

**Opening Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan**  
**Chairman John McCain**  
**October 6, 2015**

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the situation in Afghanistan. General Campbell, we thank for appearing before the Committee today, and we are grateful for your many years of distinguished service and your leadership of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan at this critical time. We ask that you convey the gratitude and appreciation of this Committee to all of the brave men and women in uniform under your command.

Fourteen years ago, U.S. forces went to Afghanistan because that was where, under the sanctuary of the Taliban regime, al-Qaeda planned and conducted initial training for the 9/11 attacks that killed 3,000 innocent civilians on American soil. Our mission was to ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for al-Qaeda or other radical Islamist terrorists to attack us again. As General Petraeus told this Committee recently, that mission has been successful for fourteen years.

American troops and civilians have made steady progress in supporting our Afghan partners to secure their country and dealt severe blows to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups that want to attack the United States and our allies.

At the same time, we have seen a remarkable progress in Afghan society – more schools and more teachers; greater opportunities for women and girls in the classroom, in the workforce, and in positions of leadership; higher literacy, better roads, and wider use of cellphones. Life expectancy in Afghanistan has increased by 22 years in less than a generation – a feat unparalleled in modern history.

And it is precisely because we are fighting for progress and fighting for our values that it has been so disturbing to read reports alleging that some of our coalition partners may be engaged in sexual abuse and other activities that contradict our values. This Committee treats such allegations with the utmost seriousness, and we look forward to hearing from you, General Campbell, as to what actions have been taken and what processes put in place to address this situation.

Yes, we have made significant and steady progress in Afghanistan. But as U.S. military officials and diplomats have warned for years – I repeat, for years – these gains are still reversible, and a robust and adaptive U.S. troop presence based on conditions on the ground is essential to ensuring that these gains endure. Failure to adopt such a conditions-based plan, these experts have warned, would invite the

same tragedy that has unfolded in Iraq since 2011. If we have learned anything from that nightmare, it is that wars do not end just because politicians say so.

The evidence of that is already clear in Afghanistan. Since President Obama hailed the end of combat operations in Afghanistan last year, ISIL has arrived on the battlefield and the Taliban have launched a major offensive to take territory across the country, as we saw most recently in the key city of Kunduz.

Meanwhile, just like the Iraqi Security Forces at the end of 2011, the Afghan National Security Forces are still developing key capabilities. The shortfalls are hauntingly familiar – intelligence, logistics, air lift and close air support, special forces, and institutional development. And yet, the White House remains committed to its politically-driven withdrawal of nearly all U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

It is not too late for President Obama to abandon this dangerous course and adopt a plan for U.S. troop presence based on conditions on the ground. But time is of the essence, and continued delays by the White House are hurting our national security interests and those of our partners in Afghanistan and beyond.

America's friends and foes alike are waiting on President Obama:

- The government and people of Afghanistan are waiting to see what kind of support and commitment the United States will make.
- Afghan security forces, whose morale has been tested by heavy casualties against the Taliban, are waiting to find out whether their American partners will remain at their side.
- Our NATO partners are waiting to determine their course in Afghanistan and need to begin generating forces now for an extended commitment.
- Pakistan is waiting for a U.S. decision while hedging its bets with individuals and groups that are hostile to our interests.
- The Taliban is waiting to see if it merely needs to wait until the United States draws down to an “embassy-centric presence” to have the battlefield largely to themselves.

And then there are the thousands upon thousands of American troops and their families who have served and are serving in Afghanistan who are waiting to see if their sacrifices will be put at greater risk because we abandoned Afghanistan by blindly following an inflexible timetable for withdrawal.

As the world waits, the consequences of the indecision and the wrong decision are beginning to merge: growing instability, terrorist safe havens, and an increase in direct threats to the United States. We cannot turn back the clock on decisions made four years ago in Iraq, but the decisions made now will determine the nature and scope of the future challenges we face in Afghanistan.

The world walked away from Afghanistan once before, and it descended into chaos that contributed to the worst terrorist attack ever against our homeland. We cannot afford to repeat that mistake, because the threats we face are real and the stakes are high for the lives of the Afghan people – especially women and girls – for the stability of the region, and for the national security of the United States.

General Campbell, thank you once again for being with us this morning, and we look forward to your testimony. Senator Reed.