



Prepared Remarks of
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“Afghanistan: Lessons Unlearned”

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Thank you for the kind introduction. I really appreciate being able to be here in person after over two years of endless Zoom. The only downside for me is that I have to wear pants today with my sports coat. Kidding aside, I want to thank Rick Kessler who I worked with in Congress for decades for suggesting to George to invite me to speak today. I only hope that I live up to Senator Muskie’s warning that “there is no point in speaking unless you can improve on silence.”

With that caveat, it is a very interesting time to be discussing Afghanistan – as we rapidly approach the one-year anniversary of the collapse of the Afghan government and Taliban takeover. I know you are planning to hear from my good friend Pam Constable in October and I am sure that she will provide a unique perspective on what life in Afghanistan is like today.

Given my experience, I thought it might be of interest to discuss some key lessons from our nation’s efforts in Afghanistan and the importance of addressing them for future contingencies. And, don’t worry, my recent knee replacement will ensure that I won’t drone on too long and we’ll all be back shortly to enjoying this beautiful state.

While I know you all are familiar with the role of an Inspector General – and some of you may recall the warm, fuzzy feeling you had when you found out one wanted to speak with you – the agency I lead is unique in the IG community, so let me briefly explain our role and work.

Introduction to SIGAR

For the last ten years I've had the honor to lead a little temporary government agency with the tobacco sounding acronym called SIGAR – the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. It is the mission of my staff to identify waste, fraud, and abuse in government projects and programs, while also recommending ways to improve government efficiency.

The reason Congress created SIGAR comes down to dollars and cents. By the time I became the SIGAR in 2012, we were spending more on reconstruction in Afghanistan than the next eight largest aid recipients combined. To date, the U.S. government has appropriated over \$146 billion for Afghanistan's reconstruction and we continue to spend taxpayer dollars there, despite the Afghan government's collapse. That amount is more than we spent on the Marshall Plan to rebuild all of Europe and includes humanitarian assistance but does not include the amount the U.S. spent on warfighting which, according to the Department of Defense, amounted to nearly \$840 billion.

SIGAR has issued over 700 audits and other reports making over 1,200 recommendations to federal agencies to recover funds, improve agency oversight, and increase program effectiveness, saving the U.S. taxpayer approximately \$2.3 billion. In addition, SIGAR's criminal investigations have resulted in 163 criminal convictions and over \$1.6 billion in fines, restitutions, forfeitures, and settlements. Our work to date has resulted in approximately \$4 billion in taxpayer savings and recoveries. Lastly, under my watch, SIGAR is the only Inspector General with a dedicated lessons learned program. We have issued twelve extensive reports on topics useful not only in Afghanistan but anywhere reconstruction or humanitarian work is undertaken in a post-conflict environment.

Learning Lessons from Afghanistan

I am proud of all the work we have done and continue to do and honestly believe we have made a difference. That said, obviously the United States and its allies did not achieve the goal of establishing a sustainable, secure, democratic Afghan state.

The question then is whether, after 20 years of effort, over \$1 trillion U.S. taxpayer dollars spent, and more than 2,300 U.S. service members killed and 20,000 wounded what can we learn from the experience to improve our chances for success

somewhere else in the world?

It is easy to say we will never take on a similar mission again. That is what we said after Vietnam and Iraq. But whether you call it reconstruction, stabilization, or security sector assistance, every expert we have interviewed says the U.S. and its allies will get involved somewhere else, sometime else, in something similar to our Afghanistan experience.

SIGAR's lessons learned program was created at the recommendation of senior U.S. military and diplomatic officials with the goal of helping U.S. government agencies institutionalize some of the lessons already learned at great cost in Afghanistan.

Early in SIGAR's history, one of my staff discovered a study commissioned in 1988 by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) entitled "A Retrospective Review of Assistance to Afghanistan: 1950 to 1979." Many of its conclusions were relevant and applicable to the U.S. government's then-ongoing reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, no one we spoke to at USAID or the State Department knew of the study's existence, let alone its findings and recommendations. I took that lesson to heart when we stood up our Lessons Learned program eight years ago. SIGAR's unique interagency congressional mandate, which provides us oversight authority over any reconstruction program regardless of the agency involved, gives us a unique vantage point and ability to assess what was going right and what was going wrong in what was already, by 2014, when I created the lessons learned program, America's longest war.

As much of the American public has moved on from Afghanistan, SIGAR's reports may seem destined to end up in the same bureaucratic black hole that 1988 USAID report fell into. But what history tells us is that our experiences in Afghanistan can and should inform future U.S. efforts in countries where corrupt governments, terrorism, insurgencies, or other violence imperil our national security interests. If we do not learn the lessons now and institutionalize necessary reforms, we will be destined to remain on the hamster wheel of history repeating the same mistakes over and over.

Having issued so many reports about the U.S. experience in Afghanistan, there are more lessons, findings, and recommendations than I could recite in a week. But as I said before, I am recuperating from knee surgery, so let me be brief and just highlight

four areas that I think are of particular importance beyond Afghanistan.

The Oversight Imperative

The first one, and admittedly I'm slightly biased, is the need for independent oversight at the very outset of a U.S. foreign engagement. As you know, the United States sent troops into Afghanistan in October 2002, and the reconstruction mission started shortly thereafter. At that point, with the Taliban and al-Qaeda seemingly on the run, Afghanistan was largely considered a post-conflict country. But by 2006, it had become apparent that it was not going well and increasing troop levels and spending reflected what Washington does best – throw money at a problem. By 2007, U.S. reconstruction spending was nearly three times what it had been the year before.

Unfortunately, the existing oversight agencies were overwhelmed and SIGAR wasn't created until 2008. My predecessors were tasked with standing up a brand-new agency and getting it operational, which many of you who have worked in the government know takes time. All the while, billions of dollars were being shoved out the door to Afghanistan and agencies came under immense pressure to spend it and show results.

But delayed oversight comes at a cost, and not just financial. Our reports have identified deficiencies which were engrained in our assistance and training programs from inception which ultimately were significant factors in the collapse of the Afghan security forces and government.

By the time SIGAR was finally up and running, so much money had been obligated that we had little opportunity to conduct proper oversight of it, although we certainly did what we could. I have testified on a number of occasions that my staff and I felt like Columbo or Inspector Morse arriving at a crime scene, where the body has been removed and, if we were lucky, the chalk outline remained. Despite that frustration, two SIGAR reviews found that at least 30% of Afghanistan reconstruction funding SIGAR examined was wasted or stolen. Just imagine how much more waste, fraud, and abuse we could have identified and potentially stopped if we'd been established back in 2002 when the dollars started pouring into that little country.

But it's not all about dollars and cents. SIGAR raised concerns for years about how the system the U.S. government set up to pay Afghan soldiers and police didn't work as intended – something that would ultimately factor in the collapse of the Afghan

security forces where it became apparent that thousands of the police and soldiers we were paying and equipping were “ghosts” and on the books just to siphon funds for senior Afghans. SIGAR also routinely identified safety hazards to both U.S. and Afghan forces due to poor construction that wasn’t properly overseen, including buildings that literally melted in the rain, bridges and roads that collapsed, and barracks that were nearly as flammable as the *Hindenburg*.

In short, independent oversight mechanisms need to be baked into the cake from the very beginning. As one general told me, oversight needs to be “mission critical” to an operation. Now, I understand the desire in the midst of a crisis to focus on getting money out the door and to worry about oversight later, but too often that creates more problems than it solves. I remind you that the Inspector General Act was enacted in 1978. Surely, we should have enough experience by now to be able to quickly incorporate independent oversight mechanisms into any urgent response to a crisis overseas and not wait years after the money starts to flow.

The Corruption Trap

While I am on the subject of waste, fraud, and abuse, let me turn to the second lesson we need to learn from Afghanistan. Namely, how corruption, and our role in exacerbating it, undermined our own goals in the process. Our government consistently raises concerns about corruption in other countries because of the pernicious effect it has on the rule of law, stability, and people’s daily lives. And let’s be clear, Afghanistan was not exactly next to Norway in Transparency International’s corruption indices before the reconstruction effort began. Nevertheless, it is clear from our research that we made a bad situation much, much worse.

As I mentioned before, the bureaucratic instinct to resolving an intractable problem is to throw more money at it. This impulse intensifies when the bureaucracy faces a deadline to resolve the problem. For example, during the surge of U.S. military forces and civilian officials into Afghanistan, U.S. reconstruction spending was equivalent to more than 100 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP, or more than double the country’s ability to absorb that much aid. Corruption, which had been endemic prior to the surge, metastasized and swelled to an unprecedented level. By 2010, the Afghan National Security Advisor told Embassy Kabul that “corruption is not just a problem for the system of governance in Afghanistan; it is the system of governance.”

U.S. spending overwhelmed systems for ensuring accountability and

effectiveness. For example, internal USAID protocols recommended that each manager oversee roughly \$10 million in grants – yet, at times, each manager ended up with responsibility for managing upwards of \$100 million in grants.

By spending money faster than it could be accounted for or absorbed in the Afghan economy, the U.S. government ultimately achieved the opposite of what it intended: it fueled corruption, delegitimized the Afghan government, and increased insecurity. This is not to say the Afghan government, warlords, and others did not take advantage of the system and bear no responsibility. But simply blaming corruption on the Afghans is not only missing the point, it will ultimately lead to a similar tragedy in some other country if the U.S. government does not (1) understand how its actions can contribute to and exacerbate corruption, and (2) take appropriate measures to minimize our corrupting influence.

Problematic Planning and Personnel Policies

The final two, interlinked, areas I'll highlight are planning and personnel. Those of you who have served in the U.S. government know the executive and legislative branches are challenged by what I would call "short-term-itis." Budget cycles are a year; Congressional sessions last two; presidential terms last four. Everyone in Washington is focused on showing success under unrealistic timelines that do not reflect the reality on the ground. To paraphrase John Paul Vann's comments about Vietnam, in Afghanistan, we didn't fight one twenty-year war – we fought twenty one-year wars. Moreover, every Administration wanted to get out as quickly as it could and planned accordingly.

From July 2010 through last August, I worked with six different U.S. Ambassadors, six different commanding generals, and eight different commanders of the military's train, advise, and assist effort. In a volunteer military and a foreign service that wants to limit the time their officers spend in hardship posts, this may be inevitable – but we need to acknowledge the problem of short tours of duty and find ways to address it. I have often commented on the "annual lobotomy" at Embassy Kabul every summer as the experienced hands left for other posts and a new batch of foreign service officers arrived with very little knowledge of what their predecessor had been working on before they departed.

There were similar challenges with the military. One senior U.S. official noted how a new unit would arrive in Afghanistan, assess the situation and say "this is going

to be difficult.” Halfway through their deployment, they’d say progress was being made. By the time they left they’d determined that a corner had been turned and goals had been met. The unit replacing them would come in, assess the situation, and say “this is going to be difficult,” and the whole process would start over. Add to that the fact that there was usually a completely new approach every year or six months and no continuity. While for Afghan officials and soldiers the war began perhaps as far back as 1979, our civilian and military personnel were eyeing their departure date from the moment their boots hit Afghan soil and claiming success as they left the country whether after a six week, six month, or year-long rotation.

But personnel problems were not limited to the length of rotations in country. I doubt I will shock any of you when I say that our civilian and military agencies don’t always play well in the sandbox together, nor do we do a good job coordinating with our NATO and international allies.

Effective coordination between civilian agencies and the military was critical if U.S. government efforts to rebuild Afghan institutions, reduce poppy cultivation, reintegrate ex-combatants, build the private sector, and convince Afghans to trust their government were to succeed. But bureaucratic clashes between agencies were abundant, often because of resource disparities. At the height of the surge, for example, just under 100,000 U.S. military personnel were stationed in Afghanistan, compared to just 600 USAID personnel. Although a variety of civilian agencies contributed personnel to the mission in Afghanistan, staff numbers never came close to approaching the military’s numbers, despite the overtly political nature of the reconstruction mission.

This imbalance in resources naturally elevated military objectives over civilian ones. Because civilian officials in the field were dependent on the military for food, housing, and transportation, they had little choice but to go along if the military insisted that they implement a project in places far too dangerous for the programs to succeed. Problems weren’t limited to lone USAID officials embedded with military units in some far-flung province; there were times senior Embassy officials weren’t aware the military had undertaken a major construction project until they literally handed the keys over to the Embassy upon the project’s completion.

This isn’t to blame the military entirely. They had a mission, just like the civilian agencies did and they executed it. If the civilian agencies did not have the same reach or resources, well, is that DOD’s fault or the result of a more fundamental problem about

the level of political support for more robustly resourcing State and USAID?

Speaking of expeditionary diplomacy, let me finish with one lesson that I saw firsthand during my many trips to Afghanistan which needs to be acknowledged by Congress, respective Administrations, and the American people. Namely, effective diplomacy and development cannot be risk-free.

I understand the imperative to take every precaution to keep one's employees safe. I have firsthand experience with this – at one point SIGAR had over fifty staff based not just in the Embassy, but also at military bases and consulates throughout Afghanistan, including staff based at the consulate in Herat when it came under attack. Through nothing other than dumb luck I personally avoided a number of encounters with the Taliban so I appreciate the risk of working in such an environment.

But over the course of my years of travel to Afghanistan, I saw a growing retreat of U.S. civilian personnel – and to a lesser extent, military personnel – that I believe harmed the mission. Especially during the last few years prior to the Taliban takeover, numerous foreign service officers served entire tours without ever leaving the confines of the Embassy. And if they did get permission to leave the Embassy, they almost certainly never left the international zone in Kabul. We may never know how much that affected the real-time analysis of the situation in Afghanistan prior to the collapse, or how it impacted the effectiveness of our programs but the State Department and USAID have to be willing to take more risks and, more importantly, be allowed to do so by Washington politicians and political pundits. You cannot do effective diplomacy, development, or reconstruction by Zoom.

I acknowledge that the level of risk increased between my first visit in 2010 and my last in 2021. During my first trips, my assigned security detail said they were more concerned about an American at the Embassy targeting me in retribution for one of SIGAR's reports than they were about the Taliban or other terrorists. And I must admit, they may not have been wrong. But certainly by my last visit, things had deteriorated dramatically. But it reaches the point of the absurd when your security detail doesn't allow you to cross a secured street between secured buildings within the Embassy compound to attend a meeting. I know the State Department has come under immense pressure to avoid casualties and I hope they never suffer another, but our government officials need to be able to go out and do their jobs in less than ideal circumstances or what's the point of having them there at all?

Conclusion

So now you're thinking, great, John, you've laid out a bunch of problems, how do we fix them? Well, to use the Maine vernacular, I admit, many of these problems are wickedly difficult and may make you uncomfortable. But as E.B. White said, it is "better to feel bad in Maine than feel good anywhere else." On a positive note, we do make a number of recommendations in our dozen Lessons Learned reports and since many of you are retired or on vacation, you may have time to read them – they're only a couple hundred pages each. Either that or you can use them to swat the black flies.

But in all seriousness, the main lesson is one Benjamin Franklin identified centuries ago. Failing to plan is planning to fail. For all the times we say we'll never do something like Afghanistan again, we will.

Jack Keane, former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, noted that "after the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision." There is a propensity to think that if we build an institutional capability – particularly on the civilian side – to address stabilization and reconstruction challenges, that we will actively seek to get involved in more of them. But even when we purge the system of all we've learned, whether it be after Vietnam, or the 1988 USAID study I mentioned earlier, we still find ourselves in situations like Iraq and Afghanistan – the only consequence is that we're less prepared and less well-equipped to address them effectively.

Former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley told SIGAR that "we just don't have a post-conflict stabilization model that works. Every time we do one of these things, it is a pick-up game. I don't have confidence that if we did it again, we would do it any better." And former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker told us "you have to start working on it before you need it."

Yet, after the last two decades in Afghanistan and Iraq, State, USAID and DOD have all signaled they do not see large-scale reconstruction missions as likely in the future. The 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review, jointly approved by all three agencies, states that "there is no appetite to repeat large-scale reconstruction efforts." But just because there is no appetite doesn't mean we won't still end up at the buffet table.

In our lessons learned report on stabilization we note that “there will likely be times in the future when insurgent control over a particular area or population is deemed an imminent threat to U.S. interests.” Does that sound like Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in 2014? We can say it won’t happen again all we want – but we’re already witnessing varying levels of U.S. engagement in areas where insurgents threaten U.S. interests in far-flung places like the Sahel, Somalia, Mozambique, and Syria, among others. To say nothing of what level of engagement we have witnessed over the last few months in Ukraine.

There are those who would like to put the entirety of our Afghanistan experience in a box and lock it away, never to be seen or heard from again. We’ll never do anything like that again, they say. The only real question is whether, next time, we want to learn from the mistakes that we experienced at such great cost in blood and treasure, or – as we’ve done all too often in the past – make it up as we go and see how things turn out.

We may want to forget; but history unfortunately does not. We can defy the lessons Afghanistan holds for us, with all the consequences that entails, or perhaps we can try something new – and learn from it, instead of running away from it.

Thank you very much and I look forward to your questions.