakistan must do and should do, and that leads to all the resentment on both sides and the accusations of duplicity that prevail today.

A couple of final thoughts. First, we are providing more and more of our assistance through Afghan government, although as far as I can tell not at the local levels that really touch people and promote stability.

Second, our military presence has been drawn down, but not yet to the point where our focus should be solely on the remnants of ISIS and al-Qaeda. We should continue to come down rapidly. Third, as was mentioned, we need to strongly support the negotiations being conducted by Ambassador Khalilzad for a stable withdrawal of troops and for negotiations among Afghans, so that they can decide the future of their country.

But fourth, there is a much broader and bigger global lesson. America needs to lead with diplomacy. The global effort to eliminate the terrorists and all those who harbor them will never be achieved by military means. They will be achieved by capable governments who will provide for their populations. That requires more diplomacy, not more interventions. We need to lead with diplomacy backed by a military capability, not the other way around. And most importantly, we need to fund diplomacy so that America can lead.

We have achieved our initial goal of ridding Afghanistan of an al-Qaeda group that attacked us. Now it is focused on helping the Afghan government control their territory. In sum, in my view, it is time to come home. Thank you.

Senator PAUL. I could not agree more. We are going to take a quick break. I have to go over and vote, for about 10 minutes, and if you both can stay I would love to ask couple of questions.

Mr. BOUCHER. Absolutely.

Senator PAUL. Thank you.

[Recess.]

If nothing else, I am getting my exercise going back and forth to the Capitol. Thank you, Ambassador Boucher. Let's go to Lieutenant Colonel Dan Davis.

**TESTIMONY OF LIEUTENANT COLONEL DANIEL L. DAVIS,¹
USA, RET., SENIOR FELLOW AND MILITARY EXPERT DE-
FENSE PRIORITIES**

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Senator Paul, thank you for having me here and giving me the opportunity to share some views here. I am very excited to do it, as you alluded to earlier. I have been telling anyone who will listen for many years now some of these issues here, and I am very grateful that you are actually putting this on, in a situation where the Senate is actually considering some of these things, and I appreciate that.

In the limited time I have, I would like to limit some of my talk to things about the tactical level. Some people may think that you are talking about strategy and diplomacy and all that, and all those things matter, of course, a great deal. But if something cannot work at the tactical level, it does not matter how brilliant a strategic plan may be, if it cannot work on the ground then it cannot work, and it has to be fixed.

I want to share with you just a couple of examples and then an excerpt of a letter I wrote from Afghanistan, which I think really illustrates what I have experienced during my time in Afghanistan and has direct relevance on what you are talking about here today.

In November 2010, I was deployed to Afghanistan at the height of President Obama's famous surge, when more than 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops were involved in combat operations. Prior to my arrival, a number of U.S. generals and senior Administration officials had testified before Congress that we were winning the war, that we were on the right azimuth, and that although the fight was difficult, we would prevail.

My duties in Afghanistan over the 2010–2011 period, with the Army's Rapid Equipping Force, took me on operations in every significant area of the country where our soldiers were engaged and fighting. Over the course of those 12 months, I traversed more than 9,000 miles and traveled and patrolled with troops in Kandahar, Kunar, Ghazni, Khost, and many other provinces.

What I saw on the ground bore no resemblance to the rosy official statements made by so many of those leaders. To the contrary, it was obvious, painfully so, that we were not winning, that we were not making progress, and that no matter how many troops we sent, the war could never be won militarily.

The 8 years since I made those observations have only reinforced that conclusion, and unless we end this war on our terms and withdraw our troops, we will continue to pay a high price for certain failure.

As you heard earlier today from John Sopko's exhaustive work over the past decade, he has graphically detailed how the war has failed, and General Lute just explained the reasons the war has lost at the strategic level. I would like to provide some context to

¹The prepared statement of Mr. Davis appear in the Appendix on page 77.

their excellent testimony and explain why, on the ground, the war was always doomed to fail.

I would like to give you two brief examples of why. In January 2011, I made my first trip into the mountains of Kunar Province near the Pakistan border to visit the troops of the First Squadron 32nd Cavalry. On a patrol into the northernmost U.S. positions in eastern Afghanistan, we arrived at an Afghan National Police station that had reported being attacked by the Taliban about an hour and a half before that.

Through our interpreter I asked the police captain where the attack had originated, and he pointed to the side of a nearby mountain. "What are normal procedures in situations like this?" I asked. "Do you form up a squad and go after them? Do you periodically send out harassing patrols? What do you do?" As the interpreter conveyed my questions, the captain's head wheeled around, looking first at the interpreter and then looking at me with an incredulous look on his face. Then he laughed in my face. "No, we do not go after them," he said. "That would be dangerous."

When the enemy knows that the government troops are not even going to leave the compounds, then the Taliban know they have free run of the countryside and they have no fear of government attack. According to the cavalry troopers I spoke with, the Afghan policeman rarely left the cover of the checkpoint. Though there were over 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops in the country, there were vast swaths of the country, even then, in which we had not the slightest influence, much less control.

In June of that year, I was in the Zharay District of Kandahar Province. While returning to a base from a dismounted patrol, as I was about to enter the gate I heard gunshots ring out across the meadow as the Taliban attacked a U.S. checkpoint about a mile away. As I entered the company's headquarters the commander and his staff were watching a live video feed of the battle on cameras that were mounted above the camp. Two Afghan National Police (ANP) vehicles were blocking the main road leading to the site of the attack. The fire was coming from behind a haystack.

As we watched this, two Afghan men emerged from the other side of it. They got on a motorcycle and began moving toward the Afghan policemen and their vehicles. The U.S. commander turned around to his Afghan radio operator and told him to make sure that the policeman realized the Taliban were heading their way and to be ready to kill or capture them. The radio operator shouted into the radio but got no answer.

On the screen we watched as the two men slowly motored right past the ANP vehicles. The policemen neither got out to stop the two men nor answered the radio until the motorcycle was out of sight. As was all too common in Afghanistan, the Afghan troops had made a secret deal with the Taliban to allow them safe passage.

These two anecdotes represent much of what I saw throughout my time in Afghanistan. If I had seen mixed results, some good, some bad, then there might have been room for cautious optimism. But I did not. The stories I heard and the operations I observed consistently revealed a war that could not be won, an Afghan force

that was never up to the task, and an enemy that was committed to pay whatever price was necessary to win.

In closing, I would like to read an excerpt of a letter I wrote in the summer of 2011, which epitomizes my entire deployment. I wrote this to a friend of mine who I thought would understand, a Vietnam veteran. I was explaining how a mortar round just that afternoon had exploded near me and almost blew my eardrums out. It was also a situation where, just days before that, a U.S. helicopter had gone down and 30 Americans had been killed.

I wrote to him and I said, “A common theme among the quotes that saw of the family members, when people are talking about what happened to those people, they are describing them in the media, was that they talked about how they had the patriotism and a love of country. It made for a tragic but heartwarming story for the readers, but to what end? For what purpose? For what greater good did those 30 die?”

“Even with me just a difference of a few millimeters at the launch site of that mortar tube, and I am joining those 30 in a coffin of my own. While I frankly do not give a crap if I go out that way—that is just part of the job, as you know yourself—the thought grieves me deeply when I think of how it would have affected my family. What would they tell my sons their dad had died for? What are any of those who survive told? Or even worse, what about those who get arms or legs blown off and become a burden on their families?”

“So what is all this remarkable sacrifice for? Nothing. We are here to keep fighting and dying until the clock can run out in 2014. That is the part that is so maddening. We are conducting for mission’s sake. We go on patrol, we do night ops, et cetera. We kill a bunch of Taliban. The Taliban kill and maim some of us. All this is done to no operational or strategic purpose. Good grief. There is not even a tactical benefit. Everybody knows we are in the fourth quarter and the clock is running out.

“This whole thing could have been wrapped up by now. In the next few months we could end this war. We do not have to go another 2½ more years of killing and being killed, but we will. As I said, this stuff is really starting to get to me.”

That was written 8 years ago, and everything that has happened in those intervening years have just reinforced this to include this past weekend where yet two more men, for no purpose, have died, and their families are now going to suffer egregiously. That needs to end.

Thank you.

Senator PAUL. Thank you. It gets to the heart of the matter and people act as if the Pentagon Papers being released is something brand new. We have been talking about the absence of mission for a long time, yourself included, and others.

I read the book, Directorate S, by Steve Coll, and in that he quotes from Holbrooke, and Holbrooke apparently does before the surge this big, monstrous, hundreds-of-pages report that he turns in. Steve Coll lists several of the items. But one of the items he lists is that our mission lacked focus then, that it was not clear what our mission was. This was before the surge.

But I guess what perplexed me is the next item, the next bullet point from Holbrooke was that he was all for the surge and he was all in and we needed to do the surge. How does that happen that we were questioning the mission before the surge? I guess people say, maybe 10,000 is not doing it, or 20,000, but 100,000, will work, but then 100,000 sort of works. The Taliban leave and then they come back when we started diminishing numbers, and it did not work.

I think we are finally getting the mission of it but has taken 18 years. I will ask each of you, and we will start with Ambassador Boucher, how does someone like Richard Holbrooke, who has all the experience, acknowledge that there is a problem with the mission but then advocate for the surge?

Mr. BOUCHER. Richard Holbrooke replaced me as Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, so I am trying to think if I ever advocated for a surge. I do not think so.

But I guess part of it—I made some reference to it. You get caught in the machine. You get a direction from the President and you are trying to help him do what he wants to do, which is get out but get out leaving behind as good of a situation as you can. Knowing that he and you are going to face a lot of criticism if you leave and there is an attack, or the Taliban take another town, or the rights of women are lost in a large part of the country.

It is very difficult. I call it the triumph of hope over experience, and we keep doing that. Particularly, if the guys in the military tell you, we need a surge. If we only do this for 6 months it will be OK, we can do it. But really, we have to more and more often say how did that work out last time, and what is that going to do this time? I think even by that time in Afghanistan there was ample evidence that more fighting was not going to get us to where we wanted to go.

Senator PAUL. Lieutenant Colonel Davis?

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. A lot of people want to say, "Well, you do your best," and you get a mission, and especially if it is somebody in uniform. You can give me a crazy mission, something that does not look like it has any chance, and I am going to do everything in my power to accomplish it. That is one of the good things about the can-do spirit.

But the negative side of that is that when you see, graphically, fundamentally, that the objective given to you by a member of the government can't be accomplished, then you have an obligation to say something. Unfortunately, I think a lot of folks just said, "Well, maybe I can do it. Maybe I can do something that other ones can't."

But I will say that in 2009, in 2010, both, I wrote an article in the Armed Forces Journal, two separate pieces that laid out why we should not surge, why we should seek alternative endings of the war at that time, before a surge. There were many things that could have been done. The Taliban had signaled that they were willing to talk back then, and from a position of strength we could have had a lot better negotiating. But no, people said, "No, we want to force them into a weaker position," so they continued to go in and fight.

But then you have even as late as 2015, you have Anthony Cordesman, who has long been talking about, very graphically, the

reasons why these things cannot work. He talked, in 2015, how we did not even have a strategy. He said, literally, you are just conducting operations but there is not even a strategy that you are seeking to obtain.

Now then here we are, 5 years after that, and still in the same situation. At some point I think that we have to come to the point to where we say it would be great if we could do a lot of other stuff, I would wish for these outcomes, but somewhere reality has to step in and we have to do what can be done, especially when you are talking about it costs lives of men to keep going.

Senator PAUL. How common was the belief that you were having at that time that we lacked mission and focus and strategy? Common to many of your other fellow soldiers, or uncommon? How common were your opinions?

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Senator, I never saw anybody, and I am not exaggerating, at the time, on the ground, that thought, this has a chance to succeed. Not one person I talked to did, and they could all show you on the ground why. Every one of them just contented themselves with conducting the tactical operations that they were given, because they can accomplish any of the tactical missions without question, because they are great at that. But they knew that it was not going to result in what we wanted it to.

Senator PAUL. Senator Hassan.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and again, thank you to both of our witnesses, Ambassador Boucher and Lieutenant Colonel Davis. Thank you for being here and for your service to our country.

Let me start with a question to you, Mr. Ambassador. Your discussions with the special inspector general, as detailed in the Afghanistan Papers, demonstrated that the United States continuously contracted with individuals in Afghanistan who did not share our goals and interests. In some cases, their goals were in direct opposition to the interests of the United States and its allies.

Is there a mechanism in place to thoroughly assess the risk of contracting with certain Afghans? Who is ultimately responsible for deciding whether to contract with these individuals?

Mr. BOUCHER. I think we are going to have to work with people we do not like, and we are going to have to work with nasty people. We are going to have to work with warlords. Some of these people can be brought into, I should say, an acceptable relationship with the government, an acceptable management of funds. We can use financial incentives. We can use supervision.

But I think, in the end, the contractual relationships that we had were many times sort of driven by what the colonel said, is that people making tactical decisions, how do I protect this base, how do I make sure that there are no attacks in this area, or how do I manage this program, would make accommodations with individuals without any further requirements.

There were a whole series of compromises being made every day, and having a set of programs that are run on a results-driven basis, and with certain clear standards, I guess is the only way I can think of, at least theoretically, to eliminate some of that. But I do not want to claim that we can turn Afghans into technocrats.

There were Afghan technocrats who were very good, but I did not know of any politicians who I would trust.

Senator HASSAN. Fair enough. I want to go back again to you, Mr. Ambassador, to something I was discussing with Mr. Sopko. When the American people see that the United States has spent nearly \$1 trillion during 19 years of military engagement in Afghanistan, they want to know where the money went. Certainly some of this money ended up in the pockets of Afghanistan's leaders, which subsequently fueled corruption.

As you noted in one of your interviews, large amounts of aid and development dollars ended up in the pockets of American contractors in the form of exorbitant overhead costs and subcontracting practices.

Can you explain for us in greater detail how inefficient the U.S. side of the contracting process was?

Mr. BOUCHER. It depends how much detail.

Senator HASSAN. Well, yes, not too much detail.

Mr. BOUCHER. Let's go back to the end of the Cold War. At the end of the Cold War, there were people in Congress, including Senator Jesse Helms, who said we don't need foreign aid anymore. Foreign aid was an anti-Soviet program.

Senator HASSAN. Right.

Mr. BOUCHER. We give people money so they don't side with the Soviets, and so we don't need foreign aid anymore.

But the deal that was finally cut with him was if you give us the money, and Congress gives us the money, we will spend it in the United States on contractors who will then carry out the programs. We will cut down the aid bureaucracy. I forget the numbers, but aid went from thousands to \$1,500 or something like that, in terms of their ability to be on the ground to deliver assistance in foreign countries.

A lot of that money that we spend on foreign aid, that we spend on development aid for especially a place like Afghanistan, the first place it goes is somewhere inside the beltway. I tried going through the AID accounts the other day to figure out how much actually was contracted in Afghanistan.

It is not. It is going to big corporations and NGO's within the beltway. They take an overhead and they hire their people and they hire their consultants and they do their PowerPoint charts and presentations and things like that, and then they subcontract to somebody that is not a general contractor but has expertise and education, or something like that. Then they subcontract with somebody who can put people in the field.

By the time you get money into the field, by the time you actually get an expert into the field, much of it has departed, and then the expert goes in and, the amount actually given to a villager is very small.

But my biggest problem with the program is not how much money it sucks. It is the fact that it is the wrong people doing it. You do not build stability in Afghanistan by having Americans come in and build a school. You build stability in Afghanistan by having the government build a school, the government build a dam, the government build a well, the government build a program to support women and children's health.

That, again and again, has to be this whole criteria. The military was out doing cert programs with their money. The majors had a certain amount of money they can spend in a local area, and that was great because it kind of calmed things down and made them welcome, a little more welcome in the community. But it did not build the long-term stability that we want in Afghanistan.

I think you have to think about the purpose of the spending much, much differently than we do, and, therefore, you have to spend it much, much differently.

Senator HASSAN. I appreciate that. I am going to follow up with you, Lieutenant Colonel, maybe on the record, because I want to be respectful of the time for the fifth vote, and Senator Lee is here. I appreciate very much your service and your willingness to participate in this process, and would look forward to more discussions about how we can provide appropriate oversight. Thank you.

Lieutenant Colonel Davis. Thank you.

Senator PAUL. Thank you, and I would ask unanimous consent that Senator Lee be allowed to be part of our Subcommittee for the day, and thank you for joining us. With that I will turn to Senator Lee.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR LEE

Senator LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks to both of you for your indulgence in letting me come and participate today. Thanks to both of you for coming to talk to us about this important issue.

Army Colonel Bob Crowley served as Senior Counterinsurgency Advisor to U.S. military commanders in 2013 and 2014. He stated, "Every data point was altered to present the best picture possible. Surveys, for instance, were totally unreliable, but reinforced that everything we were doing was right, and we became a self-licking ice cream cone."

I quote that partly because I really like the expression, "self-licking ice cream cone." But in all seriousness, it reflects something that is very disturbing. This goes beyond the run of the mill type of waste, fraud, and abuse situation that we see. The stakes are higher nowhere than when we put American blood and American treasure, to a very substantial degree, on the line.

What this reflects is a prolonged pattern, key points during this nearly two-decade-long war effort, during which the American people were actively, knowingly, willfully deceived. They were lied to. This is clearly unacceptable, and, in fact, describing it as such almost does not do justice to the concept of unacceptability.

As a republic, it is wrong for us to have a government that provides deliberately false information to the people and to hide the truth from Congress, from the people's elected lawmakers, whose job it is to make sure that we set the right policy, and that any wars that we are fighting are morally, legally, and constitutionally justified and are bringing the benefits to public safety, that a war really need to be able to command in order to justify its existence.

Colonel Davis, I will start with you. How can the Pentagon rebuild and reestablish trust, the kind of trust of the American people that it needs to have?

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. First of all, Senator, there has to be a decision at the very top that dishonesty is not going to be tolerated. Unfortunately, I almost chuckled, perversely so, I suppose, when you were talking, because to us on the ground, that was like common knowledge. Everyone knows that.

Especially any time a codel comes over, they are shown what they are supposed to see. They come in there and the intent was that we are going to show you everything to reinforce your belief that this is going in the right direction, and all the things that we told you when we were sitting in these halls here to talk about, and telling you how good things were going, we are on the right azimuth, et cetera. You would only be shown briefings and data points and everything that just seem to just absolutely make it look like that is great.

The people underneath it who were putting this stuff together, of course, we know. We know what is not being shown. We know the things that you are not seeing, the places you are not being taken to, and we knew that if you were, of course it would be a dramatic, if not radically different outcome.

But the honest truth is, and I have just got to be frank with you, sir, a lot of the people over there in the military think that you guys are not smart enough to be able to make those determinations. We do not want to show you a comprehensive viewpoint. We just want to show you what you need to see so that you can go back and do the right thing. I am just being blunt about it. That happens routinely.

That was one of the big drivers that led me, in 2012, to come out and say, this is not right. You are being lied to. It was the fact that Congress was being told the wrong thing. Because even in the things that came out at the time, I was not taking a position on what we should do but on whatever Congress is being told, it has to be the truth because you made the decisions. The civilian control of the government decides whether we go to war, whether we do not go to war, or whether we stay at war. Because you are the ones that we vote in to make that determination for the people.

My observation was that we, as military, were not doing that. We were keeping the truth from you. Now you think you are being told the truth and in good conscience you will go out and continue something because it seems to make sense.

To turn that around, it is going to take somebody at the top to say, look, whether you think that Congress is smart enough to figure this out or not does not make any difference. You are going to tell just the truth, and we are going to leave it up to our elected representatives to make the determination.

Senator LEE. What you are describing, in effect, is a significant disconnect between what was happening on the ground and what officials within the Pentagon were telling SIGAR, on the one hand, and what they were telling Congress on the other. Is that right?

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Not necessarily SIGAR specifically, because he actually got a lot of accurate information. But definitely what was being told in hearings.

Senator LEE. OK. What are some of the barriers? What are the obstacles that were in the way of them telling the truth to Congress? Was it just an assessment—you described something a

minute ago that perhaps some of the people on the ground were thinking Members of Congress are not smart enough to handle it, although we are certainly not going to be smart enough to handle it if we are not given the accurate information. It is not as if we have the ability to go to a different tour guide. It is not as if we have the ability to tour some of the countryside on our own without them deciding where we can go, because they are always going to be in the driver's seat there.

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. I can give you a perfect example of that works. It is institutionalized. When I came out in February of 2012, with my article, and it hit the New York Times, and it blasted all over the place, there just happened to be a scheduled Pentagon briefing the next day with the three-star ground commander for U.S. forces, General Scaparrotti at the time. They asked him about this. They said, "Hey, did you see this report that just came out? What do you think about it?"

He says, "Well, I saw it, but that is one person's viewpoint. If you just look at one point you could come up with the wrong information or the wrong idea. But I see all of these things, that are balanced, and in my view, we are right on track and our assessments are actually right."

The idea is I cannot tell Members of Congress the good side and the bad side, because then you might accidentally, incorrectly think, "Well then we should shut the war down." So you are only going to be shown what is the right thing to do, and that is to continue the war.

Senator LEE. Nothing to see it here.

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Yes, sir.

Senator LEE. I remember September 11th as if it were yesterday. My daughter, Eliza, was a baby at the time. Shortly thereafter, as you recall, we undertook the war effort in Afghanistan. At the time that occurred I remember being concerned. I did not hold public office. I did not work in government, just as a private citizen. But what we were told was there was a clear objective. The clear objective was to retaliate against al-Qaeda for the September 11th attacks and to make sure that Afghanistan did not serve as a stronghold where the Taliban could gain momentum and establish a sufficiently strong foothold so as to launch other attacks on the United States.

Since then 19 years have elapsed. My baby daughter, Eliza, is now in college. We are still there. That war is still going on. Taliban is still a thing. Yet I am not sure exactly what we have to show for it.

In the meantime, I am in my 10th year in the U.S. Senate now. I have had a lot of questions about this war, and I have asked a lot of questions that have not brought about satisfactory answers, from people at the Pentagon. Notwithstanding my persistence in asking or my attempt to be thorough in the manner in which I answered questions. I sensed a lot of the times that something was terribly wrong because some of the answers did not seem to make much sense.

But I guess what I am getting to is I would like to know from you what is the objective in Afghanistan. I am not sure I know anymore.

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Yes, sir. In the initial you were dead right. President Bush gave an absolutely militarily attainable mission in October 2001. It was absolutely correct. It was something we could do. We had the military capability to do it, which was to defeat the Taliban and to degrade al-Qaeda's ability to conduct operations against the United States. Those were absolutely accomplished, 100 percent, by about maybe as late as the next summer, so by 2002. Then we should have returned because there was no military mission left to accomplish. We absolutely annihilated the Taliban. We did not just defeat them.

At that time there was no military foe left to keep our troops there for. Many people often claimed that, with Bush with Iraq, he took his eye off the ball and that is what caused a problem. No. There was no ball to keep your eye on for a number of years after that. We should have retired. But President Bush then, and President Obama later on, changed the mission to nation-building, which cannot be accomplished with military forces.

Senator LEE. Hence the self-licking ice cream cone metaphor.

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Yes, sir. To answer the next part of your question, there is no strategy right now. None. There is no strategy that, OK, if you accomplish A, B, and C, the war will be over. Nothing like that exists. We are merely conducting operations with no objective.

Senator LEE. If that is the case, Colonel, at what point do we say, "OK. That is it. This war is over. It is time to go home." Or is this indeed an indefinite conflict, a war in perpetuity?

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. 2012, we should have done it. We should absolutely do it right now. Because every day that goes forward, you are going to have more men like those two who were murdered over the weekend for no good. Everybody says they are heroes and all this stuff, but, sir, we have to be honest and say they lost their lives for nothing. They did not defend American democracy. They did not secure our safety. They were just killed because we will not shut the war down, and we just keep going. That just grieves me more than I can even explain to you, sir.

Senator LEE. It seems to me that when something has taken place, and, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your indulgence. I realize I am dangerously over time now. When the United States has been involved in a conflict for this long, that has cost us as many lives as it has, that has produced literally tens of thousands of American casualties and thousands of deaths on top of those, on which we have spent trillions of dollars, and we have been lied to over and over again about what its purpose is and about what steps we are making toward a purpose, that we are later told is an illusory one. If we were in a law school setting I would describe this declaration of war as void under the rule against perpetuities.

The problem here is that we have no objective and no real end in sight. There are those who, in that circumstance, say, yes, but you cannot just pull out now, because if we were to pull out now it would leave a void, and that void would cause other problems and then we would be looking at another 9/11. We have to pull out, if at all, very gradually, so as not to create that void, so as not to make the United States more vulnerable.

What do you say to that?

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Oh, that is one of the most pernicious myths that there is out there. As General Lute talked earlier, and really laid it out in one of the best ways I have seen recently, we do not need troops on the ground to keep us safe here, to keep another 9/11 from happening. As we have seen graphically depicted with the taking out of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan—we did not have troops there—with al-Baghdadi, with Soleimani the other day, with the guy from AQAP in Yemen, ever after that, we can take out any direct threat to the United States anywhere in the world that they come to, because of our extraordinary power to project power and our intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance.

That is taking place everywhere, regardless of where the threat may arise from. But the fear that if we leave we are going to cause a void or that there is going to be a civil war belies the fact that there is a war going on right now. The casualties are higher this year than they have ever been since 2001. There is nothing to create more.

Now that is not say that our departure would not cause some real problems, but if we do this in a professional, sequenced way, in a short period of time, maybe 12 months, then we can say it is going to be on you. I do differ from a lot of people here, where I will say I think it is OK to put difficulty on the shoulder of the Afghans, and I think that they will respond very well.

I have some good friends who are still in Afghanistan, and I want to see them be safe. But I think if you put responsibility on their shoulder, and they know their life is on the line if they do not make whatever deal is necessary with the Taliban or with these other warlords they are historically used to doing that. They will do it. But as long as we keep this thing going on, into perpetuity, with no end, they have no motivation to make the hard choices.

Senator LEE. Thank you, sir. Thank you for your frankness and for informing of what you see are great problems. I want to thank President Trump for his willingness to ask difficult questions about this war, about other wars, and I want to encourage President Trump to follow his instincts.

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Sir, I think President Trump might be the only one that could make that hard choice, because there would be a firestorm of anyone who talks about actually ending this. But if anybody can do it I think it might be him.

Senator LEE. I agree completely, and I encourage him to do so. Let's get out.

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Amen.

Senator LEE. Nineteen years is too long. Let's end it. Thank you.

Senator PAUL. I am going to follow up on that and give Ambassador Boucher a chance on that, because this is sort of the argument. Even people who sincerely want to get out or want to figure out a way to end America's longest war, they feel well gosh, if there is an attack I will be blamed for it. So politicians, they worry. They worry about taking blame. Bad economy, good economy, another war or 9/11. Nobody wants the responsibility.

I think there always is that danger, whether we are in Afghanistan or not. I think there is that danger. I guess the way I look at it is I think it is sort of like a 20th century idea or a "hey boom-

er” kind of idea, that you have to occupy the acreage to stop terrorism, and this isn’t so. There is a lot of acreage.

It seems like everywhere you look there is a good place to be a terrorist. Libya is a great place these days. Somalia is still not that bad. Yemen is a decent place. Mali. There are so many places that is Afghanistan unique? If we are going to take that strategy in Afghanistan then we really have to take it in the entire world. Are there enough troops and resources to do that? We have to figure out a better way.

But what do you say to the argument from people who say, “Well, if we leave there will be another 9/11?”

Mr. BOUCHER. I think you are right. I think we have, in fact, taken it all over the world, and we have, in fact, said that, there are terrorists here, you know. We define terrorism as people who set off bombs and kill civilians, particularly in opposition to governments that we see as legitimate. You start doing that and you end up everywhere.

The one thing I will say, for those who ask what have we done in Afghanistan, we have prevented another attack on the homeland from the territory of Afghanistan. Now, we could have done that more quickly with much less loss of life, American and Afghan lives, and money. But if the goal is to prevent an attack on the homeland, then we should be able to do that with intelligence, with the assets we have, with the diplomacy that we need to deploy, with the efforts that we can use to help governments establish themselves in these ungoverned spaces, and with a lot of vigilance.

But, my contention is we need to lead with our diplomacy. The fact that, yes, the Taliban is probably going to take some territory as we withdraw, is that going to threaten the United States of America? I do not think so, particularly if we can negotiate a solution that has certain guarantees and certain capabilities in it, and we can use financial incentives, for them and for the government, to maintain a peaceful situation.

Senator PAUL. I think you are right. In the early stages the argument that may have prevented another attack by disrupting those who sort of plotted, organized, and financed the attack is real, but it very quickly became something else.

See, this question is still an important question, though, because when I asked Ambassador Lute this, and I will let both of you answer this question, we still have a lot of people who very glibly say, “Oh my goodness, ISIS is over in Afghanistan.” And maybe. There are radical Islamists or Jihadists, I am sure, in Afghanistan. The Taliban are radical. But the idea that there is a cell of ISIS that is going to take over Afghanistan or take over the world or come to New York City is just one that is a bogeyman that is put up there to keep us there.

Ambassador Lute said he thinks al-Qaeda is gone, and most honest appraisers of Afghanistan say there is not a lot of al-Qaeda left in Afghanistan. There are a lot of Taliban. We all admit there are a lot of Taliban. But when I ask are they organizing to come see us, in a violent way, in a big terrorist attack, it really is not their history. Their means do not seem to be consistent with that. He also argued that we should continue to monitor them, and are

there ways of monitoring them without going village to village in Kandahar? So I guess that is sort of the question.

The specific question is do you see Taliban as an international threat, and is that a sufficient argument for maintaining large forces in Afghanistan?

Mr. BOUCHER. The simple answer is no and no. Somewhere I saw a number, and I was not able to find it in the last week, but most of the Taliban are fighting within 20 or 30 miles of their villages. They are local people. They are representatives of Pashtuns. They are fighting to protect their villages. They are fighting to impose their idea of safety and security and justice and livelihoods. But they are not fighting so that they can plan another attack against the United States.

We need to think about that and say they are an enemy when they shoot at us, and we are going to shoot back, and we are going to try to stop them from shooting at us. But in the end they are not a threat to the homeland.

Senator PAUL. Lieutenant Colonel Davis.

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. Yes. If we are worried about the presence of someone called ISIS somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan, then we have to be worried about the people who call themselves ISIS in Libya, in all different parts of Africa, in this part of Southeast Asia. They are all over the place.

As you absolutely hit the nail on the head a second ago, you cannot put troops everywhere. It is impossible. As I said in my testimony earlier, when we had 140,000 NATO and about 300,000 Afghan troops at the time, there were still vast tracts of the country that were not governed at all. The idea that we were keeping ourselves safe, preventing that then is really not true, because they could have done that had they wanted to.

But they could not do it then and they still cannot do it now, because we have a really good global counterterrorist strategy that uses our ability to project power, our ability to coordinate with friendly intelligence services, and really good cooperation between our Federal, State, and local law enforcement. That is what keeps you safe everywhere.

But the fact that you only have a couple of dots of troops in Afghanistan right now means that most of the country is not even influenced by us, and then, of course, there is all the stuff in Pakistan and the other 'stans that are in the region there, and then all the parts in Africa and elsewhere that we have been talking about here.

We have to keep ourselves safe from all of those, every single hour of every single day, and we do a tremendous job. My hat is off to all the people who do that stuff on a daily basis. Because they are so successful, it gets to the point, sir, to where I believe it is actually counterproductive to keep troops in Afghanistan, in Syria, in Iraq especially, because all we do is act as magnets for bad guys to come and kill us. Because they cannot attack us here but they can move to certain places and fire rockets, Katyusha rockets, as we have seen in both Iraq and Syria here in recent days. Our troops in Syria have come face to face with potential Russian troops, and that has a big threat there.

Every time we spend all this money and all this diversion of our focus on something that is not even necessary, we are taking risks that we do not need to take and we are not focused on the potential existential fights that we may need to fight one day.

Senator PAUL. We are going to finish up here very quickly and I am going to end with one thing that I will let you each respond to. Probably the deadliest platitude on the planet that has killed more of our soldiers is that we have to fight them over there or we will have to fight them over here. There might be an occasion that is that true, but it does not apply to everyone in the world, and we have applied to everywhere in the world, that we have to fight them over there. I think maybe the opposite platitude might be true. They fight us over there because we are over there.

Platitudes probably are not the best way to go into foreign policy, but you hear the argument all the time, Ambassador Boucher, that we have to fight them over there or they are going to come over here. How would you respond?

Mr. BOUCHER. I guess I would say let's look at where the attacks are, what happened, what kills Americans, who kills Americans, but also who has killed Brits, who has killed Europeans. To a very great extent, those are not terrorists that fly in from Afghanistan, the Gulf, or the Horn of Africa. Those are people that were raised in those societies and ended up lost, dissatisfied, or angry for some reason. The problem of angry young men is not angry young men getting on airplanes. They are angry young men that live with us, and that requires a more domestic focus.

Senator PAUL. Lieutenant Colonel Davis?

Lieutenant Colonel DAVIS. The statement, when people say that, there is an assumption that they make subconsciously, whether they are aware of it or not, and that is that those troops do keep us safe here. I would say, do about 5 minutes of a thought process and an analysis. Are we saying that in this entire country of Syria, because we have a handful of troops and just a couple of dots, most of which are there to do self-protection, because they are out in the middle of nowhere. They are little islands. There is hardly any influence beyond where they physically are sitting on the ground. What about the entire vast expanse of that country, or in Iraq where they are right now? We maybe going on some patrols here where some people were hit recently, and some other things in Afghanistan. These Key Leader Engagements (KLEs), which is where those men were killed a couple of days ago. When they are not on those, then the entire countries, every one of them, are completely open, as though we were not there. On a strategic level is it as though we are not there.

The idea that we are protecting ourselves there, and the fear that if we remove them it will cause a new risk, underscores the fact that actually they are not helping. They are experiencing risk now, and it would reduce the risk to come out. The result is actually perversely the opposite.

Senator PAUL. Thank you both for your testimony. Thank you for volunteering to come in. Thank you for trying to give advice to our country, and I hope you both will continue.

This concludes our Subcommittee hearing. We are adjourned.

Mr. BOUCHER. Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 4:13 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Opening Statement of Chairman Rand Paul, M.D.
Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight & Emergency Management

"The Afghanistan Papers – Costs and Benefits of America's Longest War"
February 11, 2020

I now call to order this hearing of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs' Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management.

Last night I flew to Dover Air Force Base with the President to honor two soldiers killed this week in Afghanistan. We honor their bravery and patriotism. We honor their commitment to their country and their fellow soldiers.

But frankly, they deserve better.

Our soldiers deserve better from their elected officials. Congress needs to do its duty and decide whether to continue America's longest war. Congress needs to debate what the mission in Afghanistan is today. Congress needs to vote on whether to continue the war in Afghanistan. One generation cannot and should not bind another generation to war.

We now have soldiers fighting who were born after the 9/11 attacks. We need to re-examine what our mission is in Afghanistan.

Our brave young men and women in uniform deserve at least that much.

On December 9, 2019, the Washington Post published a series of investigative reports known collectively as "The Afghanistan Papers." The Afghanistan Papers series is based in part on some 400 interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (or SIGAR) between 2014 and 2018.

U.S. government officials who had been responsible for the conduct of the Afghanistan war in some capacity, both military and civilian, sat with SIGAR as part of their "Lessons Learned" program, which is intended to "show what has and has not worked over the course of the U.S. reconstruction experience."

I look forward today to speaking with SIGAR's John Sopko to discuss his work in greater detail, to clarify SIGAR's mission, and to provide some important additional context about the interviews obtained by the Washington Post.

As for the substance of The Post's reporting -- it is extraordinarily troubling. It portrays a U.S. war effort severely impaired by mission creep and suffering from a complete absence of clear and achievable objectives.

Sadly, for those of us who have followed Afghanistan closely, these reports only served to confirm our worst suspicions.

For years, it has been my view that the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan amounts to a military presence without a mission. We have no achievable end state, nor have we aligned ends, ways, and means to support a non-existent theory of victory.

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I have repeatedly raised these concerns and have repeatedly tried to force the Congress to confront the Afghanistan issue in a meaningful way. In September 2017, I forced a vote on an amendment to sunset the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force within 6 months. That amendment was defeated.

Then again, in March of last year, Senator Tom Udall and I introduced the AFGHAN Service Act, which would sunset the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force in 1 year, require the Department of Defense to produce a plan to withdraw from Afghanistan, and pay a \$2,500 bonus to our service members who were deployed in the Global War on Terror.

So I have been outspoken on winding down the war in Afghanistan.

But what the Afghanistan Papers make crystal clear is that doing nothing is no longer an option for any Senator or Member of Congress with a conscience.

The Costs of War Project at Brown University estimates that, since 2001, the U.S. government has spent just under a trillion dollars in appropriated taxpayer funds in Afghanistan.

That's \$50 billion a year for almost 20 years.

The obvious question is – what has that \$1 trillion bought us? What do we have to show for it? Did \$1 trillion make Afghanistan more stable? Did \$1 trillion make our military more capable of deterring peer competitors? Did \$1 trillion move us one step closer victory? What legacy costs await us in the future?

But beyond the immense fiscal costs, however, lie even more difficult questions about our continued presence in Afghanistan. The service members who have deployed to fight the war in Afghanistan, many of whom have deployed several times – including two of my staff – have paid a tremendous price. Some 2,400 have laid down their lives and another 20,000 have been wounded, often grievously. How do we honor their sacrifice?

Ambassador Doug Lute will also join us today. Ambassador Lute was an advisor to both President Bush and President Obama on Afghanistan. In his 2015 SIGAR interview, he says quote: "... we were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan – we didn't know what we were doing."

What has changed in Afghanistan since 2015? Anything? Have we learned what we are doing yet?

In 2019, U.S. forces dropped more munitions in Afghanistan than it has in any year since at least 2006, when the Air Force first began keeping track. Are we killing the Taliban or are we trying to bomb them to the negotiating table?

As for the prospect of some sort of negotiated settlement with the Taliban, we'll also be joined this afternoon by Ambassador Richard Boucher.

One of the key lessons learned that Ambassador Boucher discussed in his 2015 interview with SIGAR was the notion that "We have to say good enough is good enough" and "we are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable."

What is in the realm of achievable with respect to a durable peace in Afghanistan? Is the U.S. military presence there helping or hurting that process?

Finally, we'll hear from retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis. A combat veteran who was awarded the Bronze Star for valor in Afghanistan in 2011, Colonel Davis went public with his concerns about the war effort in Afghanistan while still on active duty. His testimony will remind us that, while much of the reporting in the Afghanistan Papers is new, the fundamental problems are not.

These are the sorts of difficult questions that the Congress needs to begin grappling with, and I am hoping to start that discussion today.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for appearing here today, and would recognize Ranking Member Maggie Hassan for any remarks she would like to make.

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management Subcommittee

Ranking Member Margaret Wood Hassan
Opening Statement

Tuesday, February 11, 2020

Chairman Paul, thank you for holding this hearing. To our all of the witnesses today, thank you for your testimony. And let me also thank you for your extensive service to our country.

Sadly, this hearing comes a little more than two weeks after a deadly plane crash in Afghanistan claimed the lives of two airmen, including U.S. Air Force Captain Ryan Phaneuf, of Hudson, New Hampshire. Just this weekend, two U.S. soldiers were killed and six others were wounded in combat operations in eastern Afghanistan. These losses serve as painful reminders of all the men and women in uniform in harm's way in Afghanistan and around the world.

In October, I traveled to Afghanistan to meet with our military and diplomatic leaders, as well as with the leaders of Afghanistan. The goal of the trip was to evaluate the situation in Afghanistan, to ensure that Afghanistan would never again become a safe-haven for terrorist groups who threaten our country, and to conduct oversight of the longest war in United States history. The trip was both inspiring and eye-opening. We saw examples of key successes from our nation's campaign in Afghanistan. We also saw the effects of the missteps during the course of this 18-year war.

In the weeks after this trip, the Washington Post published a series of articles on confidential transcripts of interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction known as the "Afghanistan Papers," helping bring to light several troubling trends. Chief among these concerns is the failure of successive Administrations to establish a realistic, long-term strategy that defines our mission in Afghanistan. The oft-repeated mantra from Afghanistan veterans and analysts sums this up the best: We haven't been fighting one 18-year war in Afghanistan; we've been fighting 18 one-year wars.

We must learn from these mistakes. We must establish a real long-term strategy for Afghanistan that effectively leverages our military, diplomatic and development efforts toward a goal of ensuring that Afghanistan can stand up its institutions to secure itself and combat terrorism.

We must also not forget that the ungoverned vacuum in Afghanistan in the 1990s gave space for Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda to build a global terrorist network that killed nearly 3,000 Americans in the worst attack on U.S. soil since World War II. Leaving Afghanistan before their government is capable of resisting Al-Qaeda, ISIS or any other terrorist groups could prove to be a grave mistake that could leave us less safe for years to come.

Developing a strategy, however, is just the first step. We must provide resources to carry out such a strategy, establish realistic benchmarks of success, and then Congress must hold our government accountable for meeting these goals.

While the Afghanistan Papers reveal that mistakes were made along the way, my trip affirmed that significant progress has been made to help keep Americans—and Afghans—safe, secure and free. We owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women of the US Armed Forces, the State Department and the Intelligence Community for this progress.

Our briefings with General Miller, Ambassador Bass, and meetings with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah made clear that U.S. and allied efforts have and continue to reduce terrorist groups' ability to use the country to launch attacks. Groups like Al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network and even ISIS's Afghanistan affiliate still threaten the U.S., but our continued counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan has worked to degrade the capabilities of these threats and minimize their ability to launch attack on U.S. soil.

Aside from our successes fighting terrorism, one of the most poignant parts of our trip was hearing about progress advancing the rights and freedoms of Afghanistan's women. Under the Taliban, women were oppressed, subservient and treated as property. Today, women in Afghanistan enjoy more freedoms than ever before, serve in the Afghan cabinet and are building the backbone of a more resilient and stable Afghanistan. Throughout my trip, including even in neighboring Pakistan and India, women shared with me their fears about what would happen if the United States left Afghanistan without a strong infrastructure in place to protect these gains. Their message was simple—if the US leaves today, then everything Afghanistan's women have gained will be lost.

We need to establish an achievable strategy for Afghanistan. We must define our objectives and goals, and appropriately resource them. And we must hold the federal government accountable for its adherence to that strategy. It won't be easy. But as my father used to say, "We're Americans. We *do* hard things." I hope that this hearing can be a step forward in this difficult but critically important work.



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,
Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan Reconstruction
February 11, 2020

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

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

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

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,

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

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.

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

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.

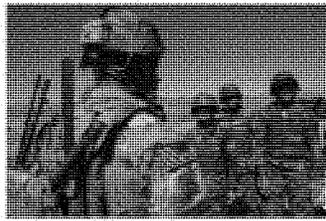
Appendix I – Letter to the Editor

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Letters to the Editor • Opinion

Setting the record straight on ‘The Afghanistan Papers’



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.

Statement of Ambassador Douglas Lute
Hearing: "The Afghanistan Papers – Costs and Benefits of America's Longest War"
Federal Spending Oversight Subcommittee of the Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
February 11, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you for this opportunity to appear today to discuss the war in Afghanistan. In this statement I will briefly outline my views on the vital U.S. interests at stake, the current situation, and one potential way forward.

In my view, the only vital national interest at stake in Afghanistan is to counter terrorist groups that have the potential to strike the United States, its citizens and its treaty allies. Indeed, this purpose mirrors the original purpose of our intervention just weeks after 9-11 in 2001, and it remains the core reason for our effort over the past 18 years. Of course, we have other, less than vital interests in Afghanistan which this committee may wish to discuss, but the essential purpose for the United States is to counter terrorism.

In my estimation, we have largely achieved our counter-terrorism objective today. Al-Qa`ida is much diminished in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with most of its senior leaders killed and those who remain marginalized. The threat from al-Qa`ida and its affiliates is greater elsewhere, including Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. There is a branch of the so-called Islamic State in Afghanistan, but I have seen no evidence that it presents a threat to the U.S. and it is under pressure from the Afghans, including from the Taliban. This potential threat should be monitored.

The situation today is a stalemate in three dimensions. First, the security situation is stalemated with neither the Taliban nor the Afghan Government (with our support) able to significantly change the control of territory or the population. In rough terms, the government controls the major population centers, and the Taliban control much of the countryside, especially in the Pashtun south and east. There is little either side can do to alter this stalemate. Second, Afghan politics are stalemated, with the results of the September 2019 elections still not revealed, and the main political factions unwilling to compromise. Third, the talks between the United States and the Taliban are not moving forward, largely because the United States has insufficient leverage and the Taliban are unwilling to make the compromises the United States is demanding for fear of losing cohesion in their ranks.

Sustaining this stalemate is expensive. Most significant, Afghans are dying and suffering more than at any time since 2001, including an increasing number from U.S. and Afghan Government operations. The United States retains approximately 13,000 troops in Afghanistan, joined by about 6000 from allies and partners. While casualties are much reduced from the peak of U.S. presence in 2010-11, we lost more than 20 soldiers last year. This troop presence costs about \$50 billion per year, a significant opportunity cost, given the other demands the Pentagon faces. Afghanistan also receives one of the largest U.S. economic assistance packages. Today's stalemate is expensive.

My main point today is that U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is out of alignment. Strategy can be defined as the alignment -- over time -- of ends, ways, and means. Ends are the objectives, ways

the methods of achieving the objectives, and means the resources required. When these three elements are aligned, a strategy is viable. My view is that in Afghanistan we have narrow counter-terrorism objectives that can be achieved by alternative methods and that do not justify the expensive resources we are committing today. Our strategy is out of alignment. In my view, U.S. objectives have rightly narrowed over time since the peak in 2010-11, and today these objectives have been significantly achieved, but we still persist in using largely unproductive methods and committing out-sized resources – all to sustain a manifest stalemate at considerable cost.

This Committee asked for my thoughts on the way ahead. I recommend the United States prioritize politics and diplomacy to move toward compromises that end the war in Afghanistan. More specifically, a comprehensive political outcome requires compromises among the Afghan political elite to reform and govern inclusively; compromises in the ongoing talks between the United States and the Taliban; and sustained diplomacy to secure support from Afghanistan's neighbors especially Pakistan and Iran, and others including Russia, China, India and the Gulf states. U.S. economic support to Afghanistan should be conditioned on progress by the Afghan Government. In the talks with the Taliban, the United States should focus on the counter-terrorism objective, and ensure verification that any deal is implemented as agreed. Afghanistan's neighbors must understand that while we have narrow interests, their own security interests are at risk until Afghanistan stabilizes. Finally, the United States should engage our allies to support this main political-diplomatic effort, including by extending economic assistance only to an inclusive Afghan Government.

At the same time, to continue to secure our vital interest, the U.S. should develop alternatives to the current counter-terrorism methods, including enhancing the most capable Afghan forces, intelligence gathering that does not rely on a costly U.S. troop presence, and off-shore basing for U.S. forces, for example in bases in the Persian Gulf.

What I am describing differs from our current approach that aims indefinitely to support unsustainably large Afghan security forces and the Afghan Government that struggles to be inclusive and combat corruption. These adjustments -- both political and military -- can bring U.S. strategy into alignment, sustaining our vital national interest while dramatically reducing the costs of U.S. troop presence. In short, we can do better than sustaining the current stalemate.

A final note of caution: there is a potential outcome to this war that is worse than the current stalemate. An uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal in the absence of the kind of political and diplomatic progress I have outlined will likely lead to civil war, the collapse of the Afghan state, and irresistible opening for transnational terrorists to widen their reach – conditions that define Afghanistan in the years leading up to 9-11.

Thank you. I am ready to respond to your questions.

Testimony by Richard A. Boucher
February 11, 2020
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management
Chairman: Senator Rand Paul, KY
Ranking Member: Maggie Hassan, NH

Chairman Paul, Ranking Member Hassan, Senators, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you very much for allowing me to testify before you today. While the fighting in Afghanistan is not yet over and Afghanistan cannot yet be said to have "stabilized," we have been fighting there for coming on 19 years. It is time, as this Subcommittee knows, to think carefully about what lessons we can learn about our involvement, about our use of military force and about our ability to build stability in foreign lands. I believe that those lessons start with remembering that both the fighting and the subsequent assistance programs must be pursued with a tight focus on our campaign goals not in any desire to remake societies to our model.

At the Department of State, I was involved with Afghanistan policy steadily from 2000 to 2009. Before 9/11, As Spokesman for Secretary Albright, I discussed our sanctions pressure on the Taliban. I was with Secretary Powell on 9/11 as his Spokesman, then with him on his first trip to Afghanistan in January 2002 and subsequent trips. Secretary Rice asked me to become Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia and, after Senate confirmation, I worked intensely on Pakistan and Afghanistan for three years until the beginning of the Obama Administration in 2009.

Now a disclaimer: Since then I've had no connection to the US government. I've had no access to classified information or internal reports. Nor have I travelled to Afghanistan, although I've been back to Pakistan once. What I know, I know from news reports.

I'm glad that the Washington Post published their series on the Afghanistan papers. While I don't agree with many of their conclusions and characterizations, the series shows how a large number of the people involved over the years are thoughtfully assessing and reviewing what they did and what happened in order to come up with better answers for the future. Before we head into these conflicts and interventions, we rarely ask ourselves "so, how'd that work out last time?" Hopefully the Washington Post series and hearings like this one will help us.

So, let me turn to Afghanistan. First, let me say, this was a war of necessity. On 9/11, we were attacked for the second time (after Al Qaeda's attacks on our Embassies in Dar Es Salaam and Nairobi) by Al Qaeda, a group located in Afghanistan. We knew they were dangerous and had been unable to push them out through a campaign of diplomacy and UN and other sanctions. After 9/11, we needed to make sure they could not remain in their sanctuary to attack us again.

That was the goal of the military intervention and, by working with Afghans, it was achieved fairly rapidly, even if we didn't capture Osama Bin Laden. By the end of 2002, Al Qaeda no longer had sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Second, we needed to ensure that Afghanistan would not be used again as a haven for terrorist groups. That required us to help Afghans institute a government that could control its territory. This was not an easy task. We were quite aware of the horrors of the Afghan civil war of the 1990s when militant and ethnic groups fought constantly for power and control. Indeed, we had contributed to this militancy during the 1980s when we funneled arms and money to groups fighting the Soviets. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, we contributed to a breakdown in traditional tribal structures and society in favor of supporting militants and mullahs who could fight the Soviets most effectively. Many of the familiar names of militants today, Hekmatyar and Haqqanis for example, grew their strength during "Charlie Wilson's War" of the 1980s and exercised it during the internal fighting of the 1990s.

So, in 2002, the goal was to help Afghanistan control the fighting and overcome its ethnic divisions. We focused on a balance of interests and ethnicities and democratic structures to keep the competition peaceful. President Karzai was a Pashtun. His cabinet was balanced with other leaders. We worked with various leaders --yes, the warlords-- in regional and provincial roles as long as they accepted the coordination of Kabul. We encouraged central leaders of different origins --Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah-- to cooperate. The goal was to support widespread participation and development that would overcome the tendency to fight.

Afghanistan's history tells us that government has worked best when a loose central government has coordinated regional and ethnic players. Revolts have happened when the central government tried to impose modernization and change; Amranullah Khan's reforms of the late 1920s led to a Pashtun revolt as did the reforms of the Communist Government before the Soviet invasion. One must tread carefully in Afghanistan in trying to impose change. Some were aware of this history in the early days of our intervention, but most knew Afghanistan only from the anti-Soviet days or from 9/11.

At first, we operated with a balance of power among leaders and ethnic groups in ministries and in regions. However, we progressively built more and more central control. Rather than helping rebuild Afghanistan from the ground up, we tried to do it from the top down. We sent our advisors, our aid workers, our NGOs, our technical personnel, and our accountants to impose a series of programs and bureaucratic structures that centralized power just like it was in Washington. Every agency in Washington had its counterpart in Kabul, and had programs to train and develop them. Governors in the Provinces exercised only limited powers and limited funds, and local government at the district level had no money and little power. People in the provinces and districts saw a government in Kabul that was distant, ineffective and corrupt.

Particularly in a dispersed, ethnic and agricultural society like Afghanistan, the government provides services to people from a local level not from their interaction directly with central ministries. Our focus on ineffective central control failed to provide services and thus stability. On my first trip to Afghanistan as Assistant Secretary in 2006, Governor Sherzai of Nangarhar said to me "I need five dams, five roads and five schools." When I asked "Why?" he said: "I need dams for irrigation and electricity, roads for farmers to get their goods to market and schools so that the children don't leave for education in radical madrassas in Pakistan." At the time, I thought that was a terrible plan for national development. Now, looking back, I think it was an excellent formula for stabilization.

We failed to provide stability and security from a local level. Training for local police fell behind. District level funding was almost non-existent and Provincial funding lagged. We focused on ministries and programs from Kabul like we had in Washington. We provided experts and advisors, often doing the work themselves rather than just "advising." We required project proposals, accounting and accountability, forms and audits that could only be managed at central levels and sent our Inspectors and Inspector Generals to trace every penny.

When you hear the headline numbers on our assistance for Afghanistan, remember the words of the Afghan finance minister who said to me: "80 or 90% of the money you spend never makes it to Afghanistan." Our contractors, subcontractors, NGOs, security consultants, technical experts and accounts, each take a salary and a cut. We focused on big centralized projects --the Kakajaki Dam or national school system, for example-- rather than the local stakeholders who needed roads, small dams and schools.

There were successes of course. Girls in school. An expanding health system that reduced infant mortality dramatically. Roads. Rebuilding institutions, colleges and hospitals. We built a lot of programs and buildings, trained a lot of Afghans, but we didn't build stability into the system.

Our failure to build stability was not just because we focused on the central rather than local levels. It was because we focused on our programs and our priorities. If the goal is to support an Afghan government that could provide security and development for its people, then the Afghan government should deliver the benefits of governance, not a US government employee, non-governmental organization or contractor. I visited aid workers, UN programs and military CERP programs which all seemed quite wonderful. Their inherent problem was that the foreigners were delivering programs and money, not the Afghan government. So the programs did little or nothing to build loyalty to the Afghan government and thus to build stability.

Over time we did "qualify" some ministries and Afghan programs like the Solidarity Program, to receive US funds. We did channel some money through programs like the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, run by the World Bank, that were better about supporting the Afghan government, but, overall, we were slow, bureaucratic, centralized and focused on our programs and our contractors. We failed to build stability because we failed to empower the Afghan government to deliver the benefits of governance to Afghans at the local level. The Taliban re-emerged as a local alternative.

We weren't the only ones. I had many conversations with President Karzai between 2006 and 2009 where it became clear that he relied on his own contacts and sources for information and didn't trust the programs of his own government. When we'd discuss Helmand province, for example, he'd say "let me tell you what's really going on" and then relate a story he'd heard from an acquaintance or relative. When I pushed him to empower local district chiefs and governors, he, along with the international assistance bureaucracy, would resist because those weren't really his people.

One difficulty with localized assistance is accounting. Local and provincial officials don't have the staff and the skills to provide the forms and accounting required by our programs. We're not the only ones. The Afghan finance minister also told me he had to manage something like 83 forms and accounting requirements from different donors. A "Common App" --like the one students use for college now-- would be a great improvement, but in the end it's not about forms and about audits --we have to work on trust and a more simpler set of rules. There is a great deal of corruption in Afghanistan as in all fractured developing societies, but we need to work out different methods of spending, incentives to achieve results, rewards for good governance and information, and a tolerance for losses that allows us to work through the government not around it. We'll lose some of our money in a system like this, but I'd rather see it lost in Afghanistan that spent on high-priced foreigners before it even arrives in the country.

Politically, the problem with local control is "warlords." Afghan regional leaders had fought the Soviets, defended their ethnic groups and prevailed through the civil war. They were not technocrats or bureaucrats or even nice people. But, I believe that with enough internal politicking and a few basic systems we could work with regional powers to ensure that they spend money on local development and help coordinate their interests in Kabul.

Why couldn't I say all this at the time? In some ways, I did in terms of emphasizing local governance. But, overall, I, too, was caught up in the machine, caught in the triumph of hope over experience. I, too, spent too little time really listening to Afghans and too much time developing strategies in Washington.

You in Congress can help future generations by asking the simple but tough questions here and elsewhere. Not just, what happened to that million dollar program? But: are you spending money through the government? Are you building capabilities? Are you building stability? Are you supporting an Afghan government that can prevent its territory from being used by terrorists? Most important ask the Administration "how'd that work out last time? How's it really working out for you this time?"

A few words on Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbor. Pakistan has been one of our strongest Allies in the war on terrorists. I believe it's still true that Pakistan has lost more men and suffered more attacks than any other country since 9/11. When our target was Al Qaeda, our cooperation with Pakistan was excellent. As we expanded our goals, from Al Qaeda to the Taliban to other groups, our interests and Pakistan's interests began to diverge. Pakistan wanted to maintain its influence in Afghanistan through groups like the Taliban. They can pressure the Taliban, circumscribe their activities, clip their wings but they won't turn on the Taliban or abandon them without a clear channel to secure their interests in Afghanistan. We can urge Pakistan to improve relations with Kabul, help them secure their border and enlist their help in pressing for negotiations. Rather than acknowledge their interests and negotiate, we try --without success-- to dictate what Pakistan must do. That leads to the resentments and accusations of duplicity that prevail today.

So, where does this all leave us today?

First, we are providing more of our assistance through the Afghan government, although as far as I can tell not through local levels that really touch the people and promote stability. President Ashraf Ghani is trying to build a coherent development program. Let us spend our money via the Afghan government and develop more flexible ways to account for the spending. We need to support the Afghan government, particularly at a local level, so that Afghans deliver benefits to local people.

Second, our military presence has been drawn down to focus on training and terrorism --although not yet to the point where our focus can be solely on ISIS and Al Qaeda. We should continue to draw down rapidly to a minimum level of training and support.

Third, we should support the negotiations being conducted by Ambassador Khalizad to secure a stable withdrawal of US troops and lead to a stable political result in Afghanistan after negotiations among Afghans. They need to decide the future of their country, not us.

Fourth, America must lead with diplomacy. Inside Afghanistan, we can work with politicians and local leaders --yes, the warlords-- to promote support for the government. Externally, we must work with Pakistan and with other neighbors to ensure their support for the government in Kabul as well.

Finally, we must always remember, as Clausewitz wrote, that wars are fought for political reasons. Most wars do not end like World War II with a clear surrender and a new constitution. Most wars end with a political deal and must be fought and managed with political objectives in mind. Certainly, the war to "eliminate the terrorists and all those who harbor them" will never be achieved by military means. It will be achieved by capable governments around the globe who are able to provide benefits to their populations. That requires more diplomacy, not more interventions. We need to lead with diplomacy backed by our military capability, not the other way around. We need to fund diplomacy to lead.

In Afghanistan, we achieved our initial goal: we rid Afghanistan of the Al Qaeda group that attacked us. Now, let us focus on how to assist the Afghan government to ensure Al Qaeda will never be able to attack us again from Afghanistan. Let's listen to Afghans about what they need and give them the wherewithal to provide for their people. It is time to convert our presence to diplomatic support, aid channeled through the Afghan government and a minimal military footprint. It's time to come home.

Statement of Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, USA, Ret.
“The Afghanistan Papers – Costs and Benefits of America’s Longest War”
Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management Subcommittee
U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
February 11, 2020

I want to begin my testimony with an overview of how I see the situation in Afghanistan, before turning to the personal experiences in the Army that led me to my dire assessment.

Following 9/11, the United States was right to target and destroy Al-Qaeda and the Taliban government which harbored those radical terrorists. After a decisive victory over Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, however, policymakers should have ended the U.S. military mission and brought the troops home. The terrorist organization had been rendered operationally ineffective and the Taliban utterly destroyed as a fighting force. There was no viable enemy left to fight at that point and by all rights we should have withdrawn our military at that time.

Instead, Washington pursued a social engineering, nation building effort in Afghanistan that was unnecessary for America’s security and doomed to strategic failure. We confused our security needs with ambitious hopes for the Afghan state.¹ After nearly two decades of trying and failing to build a viable central government in Afghanistan, it is well past time to withdraw U.S. forces and focus on higher defense priorities.

Afghanistan's internal political order is a separate matter unrelated to U.S. security; a pro-U.S. government there would be a nice thing to have but not something worth fighting an “endless war” to preserve. Spending \$20 to \$45 billion annually on Afghanistan undermines U.S. prosperity and security—and it adds to our \$23 trillion national debt.

Countering terrorist threats in Afghanistan does not require permanent U.S. ground forces. America’s global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and strike (ISR-Strike) capabilities are more sophisticated today than ever before; terrorist communications and training facilities are more easily detected and monitored. The U.S. military can identify, target, and eliminate direct threats anywhere around the globe, even in Afghanistan.

Prior to 9/11, Washington lacked the political will to approve missions to kill terrorists who were actively plotting attacks against the United States—that is no longer the case today. Terrorist recruitment, training, and direction in cyberspace is a different challenge and is at best tangentially related to military ground operations.

Ending the war best serves U.S. interests. Far from creating a vacuum, our departure would put more burden and responsibility on regional neighbors. Afghanistan is no prize to be won for other powers. Withdrawal would encourage regional powers, like India, Pakistan, Iran, or even Russia and China—with their own divergent interests—to expend resources to manage Afghanistan’s problems rather than U.S. taxpayers and soldiers.

¹ Benjamin H. Friedman, “Exiting Afghanistan,” *Defense Priorities* (August 2019), <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/exiting-afghanistan>.

We must acknowledge that America long ago achieved all it can in Afghanistan. Continued military intervention there drains U.S. power, expending resources better invested in modernizing the military and preparing for potential great power competition. The most prudent course of action is to draw down all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan. We should of course maintain diplomatic relations and other forms of productive engagement with Kabul, but ground combat operations should come to an end.

What I Saw in 2010 and 2011

In November 2010, I deployed to Afghanistan at the height of President Obama's famous surge when more than 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops were deployed in combat operations. Prior to my arrival, numerous U.S. generals and senior Administration officials testified before Congress, and gave interviews to media, declaring the United States was winning the war, that we were "on the right azimuth," and that although the fight was difficult, we would prevail.

My duties with the Army's Rapid Equipping Force took me on operations into every significant area of the country where our soldiers engaged the enemy. Over the course of 12 months, I traversed more than 9,000 miles and talked, traveled, and patrolled with troops in Kandahar, Kunar, Ghazni, Khost, and many other key provinces.

What I personally saw on the ground bore no resemblance to the rosy official statements made by so many of those leaders. To the contrary, it was obvious—painfully so—that we were not winning, we were not making progress, and no matter how many troops we sent, the war could never be won. The eight years since I made those observations have only reinforced that conclusion. Unless we end this war on our own terms and withdraw our troops, we'll continue paying a high price for certain failure.

The exhaustive work of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) over the past decade has graphically detailed how the war has failed, and many military and foreign policy experts have explained why—after an initial military victory over Al-Qaeda and the Taliban—the war was lost at the strategic level. I would like to provide additional, on-the-ground context about why the war failed, was always going to fail, and regardless of how many more decades of troops we sacrifice or dollars we spend, can never be won.

I will reference examples from operations I conducted over the course of 2010-11 and in key parts of the east, southeast, and south of the country, which will paint a comprehensive picture of why military force cannot secure victory in Afghanistan as we define it—a self-sufficient, democratic state that respects human rights.

I will also share excerpts from a letter I wrote to a friend while I was in the heat of the Afghan summer in 2011. These data points should clarify why there is a fatal mismatch between the political ends Washington is pursuing in Afghanistan and the means used to accomplish them.

The bottom line is a counterinsurgency campaign of the type we are conducting in Afghanistan will not result in the defeat of a political ideology—which the Taliban are. No matter how long

we tried, how badly we wanted to succeed, or how righteous the cause, we will never win this kind of unconventional war in a nation for which democracy and a strong central government are foreign concepts.

In January 2011, I made my first trip into the mountains of Kunar province near the Pakistan border to visit the troops of 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry. On a patrol to the northernmost U.S. position in eastern Afghanistan, we arrived at an Afghan National Police (ANP) station that had reported being attacked by the Taliban two and a half hours earlier.

Through the interpreter, I asked the police captain where the attack originated, and he pointed to the side of a nearby mountain.

“What are your normal procedures in situations like these?” I asked. “Do you form up a squad and go after them? Do you periodically send out harassing patrols? What do you do?”

As the interpreter conveyed my questions, the captain turned to me with an incredulous expression and laughed out loud.

“No! We don’t go after them,” he said. “That would be dangerous!”

According to the cavalry troopers, the Afghan policemen rarely left the cover of the checkpoints. In that part of the province, the Taliban ran free. Though we had 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops in the country, there were vast swaths of the country, even then, in which we had not the slightest influence, much less control.

In June, I was in the Zharay district of Kandahar province. While returning to base from a dismounted patrol and just as I was about to enter the gate to our base, I heard gunshots ring out across the meadow—the Taliban had attacked a U.S. checkpoint about one mile away.

As I entered the company’s headquarters, the commander and his staff were watching a live video feed of the battle on cameras mounted on poles far above the camp. Two Afghan National Police vehicles were blocking the main road leading to the site of the attack. The fire was coming from behind a haystack, and we watched as two Afghan men emerged from it, mounted a motorcycle and began moving toward the Afghan policemen in their vehicles.

The U.S. commander turned around and told the Afghan radio operator to make sure the policemen realized Taliban were headed their way and to be ready to capture or kill them. The radio operator shouted into the radio repeatedly, but got no answer.

On the screen, we watched as the two men slowly motored past the ANP vehicles. The policemen neither got out to stop the two men nor answered the radio—until the motorcycle was out of sight.

To a man, the U.S. officers in that unit told me that such incidents were common-place and that they had nothing but contempt for the Afghan troops in their area.

In August 2011, I went on a dismounted patrol with our troops in the Panjwai district of Kandahar province. Several troops from the unit had recently been killed in action, one of whom was a very popular and experienced soldier. One of the unit's senior officers rhetorically asked me, "How do I look these men in the eye and ask them to go out day after day on these missions? What's harder: How do I look [my soldier's] wife in the eye when I get back and tell her that her husband died for something meaningful? How do I do that?"²

One of the senior enlisted leaders added, "Guys are saying, 'I hope I live so I can at least get home to R&R leave before I get it,' or 'I hope I only lose a foot.' Sometimes they even say which limb it might be: 'Maybe it'll only be my left foot.' They don't have a lot of confidence that the leadership two levels up really understands what they're living here, what the situation really is."

On the 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the U.S., I visited another unit in Kunar province, this one near the town of Asmar. I talked with the local official who served as the cultural adviser to the U.S. commander (and later became my friend). Here's how the conversation went:

Davis: "Here you have many units of the Afghan National Security Forces [ANSF]. Will they be able to hold out against the Taliban when U.S. troops leave this area?"

Adviser: "No. They are definitely not capable. Already all across this region [many elements of] the security forces have made deals with the Taliban. [The ANSF] won't shoot at the Taliban, and the Taliban won't shoot them.

"Also, when a Taliban member is arrested, he is soon released with no action taken against him.

"Recently, I got a cellphone call from a Talib who had captured a friend of mine. While I could hear, he began to beat him, telling me I'd better quit working for the Americans. I could hear my friend crying out in pain. [The Talib] said the next time they would kidnap my sons and do the same to them. Because of the direct threats, I've had to take my children out of school just to keep them safe.

"And last night, right on that mountain there [he pointed to a ridge overlooking the U.S. base, about 700 meters distant], a member of the ANP was murdered. The Taliban came and called him out, kidnapped him in front of his parents, and took him away and murdered him. He was a member of the ANP from another province and had come back to visit his parents. He was only 27 years old. The people are not safe anywhere."

That murder took place within view of the U.S. base, a post nominally responsible for the security of an area of hundreds of square kilometers. Imagine how insecure the population is beyond visual range. And yet that conversation was representative of what I saw in many regions of Afghanistan.

² These are not precise quotations that I recorded at the time, but rather my recollection of conversations.

In all of the places I visited, the tactical situation was bad to abysmal. If the events I have described—and many, many more I could mention—had been in the first year of war, or even the third or fourth, one might be willing to believe that Afghanistan was just a hard fight, and we should stick it out. Yet these incidents all happened in the tenth year of war.

These anecdotes were representative of what I saw throughout my time in Afghanistan. If I had seen mixed results—some good and some bad, there might have been room for cautious optimism. But I didn't. The stories I heard and the operations I observed consistently revealed a war that couldn't be won, an Afghan force that was never up to the task, and an enemy that was committed to pay whatever price necessary to bleed us dry.

My View of the War in 2012

In February 2012, upon returning from the deployment, I published an assessment³ of the Afghan war in the *Armed Forces Journal*. In it, I exposed the truth of what I have described above, that America's senior uniformed and government leaders had been systematically deceiving the American public and U.S. Congress, claiming success and progress where there was only regression and failure.

In language strikingly similar to that used by *The Washington Post* in its Afghanistan Papers eight years later, I asked

“How many more men must die in support of a mission that is not succeeding and behind an array of more than seven years of optimistic statements by U.S. senior leaders in Afghanistan? No one expects our leaders to always have a successful plan. But we do expect—and the men who do the living, fighting and dying deserve—to have our leaders tell us the truth about what's going on.”

Barely two days after my work went public, the commanding general of all U.S. ground troops in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, held a press conference at the Pentagon in which he was asked about my pessimistic assessment.⁴ Dismissing my assessment as being “one person's view of this,” he offered his own appraisal:

“I have seen steady progress across the country,” he said. “The Afghanistan government and partnership with the coalition has taken significant steps forward... We have the right plan. We have the momentum.”

Every year since the general's press conference, the truth has been very nearly the opposite:

- The Afghan government continues to rank as nearly the most corrupt government globally.

³ Daniel L. Davis, “Truth, Lies and Afghanistan,” *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2012).

⁴ Department of Defense, Press Briefing of Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, Commander, International Security Assistance Force, February 8, 2019, <https://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4973>.

- Afghan leaders have steadily lost control of regions of their country since 2012 to insurgents.
- Afghanistan's armed forces continue suffering unsustainable casualties. The Afghan Security Forces have suffered more than 28,000 casualties since 2015.⁵
- The Taliban have grown in strength to their greatest level since 2001, currently estimated by CRS at 60,000.⁶

Then there are the egregious costs to the United States.

Every day we delay in bringing this war to an end adds to the rolls of U.S. service members needlessly sacrificed, and we continue to pour scores \$20 to \$45 billion annually with no chance of reaping a positive return. If we do truly value the lives of our service personnel, if we genuinely do "support the troops," we should demonstrate it with firm, resolute, and wise action—that means bringing an overdue end to this war on our terms. That requires no agreement from the Taliban or anyone else.

Conclusion

When I went public with my report in 2012, I did so expecting it would anger many senior leaders in the Army. I knew I was risking my career, which would affect both me and my family. I closed out my assessment by explaining I took the risk because the stakes were so high for both the military and our country. Most of what I warned against has come to pass in the intervening eight years, but sadly, the core of the risk remains as relevant today as it was in 2012:

“When it comes to deciding what matters are worth plunging our nation into war and which are not, our senior leaders owe it to the nation and to the uniformed members to be candid—graphically, if necessary—in telling them what's at stake and how expensive potential success is likely to be. U.S. citizens and their elected representatives can decide if the risk to blood and treasure is worth it.”

“That is the very essence of civilian control of the military. The American people deserve better than what they've gotten from their senior uniformed leaders over the last number of years. Simply telling the truth would be a good start.”

In closing, I would like to share a segment of an email I wrote, as I reflected on the war while out on a mission in the summer of 2011. I sent it to a friend in Colorado I felt could understand my experience, as he was a Vietnam veteran.

Steve,

This morning on my way to chow the Taliban launched a mortar at the base which blew

⁵ Susannah George, “Casualties Increase among Afghan Security Forces as War Intensifies,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-security-forces-casualties-increase-as-war-intensifies/2019/10/30/8254e442-fb52-11e9-8906-ab6b60de9124_story.html.

⁶ Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief,” Congressional Research Service, January 31, 2020, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45122.html>, p. 7.

up about 125m away from me. Not enough to physically harm me, but did lv my ears ringing for hrs. While waiting on a helo flight to the next unit HQ, I was reading the tales of heroism on my BlackBerry re the 30 killed last wknd in that helicopter crash.

A common theme among the quotes family and friends of the fallen had shared was the patriotism and love of country each had. It made for tragic but a heartwarming story for the readers. But to what end? For what purpose? For what 'greater good' did the 30 die for?

Even me; with just a difference of a few millimeters at the launch site of that mortar tube and I'm joining the 30 in a coffin of my own. While I frankly don't give a crap if I go out that way (part of the job, as u know so well yourself), the thot grieves me deeply when I think of how it would affect my sons.

What would they tell my sons their dad died for? What are any of those who survive told? Or even worse: what about those who get arms and/or legs blown off but aren't lucky enough to die and become a burden on their families? So what is all this remarkable sacrifice for?

Nothing.

We are here to keep fighting and dying so the clock can run out in 2014. That is the part that's so maddening.

Everyone knows we're in the fourth quarter and the clock is running out. Its sort of like 1952/3 in Korea. While the politicians bickered about how the armistice would b worked out in the halls of power, the troops on both sides just kept killing ea other ,conducting ops' for the sake of it. But this case is even more egregious because the politicians have already determined the outcome, but still we'll keep spilling their blood n they'll keep spilling ours.

this whole thing could b wrapped up now, in the next few months, we could end this war now. We don't have to go 2 1/2 more years of killing and being killed.

But we will...

--danny

Sent via BlackBerry from T-Mobile

All these things I've conveyed today took place more than eight years ago. What is most painful to me, though, is the reality that it is almost indistinguishable from events, operations, and anecdotes that any trooper could have conveyed within the past six months. It is past time to end this unwinnable war and withdraw our combat troops.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my experiences. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.