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September 16, 2009

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
The President
The White House
Washington DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Just last week Americans across the country gathered to remember that horrific morning in September 2001 when jetliners became weapons, when a skyline was forever changed and when a formidable symbol of America's military might was left with a gaping hole. Eight long years have passed since 9/11. And yet, it has not been long enough to defeat the enemy that attacked our country and killed 3,000 fellow Americans.

Bin Laden has not been captured. Mullah Omar still directs Taliban operations. By all accounts, the Taliban has reconstituted, taking back areas once held by coalition forces. They have studied our tactics and are adapting. The recent election results in Afghanistan were deeply troubling. Low turnout and allegations of fraud have only served to further weaken the Karzai government. Corruption is endemic. Narco-trafficking is fueling the insurgency. The porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border allows free range to al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

I know you appreciate and understand the fullness of what is at stake in Afghanistan. I was heartened by your August 17 comments at the Veterans of Foreign War National Convention where you spoke in no uncertain terms about the implications of failure there, saying: "This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting…this is fundamental to the defense of our people." At the wreath-laying ceremony at the Pentagon to commemorate the 9/11 anniversary, you said, "in pursuit of al Qaeda and its extremist allies, we will never falter."

Despite your public position, political and popular will appears to be eroding, placing our commanders and troops on the ground in a perilous position. Polling indicates a shift in the support of the American people. In recent days key leaders in Congress also have publicly voiced doubts about the way forward in Afghanistan.

While we are not assured victory by staying, I believe the probability of a future terrorist attack dramatically increases if we leave now. Look at recent history: the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 2005 attacks in London, the foiled 2006 attacks to blow up airplanes flying from

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Britain to the U.S. and Canada. These attacks have a common denominator — all are linked to al Qaeda and affiliated terrorist groups which are presently operating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Al Qaeda's murderous aims are nothing new. According to published reports as far back as 1998, the State Department "had reliable intelligence that the bin Laden network has been actively seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction—including chemical weapons—for use against U.S. interests."

As the author of the Iraq Study Group, I urge you to convene a bipartisan group of well-respected, nationally known figures with the purpose of supporting the execution of the new strategy being developed by our commanders in the field in its initial stages, and continually assessing how it is going and what resources it needs to succeed in the months ahead. This Afghanistan Support Group could include at least two members of the Iraq Study Group, such as former Senator Chuck Robb and former White House Chief of Staff Ed Meese, to allow for a degree of continuity. Other people of caliber who could comprise the group include former Senators Sam Nunn, Bob Kerrey and John Warner, former Secretary of State George Schultz and former U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker.

This group's efforts would buttress the critical work that has already been done by General Stanley McChrystal and General David Petraeus, by Secretary of Defense Bob Gates and others. This team could reinvigorate national confidence in the war effort and move us toward a shared mission in Afghanistan.

Let me be absolutely clear: I trust implicitly the judgment of our commanders in the field, the perspective they offer and the strategy they put forth. As the administration, and ultimately Congress, move toward making decisions about what resources to give U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, let us be mindful first and foremost of what they tell us is necessary. If I need a gallon of gas to get where I am going, but I only have access to a half gallon, I think most reasonable people would agree that it would be better for me not to make the trip at all. We must not put our men and women in uniform in a position whereby it is impossible for them to get to their intended destination. Again, I am confident you understand this. Our armed services were undoubtedly encouraged by your pledge during the VFW remarks to give the military the "equipment and support you need to get the job done."

Certainly there are pressing domestic issues, the economy and jobs foremost among them. But, with more than 60,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan alone, I have been distressed by the lack of public attention to these issues. If America's political leadership does not start making the case, how can we expect the American public to support this course and how can we ask more young men and women to put their lives on the line?

Everyone I have talked to in the national security arena in recent days has spoken glowingly of the capable military team at the helm in Afghanistan. I have deep respect for Secretary Gates, who himself served as a member of the Iraq Study Group, and for Generals

Petraeus and McChrystal. America's military leadership needs to be able to focus on winning the war, rather than feeling compelled to make the rounds on the Sunday morning talk shows to convince the country that they need additional resources, and that this is a war worth fighting.

Just last week, you utilized one of the most powerful tools an American president has at his disposal — the bully pulpit — in the hope of furthering a domestic policy priority of your administration. I urge you to lend the same gravity, to galvanize the weight of your office, to marshal the power of your words, to speak again to the American people about this battle in which we are engaged — a battle not of our own making, but one which we cannot lose. Mr. President, tell the country, tell the Congress, what you told the VFW. Make a nationally televised address on Afghanistan clearly outlining why we are there, what is at stake and what is our plan.

Ryan Crocker, former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Pakistan, Syrian, Kuwait and Lebanon, wrote movingly in a recent Newsweek article of a small picture frame that traveled with him from post to post in various State Department capacities. In the frame is a ticket stub from a New York-bound flight that he was on the morning of 9/11. It serves as a sobering reminder, in the words of this consummate diplomat, "of the dangers when you turn your back on the world, thinking you can walk away."

We cannot walk away. But we must not stay half-heartedly simply for the sake of staying. A bipartisan support group of well-respected men and women could help ensure that we stay with a clear mission and the political will to sustain it.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

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