Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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"Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies – Part II"

I am grateful for the opportunity to come before this committee to discuss United States policy towards Afghanistan and the lessons learned over the course of the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations. I am particularly honored to testify alongside Ambassador Ryan Crocker, LTG H.R. McMaster, and LTG Doug Lute; three leading experts on this topic. I also want to thank Chairman Meeks and Ranking Member McCaul for their leadership.

This hearing examines lessons learned from the United States' experience in Afghanistan over the past 20 years. There is certainly much to be learned from our experience during that time, but I would like to begin with the United States' first foray in Afghanistan.

Shortly after the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, we in the Reagan administration noticed an extreme sensitivity on the Soviets' part to suggestions that there was a soft Muslim underbelly to the USSR. With six of its 15 republics with Muslim majority populations, the Soviet Union had reason for concern having just invaded a Muslim country. Looking to take advantage of this sensitivity, the administration redoubled its efforts to support the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan, including with stinger missiles. As Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, it was among my duties to work with Pakistan's ISI to support the Mujahadeen in their fight. As history shows, our efforts were successful. But be assured that this was a cold calculation of national security on our part. There was no illusion about what would happen after the Soviets left. We understood that the various ethnic groups would eventually fall in on each other. We had one objective in Afghanistan, which was to degrade the Soviet Union, and we achieved it. We had no vision of global terrorism emanating from this troubled land.

Some can argue that the United States owed more to Afghanistan after the Soviet departure. But that cold calculation and focused objective avoided an extended commitment beyond our national interests. I contrast that with what happened after 9/11. As Deputy Secretary of State on that date, I was involved in crafting the United States' immediate response and follow-on efforts in Afghanistan. What we missed early on and in subsequent years were opportunities to pivot from Afghanistan when it was in our national interest to do so.

The first such opportunity came in 2001 following the Bonn Agreement, which laid the foundation for state-building efforts in Afghanistan. Under the leadership of U.S. Ambassador Jim Dobbins and with the assistance of UN Envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi, an 18-month transitional government was put into place. At that time, the Taliban was not included in our thinking because they had been soundly defeated. There was, however, a question of what ethnic group would lead the government. Hamid Karzai emerged from the chaos, and it was determined that a Loya Jirga

would make key decisions about the ultimate structure of the government. This was a perfect opportunity to leave. There was little opposition to President Karzai and little animus toward the United States. Afghanistan was at peace. It was also beneficial that the U.S. had a very light military footprint in country.

In December of 2001, our best opportunity to capture or kill Osama bin Laden existed in the battle for Tora Bora. For some reason, then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld did not carry through on the elimination of the Arabs and the Taliban in Afghanistan. They were allowed to escape to Pakistan. While there were notable gains in education, medical assistance, and women's rights in the years after, the Afghan issue largely ran on autopilot. The United States' invasion of Iraq and the lack of attention to Afghanistan prevented us from taking advantage of the relative peace.

Another decision point at which we could have reduced our presence came in 2005 when the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was introduced to Afghanistan. By 2006, however, the Taliban's resurgence had begun. Our Embassy in Kabul and LTG Karl Eikenberry had warned Washington it was coming, but those missives were ignored. As such, the U.S. was left to address the Taliban once again. The big irony in this is that the U.S. did not want to fight Mullah Omar and the Taliban originally. Soon after 9/11, at President Bush's direction, I asked ISI Director LTG Mahmood Ahmed to travel to Kandahar to meet with Mullah Omar and explain that the U.S. was only interested in the Arab terrorists and did not need to fight the Taliban if they were willing to separate themselves from al Qaeda. On grounds of Pashtunwali, Mullah Omar refused to give up his guests, and the war began.

The most recent and logical opportunity to disengage from Afghanistan came with the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011. Obviously, we failed to take advantage of that as well.

Why did the U.S. misjudge each of these important milestones? There are likely thousands of answers to that question but three come to mind most readily.

First, the United States went to war in Afghanistan in reaction to the events of 9/11. There was no larger strategy in place at the time to guide our efforts and tie them directly to our national interests. As such, 20 years of mission creep began. It is easy to get into military conflict, but hard to get out unless you set strategic aims first, and we did not.

Second, while I believe the Bush and Obama administrations had good intentions in supporting the people of Afghanistan, those good intentions were counterbalanced by the political fear of losing the war. Accordingly, the instinct to keep up the fight won over the need to critically review our interests in Afghanistan. Here, the United States' effort would have benefitted from more intense Congressional oversight.

Third, we simply did not read the situation in Afghanistan correctly. We saw things through our own glasses, not others'. The U.S. was overly optimistic about what could be accomplished in Afghanistan and did not take sufficient heed of how the Afghan people and the Taliban viewed things. A perfect example of this was evident in the last days of the war when officials in Washington were surprised by the rapidity of the Afghan Army's collapse. We had faced the same problem in Vietnam but with different topography which slowed the North Vietnamese assault.

But just as in Saigon, the corrupt government in Kabul was not worth the sacrifice of Afghan soldiers. The Afghan people and the Taliban saw this. We did not.