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**Defense Writers Group**  
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**George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs**

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**Moderator:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this session of the Defense Writers Group with John F. Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. He is truly someone who needs no introduction. Since I'm no longer a journalist and can express opinions for the first time in 40 years, I think that Mr. Sopko's work at SIGAR is some of the most important work that the US government is doing right now to safeguard American money and American lives.

As always, this session is on the record, but there is no rebroadcast of audio or video. I'll ask the first question, and then about half a dozen of you have emailed in advance to get on the list, but we'll have time, I'm sure, for just about everybody.

Mr. Sopko, welcome and thank you for your time, sir.

**Mr. Sopko:** It's a pleasure to be here, and a pleasure to meet you all.

**DWG:** Just a little bit of a plug, in my new book that comes out in May I write about Mr. Sopko's work and I describe him as a modern Cassandra from ancient Greek mythology, the prophetess who was always right but was cursed with nobody listening. That's really what you have become, sir.

Your newest report is a great read. And I just wanted to ask you, after all these years of looking at Afghanistan spending, tracking waste and fraud, is there anything at even this stage in this report that surprised you?

**Mr. Sopko:** First of all, thanks for inviting me to meet with all the journalists. I've never been called a Cassandra before I've been called worse.

There was a companion report on why the Afghan government collapsed so they almost have to be read together.

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I think the biggest surprise to me, even though I had worked with Ghani for 10 years, and I used to meet him every time I went to Afghanistan. He was an interesting person to talk to or mainly listen to when I met with him. I think the thing that surprised me the most was how he was in total denial the last 18 months and almost in a different universe than the reality around him. We lay it out in the report by a number of Afghan officials saying what was going on, but he was planning or having meetings dealing with urban renewal in Afghanistan while the Taliban were taking districts. He was totally -- it was kind of a shock if you read the report about how out of touch with reality. I think they finally came up with a strategy like a week or so -- it's in the report -- before the collapse. I think that's what surprised me the most.

I knew he didn't understand security and I knew he was sort of a teacher at heart. He liked to talk. You had to listen. But that's the thing I think that surprised me the most.

The other thing that surprised me is if you actually read these two reports together is how predictable the outcome was. I'm not tooting our own horn. There were a number of people who laid out the problems that were sort of baked into our 20 years there. So we had problems -- the State Department made mistakes, AID made mistakes, DoD made mistakes. We all did. But once you stood back and you looked at what we were saying, what the DoD/IG was saying, what experts were saying is, you almost knew that once we decided to sign the withdrawal agreement or peace agreement, however you want to phrase it, the dye was cast. It was only a matter of time before Afghanistan collapsed, the government we had supported.

So that was the other surprise looking back and saying my God, it just happened so one after the other, you knew what was going to happen.

**Moderator:** First is Tony Bertuca of Inside Defense.

**DWG:** Thank you for being with us.

Obviously two very different places -- Afghanistan and Ukraine. But you mentioned already that you see money moving very quickly out the door for Ukraine. What are some of the lessons learned that you think can be translated to oversight to Ukraine. Anything specific that you think ought to be pursued?

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**Mr. Sopko:** Let me first of all make a caveat, and that is, some people have said are you looking for the job? No, I'm not. I have a job already. It's just somebody, and I can't remember if it was a journalist or somebody on the Hill once asked me, John, you've been doing this for years. Are there any lessons learned from Afghanistan? I said yes, I think there are. But obviously -- a caveat -- Afghanistan is not Ukraine. Ukraine is not Afghanistan. Two different countries, two different cultures, and a lot of difference there.

But how we do assistance, by we I mean the United States and our Western allies, and how we do development in a war zone, I don't think that's changed too much. These reports are basically not looking as much at Afghanistan as they are looking at how the government does business in reconstructing or assisting a country in a war zone.

So the lesson -- so it's a caveat. That's what we look at.

First of all, one of the lessons is when you spend a lot of money in one country you're going to have wastage, so get your oversight in place early. We didn't do that in Afghanistan. Our office wasn't created until I think eight year into it. Billions had been spent.

The second thing is, going along with that and I think I mentioned it, when you spend that much money that fast in a country there's going to be wastage, there's going to be theft. And no matter how noble the cause you're going to have theft and problems like that.

The second thing is, and this is one reason why we did, and I hope you all take a look, we did these lessons learned programs. We have 12 of them. Were the only IG who has done that as a dedicated lessons learned staff. And the reason we created that is because General Allen who was our Supreme Commander and Ryan Crocker and a number of experts took me aside, actually on a breakfast. I remember meeting with General Allen and him saying that the future of dealing with a country like Afghanistan, the future for the US national security issues, it's going to be the similar. You're going to have multiple US government agencies working in a country and you're going to have multiple international agencies. So you're going to have not only a whole of government approach, you're going to have a whole of

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governments approach.

So you'll have, I think in Ukraine now there's 40-some countries assisting Ukraine. I think there's 17 different US government agencies. I think the DoD and State and AID/IG report talks about that. You've got the UN, you've got the World Bank, you've got the EU, you've got the International Development Bank. You've got all these operations. Somebody's got to manage it. Somebody's got to be able to coordinate. That was a big problem, there was a lack of coordination in Afghanistan. I think we have to watch that that doesn't become a problem in Ukraine.

You need somebody in charge. We did not have somebody in charge despite having a Supreme Commander and despite having the embassy. Nobody really was in charge of the work in Afghanistan. So we're saying make certain somebody or some entity is in charge of this.

The other lesson -- and I can go on. I mean they're all in the report. Understand where you're working. We came into Afghanistan assuming it was Iraq. I remember talking to a number of AID officials saying oh yeah, we did this in Iraq. Great success. We'll do it in Afghanistan. Iraq and Afghanistan were not the same. You didn't understand that.

I hope as we approach Ukraine and we do that, we understand how the country works and how it's different than Afghanistan, Iraq or wherever, and you understand, and you also listen to the host government.

Early on we realized that we were building things in Afghanistan that the Afghans didn't need, didn't want, didn't even know they were getting, and couldn't sustain. We have to make certain we go into Ukraine and listen to the Ukrainians on what they need, what they want, what they can sustain. Because the worst thing is after we leave, after the Western countries leave, are we going to leave a whole bunch of broken toys for the Ukrainians to try to work with?

Those are just a number of them.

**DWG:** You mentioned having a central place or person in charge.

**Mr. Sopko:** Yes.

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**DWG:** Do you believe we should have a Special Inspector General for Ukraine?

**Mr. Sopko:** My personal opinion, and again, I was asked this by somebody on the Hill or a reporter, my personal opinion, SIGAR has not officially said anything. It's not our job to do it. But my personal opinion, I've been working with IG since 1978 when it was created. I was in the Department of Justice at that time. I worked for over 20 years on the Hill with numerous IGs, I've spent 10 years as a Special IG. I think the Special IG model is perfect for a situation like Ukraine. One country in a conflict zone focusing on that, a temporary agency that will eventually go out of existence just like we're going out of existence right now. I think that's a good approach because you're focused.

And the nice thing is, and this is the difference between Special IGs and regular IGs. And it's not the regular IGs' fault, God bless State, AID and DoD or any of the other 17 IGs that will be working there is, they're stovepiped by definition. And I don't know who was the designer of the Special IGs when they were created, but they gave us the ability to look at the whole of governments.

When I was in Afghanistan in that report I could look at money spent by any US government agency in Afghanistan on reconstruction. My only limitation was it was Afghanistan, it was only reconstruction.

So I'm able to see how they all work together. I'm able to follow the money. I actually was able to follow the money into the World Bank and to the UN to see how well they did the job. So I think Special IGs bring that whole of government capability that the normal IGs are just limited by because of their own statutes. State looks just at State; AID just looks at AID; HHS looks at HHS; et cetera. That's just the way it's set up.

**Moderator:** Next is Meghann Myers of Military Times.

**DWG:** I wanted to ask about the Train, Advise, Assist mission. In the report you talk about how you had sort of ad hoc headquarters elements rotating quickly in and out of Afghanistan, was not effective. At which point did it become clear that that wasn't effective? And our US military strategy

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to sort of make the Afghan Army in our own image, did that fall apart because we were just not there long enough to really see that through? Or was that from the beginning sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy that they weren't going to be able to operate the same way that we do?

**Mr. Sopko:** A little bit of both. I don't mean to dodge you on that.

Early on, we treated Afghanistan as, our strategy changed. It was going to be a very light military operation there and then that changed to a more robust military that we were trying to train, advise and assist.

The underlying problem was the timelines we put on that. Almost every President -- the 20 years cover Bush, Obama, Trump, and then Biden. If you really look at the statements and the views of all those presidents and all those administrations, and again, this isn't political. This is every administration. Nobody wanted to be in Afghanistan and nobody wanted to stay.

That set up, again, almost a failure because you've sent generals over there or ambassadors or AID people over there and say look, we're not going to be there for that long, so let's show success and get out.

What happened is, we started to substitute. You're focusing mainly on the military which makes sense, you're all defense reporters. But this equally applies to the development side of the house. But we went in there, and knowing that the Afghans couldn't be trained fast enough to provide security, we did the missions for them, and they just sort of sat under the trees while we went out.

Now this isn't to say not a lot of good Afghan soldiers did learn and died in the process of fighting. But we basically put our thumb on the scale to show success so we could get out.

This is another lessons learned for Ukraine, going back to that. Unrealistic timelines for success. Success should be judged -- and you hear this all the time, but look at Afghanistan. Success should be judged by what the reality was on the ground. Likewise, in Ukraine, it should not be determined by political decisions in Brussels, London or Washington. That's a problem.

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And the rotations of the troops. We jokingly called it the annual lobotomy. Every year if you went to the embassy 78 percent of the people changed over. And that's not just for us, it was for the Germans, the Brits, the Italians, everybody switched out. So you're an Afghan and now oh, you're the seventh person coming to teach me how to do small arms. You know? Or you're the seventh person who's telling me about weaponry. After a while you just get, it was donor fatigue dealing with the Afghans; the Afghans got donor fatigue too. Okay, so you're going to tell me stories about how I do policing because you watched a TV drama in the United States. I mean that was one of the things we found in the training.

I don't know if that answers the question, but it's a little bit of both. Bad timelines. Unrealistic timelines. Desire to get out. And us substituting for the Afghans.

**DWG:** 2018 the Army decided to professionalize this work and sent a brigade that had been trained essentially for this, over to Afghanistan. It's obviously late in the game, but is there any sense that professionalizing the security force assistance profession had any effect on making the Afghan Army more proficient?

**Mr. Sopko:** It did. Actually, that approach worked a little bit. The problem was, we never fulfilled the mandate. Those units weren't fully staffed and they didn't stay long enough. Then at some point because the security situation changed, we didn't put our advisors down at the lower levels. I think at the end, it could have been in 2018, maybe a little later. I can't remember. We pulled out of the lower levels and it was basically at, it wasn't the [CANDAC] -- so it did work.

Where it did work, in that example, and we've cited this in the past as a fantastic example. When we paired trainers and advisors with the Air Force, particularly it was out of the Air Force at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia, where the advisors actually rotated over every six months to Afghanistan, worked with the same pilots, the same mechanics, the same ground crews, and then came back again. And it was flawless. It was the best program there because it was continuous. Unfortunately, that ended after a while.

**Moderator:** Next id Doug Ware of Stars & Stripes.

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**DWG:** I was struck by the amount of equipment we left behind in Afghanistan -- \$7 billion worth of vehicles; 78 aircraft; 300,000 weapons. This seems like a lot of things to leave behind, particularly because of how long, I would think, that we planned to strategize to get out of there.

Did this surprise you? This amount of waste, what we left behind? And did any of the stuff include classified packages such as depleted uranium or anything else that we don't want to all into the Taliban's hands?

**Mr. Sopko:** I can't say it was classified because if it was classified I wouldn't be able to tell you. But some of the stuff was sophisticated. It wasn't just small arms.

Was I surprised? No. Because we had highlighted, and so did the DoD/IG in reports for a number of years that DoD had a horrible system in place to keep track of weapons and where they were and how they were maintained. So I wasn't surprised that when a decision was made, we're leaving and we're taking the contractors, that we'd be leaving a lot of equipment. The exact numbers obviously we didn't know, but I wasn't surprised by that.

It does cause some pause for concern, is that Afghanistan was always kind of known as the weapons bizarre for selling illegal weapons, and I assume it still is now. So there's going to be a lot of small arms floating around that region of the country and beyond it.

Some of these weapons include some sophisticated equipment.

**DWG:** Do you expect that the Taliban is going to be able to use some of this equipment against allies such as aircraft? Would they have any way to become trained to the point where you could use them effectively against allies and everything?

**Mr. Sopko:** That's a concern. I don't know. I really don't know our visibility on what's going on there, but we have seen and we have picked up intelligence that the Taliban are actually flying some of the helicopters and some of the planes. You can see their own photos I think when they did a celebration of the one-year anniversary, there was a number of our vehicles there, so you see that all the time. Whether they will be used against any of our allies in the region, I really don't know. I can't



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really predict that, but it's a concern. That's a lot of hardware, a lot of weaponry left.

**Moderator:** Haley Britzky of CNN.

**DWG:** Thank you so much for being here.

I wanted to follow up on the equipment left behind question. When I've talked to soldiers and Marines, even contractors who were there in those final days they mentioned a lot of commanders would say like hey, go make that unusable in your free time. So when we talk about this 1.2 billion does some of that include equipment that was kind of broken down before they left? Or do you think a substantial amount of that was destroyed before they left and the 7.2 is what's usable?

**Mr. Sopko:** I'd have to double check the actual verbiage we use. I think some of it is usable. I don't really know. Some of it was destroyed. A lot of it wasn't. I'd have to go back, I don't recall the actual verbiage in the report about that.

**DWG:** And as far as lessons learned, you mentioned there are lessons that can be learned from Afghanistan to take to Ukraine. Are you confident that they will be learned? That the officials at the top are actually going to learn those lessons?

**Mr. Sopko:** It's funny you ask that question because I've been asked to testify actually this week before the German Bundestag about lessons learned in Afghanistan. My Deputy was over in, I think it was, I'm trying to remember what country, he was attending a conference in which there were like six or seven European countries who were in attendance who are all doing studies. Each of these European countries are doing studies on lessons we can learn from Afghanistan. We have not been approached by DoD, State or AID at a high level, an official level, to talk about any of these lessons we've learned.

Now we have been invited to a number of the military schools and we have had private conversations with the worker bees in the Pentagon and the worker bees at State and AID. The reason I smile, I remember General John Allen saying we don't do a good job at learning lessons in the United States government. And if you look at what happened after Vietnam, we just didn't want to talk about it and we actually abolished and eliminated anything in our government that had anything to do with Vietnam because

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the official word was, we're never going to do it again. So maybe we're doing that right now in Afghanistan.

How many people want to talk about Afghanistan in the Pentagon? How many people want to talk about Afghanistan at State or AID? Not many.

This report with its companion report is the only official US government report that's public on the 20 years spent in Afghanistan. Now to me, I'm very glad that we were able to do this, but I'm an Inspector General. You would think the Department of Defense or the Department of State or USAID or the National Security Council would have come out with something official on the 20 years there. Where is the lessons learned coming?

I know that DoD, actually one of the excuses they had for not cooperating with us was we're working on this internal report. Well, how many years are we going to wait for that?

I think the American people and Congress have a right to know what happened. What worked, what didn't, so we don't do the same mistakes again.

I don't know if that answers your question. I'm not super optimistic that we are going to learn our lessons. Maybe I'm just a crotchety old guy, but I've been in Washington since 1982 and learning lessons is not in our DNA in the United States, unfortunately.

**Moderator:** A very wise field grade officer once said to me, Mr. Shanker, a lesson is not learned until it's incorporated in what we do every day.

**Mr. Sopko:** Right. So actually our report should have been called lessons observed because he's absolutely correct. So in the military, they are just observed until they go into doctrine. And that's correct. But that was too hard to explain in the title, you'd have to put an asterisk.

But we are the only Inspector General among the 70-some independent IGs in the United States that has a dedicated lessons learned team, and it produced these 12 reports. Almost every question you asked has been answered. And the topics for these reports, from corruption to training to elections, to all

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of that, are very helpful and they were all suggested to us by generals, by State Department, by diplomats, by AID officials as these are issues that need to be looked at. So it's a wealth of information. I'm happy my staff was able to do that.

I'm going to give this to you.

**Moderator:** Next is Jeff Seldin, Voice of America.

**DWG:** Thank you for doing this.

I'd like to get back to what we were talking about earlier, the lessons learned and the efforts by the US to build up the Afghan military. It said in the report that there was a disconnect between how long it would take to do that and how long it should have taken in reference to South Korea which took decades. The US was there for two decades, essentially. How much of it was a matter of not having enough time or not properly using the time? It was said that more time was needed. What should the expectations have been? How long does it take or should it take? Obviously in each situation there are differences, but in terms of political expectations, what should the expectation have been realistically to build a self-sustaining Afghan military?

**Mr. Sopko:** It wasn't so much the time. I mean we spent 20 years there. It was how well we used that time. If you do the comparison to Korea, we're still there. We actually in this report draw a little comparison because somebody asked us on the Hill to do that. We kept getting asked that question.

It was a different approach and a different strategy and a different plan in Korea. We never really had that long term strategy and plan to build a self-sufficient ANDSF -- Afghan National Security Forces -- in Afghanistan. We said we did. But what happened is that would change. And again, this goes back to the decision and the desire that we wanted to get out of Afghanistan. So instead of one 20-year plan, you've heard this before, we basically had 20 one-year plans which correlated, or 10 two-year plans, which that corresponded with the appropriation cycle. But the rotation cycle was a year. Somebody would come in whether he was a general or ambassador or AID official and basically said I'm going to have to show success because we're getting out of here. That was the problem. We didn't really use that 20 years we were in

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Afghanistan because we never really made the commitment.

Again, that's above my pay grade, whether we should have made that commitment or not, or whether we should even have gone into Afghanistan or not. That's not an IG's call. That's a policy decision made.

I can't tell you how long it would have taken to actually construct a viable Afghan military or an Afghan government. I don't know how long it would take. That's a hypothetical question.

There were problems with us ever succeeding in that. And I go back to one of your earlier questions. The problem was we didn't understand where we were. The culture, the politics of that country. We didn't take into consideration the negative results of the corruption that was going on and how that really sapped the support for the host government and the host military. We also didn't really take into consideration the dependence and lack of sustainability by making the Afghan military look and sound like the US military.

I was just shocked when we told the Afghans you're doing a good job with the Russian and Soviet weaponry, especially the helicopters. And you realize, the Afghan military was self-sufficient in maintaining the Soviet helicopters. They'd been doing it for 20 or 30 years. They knew these things backwards and forwards. We made a decision, now the decision did not reflect the reality on the ground. The decision was a political decision here. We are not going to buy or give money to the former Soviet Union or the Russian government for spare parts and all that. So we're going to give you US equipment. Great equipment. Black Hawks are great, fantastic equipment.

You know what that did to sustainability for the Afghans? That set them back 20 years. And we did the same thing with a lot of the equipment over there. We taught the Afghans how to fight.

Well, the Afghans knew how to fight. They used their strategy to fight with the Taliban for years. No, no, no. You're going to use US or Western designed equipment and Western tactics.

Now I don't know how long that set back -- we never did a study on that but it definitely set back the sustainability. So I think you look at the Black Hawk fiasco. I call it a fiasco,

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from my point of view. Remember, IGs don't do policy. I do process. You tell me, General, Ambassador, President, you want to have a self-sustained Afghan military and then you switch out the helicopters to American-made helicopters, I will tell you the answer is they're not going to meet the goals you've set. I let the policy-makers tell me what's going on. That's what every IG does. We don't say policy.

Okay, the policy is your goal is to have a self-sustained Afghan military. Okay. Right now they can sustain the Soviet equipment. Now you're requiring them to learn English, learn how to read English, and get used to these new airplanes and new whatever. Okay. So if you want self-sustained, I mean you can read in our report, we were saying it would be until 2030 before the Afghan military could stand on its own. I think for the Afghan Air Force it was 2026 or something. Assuming there wasn't an increase in warfighting.

Those are the facts. We told the administration.

So going back to Korea, there, I think we were going to be there for the long haul so we didn't mind giving them Western equipment, but we made a decision early on we were going to be there until the bitter end. But I can't tell you exactly, and I don't think my staff ever said well how long would it have taken. I can just tell you with the airplanes, the Soviet equipment. That's one of the shocks when I first went over there and sat down and talked to our Air Force guys who were doing the training. They were saying oh, yeah, these guys are self-sufficient. Well, on the Soviet stuff. It's the new stuff they aren't self-sufficient. And when we pulled those contractors out, I told my staff Afghanistan is doomed. Because when we pulled the contractors out it's like General Barno said, it's like just pulling out one of the cards in a house of cards. You knew it was going to collapse. Everyone, everyone from the Air Force on down said the Air Force is going to collapse in a matter of months because they can't maintain the equipment.

**DWG:** Did you ever get a sense, obviously a lot of change with the Doha Agreement, but prior to that agreement did you ever get the sense that any of this, changing anything for what they go [inaudible]. If the US had decided to stay just a little bit longer, that the result would have been different, or would it have been the same because of what you're seeing. It would have just been the same, just instead of right now, a couple of years

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from now.

**Mr. Sopko:** I really can't answer that. I don't think we ever did come up with that. There were a lot of problems baked in and that's a very good question. This is a question I get asked all the time, is assuming there was no Doha Agreement, would we have had the same outcome? Basically that's what you're asking.

I don't know. That's a hypothetical, it would be very interesting. But there were problems baked in from the beginning. If those were also addressed, maybe the Afghan government would have survived, but I don't know that answer. That's a very good question. I'm paraphrasing what you said, but I think that's what you're trying to get at.

Absent Doha, would the Afghan government have survived? I don't know. I don't know.

**DWG:** Did you get the sense that any of those other problems that were baked in were in any meaningful way starting to be addressed after all the reports that you've done and the other IGs have done, the lessons learned? Was there any dent being made? Or was DoD, was the State Department starting to take some of this into consideration and apply it anywhere?

**Mr. Sopko:** There were some improvements. We didn't even set conditions. The whole issue of conditionality. DoD and CSTCA, I think somebody asked about the Combined Security Training Command Afghanistan which is how we really spent the money over there. They had no conditions on the money that was being given to the Afghans until I think, I'm trying to remember the head of CSTCA who told me that, and that was because we were beating them up, saying you're not putting any conditions in any of this. Finally they put some conditions. But that wasn't until the end.

So we actually said, if you want the money, Afghan government, you have to do X, Y and Z. So it was starting to improve.

The whole issue of ghost soldiers and ghost police, we raised that issue ten years ago, almost as soon as I got on board we had heard about it. We kept complaining about DoD not having an effective personnel system. They started to implement that. So it was starting.

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As it later turned out, the system was not foolproof and I think in the report we talk about it. Sixty to 70 percent of the police and the military didn't exist, even though we were paying their salaries. So they had a way to get around the system.

There were some improvements. We did see some improvements by the Afghan government on setting and trying to fight corruption. But as we later found out, that was probably window dressing.

So to some extent there were improvements. The air wing was getting better, the Afghan air wing. The special forces was getting better. So there were improvements on that. But the question about morale and the question about leadership were not really improving. Morale was basically geared to getting a paycheck, and if they didn't get paid you lost the morale of a lot of these Afghan soldiers. So there were some improvements. I don't know if there were enough to keep the government empowered.

Again, this is like the house of cards. When you pulled one card you could see the next one going, or maybe dominos is the thing. When you pulled out the support for the Afghan government, the morale started to crater. When you pulled out the US air support, which we did post Doha, then the Afghan military lost its ability to really function well and they had to depend on the Afghan Air Force. When you pulled the contractors out, the Afghan Air Force was doomed.

So the US Air Force has pulled out, then the Afghan Air Force is just collapsing. I think we knew where it was going to end up.

**Moderator:** Nancy Youssef, Wall Street Journal.

**DWG:** I'd like to go back to something you said earlier about how European capitals were doing reviews and asking members of SIGAR to come and give their assessment. Based on those conversations, is it your sense that the Europeans are applying any of those discussions to the US relationship they have, they have with the US vis-à-vis Ukraine? Or do they see them as separate? Do you think there's any sort of signal that there's an erosion of [inaudible] working with the US now as partners because of Afghanistan?

**Mr. Sopko:** No, I can't really answer. We don't see that. They're asking for us to explain our reports. They haven't told

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us we're doing this because we want to get better through the next thing.

I think a lot of it is their people want to know what happened. Where did we go wrong? Where se went right? And that's basically what the Germans have told me. They want us to talk about the reports, sort of explain what we learned, but they haven't told me why.

**DWG:** And I want to go back to your opening statement where you talked about how [inaudible] almost didn't understand what was happening even when meeting with officials or [inaudible]. It occurred that the US officials were equally [inaudible]. They were saying Kabul [would] stand even though these other provinces had problems with them.

From where you sit, why was the US perception so off [inaudible] even in the weeks as we were starting to see an effective Taliban take down provincial capitals and take control of provinces?

**Mr. Sopko:** I don't know. You're basically asking me was there an intel failure and why there was on our side. I don't know. We didn't look at the US intel on this.

A lot of people in the government were saying it's just a matter of time. Just nobody could pick the date when it was going to collapse, so I know that. And a lot of public statements. I think there was testimony by a number of Pentagon officials saying it's only a matter of time. I don't know.

**Moderator:** All of the senior Cabinet levels -- Biden, all the senior advisors -- said we knew it probably couldn't stand. We were surprised by how fast it fell. Why didn't they understand -- when you described to Jeff how the Air Force left, the contractors left, it was done. You could have done that all across the board to each aspect of the security force.

**DWG:** Also, I'm not that smart, but you could see the provinces fall, and that there's a pattern to the Taliban approach. So when people kept saying but Kabul's different, logic didn't show that. So why were they holding onto this idea that it would be longer [inaudible]? That's what we're having a hard time understanding. Because I think there's potentially some applicability to how this administration [inaudible] approaches



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the current conflict.

**Mr. Sopko:** We would like to have answered that question but nobody in the government would talk to us.

**DWG:** Do you have a theory?

**Mr. Sopko:** You know, I think you have to look at the history of Afghanistan. There have been -- the central government in Afghanistan has always been weak out in the provinces. I could make this argument that if Kabul was protected and then eventually -- and you could protect Kabul if you had enough forces. Even some of the Afghan military said that they had enough air force, that if they had been told to do this, to pull it back to Kabul and bring the forces back to Kabul. If you had done that with Kabul and maybe with a couple of other major cities, you could have kept it going. It would not look like the old Afghan government. But there may have been a thought that you could do that.

What it turned out is, there was really no strategy even to do that. Ghani didn't even come up with it until like days before or a week before.

I'm just guessing. Maybe that was the thought that okay, Kabul and the Kabul district area will be protected. There are enough forces, enough Air Force and whatever.

The question I had to that was okay, that's good, but where's the food coming from? Where's the electricity coming from? And if you can't control -- so Kabul can't feed itself, it had to be fed. And the electricity, most of the electricity comes from another country anyway, or it comes from a few hydroelectric plants. So I never really thought that worked.

But historically if you go back -- you can go back centuries. It was always Kabul centric was the king, and his people, and then he would basically protect the roads going to some of the major cities and that was it. The rest of the country was controlled by local fiefdoms. Maybe that was the approach. But I'm guessing totally on this.

**DWG:** Can you help me understand more about what [inaudible] about why they didn't provide more fulsome answers? You did one, that they were doing their own internal investigations.

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And who's responsible for getting DoD to provide more information?

**Mr. Sopko:** Good question. When we as an Inspector General, all Inspectors General, we cannot force government agencies to talk to us. The law says they should, but I can't subpoena anybody in the US government. I can subpoena you. I can subpoena defense contractors. But I can't subpoena anybody in the government. It's the law. For every IG, all 70 of us.

So we ask, we remind them they have to respond because the statute says they have to respond, but if they don't, what I have to do and any IG, I then issue basically, I make a statement that I view their lack of response as unreasonable. That's the test. Unreasonable in my opinion. And I then notify the agencies that I've made that opinion, and by law they're supposed to give an answer to why they don't think it's unreasonable the withholding information. But then it has to go to Congress.

I have no enforcement capability. No IG has an enforcement capability against the US government. So then it's up to Congress.

We got a lot of support from Congress for this. They were outraged. And it was bipartisan support. And actually in the last omnibus spending bill there's language in there saying that Congress is watching or upset about this, they expect the agencies to respond. And we're supposed to report I think every 60 days or six months. I can't remember, anyway I think in the next couple of weeks we're supposed to go into the appropriators and tell them what the status of cooperation is. And State and AID and DoD are supposed to come in too, so we'll have an opportunity.

And just so you know, and I know my staff won't like me saying this. When we talk about the lack of cooperation by DoD, we got emails and we got memo traffic to support everything we said about their lack of cooperation. I know one nameless, faceless bureaucrat in the Pentagon said oh well, somebody came over once. No, no. We have the paperwork. We're happy to share it with the appropriators because that's the only way to enforce cooperation.

**DWG:** And if they find that they were unreasonable, then what?

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**Mr. Sopko:** Well, I leave it to Congress to decide what they do.

**DWG:** What are the options?

**Mr. Sopko:** They can put something in law. I worked for a guy named John Glenn, Sam Nunn, and also John Dingell. I don't know if you ever heard of Dingell-grams. But in the old days if Congress didn't like what somebody was doing the next thing you knew, somebody wasn't getting the appropriations they wanted. Or there was -- you know, there's ways for Congress to force the administration to do what it wants to do. I don't know that's going to happen. I hope it doesn't happen. I hope we can work things out with DoD.

We have worked out, to a great extent, any problems we had with USAID. And we still have some questions out there but at least we're working in that area, which I see improvement. And again, it's because Congress is interested in the work we're doing.

**Moderator:** Dmitry Kirsanov of TASS.

**DWG:** Good morning. Thank you so much for doing this.

I wanted to get back for a second to DoD's oversight system of how they see the weapons distribution, if I may use that phrase. And I hope I'm not distorting what you said. I think you said, you called their system horrible.

**Mr. Sopko:** In Afghanistan it was.

**DWG:** In Afghanistan.

Were you strictly referring to Afghanistan or in general? And I'm asking because I also want to know if they are doing anything differently with regards to Ukraine. If they're trying to actually make sure this huge amount of equipment doesn't end up somewhere else.

**Mr. Sopko:** I can only really talk about Afghanistan because that's what I do. That's what I looked at.

In Afghanistan it was a horrible system set up. And there are a number of reports by us, by DoD/IG that the system didn't work. They didn't know where the weapons were and whatever happened at

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the end. I can't really speak to Ukraine because I don't do Ukraine. I'm just saying this is a lesson to look at.

Again, our lessons learned are like red lights or flashing yellow lights. You as a policy-maker should know what happened there and see if it's going to be a problem in Ukraine. That's all we're saying. Let's learn from the 20 years we spent in Afghanistan and see if it's something to look into. I can't really tell you about what's going on in Ukraine.

**DWG:** And if we can go back to something you said at the very top. You referred to "total denial" on behalf of President Ghani. Were you speaking about his total denial of the events on the ground or something else?

**Mr. Sopko:** The events on the ground. It seemed like he was in an alternate reality. Holding national procurement meetings, and I have attended a number of those things, and they went on for hours. And basically President Ghani had to approve every government contract over I think \$100,000. Just think about that. Every contract.

So these guys would traipse in and make a presentation, and it was really micromanagement. So he was holding these National Procurement Council meeting while the Taliban was taking over towns. People are saying hold it, isn't there a better use of your time than doing something like that?

I knew he was a micromanager. But this is really micromanagement to an extreme. We talk about based upon what the Afghans told us, that there were like a triumvirate of three people who basically ran the Afghan government -- Ghani, Mohib who was his National Security Advisor, and I can't remember the third person's name. It's in the report. Who was the head of the presidential palace. The irony is, none of them had any background in security. None of them had served in the military. And what these generals told us is none of them knew what was going on.

They didn't even realize -- this is how clueless they were. They didn't realize, and I think it may have been Mohib who told us this, they didn't realize until like a month before the collapse that the Afghan government was incapable of actually supplying their troops with weapons and equipment. That was the irony.

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The Afghans had the weapons, had the food, had the fuel to support all of their troops around the country. They just had no capability of getting it there. It's called logistics. Go back to what Napoleon said. An Army travels on its stomach. You can have 300,000 Afghan soldiers but if they're not paid, if they're not fed, if they're not given weapons, if they're not taken off the battlefield when they're injured, if they're not taken off the battlefield when they're killed, you don't have an army. That's what basically the Afghans discovered, this triumvirate like within months of the collapse. Which is really -- that's the question you asked me, what was I surprised about. I was surprised when we interviewed, and I think it was Mohib. I may be wrong on it. It's in there. They didn't know that they had no capability.

**Moderator:** Mr. Sopko, this has again been --

**Mr. Sopko:** That means they didn't read our reports.

**Moderator:** Right. [Laughter]. Cassandra sitting to my right.

Thank you again for a thoughtful and thought-provoking conversation. Really worrisome, and again, I hope these lessons are not only observed but incorporated.

In the last minute or two, any closing comments from you?

**Mr. Sopko:** No, other than thank you for still being interested in Afghanistan. It's not the forgotten war. We do need to learn some lessons because we are going to do this again, we may be doing it right now, but we will do this again. Do not believe anyone who tells you we're not going to do it again. I think to some extent some people may say we're doing it right now in Ukraine. I'm not saying that's a wrong thing to do, right thing, I don't do policy. I'm just saying if you do do it, let's try to do it better.

That's it.

**Moderator:** Thank you. Thanks to all the reporters who came, thanks to your staff for support, Mr. Sopko thank you for everything.

**Mr. Sopko:** Thank you very much, and thank you for the

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breakfast.

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