Learning the Lessons of War: Keeping SIGAR Alive

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The United States sometimes seems grimly determined to not learn the lessons of war. It took years to develop an honest assessment of the failures from the strategic bombing effort in World War II. The U.S. eventually produced a good official U.S. Army history of the War in Vietnam, but it had already classified a great deal of critical material and internal analysis, much of which has never surfaced. The Department of Defense (DoD) rushed to send a report to Congress on the conduct of the First Gulf War in 1991, only to have the Air Force and other services revise the report years later, revealing that many highly praised efforts were far less effective than that report stated.

In the case of what now has to be called the first Iraq War – 2003-2011, the U.S. rushed to end the role of the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction (SIGIR). Rather than keep SIGIR alive after the war to have it carry out a full and independent analysis of the lessons of previous years, SIGIR closed in 2013 – long before it was clear that the supposed end of the war was only a pause that led to a second conflict against ISIS, and long before the grim lessons that emerged about the real effectiveness of the military and civil efforts from 2003-2011 were clear.

SIGIR never had the opportunity to fully report on even the first phase of the lessons of the Iraq War. Its mission was restricted to the point where it could never cover many aspects of the fighting, while its short, quick draft of final lessons and its regular reports are hard to access. The official website’s server (SIGIR.mil) is shut, and the Federal Register site does not have the Lessons Learned Report. One has to go to the “CyberCemetary” of the University of North Texas to find one collection of SIGIR material (https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc270765/) and outside sources like the digital library of the Naval Postgraduate School to find its final report.

Limiting SIGAR’s Coverage at a Critical Point in the War

The U.S. now risks repeating this experience in spite of the fact that any serious analyst who has worked on the lessons of war realizes that it can take a minimum of three to five years to gather the data and develop an initial understanding of a conflict’s outcome and the real lessons of a given conflict. Moreover, if the personnel involved have no practical experience with analyzing the conflict and do not realize what data need to be declassified once the war is over, much of the truth may never be known.

The Congress is now considering critical restrictions on the role of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in ways that can either cripple it or become a preface to ending its role long before it has properly completed its mission. Some draft legislation contains a provision that would limit SIGAR’s jurisdiction to only six funds: the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF), the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP), the NATO Trust Fund, the Economic Support Fund (ESF), the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds, and the Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities Fund (DOD CN). This is in contrast to an original statute which provides a comprehensive “whole of government” authority to look at any reconstruction program, regardless of which agency or which funding stream is responsible for paying for it.

If such legislation is passed, SIGAR would no longer be permitted to look at many aspects of the U.S., Afghan, and allied sides of the war. It will no longer be able to examine key subjects like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) counterterrorism funding; the Department of Justice
(DOJ) rule of law programming; international trust funds such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA); or any on-budget assistance once it’s handed over to the Government of Afghanistan. Moreover, if any of the funds changed their names or had their funding go through other mechanisms, SIGAR would be unable to examine that fund – whether it involved audits, investigations, and SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program.

There are practical examples of such changes. When the Iraqi Security Forces Fund (ISFF) shut down, everything transferred from the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funding in Iraq was transferred to the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) office at the Embassy in Baghdad – an effort that virtually ended most of the public reporting on the Iraq War that SIGIR had performed. If assistance to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) shifted to FMF (or FMS), SIGAR would not be able to audit, investigate, or use the data on most Afghan military activity for any of its lessons learned work.

The Critical Need for An Independent Voice

This, however, is only part of the story. SIGAR is the only organization that is truly independent and that has had extended access to both open source and classified data, as well as to U.S. and Afghan officials. It is the only body that has enough experience and continuity to fully report on the civil and military lessons of the war. It is also clear that any peace in Afghanistan will be far more fragile than the supposed “victory” in Iraq that was followed by the war with ISIS. Such a peace not only is highly uncertain but can turn into a major power struggle between the existing central government and another conflicting party.

Other official sources like the Resolute Support Command, USCENTCOM, the Lead Inspector General (LIG), and the staffs generating the Department of Defense 1225 report have provided a great deal of useful public information. However, such reporting has become steadily more limited. There is now almost no detailed unclassified reporting on the civil side of the war; or on the role of the State Department, USAID, and other civil departments and agencies. Rather than provide “whole of government” reporting, these sources provide “hole in government” coverage of a war where the civil side is just as important as the military side.

While some aspects of LIG reporting on the military side have improved, most other sources of official reporting on both the course of the fighting and on the quality and integrity of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) have become steadily less detailed and are sometimes “spun” to put a more favorable face on what is happening. Far too much data has become classified when a given trend in the war – or the quality of ANDSF and central government activity – becomes negative. SIGAR is the only source that really covers the trends in U.S. spending and the extent to which they have had massive sudden rises and falls, and where there has been no program continuity.

SIGAR is the only source of official reporting that has shown the independence to report on the effort to overclassify and conceal embarrassing failures in U.S. aid efforts, which has led to the analysis of failures and corruption in the Afghan central government and of the tendency to exaggerate the success of U.S. civil and military aid efforts – some of which SIGAR has shown have been major failures. It is critical that SIGAR continue to perform this role as long as the U.S. is in Afghanistan and during any period of transition from war to a lasting and stable peace.
It is also highly cost-effective – something that can scarcely be said of the Afghan War itself. There are many different ways to calculate the cost of the war, but most agree that its total cost over nearly two decades is approaching a trillion dollars. The annual cost of the one authoritative independent official voice on the war is less than $55 million, and SIGAR has already exposed enough misuse of U.S. spending to pay for itself.

**Learning the Lesson that We Need to Learn about the Real Lessons of War**

More broadly, the U.S. has entered an era of extraordinarily complex civil-military conflicts where its traditional military strengths have not been able to deal with the civil dimensions of such wars, or the emergence of steadily more sophisticated threats and uses of hybrid warfare. The last thing the U.S. needs to do as a result of our “longest war” is to make the shortest effort to learn from it. The U.S. government cannot afford to rely on other official reporting that has steadily overclassified the key data involved, which “spun” much of its reporting to be more favorable or support given policy positions. The U.S. also must not repeat the experience of losing access to classified data that should not remain classified after the war is ended and should often never have been classified in the first place.

Failing to fully fund SIGAR through the end of the war – and particularly through a time when so much data is over classified, when the Department of State (DoS) and USAID have almost ceased providing details on the cost and effectiveness of their efforts, and where far too much unofficial reporting on the cost of the war in blood and dollars is ideological or political – is the last thing that the Congress or the Administration should do.

SIGAR has missions that should last as long as the war, and it should be tasked to take several years afterwards to develop a full and unclassified final lessons report. Its key tasks should include both maintaining its “whole of government” reporting without any restraints on its coverage of both U.S. and Afghan efforts and reporting on the lessons it has learned from such analysis. SIGAR should continue to report on both the civil and military dimensions of the war – including the Department of Defense, the State Department, USAID, and allied civil and military efforts.

SIGAR should continue its recent focus on the challenges in the peace effort, U.S. funding cuts and withdrawals, the ability of the central government and ANDSF to survive, and the actual levels of challenge from threats like the Taliban and ISIS-K. It should continue to examine the issues in Afghan politics, governance, and economics that affect the course of the war and now the course of any peace settlement.

Examples of the lessons analysis and reporting that SIGAR can carry out before the war ends (if it does) include broader topics like Afghan elections, the monitoring and evaluation of contracts, the development of the Afghan National Police, and the long history of failures to develop a local police force – although SIGAR should also focus on narrow issues like Afghan fuel theft and corruption.

Other key lessons areas that can be addressed during the course of the war and refined at its end, include

- **Personnel**: The U.S. reliance on one-year rotations, constant turbulence in personnel, changes in tasking, and uncertain coordination with allies and the Afghan government and ANDSF need broad examination – along with the failures of the “Afghan hands”
program. This effort should explore how decisions on the staffing, tour durations, dealing with turnover, maintaining institutional knowledge, and other topics were made.

- **Classified versus unclassified reporting, transparency, and metrics:** The lessons from two decades of effort need to be examined and made clear, along with the need for transparency in order to break down the lack of full civil-military coverage, to prevent over-classification, and to limit the “spin” of reporting that exaggerates favorable results.

- **Budget Assistance to the Afghan government:** Examine the ways the U.S. provided on-budget assistance to the Afghan government, handled oversight challenges, used conditionality, and attempted to hold the Afghan government and contractors accountable; the impact of corruptions, and the failures of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and efforts to coordinate U.S. and allied cooperation.

- **Rule of Law and the impact of the justice systems and policing:** Build on prior SIGAR reports on corruption, policing, and the impact of the justice system to explore Afghan access to the justice system, U.S. support for rule of law, Afghan perceptions of the justice system including rural/urban differences and traditional vs. formal systems.

- **The role and effectiveness of the central government, provincial government, district governments, and various power brokers** on U.S. programs and the overall conduct of the war. Analyze the limits of the central government, the conduct of the Taliban, and the U.S. ability to influence and measure the real-world level of governance throughout the country.

- **Corruption and anti-corruption efforts:** Examine which anti-corruption efforts actually had an impact, the extent to which corruption could be detected and measured, and the extent to which corruption was encouraged by factors like inadequate pay, fiscal controls, local politics, and other causes.

- **Health care and health standards:** Examine the evolving levels of medical coverage and key problems like infant mortality, life expectancy, and malnutrition. Examine U.S. efforts to build Afghanistan’s health care sector, specifically looking at the extent to which outputs (such as building hospitals, buying medical supplies, and hiring physicians and nurses) actually led to verifiable outcomes (lower infant mortality or less disease).

- **Education:** Examine U.S. efforts to build Afghanistan’s education sector, specifically looking at the extent to which outputs (such as building schools, buying books, and training teachers) actually led to outcomes (higher literacy and graduation rates, reduction in violence, and increased job opportunities) in given segments of the population and actual employment.

- **Technical Assistance and Governance:** Explore the impact of U.S. support to the non-security-sector ministries to determine which efforts had the greatest impact on stabilization, the provision of services, and public perceptions of the Afghan government.

- **Local Governance:** Look specifically at the U.S. support to local government institutions to determine if more or less support should have been provided.

The most critical function SIGAR can now report, however, is to look beyond current issues and consider how best to learn the broader lessons of the conflict. SIGAR should now be formally
tasked with writing a capstone report on the war that synthesizes the findings, lessons, and recommendations of all of its previous reports and its experience over the years.

It should have the authority to examine all related classified material and seek the declassification of such material where useful. It should be allowed to suggest broader lessons from the war and to provide a high-level assessment of the overall reconstruction effort. This report should also incorporate prior work done on strategy and planning to determine to what extent high-level, overall strategy was considered as the U.S. engaged in the various sectors of reconstruction.

Nothing could be more wasteful, or likely to lead the U.S. to repeat the mistakes of the past, than to only focus on the need to learn the lessons of war once it has clearly ended and lost policy-level attention in the process. The time to set clear goals for learning from our longest war is now. One can only learn from history through a serious effort to actually examine the past, and it is hardly necessary to point out that there are many aspects of the history of the Afghan War that the U.S. should not repeat.

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