

**June 16, 2009**

There are a number of reasons to vote for this bill. The bill funds our withdrawal from Iraq, stop-loss compensation for our troops, a more robust pandemic flu response, extends the 21st Century GI Bill of Rights education benefits to children of members of the armed forces who die while on active duty, additional international food and refugee assistance during the current global economic crisis, and other worthy programs as well. But candidly, those issues are ancillary to the real issue before us: this vote is essentially about whether or not we support current Administration policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I hope the President does not let the country down on this.

Does the Congress want to support and fund the President's new military plan? Looking back at this vote from the future, it will be seen as a vote on the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Will a vote for this bill move us closer to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in southwest Asia?

In this dangerous, complicated world it is never clear how to advance peace, prosperity, and justice for ourselves and the rest of the world. We Members of Congress are called on to exercise our best judgment, and in my best judgment what the President has done so far in Afghanistan is not the way forward, and the President will have to change the policy. The President is doing much good at home and abroad, and I want to support him wherever I can. However, he so far has not changed the policy in Afghanistan in a way that shows he has learned the lessons of Iraq. Nevertheless, I am willing to give him the opportunity to operate from a position of strength in forming that new policy.

The chairman of the full committee has suggested that he is willing to give the President a year to turn things around in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but no more than that--an argument that has considerable merit. The problem, though, is that the President's new policy may not be new enough--not enough of a clean break with the past policy that placed excessive reliance on the use of force to solve what are by definition political problems. We should take a lesson from Iraq where it was not an American troop surge that reduced violence, but rather empowering local provincial forces. And as in Iraq, it will be a reduced American combat presence that will ultimately allow the country to find some peace. So-called surgical strikes--with inevitable civilian casualties--and remote assassinations will not remove the threat of militant extremists.

Our understanding of Afghanistan is inadequate and our poor intelligence in Afghanistan and Pakistan limits our ability to carry out any strategy. We are moving forward in Afghanistan with too much military bravado and too little genuine understanding. Other countries are opting out of combat, not because they are cowards, but because they do not see the situation the same way. Some of us have asked for a plan of success or a plan of withdrawal before sending another wave of soldiers. We have received no such plan.

As with other tragic wars without a clear plan of how to get out, I fear we may be taking a first step that will be followed by sending soldier after soldier to redeem our sunk costs. Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the Mughals, the British, the Soviets--all their military interventions in this region ended badly because they misread the people and the history of this region. I am giving the President the benefit of the doubt on this request by supporting it, with this caveat: my patience has limits.

I will not support an endless military commitment in this region. Reading between the lines, I suspect I see the letter Q in Afghanistan--as in quagmire. If a year from now I do not see unambiguous indicators of success – fewer civilian casualties, Afghan and Pakistani security forces in the lead on the security mission, genuine progress in rebuilding Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure and civil institutions – I will not support further funding for operations and will support only measures that will bring our forces home, and quickly.