



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 18, 2021

## Afghanistan Reconstruction a \$145-billion Failure, Says Inspector General

As the video coming out of Afghanistan has shown, the trillion-or-so taxpayer dollars the U.S. government has spent invading and rebuilding the “Graveyard of Empires” were all for naught. If you need official confirmation, though, look no further than the latest “lessons learned” report from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko.

According to Sopko’s [140-page report](#), Washington has frittered away \$145 billion on rebuilding Afghanistan, plus another \$837 billion on military action there:



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The extraordinary costs were meant to serve a purpose — though the definition of that purpose evolved over time. At various points, the U.S. government hoped to eliminate al-Qaeda, decimate the Taliban movement that hosted it, deny all terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan, build Afghan security forces so they could deny terrorists a safe haven in the future, and help the civilian government become legitimate and capable enough to win the trust of Afghans. Each goal, once accomplished, was thought to move the U.S. government one step closer to being able to depart.

While there have been several areas of improvement — most notably in the areas of health care, maternal health, and education — progress has been elusive and the prospects for sustaining this progress are dubious.

Sopko should know. He has been auditing this tragedy for 13 years, during which time, he says, “the cumulative list of systemic challenges SIGAR and other oversight bodies have identified is staggering.” Money has [disappeared](#) or been spent [on projects that were never completed](#). Those that were finished frequently [could not be sustained](#) by Afghanistan’s weak, widely despised central government. Much cash was lost to corruption, and some of it fell into the hands of America’s enemies. Things got so bad that by 2019, Sopko [lamented](#) that “almost every metric for success or failure is now classified or non-existent” — the better to prevent the public from learning the truth.

Among the lessons learned in Sopko’s new report is that “the U.S. government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve” in Afghanistan. Moreover, as with most government efforts, instead of recognizing failure and throwing in the towel, “U.S. officials believed the solution to insecurity was pouring ever more resources into Afghan institutions” — a pattern that left the Afghan government “dependent and vulnerable.”

“The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan,” wrote Sopko, “and created unrealistic timelines and expectations that prioritized spending quickly.” Decisions were made for political reasons, and money was spent to achieve short-



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term goals, leading to corruption. “When U.S. officials eventually recognized this dynamic, they simply found new ways to ignore conditions on the ground.”

Sopko also found that reconstruction projects were rarely sustainable. While every project was touted as another step along the road to Afghan independence, in reality, “U.S. agencies were seldom judged by their projects’ continued utility, but by the number of projects completed and dollars spent.” Launched in an environment lacking good personnel, security, and an understanding of Afghan culture, the projects were doomed from the start. And, perhaps not wanting to know how their projects were turning out, officials rarely monitored them closely.

Indeed, the whole Afghanistan undertaking — like most wars — has been characterized by lies and misrepresentations from the outset. Sopko [told](#) a House committee last year that the situation was characterized by “mendacity and hubris” and an environment in which “we have created an incentive to almost require people to lie.”

Why did Sopko feel the need to rehash much of his previous reporting in such detail? First, “Despite the U.S. troop withdrawal, the Biden administration has requested more than \$3 billion for Afghanistan’s reconstruction in the coming year,” he penned, apparently hoping against hope that his report might keep that money from being squandered, too. Second, he fully expects officials to attempt similar projects in the future and wants them to prepare for such efforts by internalizing the lessons of Afghanistan.

Of course, the best — and most constitutional — option would be for Uncle Sam to mind his own business and stop destroying and rebuilding foreign countries. Otherwise, he will keep making the same old mistakes that are bankrupting the Treasury and provoking attacks on Americans.



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