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## HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

*U.S. House of Representatives*

Washington, DC 20515-6035

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ERIN C. CONATON, STAFF DIRECTOR

September 22, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Our nation has reached an important moment in our efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan. As you assess the direction you set for American and allied efforts in Afghanistan in March, you will have to make decisions concerning both strategy and resources. But I believe that you set the right goal when you called for the defeat of al Qa'ida and for preventing their return to Afghanistan. I believe that General McChrystal has the right plan and is the right man for the job. And I believe that we must give our commander in Afghanistan the resources and time he needs to successfully accomplish this task.

You do not have easy decisions before you. The heroic efforts of our military to provide security to areas like Helmand province—that had until recently been left to insurgents—have yielded American, coalition, and Afghan casualties. Many Americans are questioning whether the effort in Afghanistan is still worth the lives and money that would be needed for us to succeed. I understand their concerns. After eight years of conflict and after the distraction that Iraq posed to this central front against al Qa'ida, many Americans are fatigued by war and confused by the complexity that dominates that part of the world.

Yet, based on years of contemplating this conflict and on my experience with our military and the strategic thought of our war colleges, I believe you were right when you stated in your March speech that our nation must succeed in ensuring that Afghanistan cannot again be used as a breeding and training ground for al Qa'ida and other terrorist organizations. We must succeed in order to continue to protect the American homeland and to preserve our leadership around the world.

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I am also convinced that there is no strategy short of a properly-resourced counter-insurgency campaign that is likely to provide lasting security. But, time is not on our side. Coming from Harry Truman country, I ask myself, "What would Harry Truman do?" And this leads me to urge you to waste no time in providing a clear direction to our commanders and civilian leaders, along with the resources necessary to achieve their mission—and to do so with an understanding that the American and Afghan people, as well as our allies, must see progress in the next 12 months.

Let me explain how I come to this conclusion. Al Qa'ida presents a serious threat to American national security. Osama bin Laden and his minions have attacked or attempted to attack the United States, our citizens, and our military forces or government employees many times over the years. The most remarkable attack involved the murder of almost three thousand civilians—men, women, and children. But this was not the only attack launched by al Qa'ida, and there is no reason to believe that the threat posed by this organization has dissipated.

Following the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants fled to the border regions of Pakistan, where they have since remained, plotting attacks on the United States and calling on others to do the same. Meanwhile, the Taliban, close allies of al Qa'ida, continue to escalate their attempts to attack Americans and to overthrow the government of Afghanistan. The situation there is perilous but not lost. I, for one, do not believe that we can successfully root out al Qa'ida from Pakistan and destroy the organization if we do not succeed in Afghanistan and prevent that country from ever again being used as a safe haven to launch attacks against us.

There are many who disagree with this analysis. They believe that al Qa'ida can find many safe havens around the world and that it is not worth prosecuting a major war in Afghanistan just to remove one potential safe haven. While there is some degree of truth to this—al Qa'ida is using other places in the Middle East and Africa as safe havens—we cannot underestimate the significance that Afghanistan plays to al Qa'ida. There are some inherently unique advantages for al Qa'ida in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area that have made the region the epicenter of terrorism in the world. Al Qa'ida has over twenty years of experience in the Afghanistan-Pakistan area. Its alliance with the Taliban has deepened over time. The terrain of the border region, coupled with close personal connections forged of duration and often through marriage, allows the senior leadership of al Qa'ida to hide with a high degree of success. No other potential safe haven comes with these advantages, and moving to a new location would actually pose serious risks to the organization, as communication chains could be lengthened and well-known leaders would have to cross international borders and risk exposure.

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Some observers have suggested that if the Taliban were to retake power in some or all of Afghanistan, they would hesitate to allow al Qaeda back into the country for fear of drawing in American involvement. It is a foolish and potentially dangerous idea to assume the Taliban would not provide a safe haven to al Qaeda or any other militant group seeking to attack the United States and our allies. As we have seen countless times before the Taliban expertly exploit every ideological and military success and it should not be our policy to allow them even the smallest victory. For these reasons, I think the goal of ensuring that Afghanistan cannot be used as a safe haven for al Qaeda remains central to this conflict.

If we accept that terrorist and insurgent forces in Afghanistan continue to pose a threat to the American homeland, to our citizens and service members abroad, and to our credibility as a world leader, a number of approaches can be taken to address this threat. The first approach would be a counter-terror campaign, where pilotless drones and special operations forces are used to attack the al Qaeda leadership. For several years the United States tried to focus almost entirely on targeting al Qaeda, and the result has been a resurgent Taliban and the increased likelihood that al Qaeda will once again gain access to Afghanistan as a base.

This is not to suggest that operations to eliminate the al Qaeda leadership from the air should stop. Our special operations and other forces have had some remarkable successes. Such operations should continue, but this strategy will not be successful absent our presence in Afghanistan, in part because of the strategic outlook of our Pakistani allies. Pakistan sees India as an existential threat and Afghanistan as important for strategic depth. The Pakistanis fear that, should the Indians gain undue influence in Afghanistan, they could encircle Pakistan. Pakistan's main tool to counter this has been the Taliban, and many observers believe that Pakistan retains its ties with the Taliban for this reason. Pakistan's strategic thinking, in this case, would suggest that if the United States were to depart from Afghanistan in the near term, Pakistan would again need to rely on the Taliban to preserve Pakistani interests. Furthermore, Pakistan realizes that if it engaged the Taliban and the U.S. withdrew prematurely, they would face strong enemies on both borders.

Those who urge the adoption of a counter-terror strategy, simply targeting terrorists, need to comprehend the implications of this chain of logic. Were the United States to depart Afghanistan, Pakistan would likely continue to cooperate in our efforts to attack al Qaeda in Pakistan and those elements of the Taliban who pose a threat to the Pakistani regime. However, it is highly doubtful that their enthusiasm would extend to attacks on those they considered to be useful tools, such as the Taliban who are focused on taking power in Afghanistan and the allies of the Taliban, al Qaeda.

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If this is true, our ability to attack the leadership of al Qa'ida would suffer a serious setback. It is also doubtful that this calculus would escape the attention of the leadership of al Qa'ida and presents yet another reason for them to return to Afghanistan and further tighten ties to the Taliban.

A second approach would focus on rapidly training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) utilizing the existing footprint. Training the ANSF is undoubtedly a necessary part of our strategy, but on its own is insufficient. Right now, the Taliban and their allies have the momentum, controlling more territory, and contesting more districts than they did last year. I believe that General McChrystal can reverse this trend, but I very much doubt he can do so if his plan depends on waiting for a large increase in ANSF. The absence of assertive efforts to secure more of the population would effectively cede control of much of the population and much territory to the Taliban. This is no way to defeat an insurgency.

Focusing on the ANSF, to the exclusion of developing governance, is also unlikely to achieve long term success. A military, even an Afghan military, fighting an insurgency on behalf of a corrupt and illegitimate government cannot succeed. The illegitimacy of the Afghan government and corruption of many of its officials currently poses the biggest dilemma facing us in Afghanistan, and there is no reason to suppose that this problem would be solved if we focused solely on the ANSF. At best, the U.S.-trained ANSF would slowly lose the civil war as the Taliban continued to spread their influence, as they have for the past eight years. At worst, the Taliban would inherit large elements of a U.S.-trained and -equipped military when the Taliban retook Afghanistan. Neither option would advance our efforts to defeat al Qa'ida.

The final approach would be a real counter-insurgency plan that is properly resourced—including both U.S. and allied military forces and civilian experts—to carry out the strategy you announced in March. The elements of such a plan are well known, although the implementation will be challenging. I believe that General McChrystal's recent assessment outlines a way to do this with the best chance of success. We must clear the Taliban out of districts they now contest, hold the territory and protect the population there, and build local governments and the ANSF. If successful, this will, over time, allow us to redeploy our forces out of that country without increasing the risks to our national security.

This option – carrying out a real population-protection counter-insurgency plan – is not without risks and costs, and victory is not guaranteed. Providing security to the population will require troops to live near and often among the population. Providing security in ways that do not alienate the Afghan population will increase the risk of casualties. Building governments and economies and the ANSF will be expensive.

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We will have to rely on a marginal Afghan government that is often corrupt and almost always feckless while looking for additional provincial and local partners. We must convince the Pakistanis to increase the pressure on the Taliban who seek refuge in that country. And, of course, in war, the enemy gets a vote. Any of these risks or costs could derail the implementation of a counter-insurgency plan—particularly reliance on an Afghan government that remains corrupt and alienates its own people. But, if carried out correctly, this plan offers the best chance to gain a strategic success and vastly increases the chances that we will be able to destroy al Qa'ida and capture its remaining leaders.

Undertaking a counter-insurgency campaign is complex, and it will require additional resources, both civilian and military, and hopefully not all from the United States. I am not arguing for a blank check or unlimited time to see if this can work. I firmly believe that Congress, the American people, and above all the Afghan people must see progress in relatively short order to demonstrate that we are not throwing good money after bad and risking additional American and civilian casualties. But we have not yet given the new team on the ground the time and resources they need to show that progress – troops have only recently arrived in theater, and the influx of civilian experts has only begun.

In the days ahead, we should continue to debate the way forward and consider alternate ways to achieve our goals. If we are not seeing progress after a reasonable period of time, we should try one of those alternate paths. But we should not conclude yet that all is hopeless – it is not, and I believe the team you recently sent to Kabul, General McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry, would agree. We must not refuse to give this stellar team the time and resources it needs to succeed.

The last administration allowed itself to be distracted from the fight forced on us in Afghanistan by the fight it chose in Iraq. I believe that this was a strategic mistake, robbing the war in Afghanistan of the necessary resources and resulting in an approach of “half-ass it and hope.” We cannot afford to continue that policy. We must continue to hope and work hard, but we must also supply those in the field with the resources they need.

Strategies match desired ends, the plan to achieve them, and the resources necessary to carry out that plan. We know the ends, General McChrystal has a plan, and we should supply him the resources he needs to see if it will work.

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Thank you for your kind attention. God bless the United States of America and our brave men and women in uniform.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ike Skelton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

IKE SKELTON  
Chairman

IS:mcc

Cc: The Honorable Hillary Clinton  
Secretary of State

The Honorable Bob Gates  
Secretary of Defense

Ambassador Richard Holbrooke  
Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan

General James Jones, USMC (Ret.)  
National Security Advisor

Admiral Mike Mullen  
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff