

**John F. Sopko**  
**Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction**

**Defense Writers Group**  
**Project for Media and National Security**  
**George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs**

**29 July 2021**

**Moderator:** Good morning, and welcome everyone to this Defense Writers Group. I'm Thom Shanker, the new Director of the Project for Media and National Security at George Washington University, and we are both honored and happy with the timing to have Mr. John F. Sopko with us today. He is the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The timeliness of this meeting is superb following President Biden's withdrawal orders and of course the SIGAR's quarterly report, the embargo lifted just last night.

We have two guest observers today from CNA. We have Jonathan Schroeden who is Director of CNA's Countering Threats and Challenges Program; and Christine Lapaille who is CNA's Director of Communication. Welcome to you Jonathan and Christine. And Mr. Sopko, a special thanks to you for doing this today, sir.

**Mr. Sopko:** My pleasure.

**Moderator:** I'll start things off. I know there will be a lot of questions across the board, but I think to use an old phrase, the wolf closest to the sled is the question of the Afghan Security Forces. If they can actually defend the country against recent Taliban advances.

Your report, sir, paints a rather grim picture of that and I'd love to hear your assessment of why the Afghan Security Forces appear to be collapsing just within weeks of the American withdrawal. And as someone who's looked at Afghanistan so carefully - the money, the time and the training - are you surprised by this seeming collapse?

**Mr. Sopko:** Thank you. I think you hit the big question right on the head. That is after all the money, \$86 billion and 20 years, why did we see such poor results? I think that's the important question and I think our quarterly talks about that to some extent.

You really shouldn't be surprised. If you've been reading our reports for at least the over nine years that I've been there, we've been highlighting problems with our train, advise and assist mission with the Afghan military. From moving the goal posts every time we took a look at the assessment tools, our U.S. military would change the goal posts and say oh no, no, that's not the test you want to do. To raising serious questions about the sustainability of all this high-tech hardware we gave them. And to the real serious problem that we focused on the more urgent warfighting and not looking at what I call the long tail, the whole issue of logistics. That has been a sore point with the Afghans, and we've highlighted it from day one. A problem with the [ghost] soldiers there with the corruption, the problem with fuel.

We just issued a report last week saying CSTCA which is the Combined Security Training Command of Afghanistan, they basically just kicked the can down the road on trying to protect the fuel. A former CSTCA commander told us over half the fuel disappears. If you don't have fuel, the Afghan Army doesn't fight. And if they're not being paid they don't fight. And if they're not getting the bullets and the food and the other equipment, they don't fight. And I think this is what you're seeing since the Taliban started their latest attacks, which ironically overlap with the peace negotiations. So I hope that answers the question.

**Moderator:** It does very much, sir. Thank you.

Tony Capaccio, Bloomberg.

**DWG:** The question becomes of the \$83 billion, at what point is it fair to say that the money was wasted? What are fair metrics for determining A, was the money wasted? Or B, given what you laid out, we did the best we could?

**Mr. Sopko:** That's a tough one and it's hard to say everything was wasted. I suppose the ultimate answer will be was it wasted and we'll see how well the Afghans hold up. And even though there are serious problems, and I have serious concerns and I think our military does and most observers have serious concerns, the story isn't over. The last act hasn't played. They could still turn it around. There is time. If that's true, then ultimately the money wasn't wasted.

SIGAR - 7/29/21

But we've documented time and again and time and again where we did waste money. Whether it was buying the wrong equipment or not overseeing properly its distribution and use. So I can't really say there was one point in time where you could say it's all been wasted. I think we have to wait and see how the last act plays.

**DWG:** A quick question on the so-called Afghan papers. When will all those SIGAR interviews that were made available to the Post via Freedom of Information be put on your web site?

**Mr. Sopko:** I can't answer that question. I think a lot of them may be up on the web site, and of course those that we reviewed for the Washington Post, I think that material is available right now.

Now since the Washington Post did their story over a year, year and a half ago, we've done additional interviews and actually we're coming out with a major report, lessons learned report, in about two weeks called What We Should Have Learned: 20 Years of Reconstruction in Afghanistan. And that report is based on over 700 interviews, so a lot of new interviews we've done. And again, we will obviously release those that we can. The difficulty is we don't want to release, and that's been the argument we've had with the Washington Post, we don't want to release the names of people who didn't want their names released. We feel that necessary to continue. So that will be coming out.

But I can't answer if it's actually on the web site or not, I'd have to check. But I think a lot of these have been put up.

**Moderator:** Sylvie of AFP.

**DWG:** I was wondering if you have a better idea than us about how the U.S. is going to help maintaining the Afghan Air Force. Is it possible to do it over the horizon, as they say?

**Mr. Sopko:** That's a very good question, Sylvia, and of course the Afghan Air Force is really critical to the sustainability of the Afghan military and if you look at our quarterly report we highlight some serious problems so far because of the loss of the trainers and the loss of the contractors.

We don't have all the details. We're still waiting for more details from the U.S. military on this over the horizon

capability. So it's hard for me and my agency to answer the question.

We do know that the sustainability of the Air Force is limited without the training and without the fixing of the equipment, and I think if you go to our quarterly report, we identify that most of the airplanes, their capabilities and helicopters have dropped dramatically in the last few months. I think five of the seven airframes experienced decreases in readiness already. So we're concerned about it but we don't have an answer. We just haven't gotten any details yet from our own military.

**DWG:** But knowing the capacities and the level of training of the Afghan government, do you think it's even possible that you can do that, you know, remotely?

**Mr. Sopko:** It's possible. It will be difficult and it will be very expensive. If a helicopter's engine needs to be rehabbed, I don't know if you're going to have to fly out the helicopter out of the country or take the engine out and fly it out? That's all very expensive. It can be done. And I just don't know the details on it.

And of course you could try to do some of it in-country if you had the contractors but the agreement that was signed by Khalilzad some time ago basically said not only do troops leave but all foreign contractors.

So that is the result of that, I won't call it a peace negotiation because we don't have a peace negotiation going on now. But the withdrawal agreement that was signed by the prior administration.

**Moderator:** Stephen Losey of Military.Com.

**DWG:** I'd like to follow up on Sylvie's question and ask you specifically about the idea of virtual training. I know you said, you were talking about like potentially flying helicopters or flying engines out of the country, but it has struck a lot of people that trying to teach someone to do something as complicated as these very fine-tuned engine repairs or whatever in very close quarters while facilitated via an internet connection, like may not be workable. Do you have any idea, is the virtual stuff something that is actually going to work? And does the Afghan Air Force have the broadband capability to do

this? Is it actually workable?

**Mr. Sopko:** Again, that's a very good question and I think even our military recognizes that. I'll quote something that RS, the Resolute Support mission told us for our quarterly report, that over the horizon support does not equal "over the shoulder" oversight. They acknowledged to us for this quarterly report that the reduced presence of the U.S. forces, and that would mean also the trainers, the advisors and the contractors, will constrain the capacity to monitor ANDSF funding and material we give them, and I would say their ability to actually fix all this stuff.

So that's a really good point. They make that distinction of over the horizon versus over the shoulder, and I know you know as well as I do that you've got to be there sometimes to help somebody with maintenance or training or whatever and it's extremely difficult. And as good as we'd like Zoom, and we're on Zoom right now, it's a lot better, I personally feel, when you're face to face. And when the Afghans are face to face.

Actually, I've got to put a plug in, our training and our advising and our assistance to the Afghan Air Force is one of the success stories and those Afghan pilots and crews and members are not only brave, but they are really as competent as they could be. But as our own Air Force told us and as we have reported time and again, you can't turn somebody into a UH-60 pilot overnight, or a level one or level two or level three mechanic overnight. These take months. And that is one of the serious problems we raised with not only the ANDSF train, advise and assist, but overall with reconstruction. We've highlighted time and again, we had unrealistic timelines for all of our work and that is what now is causing the problems you see with the military and it's also the problems you see with rule of law, with counter-narcotics, and every other program we have.

So you're touching on a point, if you pull that thread, it goes to almost every reconstruction and every warfighting program we have in Afghanistan.

**DWG:** Is internet access a limiting factor for the Afghan Air Force or are they good on internet there?

**Mr. Sopko:** I'm sorry, actually, we had an internet problem right now. You said access?

SIGAR - 7/29/21

**DWG:** If the Afghan Air Force's internet access a limiting factor? Or are they good on that front?

**Mr. Sopko:** I can't speak directly to the Air Force on internet access, but internet access is a problem in general in Afghanistan because you have a country that doesn't have a lot of electricity. I think only 30 percent of the population has access to 24 hour electricity. So if you don't have electricity you can't power the computers and all that other equipment, and that was one of the problems. We gave them highly technical equipment and we tried to build a military that looked and acted and sounded like us. And that meant you had to have literate people in the military. You also had to have access to electricity and access to the internet, and that's not common throughout Afghanistan. Now I can't speak for individual Air Force bases in Afghanistan.

**Moderator:** Bob Burns, AP.

**DWG:** Mr. Sopko, picking up on your use of the term over the shoulder, I'm wondering as it applies to SIGAR, how and even if are you going to be able to continue your in-country work of assessing and auditing and analyzing what's going on with U.S. funds after August 31<sup>st</sup>?

**Mr. Sopko:** That's again a very good question. I'm asked that a lot.

Our role is to oversee and protect U.S. dollars in Afghanistan. And we're tied not to the number of troops there but to the amount of money being spent. So as the administration has said, they're calling for assistance to Afghanistan of over \$3 billion and \$300-plus million for civilian assistance and reconstruction so there's a need for oversight. I think everybody recognizes that. We have people on the ground, but we're used to also operating in dangerous locations. We've been doing it in Afghanistan with a reduction in the military since 2014.

We try to get out and kick the tires when we can if we're doing it with satellite data or with other technologies, but also using trusted Afghan civil society organizations.

So even if we're not present, and of course our preference is to be present because we also have an extensive informant network,

probably one of the largest, in Afghanistan where we talk to people all the time and they talk to us and they give us information and it's useful to have somebody in Afghanistan to do that.

But anyway, we still can do the work outside of Afghanistan because a lot of our work is paper. And particularly, we follow the money from the contracting here to where it goes. But it's important that we have access, and up to now we have, access to a lot of the internal computer systems that the Afghans use and which the U.S. government paid for. So their poor IMS, their AFMITS, their APPS which is their payroll system, those are all systems that tell us or help us in tracking the money. So yes, we can do it. Is it going to be more difficult? Yes. Are we going to miss more theft and misconduct? Yes. And that's just the nature of the beast with security. But we can do our mission as Congress has told us to do it.

**Moderator:** Next is Jeff Schogol of Task & Purpose.

**DWG:** When Biden administration officials describe the Afghan Security Forces saying they have 300,000 troops, they will continue to fight bravely, and they have the capacity to defend their country, are they accurately describing conditions on the ground in Afghanistan?

**Mr. Sopko:** I definitely don't know as much about what's going on on the ground as our National Security Agencies do. So they may be. But we do have information coming in, we report it in the quarterly report, about there's still a problem of ghosts - meaning non-existent soldiers and police who we are paying their salaries for, and there's also a problem about how well they are fighting when the battle comes to them. Again, I'll go to what our NATO Special Forces Command said, that most ANA Corps refused to execute missions without the presence of the Afghan Special Forces. Now the Afghan Special Forces is a very small and brave and very well trained component of the 300-some-thousand, if that number is accurate, Afghan Security Forces. So what is this basically saying? Our advisors are saying to us, which is in the quarterly report, that most of the Afghan Corps won't go out and fight unless there's Afghan Special Forces supporting them.

Now that's not good because you're going to run through and you're going to use up all your Special Forces if that's what you're doing.

The second thing that our NATO Special Forces Command told us, which is in the quarterly report, is that when the Special Forces show up they're given the wrong missions and they're performing tasks intended for the conventional forces such as route clearing, checkpoint security and other things. So again, they're being misused, what little forces we have in the Afghan Special Forces are being misused.

So I'm concerned about that. But again, I don't have as much accurate information as our administration does so I can't really question. I can only tell you what our own military told us which is in the quarterly report.

**DWG:** And is this sustainable? Having Afghan SOF being kind of the backbone for every corps mission?

**Mr. Sopko:** We have said in the past and the U.S. commanders have said in the past that that is not sustainable. And I have seen no evidence to the contrary. So you can't use just the Special Forces and the Special Mission Wing and the Afghan Air Force alone to fight the Taliban and other insurgents. You've got to get the regular Afghan police and the Afghan military involved in a coherent planned way. They have to do their job. You can't, my believe, we haven't done an audit on it so I don't speak from an audit, but just based upon my experience and my staff's experience talking to people and talking to a number of our generals, you can't win that war just on the back of the Afghan Special Forces.

**Moderator:** Paul Shinkman, US News.

**DWG:** I'd like to change the subject a little bit and ask you about Chinese influence in Afghanistan. Your latest report documented a recent increase in economic and development ties between Afghanistan and China, including a new access road that Afghanistan is paying for, and a dramatic increase in exports. Have you discovered other examples of a new increase in relations between the two countries? And do you have any evidence from your work on the ground about what China's intentions might be?

**Mr. Sopko:** I don't. I really don't have much information in that area. I'm happy to talk to my staff and get back to you on that.

SIGAR - 7/29/21

China's always had an interest in the extractive area of Afghanistan and my assumption, and it's just an assumption. Again, we haven't done any audit work on that, is that that road and also their involvement is also to try to insert themselves and to assert some type of role in the future extractives. But I think even the Chinese in the past have witnessed how difficult it is to successfully get extractives out of the country in an economical fashion because of where they're located, because of the insurgency that's been going on for years, and because of the weak legal structure and the very weak infrastructure.

I think recent reporting is that I think the Chinese have actually told all of their citizens to leave Afghanistan. I may be wrong in that, but I thought I read a report on that. So they're concerned about security too. But I can't really answer the question more. I'm happy to follow up with you if you want to contact my staff.

**DWG:** I will. Thanks very much, sir.

**Moderator:** Garrett Reim of Flight Global.

I can't hear you. We'll move on.

John Donnelly of CQ Roll Call.

**DWG:** I want to follow up on Bob's question about over the horizon oversight, if you will.

You basically said we can do it, but my question is, are you going to be able to do it? Has the Afghan government agreed to give you access to the paperwork and the computer systems? Is there a prospect of the U.S. government conditioning aid to Afghanistan on them allowing you to do your work? In other words, what's the outlook for this actually happening?

**Mr. Sopko:** We have in the past had access to these records, and going forward what we're saying is if you want to ensure better oversight we need and the GAO needs and we actually sent a white paper which we're happy to make available on our web site to SecDef, SecState, USAID Administrator as well as most of the Congress. There's three or four recommendations we had to improve oversight and one of them was the condition to make certain going forward that we continue to have this [inaudible] agency access.

Now the House Committee on Appropriations inserted language from our white paper which actually was supported by a number of members of Congress including Congressman Lynch and the Ranking Member from the National Security Subcommittee on House Oversight and Government Reform and others. They've inserted language which basically says there should be, we should get access, and there should be conditioning on that.

Other recommendations we had that were not adopted or inserted, we think they're pertinent to successful oversight. One of them in particular is we've got to make certain that the trust funds, because we're going to be using more trust funds to give them money, we've got to make certain that those who control the trust funds, meaning the World Bank and the UN and NATO and Asian Development Bank, that they give us access. Now they have always been problematic in the past giving us access even though we fund a significant amount of those trust funds, but that is another proposal we had.

The third very relevant proposal, just so people don't forget it and you can go on our web site when we put that white paper up. I think we're putting it up today because we referenced it in the quarterly report, is we recommend that the administration reestablish the Afghanistan Threat Finance Cell which was used in the past and then it ended. Which was used to combine law enforcement, intelligence and the military to try to document corrupt elements that not only support terrorism but also divert money and funds. We feel that would be useful to us in going forward.

But whether it will work, I can't guarantee anything in Afghanistan, and I'm not a person who is good with a crystal ball. I learned that a long time ago. Predicting the future in Afghanistan is not a good betting prospect. But I think if we do that, and we get access, I think we and the other oversight agencies, particularly the GAO and us can actually do a good job in protecting the U.S. taxpayers' investment.

**DWG:** You sent that white paper almost two months ago. I've seen it. Have you gotten any positive response from the administration indicating yeah, we're interested in attaching strings to the money we provide?

**Mr. Sopko:** We did. We did. The military in particular said

SIGAR - 7/29/21

they circulated it and [inaudible]. But we haven't heard back about any lobbying on their part with the Congress for this or anything else. But we did get some positive response, especially from CENTCOM.

**DWG:** So it's still TBD whether you're going to be able to do your work, is the bottom line.

**Mr. Sopko:** Well, we've had access in the past, and as far as I know we still have that access. It's kind of clunky now because we had access through other agencies to these records. Having direct access would be very, very useful for us and we'd avoid multiple steps. So that's something we're working on right now.

**Moderator:** Dmitry Kirsanov, TASS.

**DWG:** I wanted to ask this pretty narrow question about Russian made MI-17s. I wanted to know what the plans are for maintaining and sustaining that equipment? As far as I understand your report says that FY22 is going to be the last year that DoD will seek sustainment funding for the MI-17s. So I was just hoping you might expand on that a bit, sir.

**Mr. Sopko:** I really don't have any additional information on that. The only information I would add to that is we have identified in prior reports that the Afghan Air Force was almost to 90-97 percent sustainability of the former Soviet helicopters before we decided - not we being SIGAR - but the U.S. government decided to switch over to the UH-60 and otherwise. And we cite that as that was a problem that we've identified on sustainability. But I don't know anything more, Dmitry, as to paying for sustaining any of those helicopters.

**DWG:** Do you know a dollar figure on that, an amount of money that DoD or any other agencies of the U.S. government plan to spend on that? In interaction with the Russians to maintain the equipment.

**Mr. Sopko:** I don't know anything about the Russian's assisting to maintain the equipment. I don't have the exact numbers. If you want to, you can contact our office and we can see if we can find those. But at some point I think we probably identified the exact amount of money on that. I'm assuming. But I don't have that figure with me now.

**Moderator:** Nick Schifrin of PBS News Hour.

**DWG:** I'm going to put you on the spot here and ask you some more existential questions.

The first one is, you referenced it a little bit, and given Dmitry's question, I think it teams well with it. The U.S., as you pointed out created an Afghan Air Force in the vision of the United States rather than a more sustainable version that might have used more Russian birds and understood a little bit more about Afghan's capacities and desires. Was that a mistake?

**Mr. Sopko:** From a purely practical point of view, and I don't want to sound like I'm dodging the question. I don't do policy. And a decision made to go with U.S. helicopters instead of continuing with the Soviet was based upon multiple reasons which go beyond my pay grade. There were political reasons, there were other reasons, and that's a decision they made.

Our job as an IG is to come in and say [inaudible] have a sustainable Afghan Air Force by doing this you pushed back that sustainability goal. And that's all we've said.

There may have been other more important reasons for Congress and the prior administration to do that, so I can't say it's a mistake. I think to say from a purely sustainability point of view, that decision pushed back the sustainability of the [Afghan Air Force].

**DWG:** And an even more existential question that you definitely won't want to answer about predicting the future. As you said, it's a fool's errand. But I've got to ask. You've been watching this space for a long time, you care deeply about Afghanistan. Do you have faith that the Afghan government can survive?

**Mr. Sopko:** I can answer that. Yes, I do. If you study Afghanistan they do have a way of surviving. It's going to be difficult and they have to come up with a strategy and come up with a coordinated strategy that uses all of their resources and they have to do it quickly. And it has to be articulated. And the Afghan military and the Afghan people have to know what the strategy is, which up to now the information space has been controlled by the Taliban. It's really kind of surprising because we helped the Afghan government and people build a really good media out there, media sector, and it doesn't seem to be

SIGAR - 7/29/21

used by the Afghan government at all so it's kind of frustrating. But yes, they can do it. But they have to do it quickly, and I think they have to do it logically and I'm hoping for the best.

The last chapter has not been written. And the thing to keep in mind is, we've been involved in many conflicts from our own civil war to World War II, World War I, Korea, where the first year or two we were losing and we were losing badly. I don't think the Union Army won anything for the first two years. In Korea and elsewhere, we were on the losing end. But we turned it around. And I hope and I pray that the Afghan government can turn it around.

**Moderator:** Jeff Seldin of VOA.

**DWG:** Two questions. The first one, a little bit of a bigger picture question. But is there some sort of big picture problem or systemic problem with the way the U.S. military generally just goes in and trains foreign forces that you've been able to see by what has happened in Afghanistan. We've heard other reports about how some of these units just wilt in the face of Taliban advances, and it brings to mind how Iraqi forces that at one point had been trained by the U.S. melted away when ISIS began advancing out of Syria into Iraq.

So is there something bigger going on here than perhaps just Afghanistan that has made it difficult for the U.S. to train sustainable foreign forces?

**Mr. Sopko:** That question is hard to answer. There's no simple answer. But you're onto something, and I'm not going to kick the can down the road but I'm going to say when our report comes out on what we should have learned in another two weeks, three weeks, I think we will detail the answer to that question better than I'm doing right now.

But one thing to keep in mind is, again there's multiple reasons. One was, we have a tendency of building other governments and other militaries in our image and likeness. I think that's normal.

So we came into Afghanistan thinking that we would create a strong central government and that's where our focus would be, and that was a mistake. If you read some of the lessons learned reports done by USAID for the 20 or 30 years before, they said

that was a mistake. And if you talk to any experts on Afghanistan, they would have said it was a mistake. The problem is, we didn't listen to anybody. So that was our first problem.

Then the military goes in and with short tours of duty, and the requirement that these officers of ours have to show success in their short terms of duty, you look for short successes. And one of them is not building an infrastructure and building a capability of providing boots, bullets and food and pay in the long term. So we emphasize, again, it goes back to these short timelines we set. And we basically forced our generals, forced our military, force our ambassadors, forced the USAID to try to show success in a short timeline which they themselves knew were never going to work. And that's the big problem.

So you've focused on, the military in particular, focused on during the surge with bringing troops in, but we knew we were leaving. So we had to try to turn things around real quickly. So what was the answer? Well, pour in a lot more money. And pouring a lot more money just created more waste and created more corruption which alienated the Afghan people. So we basically hurt ourselves by doing that.

And I can't over-emphasize too much the short timelines which have no basis in reality except the political reality of the appropriations cycle or whatever is popular at the moment, is dooming us to failure in countries like Afghanistan.

Now I don't know if that answers your question but that's one of the problems. And by focusing on the immediate security situation and not the long term sustainability and not logistics.

Let me just remind you, Napoleon said during the 1800s that an army moves on its stomach. And that is so true. It hasn't changed since the 1800s. And if you expect the Afghan military to win the hearts and the minds of the Afghan people, you have to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan military. So if you don't pay them, you don't feed them, you don't support them, you don't give benefits to widows and orphans on a regular basis, you don't have Medevac capabilities, then the average Afghan soldier is saying what the heck am I dying for? And that's another problem. We didn't focus on logistics. And every time we had a problem with the Afghan military we changed the goal posts on how we were rating them.

SIGAR - 7/29/21

We got chapter and verse on that. Four times I think we went in and looked at the assessment tools that the U.S. government was using, the military, and every time we went in the U.S. military changed the goal posts and made it easier to show success.

And then finally, when they couldn't even do that, they classified the assessment tool. So they knew how bad the Afghan military was, and if you had a clearance you could find out, but the average American, the average taxpayer, the average congressman, the average person working in the embassy wouldn't know how bad it was. And we were paying for it. So that is a horrible thing.

Again, changing the goal post. I remember General Nicholson saying the new standard for success is how much the population, the Afghan population, is controlled by the Afghan government. And he set as the goal 80 percent. Eighty percent. And then when it looked like we were going down, not going to make the 80 percent by the end of his tour, the goal changed. The new goal was peace.

So you tell me how train, advise and assist missions and whether the soldiers were getting paid [on] whether they could shoot straight is linked to the ultimate goal of peace. I've referred to two words that can describe Afghanistan. One is this hubris, that we can somehow take a country that was desolate in 2001 and turn it into little Norway in that timeframe.

The other thing is mendacity. We over-exaggerated, our generals did, our ambassadors did, all of our officials did to Congress and the American people, about we're just turning the corner. We're about ready to turn the corner. We can give you chapter and verse about how many of our generals talked about just about ready to win. Well we turned the corner so much, we did 360 degrees. We were like a top. That is the problem with Afghanistan. And that unfortunately is a problem not just with Afghanistan. I think you find it in other countries where we've gone in. We have to be honest. We have to be honest with ourselves and we have to be honest with the American people who pay for this. Not only in money but also in blood and treasure.

I'm sorry, but that is - it's a complicated issue, but all of them get together and this is why we got what we got right now.

**Moderator:** That was a very powerful answer, Mr. Sopko. Thank

SIGAR - 7/29/21

you so much.

Christopher Woody of Business Insider.

**DWG:** Regarding counternarcotics. Back in December 2019 you said the effort in Afghanistan has just been a total failure. I wanted to ask if that assessment held now, and if so, to what do you attribute that failure?

**Mr. Sopko:** Well we did a whole lessons learned report on it which probably can better answer it. But the failure is we basically kicked the can down the road. And it is a total failure. I think we report that the UN now says that this has been the third largest production of narcotics, a 37 percent increase in narcotics production.

There are a number of things we did in Afghanistan which were too difficult, so we just kicked the can. Narcotics, that was one. We just basically kicked the can down, just gave up.

Protecting our fuel. Remember, the CSTCA commander said over 50 percent of the fuel is stolen. We kicked the can down on that.

I think doing monitoring and evaluation, we kicked the can down. We gave up on assessing the Afghan military. So that's one of those issues that we just kicked the can down.

Now the problem is, drugs in Afghanistan are not just a health issue or a crime issue, they're a national security issue because they fund the terrorists. They also fund the corruption inside the government.

**Moderator:** Paul Shinkman has asked to ask another follow-up.

**DWG:** This is sort of a variation on a question that's already been asked but I think it's an important one.

The administration and the White House, depending on other agencies that have spoken publicly about the planned withdrawal seems to have been jumping back and forth between the idea that Afghanistan is now ready to stand up on its own and it is time for it to do so. And the idea that the U.S. has lost the will to continue its mission in Afghanistan after 20 years and no matter what the circumstance, it's time for the Afghans to stand up on their own.

Do you feel like either of those is a more accurate depiction of what's happening on the ground? I suppose simply, do you think that the Afghan government, military is, independent of what the U.S. might be doing, has the capability right now to be able to succeed?

**Mr. Sopko:** Yes, I do. I think the Afghan military can succeed. It is not all bleak. But they can't continue with the status quo. If they do, military experts and counterinsurgency experts who are far wiser than me, tell me they're going to lose. So it's important for them to change their behavior. But they can do it. We have given them the hardware, we are funding them.

Remember, go back to - our best example is what happened when the Soviets left. When the Soviets left, it was three years before the Najibullah government collapsed. So the troops moved out. Three years later Najibullah's government collapses. But it was only three months between when President Yeltsin ended funding from the Russian government at that time until the collapse of Najibullah.

So the biggest support we can give the Afghans is financial support. Again, that's the best example we have and it's right in Afghanistan history, so I think they can.

**Moderator:** One final follow-up from Jeff Seldin before we turn the floor back over to you, Mr. Sopko.

**DWG:** I'm wondering in the course of doing these reports if you noticed over time concerns about other militaries or other presences like perhaps Russian, Iranian, or other military forces into Afghanistan and with anything that you did see, what does it say about what might happen, not that predictions are easy, but what some of the potential stumbling blocks or obstacles could be going forward with U.S. troops, combat troops essentially, no longer in the country?

**Mr. Sopko:** Over the last nine years we've seen other people in Afghanistan, not a lot, but they are there. I go back to somebody else who's wiser than me who said nobody wants to be in Afghanistan, but nobody wants anybody else in Afghanistan. So you may see people doing some kind of intrusions, whether clandestine usually or not, but they don't want to be there. I don't think anybody does. But they don't want anybody else from

SIGAR - 7/29/21

the surrounding countries to be there either. That's the only way I can answer that question.

**Moderator:** This has been a really intellectually challenging and dynamic conversation. On a personal note, given the power of the chair, I want to thank you for making the point about funding after the Soviet withdrawal. I was based in Moscow. I covered the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. It's a point that few remember, is that the Gorbachev administration did continue funding. It was only after the collapse of communism that George Bush and Helmut Kohl pressured Yeltsin to cut off all the final funding to the Afghan government. And as you said, within three months, Najibullah was hanging from a lamp post.

So the power of money should not be forgotten as we look to Afghanistan's future.

With that, sir, thank you for your conversation. Thank you for your service. And if you have any final comments to close out this discussion, we welcome them.

**Mr. Sopko:** My final comment is thank you very much for this opportunity. It's been two years since I've done it. I wish I had done it before or since then.

The only thing I would end is, it's not over. As long as the money is funding you need to do oversight. Otherwise it will be wasted and it will actually harm us in the long run. So that's one thing we've learned and I would encourage everyone to read our lessons learned reports and particularly the one coming out next month. It answers a lot better than I have today, but in more detail, issues about narcotics; about corruption; about the train, advise and assist mission; about the elections and the failures with that; in all of these areas. And they're all things that we can learn from.

And let me end with another thing. That is what you see in Afghanistan is evidence of problems of our own government. We have a lousy HR system, -- human resources. We have a lousy procurement system in place. And we have a lousy way of hiring people, getting the best people for the job and firing the bad people. And we also have a lousy way of collecting lessons or observations from major actions like we did in Afghanistan.

Remember, Afghanistan was the largest redevelopment program ever

SIGAR - 7/29/21

in the history of the United States. Bigger than rebuilding Europe with the Marshal Plan after World War II.

But the last thing, what we have identified in Afghanistan is relevant in other places of the world. And don't believe what you're told by the generals or the ambassadors or people in the administration saying we're never going to do this again. That's exactly what we said after Vietnam. We're never going to do this again. Lo and behold, we did Iraq. And we did Afghanistan. We will do this again and we really need to think and learn from the 20 years in Afghanistan.

That's all.

**Moderator:** Once again, Mr. Sopko, thank you for your time, thank you for your service to our nation. To all the members of the Defense Writers Group who joined us, on behalf the Project for Media and National Security, thank you for being here today.

**Mr. Sopko:** Thank you. Bye now.

# # # #