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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

June 7, 2012

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

Dear Mr. President:

Two weekends ago, many Americans celebrated Memorial Day with a visit to the beach, the pool or possibly a neighborhood cookout. But for some this annual holiday was far more than simply a long weekend. Rather it was somber remembrance marked by a profound sense of loss for the son or daughter that never came home or the parent that never met their child.

Our nation has been at war for 11 years now – the longest in our history. As such, these grim realities hit close to home for many families, not to mention the less obvious but still devastating impact of prolonged separations, life-altering injuries, divorce, post traumatic stress syndrome and even suicide.

These challenges are set against the backdrop of precipitously declining public support for the war effort, an increasingly bleak picture on the ground in Afghanistan and pervasive national confusion about our overall aims and if they are attainable.

For these and countless other reasons, I began pressing your administration in August 2010 to convene a bipartisan, independent Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group (APSG), modeled after the Iraq Study Group (ISG), to serve as “fresh eyes” on the target and conduct a comprehensive analysis of U.S. strategy in the region. This group would have been charged with putting forward policy options for your consideration, and perhaps just as significantly, would have fostered a national conversation about the war effort: Why are we there? What are we aiming to accomplish? At what cost? What are the consequences of failure?

Before proposing this idea I spoke with a number of knowledgeable individuals, including former senior diplomats, public policy experts and retired and active military. At that time, many believed our policy was adrift and all agreed that an outside group was needed. Ryan Crocker was among those dignitaries who embraced the idea, prior to taking on his current post as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan.

I believed then, and continue to believe, that a group of the caliber of the ISG would have served this nation well on a matter of utmost national security and interest. Despite repeated correspondence and even legislative action (the FY 2012 Defense Appropriations bill included

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language directing the Secretary of Defense to convene an Af-Pak Study Group and provided the necessary funding to ensure the group's viability) your administration has repeatedly failed to act. I have been particularly puzzled by your intransigence given that prominent members of your administration served with distinction on the ISG, including Defense Secretary Leon Panetta.

Further, in a 2006 interview, you signaled, as a U.S. senator, support for the ISG and its recommendations. When asked by *CBS News* reporter Harry Smith whether, if you were president, you would take seriously the group's recommendations, you answered, rather emphatically, "I would take these recommendations very seriously." And yet, now you are president, and such a group could have easily been formed, with bipartisan support, and could have offered recommendations outside of the scope of what your own advisors were putting forward, which may have profoundly altered our strategy and ultimately our course in Afghanistan. And still you failed to act.

In light of your recent announcement at the NATO summit in Chicago that "the Afghan war as we understand it is over," it is abundantly clear that your administration is immovable and has no intention of pursuing the Af-Pak Study Group, as Congress directed. That said, I remain deeply troubled by what appears to be a pattern of politicization of national security matters of the highest magnitude.

On May 29 the *New York Times* reported that David Axelrod, your political advisor and chief campaign strategist, repeatedly attended high-level national security meetings related to terrorist drone strikes when he worked at the White House. The article noted "David Axelrod...began showing up at the 'Terror Tuesday' meetings, his unspeaking presence a visible reminder of what everyone understood: a successful attack would overwhelm the president's other aspirations and achievements."

This revelation is in keeping with the reporting of Bob Woodward in *Obama's Wars*. Woodward indicated that discussions of the war strategy were infused with political calculations. Woodward also wrote of an administration that "wrestled with the most basic questions about the war...What is the mission? What are we trying to do? What will work?"

These are questions that demand answers and could have been taken up by an Af-Pak Study Group. But I venture that such a group would not have factored politics into their calculus. Was that a consideration in your decision to disregard congressional intent as it relates to the Af-Pak Study Group?

Our men and women in uniform have fought bravely and served with distinction in Afghanistan and will continue to do so until they are called home. Any shortcomings in our strategy or overall vision for success are not their burden to bear. As too often happens, they have found themselves at the mercy of the latest political winds blowing through Washington. And I have been deeply disappointed that, as president, you appear to have allowed these political winds to drive the war strategy.

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It is not at all certain what will unfold when U.S. troops exit or significantly decrease in number – there are varied sobering scenarios, including the Taliban once again seizing the reins of power; a destabilized and nuclear armed Pakistan; Afghanistan as a haven for international terrorists. Only history will tell. But I believe one thing is clear: your administration missed a golden opportunity when, for two years, it failed to convene an Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group to provide an independent, outside analysis of the most pressing national security matter of your presidency.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

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HISTORY WILL NOT
TREAT KINDLY THE
HANDLING OF THIS ISSUE.