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Written and Opening Statement

Afghanistan War Commission Public Hearing

Veterans of Foreign Wars Center

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Co-Chairs Chaudhary and Jackson, Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on the Afghanistan War. I would like to make three points in my opening statement. Most of what I'm about to say is drawn from my recently published memoirs, *By All Means Available*, so I refer you to it if you'd like additional context and details.

- My first point is that it is important to remember that large-scale U.S. involvement in Afghanistan began more than two decades before the 9/11 attacks. During the last decade of the Cold War, we waged the largest and most successful covert action program in American history to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan and help bring an end to the Cold War. It was the only war the Red Army ever lost. The Afghan people suffered 1 million dead and saw 1/3 of the country's population displaced as a result of the Soviet occupation, but they continued to resist until they won.

There are significant lessons in the U.S. experience for how to achieve escalation dominance and prevail in a proxy war against a great power adversary and, unfortunately, there are also important lessons on how to lose the peace after you've won the war.

After our decisive victory, we disengaged from the region. A brutal civil war followed, which led to the takeover of most of Afghanistan by the Taliban and the use of Afghanistan's territory as a sanctuary for al-Qa'ida.

Prior to 9/11, we treated al-Qa'ida as just another terrorist group and pursued a reactive counterterrorism strategy that did not deny sanctuary to our enemy. Simply put, before 9/11, al-Qa'ida was at war with us, but we weren't at war with them. After the 9/11 attacks, we shifted to a proactive CT strategy that did deny sanctuary to AQ and it ultimately led to the group's operational defeat.

- My second point is that the brilliant unconventional campaign the U.S. conducted during the fall of 2001 was only the initial campaign of what would turn out to be a very long war across multiple theaters against al-Qa'ida, its allies and offshoots. A war that began in Afghanistan would spread to four kinetic theaters – Pakistan-Afghanistan, Syria-Iraq, Yemen-Somalia, and North Africa – and would include multiple, non-kinetic CT operations in several other theaters.

After al-Qa'ida's senior leadership escaped to Pakistan and Iran at the end of 2001, the CT fight became largely operationally and geographically distinct from the COIN fight. From 2004 onwards, Afghanistan became primarily a platform for the CT fight in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region rather than a battleground in the war with al-Qa'ida.

Though a series of policy and capability innovations that I describe in my memoirs, our counterterrorism strategy was transformed to reflect this reality. As a result, we were able to deny al-Qa'ida and its safe haven providers any sanctuary, dismantle core al-Qa'ida, and prevent another 9/11 attack.

- Let me now turn to our nearly 20-year war with the Taliban and start with the obvious: while we won our wars with al-Qa'ida and its offshoots, we lost our war with the Taliban. One reason was that we couldn't solve the Pakistan sanctuary problem. We could largely deny al-Qa'ida any sanctuary after the group relocated to Pakistan, but we couldn't deny the Taliban sanctuary there. Pakistan's Army leadership mostly supported our efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa'ida, but it saw the Taliban as a strategic instrument it could use to create a government favorable to its interests in Afghanistan. The Pakistanis played a double game, part open ally, part covert enemy.

To be sure, our counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan was not without its faults. We succumbed to mission creep and strategic overreach in our nation-building efforts and did not remain focused on the reason we went into Afghanistan in the first place: to overthrow the Taliban regime, defeat al-Qa'ida, and prevent another 9/11 attack. We started way too late to build credible Afghan security forces and wasted substantial funds on building the wrong security forces. As a result, we transitioned security responsibility to the Afghan government much later than we should have.

But the real reason we lost is that two American presidents decided that defeat was preferable to continued support for the Afghan government and indirect conflict with the Taliban. This was a protracted war in which we had asymmetric advantage and escalation dominance and were, after 2015, suffering very few casualties.

The paradox of our war with the Taliban is that while we couldn't win in a short period of time with 150,000 U.S. and coalition troops, we couldn't lose with a few thousand advisors, as long as we provided support for the Afghan government and used our airpower in extremis to prevent the Taliban from massing and taking over the cities. We instead chose to defeat ourselves.

So, in sum, the Afghanistan War is full of lessons on effective and ineffective covert action, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies, the importance of strategic persistence, and the importance of standing by our allies. I wish you all the best as you proceed with your work.