

Special Inspector General for



Afghanistan Reconstruction

STAFFING THE MISSION: LESSONS FROM THE U.S. RECONSTRUCTION OF AFGHANISTAN



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Staffing the Mission: Lessons from the U.S. Reconstruction of Afghanistan is the 13th lessons learned report issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The report examines how U.S. officials were unable to overcome critical deficiencies in U.S. military and civilian personnel practices during two decades in Afghanistan. In our consultations and interviews, this problem was identified by almost every person who worked in Afghanistan as one of the most critical issues that confronted our efforts there. It included: (1) a recurring inability to staff a demanding mission, (2) rapid turnover of the staff they did find, and (3) poor coordination between military and civilian organizations. There were often not enough staff to oversee the spending, and not enough who were qualified to do so. U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain. Every agency suffered from frequent staff turnover, draining institutional knowledge and leaving successors to make similar mistakes all over again.

In its effort to rebuild Afghanistan over 20 years, U.S. government agencies suffered from a chronic lack of institutional preparation that consistently prevented them from getting the right people into the right jobs at the right times. Throughout those two decades, there were many opportunities for the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the U.S. Department of Defense to build their own state-building institutions to meet the task. But politically driven timelines that hindered long-term thinking made it all but impossible to invest in our own institutions to effectively rebuild Afghanistan. Policymakers assumed they could effect change via sheer willpower, and imposed timelines or political pressures to rapidly complete a mission that was exceptionally difficult on any timeline. Perhaps the greatest strategic liability created by that short-term mentality was in the recruitment, training, coordination, and replacement of personnel who oversaw the country's reconstruction.

Lessons learned reports such as this one comply with SIGAR's legislative mandate to provide independent and objective leadership and recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness; prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse; and inform the Congress, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the administrator for USAID about reconstruction-related problems and the need for corrective action, not only in Afghanistan but anywhere the United States may seek to rebuild a conflict-affected country or region.

The Congress created SIGAR as an independent agency. Unlike most inspectors general, SIGAR is not housed inside any single agency. It is also the only inspector general focused solely on U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. While other inspectors general have jurisdiction over the programs and operations of their respective departments or agencies, SIGAR has jurisdiction over all programs and operations supported with U.S. reconstruction dollars, regardless of the agency involved. Because SIGAR has the authority to look across the entire reconstruction effort, it has been uniquely positioned to identify and address whole-of-government problems as well as lessons and solutions.

Our lessons learned reports synthesize not only the body of work and expertise of SIGAR, but also that of other oversight agencies, government entities, academic institutions, independent scholars, and current and former officials with on-the-ground experience. The reports document what the U.S. government sought to accomplish, assess what it achieved, and evaluate the degree to which these efforts helped the United States reach its reconstruction goals in Afghanistan. They also provide recommendations to address the challenges stakeholders face in ensuring efficient, effective, and sustainable reconstruction efforts in future contingency operations.

I want to express my deepest appreciation to the team members who produced this report. I thank the research team—Matt Rubin, senior analyst and lead researcher and David Young, project lead and deputy director of the Lessons Learned Program—as well as Nikolai Condee-Padunov, program manager; Tracy Content, editor; and Joseph Windrem, director of the Lessons Learned Program. In producing its reports, the program also uses the significant knowledge and experience found in SIGAR’s Audits, Investigations, and Research and Analysis directorates.

I am also grateful to Ambassador Ronald Neumann, the former ambassador to Afghanistan and the President of the American Academy of Diplomacy, for offering his critical insights on multiple occasions and serving as a peer reviewer for this report. But for his dogged insistence that this area was one of the most critical issues that confronted U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, this report would not have been initiated or finished before SIGAR’s conclusion of its mission.

I believe lessons learned reports such as this will be a key legacy of SIGAR. They are unique in the Inspector General community, and through these reports, we hope to reach a diverse audience in the legislative and executive branches, and at the strategic and programmatic levels, both in Washington and in the field. By leveraging our unique interagency mandate, we intend to do everything we can to make sure the lessons from the most ambitious reconstruction effort in U.S. history are identified, acknowledged, and—most importantly—remembered and applied in future reconstruction efforts elsewhere in the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John F. Sopko,

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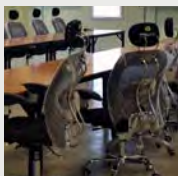
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between late 2001, when the Bonn Conference established a process for the construction of a new political order in Afghanistan, to August 2021, when that political order collapsed, thousands of U.S. civilian employees and roughly 832,000 American soldiers deployed to Afghanistan.¹ Many of these personnel participated in the \$145 billion effort to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society.²

While contractors substantially augmented U.S. government capacity and have played a critical role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, this report focuses on the U.S. government personnel who oversaw those contractors and made the most consequential decisions across the 20-year reconstruction mission. SIGAR—as well as the Commission on Wartime Contracting—have examined many issues surrounding the use of contractors over the years in Afghanistan.³ These include weaknesses in DOD’s process for ensuring U.S. government contracting funds were not provided to entities supporting the insurgency, a lack of performance data to effectively assess the contributions of contractors, and contractors with no relevant experience being hired to train the Afghan police.⁴ Still, as U.S. officials made the most consequential decisions of the U.S. reconstruction effort, including overseeing everything contractors did, this report prioritizes understanding and addressing personnel constraints among U.S. officials.

Throughout the reconstruction effort, U.S. officials were unable to overcome critical deficiencies in U.S. military and civilian personnel practices, including: (1) a recurring inability to staff a demanding mission, (2) rapid turnover of the staff they did find, and (3) poor coordination between military and civilian organizations.⁵ U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain. Every agency suffered from frequent staff turnover, draining institutional knowledge and leaving successors to make similar mistakes all over again.⁶

There were often not enough staff to oversee the spending, and not enough who were qualified to do so. As detailed in SIGAR’s 2021 report, *What We Need to Learn*, this was particularly true for civilian agencies, such as the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), both of which should have been leading the reconstruction effort, given their expertise in navigating complex political and development dynamics, but were unable to meaningfully perform these roles. This compelled the better-resourced U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to fill the void, creating tensions with civilian agencies that often had different ideas but fewer staff to offer.⁷

Carefully examining the personnel policies and procedures implemented in Afghanistan is crucial for extracting insights to benefit similar efforts in the future. However, their effectiveness or lack thereof should be assessed in relation to the tasks assigned to agency personnel. The swift downfall of the Afghan government also raises questions

about whether personnel problems, if solved, would have resulted in a different outcome. As detailed in SIGAR's 2021 report, *What We Need to Learn*, no number of thoughtful reforms at the technical level and not even the largest and best-qualified staff can compensate for a weak strategy or objectives that may be unachievable.⁸

SIGAR identified four key lessons on the use of U.S. personnel in Afghanistan's reconstruction, which together form the foundation of this report:

1. Recruitment: U.S. agencies struggled to recruit and hire qualified staff, resulting in significant shortages and compromises.

With any large-scale reconstruction effort, large numbers of people are needed to implement, monitor, and guide the various projects that make up the overall mission. In Afghanistan, the process of recruiting and hiring personnel throughout the reconstruction effort unfolded as a chronicle of challenges and setbacks, culminating in staff shortages that undermined the mission's effectiveness. From the outset, it became evident that the recruitment and hiring processes at State, USAID, and DOD hindered the timely deployment of qualified personnel to Afghanistan. Challenges ranged from an absence of available reserve personnel for swift deployment to a scarcity of individuals with the experience and qualifications to engage in reconstruction efforts within a war zone. There were no stress-tested mechanisms for identifying, recruiting, or hiring the necessary staff to oversee and implement a proper reconstruction mission. As new solutions were developed to address the staffing shortfall—including a civilian reserve corps and an Army brigade model designed from scratch to train host-nation security forces—they mostly proved unable to meet the challenge due to various political, technical, and bureaucratic constraints.

2. Training: DOD, State, and USAID training often fell short in preparing personnel for the specific tasks and challenges they encountered in Afghanistan.

Once personnel were hired or chosen to deploy, the process of properly training them posed another significant hurdle. Afghanistan's unique environment demanded specialized knowledge and skills. However, training programs for DOD, State, and USAID personnel were often lacking or insufficiently tailored to the specific challenges of the Afghan context. Personnel deployed to advise the Afghan National Police (ANP), for example, often complained that their predeployment training was not Afghanistan-specific and was focused on combat skills, rather than advising skills or specific topics, such as Afghanistan's criminal code or the logistics systems used by the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Many uniformed U.S. advisors deployed without any advisor training whatsoever.

This is not to say that proper training would have somehow guaranteed success. Given that the United States government eventually sought to reform wide-ranging aspects of Afghan society and to develop formal institutions informed by Western

norms, it is likely that some goals were unachievable to begin with. However, to the extent that policymakers conclude it is in the national interest to undertake similar nation-building efforts in the future, improvements to federal workforce training could mitigate some of the waste associated with reconstruction projects.

3. Coordination: Growing insecurity forced civilian agencies to depend on the military for various needs, creating a conflict as immediate military priorities clashed with the long-term political nature of reconstruction efforts.

The deployment of personnel was further complicated as insecurity worsened and civilian agencies increasingly relied on the military for security, food, housing, and transportation. Widespread insecurity also resulted in DOD assuming an outsized role in reconstruction activities, including tasks generally outside its expertise. Reconstruction is an inherently political undertaking, yet given the enormous size and resources of DOD, the military consistently determined priorities on the ground. Military deployments are typically finite, and their success is measured in terms of achieving specific military objectives within a certain timeframe; reconstruction and development are long-term endeavors that require consistent effort over many years. By relying on the military, the United States was bound by the constraints of military deployments, resulting in rushed and incomplete projects that lacked long-term vision and sustainability.

4. Replacement: Brief assignments and weak handovers for both military and civilian personnel eroded institutional memory and programmatic continuity.

Short tours of duty, typically lasting less than a year for both civilian and military positions, limited the ability of staff to build a nuanced understanding of their role, their environment, and the Afghans they worked with. By the time they found their bearings and built important relationships, they began preparing to depart. With personnel taking critical information with them as they rotated out, newly arriving staff made the same mistakes as their predecessors.

Even though they were harmful to the reconstruction effort, short-term assignments may have been unavoidable. U.S. officials created arbitrary timelines for the complex task of transforming Afghan institutions, relationships among its powerbrokers, and Taliban-contested communities. These timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and created perverse incentives to spend money quickly. Furthermore, shifts in U.S. domestic politics over the course of the reconstruction effort have turned over two decades of reconstruction into what amounted to a series of one-year efforts, creating a perpetual—and conflicting—sense of both imminent departure and permanent presence. Ultimately, the absence of a clear and stable timeline for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan had a ripple effect on personnel management. It resulted in shorter deployments, frequent rotations, and a lack of continuity in personnel assignments.

State, USAID, and DOD all reviewed a draft of this report. State and USAID provided a formal response (Appendix C), and DOD provided technical comments. SIGAR incorporated their feedback where appropriate.

* * * * *

In its effort to rebuild Afghanistan over 20 years, U.S. government agencies suffered from a chronic lack of institutional preparation that consistently prevented them from getting the right people into the right jobs at the right times. Throughout those two decades, there were many opportunities for State, USAID, and DOD to build their own state-building institutions to meet the task. But politically driven timelines that hindered long-term thinking made it all but impossible to invest in our own institutions to effectively rebuild Afghanistan. As detailed in SIGAR’s 2021 report, *What We Need to Learn*, policymakers assumed they could effect change via sheer willpower, and imposed timelines or political pressures to rapidly complete a mission that was exceptionally difficult on any timeline.⁹ Perhaps the greatest strategic liability created by that short-term mentality was in the recruitment, training, coordination, and replacement of personnel who oversaw the country’s reconstruction.

Many of the personnel who did deploy were often too unqualified to recognize how U.S. efforts were exacerbating corruption and conflict, and too inexperienced in navigating their own bureaucracies to sound the alarm even if they had noticed. The U.S. agencies that deployed these personnel did not prepare even those who were qualified for their assignments to work effectively with other agencies in a contingency environment, to understand the Afghan government and population, or to evaluate the impact of their work. Instead, U.S. agencies gave these personnel a box of broken tools, expected miracles from them, and then discouraged bad news when success proved elusive.

Addressing these challenges is complex. Strengthening one link in a chain may prove immaterial if the others remain weak. Predictable links that would need strengthening on the personnel chain include finding more qualified candidates, improving their training and coordination, retaining high-performing individuals, keeping them in country longer, and ensuring they are able to hand off critical knowledge and expertise to their replacements. Implementing only one of these reforms, even perfectly, would simply change the point of failure, not remove it. Giving U.S. government personnel the tools to succeed would require addressing all of these links effectively.

Fatigue from the failures of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan may make improving the entire chain a daunting prospect. It may be tempting to think the U.S. government can avoid failure by simply declining all such missions in the future. Yet, as SIGAR has noted previously, after Vietnam, the U.S. government incorrectly predicted that it would not conduct large-scale, state-building efforts again. For better or worse, rebuilding institutions in conflict-affected environments will likely remain a component of U.S. national security objectives.¹⁰

In the two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Congress has appropriated more than \$113 billion for Ukraine, including \$35 billion for security assistance. USAID has designated \$18 billion in direct budget support for the government of Ukraine.¹¹ Overseeing these enormous expenditures, which have been made in an unprecedentedly short period, requires significant staff time from U.S. personnel. Compromises in the qualifications, training, and rotations of these personnel will pose challenges similar to those seen in Afghanistan, no matter where those staff are located.

Moreover, the collapse of Afghanistan, and the ensuing crisis of evacuating so many U.S. personnel and Afghan allies, demonstrates that having systems in place for staffing emergencies is not unique to reconstruction missions. Staffing constraints are abundant across the work of U.S. government agencies. State's March 2022 after-action review for its noncombatant evacuation operation in Afghanistan described how the agency lacks sufficient staff, equipment, and surge capacity to manage crises effectively.¹²

RECOMMENDATIONS

To that end, some experts are offering ideas that would address all manner of crises at U.S. civilian agencies where constraints on personnel and training are most pronounced. For example, a number of former senior State officials—including Ambassador Marc Grossman (former special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan), Ambassador Marcie Ries (minister-counselor in Baghdad during the U.S. surge in Iraq), and Ambassador Pat Kennedy (former under secretary for management)—have advocated for a Diplomatic Reserve Corps. If realized, it would comprise 1,000 reservists, ranging from State retirees to experts from outside government. All reservists would serve three-year terms and be subject to deployment if called up. Altogether, recruitment, examination and screening, medical and security clearances, onboarding, training, and management would cost an estimated \$42 million annually.¹³ (After conducting a feasibility study at the request of Congress, State determined that a less ambitious reserve corps at half the cost would be more appropriate and sustainable.¹⁴) SIGAR has recommended similar personnel solutions if the United States is to ever succeed in rebuilding institutions in conflict-affected environments.¹⁵

In meetings with SIGAR, many observers in and out of government have raised concerns about creating a new, permanent government entity to address unspecified future contingency challenges. Some U.S. officials have implied that 1,000 reservists for \$42 million per year is excessive or unrealistic.¹⁶ For perspective, however, as of 2016, DOD had 6,600 military musicians in bands across the armed forces—nearly half of them reservists or national guard—at an annual cost of more than \$300 million.¹⁷ Still, the current appetite for an investment in a diplomatic reserve corps may be limited. As a result, SIGAR offers six more modest common-sense matters for consideration, including four recommendations for U.S. agencies (1–4) and three matters for the U.S. Congress to consider (5–7):

1. **U.S. agencies should consider requiring personnel departing their post to write for their replacements a detailed exit memo to be included in a searchable database.**

SIGAR has long raised concerns about the loss of knowledge caused by short tours and rapid staff turnover. Short tours of duty, typically lasting less than a year for both civilian and military positions, limited the ability of staff to build a nuanced understanding of their role, their environment, and the Afghans they worked with. By the time they found their bearings and built important relationships, they began preparing to depart. With personnel taking critical information with them as they rotated out, the reconstruction effort lost key institutional knowledge, as newly arriving staff made the same mistakes as their predecessors.

In SIGAR's work, we were surprised to discover that very few people assigned to Afghanistan had the requirement or time to leave their successors with any information about their assignment. Something as simple as writing an exit memo should be a standard practice for outgoing personnel and mandatory reading for incoming replacements. An exit memo would describe the most important opportunities and challenges in dealing with host nation government and non-government stakeholders, navigating the U.S. interagency, and improving the quality of U.S. programs. Exit memos thus offer a practical solution to address the challenges of maintaining continuity and institutional knowledge in dynamic and conflict-affected environments like Afghanistan. As described in written comments to SIGAR (Appendix C), USAID has already established a process for ensuring "handover/exit memos," but it is not mandatory.¹⁸ Making it mandatory for all U.S. agencies would have multiple benefits:

- **Preservation of institutional knowledge:** Exit memos would serve as repositories of valuable institutional knowledge accumulated by outgoing personnel during their tenure. These memos could include insights, lessons learned, best practices, ongoing problems, contacts, and other pertinent information crucial for the continuity of operations.
- **Facilitating transition:** Incoming personnel often face steep learning curves when assuming their roles in conflict-affected environments. Reading exit memos would provide them with essential context, enabling a smoother transition and reducing the time required to get up to speed with ongoing projects and programs.
- **Preventing redundancy and duplication:** By familiarizing themselves with the insights shared in exit memos, incoming personnel can avoid reinventing the wheel or duplicating efforts already undertaken by their predecessors. This increases the chances of more judicious resource allocation and promotes continuity in project implementation.

- **Enhancing strategic planning:** Exit memos can offer critical perspectives on the challenges, opportunities, and strategic priorities. Incoming personnel can leverage this information to refine their strategic plans and make informed decisions aligned with overarching objectives.
 - **Promoting accountability and responsibility:** By documenting both successes and failures, exit memos contribute to a culture of accountability. Similarly, mandating incoming replacements to read these memos instills a sense of responsibility to leverage existing knowledge and build upon previous efforts effectively.
 - **Cultural and operational awareness:** Exit memos can provide valuable insights into the cultural nuances and operational dynamics of the warzone environment. Incoming personnel can leverage this understanding to adapt their approaches, foster better relationships with local stakeholders, and navigate complex challenges more adeptly.
2. **U.S. agencies should begin working on the various components of recruiting and retaining qualified candidates to meet the needs of large-scale reconstruction and other contingency missions so that agencies are prepared before these missions begin.**

Identifying appropriate government staff was a recurring challenge throughout Afghanistan's reconstruction, often leading to ineffectual or counterproductive decisionmaking. However, there are multiple ways to increase the pool of qualified, motivated candidates available to staff the mission at the senior, mid, and junior levels. Possible examples include:

- a. **Subject to congressional authorization, reemployed annuitants working at State and USAID could receive permission to collect their pensions even while on assignment—known as a dual compensation waiver—to allow more retirees to be quickly rehired to fill roles in contingency operations or crises.**

Many State and USAID employees retire in their late 40s or early 50s after 20 years of service but remain in the workforce. State and USAID have processes by which these retirees can return to work for them and continue to collect their pension, but only if they work part-time. As a result, in order to take even a one-year assignment during a contingency operation, these retirees would have to sacrifice much of their pension, significantly reducing their motivation to take such an assignment.

Their counterparts at DOD, meanwhile, can retire, collect their pension, and take a new job at DOD for full pay. With a modest change to their incentive structure, seasoned State officials who understand the department's

processes and bureaucracy would be well positioned to staff senior roles in a reconstruction mission.

- b. State and USAID should each consider creating and managing a database of employees who resigned on favorable terms to ensure they can be easily contacted and invited to apply for the diverse roles needed to staff a contingency operation.**

When State and USAID employees resign, even on favorable terms, neither agency tracks or communicates with them after separation. Over time, this pool of qualified former employees—some of whom may now occupy senior positions in the private sector or other government agencies—constitutes an untapped resource for contingency operations. In Afghanistan, many hires came from the open market. Many lacked relevant qualifications or an understanding of how to navigate their agency or complex bureaucracies in general. Given that former State and USAID employees often have many years of experience working at their respective agencies, some would be well suited to return and staff positions in a reconstruction mission.

Even a lightly managed database with contact information linked to the personnel files of departed employees would provide each agency access to a large group of vetted and potentially qualified staff. They would merely need a method to communicate with this community and notify them when hiring for contingency operations.

It may not be necessary to create a new database from scratch. State and USAID already have such systems for tracking and communicating with retired officials for identical recruitment purposes, so these existing databases could simply be expanded to include resigning officials as well.

- c. State and USAID should each consider creating and managing a database of staff for contingency operations using individuals who were given conditional offers of employment in the Foreign Service but who never joined a training class.**

Every year the Foreign Service receives thousands of applications. At the end of a lengthy vetting process, a smaller number are given conditional offers of employment and join a register, waiting to be pulled into a training class of foreign service officers—often one class per month. While class size and makeup varies based on need and resources, each class contains the offerees with the highest scores in the register at that time. Offerees who remain on this register for 18 months will be automatically removed; they have the option to apply again from scratch or move on. The number of offerees entering and exiting the registry varies from month to month, but some years there may be more than a hundred qualified, vetted candidates with medical and security

clearances who leave the register and move on. State and USAID currently have no way of tracking or communicating with these important talent pools.

For each person on this register, the U.S. government has already spent tens of thousands of dollars on tests, interviews, evaluations, medical clearances and security clearances. This process is separate from the compressed hiring process associated with staffing for a contingency operation. With such databases, State and USAID would have the time to carefully and gradually identify these individuals as being suitable for work. As a result, these candidates would be well suited to fill more junior roles in a contingency operation—likely better suited than many of the temporary staff hired off the open market in Afghanistan.

When offerees fall off the register, their contact information should be retained in a database and tied to their application and evaluation materials so that they can be easily reviewed and invited to apply en masse as a contingency operation scales up.

- d. USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives should consider significantly increasing the size of its pool of on-call staff to compensate for shortages in key advisor roles for any future contingency operations.**

As part of its normal work in conflict-affected environments, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives has a “bullpen” of dozens of highly qualified USAID advisors with medical and security clearances who have spent years running and advising USAID programs in areas undergoing conflicts. These bullpen advisors deploy periodically to provide expert advice on existing programs, to temporarily fill unexpected staffing gaps, or to help with specific programmatic tasks. They do not get paid while waiting for assignments, though USAID does pay the administrative costs of keeping them eligible to deploy within days if needed.

This model has worked very well and is scalable in proportion to the amount of funds provided, as the various systems and procedures necessary to keep these advisors continuously deployable have been tested and refined for decades.

- e. USAID should consider substantially increasing the number of contracting officers to oversee programs amid an agency-wide shortage.**

In a growing contingency operation, program spending grows exponentially faster than the number of staff necessary to oversee that spending. This can result in a single contracting officer being responsible for overseeing an alarming amount of assistance—as high as \$100 million in Afghanistan, 10 times the recommended ceiling for a single contracting officer.¹⁹ As a result, overwhelmed contracting officers struggled to detect corruption and weaknesses in program performance. Under political pressure to make rapid

progress in a contingency operation, it is tempting for policymakers to ramp up spending even if USAID needs far more time to hire and train qualified staff to safeguard that increase in spending.

Hiring and training more contracting officers in advance of a contingency operation would be one effective way of closing that gap and preventing the kind of corruption and programming weaknesses that hurt U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. In fact, these added staff are already needed. Even absent a contingency, USAID faces a significant shortage of contracting officers. Agency-wide, each USAID contracting officer managed an average of \$65 million annually between 2017–2021, more than four times higher than the average contracting officer at DOD.²⁰

3. State, USAID, and DOD should consider significantly improving the quality of predeployment training for their staff.

Training improvements should:

- a. Provide staff with a functional understanding of their agencies' structure and operating procedures, guidance on how to work collaboratively with other agencies, and an understanding of how the work they will be performing fits into the whole-of-government effort to advance U.S. interests and strategic goals.**

In many cases, even technically qualified and experienced individuals newly hired by State and USAID struggled to grasp their respective agencies' missions and operational procedures. Temporary hires who had significant experience in development often had little to no experience working within the bureaucracy of the U.S. government, including across agencies that had to work together to succeed.

The relative lack of experience of many temporary staff also reduced their oversight capabilities. The authority to oversee programming required training and certification as a contracting officer's representative to ensure taxpayer dollars were not wasted or misallocated, yet few of those working outside Kabul had such training.

- b. Provide staff with a foundational understanding of the government and the current social, economic, and political contexts of the host nation.**

U.S. staff deployed to Afghanistan in most cases had a limited understanding of the complexities of a country that is very different from the United States. Even those who have formally studied any given country for years, may not know enough to grasp the nuances of power dynamics, financial interests, or grievances within affected communities. However, basic knowledge of the

context in which one is working is critical if one is to avoid making critical errors in the field.

In Afghanistan, U.S. officials were consistently operating in the dark, often because of the difficulty of collecting the necessary information. The U.S. government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions, trained security forces in advanced weapon systems they could not understand, much less maintain, imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means, and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls. Without a nuanced and highly informed understanding of the complexities of the country, U.S. officials often empowered powerbrokers who preyed on the population or diverted U.S. assistance away from its intended recipients to enrich and empower themselves and their allies. Lack of knowledge at the local level meant projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it, and even inadvertently funded insurgents. Still, there will always be limitations to what U.S. officials can be trained to understand about a foreign country, particularly at scale.

c. Ensure all staff expected to work directly with host nation officials or civilians are proficient in working with interpreters.

Ideally, there would be enough U.S. government personnel with expertise relevant to any future effort to reconstruct a foreign nation. In reality, given budgetary limitations and the temporary nature of reconstruction efforts, permanently expanding State and USAID personnel numbers to address potential future contingency operations is challenging. To address staffing shortfalls in contingency operations, U.S. agencies often tried to offer crash courses in Afghan language and culture to temporary hires. However, this rarely went beyond enabling U.S. personnel to make basic conversation or become aware of the most basic social mores that needed to be observed with their Afghan counterparts.

As a practical matter, the U.S. government cannot predict with any degree of certainty when and where it will need to conduct reconstruction operations. Therefore, rather than attempting to train thousands of experts fluent in the local dialects and well-versed in the history of all the nations that *could* be subjects of reconstruction operations, a more pragmatic approach would be to train staff in how to communicate with the locals they work with through the skilled use of interpreters.

In Afghanistan, U.S. personnel faced a number of challenges, including some they were not aware of. Interpreters sometimes had their own agendas, showed little respect for precision in language, and lacked a nuanced understanding of cultural divisions within Afghanistan. Even when they had skilled interpreters,

U.S. personnel sometimes neglected to lean on them as advisors critical to their success. This became especially problematical when many meetings took place behind coalition blast walls and the words of U.S. counterparts took on extra weight as they could not be independently verified. Better training in the use of interpreters would help staff navigate these sorts of challenges.

4. The U.S. Army should consider instructing and empowering its Security Force Assistance Command to build the human capital and administrative infrastructure necessary for scaled operations in preparation for the next contingency operation requiring the training of host nation security forces.

Over 20 years, the U.S. government spent \$90 billion developing and sustaining the Afghan security forces. SIGAR has extensively chronicled the obstacles in this effort, many of which came down to the choice of personnel involved in making and implementing those decisions.²¹ For the first 16 years of the war, a collection of ad hoc training and advisory models was used to build the Afghan security sector. It was not until 2017 that DOD piloted a more institutional model with the first Security Force Assistance Brigade (see p. 23). While SFABs represented only a portion of the security force assistance at the time, the approach has been refined and subsequently expanded across the U.S. Army, with one 816-person brigade for each combatant command.

Though designed for smaller scale efforts, SFABs are likely to serve as the model for large-scale security force assistance in the future. As such, they need to be prepared to grow well beyond their normal mission requirements. Not only are they unprepared for that possible growth, but DOD recently announced a 34 percent cut to SFABs as part of the U.S. Army's "force structure transformation" in order to move away from "soldier-intensive COIN operations."²² DOD shifted similarly after the Vietnam War, which left it poorly prepared for what would come in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While it may be unrealistic to sustain the capability to rebuild a country's entire security sector on an ongoing basis, it is prudent to retain the institutional capability that would allow that growth when the time comes. Specifically, rather than scale down this capability, the U.S. Army could develop plans to train and deploy more SFABs and retain the staff that could oversee that growth in the case of a contingency. Now that DOD finally has a proper long-term institution for security force assistance, it should use it to plan for future challenges rather than allow that relatively new capability to atrophy over time.

5. Congress may wish to consider conducting an extensive review of U.S. personnel practices in countries undergoing reconstruction.

The U.S. government was not equipped to staff the reconstruction of Afghanistan. It remains poorly equipped for another similar mission if the need arises again.

Ongoing efforts in Ukraine and prospective efforts in Gaza illustrate the ongoing importance of being able to recruit, train, coordinate, and replace U.S. staff as part of large-scale reconstruction missions. Waiting to implement reforms until the need is dire creates the conditions for failure. Given how preparing for and staffing these larger missions has such a significant impact on personnel practices across the agencies, Congress may wish to consider commissioning its own non-partisan study of U.S. personnel practices, particularly in conflict-affected environments.

6. Congress may wish to consider giving State and USAID staff dual compensation waivers to open up the available pool of qualified retired staff.

Having dual compensation waivers (see p. 42) would make retired staff more motivated to return to the department for temporary assignments related to contingency operations. These staff will be especially important for senior deployed roles for any contingency operation, as they will be the officials making the most consequential decisions on devising and implementing reconstruction strategies.

7. Congress may wish to consider encouraging the U.S. Army to retain or enhance the capability of the Security Force Assistance Brigades to ensure the U.S. government's readiness to train partner forces as part of a contingency operation.

As described on p. 40 and at length in SIGAR's 2021 report, *What We Need to Learn*, DOD has a tendency to avoid preparing for wars it would rather not fight, even if those are the most likely to be fought. As after the Vietnam War, DOD is currently reducing its capability to train host nation security forces, which will leave it poorly prepared to engage in contingency efforts in the future. Compelling DOD to retain or enhance this capability will likely serve as an insurance policy against similar failures in the future.



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Between late 2001, when the Bonn Conference established a process for the construction of a new political order in Afghanistan, to August 2021, when that political order collapsed, thousands of U.S. civilian employees and roughly 832,000 American soldiers deployed to Afghanistan.²³ Many of these personnel participated in the \$145 billion effort to rebuild Afghanistan's security forces, infrastructure, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society.²⁴

Throughout the reconstruction effort, U.S. officials were unable to overcome critical deficiencies: a recurring inability to staff a demanding mission, rapid turnover of the staff they did find, and poor coordination between military and civilian organizations.²⁵ The U.S. government's inability to get the right people into the right jobs at the right times had significant downstream implications for the reconstruction mission. It is also one of the hardest problems to address. U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain. Every agency suffered from frequent staff turnover, leaving successors to start from scratch and make similar mistakes all over again.²⁶

There were often not enough qualified staff to oversee the spending. As demonstrated throughout this report, this was particularly true for civilian agencies, such as State and USAID, both of which should have been taking the lead on many of the development-focused aspects of the reconstruction effort, but which were unable to meaningfully perform that role

Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta speaks to the members of the American Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan on December 14, 2011. Secretary Panetta thanked them for their service to their country and their hard work in helping Afghanistan progress. (DOD Photo by Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo)

due to resource limitations. This compelled the better-resourced DOD to fill the void, creating tensions with civilian agencies that often had different ideas but fewer staff to offer.²⁷

SCOPE OF REPORT

The personnel engaged in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan constituted a diverse group of individuals and entities, each carrying distinct roles, affiliations, and agendas. Within this reconstruction framework, the term “personnel” includes military and civilian personnel, contractors, and local staff. Although contractors have played an essential role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, this report focuses on U.S. government military and civilian personnel. It combines original research with findings from the considerable analytical work previously done by SIGAR. The report’s primary concentration is on the life cycle of typical U.S. personnel, from recruitment and training to deployment and turnover. These U.S. officials made the reconstruction mission’s most consequential decisions, including those regarding the management of contractors. As a result, addressing the staffing issues facing U.S. officials would improve oversight of contractors further downstream.

While this report does not focus on contractors, SIGAR has long reported on the U.S. government’s use of contractors, such as in SIGAR’s lessons learned report *The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly: Monitoring and Evaluation of Reconstruction Contracting in Afghanistan*. In addition, the 2011 Commission on Wartime Contracting and other U.S. government entities have documented the various kinds of problems related to the use of contractors in Afghanistan.²⁸

This report was written to help policymakers and agency officials understand the challenges in deploying thousands of U.S. personnel to complex contingency environments. In addition to an introduction in Chapter 1, the report is divided into four chapters.

- **Chapter 2** provides an overview of the process of recruiting and hiring personnel throughout the reconstruction effort and examines how it unfolded as a chronicle of challenges and setbacks, culminating in staff shortages that plagued the mission’s effectiveness.
- **Chapter 3** examines how training programs for DOD, State, and USAID personnel were often lacking or insufficiently tailored to the specific challenges of the Afghan context.
- **Chapter 4** highlights how the deployment of personnel was further complicated by the reliance of civilian agencies on the military for security, food, housing, and transportation. It also examines how the military consistently determined priorities on the ground and assumed an outsized role in reconstruction activities, including tasks generally outside its expertise.
- **Chapter 5** examines how the constant churn of personnel created by short tours left military and civilian officials with little time to develop sufficient knowledge of the operating environment, created barriers to consolidating knowledge at the institutional level, and harmed relationships with Afghan and coalition counterparts.

State, USAID, and DOD all reviewed a draft of this report. State and USAID provided a formal response (Appendix C), and DOD provided technical comments. SIGAR incorporated their feedback where appropriate.

THE LACK OF CLEAR GOALS, METHODS, TIMELINES, AND RESOURCES IMPEDED THE ABILITY OF AGENCIES TO PLAN AND MODIFY PERSONNEL DEPLOYMENTS

Carefully examining the personnel policies and procedures implemented in Afghanistan is crucial for extracting valuable insights and preventing future errors. However, their effectiveness or lack thereof should be assessed in relation to the tasks assigned to agency personnel. As detailed in SIGAR's 2021 report, *What We Need to Learn*, no number of thoughtful reforms at the technical level and not even the largest and best-qualified staff can compensate for objectives that are inherently unachievable.²⁹

At a more technical level, deploying personnel effectively is like assembling a chain with interconnected links, where each link represents a crucial phase in the process: recruiting, training, deploying, and turnover. Even one weak link compromises the entire chain, and in Afghanistan, every link in the U.S. personnel chain was found during the course of our review to be weak.

To effectively deploy qualified personnel to appropriate positions for optimal durations, the U.S. government needed a strong understanding of its intended goals. Yet U.S. goals were at times unclear and shifted throughout the reconstruction. Retired General David Petraeus told SIGAR that the United States “never adopted a consistent strategic overarching approach and stuck with it from administration to administration, or arguably even within administrations.”³⁰ The absence of a clear and stable timeline for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan compounded this strategic ambiguity and created a ripple effect in personnel management. Shorter timelines that are continuously extended resulted in shorter deployments, frequent rotations, and a lack of continuity in personnel assignments.

Despite this lack of a clear and stable end goal, the U.S. government spent two decades and billions of dollars deploying personnel to:

- Train, equip, and pay the salaries of hundreds of thousands of Afghan soldiers and police;
- Build a credible electoral process by funding elections, cultivating political parties, and training election officials and observers;
- Educate more Afghans, particularly girls and women, by building, repairing, staffing, and equipping schools;
- Reintegrate back into society tens of thousands of armed fighters with few other skills, an abundance of weapons, and ample opportunity to resume violence;
- Develop the private sector by training entrepreneurs, lowering the costs of starting and running businesses, and creating an environment that would attract foreign and domestic businesses to Afghanistan;

- Reduce rampant corruption in the Afghan government to improve its performance and legitimacy;
- Reduce the cultivation and trade of poppy and provide alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers;
- Deliver services at the local level so that Afghans in contested territory would come to favor the Afghan government over the Taliban;
- Improve the quality and accessibility of health care by building, repairing, staffing, and equipping medical facilities; and
- Train and empower Afghan officials to sustain the above efforts by collecting their own revenue and effectively managing their own national budget.³¹

To develop a strategy for all these objectives, including how agencies would deploy personnel to achieve them, planners needed a detailed understanding of the object of reform (Afghanistan’s institutions and population) and the tools that would create the reform (U.S. government agencies and partners). Knowing each would have allowed planners to adjust the strategy accordingly. However, this knowledge was rare.³²

In Afghanistan, the most fundamental questions were continuously revisited—including who America’s enemies and allies were, and exactly what the U.S. government should try to accomplish.³³ When then-Vice President Joe Biden returned from a trip to Afghanistan in 2009, he told President Obama, “If you ask 10 of our people what we’re trying to accomplish here, you get 10 different answers.”³⁴ After coordinating Afghanistan strategy at the National Security Council from 2007 to 2013, Douglas Lute told SIGAR, “We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan. We didn’t know what we were doing. . . . It’s really much worse than you think. There [was] a fundamental gap of understanding on the front end, overstated objectives, an overreliance on the military, and a lack of understanding of the resources necessary.”³⁵

Some of this uncertainty was understandable. Ever-changing conflict dynamics on the ground and shifting political winds in Washington routinely required senior U.S. officials in Washington and Kabul to review and modify their strategies. But these reviews never resolved the fundamental ambiguity about goals, methods, and resources.³⁶

When properly developed, strategies clearly define the ends, ways, and means of the mission:

- **Ends:** the overarching goals or end states that guide all lower-level decisions
- **Ways:** the sequence of actions needed to achieve those goals
- **Means:** the resources allocated to complete those actions

Across two decades of reconstruction in Afghanistan, the U.S. government suffered from several strategic failures. The division of labor for conceiving the strategy set it up for failure; the ends were unclear and subject to mission creep; the ways, ends, and means were poorly aligned with one another.³⁷ “The person at the top needs to have [objectives]” that are both possible and communicated, British diplomat and politician Rory Stewart told SIGAR. Diplomats “needed a clear mission” with basic directions.

Platitudes like ‘supporting human rights’ or ‘developing the economy’ did not give diplomats or military commanders any information on how to accomplish that.³⁸ General James Mattis, who served as head of Central Command from 2010 to 2013 and as secretary of defense from 2017 to 2018, echoed this sentiment. He told SIGAR, “The lack of political clarity on ends, ways, and means meant we were always wondering if we were still going to be here next year. Were we going to be funded next year? We weren’t sure whether to attack, retreat, or go sideways.”³⁹

U.S. officials often underestimated the time and resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan, leading to short-term solutions like the surge of troops, money, and resources from 2009 to 2011. U.S. officials also prioritized their own political preferences for what they wanted reconstruction to look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve.⁴⁰

This misjudgment created a chronic dilemma: U.S. officials in Afghanistan could satisfy overwhelming political pressure to show progress by focusing on short-term achievements, or they could take the necessary time to work through the Afghan government to ensure sustainable improvements to Afghan institutions and infrastructure. Too often, the answer was to focus on short-term achievements. U.S. officials created arbitrary timelines for the complex task of transforming Afghan institutions, relationships among its powerbrokers, and Taliban-contested communities. These timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and created perverse incentives to spend quickly.⁴¹

Shifts in U.S. domestic politics over the course of the reconstruction effort turned the 20-year reconstruction into what amounted to 20 one-year efforts, creating a perpetual—and paradoxical—sense of both imminent departure and permanent presence. This ambiguity diminished agencies’ capability to prepare for personnel deployment and set in motion a persistent cycle: Short-term goals and short timelines reinforced one another, creating new problems that were then addressed by more short-term goals and timelines.⁴²

LESSON 1

U.S. agencies struggled to recruit and hire qualified staff, resulting in significant shortages and compromises.



CHAPTER 2

RECRUITMENT AND HIRING

With any large-scale reconstruction effort, large numbers of people are needed to implement, monitor, and guide the various projects that make up the overall mission. In Afghanistan, the process of recruiting and hiring personnel throughout the reconstruction effort unfolded as a chronicle of challenges and setbacks, culminating in staff shortages that plagued the mission's effectiveness. From the outset, it became evident that the recruitment and hiring processes at State, USAID, and DOD hindered the timely deployment of qualified personnel to Afghanistan. These issues ranged from an absence of available reserve personnel for swift deployment to a scarcity of individuals with the experience and qualifications to engage in reconstruction efforts within a war zone. There were no stress-tested mechanisms for identifying, recruiting, or hiring the necessary staff to oversee and implement a proper reconstruction mission. As new solutions were developed to address the staffing shortfall—including a civilian reserve corps and an Army brigade model designed from scratch to train host nation security forces—they mostly proved unable to meet the challenge due to various political, technical, and bureaucratic constraints.

U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. William McCollough, second from right, commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, talks with members of the USAID team at Patrol Base Jaker in Nawa District, Helmand Province, on August 16, 2009. (DOD photo by S. Sgt. William Greeson, U.S. Marine Corps)

EARLY STAFFING ENVIRONMENT AT DOD, STATE, AND USAID

In 2002, the prevailing assumption within the Bush administration was that the conflict in Afghanistan was over. Senior U.S. officials began to consider their immediate post-conflict reconstruction objectives—but this first required them to acknowledge that

reconstruction was even a goal at all. President George W. Bush had campaigned on a platform against U.S. involvement in nation-building activities and had opposed armed humanitarian actions previously taken by the Clinton administration. Weeks after 9/11, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz cautioned that in Afghanistan, “there is a lot that could be done with just basic food, medicine, and education programs, if we don’t set the bar too high.”⁴³ In policy guidance, Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith was more blunt: “The U.S. should not plunge into a nation-building project.”⁴⁴

Given this sentiment, U.S. agencies—specifically DOD, State, and USAID—were not laying the groundwork for personnel to be trained and bureaucratically positioned for a scaled reconstruction campaign. However, by 2003, the Bush administration had accepted that nation building was unavoidable, and by 2005 reconstruction funding increased to nearly \$5 billion, more than four times what it had been in 2002.⁴⁵ This set in motion a trend for how the United States approached reconstruction in Afghanistan: by creating and funding reconstruction projects—and only then attempting to locate people to carry them out.⁴⁶ As the reconstruction campaign gained momentum, each agency played catch-up by adjusting staffing in response to escalating financial commitments and the mission’s expanding scope.

State and USAID were especially ill-prepared. Because civilian agencies lack the strategic reserves of personnel that the military enjoys, they had to pull staff from other assignments and hire people quickly to meet demand.⁴⁷ In an interview with SIGAR, former ambassador Ronald Neumann emphasized that, unlike the military, State is a “fully deployed force,” with no civilian reserve to draw from to address a national security crisis.⁴⁸ Describing a 2004 effort to establish a reserve corps of civilian personnel, a senior State official said that the initiative “assumed that the government has the [people] to give for the effort, but where there is slack to give, those are often not the people with the skills you need. [The people you need] are already doing other important work.”⁴⁹ According to a Princeton University study commissioned by SIGAR, the chronic staffing shortage was driven by a hiring freeze at both USAID and State in the mid-1990s, which created a ripple effect that deprived both agencies of the experienced personnel needed to manage contingency operations in later decades.⁵⁰

DOD, endowed with a surplus of personnel and resources, found itself better equipped for rapid deployment to Afghanistan compared to State and USAID. In their operating costs, U.S. military branches have built in an additional 10 percent “float” of staff and resources in case of an emergency—a luxury almost unthinkable for U.S. civilian agencies.⁵¹ Yet, as the mission evolved and DOD took on responsibility for broader reconstruction tasks, such as training the Afghan police and army, personnel issues within the department became more pronounced. The transition to nation-building and civilian capacity-building missions placed a considerable burden on the military’s manpower and stretched its capabilities.

ATTEMPTS TO MITIGATE PERSONNEL ISSUES

In 2004, the Bush administration recognized the need to improve the government's ability to mobilize personnel for overseas reconstruction missions. This led to early staffing initiatives, including National Security Presidential Directive 44, "Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization," which required State to develop a civilian response capability that would be able to respond "quickly and effectively" to stabilization and reconstruction needs. State's new coordinator for reconstruction and stabilization established a Civilian Response Corps to mobilize "federal employees and volunteers from the private sector [and] state and local governments," with active, standby, and reserve components. By design, State would lead the interagency efforts of eight agencies, including USAID, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Justice.⁵²

The first tier, the Active Response Component, would have 250 federal employees, spread across eight agencies but funded by State, who would be ready to deploy in as few as two days, if asked. When not deployed, they would take on other assignments within their agency. The second-tier Standby Response Corps would have 2,000 current federal employees, who would have jobs spread across the eight agencies but who could deploy within 30 to 45 days.⁵³ The third tier, the Civilian Reserve Corps, would resemble the U.S. Army Reserve or the National Guard, and would be composed of contracted civilian specialists from state and local governments, as well as from the private sector. The eventual plan was for the Civilian Reserve Corps to have a cadre of roughly 2,000 qualified specialists capable of deploying within 60 days.⁵⁴

State also relied on §3161 of Title 5, U.S. Code—a law that enables U.S. agencies that are given this authority to quickly hire temporary personnel—to meet the demand of the rapidly expanding reconstruction effort. The section 3161 authority permitted State to bring in personnel on a temporary basis, although hired personnel could not be employed for more than five years on the same appointment. Recruitment and hiring of section 3161 employees at State was managed by the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Likewise, USAID requested that Congress provide an extension of the Foreign Service Limited (FSL) hiring authority so it could expand its workforce. USAID's Afghanistan/Pakistan Task Force and subsequently the Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs oversaw the hiring of FSLs.⁵⁵

DESPITE EFFORTS, PERSONNEL CHALLENGES PERSISTED

Problems developed with the Civilian Reserve Corps almost immediately. According to Michael Miklaucic, a USAID representative on the Civilian Response Corps Inter-Agency Task Force who helped establish the corps, there was no appetite in Congress to fund the civilian reserve component, as it would require the same kind of legislative framework as the reserve component of the armed forces to ensure that jobs would be available when personnel returned from active duty. After years of military reserve deployments, Congress was already under pressure from employers who were required to provide job protections for deployed military reserves. Traditionally, businesses

that hired “citizen soldiers” only had to fear losing them for the rarest of deployments; however, the operational tempo of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars meant that year after year, many businesses were losing employees they could not legally replace. For this and other reasons, Congress refused to create another reserve corps for civilians, and the reserve concept was postponed indefinitely.⁵⁶

The standby and active components of the Civilian Reserve Corps also faced challenges. All eight agencies that were meant to contribute deployable civilians had their own ideas about what types of personnel should be in their respective active pools, often based on how they could use them when not deployed rather than their suitability for reconstruction missions. In theory, State had the authority to oversee the other agencies; in practice, the other agencies had their own equities to protect. Out of 250 personnel in the active component, only 36 were allotted to State’s Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stability Operations, whose active pool of employees was best suited to most civilian stabilization work in Afghanistan. These 36 active members, as well as USAID’s contingent, had utilization rates as high as 60 percent, but with so few members of the overall active component suited to challenging deployments to places like Afghanistan, much of the rest never rose above 20 percent utilization.⁵⁷ Ultimately, State was unable to secure enough people with the right skills to fill the standby and active components, which made the entire endeavor difficult to justify.⁵⁸

The failure of early efforts to improve the recruiting and hiring process was felt most acutely during the 2009 to 2012 surge. Agencies tasked with dramatically increasing the number of personnel deployed to Afghanistan lacked the means to rapidly recruit or draw upon reserve personnel, and were forced to create ad hoc mechanisms to quickly boost staffing.⁵⁹ New hires needed medical screenings, security clearances, and training before they could deploy, which slowed the flow of personnel to Afghanistan.⁶⁰

The two agencies that provided most personnel for the civilian surge, State and USAID, already faced staff shortages for their day-to-day missions. From 2008 to 2011, 14 percent of overseas State Foreign Service positions were vacant and another 14 percent were filled by less-senior personnel than what the billet was coded for.⁶¹ Already operating below its planned staffing levels, State had no surplus from which to fill its requirement for the civilian surge.⁶² Because of a dearth of reserve personnel to meet the demands of the civilian surge, the two agencies pulled staff from other assignments and hired outside staff through congressionally approved temporary hiring authorities. According to State, the number of civilian personnel under the embassy’s control more than tripled—from 320 in January 2009 to 1,142 in December 2011. By 2011, more than 20 percent of all USAID worldwide staff were in Afghanistan.⁶³

Despite the hiring latitude provided by the section 3161 and the FSL authority, finding qualified section 3161 and FSL candidates proved a challenge. The pool of potential employees with experience doing development work in war zones and some familiarity with the complexities of U.S. government processes was small. It was even harder to find personnel with experience in south Asia or proficiency in Farsi or Pashto. There

was also the issue of assessing an individual's physical capacity to operate effectively in a war zone. Some temporary hires faced challenges in meeting the physical demands of living and working in a volatile environment.⁶⁴ Even qualified candidates faced significant delays in being deployed.⁶⁵

Consequently, the staff hired under these temporary hiring authorities had varied levels of experience. A USAID official told SIGAR, "At the height of the civilian surge, our existing numbers were so limited we were forced to bring on roughly 250 to 350 people per year to do the work of USAID across Afghanistan, many with little to no practical USAID experience."⁶⁶ These temporary hires had little experience or training in monitoring and project oversight. One temporary hire recalled, "I got this job because I had a pulse and a master's degree."⁶⁷

Understaffing had a predictably negative effect on the quality of U.S. programs. In 2009, for example, a year after a 2008 USAID mission order mandated that gender "be addressed in all USAID/Afghanistan project designs," the mission had only one gender advisor on staff. This advisor was also tasked with overseeing "anything that didn't have a home in a technical office," including gender, corruption, and returning refugees. In 2010, when USAID/Afghanistan had only two gender advisors on staff, they spent \$1.8 billion on reconstruction programs, all of which were supposed to have a gender component. Given the breadth of development programs being designed and implemented, it is no surprise that gender advisors struggled to provide adequate support.⁶⁸ Ultimately, USAID was unable to field the resources and expertise needed to effectively integrate gender-related objectives across programming in Afghanistan.⁶⁹

There also were not enough direct-hire personnel dedicated to contract and program management. By 2011, the demand for personnel was so acute that USAID's director of the Office of Acquisition and Assistance determined that to meet the U.S. government's average ratio of dollars to contracting officers, USAID would have to send nearly its entire overseas workforce to work only in Afghanistan. Given how impractical that would be, the quality of program oversight suffered instead. In addition to expansive budgets, the number of contractor personnel overseen by direct-hire State and USAID personnel was similarly large. In 2011 in Afghanistan, there were approximately 18 contractors for every direct hire at State; at USAID, the ratio of contractors to hired staff was 100 to 1.⁷⁰

Even after the surge, when the funding decreased considerably, staffing patterns still could not keep up with the demands of contract management and administration. According to officials at State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), that office needed at least three and ideally four full-time contract management staff in Afghanistan for effective oversight—but due to the need for rotations, clearances, and leave, staffing was a "leaky glass." In September 2017, one permanent INL contracting officer's representative was responsible for monitoring both the Justice Sector Support Program and the Corrections System Support Program, cumulatively worth hundreds of millions of dollars. By November 2017, even that person

rotated out and INL had no permanent contracting officer representatives in country. The remaining two temporary staff members faced an overwhelming workload. As one official put it, “Most [contracting officer’s representatives] are just trying to get through the day. . . . They function more like a boxer trying to get through a round.”⁷¹

Even though many contracting officer’s representatives faithfully worked to perform their duties, sometimes corners were cut. With overworked personnel struggling to manage multiple contracts, it was sometimes difficult to perform adequate monitoring and evaluation. Two INL officials told SIGAR that they were able to do little to assess actual outcomes, in part because it was challenging to manage the various contracts under these circumstances.⁷² When neither civilian nor military personnel were available to report on the progress of various reconstruction efforts, the amount of money spent on projects became the de facto measure of progress.⁷³

DOD, despite its reserve personnel, also grappled with staffing problems as its mission in Afghanistan evolved. The staffing deficits within DOD were exacerbated by the increasing scope of responsibilities the department undertook. In 2005, for example, the United States committed to both training and equipping the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army. To meet these obligations, the U.S. military attempted to put together mentoring teams, with the idea that each team would be competent and diverse enough to develop capable Afghan security forces.⁷⁴ However, the U.S. military consistently had difficulty meeting personnel requirements for advising units.⁷⁵ In 2009, the U.S. military projected a need for 635 Police Mentoring Teams—but had only enough personnel to sustain 90. Many of those remained understaffed.⁷⁶

Understaffed teams faced several operational and advising challenges. For example, some Embedded Training Teams were unable to mentor their Afghan counterparts in the field because they lacked enough force protection personnel to move off a U.S. base.⁷⁷ One former police advisor noted that because they were short-staffed, “we [would] have to pull from other teams, but when you pull from another team, that restricts [the other police mentoring team] to the [base].” Another advisor explained: “If we went outside of the wire, who’s going to protect the fort? You need 30 [U.S. soldiers] to do it.” Short staffing also undermined unit cohesion and the value of collective training. Under the police mentoring team model, teams were supposed to be formed before deployment and trained together to create team cohesion. But many police mentoring team advisors noted that once they were deployed to Afghanistan together, their teams were disbanded, and different advisors were deployed to different parts of the country.⁷⁸

When the U.S. military recognized in 2009 that it did not have enough civil affairs teams to build infrastructure in contested Afghan communities, it tried to mass produce these teams by taking chemical warfare response units and giving them four week-long PowerPoint trainings. Results were poor. For example, according to one senior U.S. military official who oversaw these projects nationwide, many project proposals written by these new civil affairs teams contained justifications that were copied and pasted from one another. Another senior military officer told SIGAR that some

justifications even included references to “sheikhs,” indicating they were being copied from proposals written in Iraq.⁷⁹

The lack of qualified DOD personnel also created budgetary problems: Without enough oversight staff, it was impossible to properly validate data from the field. For instance, a SIGAR audit from January 2015 reported that Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A), which oversaw the training and equipping of Afghan forces, was unable to provide sufficient staff to verify Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police attendance data. Without sufficient oversight, corrupt officials artificially increased their payroll numbers, leading to “ghost soldiers”—nonexistent personnel created to draw a salary. Because CSTC-A was unable to verify employment rates, the SIGAR audit warned that more than \$300 million a year was spent paying salaries with little assurance that these funds were going to active ANDSF personnel or that the amounts paid were correct.⁸⁰

Ultimately, every agency that worked on reconstruction in Afghanistan suffered from personnel deficits borne from rapid scaling and the pressure to make quick progress. No organization was prepared to ramp up quickly, and it showed across the board.⁸¹ Yet given the lack of robust personnel structures necessary to scale up a reconstruction effort, it is difficult to imagine how U.S. officials could have performed any better. The problem was not that they were poor at improvising, but that the U.S. government thought improvisation would work.⁸² Going into this war and in each of its critical phases, the absence of a pre-existing method of identifying, recruiting, and hiring talented staff set the mission up for failure.

LESSON 2

DOD, State, and USAID training often fell short in preparing personnel for the specific tasks and challenges they encountered in Afghanistan.



CHAPTER 3 TRAINING

Once personnel were hired or chosen to deploy, the process of properly training them posed another significant hurdle. Afghanistan's unique environment demanded specialized knowledge and skills. However, training programs for DOD, State, and USAID personnel were often lacking or insufficiently tailored to the specific challenges of the Afghan context. Personnel that deployed to advise the Afghan National Police, for example, often complained that their predeployment training was not Afghanistan-specific and was focused on combat skills, rather than advising skills or specific topics, such as Afghanistan's criminal code or logistics systems used by the ANDSF. Many uniformed U.S. advisors deployed without any advisor training whatsoever.

While more comprehensive training may have improved the ability of personnel to navigate the complexities of Afghanistan, the overall success of the reconstruction mission was contingent on the achievability of the end goals. In Afghanistan, the United States tried to reform wide-ranging aspects of Afghan society and develop formal institutions where none had existed before. For many U.S. personnel, no amount of predeployment or on-site training could adequately prepare them for the scale and ambition of these goals.

More than 400 deployed service members, DOD civilians and contractors pay tribute to the 10th anniversary of 9/11 during an official ceremony at Camp Eggers in Kabul, Afghanistan. 35 flags representing the nations contributing to the NATO training mission lowered and then raised their flags to honor those killed in the attack. (NATO Training Mission Afghanistan photo)

IGNORANCE AND UNATTAINABLE GOALS COMPLICATED TRAINING

For training to be appropriately designed, it was crucial for agencies to first understand the environment that personnel would be operating in. This proved challenging. As a member of former International Security Assistance Force Commander General Stanley McChrystal's assessment team observed, implementing an effective counterinsurgency campaign requires "a level of local knowledge that I don't have about my own hometown."⁸³ Ignorance of social, cultural, and political dynamics contributed significantly to failures at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.⁸⁴

The U.S. government's ignorance of Afghanistan's social landscapes was not limited to the intricacies of village politics or covert ties between insurgents and nominal U.S. allies. The U.S. government was equally incapable of understanding the social and political dynamics within the very institutions it fostered in Kabul.⁸⁵ For example, providing material support and equipment to certain units within the ANDSF without considering ethnic dynamics between units often created the erroneous impression that the United States favored one ethnic group or faction over another. A 2017 SIGAR report on the development of the ANDSF underscored that point, finding that the United States "largely ignored" intra-force political dynamics, which led to "major social and political imbalances" within the ANDSF.⁸⁶

The U.S. government's misreading of the Afghan social and political environment meant that initiatives designed to stabilize and rehabilitate the country were often ineffective.⁸⁷ It also made it exceedingly difficult to develop training programs that could prepare personnel for the diverse and unpredictable situations they would encounter. Such information was difficult to obtain in an active conflict environment. On the other hand, it is unclear whether even under the best of circumstances policymakers and practitioners could have developed a sufficiently detailed and accurate understanding of Afghanistan's complex social fabric.⁸⁸

For example, the United States tried to impose a formal rule of law system on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means.⁸⁹ The formal court system established through U.S. intervention was slow, corrupt, and foreign to Afghans used to traditional community-level dispute resolution mechanisms. Ultimately, U.S. officials chose to pursue a vision for Afghanistan's justice system that reflected American values and preferences, without sufficient regard for what was practical or possible.⁹⁰ "We wanted to give them something they had never had before," remembered one former senior USAID official.⁹¹

Yet here too it remains uncertain whether improvements in training programs would have averted the U.S.-supported government's precipitous collapse. When the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, they embarked on an effort to encourage or impose broad reforms that touched essentially all aspects of Afghan society, including politics, economics, education, defense, rule of law, and the societal roles and relations between men and women. The U.S. government pursued these reforms while simultaneously attempting to quell multiple security threats, including a

Taliban insurgency, a powerful narcotics industry, warlords entrenched in the Afghan government, and a nascent local affiliate of the Islamic State.⁹² The enormity of these objectives overshadowed efforts to train and prepare personnel.

There were, however, areas where more comprehensive training would likely have made a positive difference. These include ensuring that personnel had a functional understanding of their agencies' operating procedures, preparing them to work collaboratively with other agencies, providing some basic language skills, and relevant instruction for DOD advisors tasked with supporting the Afghan security sector. The U.S. government struggled with them all.

Yet training took place. In formal comments provided to SIGAR in response to a draft of this report (see Appendix C), State wrote:

Prior to August 2021, the Department continually refined our training program to ensure personnel assigned to Afghanistan were trained and prepared prior to their arrival. The Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) provided training courses which focus on history, politics, economics, social and cultural issues, and diplomatic relations of Afghanistan for Department personnel and employees of other foreign affairs agencies preparing to serve in Afghanistan. Initially this training was provided under a regional Area Studies course. Starting in 2007, a separate, one-week Afghanistan Orientation course and a one-week Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) course were created. As of 2009, an Afghanistan Familiarization course and a one-week Diplomatic Security-led Foreign Affairs Counter Threat (FACT) course were mandatory for all personnel, including those on temporary duty. For those assigned to a PRT or field assignment, the Integrated Civil-Military Training Exercise course held at Camp Atterbury was also made mandatory.

The Familiarization course covered orientation topics such as support for high threat posts and life at post; overview of U.S. objectives in Afghanistan; Afghan history, culture, and elementary language skills; the role of Islam in Afghanistan; counternarcotics and counterinsurgency; and state building. The PRT course covered U.S. strategy, counterinsurgency, civil-military operations, working in a combat environment, U.S. and Afghan funding sources, civil society, and the Afghan government and operations. The Civil-Military course provided tailored civilian field training with former PRT military commanders and military personnel focused on working with coalition partners and Afghan officials, strengthening sub-national governance, implementing U.S. economic and social development strategy, and adapting to challenging living and working conditions. The Department also provided language training in both Dari and Pashto to employees who went into Language Designated Positions (LDPs). Employees were tested in language proficiency before they traveled to post.⁹³

For most roles, all of this training combined was just several weeks in duration. Thus, depending on their role, most civilian officials who deployed to Afghanistan received minimal training on Afghanistan, the complex conceptual and operational challenges they would face in their roles, and how to overcome them.

TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE OFTEN FELL SHORT

When it comes to complex tasks like reconstruction and development, having knowledgeable professionals who understand the nuances of their field is necessary,

but not sufficient. In many cases, even technically qualified and experienced individuals newly hired by State and USAID struggled to grasp their respective agencies' missions and operational procedures.⁹⁴ Temporary hires who had significant experience in development often had little to no experience working within the bureaucracy of the U.S. government. Because they lacked both an understanding of how to work the system and key connections in positions of power, they struggled to influence U.S. reconstruction priorities and programming.⁹⁵

The relative lack of experience of many temporary staff also reduced their oversight capabilities. The authority to oversee programming required training and certification to ensure taxpayer dollars were not wasted or misallocated, yet few of those working outside Kabul had such training.⁹⁶ USAID contracts, cooperative agreements, and grants are managed through a highly complex system. Yet even halfway through the reconstruction effort, many USAID field personnel had limited knowledge of program management processes or government contracting requirements.⁹⁷

Ultimately, without this training, the thousands of temporary USAID employees hired during the surge without USAID experience did not have the tools to monitor projects.⁹⁸ According to one former USAID official, one major problem was junior employees attempting to evaluate projects. "You can't successfully manage and evaluate a program if you haven't actually seen the country, or the program operating in it, [because] you don't know the right questions to ask," the former official said. "It was like taking someone who had never seen an elephant before, blindfolding them, and asking them to assess a real elephant based only on what they'd learned secondhand."⁹⁹

There was also a need for more comprehensive training on collaborating with other agencies, particularly in field locations where civilian personnel worked alongside military counterparts.¹⁰⁰ According to a SIGAR audit that examined the 2009 civilian uplift, civilian-military integration in the field relied primarily on ad hoc arrangements and individual personalities, even where more formal structures existed.¹⁰¹ Several civilians from State, USAID, and the USDA told SIGAR that the U.S. embassy in Kabul needed more realistic training on this issue. Both civilian and military personnel told SIGAR that they would benefit from further training on the precise dynamics and best practices of the civilian-military relationship, as well as more integrated civilian-military training. For example, one official stated that training should include more exercises requiring conflict resolution between civilian and military personnel with significant differences in organizational cultures.¹⁰²

Even in the best of circumstances, when experienced civilian and military personnel coordinated and collaborated, they still grappled with exceedingly complex surroundings where their technical competencies weren't always relevant. For example, USDA advisors selected for their expertise in agricultural fields reported that their technical skills were less relevant during their deployment than soft skills, such as communication and networking.¹⁰³ In another example of a mismatch between U.S. technical skills and Afghanistan's actual needs, U.S. military advisors tried to develop a

budgeting system for the comparatively modest needs of the Afghan Ministry of Defense. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Thomas Ross Jr. described the concept as “seeking to adapt an incredibly complex system designed to balance requirements of numerous components and agencies across over a half trillion dollars to meet the needs of a ministry that had a budget the size of an average big-city school district in the United States.”¹⁰⁴

Language barriers compounded the difficulties. Ryan Crocker, who re-established the U.S. embassy in Kabul soon after 9/11 and again led the embassy from 2011 to 2012, said of training for deployment to conflict zones that “language is first, second, and third on my list of priorities.”¹⁰⁵ Yet language training for U.S. personnel was generally insufficient or nonexistent.¹⁰⁶ Some personnel received training in the wrong language for their area of operations (Afghanistan has two official languages, Dari and Pashto).¹⁰⁷ Personnel who received advanced language training sometimes found that this training focused disproportionately on tactical-level situations rather than higher-level interactions with Afghan officials.¹⁰⁸

Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann agreed that “language is important,” but added that “if you’re not going to do language, you have to train people how to use interpreters.” He noted that the military was notoriously bad at speaking through interpreters. One advisor from DOD recalled only one training session on how to use an interpreter.¹⁰⁹ Beyond language ability itself, Ambassador Neumann said it was important to know how to communicate in a culturally relevant way, and to ask the right questions. For example, biographies of Afghan government officials generally only listed the jobs that person had held, but “you want to know what side his daddy fought on, who killed his uncle, [and] then you can get talking to him,” said Neumann. There was “a whole set of political programming going on, and we were completely oblivious to it,” he added.¹¹⁰



U.S. and Afghan National Army soldiers sit with village elders to discuss the latest developments in Kopak village, Logar Province, on April 22, 2010. (DOD photo by Sgt. Russell Gilchrest, U.S. Army)

Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands (AFPAK Hands) Program

In 2009, DOD created the Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands (AFPAK Hands) program to develop a cadre of experts specializing in the language, culture, processes, and challenges facing Afghanistan and Pakistan. The AFPAK Hands program was staffed with uniformed personnel who were either nominated or selected by their services or who volunteered, as well as civilian employees from DOD. AFPAK Hands were meant to receive extensive cultural and language training, including lessons on the history, culture, governance, and political dynamics of Afghanistan.¹¹¹ AFPAK Hands served three consecutive one-year tours: an initial deployment to Afghanistan, an Afghanistan-related posting in the United States, and a second deployment to Afghanistan.¹¹²

The AFPAK Hands training consisted of 16 weeks of language training, 2 weeks of cultural and regional training, and 6 to 10 weeks of combat skills training before the first deployment. Before their second deployment, AFPAK Hands completed 6 to 8 weeks of service combat skills training and 14 weeks of language sustainment training.¹¹³ Although AFPAK Hands received relatively significant language and cultural training, it was not always clear how that training was meant to be used. According to one former AFPAK Hand, Hands operated in a guidance vacuum of sorts, relying on their own initiative, ideas,

priorities, and efforts.¹¹⁴ Another former Hand told SIGAR that the assignment of positions and duties was “like throwing darts at a dartboard.”¹¹⁵

Crucially, AFPAK Hands were not trained on how to be advisors, yet they often served as ministerial advisors on subjects in which they had no specific education or experience.¹¹⁶ One former AFPAK Hand told SIGAR that the advanced language training they received “was very practical and [was used] in order to gain insights from the interpreters that the coalition hired.” But this language training was not tailored to ministerial level advising and, according to former Hands, was better suited for the tactical level. Some former AFPAK Hands observed that they were trained in combat skills, but there was no training in how to develop relationships and advise a counterpart. They further noted that the process used to screen AFPAK Hands did not select individuals with the right disposition needed to be an effective advisor.¹¹⁷

As with security-sector advisor roles generally, becoming an AfPak Hand was rarely career-enhancing.¹¹⁸ According to Ambassador Neumann, the armed services from which Hands were drawn were generally opposed to the program for pulling qualified officers from other important assignments, which meant “careers suffered.”¹¹⁹

DOD ADVISORS WERE OFTEN POORLY TRAINED AND INEXPERIENCED

Although State is the lead U.S. agency for police assistance, it did not have a dedicated team of deployable police development experts.¹²⁰ Consequently, even though the U.S. military had no doctrine on how to reconstruct a foreign civilian police force, all police assistance and training programs were transferred from State to DOD in 2005. In some respects, DOD was best positioned for the task: It had the manpower and the force protection to finally implement a program of advising and mentoring police units in the field, and it quickly took many of the necessary organizational steps to assume that role. But that promising start almost immediately ran into fundamental problems.¹²¹

DOD lacked in-house expertise on civilian police training, and often deployed soldiers who had no experience in community policing, law enforcement, or rule of law.

According to former ambassador Neumann:

The United States has no national police training doctrine nor any pool of advisors for police training. When police training was given to contractors, they had to rely on either retired police personnel or very new recruits from U.S. police forces who were not deeply vested in their profession and pay. Police forces generally do not want to release their personnel for training. The military could draw on military police personnel, but that was inadequate in numbers and not all military police battalions necessarily have the full range of policing skills that need to be taught.¹²²

This meant that most advisors assigned to a police mentoring team lacked even an operational understanding of Western legal norms, much less the various legal traditions engrained in Afghanistan’s criminal code or the role of informal justice systems—concepts they learned on the job, if at all.¹²³ Some soldiers reported that their training gave them no instruction on Afghan National Police tactics, equipment, systems, or logistics. One advisor commented in an end-of-tour survey that predeployment training “did not teach [U.S. advisors] anything about the systems that [the ANP] use for personnel, intelligence, operations or supply,” even though “90 percent of mentoring is spent working with [Afghan] systems.”¹²⁴

Some soldiers were not assigned to be an advisor on police mentoring teams until they were deployed to Afghanistan, and therefore received no advisor training at all. Other U.S. soldiers were shifted from mentoring the Afghan National Army to police mentoring teams—so even if training was offered, the advisor would not have received police-oriented training. Maj. Gen. Robert Cone noted: “We melted down a lot of [security force] units and used them to form mentor teams. In doing that . . . we were not able to get them police mentor trained.” When Afghan National Army mentors were redirected to the Afghan National Police, he said, “I [would] get asked questions such as, ‘Sir, you knew a year ago we were going to be police trainers . . . but we weren’t police mentor trained. How could this happen?’”¹²⁵ In the absence of a formal predeployment training program, some advisors were left to their own study efforts to prepare for their mission. In desperation, some turned to television shows like “Cops” and “NCIS” to learn basic policing techniques.¹²⁶

Further up the chain, ministerial advisors deployed without appropriate training. DOD assumed responsibility for advising the Ministry of Interior despite having no programs for developing advisors at the ministerial level.¹²⁷ To address this issue, in 2010 DOD created the Ministry of Defense Advisors (MODA) program. MODA deployed civilian experts who received extensive predeployment training and served longer tours. However, MODA advisors never accounted for more than 15 percent of the advisory mission. MODA also created tension between DOD civilian and military personnel—the result of the emphasis MODA advisors placed on increasing governing capacity versus the military’s focus on military operations and fighting capabilities. Ultimately, no permanent organization within DOD had responsibility for preparing personnel for the ministerial advising mission in Afghanistan.¹²⁸

Training personnel for ministerial advising in the security sector is demanding. As noted in a 2015 Rand report, “Advisors require substantive training in language and cultural skills, coalition force structure, partner nation governing institutions, command and control, and logistics processes.”¹²⁹ A former CSTC-A commander emphasized that “if someone is deploying to be an advisor, part of the predeployment training requirement must include training on how to be an advisor. An individual who is coming here to be an advisor better understand Afghanistan and her culture.”¹³⁰ However, throughout the conflict, military advisors did not receive specific training on advisor fundamentals or defense institutional capacity building. Advisors reported that the predeployment training they received focused largely on “combat survival skills, without sufficient emphasis on Afghan-centric mentoring and training skills specific to their assignments.”¹³¹ The result was that DOD persistently deployed untrained and underprepared U.S. military officers advising the highest echelons of the ministries of defense and interior.¹³²

In-country training did not compensate for the lack of predeployment training. For many advisors, in-country training was limited to a single half-day advisor course. During one iteration of the course, only 5 of the 26 newly arrived advisors had received previous training at an advisor training center. Further, SIGAR found that DOD did not ensure that all its advisors completed their required predeployment training. To educate themselves, some advisors studied on their own to prepare for their mission, an approach most described as inadequate. Some departing units offered instruction to incoming personnel on procedures, but most incoming units preferred their own processes—even if it meant providing guidance to their Afghan counterparts that contradicted what their predecessors had said.¹³³

The problem of uniformed advisors who never completed advisor training before deployment was flagged at the highest levels of DOD: Former Resolute Support commander General John Nicholson noted it in 2017, as did Maj. Gen. Richard Kaiser, former commanding general of CSTC-A, later the same year.¹³⁴ In mid-2017, over a decade after DOD assumed responsibility for advising the Ministry of Interior, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis directed military branches to provide more trained advisors to Resolute Support because Resolute Support had informed DOD that many of its uniformed advisors arrived without any advisor training.¹³⁵

Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB)

Starting in 2017, the U.S. military took several steps to institutionalize combat advisor teams within the services. In February 2017, the U.S. Army announced the creation of six SFABs to serve three important functions: to free up conventional units preoccupied with warfighting, to capture security force assistance expertise, and to complement the U.S. Special Forces that typically perform this work but in smaller numbers. In emergency situations, SFABs are structured to transition from an advisor unit to a fully capable combat unit.¹³⁶

On paper, SFABs consisted of about 800 personnel organized in 36 multifunctional advisor teams, each composed of 12 advisors and 8 security personnel. Each advisor team was staffed with a variety of military personnel, including a commander, a medic, a communications officer, a mechanic, an intelligence analyst, and specialists in logistics, operations, and explosives. In Afghanistan, SFABs were initially designed to partner with the ANDSF at the corps level and below, accompany ANDSF units on operations, and coordinate access to intelligence assets, sustainment, close air support, and medical evacuation.¹³⁷

After a soldier was selected as a member of an SFAB, that soldier was required to go through the U.S. Army's Military Advisor Training Academy at what is now Fort Moore, Georgia (formerly Fort Benning). After that, members of the SFAB attended additional advisor training at the Joint Readiness Training Center at what is now Fort Johnson, Louisiana (formerly Fort Polk). SFAB personnel also received home-station language and culture training, and those SFABs slated for Afghanistan returned to the Joint Readiness Training Center to conduct a mission readiness exercise geared toward advising the ANDSF.¹³⁸

Military Advisor Training Academy instructors initially designed a six-week training program to train advisors at the ministerial level, but the U.S. Army Chief of Staff and the Secretary of Defense informed them that the training needed to be altered to meet the SFAB mission of providing combat field advising instead. With a limited amount of time to change the program of instruction, the 1st SFAB that deployed to Afghanistan received a 10-day training program on the context of operations, cultural considerations, the NATO Resolute Support Mission, the use of interpreters and translators, Afghan interactions, the role of an advisor, force protection, and security force assistance operations. The 1st SFAB received limited language training and no training on small unit planning. The training course provided limited information on ANDSF systems, weapons, and structure, and was not tailored to the environment the SFAB would be operating in. For example, during one training scenario, SFAB personnel were tasked with advising the ministries of defense and interior on topics such as fiscal sustainability and force allocations—issues no operational or tactical unit would face.¹³⁹

Recognizing issues with previous pre-deployment courses, the 2nd SFAB received Theater-Specific Advisor Training, which was tailored completely to advising the ANDSF. It exposed advisors to ANDSF structures, processes, and weapon systems and partnered with advisors from the 1st SFAB to hear lessons learned and best practices from advising the ANDSF.¹⁴⁰ Although this was an improvement over previous field advising efforts, there was still not enough theater-specific training focused on the ANDSF's security institutions, systems, processes, and weapons.¹⁴¹

Although SFABs were created too late in the war, their inception was an important reform to a long line of ad hoc solutions to U.S. efforts at training and advising the ANDSF, particularly at the tactical level. Currently, six SFABs operate across all Geographic Combatant Commands, including the U.S. Southern Command, U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and the Army National Guard. Each SFAB has approximately 816 soldiers and is broken down into 60 multifunctional teams consisting of 4 to 8 soldiers each. The teams provide support on a range of issues including maneuver advising, field artillery advising, engineer advising, and logistics advising.¹⁴²

LESSON 3

Growing insecurity forced civilian agencies to depend on the military for various needs, creating a conflict as immediate military priorities clashed with the long-term political nature of reconstruction efforts.



CHAPTER 4

INTERAGENCY COORDINATION AMID CONFLICT

The deployment of personnel was further complicated as security conditions worsened and civilian agencies increasingly relied on the military for security, food, housing, and transportation. Widespread insecurity also resulted in DOD assuming an outsized role in reconstruction activities, including tasks generally outside its expertise. Military deployments are typically finite, and their success is measured in terms of achieving specific military objectives within a certain timeframe; reconstruction and development are long-term endeavors that require consistent effort over many years. By relying on the military, the United States was bound by the constraints of military deployments, resulting in rushed and incomplete projects that lacked long-term vision and sustainability.

Members of Khost Provincial Reconstruction Team meet with engineers and beneficiaries on May 2, 2010, to discuss an upcoming infrastructure project. (DOD photo)

CIVILIAN PERSONNEL RELIED ON DOD FOR SECURITY AND LOGISTICS

The absence of violence was a critical precondition for everything U.S. personnel tried to do in Afghanistan—yet the U.S. effort to rebuild the country took place while the country was being torn apart.¹⁴³ As the insurgency spread and security deteriorated across the country, the mobility and physical access of U.S. personnel to project locations became more constrained.¹⁴⁴

Civilian agencies lack the capacity to manage the security needs of large-scale programs when operating in a high-threat environment.¹⁴⁵ The civilian surge, for example,

was almost entirely reliant on the military for security and logistical support.¹⁴⁶ This dependency was in part due to the low institutional tolerance for risk that prevented development personnel from leaving their offices and bases to monitor projects and assess general conditions.¹⁴⁷ According to David Chu, former undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, military officers were generally uncomfortable with the idea of civilians in hazardous situations, but the civilians themselves were willing to go. There was “a terrible misunderstanding with the DOD of the willingness of our civilians to go into combat zones,” he told SIGAR.¹⁴⁸

Supporting civilian programming was frequently a lower priority for military forces than targeting insurgents.¹⁴⁹ One senior USAID official told SIGAR that many USAID field staff could not get out of their compounds or bases because civilian movements for development purposes were considered a relatively low priority for military security details.¹⁵⁰

The resulting limitations affected everything from the implementation and monitoring of projects, to accessing information necessary to vet grant recipients, to building relationships with local partners.¹⁵¹ They also impeded U.S. personnel from engaging with the society they aimed to rebuild. As former British diplomat and politician Rory Stewart told SIGAR, there was a great deal of “risk aversion about people spending a lot of time outside the wire.” Stewart said that this created a situation in which “you end up speaking to a tiny expat elite or are very much held prisoner by your Afghan interpreter.” Some interpreters also had their own biases and possible ulterior motives.¹⁵²

Military forces were under immense pressure by policymakers to make fast progress. The same pressure also affected civilian personnel.¹⁵³ For example, there was significant friction between military forces and the civilians tasked with stabilization programming. In theory, personnel with the International Security Assistance Force would choose the areas to clear in partnership with its civilian counterparts, and together they would plan and execute the holding and building of those areas. In practice, however, the military made (or had considerable influence on) most of the key decisions on the ground, including deciding which districts to clear, determining when communities were ready for civilian stabilization programming, and deciding what kind of projects should be implemented in an attempt to win local hearts and minds.¹⁵⁴

Because civilian officials in the field were dependent on the military for food, housing, and transportation, they had little choice but to go along, even if the military insisted that they implement a project in places far too dangerous for the programs to succeed.¹⁵⁵ In one case, a senior USAID official described to SIGAR how poor security prevented him from simply visiting a road construction project:

The military asked us to build a 38-kilometer road in Arghandab, Kandahar, and five kilometers in, our implementing partner told us it's not safe enough to go further. The military asked why we stopped, so we all flew out there to take a look, and it was so insecure that our landing zone was under fire, and we had to turn back. Think about that. We were supposed to build roads in an area so dangerous that armed U.S. military helicopters could not even land nearby.¹⁵⁶

As insecurity worsened, limiting the mobility of civilian personnel throughout the country, DOD took on a more prominent role in implementing reconstruction programs.

DOD ASSUMED AN OUTSIZED ROLE IN RECONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES

DOD's resources and staffing far exceed those of State and USAID, both in Afghanistan and around the world. In Afghanistan, this abundance of resources had the practical effect of putting DOD in charge. At the height of the Obama administration's troop surge, for example, a total of 99,800 U.S. military forces were stationed in Afghanistan, compared to just under 600 USAID personnel. Although a variety of civilian agencies contributed personnel to the mission in Afghanistan, combined staff numbers never came close to approaching the military labor force—and this was despite the overtly political nature of the reconstruction mission. This mismatch in resources often elevated military objectives over civilian ones.¹⁵⁷

As DOD assumed more responsibility for planning and implementing reconstruction programming, civilian agencies either resisted or were unable to keep up. Both responses had the effect of convincing DOD that civilian agencies were not nimble or capable enough to effectively implement certain projects in insecure environments.¹⁵⁸ According to one senior USAID official, "We had to get in line. The military was in charge. We were always chasing the dragon—always behind, never good enough in the military's eyes."¹⁵⁹ Yet having more resources to do reconstruction work does not mean that the military is ideally suited to take the lead. Inherently political reconstruction campaigns should be led by political institutions such as State. Yet U.S. policymakers had no other viable option but to lean on the military and simply pretend State held the reins.¹⁶⁰



Production agriculture specialists from the Iowa National Guard's 734th Agribusiness Development Team till the ground inside the greenhouse at the Chowkay Demonstration Farm in Chowkay District, Kunar Province, on December 5, 2010. (U.S. Air Force photo by Capt. Peter Shinn)



U.S. and Afghan officials gather to celebrate the delivery of wheat seed, fertilizer, and fruit trees as an alternative crop to poppy in Herat on February 21, 2009. (DOD photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Monica R. Nelson)

The Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), for example, epitomized one of DOD's boldest ventures in filling the reconstruction void. The program aimed to provide "urgent humanitarian or reconstruction projects," in hopes of reducing violence. Starting in 2009, the program encouraged military commanders to spend money in a way that would benefit the Afghan population through projects that could later be transferred to the Afghan government—in theory, improving that government's legitimacy.¹⁶¹

In practice, CERP implementation was plagued by a shortage of well-trained and experienced personnel. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed a need for more personnel with special skill sets outside traditional, conventional military occupations, such as civil affairs. Recognizing the demand for units with "softer" skills, DOD made the decision in 2006 to sharply increase the number of civil affairs units—yet the demand still outstripped supply. Although civil affairs was the military's premier specialization for stability and humanitarian operations, many civil affairs personnel were unfamiliar with CERP and received insufficient training on its use.¹⁶²

Once DOD deemed money a "weapon system" in 2009, commanders were often judged on the amount of CERP money they spent.¹⁶³ Abundant funds, weak guidance, and pressure from policymakers to spend and generate fast results contributed to poor project planning and distracted from the need to assess project impacts.¹⁶⁴ A senior civil affairs officer pointed out, "In a resource-restricted environment, if you want your project to be funded, it has to be rigorous and thoughtful. If the resources are infinite, there is no need to use your head or be accountable. If we don't have to make any tradeoffs, priorities, or sacrifices, why would we think at all? If no one has to ask why, the ideas are going to be awful. And that's what happened."¹⁶⁵

CERP generally suffered from poor data collection and a lack of meaningful measures of effectiveness.¹⁶⁶ In complex environments, causal processes of change are usually not

well understood. Yet assumptions about those causal processes are often used to justify programming. In such environments, many projects are likely to be implemented because they are believed—rather than proven—to be effective. For example, a senior civil affairs officer said his division staff would regularly tell the commander of the International Security Assistance Force that CERP was “a terrible development tool, but it’s a great stabilization tool.” The problem, he added, was that “we never knew if it was true.”¹⁶⁷

A former senior official in charge of CERP implementation confirmed to SIGAR that there was no formal way to report on project impact. “When you request a project, you include the expected impact you think the project will have,” he said, “but if we built a school, we never went back to do a nose count of the students at the school.”¹⁶⁸ One senior civil affairs officer said, “At one point, I told my brigade that if we are going to ignore impact, then the smartest thing to do is nothing. I got crickets. ‘We can’t build nothing,’ they said.”¹⁶⁹

Ultimately, civilian agencies simply could not compete with DOD’s resources. DOD ended up making critical decisions that should have been made by U.S. civilian officials with expertise in navigating complex political dynamics.¹⁷⁰ With insufficient attention to impact and a frequent assumption that more money spent would translate into more progress, these projects may have exacerbated the very problems commanders hoped to address.¹⁷¹ For example, power brokers with access to coalition projects became kings with patronage to sell, and stabilization projects created or reinvigorated conflicts between and among communities. In turn, Afghans who were marginalized in this competition for access and resources found natural allies in the Taliban, who used that support to divide and conquer communities the coalition was keen to win over.¹⁷²

LESSON 4

Brief assignments and weak handovers for both military and civilian personnel eroded institutional memory and programmatic continuity.



CHAPTER 5 REPLACEMENT

Short tours of duty, typically lasting less than a year for both civilian and military positions, limited the ability of staff to build a nuanced understanding of their role, their environment, and the Afghans they worked with. By the time they found their bearings and built important relationships, they began preparing to depart. With personnel taking critical information with them as they rotated out, newly arriving staff made the same mistakes as their predecessors.¹⁷³

An empty meeting room in an Afghan National Army facility. (U.S. Army photo)

Even though they were harmful to the reconstruction effort, short-term assignments may have been unavoidable. U.S. officials created arbitrary timelines, including the U.S. surge, for the complex task of transforming Afghan institutions, relationships among its powerbrokers, and Taliban-contested communities. These timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and created perverse incentives to spend money quickly.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, shifts in U.S. domestic politics over the course of the reconstruction effort turned the reconstruction into what amounted to 10 two-year efforts, creating a perpetual—and paradoxical—sense of both imminent departure and permanent presence.¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, the absence of a clear and stable timeline for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan created a ripple effect in personnel management. It resulted in shorter deployments, frequent rotations, and a lack of continuity in personnel assignments.



Afghans sit on food donations in the back of a pick-up before distributing to needy families in Nawa District, Helmand Province, in September 2010. (Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Mark Fayloga)

THE IMPACT OF SHORT TOURS ON RECONSTRUCTION PROGRAMS

Short rotations of personnel had a predictable negative effect on the quality of U.S. programs. For example, civilian staffing for rebuilding Afghanistan’s private sector was stymied by the need to do more frequent recruiting from an increasingly limited pool of qualified applicants, raising the probability of delayed activities when positions were not filled. The lack of candidates meant that vacated positions were often filled by unqualified newcomers.¹⁷⁶ In areas flooded with programming, it often took months for new personnel to understand all the activity in their area of operations. National-level programming run from Kabul was particularly challenging to track. One USAID stabilization official admitted, “Only halfway into my tour did I know the lay of the land and what projects were going on where.”¹⁷⁷

The challenges posed by short tours also weakened the ability of programs to address the needs of Afghan women and girls. Gender analysis, an essential component of the gender mainstreaming strategy, was often delayed or ineffective, in part because of the limited time personnel had to commit to the exercise. As noted by Alexandria Huerta, the former gender point of contact in the agriculture office at USAID/Afghanistan, having a good analysis and using that data effectively required technical specialists and gender experts sitting down and “taking the time to get it right.” However, in Afghanistan, “where everything is running at warp speed, time is something you don’t always have. So, you oftentimes end up with mediocre analyses or results.”¹⁷⁸

The quick turnover also resulted in a lack of continuity and ownership. Contracting officers—U.S. officials with the authority to enter into contracts on behalf of the U.S. government—could approve projects knowing that they would not be in the country when the project was done and that their replacements would have little knowledge of or interest in the project they inherited.¹⁷⁹ Changes in contracting officers and their representatives “can be disruptive,” noted one chief of party (the nongovernmental

representative responsible for the supervision and performance of the duties undertaken by a contractor), since it could take three to four months to familiarize the new contracting officer's representative with the details of the contract.¹⁸⁰ Another chief of party noted that such changes also meant a risk of "continual redesign." In some cases, implementing partners attributed modifications and changes directly to turnover in the contracting officer's representative.¹⁸¹

THE IMPACT OF SHORT TOURS ON OVERSIGHT

Rapid personnel turnover affected the ability of contracting officer's representatives to perform oversight and management functions.¹⁸² According to one implementing partner project's chief of party, "there were three sequential [contracting officer's representatives], each with a different vision of report writing and communication intimacy. Every year, [the implementing partner] had to revamp their reporting because the [contracting officer's representative] wanted something different. . . . Sometimes the monthly reports were three pages, sometimes they were 30. Sometimes they were more than 1,000. It varied by the [contracting officer's representative]."¹⁸³

THE IMPACT OF SHORT TOURS ON TRAINING FOR THE AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES

Short deployment lengths of military and civilian units training the ANDSF had an especially corrosive effect, as Afghans regularly had to adjust to a new unit's expectations and training and/or advising program. Responsibilities for developing the ANDSF's capabilities were divided among multiple services, each of which assigned these tasks to advisors usually deployed for a year or less. DOD struggled to manage the frequent turnover of trainers.¹⁸⁴ From 2003 to 2009, eight different Army National Guard units assumed responsibility for the training of the Afghan National Army. With few standard operating procedures or consistent staffing policies in place, incoming units were unable to build upon previously established relationships or take advantage of lessons learned.¹⁸⁵

Quick turnaround of trainers also created redundancies in the military's supply chain. In 2013, for instance, incoming personnel at CSTC-A, the unit responsible for the ANDSF's development, requested \$195.2 million for specialized military cargo trucks on behalf of the ANA. They were unaware that the White House and the National Security Council had already approved an identical request placed by their predecessors. Under pressure to allocate funds quickly and without knowing they were duplicating an already-filled order, CSTC-A personnel went ahead and procured the trucks anyway, even though the Afghan government did not need them. A similar event occurred in 2016 when a new rotation of CSTC-A personnel submitted a request for ammunition without realizing their predecessors had already deemed the order unnecessary.¹⁸⁶

The short rotations reinforced the perception among Afghans that the international presence lacked a long-term commitment. Ambassador Neumann told SIGAR that from an Afghan

perspective, “Foreigners [Americans] would constantly change, and change priorities, so Afghans never knew what they should commit to and did not want to get involved in any one particular system.”¹⁸⁷ The coalition advising mission even coined the term “mentor fatigue” to describe a sentiment frequently felt by their Afghan counterparts.¹⁸⁸

This perception had implications for building trust and credibility. According to Robert Prillaman, a former MODA advisor, progress in Afghanistan “was heavily dependent on relationships and a lot of time. If you had a lot of churn with advisors every 6, 9, 12 months, as was common with military advisors, you were constantly introducing people. So the Afghan military had become accustomed to that, and they spent a lot of time getting to know new advisors. You have to have a level of trust for them to listen to what you recommend.”¹⁸⁹ Generally, new ANDSF advisors had to spend several months building trust and rapport with their counterparts before they could be effective, meaning that advisors on short tours often had only about six to nine months of effective advising time available—assuming they were qualified in the first place.¹⁹⁰

SHORT TOURS WERE A PROBLEM, BUT IT REMAINS UNCLEAR WHETHER LONGER TOURS WERE THE SOLUTION

While constant churn in personnel led to shortcomings in the delivery of reconstruction assistance and its oversight, longer tours alone may not be a solution.¹⁹¹ In theory, longer tours of duty can foster a deeper understanding of complex local dynamics. An extended tour may enable personnel to build more effective working relationships with local communities and stakeholders. Increased continuity among personnel can help them become more attuned to the evolving needs of the local population. Despite all this, it remains an open question whether longer tours were really the solution.

Former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman noted that while short tours are a problem, “the bigger question is what people are actually doing, are they doing something great, are they are good at their jobs? If they are just there to be there, short tours do not matter.” For the most part, he said, people were confined to the U.S. embassy compound, which reduced their experience and connections. “It’s no wonder nobody knows any Afghans,” he said—and given those constraints, he added, longer tours in the same situation would not fix this.¹⁹² According to former British diplomat and politician Rory Stewart, extending the length of tours to increase cultural knowledge “only works if the diplomat is empowered to leave the embassy.” Time spent “in country” is only valuable for cultural gains if diplomats can interact directly with locals and establish personal relationships, he added. Mr. Stewart did not, however, claim that greater knowledge could have changed the outcome, but that it would have allowed a greater understanding and perhaps a better, more limited strategy.¹⁹³

Some personnel were able to deploy for longer periods, which afforded them greater experience to advise on various aspects of the reconstruction process. But when their opinions diverged from conventional thinking, they could be seen as disruptive. According to Stewart, “peoples’ minds are very shaped by what they believe it politically

possible,” and staffers often arrived in Afghanistan with preconceived ideas and inside-the-Beltway conventional wisdom. Moreover, promotions were awarded “on the basis of being inherently optimistic,” not for challenging assumptions.¹⁹⁴

Security analyst Jonathan Schroden observed that NATO had a handful of civilians who had spent “seven to eight years, some even a decade or longer” advising NATO’s headquarters in Kabul as part of the Afghanistan Assessment Group. “What was disappointing,” Schroden said, was that “when you would meet them, they were never empowered. . . . No one took advantage of their institutional longevity, nobody listened to them. The sense I got was, the longer you were in Afghanistan, the more you got a sense of how hard it would be to do anything there.” Schroden recalled that when he asked longer-term experts questions, they would tell him, “Yeah, that’s a good idea on the surface, but let me explain some nuance.”¹⁹⁵

Newcomers perceived this as pessimism and a lack of initiative and faith. “Every new person is full of energy and ideas,” said Schroden, a feeling “that I’m going to do great things during my months-long tour.” Personnel who had been there longer could be viewed as “sticks in the mud, trying to slow us down. There was such pressure from the political level down to move the ball. Every commander said, ‘I have two years to get this done,’ so there was not much appetite for anyone to say, ‘time out.’”¹⁹⁶ To deploy personnel who could stress test assumptions and strategies on the ground, there needed to be enough long-term experts who could not be dismissed as dissenters, but rather as generators of a rival narrative that could not be ignored.



Afghan government officials and members of Provincial Reconstruction Team Zabol meet with elders in Safidar village in Zabol Province in February 2011 to discuss the distribution of winter supplies. (DOD photo by Staff Sgt. Brian Ferguson, U.S. Air Force)

EFFORTS TO COUNTERACT SHORT TOURS

There were some attempts at fixing the problem of short tours.¹⁹⁷ State, for example, developed a menu of proposed Afghanistan assignments in which personnel could choose 18- or 24-month “hybrid” tours in both Afghanistan and Washington.¹⁹⁸ But this solution would have required an overhaul of the agency’s entire personnel management structure. It was met with stiff bureaucratic resistance and ultimately failed.¹⁹⁹ State and other agencies implemented incentive programs to encourage personnel to stay in the country for longer.²⁰⁰ Sometimes these incentive programs worked, but they did not always mesh with existing human resource policies.²⁰¹ The timing of the bidding processes through which State personnel selected their next assignment, for example, forced staffers to make a decision about extending their tour in Afghanistan soon after arriving, giving them little time to make an informed choice.²⁰²

THE IMPACT OF SHORT TOURS ON INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Short deployments often resulted in a lack of institutional memory, where departing individuals took their newly acquired expertise with them. New personnel were constantly arriving with little or no knowledge of what their predecessors were doing, the problems they faced, or what worked and what did not work.²⁰³ Ultimately, every agency suffered from frequent staff turnover, leaving successors to start from scratch and make similar mistakes all over again.²⁰⁴

But even longer tours would have to end eventually, which still made turnover a critical vulnerability. For two decades in Afghanistan, the U.S. government struggled to find a way to ensure that departing personnel had time to hand over their work to their replacement.²⁰⁵ Yet as late as 2017, the U.S. military still had no institutionalized mechanism to address this issue.²⁰⁶ U.S. and international police advisors frequently had little to no contact with their predecessors or successors, a fact that created large gaps in institutional memory and unpredictable shifts in the priorities of police assistance programs.²⁰⁷ As reported by RAND, the lack of proper communication and coordination between units was described by Special Operations Advisory Group advisors as causing “advisor fratricide,” where, without the ability to “mentor the mentors,” incoming advisors provided advice to their Afghan counterparts that contradicted what their predecessor had said.²⁰⁸

The frequent turnover of advisors and senior leaders was also ill-suited for a counterinsurgency campaign, where understanding the local context and building relationships are essential. Jason Dempsey, a former special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and advisor to the Afghan Border Police, wrote in 2015, “By changing out entire units so frequently, our policy has guaranteed that military leaders rotating through Afghanistan have never had more than a superficial understanding of the political environment they are trying to shape.”²⁰⁹ Retired Command Sergeant Major Robert Bush emphasized a similar point, describing the “acclimatization” and “training wheels” phase required by newly arrived units as ill-suited for any type of campaign

where cultural knowledge is critical. He wrote, “One tenet of COIN, and for any type operations, is to know the populace, and one-year tours . . . did not give organizations or the community they were supporting the time to get to know one another. [One unit] leaves and another unit would come in and begin the learning phase all over again.”²¹⁰

According to a U.S. military officer who served in Afghanistan, new units arriving in theater often made changes “before they fully [understood] all the implications of their actions.”²¹¹ This was affirmed by a senior defense contractor, who noted that while some attempts were made at educating incoming personnel on previous procedures, many incoming units desired to “do it their own way.”²¹² Ambassador Neumann observed a similar “American tendency and certainly a military tendency to come in and want to redesign things.” Longer tours would lead to “more continuity in the campaign plan,” he said. “Whether it’s the right plan is a different question.”²¹³

Knowing that their deployment would last just a year, many personnel felt they had to demonstrate progress in a short amount of time. One senior U.S. official noted how a new unit would arrive in Afghanistan, assess the situation, and say, “This is going to be difficult.” Halfway through their deployment, they would say progress was being made. By the time they left, they’d determined that a corner had been turned and goals had been met. The unit replacing them would come in, assess the situation, and say, “This is going to be difficult,” and the whole process would start over. As for the civilians based in Kabul, according to journalist Christina Lamb, “it was as if [they believed] history had only started when they had arrived a few months earlier.”²¹⁴



CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

In its effort to rebuild Afghanistan for over 20 years, U.S. government agencies suffered from a chronic lack of institutional preparation that consistently prevented them from getting the right people into the right jobs at the right times. Throughout those two decades, there were many opportunities for State, USAID, and DOD to build their own state-building institutions to meet the task. But politically driven timelines that hindered long-term thinking made it all but impossible to invest in our own institutions to effectively rebuild Afghanistan.²¹⁵ Perhaps the greatest strategic liability created by that short-term mentality was its effect on the recruitment, training, coordination, and replacement of personnel who oversaw the country's reconstruction.

Many of the personnel who did deploy were too unqualified to recognize how U.S. efforts were exacerbating corruption and conflict, and too inexperienced in navigating their own bureaucracies to sound the alarm even if they had noticed. The U.S. agencies that deployed these personnel did not prepare even those who were qualified for their assignments to work effectively with other agencies in a contingency environment, to understand the Afghan government and population, or to evaluate the impact of their work. Instead, U.S. agencies gave these personnel a box of broken tools, expected miracles from them, and then discouraged bad news when success proved elusive.

Addressing these challenges is complex. Strengthening one link in a chain may prove immaterial if the others remain weak. Predictable links that would need strengthening

Fire Controlman 1st Class Andrew Eden, ISAF Joint Command disclosure officer, right, and French Air Force Sgt. Lydia Briand prepare to raise the American Flag here at Kabul International Airport, Afghanistan, Sept. 11, 2010. (ISAF photo by U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Joseph Swafford)

on the personnel chain include finding more qualified candidates, improving their training and coordination, retaining high-performing individuals and keeping them in country longer, and ensuring they are able to hand off critical knowledge and expertise to their replacements. Yet implementing only one of these reforms, even perfectly, would simply change the point of failure, not remove it. Giving U.S. government personnel the tools to succeed would require addressing all of these links effectively.

Fatigue from the failures of state-building efforts in Afghanistan may make improving the entire chain a daunting prospect. It may be tempting to think the U.S. government can avoid failure by simply declining all such missions in the future. Yet as SIGAR has noted previously, after Vietnam, the U.S. government incorrectly predicted that it would not conduct large-scale, state-building efforts again. For better or worse, rebuilding institutions in conflict-affected environments will likely remain a component of U.S. national security objectives.²¹⁶

The prospect is not notional. In the two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Congress has appropriated more than \$113 billion for Ukraine, including \$35 billion for security assistance. USAID has designated \$18 billion in direct budget support for the government of Ukraine.²¹⁷ Overseeing these enormous expenditures, which have been made in such an unprecedentedly short period, requires significant staff time from U.S. personnel. Compromises in the qualifications, training, and rotations of these personnel will pose challenges similar to those seen in Afghanistan, no matter where those staff are located.

Moreover, the collapse of Afghanistan, and the ensuing crisis of evacuating so many U.S. personnel and Afghan allies, demonstrates that having systems in place for staffing emergencies is not unique to reconstruction missions. State's March 2022 after-action review for its non-combatant evacuation operation in Afghanistan described how the agency lacks sufficient staff, equipment, and surge capacity to manage crises effectively.²¹⁸

To that end, some experts are offering ideas that would address all manner of crises at U.S. civilian agencies where constraints on personnel and training are most pronounced. For example, a number of former senior State officials—including Ambassador Marc Grossman (former special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan), Ambassador Marcie Ries (minister-counselor in Baghdad during the U.S. surge in Iraq), and Ambassador Pat Kennedy (former under secretary for management)—have advocated for a Diplomatic Reserve Corps. If realized, it would comprise 1,000 reservists, ranging from State retirees to experts from outside government. All reservists would serve three-year terms and be subject to deployment if called up. Altogether, recruitment, examination and screening, medical and security clearances, onboarding, training, and management would cost an estimated \$42 million annually.²¹⁹ (After conducting a feasibility study at the request of Congress, State determined that a less ambitious reserve corps at half the cost would be more appropriate and sustainable.²²⁰) SIGAR has recommended similar personnel solutions if the United States is to ever succeed in rebuilding institutions in conflict-affected environments.²²¹

In meetings with SIGAR, many observers in and out of government have raised concerns about creating a new, permanent government entity to address unspecified future contingency challenges. Some have implied that 1,000 reservists for \$42 million per year is excessive or unrealistic. For perspective, however, as of 2016, DOD had 6,600 military musicians in bands across the armed forces—nearly half of them reservists or national guard—at an annual cost of more than \$300 million.²²² Still, the current appetite for an investment in a diplomatic reserve corps may be limited. As a result, SIGAR offers a number of more modest common-sense matters for consideration below.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION FOR STATE, USAID, AND DOD

1. **U.S. agencies should consider requiring personnel departing their post to write for their replacements a detailed exit memo to be included in a searchable database.**

SIGAR has long raised concerns about the loss of knowledge caused by short tours and rapid staff turnover. Short tours of duty, typically lasting less than a year for both civilian and military positions, limited the ability of staff to build a nuanced understanding of their role, their environment, and the Afghans they worked with. By the time they found their bearings and built important relationships, they began preparing to depart. With personnel taking critical information with them as they rotated out, the reconstruction effort lost key institutional knowledge, as newly arriving staff made the same mistakes as their predecessors.

Writing an exit memo should be a standard practice for outgoing personnel and mandatory reading for incoming replacements. An exit memo would describe the most important opportunities and challenges in dealing with host nation government and non-government stakeholders, navigating the U.S. interagency, and improving the quality of U.S. programs. Exit memos thus offer a practical solution to address the challenges of maintaining continuity and institutional knowledge in dynamic and conflict-affected environments like Afghanistan. As described in written comments to SIGAR (Appendix C), USAID has already established a process for ensuring “handover/exit memos,” but it is not mandatory.²²³ Making it mandatory for all U.S. agencies would have multiple benefits:

- **Preservation of institutional knowledge:** Exit memos would serve as repositories of valuable institutional knowledge accumulated by outgoing personnel during their tenure. These memos could include insights, lessons learned, best practices, ongoing problems, contacts, and other pertinent information crucial for the continuity of operations.
- **Facilitating transition:** Incoming personnel often face steep learning curves when assuming their roles in conflict-affected environments. Reading exit memos would provide them with essential context, enabling a smoother transition and

reducing the time required to get up to speed with ongoing projects and programs.

- **Preventing redundancy and duplication:** By familiarizing themselves with the insights shared in exit memos, incoming personnel can avoid reinventing the wheel or duplicating efforts already undertaken by their predecessors. This increases the chances of more judicious resource allocation and promotes continuity in project implementation.
- **Enhancing strategic planning:** Exit memos can offer critical perspectives on the challenges, opportunities, and strategic priorities. Incoming personnel can leverage this information to refine their strategic plans and make informed decisions aligned with overarching objectives.
- **Promoting accountability and responsibility:** By documenting both successes and failures, exit memos contribute to a culture of accountability. Similarly, mandating incoming replacements to read these memos instills a sense of responsibility to leverage existing knowledge and build upon previous efforts effectively.
- **Cultural and operational awareness:** Exit memos can provide valuable insights into the cultural nuances and operational dynamics of the warzone environment. Incoming personnel can leverage this understanding to adapt their approaches, foster better relationships with local stakeholders, and navigate complex challenges more adeptly.

2. U.S. agencies should begin working on the various components of recruiting and retaining qualified candidates to meet the needs of large-scale reconstruction and other contingency missions so that agencies are prepared before these missions begin.

Identifying appropriate government staff was a recurring challenge throughout Afghanistan’s reconstruction, often leading to ineffectual or counterproductive decisionmaking. However, there are multiple ways to increase the pool of qualified, motivated candidates available to staff the mission at the senior, mid, and junior levels. Possible examples include:

- a. **Subject to congressional authorization, reemployed annuitants working at State and USAID could receive permission to collect their pensions even while on assignment—known as a dual compensation waiver—to allow more retirees to be quickly rehired to fill roles in contingency operations or crises.**

Many State and USAID employees retire in their late 40s or early 50s after 20 years of service but remain in the workforce. State and USAID have processes by which these retirees can return to work for them and continue to collect

their pension, but only if they work part-time. As a result, in order to take even a one-year assignment during a contingency operation, these retirees would have to sacrifice much of their pension, significantly reducing their motivation to take such an assignment.

Their counterparts at DOD, meanwhile, can retire, collect their pension, and take a new job at DOD for full pay. With a modest change to their incentive structure, seasoned State officials who understand the department's processes and bureaucracy would be well-positioned to staff senior roles in a reconstruction mission.

- b. State and USAID should each consider creating and managing a database of employees who resigned on favorable terms to ensure they can be easily contacted and invited to apply for the diverse roles needed to staff a contingency operation.**

When State and USAID employees resign, even on favorable terms, neither agency tracks or communicates with them after separation. Over time, this pool of qualified former employees—some of whom may now occupy senior positions in the private sector or other government agencies—constitutes an untapped resource for contingency operations. In Afghanistan, many hires came from the open market. Many lacked relevant qualifications or an understanding of how to navigate their agency or complex bureaucracies in general. Given that former State and USAID employees often have many years of experience working at their respective agencies, some would be well suited to return and staff positions in a reconstruction mission.

Even a lightly managed database with contact information linked to the personnel files of departed employees would provide each agency access to a large group of vetted and potentially qualified staff. They would merely need a method to communicate with this community and notify them when hiring for contingency operations.

It may not be necessary to create a new database from scratch. State and USAID already have such systems for tracking and communicating with retired officials for identical recruitment purposes, so these existing databases could simply be expanded to include resigning officials as well.

- c. State and USAID should each consider creating and managing a database of staff for contingency operations using individuals who were given conditional offers of employment in the Foreign Service but who never joined a training class.**

Every year the Foreign Service receives thousands of applications. At the end of a lengthy vetting process, a smaller number are given conditional offers

of employment and join a register, waiting to be pulled into a training class of foreign service officers—often one class per month. While class size and makeup varies based on need and resources, each class contains the offerees with the highest scores in the register at that time. Offerees who remain on this register for 18 months will be automatically removed; they have the option to apply again from scratch or move on. The number of offerees entering and exiting the registry varies from month to month, but some years there may be more than a hundred qualified, vetted candidates with medical and security clearances who leave the register and move on. State and USAID currently have no way of tracking or communicating with these important talent pools.

For each person on this register, the U.S. government has already spent tens of thousands of dollars on tests, interviews, evaluations, medical clearances and security clearances. This process is separate from the compressed hiring process associated with staffing for a contingency operation. With such databases, State and USAID would have the time to carefully and gradually identify these individuals as being suitable for work. As a result, these candidates would be well suited to fill more junior roles in a contingency operation—likely better suited than many of the temporary staff hired off the open market in Afghanistan.

When offerees fall off the register, their contact information should be retained in a database and tied to their application and evaluation materials so that they can be easily reviewed and invited to apply en masse as a contingency operation scales up.

- d. USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives should consider significantly increasing the size of its pool of on-call staff to compensate for shortages in key advisor roles for any future contingency operations.**

As part of its normal work in conflict-affected environments, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives has a “bullpen” of dozens of highly qualified USAID advisors with medical and security clearances who have spent years running and advising USAID programs in areas undergoing conflicts. These bullpen advisors deploy periodically to provide expert advice on existing programs, to temporarily fill unexpected staffing gaps, or to help with specific programmatic tasks. They do not get paid while waiting for assignments, though USAID does pay the administrative costs of keeping them eligible to deploy within days if needed.

This model has worked very well and is scalable in proportion to the amount of funds provided, as the various systems and procedures necessary to keep these advisors continuously deployable have been tested and refined for decades.

e. USAID should consider substantially increasing the number of contracting officers to oversee programs amid an agency-wide shortage.

In a growing contingency operation, program spending grows exponentially faster than the number of staff necessary to oversee that spending. This can result in a single contracting officer being responsible for overseeing an alarming amount of assistance—as high as \$100 million in Afghanistan, 10 times the recommended ceiling for a single contracting officer.²²⁴ As a result, overwhelmed contracting officers struggled to detect corruption and weaknesses in program performance. Under political pressure to make rapid progress in a contingency operation, it is tempting for policymakers to ramp up spending even if USAID needs far more time to hire and train qualified staff to safeguard that increase in spending.

Hiring and training more contracting officers in advance of a contingency operation would be one effective way of closing that gap and preventing the kind of corruption and programming weaknesses that hurt U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. In fact, these added staff are already needed. Even absent a contingency, USAID faces a significant shortage of contracting officers. Agency-wide, each USAID contracting officer managed an average of \$65 million annually between 2017–2021, more than four times higher than the average contracting officer at DOD.²²⁵

3. State, USAID, and DOD should consider significantly improving the quality of predeployment training for their staff.

Training improvements should:

a. Provide staff with a functional understanding of their agencies' structure and operating procedures, guidance on how to work collaboratively with other agencies, and an understanding of how the work they will be performing fits into the whole-of-government effort to advance U.S. interests and strategic goals.

In many cases, even technically qualified and experienced individuals newly hired by State and USAID struggled to grasp their respective agencies' missions and operational procedures. Temporary hires who had significant experience in development often had little to no experience working within the bureaucracy of the U.S. government, including across agencies that had to work together to succeed.

The relative lack of experience of many temporary staff also reduced their oversight capabilities. The authority to oversee programming required training and certification as a contracting officer's representative to ensure taxpayer dollars were not wasted or misallocated, yet few of those working outside Kabul had such training.

b. Provide staff with a foundational understanding of the government and the current social, economic, and political contexts of the host nation.

U.S. staff deployed to Afghanistan will, in most cases, have a limited understanding of the complexities of a country that is very different from the United States. Even those who have formally studied any given country for years, may not know enough to grasp the nuances of power dynamics, financial interests, or grievances within affected communities. However, basic knowledge of the context in which one is working is critical if one is to avoid making critical errors in the field.

In Afghanistan, U.S. officials were consistently operating in the dark, often because of the difficulty of collecting the necessary information. The U.S. government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions, trained security forces in advanced weapon systems they could not understand, much less maintain, imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means, and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls. Without a nuanced and highly informed understanding of the complexities of the country, U.S. officials often empowered powerbrokers who preyed on the population or diverted U.S. assistance away from its intended recipients to enrich and empower themselves and their allies. Lack of knowledge at the local level meant projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it, and even inadvertently funded insurgents. Still, there will always be limitations to what U.S. officials can be trained to understand about a foreign country, particularly at scale.

c. Ensure all staff expected to work directly with host nation officials or civilians are proficient in working with interpreters.

Ideally, there would be enough U.S. government personnel with expertise relevant to any future effort to reconstruct a foreign nation. In reality, given budgetary limitations and the temporary nature of reconstruction efforts, permanently expanding State and USAID personnel numbers to address potential future contingency operations is challenging. To address staffing shortfalls in contingency operations, U.S. agencies often tried to offer crash courses in Afghan language and culture to temporary hires. However, this rarely went beyond enabling U.S. personnel to make basic conversation or become aware of the most basic social mores that needed to be observed with their Afghan counterparts.

As a practical matter, the U.S. government cannot predict with any degree of certainty when and where it will need to conduct reconstruction operations. Therefore, rather than attempting to train thousands of experts fluent in the local dialects and well-versed in the history of all the nations that *could* be

subjects of reconstruction operations, a more pragmatic approach would be to train staff in how to communicate with the locals they work with through the skilled use of interpreters.

In Afghanistan, U.S. personnel faced a number of challenges, including some they were not aware of. Interpreters sometimes had their own agendas, showed little respect for precision in language, and lacked a nuanced understanding of cultural divisions within Afghanistan. Even when they had skilled interpreters, U.S. personnel sometimes neglected to lean on them as advisors critical to their success. This became especially problematical when many meetings took place behind coalition blast walls and the words of U.S. counterparts took on extra weight as they could not be independently verified. Better training in the use of interpreters would help staff navigate these sorts of challenges.

4. The U.S. Army should consider instructing and empowering its Security Force Assistance Command to build the human capital and administrative infrastructure necessary for scaled operations in preparation for the next contingency operation requiring the training of host nation security forces.

Over 20 years, the U.S. government spent \$90 billion developing and sustaining the Afghan security forces. SIGAR has extensively chronicled the obstacles in this effort, many of which came down to personnel decisions and constraints.²²⁶ For the first 16 years of the war, a collection of ad hoc training and advisory models was used to build the Afghan security sector. It was not until 2017 that DOD piloted a more institutional model with the first Security Force Assistance Brigade (see p. 23), an approach that has since expanded across the U.S. Army, with one 816-person brigade for each combatant command.

Though designed for smaller scale efforts, SFABs are likely to serve as the model for large-scale security force assistance in the future. As such, they need to be prepared to grow well beyond their normal mission requirements. Not only are they unprepared for that possible growth, but DOD recently announced a 34 percent cut to SFABs as part of the U.S. Army's "force structure transformation" in order to move away from "soldier-intensive COIN operations."²²⁷ DOD shifted similarly after the Vietnam War, which left it poorly prepared for what would come in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While it may be unrealistic to sustain the capability to rebuild a country's entire security sector on an ongoing basis, it is prudent to retain the institutional capability that would allow that growth when the time comes. Specifically, rather than scale down this capability, the U.S. Army could develop plans to train and deploy more SFABs and retain the staff that could oversee that growth in the case of a contingency. Now that DOD finally has a proper long-term institution for security force assistance, it should use it to plan for future challenges rather than allow that relatively new capability to atrophy over time.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION FOR THE U.S. CONGRESS

5. Congress may wish to consider conducting an extensive review of U.S. personnel practices in countries undergoing reconstruction.

The U.S. government was not equipped to staff the reconstruction of Afghanistan. It remains poorly equipped for another similar mission if the need arises again. Ongoing efforts in Ukraine and prospective efforts in Gaza illustrate the ongoing importance of being able to recruit, train, coordinate, and replace U.S. staff as part of large-scale reconstruction missions. Waiting to implement reforms until the need is dire creates the conditions for failure. Given how preparing for and staffing these larger missions has such a significant impact on personnel practices across the agencies, Congress may wish to consider commissioning its own non-partisan study of U.S. personnel practices, particularly in conflict-affected environments.

6. Congress may wish to consider giving State and USAID staff dual compensation waivers to open up the available pool of qualified retired staff.

Having dual compensation waivers (see p. 42) would make retired staff more motivated to return to the department for temporary assignments related to contingency operations. These staff will be especially important for senior deployed roles for any contingency operation, as they will be the officials making the most consequential decisions on devising and implementing reconstruction strategies.

7. Congress may wish to consider encouraging the U.S. Army to retain or enhance the capability of the Security Force Assistance Brigades to ensure the U.S. government's readiness to train partner forces as part of a contingency operation.

As described on p. 40 and at length in SIGAR's 2021 report, *What We Need to Learn*, DOD has a tendency to avoid preparing for wars it would rather not fight, even if those are the most likely to be fought. As after the Vietnam War, DOD is currently reducing its capability to train host nation security forces, which will leave it poorly prepared to engage in contingency efforts in the future. Compelling DOD to retain or enhance this capability will likely serve as an insurance policy against similar failures in the future.



اداره سر مقتضی ویژه برای بازسازی افغانستان

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Definition
AFFPAK Hands	Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands Program
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANP	Afghan National Police
CERP	Commander's Emergency Response Program
CSTC-A	Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
FSL	Foreign Service Limited
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State)
MODA	Ministry of Defense Advisors
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
SFAB	Security Force Assistance Brigades
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture

Private security contractors protect the construction of the Khost-Gardez road, on March 30, 2010. (USAID photo)

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

SIGAR conducts its Lessons Learned Program under the authority of Public Law 110-181 and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, and in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* (commonly referred to as the "Blue Book"). These standards require that we carry out our work with integrity, objectivity, and independence, and provide information that is factually accurate and reliable. SIGAR's lessons learned reports are broad in scope and based on a wide range of source material. To achieve the goal of high quality and to help ensure our reports are factually accurate and reliable, the reports are subject to extensive review by subject matter experts and relevant U.S. government agencies.

The Personnel research team drew upon a wide array of sources. Much of the report is a compendium of prior lessons learned research, as well as SIGAR quarterly reports to Congress and audits. Some of the team's documentary research focused on publicly available material, including reports by USAID, State, DOD, and coalition partner nations, as well as congressional testimony from government officials. These official sources were complemented by hundreds of nongovernmental sources, including books, think tank reports, journal articles, press reports, academic studies, and analytical reports by international and advocacy organizations. The research team also benefited from SIGAR's access to material that is not publicly available, including thousands of documents provided by U.S. government agencies.

While the documentary evidence tells a story, it cannot substitute for the experience, knowledge, and wisdom of people who participated in the effort to find the right people for the right jobs at the right times. Therefore, the research team interviewed more than 30 individuals with direct knowledge of U.S. personnel challenges in Afghanistan. Interviews were conducted with U.S. and international experts; and former U.S. civilian and military officials who worked on Afghanistan.

Interviews provided valuable insights into the rationale behind decisions, the debates within and between agencies, and the frustrations that spanned the years, but often remained unwritten. Due in part to the politically sensitive nature of their work, a majority of the interviewees wished to remain anonymous. For those still working in government, confidentiality was particularly important. Therefore, to preserve anonymity, our interviews often cite, for example, a "former senior U.S. official" or a "USAID official."

State, USAID, and DOD were given an opportunity to formally review and comment on the final draft of this lessons learned report. Formal comments from State and USAID are included in an appendix to this report. Although we incorporated agencies' comments where appropriate, the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations of this report remain SIGAR's own.

APPENDIX C: COMMENTS FROM U.S. AGENCIES

Response from the U.S. Department of State



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

August 30, 2024

Mr. John M. Sopko
Special Inspector General
Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)
2350 Crystal Drive
Arlington, VA 22202

Dear Special Inspector General Sopko,

Thank you for the opportunity to review the July 24 draft of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) Lessons Learned 17 report, “The People Problem: Reflections on U.S. Personnel Challenges Throughout the Reconstruction of Afghanistan.”

The Department of State (“Department”) continues to cooperate with SIGAR and other oversight bodies in an effort to ensure that U.S. taxpayer dollars benefitting the people of Afghanistan are not subject to waste, fraud, or abuse. The Department would like to acknowledge and address the areas of concern SIGAR identified in its report, which discuss perceived challenges of recruitment and training for Department personnel.

Prior to August 2021, the Department continually refined our training program to ensure personnel assigned to Afghanistan were trained and prepared prior to their arrival. The Department’s Foreign Service Institute (FSI) provided training courses which focus on history, politics, economics, social and cultural issues, and diplomatic relations of Afghanistan for Department personnel and employees of other foreign affairs agencies preparing to serve in Afghanistan. Initially this training was provided under a regional Area Studies course. Starting in 2007, a separate, one-week Afghanistan Orientation course and a one-week Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) course were created. As of 2009, an Afghanistan Familiarization course and a one-week Diplomatic Security-led Foreign Affairs Counter Threat (FACT) course were mandatory for all personnel, including those on temporary duty. For those assigned to a PRT or field assignment, the Integrated Civil-Military Training Exercise course held at Camp Atterbury was also made mandatory.

The Familiarization course covered orientation topics such as support for high threat posts and life at post; overview of U.S. objectives in Afghanistan; Afghan history, culture, and elementary language skills; the role of Islam in Afghanistan; counternarcotics and counterinsurgency; and state building. The PRT course covered U.S. strategy, counterinsurgency, civil-military operations, working in a combat environment, U.S. and Afghan funding sources, civil society, and the Afghan government and operations. The Civil-Military course provided tailored civilian field training with former PRT military commanders and military personnel focused on working with coalition partners and Afghan officials, strengthening sub-national governance, implementing U.S. economic and social development strategy, and adapting to challenging living and working conditions. The Department also provided language training in both Dari and Pashto to employees who went into Language Designated Positions (LDPs). Employees were tested in language proficiency before they traveled to post.

With regard to SIGAR's recommendations for ways to open up the available pool of qualified and retired staff for contingency operations, the Department notes the Reemployed Annuitants (REA) program which manages a database for retirees. One of the questions the Department addresses in the report is whether reemployed annuitants working at State could receive permission to collect their pensions even while on assignment. With the support of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM) has requested this authority in the 2025 NDAA for anyone hired into the State Department Reserve Corps-a \$20M President's Budget Request item.

The Department remains committed to improving recruitment and training while ensuring personnel are fully equipped prior to their deployment in complex contingency environments.

Sincerely,

Sherry Keneson-Hall
Director
Office of Afghanistan Affairs
Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs

Response from the U.S. Agency for International Development



MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable John F. Sopko, The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)

FROM: Joel Sandefur, Mission Director, USAID/Afghanistan *Joel Sandefur*

DATE: September 04, 2024

SUBJECT: Management Comments to Respond to the Draft SIGAR Lessons Learned report, "The People Problem: Reflections on U.S. Personnel Challenges throughout the Reconstruction of Afghanistan" (SIGAR LL-17)

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would like to thank SIGAR for the opportunity to provide comments on the subject draft report. The Agency agrees with the recommendations and is fully committed to complying with the SIGAR recommendations.

1. The report reflects on efforts to establish contingency operations staffing and the challenges faced with implementation. The report surmises that prior efforts to establish contingency staffing were not fully successful and that therefore "the permanent expansion of State and USAID personnel numbers to address potential future contingency operations is unlikely." USAID recommends that SIGAR reflect Section 7065(i) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law 117-328), which provided crisis operations staffing funds. Furthermore, following enactment of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, USAID has worked with the Office of Personnel Management to identify modalities for implementation to appoint and employ personnel to prevent or respond to foreign crises and context with growing instability.
2. The report recommends "U.S. agencies should begin working on the various components of recruiting and retaining qualified candidates to meet the needs of large-scale-reconstruction and other contingency missions so that agencies are prepared before these missions begin." However, SIGAR's provided possible examples narrowly reference the Department of State in three of five examples and USAID in two of five examples. USAID concurs with the broader frame of the recommendation as "U.S. agencies" and therefore suggests that the examples be framed more broadly when such examples could improve contingency staffing efforts across foreign affairs agencies. Reemployment of annuitants, creating and managing databases of employees, and expanding the pool of specific skill sets necessary for crisis response are recommendations that can be applied at foreign affairs agencies.

"State should consider creating and managing a database of employees who resigned on favorable terms before retiring to ensure they can be easily contacted and invited to apply for the diverse roles needed to staff a contingency operation." USAID concurs with this recommendation and recommends that it be applied to all foreign

affairs agencies and departments and not just the Department of State as each agency and department has its own networks, hiring practices, and budget authority. USAID maintains various mechanisms to recruit experienced employees who have retired or transitioned from USAID. These are maintained primarily by backstop.

For example, USAID maintains a “tiger team” roster which is a cadre of experienced U.S. Personal Services Contractor (USPSC) management professionals. The cadre is made up of Executive Officers (EXOs), Resident Legal Officers (RLOs) and Controllers (CFOs) to support USAID Missions on a temporary basis. The Tiger Team is a surge support team with critical management skill sets and professional experience available for deployment to support any essential USAID Mission operations. Tiger Team members are familiar with USAID processes, policies, and procedures. They speak various languages and bring regional and technical expertise. The Tiger Team members are available to USAID Missions upon request, to support management of field staff, provide subject matter expertise and temporarily fill newly created positions or vital vacant positions.

All members of the Tiger Team are intermittent USPSCs activated only when needed. The majority of Tiger Team members are retired international development experts at the GS-15 equivalent with 10 to 40 years of USAID and other international development experience. Tiger Team members have worldwide medical clearances; secret security clearances; USAID badges and emails; government travel cards; diplomatic passports; and required training. Tiger Team members are U.S. Citizens who can perform most inherently governmental functions. They can provide management and oversight, represent the government, participate in budget exercises, participate in personnel actions, and handle classified information. Since 2013, Tiger Team members have completed more than 120 assignments and deployed to more than 50 countries in support of USAID Missions worldwide.

3. **“U.S. agencies should consider requiring personnel departing their post to write for their replacements a detailed exit memo to be included in a searchable database”.** USAID concurs that it is vitally important to ensure knowledge retention and transfer (KRT) occur at posts with high turnover. USAID provides guidance to institutionalize effective knowledge retention processes throughout the cycle of staff transition, which in turn improves productivity, reduces stress and frustration, and provides incoming staff and new hires the tools and information they need to start contributing to Mission objectives right away. USAID’s KRT Model includes a toolkit, an implementation checklist, and a maturity matrix. The toolkit includes a Handover/Exit Memo Template. The KRT Model is encouraged but not required, pending the release of the Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning (KMOL) Policy and Automated Directives System Chapter.

USAID has also utilized Strategic Transition Planning Workshops as a forum to bring together all incoming and outgoing Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) to enable Mission institutional knowledge to transfer from outgoing to incoming FSOs to build crucial new team cohesion. This was pioneered with USAID/Ukraine in 2023 which provided a strategic and operational orientation, teambuilding, networking, and knowledge sharing. It provided incoming staff with the information they needed for preparing to come to a high-threat, demanding post. The event was critical for both incoming staff

to learn key operational and policy issues from outgoing staff, while also giving an opportunity for Washington leadership and staff to provide context, nuance and information for incoming staff on the issues at play related to Ukraine and the challenging interagency and congressional environment they will be working in.

Furthermore, in April 2024, USAID and the USAID Alumni Association hosted an Agency-wide webinar on In-Country Transitions: Leadership and Management in Response to Sudden Context Changes. This webinar spotlighted former members of USAID leadership who shared their real-life experiences managing Missions and teams during a crisis and country transitions, ranging from the 2015 Nepal Earthquake to events in Iraq and Afghanistan. The webinar was [recorded](#) and is available for reference.

4. **“USAID should consider substantially increasing the number of contracting officers to oversee programs amid an agency-wide shortage.”** USAID concurs with this recommendation and has taken steps under its Acquisition and Assistance (A&A) Strategy to rebuild the A&A workforce by focusing on recruiting, retaining and filling staffing gaps. Under a Deputy Administrator for Management and Resources approved initiative called “A&A Accelerate” USAID plans to enhance A&A surge capacity during moments of crisis by providing gap coverage and A&A expertise to Missions and Bureaus and running a new program to train and hire eligible family members (EFMs) as A&A specialists. USAID plans to increase A&A capacity in Mission contracting offices by continuing to elevate and invest in Foreign Service National (FSN) colleagues. USAID also plans to expand professional and leadership development opportunities by creating exchange programs between units and leadership certification programs for A&A staff worldwide to improve knowledge transfer and sharing best practices, with specific attention to optimizing business operations in difficult environments.

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The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008 (P.L. 110-181) established the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

SIGAR's oversight mission, as defined by the legislation, is to provide for the independent and objective

- conduct and supervision of audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations funded with amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- leadership and coordination of, and recommendations on, policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of the programs and operations, and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations.
- means of keeping the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operations and the necessity for and progress on corrective action.

Afghanistan reconstruction includes any major contract, grant, agreement, or other funding mechanism entered into by any department or agency of the U.S. government that involves the use of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Source: P.L. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," 1/28/2008.

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