

The WASHINGTON POST

Setting the record straight on 'The Afghanistan Papers'



U.S.

soldiers attend a training session for the Afghan army in Herat, Afghanistan, on May 2. (Jalil Rezayee/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock)

By **Letters to the Editor**

Dec. 17, 2019 at 3:46 p.m. EST

The Post's "[Afghanistan Papers](#)" project attempted to shine a light on problems in the United States' longest war and the \$133 billion U.S. reconstruction effort.

I'm intimately familiar with those problems. The agency I lead — the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) — has a long record of uncovering waste, fraud and abuse of taxpayer dollars in Afghanistan.

Over the years, media organizations around the world have reported our findings far and wide. Poor planning. Pointless spending. Corruption that corrodes Afghans' confidence in their government. "Ghost soldiers" on the rolls of the Afghan security forces. Rampant theft of U.S.-supplied fuel — much of it winding up in the hands of insurgents who kill Americans. The list goes on.

But the Afghanistan Papers fell short in several respects when it comes to the labors of the men and women of SIGAR, some of whom work under often dangerous conditions in Afghanistan. I am compelled to correct the record:

The Post claimed SIGAR offered anonymity to sources it interviewed in its Lessons Learned Program “to avoid controversy over politically sensitive matters.” SIGAR withheld names of confidential sources to protect them from retaliation and because we are required to by law: the Inspector General Act of 1978. Protecting confidential sources is a bedrock principle at all U.S. law enforcement and inspector general offices, including SIGAR. Moreover, it’s a necessity: Often a witness will provide important evidence of government waste or fraud only if his or her identity is protected, something that reporters and news outlets should well appreciate. Ironically, The Post is suing us in federal court demanding that we reveal the names of the confidential sources of the Afghanistan Papers.

The Post’s series also [claimed](#), “To avoid controversy, SIGAR sanitized the harshest criticisms from the Lessons Learned interviews.” That’s absurd. We’ve been criticized for many things. Avoiding controversy is not one of them. A simple Google search reveals hundreds of articles, spanning years, detailing how SIGAR routinely speaks truth to power and exposes mismanagement of reconstruction programs, often provoking the ire of generals, ambassadors and other high-ranking officials. Many SIGAR reports and the controversies they provoked have been covered by The Post.

The series also [criticized](#) some of our Lessons Learned reports for their “flat, bureaucratic jargon.” SIGAR is an inspector general, not a newspaper. It’s one thing to turn a snappy quote into a headline. It’s another to produce painstakingly researched and referenced reports to Congress and the executive branch bureaucracy under strict professional standards. SIGAR makes recommendations for fixing problems and discusses them in depth in our Lessons Learned reports and audits.

Allegations that we pulled our punches and sat on key interviews, including those with Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, a top Afghanistan war adviser to two presidents, and Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who oversaw intelligence in Afghanistan and served as President Trump’s first national security adviser, are unfounded.

The series didn’t say that we provided the Flynn interview to The Post in December 2017 and the Lute interview in March 2018. If The Post believed these interviews were so important to the public’s right to know, why didn’t it publish them when it got them?

That said, the Afghanistan Papers is an important contribution to public discourse about the war in Afghanistan. But it is not a “secret” history. SIGAR has written about these issues for years, including in seven Lessons Learned reports and more than 300 audits and other products. So have a number of brave Post journalists reporting from Afghanistan over the years, including former longtime Kabul bureau chief Pamela Constable, as well as journalists from other news outlets.

Taken together, all of our contributions — from reporters, SIGAR staff and those who aided SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program — can lead to a better understanding of America’s longest war.

For an even deeper dive, I recommend SIGAR’s quarterly reports to Congress and the seven Lessons Learned reports published so far, available online at www.sigar.mil. Spoiler alert: We plan to publish several more Lessons Learned reports in 2020.

John F. Sopko, Arlington

*The writer is the special inspector general for
Afghanistan reconstruction.*

[Read more letters to the editor.](#)