

of challenges that are thrown to him. So I want to associate myself with my colleague from Georgia.

Mr. President, I would suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to yield back the remainder of the time and I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Is there a sufficient second? There appears to be a sufficient second.

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the nomination of Michael H. Simon, of Oregon, to be United States District Judge for the District of Oregon? On this question, the yeas and nays have been ordered, and the clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. KYL. The following Senator is necessarily absent: the Senator from New Hampshire (Ms. AYOTTE).

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The result was announced—yeas 64, nays 35, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 92 Ex.]

YEAS—64

Akaka	Graham	Murkowski
Alexander	Hagan	Murray
Baucus	Harkin	Nelson (NE)
Begich	Inouye	Nelson (FL)
Bennet	Johnson (SD)	Pryor
Bingaman	Kerry	Reed
Blumenthal	Kirk	Reid
Boxer	Klobuchar	Rockefeller
Brown (MA)	Kohl	Sanders
Brown (OH)	Kyl	Schumer
Cantwell	Landrieu	Shaheen
Cardin	Lautenberg	Snowe
Carper	Leahy	Stabenow
Casey	Levin	Tester
Collins	Lieberman	Udall (CO)
Conrad	Lugar	Udall (NM)
Coons	Manchin	Udall (NM)
Cornyn	McCain	Warner
Durbin	McCaskill	Webb
Feinstein	Menendez	Whitehouse
Franken	Merkley	Wyden
Gillibrand	Mikulski	

NAYS—35

Barrasso	Grassley	Paul
Blunt	Hatch	Portman
Boozman	Heller	Risch
Burr	Hoeven	Roberts
Chambliss	Hutchison	Rubio
Coats	Inhofe	Sessions
Coburn	Isakson	Shelby
Cochran	Johanns	Thune
Corker	Johnson (WI)	Toomey
Crapo	Lee	Vitter
DeMint	McConnell	Wicker
Enzi	Moran	

NOT VOTING—1

Ayotte

The nomination was confirmed.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:45 p.m., recessed and reassembled at 2:15 p.m. when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. WEBB).

EXECUTIVE SESSION

NOMINATION OF LEON E. PANETTA TO BE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to the consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read the nomination of Leon E. Panetta, of California, to be Secretary of Defense.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, there will be 2 hours of debate, equally divided, between the two leaders or their designees.

The Senator from Michigan.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I understand there is a time agreement on this nomination; is that correct?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct—2 hours of debate, equally divided.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the Presiding Officer, and I yield myself 10 minutes.

Mr. President, the nomination of Leon Panetta to be Secretary of Defense is a wise and a solid nomination. Director Panetta has given decades of dedicated public service to this Nation, and we should all be grateful he is once again willing to answer the call and take the helm at the Department of Defense. We are also grateful to his wife Sylvia for her significant sacrifices over the last 50 years in supporting Leon Panetta's efforts in the public and private sectors.

When Mr. Panetta appeared before the Armed Services Committee at his nomination hearing, all of our Members commented invariably in the same way—reflecting the view that we are grateful Mr. Panetta is willing to take on this position. He is going to bring a reassuring level of continuity and in-depth experience. He has been a critical member of President Obama's national security team during his tenure as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. The Department of Defense will need Director Panetta's skill and his wisdom to navigate the extraordinarily complex set of challenges in the years ahead.

Foremost among those demands are the demands on our Armed Forces, and these are exemplified by the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Between those two conflicts, we continue to have approximately 150,000 troops deployed. The U.S. military is also providing support to NATO operations to protect the Libyan people. In addition, even after the extraordinary raid that killed Osama bin Laden, we face potential terrorist threats against us and against our allies which emanate from Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and other places.

The risk of a terrorist organization getting their hands on and detonating an improvised nuclear device or other weapon of mass destruction remains one of the gravest possible threats to the United States. To counter that threat, the Defense Department is working with the Departments of State, Energy, Homeland Security, and other U.S. Government agencies to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, fissile materials, and dangerous technologies. As Secretary of Defense, Director Panetta's leadership in this area will be of vital importance. Here again, it is that experience as Director of the CIA which will be so invaluable.

In the coming weeks, President Obama and his advisers will face a number of key national security decisions. While the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq remains on track, there have been recent signs of instability in that country. As a result, it is possible that Iraq's political leadership may ask for some kind of continuing U.S. military presence beyond the December 31 withdrawal deadline which was agreed to by President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki in the 2008 Security Agreement.

Another key decision point is looming in Afghanistan regarding reductions in U.S. forces starting next month. President Obama said the other day:

It's now time for us to recognize that we have accomplished a big chunk of our mission and that it's time for Afghans to take more responsibility.

The President also said a few months ago that the reductions starting next month will be "significant." Hopefully, they will be. Director Panetta, while not assigning a specific number, agreed they need to be significant. A significant reduction in our troop level this year would send a critical signal to Afghan leaders that we mean it when we say our commitment is not open-ended and that they need to be urgently focused on preparing Afghanistan's security forces to assume security responsibility for all of Afghanistan. The more that Afghan security forces do that, the better the chances of success because the Taliban's biggest nightmare is facing a large, effective Afghan Army—an army which is already respected by the Afghan people, but now, hopefully—and soon—in control of Afghanistan's security.

Another major issue facing the Department is the stress that 10 years of unbroken war has placed on our Armed Forces. Over the last decade, many of our service men and women have been away from their families and homes for multiple tours. Not only is our force stressed, so are our military families. We owe them our best efforts to reduce the number of deployments and increase the time between deployments.

The next Secretary of Defense will have to struggle with the competing demands on our forces while Washington struggles with an extremely challenging fiscal environment. The

Defense budget will not and should not be exempt from cuts. But Congress, working with the next Secretary of Defense, will need to scrub each Defense program and expenditure and make the tough choices and tradeoffs between our war fighters' requirements today and preparations for the threats of tomorrow.

Last week, the Armed Services Committee marked up the fiscal year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act. The committee cut about \$6 billion from the President's budget request. However, the President has decided to reduce the national security budgets for the next 12 years by \$400 billion. What we don't know is how much of that \$400 billion he will recommend to come from the Defense budget and how much from the intelligence and homeland security budgets or how much is recommended to be in the first of that 12-year period—fiscal year 2012.

The Nation is fortunate that Director Panetta's compelling record of achievement and experience is well suited to the demands of the position of the Secretary of Defense. Mr. Panetta is the right person to help our military through the fiscal challenges that confront this Nation. His service as President Clinton's Director of the Office of Management and Budget is invaluable because he understands the budget process and because he shaped the decisions that helped achieve the budget surpluses of the late 1990s.

Leon Panetta has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to reach across party lines and work in a bipartisan spirit since entering public service 45 years ago. He worked on the staff of the Republican whip in the Senate and headed the Office of Civil Rights in the Nixon administration. He later won election to the House of Representatives as a Democrat, where he served 16 years, earning the respect of his peers and becoming the chairman of the House Budget Committee.

Throughout his time in public service, Leon Panetta has been guided by a clear moral compass. He has said:

In politics there has to be a line beyond which you don't go—the line that marks the difference between right and wrong, what your conscience tells you is right. Too often people don't know where the line is. My family, how I was raised, my education, all reinforced my being able to see that line.

Leon Panetta has been intimately involved in the most pressing national security issues of our time. During his tenure as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, President Obama turned to Director Panetta to personally oversee the manhunt for Osama bin Laden and the awe-inspiring operation that brought an end to al-Qaida's murderous leader and provided a measure of relief to the families and friends who have suffered since September 11, 2001. The raid on the bin Laden compound epitomizes the way in which the CIA and the Defense Department are finally working together to support each other in counterterrorism operations,

and Director Panetta deserves credit for this close coordination.

Before concluding, I wish to pass along my gratitude and deep admiration for the man who is stepping down as head of the Department of Defense, Secretary Robert Gates. Secretary Gates has provided extraordinary service to this country, spanning the administrations of eight Presidents. Four and a half years ago, he left the comfort and rewards of private life, following a long career in government, to once again serve the critical post of President Bush's Secretary of Defense at one of the most difficult times in recent history. Throughout his tenure, across the Bush and Obama administrations, Secretary Gates' leadership, judgment, and candor have earned him the trust and respect of all who have worked with him.

Secretary Gates has combined vision and thoughtfulness with toughness, clarity and courageous decision-making. Secretary Gates established a direct and open relationship with Congress and with our Senate Armed Services Committee in particular. As chairman of that committee, I will always be personally grateful for that.

Secretary Gates' tenure as Secretary of Defense will be judged by history to have been truly exceptional. So our next Secretary of Defense will have enormous responsibilities but also big shoes to fill. I am confident Leon Panetta is the right person to take on that challenge, and I urge our colleagues to support this nomination.

Mr. President, I yield the floor, I suggest the absence of a quorum, and I ask unanimous consent that any time consumed during the quorum call be equally divided.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I rise in strong support of President Obama's nominee to serve as our 23rd Secretary of Defense, Mr. Leon Panetta. These are big shoes to fill. Secretary Gates has had a remarkable term as Secretary and a remarkable career in public service. In addition, the challenges our military faces in this economic climate are significant. We must have a serious discussion about crafting a sustainable way forward.

I sat down with Director Panetta earlier this month to discuss these challenges. I can say with certainty, Leon Panetta is up to the test. He has the experience and wisdom required, and I look forward to working with him once the Senate gives its advice and consent to his nomination.

I have known Leon Panetta for a long time. We served together in the House of Representatives, and we

worked together in government for many years. He has an amazing history of public service to America. We served together on the House Budget Committee when we were both Congressmen in the early 1990s, and he chaired that committee. He understands budgets and the challenges they present.

As Director of the Office of Management and Budget, he took that skill to the executive branch; and as Chief of Staff to President William Jefferson Clinton, he crafted the proposal which brought us to balance in our budget as a nation.

It is hard to imagine it was only 10 years ago that we had a balanced Federal budget. In fact, we were generating a surplus, putting that money into the Social Security trust fund to make it stronger. Ten years later, mired deep in debt, it is hard to imagine that happened, but it did, and Leon Panetta was a big part of that occurrence.

He advised President George W. Bush on how to bring a close to the Iraq war in a responsible way. For the last 2 years he has had an awesome responsibility as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Thanks to the President's strategic focus and Director Panetta's extraordinary leadership, Special Forces and CIA operatives were able to locate and capture Osama bin Laden last month in Pakistan. These are precisely the skills and experiences we need at the table at this moment.

I know Leon Panetta as more than just a fellow colleague in the House and a person who shared some time in public service when I did. I know him as a person. I know his family. I know what he thinks. I know his values. I have to tell you, President Obama and America are fortunate to have a person of this quality who is willing to give even more of his life in public service. He could have stayed out in Monterey, CA, his home area, and no hardship assignment, but he chose not to. He came to Washington to head up the Central Intelligence Agency and now has accepted this invitation to head up the Department of Defense. There is no question in my mind that he will bring to it an extraordinary skill level and amazing values.

Director Panetta and I have talked a little bit about some subjects, and one near and dear to my heart, the DREAM Act. The DREAM Act is legislation I introduced almost 10 years ago allowing immigrant students who have no country an opportunity to contribute to America. These young people came to the United States with their parents when they were just kids and infants. They have lived here all their lives. All they want is a chance to prove how much they love this country. The bill I introduced said there are two ways they should be allowed to do it: No. 1, to complete at least 2 years of college, to have, obviously, a high school diploma and good background; but another, to serve in our Nation's military.

I have been proud to have the support of Secretary of Defense Gates in this effort, and I look forward to the same support from the next, Secretary Panetta. The DREAM Act would strengthen our military and strengthen our Nation, and I am sure, as General Colin Powell has said, "Immigration is what's keeping this country's lifeblood moving forward." These young people can help us move forward as a nation to be safer and create more opportunity.

We have a number of challenges ahead. Our men and women are fighting wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Libya. Servicemembers and their families have borne an incredible burden of sacrifice in these conflicts over the last decade. As a nation, we are spending tens of billions of dollars a month to sustain them in their efforts.

At the same time, public support for these undertakings will not last forever. The current situation needs to change, and the President is about to make an announcement when it comes to our troop levels in Afghanistan. We have to craft a way forward and deal honestly and responsibly with what is possibly one of our most challenging situations in Afghanistan. I believe it has to begin with a substantial redeployment of U.S. troops back to America from Afghanistan.

Last week I joined Senator JEFF MERKLEY of Oregon and 24 of my colleagues in a letter to the President expressing these concerns. I trust the President and incoming Secretary of Defense and Congress can find a responsible path forward. We need to take a hard look at every aspect of our Federal budget, including our Department of Defense, to sustain our men and women in uniform but not to waste money on privatization, on contractors, and on runaway contracts.

As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen has commented that our greatest national security threat is our ballooning deficit. Of course, we need to protect our country, but we need to do it in a fiscally responsible manner. Even as we address the path forward in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, even as we trim the spending in the defense budget, we will not back away from our commitment to the men and women in uniform. I know Leon shares that statement.

I support Leon Panetta as our next Secretary of Defense because now more than ever we need his steady hand, his leadership, to tackle these challenges in budgets, in management, and in the critical conflicts we are engaged in around the world. I congratulate President Obama for selecting Leon Panetta for this awesome responsibility, and I look forward to working with him on these issues and others in the years to come.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I rise today to express my strong support for

the nomination of Leon Panetta as the next Secretary of Defense. Director Panetta comes to this job at an extraordinarily challenging time for the Department of Defense and for our Nation. Among the many issues he will confront, Mr. Panetta will oversee the completion of our direct military operations in Iraq, the beginning of the transition of our forces out of Afghanistan, the enhancement of our cyber defenses, and the reduction of our defense budget.

I have known Leon Panetta for many years, and I know he is particularly well suited to address all of these challenges. He is a man of great intellect, of great decency, and great determination.

At the end of this year, for example, in compliance with the Status of Forces Agreement, we will complete the withdrawal of our forces from Iraq and hand over primary responsibility for our ongoing relationship with Iraq to the Department of State. It remains to be seen whether the Iraqi Government will ask us to extend our military presence past December 31. But for now, we are thoroughly and determinately preparing our troops to leave. Having served as a member of the Iraq Study Group, Mr. Panetta certainly understands the importance of this transition and will carry it out.

As the next Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta will also continue to focus our efforts on fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are facing a critical turning point in our operations. This week, we expect President Obama to announce his plan to begin reducing our force levels in Afghanistan this summer, a commitment he made in his speech at West Point in 2009.

Along with the reduction in forces we must sustain the security gains that we have accomplished during the past year and further build the capacity of the Afghan forces so they are able to take full responsibility for their own security. Mr. Panetta understands how important it is for all of our agencies to work together in this effort and all security missions; that using military force may be our primary weapon of securing areas but enduring success comes from coordination among the intelligence and law enforcement communities, from effective diplomacy, and from assistance programs administered by the Department of State and the USAID.

The conditions on the ground in Afghanistan are directly related to our ability to successfully attack the terrorist networks that are operating along the border in Pakistan. In his current position as Director of the CIA, Mr. Panetta has reinvigorated these efforts, most notably with the successful raid on Osama bin Laden. Indeed, I believe when history looks back, outside of the critical and ultimate decision by the President of the United States, one of the most important roles played in this effort to prepare the way for those

courageous SEALs was the steady leadership of Leon Panetta at the Central Intelligence Agency. He understands the complexities of our relationship with Pakistan and, indeed, throughout the world. This expertise will be critical as we move forward, and critical for our next Secretary of Defense.

He will also lead the Department of Defense in preparing for the emerging threats to our national security, such as attacks to our cyber infrastructure. Indeed, every branch of government is working to define the roles various organizations will play in protecting people, infrastructure, and information within cyberspace.

During his confirmation hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee, I discussed with Director Panetta the strategy the Department of Defense would employ in confronting the potential of a cyber attack against the United States. He responded in no uncertain terms. His words:

I have often said that there is a strong likelihood that the next Pearl Harbor that we confront could very well be a cyberattack that cripples our power system, our grid, our security systems, our financial systems, our governmental systems. This is a real possibility in today's world. And as a result, I think we have to aggressively be able to counter that.

Indeed, Mr. Panetta understands the future as well as the present, and he will bring his experience as well as his vision to bear on the emerging challenges that face the United States.

Perhaps most challenging of all, Leon Panetta will lead the Department at a time of great fiscal constraints. As our Nation continues to find a path forward to rebound from the economic challenges of the last few years, there is an ever-growing pressure to reduce the size of the defense budget, which has nearly doubled over the past 10 years. But we must be careful to do so in a way that removes unsustainable costs without losing vital capability.

As a result of the high operational tempo and the duration of multiple overseas operations, all of our services are facing serious reset and recapitalization needs. Serious decisions will have to be made to ensure that we have the right systems in place to meet the threats we face, all at a price level that we can afford.

Having served as the House Budget Committee chairman, and as the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, there is no one who has more knowledge, more experience, more sense of the details than Leon Panetta, and I believe he is the most well qualified individual to tackle the huge budgetary issues that are facing the Department of Defense.

Leon will have an extraordinary role to play, particularly in the wake of the extraordinary service of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. I can't think of anyone I respect or admire more. I can't think of anyone who has served this country with more distinction,

who has served with more selfless dedication to the Nation, and fundamentally who has made his decisions knowing full well that at the end of the day young Americans in the uniform of the United States will carry out his orders.

Bob Gates has done a superb job. But I have every confidence that Leon Panetta will continue to carry on, will continue to meet those standards, will continue to lead the Department of Defense with distinction, with dedication and great loyalty, just as Secretary Gates has done, and ultimately we will know that at the end of all the decisions emanating from the Pentagon there is a young American willing and able and ready to serve, to support this Nation and defend it.

With that, I rise to express my great support for Secretary-designee Panetta and wish him well in all of his endeavors and pledge to work with him closely.

I yield the floor.

I note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. FRANKEN). The clerk will call the roll. The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MANCHIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MANCHIN. Mr. President, first of all, I rise in total support of Mr. Leon Panetta as the new Secretary of Defense. He is an outstanding public servant who has served in many capacities and he has been a tremendous leader in every role he has held.

THE DEBT CEILING AND AFGHANISTAN

With that being said, I rise to speak on our war in Afghanistan. Very soon our Nation, this esteemed body, and particularly the President of the United States will address two of the greatest challenges our Nation currently faces. The first is Afghanistan.

The second issue is raising the debt ceiling and confronting our Nation's unsustainable spending and debt. To the average American, Afghanistan and raising our debt ceiling may seem unrelated, but they are, in fact, directly related. They are directly related to the hard fiscal and strategic choices our Nation must make if we are to remain safe and secure in the coming decades.

With respect to raising the debt ceiling, the budget realities we face are both striking and frightening. While some may choose to ignore this threat, mere words cannot give weight to the fiscal peril our Nation now faces. Only numbers can.

Since 1992, we have raised the debt ceiling 16 times. In 1992, our national debt stood at \$4.1 trillion. Between 2002 and today, our national debt rose from \$5.9 trillion to over \$14.3 trillion. Now for the first time in our Nation's history, our yearly budget deficits may exceed \$1 trillion for 4 years in a row. At the current pace of deficit spending, CRS projects our national debt will exceed \$23.1 trillion by 2021.

In order to pay for the financial hole we have dug, the Congressional Budget Office projects that net interest payments will increase fourfold over the next 10 years, from \$197 billion in fiscal year 2011 to \$792 billion in fiscal year 2021. To put that number into perspective, one decade from today, interest payments on our \$23.1 trillion debt will exceed the amount we currently spend on education, energy, and national defense combined. Numbers of this size are not only unimaginable, they will prove catastrophic for our Nation's future.

The fiscal peril we face reminds me of the words a former Senator said on this floor in declaring why he chose in 2006 to vote against raising the debt ceiling when our national debt stood at that time at \$8.18 trillion. He said:

The rising debt is a hidden domestic enemy, robbing our cities and States of the critical investments and infrastructure like bridges, ports, and levees; robbing our families and our children of critical investments in education and health care reform; robbing our seniors of the retirement and health security they counted on. Every dollar we pay in interest is a dollar that is not going to investment in America's priorities.

That former Senator was President Barack Obama.

While his perspective on these words may ring differently today, I believe they accurately capture the difficult choices we face today. The choice is this: Will we rebuild America's future?

Today, with our Nation facing a stagnant economy and a death spiral of debt, we can no longer have it all—or pretend we can. We must choose what as a nation we can and cannot afford to do. Our risky debt will not only undermine our economic security, it also threatens our national security. As ADM Michael Mullen said:

I believe that our debt is the greatest threat to our national security. If we as a country do not address our fiscal imbalances in the near-term, our national power will erode, and the costs to our ability to maintain and sustain influences could be great.

We can no longer in good conscience cut services and programs at home, raise taxes, or—this is very important—lift the debt ceiling in order to fund nation building in Afghanistan.

Ten years ago, when our mission in Afghanistan began, it was a just and rightful mission to seek out and destroy those responsible for the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the deaths of thousands of innocent Americans. We overthrew the Taliban government to provide a safe haven to al-Qaida. We have hunted down and killed Osama bin Laden as well as most of the senior members of this terrorist group. Today, in Afghanistan, in a nation of 30 million people, intelligence estimates suggest there are only between 50 and 100 al-Qaida terrorists harbored there. Because of the incredible work of our military men and women, the mission of destroying al-Qaida in Afghanistan by all accounts has been a success. But the real truth is, after 10 years, our current mission in Afghanistan has be-

come less about destroying al-Qaida and more about building a country where, frankly, one has never existed.

In February, I saw firsthand the significant challenges our brave troops face as they pursue this nation building mission. During the trip I heard from Ambassador Eikenberry and General Petraeus. I visited Helmand Province and Kandahar. I met with local tribal leaders and President Karzai of Afghanistan. What I heard from many officials and diplomats was that progress could be just around the corner but only if we give it more time and more money. I heard we must stay to counter the threat of al-Qaida but then was told that only a handful of al-Qaida members existed in Afghanistan. I was told that governance was improving, but that corruption was so rampant that billions—yes, billions—of dollars were lost to corrupt officials who seemed more interested in improving their own lives than the lives of their own people. I was told we need a sizable force to diffuse the threat posed by the Taliban but that estimating the size of the enemy was difficult. Still, everyone acknowledges that their force is a fraction of the number of troops we have there now. I was told that because of rampant corruption and theft, the very cost of moving our supplies was indirectly funding the very enemy we face.

I was told that China—yes, China—could reap billions by extracting resources from Afghanistan, but guess what. They are not contributing anything to the cost of security. I was told that after years of spending billions training a new Afghanistan military and police force, it could be years longer before they could fully defend their nation and their people, and even then it would demand billions more in funding from us. I was also told we were building schools, roads, and infrastructure as well as providing billions in aid for small businesses and job creation so Afghanistan could become more self-sufficient. But today, 97 percent of the Afghan economy is based on foreign aid, and that is after 10 long years. I have been told again and again that American aid is critical to rebuilding Afghanistan but that local projects built with American tax dollars could not be branded as American-funded projects out of fear of reprisals. I was told the people of Afghanistan truly want us there but was then told in a meeting with President Karzai that it was time for America to leave.

The American people have been hearing all of these arguments and the sad facts for nearly a decade. Now, after 10 years, I had truly hoped progress in Afghanistan would be clear and the Afghan people would be united and their government and leaders would be one defined by honesty, integrity, and a shared determination to build a better state. But the real truth is impossible to ignore. After 10 years, we face the choice of whether we will continue to spend tens of billions of tax dollars and lose precious American lives not on