

U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management
“Afghanistan in Review: Oversight of U.S. Spending in Afghanistan”

May 9, 2018

Senator Gary C. Peters, Ranking Member

Opening Statement

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to join you in welcoming Inspector General Sopko and Ms. Miller to the Subcommittee. I look forward to their testimony.

Today’s hearing is notable, not just because of its important topic—reconstruction spending in Afghanistan—but also because of its venue. Although the Senate regularly holds hearings related to our nation’s efforts in Afghanistan, until now, those hearings have generally been held before the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees. It is rare for our oversight committees to focus on spending in Afghanistan, and we must.

In the 17 years since September 11th, the American taxpayer has been asked to bankroll hundreds of billions of dollars of spending on combat, relief, and reconstruction in Afghanistan. Our total bill is quickly approaching 900 billion dollars, not counting what we spend here at home treating and caring for our veterans. More than 125 billion dollars has been spent on relief and reconstruction alone. Even accounting for inflation, that’s more than what we spent on the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe in the aftermath of World War II. Frankly, calling it “reconstruction” is a bit of a misnomer. Much of our work in Afghanistan is construction, building infrastructure and capacity where none exist.

After 17 years and hundreds of billions of dollars, it is more than fair for taxpayers to ask, “Is it worth it?” “What is the return on our investment?” “Are we throwing good money after bad?” “Why are we spending hundreds of billions of dollars on infrastructure thousands of miles away, when roads and bridges are crumbling right outside my door?”

What do I tell the people of Flint, Michigan who ask me, “Why are my taxes paying for clean water in Kabul when I don’t have clean water in my own home?”

These are important questions, and hard ones. Partly, they are policy questions. Put simply, the money we spend in Afghanistan is intended to promote our national security. Thanks to the incredible dedication and sacrifice of our servicemembers, frontline civilians, and their families, we have been successful in driving al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan and denying safe haven to

transnational terrorists. We have made progress in democracy and development, and in helping to strengthen Afghan institutions. There are more roads, more electrical lines. Literacy is up; infant mortality is down.

And yet, Afghanistan is not secure. We are constantly warned that chaos would follow a precipitous withdrawal of our forces and funding. Every year, we add tens of billions of dollars to the bill. But taxpayers are growing weary. My constituents tell me: we can't afford to write a blank check.

To draw America's longest war to a successful conclusion we must empower Afghans to achieve and sustain the peace. We must responsibly reduce our spending as we continue to transition military and governing capacity to Afghans. How we achieve that is as much about process as policy. The right policies don't ensure success on their own. Far from it. When the money we spend in Afghanistan is wasted, stolen, or ends up in the hands of the very enemies we seek to defeat, it undermines our policy, however well intended.

And I hope that's what we focus on today. How do we prevent waste, fraud, and abuse of our spending in Afghanistan? How do we ensure that each dollar is put to its highest and best use? How do we track it? How do we measure its effectiveness? Are the right oversight structures in place to provide us with the information we need to make the tough decisions?

I know from my own visit to Afghanistan, and from the visit made by our staff last month, that our security posture severely limits the ability of Americans to work "outside the wire." In many cases American aid workers and auditors can't even visit the projects our taxpayers fund. What oversight options, if any, do we have in that kind of security environment?

I'm grateful to be able to hear from Mr. Sopko and Ms. Miller, who have years of experience working on these questions, inside and outside of Afghanistan. Between them, they can speak to the challenge of conducting reconstruction programs and the challenge of auditing and overseeing those programs. Thank you for your service and thank you for being here today.

Members of this Subcommittee have a wide range of views about our nation's involvement in Afghanistan. But whatever your views, our success depends on spending money effectively, even as we seek to reduce our overall expenditures. Waste fuels corruption, undermines the institutions in Afghanistan that we seek to empower, and breaks faith with the American taxpayer. I hope today's hearing will help address these issues and send a strong message that Congress's role doesn't end when we pass a budget and write a check. We have an obligation to follow the money and ask the tough questions. And with that, I yield back.