

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement Chairman Stephen F. Lynch Subcommittee Hearing on “The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction’s 2019 High-Risk List” Subcommittee on National Security April 4, 2019

Good afternoon, everyone. and welcome to the first official hearing in the 116th Congress of the House Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security. I would also like to personally welcome the gentleman from Georgia, Mr. Hice, to join me as the Ranking Member on this Subcommittee.

In 1947, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Arthur Vandenberg asserted on the Senate floor that, quote: “politics stops at the water’s edge.” Today, more than 70 years later, the international security environment is more complex and dangerous than ever before. States with hegemonic aspirations such as China, Russia, and Iran, all threaten to undermine representative democracy and the international order that the United States has supported since World War II. Terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al Qaeda, although significantly degraded, continue to threaten the United States homeland and our international partners. And there are also new and emerging challenges, such as the proliferation of cyber threats and capabilities that could discredit and undermine U.S. national, political, and economic security, and human rights.

Although the Constitution grants the Executive Branch with the authority to implement the foreign policy of the United States, Congress also has a solemn responsibility to provide oversight. In today’s increasingly complicated international security environment, Congress cannot afford to sacrifice our oversight responsibilities in the hope that by doing so we might be able to “get along” with the Trump White House. We have to do our jobs. As we enter the 116th Congress, I hope all of us on this Subcommittee will commit to working together across the aisle to do what is best for the safety and security of the American people. In that spirit, I am pleased to inform the Ranking Member that – at his request – we have scheduled May 8th as a potential day to convene our next hearing on the suicide epidemic that is plaguing our nation’s veterans.

During his first cabinet meeting of 2019, President Trump raised the very topic that we will examine at today’s hearing: public inspector general reports on critical areas of U.S. military operations, including Afghanistan. According to the President, government military watchdog reports should be “*private and locked up*” and their release to the American public is “*insane*.” He also cautioned Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan not to let it happen again.

America’s long and strong tradition of robust and responsible Congressional oversight flatly rejects the Trump Administration position on this point. In fact, Congressional oversight has a long history of providing tangible, real-world benefits for our warfighters serving on the front lines. For example, in the mid-2000’s, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld refused to acknowledge that an insurgency was emerging in Iraq. It was only after meeting with American servicemembers on the front lines, and with the

help of Stuart Bowen, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, that Members of Congress from this Committee were fully and appropriately informed about the potential risks to American servicemembers and as a result were able to take action to provide our sons and daughters with up-armored humvees and mine resistant ambush protected vehicles, or MRAPs, to protect them from IEDs.

Similarly, in 2007, Congressman John Tierney, from my home state of Massachusetts, opened an investigation when wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Medical Center returning from Iraq and Afghanistan – many of whom had lost limbs or suffered traumatic brain injuries – reported being quartered for months in moldy and rodent-infested rooms with inadequate follow-up care.

In another example, the U.S. Army in 2007 awarded a \$300 million contract to supply ammunition to the Afghan Security Forces to AEY, Inc., a company owned by an inexperienced 21-year-old. After reviewing more than 26,000 pages of documents from the AEY, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense, as well as interviewing U.S. Army, Department of State, and Department of Defense contracting officials, this Committee determined that more than \$66 million in taxpayer dollars were paid to a contractor who provided unserviceable ammunition, much of it Vietnam-era weaponry and some of illegal Chinese origin.

Three years later, this Subcommittee opened a six-month investigation into the circumstances surrounding the Department of Defense's outsourcing of security for vital U.S. supplies in Afghanistan to questionable providers, which revealed a vast protection racket run by a shadowy network of warlords, strongmen, commanders, corrupt Afghan officials. Not only did the system run afoul of the Department's own rules and regulations, it also risked undermining the U.S. strategy for achieving our goals in Afghanistan.

Today, after more than 18 years of war in Afghanistan, more than 2,400 American servicemembers have made the ultimate sacrifice in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom's Sentinel. More than 14,000 U.S. troops are still deployed in the region. To date, the U.S. has allocated more than \$750 billion in taxpayer funds to pay for the war in Afghanistan, in addition to the \$132 billion contributed towards efforts to secure and stabilize the country. The American people deserve to remain informed on the progress, or lack of progress, of our military and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. They have every right to know whether our sons and daughters in uniform are well-deployed and well-equipped and whether taxpayer-money is being well spent. The Department of Defense must also continue to permit Congressional travel to the region to facilitate our oversight efforts.

In addition, the oversight reports issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction since 2008 have served to identify, for the public and Congress, those projects that have been subject to significant waste, fraud, and abuse. Today we will be examining the Inspector General's recent *2019 High-Risk List* of reconstruction areas that are especially vulnerable to waste, fraud, abuse, and mission-failure. This report is extremely timely in light of the continuing peace negotiations led by the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. In anticipation of a potential peace agreement that could result in a large-scale withdrawal of U.S. personnel and the reintegration of the Taliban into the Afghan Government, the report examines the sustainability of U.S.-funded reconstruction programs in a post-reconciliation Afghanistan.

I'd like to again thank Inspector General Sopko for helping this Subcommittee with its work. I now yield 5 minutes to our distinguished Ranking Member, Mr. Hice of Georgia, for his opening statement.

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