

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management Subcommittee

Ranking Member Margaret Wood Hassan
Opening Statement

Tuesday, February 11, 2020

Chairman Paul, thank you for holding this hearing. To our all of the witnesses today, thank you for your testimony. And let me also thank you for your extensive service to our country.

Sadly, this hearing comes a little more than two weeks after a deadly plane crash in Afghanistan claimed the lives of two airmen, including U.S. Air Force Captain Ryan Phaneuf, of Hudson, New Hampshire. Just this weekend, two U.S. soldiers were killed and six others were wounded in combat operations in eastern Afghanistan. These losses serve as painful reminders of all the men and women in uniform in harm's way in Afghanistan and around the world.

In October, I traveled to Afghanistan to meet with our military and diplomatic leaders, as well as with the leaders of Afghanistan. The goal of the trip was to evaluate the situation in Afghanistan, to ensure that Afghanistan would never again become a safe-haven for terrorist groups who threaten our country, and to conduct oversight of the longest war in United States history. The trip was both inspiring and eye-opening. We saw examples of key successes from our nation's campaign in Afghanistan. We also saw the effects of the missteps during the course of this 18-year war.

In the weeks after this trip, the Washington Post published a series of articles on confidential transcripts of interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction known as the "Afghanistan Papers," helping bring to light several troubling trends. Chief among these concerns is the failure of successive Administrations to establish a realistic, long-term strategy that defines our mission in Afghanistan. The oft-repeated mantra from Afghanistan veterans and analysts sums this up the best: We haven't been fighting one 18-year war in Afghanistan; we've been fighting 18 one-year wars.

We must learn from these mistakes. We must establish a real long-term strategy for Afghanistan that effectively leverages our military, diplomatic and development efforts toward a goal of ensuring that Afghanistan can stand up its institutions to secure itself and combat terrorism.

We must also not forget that the ungoverned vacuum in Afghanistan in the 1990s gave space for Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda to build a global terrorist network that killed nearly 3,000 Americans in the worst attack on U.S. soil since World War II. Leaving Afghanistan before their government is capable of resisting Al-Qaeda, ISIS or any other terrorist groups could prove to be a grave mistake that could leave us less safe for years to come.

Developing a strategy, however, is just the first step. We must provide resources to carry out such a strategy, establish realistic benchmarks of success, and then Congress must hold our government accountable for meeting these goals.

While the Afghanistan Papers reveal that mistakes were made along the way, my trip affirmed that significant progress has been made to help keep Americans—and Afghans—safe, secure and free. We owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women of the US Armed Forces, the State Department and the Intelligence Community for this progress.

Our briefings with General Miller, Ambassador Bass, and meetings with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah made clear that U.S. and allied efforts have and continue to reduce terrorist groups' ability to use the country to launch attacks. Groups like Al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network and even ISIS's Afghanistan affiliate still threaten the U.S., but our continued counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan has worked to degrade the capabilities of these threats and minimize their ability to launch attack on U.S. soil.

Aside from our successes fighting terrorism, one of the most poignant parts of our trip was hearing about progress advancing the rights and freedoms of Afghanistan's women. Under the Taliban, women were oppressed, subservient and treated as property. Today, women in Afghanistan enjoy more freedoms than ever before, serve in the Afghan cabinet and are building the backbone of a more resilient and stable Afghanistan. Throughout my trip, including even in neighboring Pakistan and India, women shared with me their fears about what would happen if the United States left Afghanistan without a strong infrastructure in place to protect these gains. Their message was simple—if the US leaves today, then everything Afghanistan's women have gained will be lost.

We need to establish an achievable strategy for Afghanistan. We must define our objectives and goals, and appropriately resource them. And we must hold the federal government accountable for its adherence to that strategy. It won't be easy. But as my father used to say, "We're Americans. We *do* hard things." I hope that this hearing can be a step forward in this difficult but critically important work.