

STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY 10/1/14

**MONTEL WILLIAMS TESTIMONY BEFORE HOUSE FOREIGN
AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN
HEMISPHERE**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to testify today, and with the Committee's permission, I would like to submit additional testimony for the record

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sires, Chairman Royce, members of the subcommittee and the full committee, this is a critical hearing and I thank you for calling it. To all of you who made time to come back for this hearing, I can tell you veterans are watching and the absence of some of your colleagues has not gone unnoticed.

While the scope of this hearing is limited to the case of Sgt. Andrew Tahmooressi, I'd be remiss not to remind the Committee that Andrew's case is but merely a symptom of a greater policy failure in how we address the needs of our returning soldiers – that failure is unfortunately even more pronounced when it comes to PTSD. Mr. Chairman, Members, you need to understand that our nation's veterans - especially those who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan - often feel entirely abandoned by their Government, and unfortunately I find that sentiment hard to argue with.

Before I begin, I'd ask you all to close your eyes for a moment – close your eyes and forget about the politics that have led to a conflation of issues with respect to Andrew's case. The harsh, indisputable reality we face here is that we lose an average of 22 veterans to PTSD-related suicide daily. Andrew has received NO treatment whatsoever in six months and is being held in complete isolation. Now as you open your eyes, consider letting that be the filter through which you think about this case. We are on the clock, and frankly we don't have much time.

We are here to talk about a 26-year-old MARINE whose distinguished service spanned two tours in Afghanistan and earned him numerous decorations. He is without a doubt one of America's treasures. I spent 22 years in the United States Military, first as an enlisted marine and then as a special duty intelligence officer after graduating from the Naval Academy. I left the service soon after my show started, but I still wear my metaphorical uniform every day – it's never truly come

off. I sit on the board of Fisher House Foundation and I regularly visit our wounded warriors at Walter Reed as often as possible. My advocacy for active duty troops and our veterans is what keeps me going, and I'll do this until the day I die.

But this isn't about me – this is about a young Marine who served his country with distinction and came home broken, as it seems so many do. And now as the proximate result of his PTSD, he has been jailed in Mexico without treatment for six months. Let me set a few misconceptions straight – Andrew Tahmoore's vehicular entry that fateful night was indisputably not intentional, the representations made to me by the Mexican Government notwithstanding. The video tape evidence clearly indicates he received a green light at the Mexican checkpoint and, rather than drive into Mexico, he summoned officers to explain his predicament and immediately requested permission to turn around.

Andrew had in fact entered Mexico several times by foot, including the day of his arrest – there is nothing nefarious about that. I'd refer you back to his interview with CNN in which he clearly states he intended to spend the night, but as daylight waned he became uncomfortable with his surroundings decided to leave. ***One of the defining features of PTSD is hyper-vigilance, or an overly-attuned sense of being in danger.*** I believe he was triggered at that point and stopped thinking clearly. He returned to his vehicle still triggered, and as a result he missed some street signs that might have prevented this – yet again, classic PTSD. In fact, he was so triggered that once he entered the barricaded lanes that led to Mexico, his tunnel vision overrode even the most basic critical thinking skills needed to simply stop the car and walk back towards our border to summon the proper authorities to help him.

I hesitated to enter the fray at first, partially because I believed the Mexican system would expeditiously conclude the proceeding and send him back, and also because the politicized character this case had taken on deeply troubled me. I have nothing but respect for Mexico and the Mexican people - I know the Mexican people to share common values with us in terms of compassion, faith, and an innate desire to build a better future for our children. I regret that some on our side have allowed the serious policy issues we face us concerning the border to become infected with ignorance, bigotry and hate. For the record, I want be clear that I find the anti-Mexican tone taken by an overly-vocal few to be despicable.

It became clear to me in June that Sgt. Tahmooressi faced a serious problem – the process seemed stagnant, and by that time I had established communication with his attorney. *I believe there is powerful evidence that the case against Sgt. Tahmooressi was poisoned from the outset.* With the Committee’s permission, I would like to submit for the record a copy of an article from El Universal which was reprinted in English by borderlandbeat.com from July 2013, which uncovered the assets belonging to Alejandro Gonzalez Guilbot (gee-bowt) - who at the time of Andrew’s arrest was the head of Customs in Tijuana. The site found he owned nearly \$600,000 worth of vehicles and millions of dollars in real estate in Texas despite a salary of just \$96,000 a year. He was the lead witness as to the behavior of customs to the Court, and his representations appear to have been heavily relied upon by the Mexican Government. He was suddenly and quietly transferred two days after my first appearance on Greta Van Susteren. Those facts, combined with the video tape evidence that proves his testimony at best suspect, have led me to lose all faith in the administration of justice in this case.

I have spoken with Sgt. Tahmooressi at length. He presents all the hallmarks of one severely impacted by PTSD – he sounds dazed, triggered and is losing more of what little hope he has left every day. His affect is flat, and he expressed difficulty coping with the isolation – specifically in terms of “keeping the bad thoughts out.” **Make no mistake about it, having been in custody six months with no treatment, the urgency to bring him home so that he may get the treatment he so badly needs increases significantly by the day.**

This is an important day for all veterans and I hope it will be a turning point. Andrew’s suffering has gone on far too long, and I believe there has been a massive failure of Government to appreciate the severity of his situation. Apparently the President of the United States has not raised the issue, and in the span of 10 days two Governors – one democrat and one Republican – both failed to raise the issue with President Nieto. As of the start of my testimony, only 80 some odd members of this body have co-sponsored H.Res. 620. The lone bright spots in this sea of inexcusable inaction have been the State Department and you – the members of this committee.

While I acknowledge the possibility that the President has had private conversations with President Nieto that we just don’t know about, at a bare minimum someone at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or Foggy Bottom should have called Jill Tahmooressi. Someone could have said we know your child is important and we are working as hard as we can. I’d like to know why they

haven't. I'd also like to know why an official at the State Department told a CNN reporter on background that there were doubts as to Andrew's truthfulness. In contrast to the failures I see here in DC, I have to commend the hard work of the Consulate in Tijuana - including their consistent support of Jill through this ordeal. They have served with distinction.

Make no mistake about it – PTSD is a serious condition that often leads to tragic results when left untreated. The Mexican Government is apparently unable or unwilling to provide even the most basic treatment to Andrew. This case is not about the law and not about politics – It's about one very sick Marine who is at risk of becoming one of those 22 veterans we lose to suicide every day.

I would encourage this Committee to draw a line in the sand here today. To the Mexican Government I reiterate again that the time for political brinkmanship has passed. Whatever political problems President Nieto has internally in Mexico are entirely of his own making and have nothing to do with Sgt. Tahmooressi. I call on the Mexican Government to step up and have the courage to lead. I hold the Mexican Government SINGULARLY responsible for ensuring Sgt. Tahmooressi's safety in custody. Should any harm befall him before this "process" reaches its inevitable conclusion, I'd encourage this Committee to closely examine every dollar of foreign aid that we send to Mexico – put it under a microscope.

I'd also encourage this Committee to look hard at ways to speed up the pace of judicial reform in Mexico; reform in which we have invested heavily and seem to miss no opportunity to delay. Again - Andrew's case is a symptom of a far greater problem, and in a country with an 80% impunity rate for violent crime, we ought to pressure the Government to implement the reforms so badly needed and wanted by the Mexican People - People who need no reminder of the lack of judicial transparency in their own country.

Today's hearing is of utmost importance. A previous Congress sent Sgt. Tahmooressi to war, and what remains to be seen is if this Congress is prepared to honor the obligation it has to every veteran in this country. I firmly believe this case is part and parcel of the massive failure of public policy when it comes to addressing PTSD. As this committee presumably nears voting on formal authorization to send more of America's treasures in harm's way, you need to ask yourselves how many of those treasures will continue to answer the call if their Government misses yet another opportunity to stand behind them in their hour of need.

The time has come for us to speak with one, very firm voice to the Mexican Government – they must decide what’s really important. I’d strongly suggest to them that using this case in a sideways attempt to bolster President Nieto’s political position at home is the wrong battle. It’s time to release Andrew and let him get the treatment he needs. They need to hear that we are watching, and that the consequences of continued inaction on their part could be devastating.

I’ll leave you with this: There’s an old saying that goes, “If we can’t take care of the best of us, how will we take care of the rest of us?” Andrew and all those who serve or have served represent the best this Country has to offer. What remains to be seen is whether his Government will line up to support him as Chairmen Salmon, Royce and Ranking Member Sires have. We can do better, and we must do better - we owe it to the men and women who protect our democracy to stand beside them when they come home just as they stood for us when they went away.