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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
September 5, 2012

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

Dear Mr. President:

With the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks less a week away, and the horrors of that day still seared into our collective consciousness, America deserves a commander in chief who will, above all else, prioritize our national security. Sadly, on your watch, America's longest running war has lately received scant attention or mention, except when it has been politically advantageous to do so.

This seeming ambivalence about the war effort is disturbing with so many young America lives at stake. In a *Washington Post* piece this weekend, penned by *Post* editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, Hiatt writes, "Obama has commanded the war in Afghanistan with a kind of split-the-baby ambivalence. In 2009, he ordered a major ramp-up of U.S. troops while setting the date to begin their withdrawal." Hiatt continues, "If the strategic goal justifies such a commitment of U.S. lives, how can it be prudent to order a withdrawal regardless of whether the goal has been achieved?"

Few would argue that the goal has been achieved, in part because the goal has remained ill-defined. In Bob Woodward's book "Obama's Wars," he indicated that discussions of war strategy were infused with political calculations and that your administration "wrestled with the most basic questions about the war... What is the mission? What are we trying to do? What will work?"

More recently we've seen you mention Afghanistan only when it is politically convenient to do so—and in a manner which is detrimental to those troops on the ground. On Sunday, you said, "We are bringing our troops home from Afghanistan. And I've set a timetable. We will have them all out of there by 2014." This approach is nonsensical. Would President Roosevelt, prior to D-Day, announce that U.S. troops will be leaving Europe by a date certain? Surely, this would have emboldened Hitler and the Nazi troops at a pivotal juncture, much in the same way that the Taliban could reasonably determine that they simply need to bide their time and hold on a bit longer.

In a 1969 speech titled, "Problems of Disengagement: The Conduct of the United States," delivered before the board of directors of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, David Abshire, then the executive director of the Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies spoke with great foresight about the inherent dangers of publicly announcing a timetable for troop withdrawal from an international conflict. He said, "When a predominant power commits itself publically to withdraw by a fixed date, it often becomes a lame duck. Those who supported it seek other allies, and indigenous conflict sets in. Thus that power loses its ability to influence events for the remainder of its tenure. It loses its influence to negotiate successfully with local competing factions within, or with other major powers without."

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I want to be perfectly clear—I am not advocating for a particular strategy in Afghanistan, for certain troop levels or a long-term presence. Rather, I have consistently advocated for the creation of an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group (APSG) to evaluate U.S. strategy in the region and to clarify the U.S. mission, goals and objectives for success. A group which would in essence initiate a national conversation on the war effort—a conversation which you have been unwilling to start using the presidential bully pulpit.

Modeled after the Iraq Study Group, the APSG would be tasked with conducting a forward looking assessment of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan, its impact on the surrounding region, and its consequences for U.S. interests. Even though I secured the necessary funding and Congress granted you the authority to convene a bipartisan group of this nature, your administration has defied congressional intent and failed to act.

I am baffled by your intransigence in this regard and would venture that many of our men and women in uniform are as well. The APSG, like the Iraq Study Group (ISG), could be a collaborative effort involving a variety of think tanks, among them the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the U.S. Institute for Peace. Each of these groups played an instrumental role in producing the ISG, each possess in-house expertise on the subject matter in question, and each is well-practiced in convening people of varied political stripes in an effort to seek bipartisan, forward-looking recommendations on matters of utmost national security import.

Arguably, there is no more important task than examining the military, diplomatic and humanitarian policies that could help ensure a successful outcome in South Asia.

Few would disagree that the situation in the region is complex and deteriorating. There has been a devastating spike in deaths both from insurgent attacks and attacks from Afghan security forces, the very forces we aim to train and equip and which are central to any future handover. A September 4, TIME magazine piece reported, "Nearly a quarter of all combat fatalities in Afghanistan this year were 'green on blue' attacks, with 45 U.S. and NATO soldiers killed by Afghan soldiers and police thus far." The piece continued, "The loyalty, reliability and professionalism of those 350,000-plus Afghan troops is essential if Washington and Brussels' endgame in Afghanistan is to have any success."

Have these developments caused you or your senior advisors to seriously consider recalibrating our strategy? Have the tough questions even been asked? Or has Afghanistan simply been reduced to campaign season stump speech platitudes?

I am afraid we already know the answers to these questions. Convening an APSG would ask these questions and seek to provide solutions in a manner that removes politics from the war strategy—something which your administration has struggled to do.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress