

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement for Veterans Of The Afghan War Hearing
April 23, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) made the following opening remarks today at the hearing titled “Voice of Veterans of the Afghan War.”

Full text as prepared is below:

Earlier this week, I was up at Harvard Business School talking with veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars. They were a smart, accomplished group and talking with them underscored my belief that military service instills strong leadership skills.

But what struck me was the lessons we’ve learned over the past 40 years about how we regard our veterans. We are all standing on common ground now: We are saying thank you to the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who have served. We are not confusing the war with the warriors. So I want to thank you, your fellow veterans and those who are still serving.

Today we want to hear your views of the conflict in Afghanistan. We want to understand the challenges from the perspective of the men and women who are fighting there, risking their lives, and seeing their friends killed and wounded.

We want you to help us find the way to victory in Afghanistan, even as we redefine the terms of that victory.

And we want to honor your service and demonstrate our appreciation of your sacrifices and those of your families.

History proves that soldiers on the ground have intimate knowledge that is vital to their commanders and to us, as policymakers.

Most recently, it was soldiers who sounded the early warnings that our mission in Iraq was in trouble. And it was soldiers in Anbar Province who saw the major political opportunity to reconcile with the sheikhs.

Soldiers know the challenges, up close and personal, and we are eager to hear and to learn from the insights of this generation of young warriors who served with honor and professionalism in Afghanistan.

I made a promise to myself long ago that I would not compare all of our conflicts to the Vietnam War. That sort of analogy by history can be unproductive. More importantly, it can divert us from developing the right policy for the current conflict.

What we need to do, and the reason these witnesses are here today, is to address the intricacies and nuances of Afghanistan from every angle.

This does not mean, however, that there are no parallels between the two wars.

Once again, we are fighting an insurgency in a rural country with a weak central government. Our enemy blends in with the local population and easily crosses a long border to find sanctuary in a neighboring country. Our efforts to win the loyalty of the locals are hampered by civilian casualties and an inability to deliver the security that we promised more than seven years ago.

We ignore these similarities at our peril.

There are fundamental differences, too. We have a responsibility to the men and women fighting in Afghanistan to understand those differences and adapt to them.

First and foremost, the North Vietnamese never posed a direct threat to our country. The extremists we are fighting today in Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan do represent a direct threat to the security of the United States.

They planned the attacks on New York and Washington that killed 3,000 Americans. They have killed hundreds of other innocents in terrorist attacks worldwide since then. And they are preparing new attacks on the United States and our interests even as we sit here today.

Our original goal in Afghanistan was to go after those men. We were determined to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and eliminate Al Qaeda's base of operations so that they could never again attack the United States.

Our attention strayed from that goal and our enemies took advantage of our mistakes. Now the Obama administration has redefined and narrowed the mission, embracing objectives closer to those original goals.

We are bolstering the American forces in Afghanistan to protect the citizens and to train the Afghan police and army. We recognize that no solution is possible without a strong alliance with Pakistan. In some ways, Pakistan represents a greater threat today. So we will increase aide to Pakistan and support its democratic government.

But we are no longer offering either country a blank check: We will set strict standards for measuring progress against Al Qaeda and the Taliban and see that they are met.

Let me be clear: There is much still to be done in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but our new focus creates a sense of determined optimism for us and our coalition allies.

Better defined objectives should lead to a better battle plan for our troops. But this remains an immensely complicated task, one that leaves our troops simultaneously on the frontlines of the struggle against extremists and in the absolute middle of nowhere.

Sitting on a mountain ledge in a helicopter during a snowstorm in Afghanistan last year really drove this home for me.

We are asking our young men and women to be warriors, and anthropologists, and builders, and then warriors again. You and your colleagues have carried out these difficult and contradictory tasks with remarkable competence and courage.

Our job this morning is to listen and learn from your perspective.

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