

Transcript of Senator Jim Webb's Opening Remarks

Senate Committee on Armed Services Nomination Hearing Reappointment of Admiral Michael G. Mullen, USN, to the Grade of Admiral and as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

September 15, 2009

SEN. JIM WEBB: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

SEN. WEBB: And Admiral, I'd like to add my thanks to you and Deborah and your sons for all the years of service that you've given our country, and also to express my appreciation for the integrity and forthrightness that you have brought to this job. I can tell you that it is greatly appreciated on this side of the river. And having spent five years in the Pentagon, I know it's appreciated on the other side as well.

There's been a lot of talk about Afghanistan. I'm going to ask some questions on that. But before I do, I would like to point out that, as you know, we're doing this Quadrennial Defense Review, and it's a very important one with a new administration in.

And I hope that we don't lose sight on either side of the river of the larger aspects of national strategy that sometimes fall away at the expense of short- and mid-term ground commitments that can affect force structure in the short term but really not play out to our national advantage in the long term.

And in the interest of time, I have two questions that I would like to submit for the record on that. One of them relates to the size of our Navy. The other regards the roles and missions of the Marine Corps. And I will submit that for the record.

With respect to the situation in Afghanistan, there's been discussion earlier about whether this is a new strategy or an ongoing strategy. The most important point, I believe, is whether this is a valid and achievable strategy, whether we have attainable goals that are clearly articulated -- to our side, to the other side, and to the American people -- and whether those goals have an understandable end point so that we know when we are done, particularly in a military sense. And what you are attempting to achieve or what the administration says that it's attempting to achieve is, in some ways, without historical precedent.

We've had a lot of discussion today about Iraq as something of a touchstone here. But as you know and I know, for better or worse, the Iraqis have been used to, in the past, to a strong central government, strong national government. And they also have, for a very long time, had a national army. Hundreds of thousands of Shi'a are known to have died in the war against Iran, fighting in the national army of Iraq.

And it's a different situation with respect to Afghanistan. I wonder if you would comment on the historical precedent, or lack thereof, for what you are attempting to do right now.

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I worry a great deal about -- I think history is something we must pay attention to, recently in Iraq and the things that we've learned there, the things that are the same and the things that are different; obviously the history in Afghanistan, which has rich lessons as well. And it's a country that's never been governed centrally, and I certainly understand that.

I don't argue for a strong central government in Afghanistan. I think it's important that there is governance that is available to the people at every level. So in the totality of governance that I would look at for the future, it would be from village to some level of relatively weak central government that isn't corrupt more than anything else in terms of establishing some semblance of governance for the future.

I hear the discussions about an occupying force. I think McChrystal said it very well not too long after he got there, that it isn't necessarily how big; it's what you do with what you have and how the Afghan people --

SEN. WEBB: In the interest of time, my readings are that in the history of Afghanistan, the largest national army, actual national army, was somewhere between 80,000 and 90,000.

ADM. MULLEN: In 1979.

SEN. WEBB: And your goals with respect to a national-level force are at what level?

ADM. MULLEN: Right now, for the Army, 134 (thousand).

SEN. WEBB: National police, military combined?

ADM. MULLEN: Right now it'd be about 240 (thousand), 230 (thousand).

SEN. WEBB: So in the absence of an affiliation with a national government, what is the challenge to building a national military and police force of that size?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I think the challenge is huge. The only thing I would say is that, as a percentage of the population, the goals that are out there -- not just these, but even the goals you may hear tied to the chairman's previous letter -- are within -- you know, they're within the math as a percentage of the population.

But I think you raise a good point. And I don't underestimate the challenge of recruiting a force that could do this at the national level. I am encouraged, because the army is seen as, you know, the one non-corrupt institution the country has and is held in pretty high regard by the people. And they're also an excellent fighting force historically, with a great warrior mentality.

SEN. WEBB: We run the risk, as I mentioned to General Petraeus and General McChrystal, of allowing our success to be defined by something that's never happened before, something that we can't totally control, which is something that concerns me.

You're familiar with this raid that took place in Somalia within the past 24 hours?

ADM. MULLEN: I've seen the press reports. (Laughs.)

SEN. WEBB: In concept, this was American Special Operations coming in over the horizon, presumably off of naval ships, taking out an element of al Qaeda, and returning back to its original point of origin, which to me, if the target was an appropriate target, is an appropriate way to use military force against international terrorism. Would you agree?

ADM. MULLEN: Globally, we're very focused on this. I'd actually be happy to go through the details of that, but I'd really need to do it in a closed session.

SEN. WEBB: Well, it points to a concern that a lot of people who have served and a lot of people who have written about the situation in Afghanistan share, and that is that maneuverability is the most effective way to conduct operations against international terrorism. And the more territory that you have to defend or occupy, the more vulnerable you are in terms of carrying out your mission. And I know the counter-argument about the populous.

But it would seem to me that, from what I've been hearing and reading with respect to the level of activity of al Qaeda in Afghanistan, it seems to be very low. And we have to be pretty careful in terms of how we lock our people down in defensive cantonments as we approach the issue.

ADM. MULLEN: I think you'll see McChrystal emphasize the exact maneuverability that you're talking about. I take it a huge part of that is just footprint-related; you know, the larger the footprint, the less maneuverable you may be. But clearly he wants -- he does not want his people in cantonments, and he's made that very clear.

SEN. WEBB: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.