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Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Hearing: Afghanistan 2001-2021: U.S. Policy Lessons Learned

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch, it is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss the lessons learned from 20 years of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan post 9/11. The consequences of our intervention, our presence and our departure will reverberate in the region and beyond in the years to come, in ways we may not even be able to imagine today. These are grave and complex issues that bear directly on American security and American values, and I commend the Committee for focusing attention on them. Your initiative will inform and illuminate questions that are of great significance for all Americans.

In that spirit, I will impart to this Committee all of the lessons that I learned during my professional engagement in the broader Middle East spanning almost 40 years. Actually, there are only two, plus one overarching principle: strategic patience, or in our case, the lack thereof. They are deceptively simple. The first is to be careful about what you get into. Military interventions bring consequences not just of the third and fourth order, but the thirtieth and fortieth, consequences that we cannot even imagine, let alone plan for. So the good you seek to achieve, or the bad you wish to eliminate must be of a magnitude sufficient to justify not just the dangers you can foresee, but also those you can't. I learned this not in Afghanistan or Iraq, but in Lebanon at the time of the Israeli invasion in 1982. That operation, aimed at eliminating the ability of the PLO to attack Israel's northern border areas. That goal was achieved within days. And then came the unforeseen consequences: the massacre of Palestinians in the Shatila refugee camp, the return of our Marines without a clearly defined mission, the bombings of the American Embassy and the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. That was enough for us_ the Marines were withdrawn in 1984, ending our military presence in Lebanon. Israel hung on for 16 more years, losing over 1100 IDF soldiers before withdrawing in 2000 with nothing to show for it. Unintended consequences.

With respect to Afghanistan after 9/11, there was no serious debate over US military intervention after the Taliban refused our demand to hand over al-Qaida leaders. I was certainly all in. At the beginning of January 2002, I reopened the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, shuttered for security reasons since 1989. As ambassador to Pakistan 2005-2007, I visited Afghanistan several times at the invitation of Ron Neumann, my colleague in Kabul, to meet with President Karzai. In 2011, I returned to Afghanistan as ambassador. These different visitations provided me with different perspectives over time. But they also provided a very important and consistent answer to the question of why we came to Afghanistan and why we stayed: to insure that Afghan soil would never again be used to launch an attack on the American homeland.

It is important to stress this point, Mr. Chairman. The sound and fury swirling around the current debate on U.S. policy in Afghanistan can create the mistaken impression that successive Administrations have been confused over what that policy actually was. That is not the case. It was not the case on March 11, 2002, six months after 9/11, when we commemorated the placing of a fragment of the World Trade

Center at the base of the Embassy flagpole in Kabul. It had been brought to Afghanistan by the commander of the Fifth Special Forces Group, Colonel (later Lieutenant General) John F. Mulholland Jr. It was clear to me a decade later when President Obama asked me to return to Afghanistan as ambassador and to negotiate a long term Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Afghans that he could sign. He did so in May 2012 in Kabul.

So in my view at least, the end goal for the U.S. in Afghanistan was clear from the beginning and never shifted: the security of the United States. Everything else was about ways and means. That was on my mind that first week in January 2002, driving from Bagram to Kabul (the airport in Kabul was closed, its runways cratered and littered with destroyed aircraft). The landscape was a total wasteland of abandoned structures and endless fields of frozen mud. There were few signs of life – plant, animal or human. Kabul was not much better. Entire city blocks were destroyed, reminiscent of images from Berlin in 1945. Most of this destruction came not from the Americans or the Soviets. It was wrought by the Afghans themselves during the vicious civil war that followed the Soviet retreat in 1989.

Hamid Karzai's Interim Administration had nothing – no army, police, governmental institutions or rule of law. Long term stability in Afghanistan, and security for America, would require focus on these issues. Education was a top priority, especially for girls who had been deprived of that opportunity when the Taliban took over. USAID moved immediately to establish girls' schools, and that January, I took our first Congressional visitor to see a first grade class. Ages ranged from six to twelve, the older girls having reached school age when the Taliban was in power. Did it bother them that they were in a class with girls literally half their ages? Not at all. They were just happy to be in school. That visitor was Senator Joe Biden, then Chairman of this Committee, and he offered solid support for our educational initiatives. Through sustained effort over the years, the U.S. helped Afghanistan move from some 800,000 students on 9/11, all of them boys, to nearly eight million when I left as ambassador in 2012, some 35% of them girls. That is a powerful tool for social change that would transform the country, but it takes time. And patience. I want to be clear. Education for Afghan girls and opportunities for women were consistent with American values. These initiatives also supported our key national security priority of an Afghanistan that would never again threaten United States soil. If women's rights are human rights, it is also true that women's security is national security. Dr. Valerie Hudson at Texas A&M's Bush School and her colleagues have done exhaustive research to support that hypothesis.

Part of the argument for a complete U.S. troop withdrawal was that we were not "winning" in Afghanistan. And if we are not winning, we should withdraw. Winning and losing, victory and defeat were terms that I did not use in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. In an era of limited warfare, these terms lose their meaning. Take the word defeat. It only has meaning if a people feel defeated. That is an argument put forward to justify the Dresden raids of February 1945 and their heavy civilian casualties. Coming just two months before the final German surrender, the argument is that the attacks were primarily intended to break the will of the German people. The same could be said of Sherman's march through Georgia at the end of the Civil War. We do not do total war anymore, with the consequence that the Taliban did not feel defeated in Afghanistan. We saw the first signs of this during Operation Anaconda against al-Qaida and Taliban fighters in a rugged area in Afghanistan's northeast at the beginning of March 2002 when young Afghans tried to penetrate our lines, not to get out of the fight but to get into it. As was the case in Iraq as well, if an enemy does not feel defeated, an insurgency is virtually inevitable.

This combines with another phenomenon in the broader Middle East. Peoples of this region learned long ago that it is not possible to prevail by force of arms over the better trained and equipped forces of the West. So put up enough of a fight to save face, then scatter. Lie low for a while, regroup, refresh and then, sometime after the western power thinks it has won, start counterpunching. It happened to the French in Morocco, the Italians in Libya, the British in Iraq, the Brits, the Soviets and the Americans in Afghanistan. It has been an enduring element of the region's political culture for several hundred years and is unlikely to change anytime soon.

There are other consequences of armed intervention and regime change we need to absorb. One is the likelihood of industrial strength corruption in the wake of regime change, something I encountered in Iraq as well as Afghanistan. Without respected institutions and the rule of law, corruption will flourish. Institutions cannot be imported and they do not grow overnight. Looking back, metastasizing corruption seems as inevitable as the insurgencies themselves. If we look at our own history, we can see how slow, uneven and painful the development of such institutions is. When you add significant sums of money, you get corruption, as inevitably as you get an insurgency. As our own history shows, institutional development takes time, and a lot of it. But it is also critical for a stable, pluralistic society. In my experience, institutions are far more important to the building of a democracy than elections, which can be counterproductive if conducted without a stable institutional base. We have seen this too in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

This brings me to my second lesson: Be at least as careful in deciding what you get out of. A withdrawal can have consequences as far reaching and as serious as those of an intervention. We do not end a war by withdrawing our forces. We simply cede the field to our adversaries. In Iraq, there was a grace period. The last of our deployed forces left the country at the end of 2011. Islamic State forces swept through western and northern Iraq in June of 2014, two and a half years later. That threat was met by the formation and legitimization of Shia militias, most of them influenced by Iran. So the space left by our withdrawal was filled by our two most potent adversaries in the region. Not exactly the outcome we desired.

In Afghanistan, it was worse. We saw the horrific images of a panicked mob chasing a C-17 taxiing for takeoff. Several clung to the wheel wells. only to fall to their deaths minutes later when the plane was airborne. There was no grace period. Taliban fighters ousted the Afghan government that we had supported before we had managed to get out of town. It made the final evacuation of Saigon look orderly. We were anything but careful in our withdrawal, with potential consequences that could play out for years. It did not have to go this way.

When I left Afghanistan as ambassador in the summer of 2012, President Obama's surge had brought over 100,000 US troops to the country. The Taliban controlled none of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals. Beginning with President Obama and continuing under his successor, troop levels steadily dropped. By the end of President Obama's second term in 2017, there were around 15,000 US troops, and still the Taliban controlled no provincial capitals. And when President Trump left office, the number was just 2500. Only when President Biden made clear that all forces would be withdrawn by a set date did the Taliban begin to move.

Challenges to stability in Afghanistan such as endemic corruption are real and they are serious. But they are not new. The one new and decisive factor in the process that enabled the Taliban to move from controlling none of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals to controlling the entire country almost

overnight was the final U.S. withdrawal. President Biden owns the consequences of his withdrawal decision. But the process that led there began under President Trump. In 2019, President Trump authorized direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban without the participation of the Afghan government. It was a concession to a long-standing Taliban demand: they were ready to talk to the Americans, but not with their illegitimate puppet regime in the room.

This action delegitimized the Afghan government and its security forces, and began the process that culminated in the collapse of the government and the triumphant return of the Taliban. It was the virtually certain outcome of a negotiation that was never about peace. It was about American withdrawal and a Taliban return to power. In an NPR interview in September 2019, almost six months before the conclusion of the February 2020 U.S. – Taliban agreement, I said that a planned Camp David meeting between the Taliban and President Trump that had been cancelled by the President and the talks with the Taliban suspended following a Taliban attack that killed an American might be a net positive if the U.S. abandoned these negotiations with the Taliban which were not peace talks but a discussion on the terms of a U.S. surrender, reminiscent of the Paris peace talks on Vietnam in the 1970s.. "At the end of the day, there has to be a negotiated settlement. You don't end wars without it. But the tack this Administration has taken since the beginning of these talks was going in absolutely the wrong direction." And so they did, bringing us the horrific spectacles of August. It is a grim irony that two Administrations so different in so many respects were united on a disastrous policy in Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman, this hearing as well as similar exercises elsewhere will produce a number of lessons learned that will be important for our future endeavors. But I believe there is a single overarching problem that is at the root of what we have seen in Afghanistan and elsewhere. It is the failure on our part to demonstrate strategic patience . This is not new, and it is not unique to Afghanistan. But it has perhaps had its greatest impact there and next door in Pakistan. Our allies have come to fear our lack of strategic patience, and our adversaries to count on it. A comment attributed to the Taliban has circulated for years in Afghanistan: "You Americans have the watches, but we have the time." In Pakistan, where I served as ambassador 2004-2007, much of the Taliban leadership enjoyed sanctuary, and it was a major source of friction in our bilateral relationship. The Pakistani narrative on the Taliban runs like this: We were close allies in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s in Afghanistan. But when we prevailed, you went home. And once you no longer needed us, you stopped getting waivers for the Pressler Amendment which stipulates the withholding of all U.S. economic and military assistance to any country pursuing a nuclear weapons program. So almost overnight we went from being the most allied of allies to the most sanctioned of adversaries. And we were left with a vicious Afghan civil war on our borders, threatening our own stability. So when the Taliban emerged as a force that could stabilize most of Afghanistan, they had our backing. Then 9/11 happened and you're back. We're happy to see you, and we'll take whatever is on offer while the taking is good. Because we know that at some point, you will be leaving again – it's what you do. Oh – there you go now. We're so happy we didn't turn the Taliban into a mortal enemy just to watch you ride off into the sunset.

So the Pakistanis saw their strategic position vindicated. But I doubt the high fiving in the corridors of power lasted more than 15 minutes or so. The U.S. withdrawal and the manner in which it was conducted has emboldened Islamic radicals everywhere, not least in Pakistan where the Pakistani Taliban seeks the overthrow of the government in Islamabad. Islamic destabilization of a state with nuclear weapons is a terrifying prospect.

The list of damage to our national security and our values is long. We have allowed the Taliban and al-Qaida to reunite. The threat this poses to our own security is not theoretical – 9/11 actually happened, brought to us from Afghanistan by these same actors. At the same time, our complete withdrawal has degraded our intelligence capabilities. The strike in Kabul on what was supposed to be an Islamic State target but wasn't foreshadows the future. We urged Afghan women and girls to step forward, into parliament, private enterprise, the classroom and the military. They did. And now they will pay the price for our lack of strategic patience. That has already started. Afghan interpreters and others provided direct assistance to our military and civilian personnel. They were critical to our efforts, and put their lives and those of their families at risk by working with us. We said we would take care of them through the Special Immigrant Visa program, bringing them to safety in our country. I am a member of the advisory board for an NGO dedicated to fulfilling our promise to them - No One Left Behind. We left thousands behind.

I will conclude on a personal note. One of the projects that had the greatest impact in Afghanistan cost the least amount of money. It was the reconstruction of Ghazi Stadium in Kabul to FIFA standards, meaning that it could host World Cup matches. It was a joint endeavor by International Security Assistance Forces Commander John Allen and me. For a soccer mad country, this was huge. But there was a deeper meaning. Ghazi Stadium was used by the Taliban to carry out public punishments after Friday prayers, including beheadings and the stoning of women. The reborn Ghazi stadium was the symbol of the new Afghanistan. I wonder how long it will take the Taliban to turn it back into a killing ground. We had agency, and we gave it up. We bear responsibility for these consequences.