

# **We Blew \$17 Billion in Afghanistan. How Would You Have Spent It?**

by [Megan McCloskey](#), [Tobin Asher](#), [Lena Groeger](#) and [Sisi Wei](#), ProPublica, and Christine Lee, Special to ProPublica, December 17, 2015

**The U.S. government has wasted billions of dollars in Afghanistan, and until now, no one has added it all up. Project after project blundered ahead ignoring history, culture and warnings of failure. And Congress has barely blinked as the financial toll has mounted. Here's just what the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction found. See for yourself how that money could have been used at home. [Read the story](#) ↓**

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## **What the Government Wasted**

All  
Waste  
On the Brink  
Budget Busters  
You be the Judge

\$8B

### **Fighting the drug trade**

\$2B

### **Roads the Afghans likely can't maintain**

\$1B

### **Broad, undefined justice initiatives**

\$936M

**Underused aircraft for counternarcotics and counterterrorism**

\$661M

**Armored vehicles Afghans struggle to maintain**

\$488M

**Mineral extraction programs Afghans can't keep up**

\$486M

**Planes that couldn't be flown**

\$470M

**Afghan Local Police**

\$400M

**Governance program that fell short of goals**

\$335M

**Underused power plant**

\$303M

**Unfinished dam meant to provide electricity**

\$200M

**Literacy training that was never evaluated**

\$159M

**Roads that aren't maintained**

\$150M

**Pricey task force housing**

\$138M

**Spare parts ordered without knowing if needed**

\$130M

**Afghan Army buildings at risk of flooding**

\$120M

**Fixing 2,049 dangerous buildings**

\$109M

**Training and logistics for helicopter mission Afghans can't handle**

\$106M

**Unused consulate**

\$77M

**Questionable agriculture development**

\$74M

**Cancelled USAID contracts**

\$71M

**Afghan Army buildings with structural issues**

\$70M

**Criticized farming program**

\$68M

**Roads that aren't maintained**

\$61M

**Cancelled USAID contracts**

\$59M

**Uncollected insurance refunds**

\$56M

**Even more armored vehicles**

\$53M

**Operation and maintenance costs for undrivable roads**

\$49M

**27 projects unlikely to work**

\$46M

**Stolen paychecks**

\$43M

**An unused gas station**

\$40M

**Improper payroll payments**

\$34M

**Failed soybean initiative**

\$30M

**Last-minute air traffic control contract**

\$25M

**Unused, unneeded military HQ**

\$23M

**Judicial training program Afghans uninterested in**

\$23M

**Unused vehicle offloading facilities**

\$20M

**Failed communication programs**

\$19M

**Unoccupied border police bases**

\$19M

**Unfinished prison renovation**

\$18M

**Security costs for long-delayed project**

\$18M

**Pricey hospitals**

\$18M

**HQ too advanced for Afghans to maintain**

\$17M

**Fake pension withholdings**

\$16M

**Mediocre water program**

\$15M

**Unneeded, unused warehouse**

\$13M

**Unused electrical equipment**

\$11M

**Prison Afghans failing to maintain**

\$11M

**Failed attempt to train air traffic controllers**

\$11M

**Unused trash incinerators**

\$10M

**Unused electrical equipment**

\$10M

**Mysterious payroll withholdings**

\$10M

**Overpaid insurance premiums**

\$8M

**Underused industrial park**

\$8M

**Bad agriculture program**

\$8M

**Mostly vacant industrial park**

\$7M

**Underused border police headquarters**

\$7M

**Maintenance for nonexistent vehicles**

\$7M

**Roads that aren't maintained**

\$7M

**Communication towers that couldn't be used**

\$6M

**Unused irrigation pumps**

\$4M

**TV Trucks for Sports**

\$4M

**Unused watershed assessments**

\$3M

**Unused, unneeded patrol boats**

\$3M

**Unused warehouse**

\$3M

**Fixing contractor mistakes**

\$2M

**Unfinished U.S. military HQ**

\$2M

**Fixing what the Afghans broke**

\$2M

**Building with no back-up power**

\$2M

**Too advanced power system**

\$2M

**Unfinished, unneeded slaughterhouse**

\$1M

**Unused fuel pumps**

\$700K

**Failed billing system**

\$598K

**Unsuccessful hospital**

\$585K

**Repairs at poorly built teacher training facility**

\$457K

**Disintegrated buildings**

\$396K

**Unfinished courthouse**

Select All Projects

 **Pick a project we wasted money on in Afghanistan**

 **Compare it to what we could have spent money on**

**What We Could Have Gotten**

All

Education

Health

Human Services

Misc.

\$300K

**Child literacy**

\$11B

**Halve estate taxes**

\$5M

**Small business help**

\$750K

**Drinking water**

\$25M

**Energy independence**

\$500K

**Feed children**

\$2M

**Patrol wildlife refuges**

\$4M

**Welfare money**

\$4M

**Women shelters**

\$4B

**Reduce corporate taxes**

\$6M

**Free breakfast**

\$11M

**Debt forgiveness**



\$17M

**Test rape kits**

\$19M

**Environmental research**

\$19M

**Literacy Through School Libraries**

\$28M

**Workers' rights**

\$29M

**Family planning clinics**

\$42M

**College scholarships**

\$59M

**Protect children**

\$60M

**Fight childhood obesity**

\$74M

**Mental health treatment**

\$75M

**Police body cameras**

\$75M

**Heat cold homes**

\$84M

**New border crossing**

\$88M

**Stop teen pregnancy**

\$90M

**Safe schools program**

\$111M

**Quit smoking**

\$117M

**Community learning centers**

\$139M

**Feed refuges**

\$159M

**Treat addicts**

\$185M

**Federal staff**

\$200M

**Educational technology**

\$210M

**Workers' rights**

\$250M

**NASA funding**

\$251M

**Fund Amtrak**

\$300M

**Going to space**

\$301M

**Provide shelter**

\$331M

**Worker training**

\$364M

**Health research**

\$370M

**Money for college**

\$400M

**Early education**

\$403M

**Doctor appointments**

\$582M

**Clinics for vets**

\$668M

**Fund schools**

\$690M

**Treat veterans**

\$714M

**Health research**

\$942M

**Community development**

\$997M

**Water projects**

\$4B

**9/11 health care**

\$6B

**Provide shelter**

\$10B

**Safe drinking water**

\$730K

## Gun owner help

\$2B

## Staff up the IRS

\$159M

## Update juvenile justice

\$44M

## Reduce drug addiction

Select All Projects

?How did we pick these projects?

Behold, American taxpayer, what happened to nearly a half billion of your dollars in Afghanistan:



16 cargo planes were sold as scrap metal. (Courtesy of SIGAR)

In 2008, the Pentagon bought 20 refurbished cargo planes for the Afghan Air Force, but as one top U.S. officer put it, “just about everything you can think of was wrong.” No spare parts, for example. The planes were also “a death trap,” according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. So \$486 million was spent on worthless planes that no one could fly. We did recoup some of the investment. Sixteen of the planes were sold as scrap for the grand sum of \$32,000. That’s six cents a pound.

You’d think someone would have been in trouble.

Wrong.

Nothing happened to anybody in charge of that spectacular screw up. No general even had to make an embarrassing appearance on Capitol Hill. Congress made not a peep.

Even worse, such jaw-dropping waste without a shred of accountability is not an anomaly. It has happened in Afghanistan again and again, and, you guessed it, again. Some of the more outlandish examples have briefly seized the attention of the news media, but really, the running tab for the waste has mounted out of sight of the taxpayers footing the bill.

And what a bill it is. There's a widely held idea of "just" as in "just a few million." Like the military officer who wrote that the \$25 million blown on a fancy headquarters nobody used was "probably not bad in the grand scheme of things." But those millions add up. To billions.

The problem, contrary to popular assumptions, is not unscrupulous contractors. Follow the long trail of waste and you'll be standing at the doors of the military, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. It's their bad decisions, bad purchases and bad programs that are consistently to blame.

ProPublica pored over more than 200 audits, special projects and inspections done by SIGAR since 2009 and built a database to add up the total cost of failed reconstruction projects. Looking at the botched projects collectively — rather than as one-off headlines — reveals a grim picture of the overall reconstruction effort and a repeated cycle of mistakes.

- In just six years, the IG has tallied at least \$17 billion in questionable spending. This includes \$3.6 billion in outright waste, projects teetering on the brink of waste, or projects that can't — or won't — be sustained by the Afghans, as well as an additional \$13.5 billion that the average taxpayer might easily judge to be waste. Exhibit A for "You be the judge": \$8.4 billion was spent on counter-narcotics programs that were so ineffective that Afghanistan has produced record levels of heroin — more than it did before the war started.
- Often the programs' ambitions were out of whack with the reality of life in Afghanistan. After the invasion, the U.S. rushed forward with bold plans to create a democratic, fiscally secure, ethical government and society — out of whole cloth. It was the same country-building bravado that had earlier tripped up the U.S. in Iraq when it dismissed the local culture and ignored corruption.
- "Pie in the sky" projects, as one USAID worker called them, were routinely launched without any thought to the financial and technological ability of the Afghans to maintain them. It turned out that the Afghans couldn't afford most of them, so even the best programs could end up becoming waste.
- None of the programs were required to prove they had even limited success. Officials tracked dollars spent, not impact. For instance, no one evaluated whether Afghan security forces actually learned to read and write after going through a \$200 million literacy program.
- Those who signed off on the failed projects appeared to suffer no consequences. As head of SIGAR John Sopko puts it: Reconstruction efforts are "like a child sports game where everyone gets a trophy."

If this accounting wasn't bad enough, consider this: SIGAR has only examined a small percentage of the \$110 billion effort to rebuild and remodel Afghanistan. The waste totals are likely much higher.

Still, it's often hard to grasp what this kind of money means to the average American. Perhaps the most meaningful way to underscore what has been lost is to look at what the money could have paid for at home.

To set the scene, in 2010, as the U.S. was drastically increasing its investment in Afghanistan, a quarter of America's homeowners — more than 11 million — were underwater on their mortgages, and the country hovered near a 10 percent unemployment rate. Congress was routinely gutting federal programs.

Do you think we're wasting money fighting the drug trade in Afghanistan? [#AfghanWaste https://t.co/PC5Mgieu2D](https://t.co/PC5Mgieu2D)

— ProPublica (@ProPublica) [December 17, 2015](#)

The \$14.7 million spent on a storage facility the military never used? That could have paid for about 9,800 rape kits to be tested — enough to clear the backlog for the entire state of Tennessee.

The \$456,000 police-training facility that was so poorly constructed it literally melted in the rain? That could have funded more than 180,000 dinners for low-income kids, enough for an entire summer.

The \$335 million spent on a power plant that the Afghans don't use? That could have paid for permanent housing for 37,000 homeless Americans and \$250,000 grants to 20 small-business owners to help them commercialize new technologies.

Take the money wasted on those worthless planes, plus that spent on an unused consulate, and fixing the buildings constructed with hazardous materials. That could have restored the \$714 million cut from the National Institute of Health's budget, which funds scientific research into new treatments for disease.

Despite such trade-offs, there's been little collective outrage from either the public or Congress about the massive waste in Afghanistan.

The military, the State Department and USAID provided detailed public responses to the findings in each of SIGAR's reports, sometimes disputing the conclusions and recommendations. The reports and their responses can be read [here](#). This week a Defense Department spokesman told ProPublica that the Pentagon "disagrees with the assertion that \$17B in projects are 'questionable.'"

Often those responsible for the failed projects treat SIGAR's findings like unnecessary niggling. Their rejoinder, in essence: "Hey, it's a war zone, what do you expect?" There's little time spent on pondering the bigger question: If it's a war zone, why were we pouring billions into reconstruction?

## **Fingers in Ears:**

### **Ignoring History, Advice and Culture [Link](#)**

Iraq could have been a template for what worked and what didn't when it came to massive reconstruction in the midst of a violent insurgency.

In 2009, when reconstruction ramped up in Afghanistan, similar efforts had been going on for years in Iraq — with often dismal results.

If one thing is clear from ProPublica's review of SIGAR's trove of inspection reports and extensive interviews with aid workers, former military and others familiar with the reconstruction efforts, the U.S. is a slow learner.

Again and again, the U.S. disregarded expert advice, the local culture or past mistakes in both Afghanistan and Iraq — sometimes, ignoring all three in a single failed project.

In fairness, the countries present vastly different challenges, and some experts contend that it would be a mistake to apply lessons from one to the other. "I categorically don't accept comparisons from Afghanistan to Iraq," said Larry Sampler, a senior USAID official for Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the game plans for both countries were virtually the same: Military-led development with a focus on security forces. The creation of a Western-style democracy. And an attempt to thwart an insurgency by providing services like healthcare and energy. In its key elements, the "hearts and minds" campaign of Iraq in the mid-2000s was picked up and shipped to Afghanistan.

And the problems SIGAR has found are nearly a carbon copy of those uncovered by its counterpart in Iraq.

Take perhaps the biggest lesson spelled out in the Iraq inspector general's final report (called, ironically, "[Learning From Iraq](#)"). Large-scale projects were perilous when there was still active fighting. Anything big drew the attention of the insurgency.

In an interview, former U.S. Ambassador William Taylor, who worked as director of the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office from 2004 to 2005, said this lesson was reinforced on a daily basis in Iraq. He recalled morning briefings with the military brass to go over political and reconstruction developments.

"Very frequently on those PowerPoints you would see this pipeline that already had been reconstructed had been blown up again. Or an electricity grid," Taylor said. "That led us to several lessons in Iraq that have general applicability, which are: Smaller projects at the local level, by and large, are to be preferred."

That didn't stop the U.S. years later from trying to build a nationwide electricity system in Afghanistan that crossed through Taliban strongholds at the height of fighting. Or sinking billions into roads that spanned the country and were routinely blown up by insurgents.

Officials also identified over-gifting as a problem in Iraq. Iraqis would give a "head nod" to whatever the U.S. offered, because they weren't footing the bill, former U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker told

Iraq's inspector general. Once the projects were built, the Iraqis couldn't pay to operate or maintain them.

And yet in Afghanistan, the military, the State Department and USAID repeatedly defended unsustainable projects by saying that the Afghans had agreed to them.

Corruption also prominently undermined the security forces in Iraq and many efforts at governance. SIGAR, however, said the U.S. moved forward for years in Afghanistan with no strategy in place to deal with corruption, a failure investigators found baffling.

"Something that quite's pertinent to Afghanistan that we could have learned in Iraq is the problem of the local culture of corruption," said Charles Tiefer, who investigated reconstruction on the Commission for Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Then there was the military, the State Department and USAID's frequent failures to consider the local culture in either country, a costly misstep that caused many ill-considered projects to tank.

Retired British Gen. Sir Nick Parker, who commanded in Iraq then was deputy commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2010, said serious attempts were made to better understand the Afghans, but the military still "underestimated the enormous differences that existed" in how Westerners and the Afghans decided their priorities.

Parker and others who worked in Afghanistan said there was an overriding sense of "we know what's best for Afghanistan" among the military and development agencies, and the Afghans didn't have a real seat at the table.

The reconstruction effort was also rushed, because the surge of troops in the country that made it possible would only last a short while. The military saw itself "as being in the driving seat, and that will inevitably skew the way decisions are made," Parker said. "And I would conclude that the decisions are then probably not necessarily in the best interest of the people who live in the country."

Ashley Jackson, who worked for Oxfam and the United Nations in Afghanistan, described the reconstruction effort as often feeling "super colonial." She recalled that in meetings after discussing what the Western forces wanted to do, someone inevitably said "put an Afghan face on it." One time she was taken aback when the American military dismissed a local NGO in Kunar as unimportant because it was "just Afghans working there."

This attitude showed up in projects that were tone deaf to the Afghan culture.

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## **Waste**

**\$34M**

### **Failed soybean initiative**

**What:** Program to convince Afghans to grow, and like, soybeans despite studies that showed soybeans



would be difficult to grow and Afghans had no interest in them.

**Who:** USDA

Compare the cost of this project to what we could have funded » (Scrolls To Top)

Perhaps one of the most willfully ignorant U.S. projects happened in 2010. The U.S. Department of Agriculture leaped into a \$34.4 million program to push Afghan farmers to produce soybeans. There were two obvious problems: the crop doesn't grow well in northern Afghanistan and Afghans weren't particularly interested in eating it — no matter how much encouragement they had from the American Soybean Association, the lobbying group that convinced USDA to do the program.

“What is troubling about this particular project is that it appears that many of these problems could reasonably have been foreseen and, therefore, possibly avoided,” Sopko wrote.

USDA admits that had it done a feasibility study in the beginning it could have avoided this failure. But it was even easier than that. All they needed to do was read a British study done two years earlier that showed soybeans and Afghanistan weren't a good match.

“To date, positive outcomes for soybean production and the long-term operation of the soy processing plant have not occurred,” the USDA conceded to SIGAR. But all was not lost, USDA said. If production in 2014 was sufficiently high, an argument “could perhaps be made that a profitable soybean market was possible.” USDA promised SIGAR it was monitoring the program closely.

But when ProPublica asked USDA recently what the outcome was for 2014, the department didn't know. It hadn't tracked the data.

That refusal to heed outside advice isn't rare. For example, officials from the Department of Agriculture, the State Department and the local Afghan government all told USAID a tree sapling and seed distribution program was a bad idea. It cost too much and had been done before and failed because of corruption and theft. USAID still went ahead and spent nearly \$8 million on the program.

The two departments and USAID sometimes even ignore advice from their own people.

The State Department spent \$6.5 million on telecommunication towers despite several senior State Department, DOD and Afghan officials warning that Afghan telecom companies wouldn't connect to the system and fuel costs for the generators were too high, SIGAR found. The towers went unused.

And in 2009, the State Department decided it would sink \$106 million into refurbishing a compound in Mazer-e-Sharif to be a consulate — despite State Department insiders' warnings that it wasn't safe enough, according to an internal document revealed by The Washington Post. The compound was vulnerable to car bombs and spying, and was otherwise too dangerous to use, so the State Department had to abandon its plans there regardless of the millions spent.

The U.S. has since leased the building to the Germans, but officials couldn't answer basic questions about the lease, such as how long it was and how much it was for. A State Department spokeswoman suggested to ProPublica that maybe the Germans would be able to provide an answer.



British Gen. Sir Nick Parker: “We thought we were doing what was best for everybody in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it’s quite upsetting to see that it’s left this legacy that doesn’t look as stable as it should be. We wanted it to be better.”



Former U.S. Ambassador William Taylor: “Occupation is a bad idea. When you occupy then you’re responsible for providing the services, and when you don’t know the country very well, you’re not going to do it very well.”



Stuart Bowen, former Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction: “What’s been done to the structure to prevent future terrible waste? Very little.”

### **Building in our Image: An Overly Ambitious Effort from the Start [Link](#)**

In 2011, [a task force of financial gurus](#) brainstorming business projects for the military had an idea: Alternate fuels! That’s what Afghanistan needs to jumpstart its economy and bring in foreign investors.

A few years earlier a geological survey had found that the northern part of the country was blessed with natural gas reserves. Commercializing that resource would be a boon for Afghanistan, the task force figured, particularly since the country relies on imported gasoline it can barely afford.

It seemed like a good idea on paper. But, as expert after expert has noted, Afghanistan is not the U.S. It’s not even Pakistan. Getting the gas out of the ground and moved around the country would be a feat. There is no distribution system in Afghanistan for that kind of compressed gas — and building one in a war-torn country that has trouble keeping the lights on with generators was an expensive, if not laughable, notion.

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### **Waste**

**\$43M**

### **An unused gas station**

**What:** Compressed natural gas filling station built to encourage use of alternate fuels cost 140 times what it should have and had no customers.

**Who:** DOD

Compare the cost of this project to what we could have funded » (Scrolls To Top)

That didn't seem to matter. The task force sunk \$43 million into a proof-of-concept gas station anyway. (That was about \$42.5 million too much, but [that's another story.](#))

Then there was another very key problem: no customers. The average Afghan would have to shell out more than an entire year's worth of salary to convert their cars to run on compressed natural gas. It costs about \$700 and most Afghans bring home \$690 annually. So unsurprisingly, the only people who used the station were the 120 Afghans the U.S. paid to convert their cars.

The scale of what that project wanted to achieve was inappropriate in almost every aspect, and ProPublica found, it wasn't unique in that regard. Afghanistan is at the bottom of almost every conceivable development ranking. Yet much of the reconstruction effort has seemed as if the U.S. and its allies were trying to create a new Afghanistan in their own image — both in the Western ideals superimposed on the Afghans and in the sheer ambition of the projects.

Giant warehouses around the country sit empty because there are no Afghan businesses to use them. At one industrial park, SIGAR found just four out of an intended 48 businesses. And those Afghan businesses that took the U.S. up on its economic promises in Kandahar are struggling since the U.S. military left, taking their generator fuel with them. The power is intermittent and profits for at least one business owner are literally melting away. [He's an ice cream distributor.](#)

The same task force that thought up the gas station also built a 23,000-square-foot, cold-and-dry storage facility for nearly \$3 million that was supposed to be a hub of agricultural development in Helmand. But it has gone unused. Before approving the project, the DOD didn't check whether any Afghan businesses could make use of such a big warehouse. So far, none have been able to pull it off.

There are “too many people in DOD and State and AID who are trying to make Afghanistan look like northern Virginia,” said John Sopko, head of SIGAR. “That's the problem.”

Sopko joked to his staff to be on the lookout for high speed rail proposals because with all the “boneheaded proposals” for the country it wouldn't be an unlikely idea. Once, he said, he had to quash a plan under consideration to build solar-panelled bus shelters in Kabul.

In interviews, Sopko, who has been the inspector general for more than three years, occasionally apologizes for being flippant. But when the military spends half a billion dollars on airplanes that barely made it off the ground, he can't help but be snarky about a helicopter program, saying: “At least they can fly.” (Of course, this being Afghanistan, there aren't enough qualified pilots to fly them.)

This is not a new problem for the U.S. in Afghanistan. A 1988 USAID report looked at American efforts in the country from 1950 to 1979 and concluded they were “overambitious, both as to scale and timing” and that, “in many ways, the program was larger than could be effectively administered by either the US or Afghan governments.”

Cue 2001, and the pattern started all over again.

The Afghan government had to be built from scratch — ministries of defense, agriculture, education, health, all the components that go into a modern government — when the Afghans didn't even have a concept of what those were, USAID's Larry Sampler said.

One project whose ambitions outstripped reality is the State Department and USAID's plans for airspace management. At first glance, spending \$11 million to train Afghans as air traffic controllers seems reasonable. The U.S. military had been managing their skies, but would soon be packing up. But under closer examination, the question arises: What were they thinking?

Afghans are largely illiterate in their own language much less the English required for air traffic control, so the trainees would have to start with rudimentary language lessons. Plus they'd need on-the-job training. But no one asked the U.S. military, which operated the airports, if that would be OK. It wasn't: There was way too much classified information for the taking. Instead the Afghans would have to be sent overseas, but many couldn't get visas and some of those who did never returned.

Plus only 36 Afghans were part of the program and Afghanistan needed 139 to run its airports. The kicker: turns out that most countries the size of Afghanistan contract out for airspace management.

“We have a disastrous experiment in Afghanistan to build a First World infrastructure on top of an impoverished nation,” said Tiefer of the wartime contracting commission. “We have to remember Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries on earth. It's also one of the most corrupt countries on earth. You can't build on top of sand.”



John Sopko, head of SIGAR, to his staff about their investigations: “I can't believe that. You're making that up. This is Alice in Wonderland.”

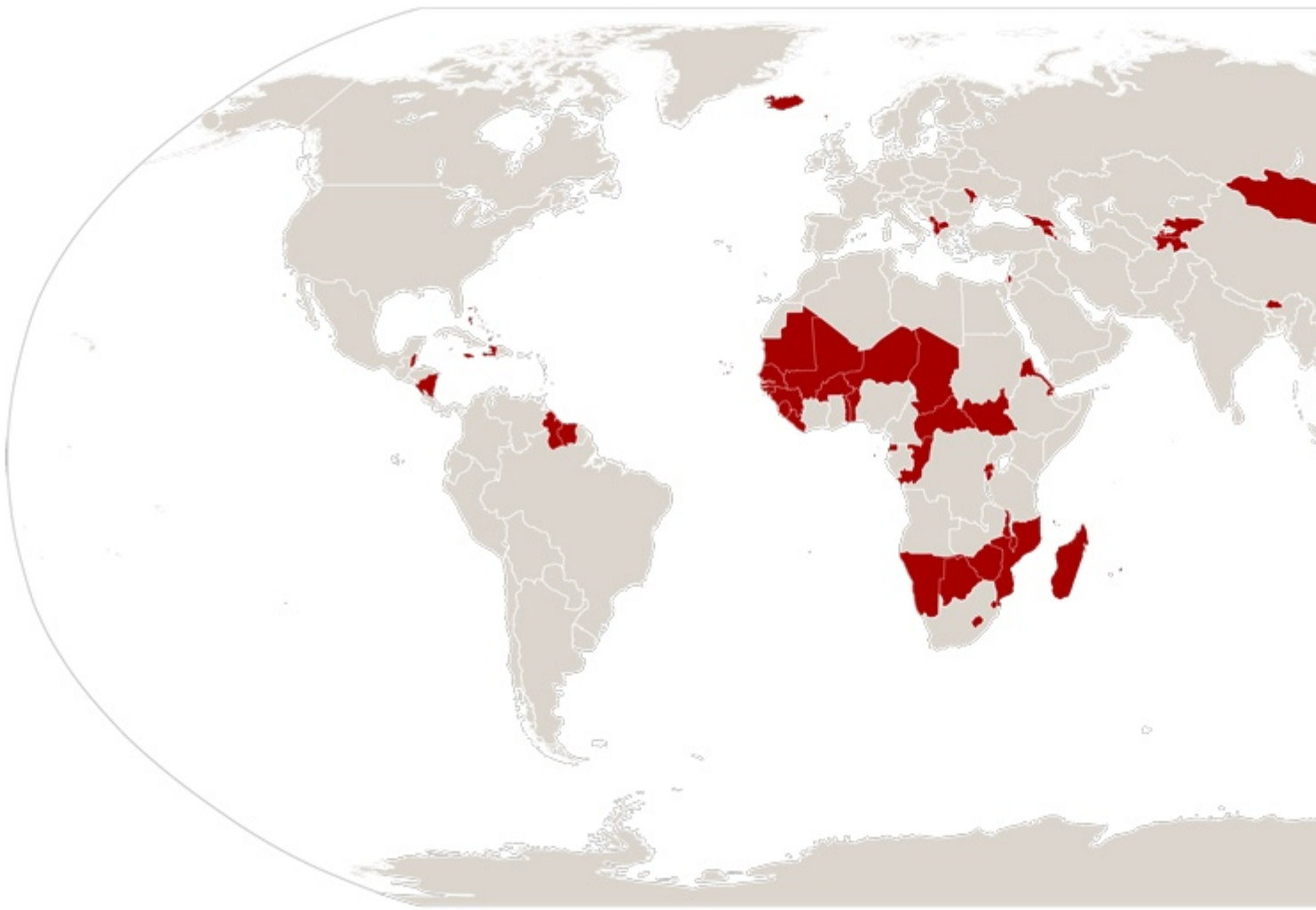


Sloan Mann, worked for USAID in Afghanistan: “We need to be much more humble about what we can achieve, and that translates into doing less. If we can’t have a measurable impact, then why are we there? It’s a hard question we have to answer.”



Ashley Jackson, who worked for Oxfam and the U.N. in Afghanistan: “Most Afghans live in a space between abject poverty and doing OK, so it doesn’t take a lot to have an impact on their lives.”

**These 80 Countries Had a Lower GDP Than the \$17.1 Billion We Blew in Afghanistan**



Note: Figures from 2014. Source: [The World Bank](#); map from Wikimedia Commons. [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#)  
[Link](#)

### **Over-Gifting: Afghans Can't Afford, Don't Need What They Got [Link](#)**

In a 14-year flurry of giving, the U.S. built the Afghans an array of big-ticket projects, but whether they could afford to maintain, or even operate, this largess was rarely considered in any meaningful way.

The World Bank ranks Afghanistan's ability to pay its bills as one of the world's lowest. Right now, the country is significantly propped up by foreign aid whose future is uncertain. International donors have so far only committed at current levels through 2017.

A former SIGAR official listed three key tests for sustainability: Do they have the money? The technical capacity? The political will?

"Afghanistan generally fails all three."

American "over-gifting" was a problem on virtually every project.

Consider health care. In 2011, the inspector general for USAID issued a bleak assessment of the ability

of the Afghans to sustain any of the agency's health programs. The Afghan government paid the tab for just 6 percent of the nation's health care expenditures.

Yet USAID replaced a hospital in Gardez with a new, larger facility, saddling the Afghans with at least a 180 percent, and possibly as much as a 524 percent, increase in that annual bill. (Or it will when the hospital is finally completed. It's years behind schedule.) Not far from that hospital, USAID replaced another that had cost \$98,000 per year to run with one that costs \$587,000 annually — nearly six times as much.

Sure, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health agreed to fund the new hospitals, but USAID didn't address a fundamental question: Could it actually afford to do so? Without donor money, the answer is unequivocally "no." And that's the answer for almost every single aspect of the Afghan government, according to a dozen of military and civilian Afghan experts.

In the case of the Gardez hospital, the Afghans also told SIGAR the hospital wasn't just beyond their means, but their needs, too. It's 12 times the size of the old one and will require, the Afghans said, "additional staff for cleaning and security and further strain funding available for future hospital operations," according to [SIGAR's report](#). The large generators required for the huge facility and a complex heating system ballooned the costs. The military built similarly outsized hospitals as well.

To be fair, many cite the improvements in health care as one of the more positive storylines in Afghanistan. Andrew Wilder, an Afghanistan expert with the United States Institute of Peace, said it was "a real success story," and that the health ministry is actually one of the Afghans' strongest. USAID's Sampler said the availability of health care has soared since 2002, noting, for example, that there are three times as many midwives.

Then there's the \$335 million power plant in Kabul that some critics have dubbed the "fantasy plant." Hastily planned in a rush to build it before the 2009 Afghan elections, it ended up \$181 million over budget. The diesel-powered plant is so expensive to run, the Afghans are only using about 1 percent of its capacity. That intermittent use is actually harming the equipment and putting it on the path to "catastrophic failure," USAID's inspector general found. The Afghans would have to come up with \$245 million per year to run the plant continuously as USAID originally intended.

USAID has long defended the plant as a vital piece of the energy supply in the capital region, noting that after an avalanche last year took out other power lines, it was able to provide some electricity to Kabul.





Sustaining non-security projects in Afghanistan, like this Department of Defense-funded road, could cost as much as 15% of Afghanistan's GDP. (SIGAR [via Flickr](#))

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## You be the Judge

\$2B

## Roads the Afghans likely can't maintain

**What:** Construction and maintenance of 5,700 miles of roads that the Afghans currently don't have sufficient funding and technical capacity to maintain. They fall \$100 million short each year.

**Who:** Multiple Agencies

Compare the cost of this project to what we could have funded » (Scrolls To Top)

When the Afghans don't, can't or won't sustain something, it means a running tab for the American taxpayers, because they end up covering the cost of upkeep. It's not cheap. For instance, after the Afghans failed to take over operation and maintenance of all the security forces buildings, the U.S. had to re-up a contract that costs \$800 million.

One of the largest, most notorious, capital projects in Afghanistan is roads. So far the U.S. and other donors have spent more than \$4 billion total on multiple projects to build more than 5,700 miles of them. Yet the U.N. says 85 percent of the country's roads are undrivable.

The Afghans do little to care for them. USAID tried to mold the Ministry of Public Works into a competent bureaucracy, but so far it remains ineffective. There's about a "\$100 million maintenance gap and inadequate technical staff" at the ministry for "routine, periodic, preventive, emergency and winter maintenance," [USAID told SIGAR](#).

Adding to their quick deterioration: the roads were built to U.S. weight standards, but Afghan trucks are notoriously overweight, Sopko said.

"What a stupid standard," he said in a talk last year. "Who is in la-la land applying Bethesda to Afghanistan?"



Jackson: "So many Afghans thought the US would never leave and neither would the money, so they wouldn't ever say 'no' to a project."



Sopko: "USAID is so defensive...they put the wagons in a circle and point the guns out...I've watched

them go from a big vibrant agency and get smaller and smaller.”



Tiefer: “We’re building and investing in Afghanistan on the doubtful expectation that other countries will pour many billions of dollars, maybe tens of billions, into Afghanistan in the decade to come. The world has many needs for the money.”

### **Doomed to Repeat: An Afghan Security Force That Can’t Maintain Its Numbers, Buildings, Equipment. Even Its Front Lines. [Link](#)**

If recent history is any guide, the outlook for the Pentagon’s ambitious and expensive goal to create an advanced army in Afghanistan isn’t promising.

One only has to look to Iraq, where the Pentagon spent more than \$20 billion to build an army and hailed it a resounding success. Until ISIS came and the Iraqi security forces crumbled.

Meanwhile in Afghanistan, a far poorer and less sophisticated country, the military has replicated that training program, but tripled the investment, spending \$65 billion — nearly 60 percent of the entire reconstruction budget. The plan: Create a well-schooled, 352,000-strong national Army and police force, and a robust air force able to secure the country on its own — all in a matter of years.

But this formidable objective ignored the Afghans’ pervasive corruption, fledgling leadership, and rudimentary capabilities. Not to mention Afghanistan’s complete inability to pay the bills of such a large, modern military — which costs upwards of [\\$5 billion per year](#) (If the Afghans spent every cent they collected in revenue on security and nothing else, they still couldn’t cover the cost.) The Pentagon has also had a perplexing tendency to repeat mistakes made in Iraq.

Success for the Afghan military hinged on turning a largely uneducated population into fighter pilots, into advanced mechanics, into logisticians for complicated supply needs spread across a nation.

“It takes generations to build an army no matter how much money you throw at it,” said retired Lt. Gen. Daniel Bolger, who was commanding general for the training mission in Afghanistan from late 2011 to 2013 and authored [“Why We Lost.”](#)

To put the arduousness of this task in perspective, consider the starting point: Teaching recruits to read. Seventy percent of Afghanistan is illiterate, and the percentage was even worse among the recruits — only 13 percent could write a basic sentence.



Literacy instruction at Darulaman Literacy Center. The military has no idea if this training worked. (SIGAR [via Flickr](#))

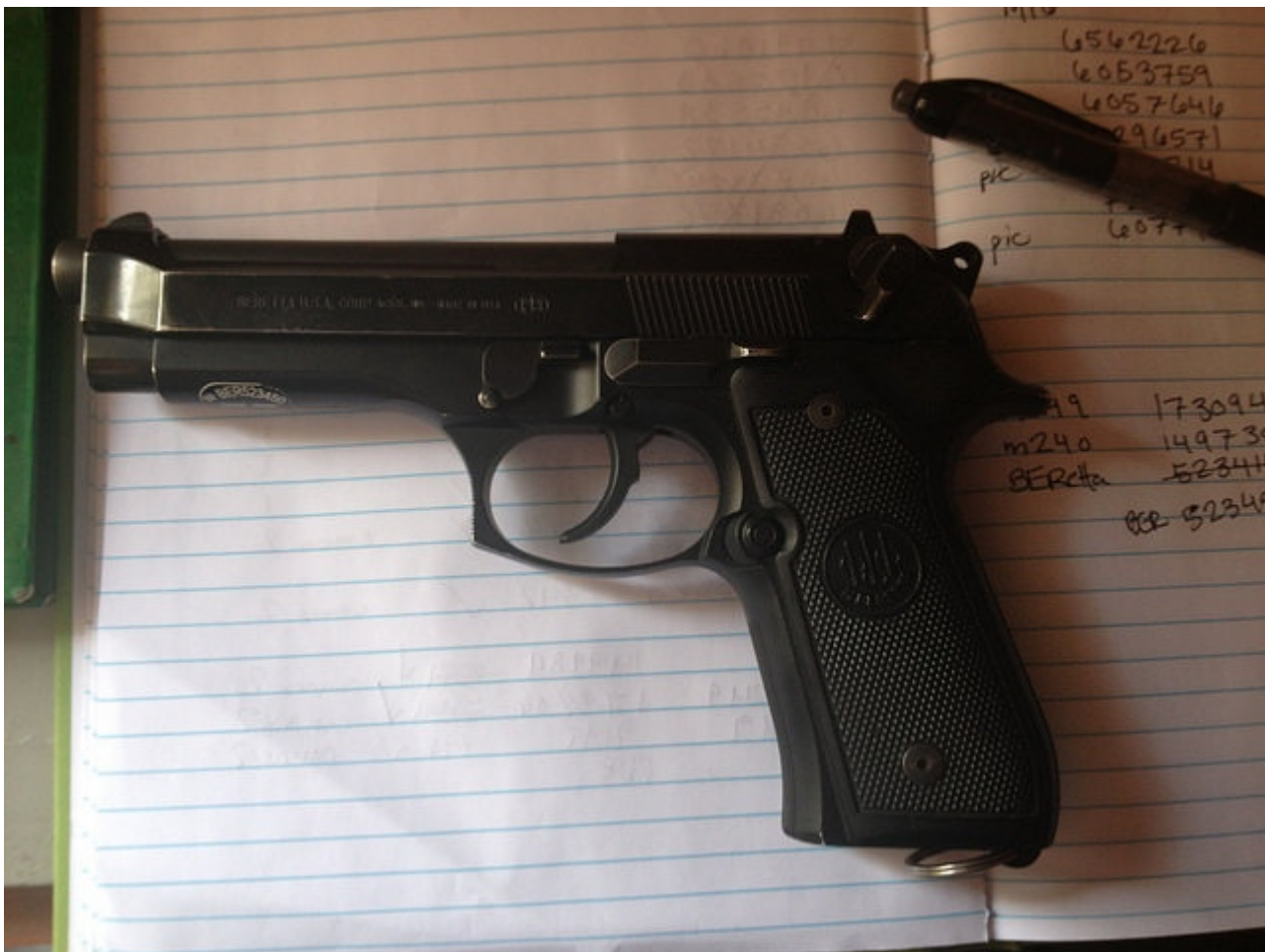
The Pentagon invested heavily in a literacy program, spending \$200 million since 2010. But education apparently has its limits, even at that cost. The majority of recruits only go through basic classes in which the goals are to recognize and pronounce letters, write their names and some short words, count to 1,000 and do basic addition and subtraction.

The military has no idea if the training worked. The students' proficiency had not been independently evaluated after the classes and the contractor hadn't been required to track results. Some students "graduated" after attending class for as little as two hours a month, SIGAR found.

As for those graduates, the military hasn't tracked them either. In fact, because so many policemen and soldiers bail on the security forces, the military doesn't know how many who completed the training are still serving. The military's best guess as of 2014 was that half of the force was illiterate, according to [SIGAR's report](#). A year earlier, the need for police and soldiers was such that the literacy program was suspended and many recruits went straight into service without even being able to write their name. Not surprisingly, tracking of weapons, ammunition and spare parts is lacking.

In the case of weapons, it's deja vu of Iraq. Back in October 2006, an audit by Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction revealed a massive failure to track the 370,000 weapons — \$130 million worth — bought for the Iraqi security forces since 2003. In response, the military said it had developed a system to “maintain accountability” for the weapons in the future.

It's not hard to guess what happened next. In 2014, SIGAR discovered that the U.S. was not certain of the whereabouts of \$626 million worth of weapons it had provided Afghanistan forces. (Even that total was hard for the military to pin down. Initially officials said the total was \$878 million in 2013 and then revised that to \$626 million.) The military also wasted money on at least 112,000 weapons for the army and police that they didn't need, including more than 83,000 extra AK-47s, SIGAR found.



Afghan National Security Forces weapon. (SIGAR [via Flickr](#))

The heavy equipment used by the world's high-level militaries is far too much for the Afghans to

handle. The Pentagon has shopped for the Afghan military like a new dad who gives his infant son a regulation basketball years before he can, or wants, to play the game. “They buy things and hope they’ll be utilized,” said Daniel Chen, SIGAR’s Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audits & Inspections.

?

## You be the Judge

\$936M

### Underused aircraft for counternarcotics and counterterrorism

**What:** U.S. military has poured time and money into developing a special aviation unit for counternarcotics and counterterrorism, including \$935.8 million to buy helicopters and planes. But the Afghans lack the personnel and the expertise to fully handle the mission. The unit is only about 60 percent staffed, missing the target of being 100 percent last summer.

**Who:** DOD

Compare the cost of this project to what we could have funded » (Scrolls To Top)

The Pentagon spent, for instance, nearly \$936 million on Mi-17 helicopters and other equipment for the Special Mission Wing for counternarcotics and counterterrorism — even though there were already too few pilots and mechanics for previously purchased helicopters, SIGAR found.

The special mission itself is on wobbly ground. The Afghans lack the personnel and the expertise for it, despite the estimated \$109 million DOD spends annually to provide training, logistics and maintenance. As of October, the wing had just 60 percent of the personnel it needed, falling far short of the deadline last summer to hit full strength of 806 people. In 2013, SIGAR reported the DOD was having trouble recruiting more people because Afghans couldn’t pass the literacy or criminal requirements. The wing did fly more than twice as many missions this year than it had in 2014.

The Pentagon vigorously disagreed with SIGAR’s assessment of the Special Mission Wing in 2013. A spokesman told ProPublica that the Afghans were “successfully operating these aircraft at a high operational tempo in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.”

In a testament to how much the Afghan Air Force as a whole is struggling, Bolger said that “of all the air things we did,” the Special Mission Wing, even with its failings, is “the most practical one, no doubt.”

Eight years in, the Afghans are still reliant on the U.S. for air support. This was on full display in September when the Taliban stormed the major city of Kunduz. Not only did the Afghan forces retreat and hand over much of the city with little fight — showing just how far short they are of being an independent fighting force — they also couldn’t retake the city a few weeks later without U.S. airstrikes.

“Despite our investments of large sums of money in various kinds of Afghan aircraft to support the security forces, the money appears wasted,” said Tiefer, of the wartime contracting commission.

When the Taliban overruns an Afghan city, the losses go well beyond the money invested in training. The United States poured more than \$9 billion into military and police infrastructure.

In Kunduz, tens of millions worth of buildings and compounds were at risk, including a nearly \$71 million Army garrison, a \$17.7 million police headquarters and a \$7.3 million border police headquarters that might never have been used. In 2013, SIGAR discovered just a dozen officers there and they were locked out of nine of the 12 buildings. ProPublica asked a Pentagon spokeswoman in September whether Afghan officers were now using the station, but she couldn’t answer. The standard military line is that once something has been given to the Afghans, the U.S. government is not responsible for ensuring that it is being used as intended, or at all.

That kind of hands-off attitude leaves the door wide open for corruption, Sopko said. The importance of dealing with corruption’s corrosive effects should have been another lesson learned from Iraq. Yet SIGAR, other inspectors general, and the Government Accountability Office have all raised concerns that graft has run rampant, particularly in the security forces. “That’s the 800-pound gorilla in the room,” Sopko said.

For years there was no comprehensive strategy to combat corruption. In the security forces, siphoning of salary money is endemic, both in high-level government and at the local level. In 2014 alone, \$45.5 million worth of U.S.-funded salaries might have been stolen by those in charge of paying policemen, SIGAR reported. (The Afghan government is shifting to a safer policy of paying police through cell phones.) Then there was the millions in fake pension withholdings and fees for official stores that didn’t exist.

In a speech last year, Sopko said the Iraqi security collapse, which in many ways was linked to both petty and political corruption, was a warning sign for American efforts in Afghanistan. Should that same default befall Afghanistan, “it would be a tragedy for the American taxpayer.”



Retired Army Lt. Gen. Daniel Bolger: “We being nice guys, we’ll help build their air force, but how

realistic is that?”



Bowen: On the United States investment in the Iraqi military, which recently fell apart: “Arguably that money should now be considered to be wasted.”



Andrew Wilder, Afghanistan expert with the United States Institute of Peace: “The biggest driver of conflict was a corrupt and predatory government.”

**“A” Is For Effort: In Afghanistan No One Has To Prove Success [Link](#)**

For five years, USAID poured \$150 million into a project with warm, but fuzzy, aspirations: helping isolated, unstable Afghan communities grow and feel more connected to their government. It was a part of the military’s broad campaign to win “hearts and minds.”

?



## You be the Judge

\$400M

### Governance program that fell short of goals

**What:** Local Governance and Community Development program was meant to stabilize communities for long-term economic, social and governmental success. USAID had trouble determining if it was effective, but doubled the budget anyway. The agency also had a difficult time monitoring contractors -- less than half the money was spent on actual projects, with the rest going to living expenses, security and other overhead. Despite some progress, the program did not meet its overarching goals. One Afghanistan expert called it "absolutely atrocious."

**Who:** USAID

Compare the cost of this project to what we could have funded » (Scrolls To Top)

In all that time, though, USAID was never able to define what, exactly, the objectives of the "Local Governance and Community Development" program were, let alone if it had met them. The agency also had a hard time keeping track of what contractors were actually doing, SIGAR reported.

That, however, didn't stop USAID from literally doubling down on the program in 2009, increasing its budget to \$373 million.

SIGAR's conclusion: scattered, small successes but no wins on any overarching goals. Ashley Jackson, a longtime non-governmental organization worker, was more blunt. USAID, she said, "would have been better off setting the money on fire."

USAID rebuffed SIGAR's harsh assessment, saying its programs needed to be flexible because Afghanistan was a fluid, uncertain environment and goals changed as USAID officials became more experienced in the country.

With programs in general, Jonathan Carpenter, a senior State Department official, said there's a fundamental difference between waste and efforts that are well thought out but the outcome was not as hoped. "It's disappointing, but that's not fraud, waste and abuse."

Still, a consistent problem with many of the reconstruction programs SIGAR investigated is there's no way to tell if they're successful. The stated goals are often vague and shifting, and only rarely does anyone measure performance or impact. That makes fudging easy. If success isn't defined, nothing fails.

The military, the State Department and USAID all like to have opening ceremonies and shake hands, said SIGAR's Chen, "but they're not looking at what happens after you cut the ribbon."

For instance, the Pentagon built more than 1,000 infrastructure projects for the Afghan army and police and had "zero insight" into how much they were used, he said.

“I was never ever asked in two years what the impact of my program was. Never,” said Sloan Mann, who worked for USAID in Afghanistan.

When those in charge do track performance at all, it’s often outputs not outcomes — like USAID reporting that it has trained 650 judges, but not whether those judges are now working in the judicial sector.

Even that basic counting is often suspect. For example, State Department and USAID officials boasted for years about building 680 schools — the \$769 million education investment was routinely trotted out as a success story by top officials, including the president — but [Buzzfeed found](#) that the number was really 563. And many of them were empty, both Buzzfeed and SIGAR reported.

When it came to health clinics, SIGAR found that USAID had GPS data listing 13 that weren’t in Afghanistan and one that was in the Mediterranean Sea. USAID then gave different data to SIGAR. There were 55 fewer clinics, and in five provinces, every clinic location was different from the first list. USAID and SIGAR are still working out the discrepancies.



A USAID-built school in Helmand Province that is abandoned and riddled with bullet holes. (Courtesy of Sloan Mann)



Chairs at a school built, but never occupied, were stripped for firewood. (SIGAR [via Flickr](#))

Often, too, the military, the State Department and USAID bragged about how much was spent on a program as if that alone was a sign of success. (USAID's [fact sheet](#) on the community development program highlighted “more than 2,500 community-stabilization projects, representing an investment of \$109 million.”)

Mann said he created his own indicators to track his progress because, as far as his bosses were

concerned, “I was rewarded by how much money I spent.”

Measures of success are often malleable as well. The military, for example, ranks Afghan army units to assess their competence. But at one point the highest rating changed from “independent” to “independent with advisors.” As a result, more units were judged top tier, the Government Accountability Office said in 2012. SIGAR found the assessment tool was arbitrarily applied and not that useful anyway. Afterwards the military created a new tool, but classified it.

Zooming out to the 35,000-foot view, there are many indications of positive effects the reconstruction effort has had on the country. Carpenter, of the State Department, highlights that the capital city of Kabul now has near continuous power, cell phones are widely available, and there’s a free, vibrant press. About 43,000 women attended university last year, USAID’s Sampler said.

But overall, the Pentagon, the State Department and USAID don’t evaluate which of their programs are working well and which are not.

Searching for the good his critics so often say he ignores, John Sopko, the head of SIGAR, asked them in 2013 [to list their top 10 best programs](#). None of them would do it.

The State Department and USAID wrote a joint letter in response, saying “given the wide range of assistance projects and programs our agencies have carried out, we do not compare individual projects against others, particularly over a decade of intensive rebuilding efforts, which result in constantly changing conditions for each project.”

Instead, they wrote broadly about their programs and listed off general indicators that life was getting better in Afghanistan, pointing in particular to health care and education. While reconstruction certainly played a role, some of the statistics cited resulted from a variety of factors, such as the country becoming less rural and more urban, Sopko [wrote back](#) to them a few months later. For example, the letter noted that 60 percent of the population had access to healthcare within an hour’s walk compared to just six percent in 2001.

“OK, maybe this is too difficult,” Sopko said about his response to them. “Give me some successes.”

The two departments and USAID again said they wouldn’t do it. Sopko had also asked them to list their 10 worst programs and why. But this, too, went unanswered. They barely mention programs that hadn’t worked. USAID briefly brought up just one, a road program that was ended because of poor results. Each of their letters cataloged general challenges of working in the country.

“Delays, fraud, poor performance, security challenges, contractor overcharges have been a too-constant feature of doing business in Afghanistan,” officials from the State Department and USAID wrote.

There was no mention of bad decisions or bad oversight or money wasted. Instead the letter focused on all they had done to cope with these challenges — and showed, Sopko said, they had completely missed the point.



Scott Harmon, a SIGAR inspector: “The two objectives of every [building] inspection were: Was it built to requirements and is it being used as intended or maintained? Those are just loaded questions for Afghanistan. It would be no and no.”



Bowen: “We did something in Afghanistan that we didn’t in Iraq that I think pushes the risk off the charts: deposit US dollars into Afghan accounts for them to manage. All under the proviso that they have effective oversight in place in their ministries. Those assurances are not worth anything.”



Jonathan Carpenter, senior official with the State Department: “Even the most aggressive criticisms of the education system can’t ignore the fact that there are millions of more children, certainly more girls, in school than there were on Sept. 10, 2001.”

## \$3 Million Of Boats Left In Storage 7,000 Miles Away From Afghanistan



### \$3 million waste? Patrol boats intended for Afghan forces sit in Virginia base

Patrol boats U.S. taxpayers sunk \$3 million on in 2010 that were supposed to beef up the Afghan National Police presence along its border are collecting dust inside a...

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**Brian P Phillips** David, I remember the day I ordered them... One of the reason they moved me upstairs is because of them dam things... look good.

June 12, 2014 at 10:08pm



**David Ems** Yea I figure one day we will all be standing in front of congress

June 13, 2014 at 6:58am

Patrol boat purchased for the Afghan National Police. (SIGAR [via Flickr](#); Screenshot of Facebook by Megan McCloskey)

In 2010, the military spent \$3 million on boats for Afghanistan that never made it to the country. Instead the eight patrol boats sat for years, unused, in a Naval facility in Virginia because the military changed its mind after ordering them. The boats were intended for the Afghan National Police, but the military couldn't tell SIGAR why the order was cancelled, whether the Afghan government was involved in the decision to buy them, or most startlingly, why exactly the boats were purchased in the first place.

When SIGAR first broke the story about the boats, one Army officer involved with the purchase, posted about it on the Facebook page of another Army major: "Yea I figure one day we will all be standing in front of congress."

## Consequence-Free Zone: No One Is Ever Blamed For Failure [Link](#)

North of Kabul, where a distinctive, two-story courthouse is supposed to be, there's only a shell of rebar and cracking concrete.



Tilted columns and sagging reinforcing rods at the Justice Center Court House construction project in Parwan Province, Afghanistan. (SIGAR [via Flickr](#))

This should have been the centerpiece for Afghan national security trials, a prominent place to prosecute suspected insurgents. Instead, judges preside over a makeshift courtroom in a nearby building with fold-out tables.

?

## Waste

\$396K

## Unfinished courthouse

**What:** Planned prominent courthouse for Afghan national security trials is an abandoned shell of rebar because the project was so badly managed.



**Who:** The DOD & State Department

Compare the cost of this project to what we could have funded » (Scrolls To Top)

It turns out no one with the U.S. military made sure the courthouse was actually being built, a SIGAR inquiry found.

It was “the most gross display of incompetence I’ve probably ever seen,” said Scott Harmon, the SIGAR staffer who did the inspection.

The project, Harmon said, was bungled from the start. A Reserve Army staff sergeant, whose main qualification appeared to be that he was a plumber in civilian life, was put in charge. He told SIGAR that he had no idea what he was doing.

The Afghan contractor hired to build the courthouse had only been in business for about six months and there was very little documentation on why his company was chosen to do the work, Harmon said. The contractor hired a subcontractor that military commanders knew actively supported the Taliban. But since those commanders failed to share this information throughout the organization, the subcontractor had access to a U.S. military-controlled area for two days — a serious security lapse, according to a SIGAR report.

With just basic foundation work done on the justice center, the contractor disappeared, taking almost \$400,000 of U.S. taxpayers’ money with him. The military subsequently abandoned the project.

The consequences for those mismanaging this misbegotten project? Nothing.

That was true in most of the SIGAR reports reviewed by ProPublica, despite botched management and poor decisions that resulted in sometimes hundreds of millions of dollars in waste.

There is no single chain of command responsible for the reconstruction effort. The Pentagon and the State Department in partnership with USAID run their own projects, often without coordination. The two departments are free to ignore one another, which allows each not only to dodge responsibility for overall reconstruction failures, but also for duplicative or contradictory programs.

The system doesn’t work, because “we don’t have one. We just respond,” said Bowen, the former Iraq IG, who found the same accountability problems in that country.

The culture within the two departments and USAID also treats any failings short of criminal as acceptable. In their responses to SIGAR and other critics, all three routinely shrug off failures as part of doing a challenging job.

SIGAR often turns up a specific person who failed in their duties, recommends some type of reprimand and the department declines. For example, in 2013, a United States Army Corps of Engineers official signed off on the installation of trash incinerators without even checking if they worked. They didn’t, and actually needed \$1 million worth of fixes, SIGAR discovered. Yet the contractor was paid the full \$5.4 million. USACE concluded no one was at fault. (The incinerators were never used and were dismantled when the military closed the base. As in other parts of the country, troops there were exposed to toxic fumes from open-air burn pits — another instance of the military skating without

consequence. Burn pits were banned in 2011 to protect troops' health.)



Open-air burn pit at shindand airbase, with unused Afghan-operated incinerators in background (SIGAR [via Flickr](#))

Officials also repeatedly let contractors off the hook for bad work and then hired them again. At an Afghan Army camp, Harmon recalled how SIGAR inspected phase 2 of the construction, which was happening to fix the problems from phase 1. Then there was a phase 3 to correct phase 2 and a phase 4 to correct phase 3. None of the contractors were held responsible for botched work that required pricey fixes, he said.

USAID handed over one of its largest and most important projects to a company that had already come in years late and millions over budget for a power plant in Kabul — and had been called out by both the agency's inspector general and SIGAR for poor work. (The company had been problematic in Iraq, too.)

USAID “has a very extreme dependence upon its group of favorite contractors,” said Tiefer, of the wartime contracting commission.

Majority of the reconstruction effort was driven by the whims of the military agenda, rather than by thoughtful, long-term goals.

“The immediate needs of security trumped everything else” including “development perspectives,” according to Sampler, who has been working on Afghanistan for USAID since 2002.

The military said it saw reconstruction solely through the lens of defeating the insurgency.

“We’re going to build a school in that village, because the village is difficult and they’ll like us better if we build a school,” Parker, the British general, offered as an example.

The Pentagon and its commanding officers are rarely called to account for failed projects — or failed overall strategies for using reconstruction as a means to win over the population.

## [Related App: Money as a Weapons System »](#)

How U.S. Commanders Spent \$2 Billion of Petty Cash in Afghanistan



The Goats of War



Wrong Target



Prayer Beads

After the military went forward with building a \$25 million headquarters that several high-ranking officers said wasn’t needed — and no one ever used — [nothing happened](#) to the general who insisted it be built. In fact, afterwards he was made the Army inspector general.

USAID, on the other hand, has been Congress’ favorite target for cuts and frustrations about progress in Afghanistan. But even when USAID does try to police itself, shutting down underperforming or not strategically relevant projects, there’s still a gotcha moment, said Carpenter, of the State Department. “Somebody says, ‘Aha! 5 million taxpayer dollars went to waste.’”

USAID is expected to be almost “omniscient” to know at the start that a program will work, he said. “The burden [for] success is very, very high.”



Sopko: “Why is it in the government you can blow \$600 million and probably get a pay raise?”



Mann: “You can build them a school, but what does that have to do with why the insurgency is flourishing? Nothing. It has nothing to do with it.”

**Success or Failure: We Spent \$8 billion and There’s Now More Heroin Than Ever [Link](#)**

Today Afghanistan is the king of heroin.

It sits on a narco throne as “the global leader in illicit opium cultivation and production,” according to SIGAR.

?

## You be the Judge

\$8B

### Fighting the drug trade

**What:** After a 13-year effort by the U.S. to end Afghanistan's drug trade, it is now the world leader in heroin production. Plans to promote alternative farming and eradicate poppy fields have only led to more poppies planted. Law enforcement training has been insufficient. About \$109 million was spent on substance abuse treatment programs and education.

**Who:** Multiple Agencies

Compare the cost of this project to what we could have funded » (Scrolls To Top)

And that \$8.4 billion the U.S. spent to end its reign over the last 13 years appears to have only enhanced its standing. The Pentagon, USAID and the State Department had a grand plan to eradicate poppy fields, develop Afghan law enforcement and promote alternative farming livelihoods. Yet the drug trade still "poisons the Afghan financial sector and undermines the Afghan state's legitimacy by stoking corruption, sustaining criminal networks, and providing significant financial support to the Taliban and other insurgent groups," SIGAR found.

In fact, the country grows more poppy now than it did before the war.

Afghanistan's income from heroin is significant. Opium makes up about 10-15 percent of the country's GDP, or around \$3 billion a year, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

And the Taliban has benefited. It actually made more money during the U.S. counternarcotics effort than it did when it was in power in the 1990s, the U.N. reported in 2009. The Taliban used to earn \$75 million to \$100 million each year taxing the poppy cultivation, but by 2005 that had jumped to \$90 million to \$160 million.

The insurgent group was helped along by failed U.S. agriculture programs that were intended to encourage farmers to grow legal crops. In seven provinces where USAID had at least one such program, the agency's inspector general found that poppy growth actually increased.

SIGAR reported that many of the attempts to expand suitable land for legal farming just increased the acreage viable for poppy growth.

"We irrigated some of the finest poppy crops in the world," retired Army Lt. Gen. Daniel Bolger said, deadpanning: "That was not the plan."

The U.N. deemed it one of the world's "most high profile cases of failed alternative development strategies," saying "the focus on military victory rather than on poverty and food security has done little to incentivize poor farmers to grow licit crops."

The military had also invested heavily in eradication in the early years of the war with the help of the DEA, but eventually abandoned that costly strategy.

For a few years, the overall effort looked successful. Many provinces were declared “poppy free” around 2008. But it didn’t last. For example, in one such province in eastern Afghanistan, there was “a fourfold increase in opium poppy cultivation between 2012 and 2013,” SIGAR said.

Poppy growth decreased in 2015, but the U.N. warned that drop could simply be reflecting a “major improvement” in measurement tools, and other analysts pointed to drought and blight in the biggest growing regions as key factors.

The large sum spent so far on fighting the drug trade took some White House staffers and a top official at the State Department by surprise, according to Sopko. They didn’t know the effort had cost that much until SIGAR came out with a report, he said.

Much of the \$8 billion went to developing the Afghan government’s ability to fight the drug trade. So, Sopko said, one positive outcome is that judges and prosecutors have been trained to handle criminal cases, and there is a special Air Force wing — albeit one that SIGAR has raised concerns about — that the U.S. military has been training to fly counternarcotics missions.

About \$108 million also went to drug treatment and prevention programs, ProPublica found.

But overall, Sopko said, “the vast majority has been wasted.”

Some experts who have studied the reconstruction effort and DEA agents who participated in the counternarcotics mission concede the total spent was much too high, but they question whether there was an alternative given that it was such a tremendous problem.

“You can’t just not do anything,” said Craig Chretien, a retired DEA agent who worked on the Afghanistan drug task force. “To do nothing would be significantly worse.”

Tiefer from the wartime spending commission agreed. “It’s not clear there was some better strategy to follow.”

The drug trade feeds corruption, Sopko said. Dealing with both are intrinsically tied to reconstruction success, he said, which is why the failure to have an effective strategy “is one of these things I get so upset about.”

When a farmer grows poppy, he pays off the local officials, and the money goes up the chain and leads to corruption of entire institutions, Chretien said. Part of the program was to demonstrate to the Afghans that was why they shouldn’t let the drug trade go on, he said.

To American taxpayers, the idea the money was well spent might be a hard sell.

“The test to a person of common sense is that we should have something to show for that much money, and we don’t have anything to show for it,” Tiefer said. “In that sense it’s been a waste.”

The Pentagon and the State Department blamed a lack of Afghan government support for the failures. In a letter to Sopko, the State Department wrote that there was “no silver bullet” to deal with the drug trade and that “our counternarcotics goals can be accomplished only when these are also Afghan counternarcotics goals. We look forward to the new Afghan government assuming a leadership role in this regard.”

In October, the U.S. signed on to the Afghan’s new counternarcotics strategy for the next five years and agreed to pay \$350 million for it.

So was spending the \$8 billion and counting worthwhile? You be the judge.

**Image Credits:** Headshots: Ashley Jackson (Courtesy of Ashley Jackson), Andrew Wilder (U.S. Institute of Peace), Daniel Bolger (AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/Getty Images), Charles Tiefer (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images), John Sopko (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak), Jonathan Carpenter (VOA Urdu), Sir Nick Parker (Matt Cardy/Getty Images), Stuart Bowen (AP Photo/Evan Vucci), William Taylor (UPI/Michael Kleinfeld), Sloan Mann (Courtesy of Sloan Mann), Scott Harmon (Courtesy of Scott Harmon); Icons from [the Noun Project](#) by Musket, Michael Zenaty, Demograph, Alex Tai, Magicon, Wilson Joseph, Jetro Cabau Quirós, Matt Wasser, Arthur Shlain, Ugur Akdemir, Iain Hector, Stan Diers, Creative Stall, Matt Steele, anbileru adaleru, Liane Kirschner, Stephen McKamey, Ciro Esposito & Stephen Plaster.



CREDIT: LARS KLOVE

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