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Act Now to Save and Learn the Lessons of the Afghan War

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It will be all too easy to lurch from crisis to crisis in leading with the collapse of Afghanistan and its aftermath. It will be all the more easy to fail at preserving the data and institutions necessary to learn as much from that collapse as possible. The U.S. made this mistake in dealing with its first withdrawal from Iraq. It let the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) collapse, did not create any official independent body to replace SIGIR to learn from the war, let much of the official open source data disappear from the web, and never established a process for declassifying masses of key data that would have helped analysts and historians learn the right lessons with as much information as possible.

The U.S. made equally serious mistakes in learning from the first Gulf War. It rushed out a report to Congress called the [*Conduct of The Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*](#) that grossly exaggerated the level of success in using airpower, understated the problems in creating an effective coalition, did not address the serious intelligence and policy mistakes that led to premature conflict termination without the proper conditions, failed to address the legacy and relevant lessons of the Iran-Iraq War, and failed to examine the post-conflict costs of failing to have an effective plan for conflict termination. Some excellent studies have since been written by outside analysts, and separate efforts by bodies like the U.S. Air Force Studies and Analyses Agency (AFSAA) have corrected many of the mistakes in the first official report, but much of the data and facts have been lost.

The U.S. also largely failed to provide a timely analysis of the lessons of the Vietnam War, although outside historians and analysts have since written some excellent work, and the later volumes of the 33 volumes in the U.S. Army's official history of the Vietnam War did cover many key areas in depth. Jeffrey J. Clarke's *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* should have been required reading for every officer and official going to both Iraq and Afghanistan, although it clearly suffered from a lack of full access to sensitive data that never became public after the war.

The U.S. should not repeat these mistakes in the case of the Afghan War, and this time it maintains a body *capable* with all of the expertise, objectivity, and practical contacts it needs to do the job efficiently, handle sensitive and classified data securely, and take a "whole of government" approach that will ensure that there is a proper focus on both the civil and military lessons of the conflict.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has already addressed many of the lessons that should be learned from the war. It has experienced experts that have already worked in the field, and it has shown it can work well with both military personnel in the field and with think tanks in Washington. Equally important, it has demonstrated that it really is non-partisan in a Washington where partisanship is all too common and campaigning for the 2022 mid-term election has already begun.

Furthermore, SIGAR has focused on the costs of war in terms of money and casualties, not just policy and strategy in the broad sense. It has examined the problems in train and assist efforts for the Afghan military as well the problems in civil aid efforts and the impact of Afghan internal politics and corruption. It has already worked with classified data on the growth of Taliban forces

down to the local level and on the full impact of the shifts and cuts in U.S. and foreign military, civilian, and contractor personnel.

This is critical in handling the level of detail necessary to fully address the practical lessons from the war. Outside experts have already issued at least two important books on the war: Carter Malkasian's *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* and Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers*, and there are certain to be many more. Some of the most important lessons, however, will address individual areas of federal spending, the timing and reasons for shifts in military civilian projects and personnel, the details of the changing train and assist efforts, the need for managing the flow of aid and making it conditional, and a long list of other areas where SIGAR has already shown that a detailed analysis of lessons is necessary and where it often could not address the details because the Afghan government insisted that key data would not be made available.

Most importantly, SIGAR has also shown consistently that it has no partisan edge, no political or ideological biases, and no institutional biases or reluctance to discuss difficult decisions and bureaucratic failures. It is an organization which – unlike so many study groups and commissions – has proven its ability to be objective and deal with the uncertainty of so many aspects of complex warfighting decision-making.

To succeed, however, SIGAR's mandate has to be extended almost immediately, along with its authority to collect key data, keep experienced personnel, and have full access on an interagency level. Congress needs to change SIGAR's mandate, give it at least two more years to work through the lesson process, and avoid pressing it for instant answers in the many areas where data need to be verified and conflicting views need to be addressed.

Congress also needs to fully understand that the cost of learning the right lessons from this war will be negligible compared to the cost of failing to learn. Important as China and Russia may be, the U.S. will still face many more struggles against terrorism, irregular warfare, and insurgencies. It will still have to deal with a world where at least 20% of the countries are now fragile states, and where the U.S. must find the right path to a real "whole of government" approach and adequate contingency planning.