

Transcript of Senator Jim Webb's Opening Remarks

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing: "Countering the Threat of Failure in Afghanistan"

September 17, 2009

SEN. WEBB: Thank you, Senator Lugar. And I would like to express my appreciation to the chairman and to you for having put together this extraordinary variety of expertise in the panel today.

I don't know any American public servant who has had more time on the ground, intellectual dedication and emotional commitment than Ambassador Crocker. And it's great to see you here today, sir.

And, Dr. Hosseini, as someone who has spent a good part of his life as a novelist and also having worked in the dreaded Hollywood off and on for about 15 years, I have incredible admiration for the literary achievement that you were able to bring in "The Kite Runner." I've often said that you can communicate with people on an emotional level through a piece of literature in a way that they come to understand things probably better than any other way. And it's just an amazingly powerful film.

And I congratulate you on what it took to put together. All of that so rare to see a piece of literature that can hit all the issues of loyalty, respect, father/son relationships, and all those sorts of things. It was just an amazing achievement.

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation for what Senator Corker said because it does address the difficulties that we have in this particular issue when you look at where we seem to be going from a national strategic perspective in terms of how we use our assets, where we put our expenditures in terms of national treasure, and whether we should build up an infrastructure to address an enemy that is basically mobile.

We saw this in Iraq, quite frankly. We built up a huge infrastructure to address two different sets of problems. One was the issue of international terrorism, which is intrinsically mobile and decided to relocate after a period of time. But then also to have to pick up the pieces of what we did following our invasion and try to repair relationships and move Iraq forward.

In terms of the advantage that the forces of international terrorism wish to have, that was pretty good for them in the long-term. We spent hundreds of billions of dollars, and they remain active. We are looking at something similar here in Afghanistan. We've got national mission creep going on now, and I'm talking about whether we really are going to attempt to basically build a state here. There's going to be a debate about this.

I look at what happened in Somalia a couple of days ago, and if you are really talking about going after the forces of international terrorism, that was a pretty effective way to do it: coming over the horizon, hitting an element of international terrorism, leaving, not leaving behind an infrastructure and being able to have the same maneuverability as your enemy.

On the other hand, we are moving forward with a different debate here. We will have that debate. The question is not whether there is no military solution, which has sort of been agreed upon. It is whether the military component of this solution is one that is going to work.

I say all that because I would like to ask you on your panel here to look at this from two different perspectives.

First, at what point do we reach a tipping point with United States military where the presence and the operations might actually be counter-productive? This has been raised before, but there's an additional component to this that I have a good deal of concern on. To what extent in Afghanistan can we actually build a national army? I have asked this question to General Petraeus and General McChrystal. I asked it to Admiral Mullen the other day.

This is not a country that has had experience with national army. It's a country with a lot of national pride. But the best that I can see is that at one period in the mid- to late 1900s there was a national army of about 90,000. If you include the police to this number, we are at about 250,000.

So on the one hand, at what point does our presence reach a tipping point where it's counterproductive, where people believe that we are an occupying force. And then can we actually do the other piece of this in terms of the history of the country?

And, Dr. Lockhart, I'd actually like to get your views on that as a starting point.

LOCKHART: I do believe that there is potentially a point where the presence may be counter-productive, but I don't believe we have reached that yet. I think the only way that could be tested, or ascertained, is through polling and observation of the population. I believe, like Dr. Hosseini, that on balance is whether a shade of -- now criticism -- that the presence is an occupation -- those are very much in the minority. And the majority of the population seeks very much, and hopes very much, that the U.S. commitment remains, and the international partnership remains for the long-term stability of the country.

In terms of the possibility of building national institutions, whether the army or other institutions, I believe, it absolutely is possible and the remarkable efforts since 2001 to build up the Afghan national army, I had the honor to observe the first battalion graduate and walk down the streets, and it was welcomed literally with tears of the population.

And the pride of the people in that institution was remarkable because they deeply understand that it's through institutions like that, that their daily needs -- basically, their security -- can be met. And we've seen that in the Afghan national army and then across the different institutions where Afghans with a minimal commitment to training and education do rise to the challenge of managing their institutions.

WEBB: Ambassador Crocker, I remember when you and I had an exchange several years ago with the situation in Iraq and one of your strongly made points was that the Iraqis of all different ethnicities had come together in a national army. In fact, your point had been that actually more than 200,00 Shia had died fighting in the Iran/Iraq war.

What are your thoughts about the situation with respect to Afghanistan?

CROCKER: Well, the fortunate thing for me, Senator, is I represent no one but myself these days, so as uninformed as my opinions may be, at least I'm entitled to have them and, since you asked, to express them.

I do believe that what we have seen thus far shows us, with all of the shortcomings in terms of manpower, materiel, and even abilities, that the Afghans are capable of developing and fielding national forces, as I understand it, perhaps the army more so than the police, but even with the police.

And as you noted, sir, while Afghanistan has a history of challenges to central governments, it also has a history of a national military. And my sense is that Afghans are quite proud of the tradition of that military in the country's history.

I think it can be done. I think it is being done. But as we saw in Iraq, this takes time. The early tests that, as you know, that the Iraqi security forces faced almost took them apart, so I think that we and the Afghans have to be careful not to put more of a burden on these developing forces than they can bear at this time.

Like so many things in this part of the world -- whether it's Iraq, Pakistan or Afghanistan -- this will take time. And nowhere, I think, is that more the case than it is in the development of these security forces.

WEBB: I appreciate both of your answers. Of course, the difficulty is the other side of that, that the more time we have a sizable American presence, the more risk we have of being viewed in a different light. I thank you for your comments.

Thank you.

LUGAR: Thank you, Senator Webb.