

Opening Statement of Chairman Rand Paul, M.D.  
Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight & Emergency Management

*“The Afghanistan Papers – Costs and Benefits of America’s Longest War”  
February 11, 2020*

I now call to order this hearing of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs’ Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management.

Last night I flew to Dover Air Force Base with the President to honor two soldiers killed this week in Afghanistan. We honor their bravery and patriotism. We honor their commitment to their country and their fellow soldiers.

But frankly, they deserve better.

Our soldiers deserve better from their elected officials. Congress needs to do its duty and decide whether to continue America’s longest war. Congress needs to debate what the mission in Afghanistan is today. Congress needs to vote on whether to continue the war in Afghanistan. One generation cannot and should not bind another generation to war.

We now have soldiers fighting who were born after the 9/11 attacks. We need to re-examine what our mission is in Afghanistan.

Our brave young men and women in uniform deserve at least that much.

On December 9, 2019, the Washington Post published a series of investigative reports known collectively as “The Afghanistan Papers.” The Afghanistan Papers series is based in part on some 400 interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (or SIGAR) between 2014 and 2018.

U.S. government officials who had been responsible for the conduct of the Afghanistan war in some capacity, both military and civilian, sat with SIGAR as part of their “Lessons Learned” program, which is intended to “show what has and has not worked over the course of the U.S. reconstruction experience.”

I look forward today to speaking with SIGAR’s John Sopko to discuss his work in greater detail, to clarify SIGAR’s mission, and to provide some important additional context about the interviews obtained by the Washington Post.

As for the substance of The Post’s reporting -- it is extraordinarily troubling. It portrays a U.S. war effort severely impaired by mission creep and suffering from a complete absence of clear and achievable objectives.

Sadly, for those of us who have followed Afghanistan closely, these reports only served to confirm our worst suspicions.

For years, it has been my view that the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan amounts to a military presence without a mission. We have no achievable end state, nor have we aligned ends, ways, and means to support a non-existent theory of victory.

I have repeatedly raised these concerns and have repeatedly tried to force the Congress to confront the Afghanistan issue in a meaningful way. In September 2017, I forced a vote on an amendment to sunset the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force within 6 months. That amendment was defeated.

Then again, in March of last year, Senator Tom Udall and I introduced the AFGHAN Service Act, which would sunset the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force in 1 year, require the Department of Defense to produce a plan to withdraw from Afghanistan, and pay a \$2,500 bonus to our service members who were deployed in the Global War on Terror.

So I have been outspoken on winding down the war in Afghanistan.

But what the Afghanistan Papers make crystal clear is that doing nothing is no longer an option for any Senator or Member of Congress with a conscience.

The Costs of War Project at Brown University estimates that, since 2001, the U.S. government has spent just under a trillion dollars in appropriated taxpayer funds in Afghanistan.

That's \$50 billion a year for almost 20 years.

The obvious question is – what has that \$1 trillion bought us? What do we have to show for it? Did \$1 trillion make Afghanistan more stable? Did \$1 trillion make our military more capable of deterring peer competitors? Did \$1 trillion move us one step closer victory? What legacy costs await us in the future?

But beyond the immense fiscal costs, however, lie even more difficult questions about our continued presence in Afghanistan. The service members who have deployed to fight the war in Afghanistan; many of whom have deployed several times – including two of my staff – have paid a tremendous price. Some 2,400 have laid down their lives and another 20,000 have been wounded, often grievously. How do we honor their sacrifice?

Ambassador Doug Lute will also join us today. Ambassador Lute was an advisor to both President Bush and President Obama on Afghanistan. In his 2015 SIGAR interview, he says quote: "...we were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan – we didn't know what we were doing."

What has changed in Afghanistan since 2015? Anything? Have we learned what we are doing yet?

In 2019, U.S. forces dropped more munitions in Afghanistan than it has in any year since at least 2006, when the Air Force first began keeping track. Are we killing the Taliban or are we trying to bomb them to the negotiating table?

As for the prospect of some sort of negotiated settlement with the Taliban, we'll also be joined this afternoon by Ambassador Richard Boucher.

One of the key lessons learned that Ambassador Boucher discussed in his 2015 interview with SIGAR was the notion that "We have to say good enough is good enough" and "we are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable."

What is in the realm of achievable with respect to a durable peace in Afghanistan? Is the U.S. military presence there helping or hurting that process?

Finally, we'll hear from retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis. A combat veteran who was awarded the Bronze Star for valor in Afghanistan in 2011, Colonel Davis went public with his concerns about the war effort in Afghanistan while still on active duty. His testimony will remind us that, while much of the reporting in the Afghanistan Papers is new, the fundamental problems are not.

These are the sorts of difficult questions that the Congress needs to begin grappling with, and I am hoping to start that discussion today.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for appearing here today, and would recognize Ranking Member Maggie Hassan for any remarks she would like to make.