

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING TO CONSIDER THE NOMINATION OF
GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON JR., USA,
TO BE GENERAL AND COMMANDER, RESOLUTE
SUPPORT AND COMMANDER, UNITED
STATES FORCES-AFGHANISTAN

Thursday, January 28, 2016

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1 TO CONSIDER THE NOMINATION OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL JOHN W.
2 NICHOLSON JR., USA, TO BE GENERAL AND COMMANDER, RESOLUTE
3 SUPPORT AND COMMANDER, UNITED STATES FORCES-AFGHANISTAN
4

5 Thursday, January 28, 2016
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7 U.S. Senate
8 Committee on Armed Services
9 Washington, D.C.
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11 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:37 a.m. in
12 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John
13 McCain, chairman of the committee, presiding.

14 Committee Members Present: Senators McCain
15 [presiding], Ayotte, Fischer, Cotton, Rounds, Ernst, Tillis,
16 Sullivan, Graham, Reed, Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Donnelly,
17 Hirono, Kaine, and Heinrich.

18 Also Present: Senator Kirk.
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1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN McCAIN, U.S. SENATOR
2 FROM ARIZONA

3 Chairman McCain: Good morning, all.

4 Thank you for being here, General Nicholson.

5 I would ask the indulgence of the committee to allow
6 our distinguished colleague from Illinois, Senator Kirk, to
7 make a few words of introduction before we begin the
8 committee proceedings.

9 Senator Kirk?

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1 STATEMENT OF HON. MARK KIRK, U.S. SENATOR FROM
2 ILLINOIS

3 Senator Kirk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am here to
4 give General Nicholson my highest recommendation. General
5 Nicholson has had 3.5 years of Active Duty service on the
6 ground, more than any other general officer in the U.S.
7 military. I have served him several times as a reservist in
8 Afghanistan. There is no officer who has as much experience
9 in the U.S. military as he does.

10 I would note that with him you get multigenerational
11 input from his father and grandfather and great grand uncle,
12 the famous Nikal Seyn, who also has been given a monument in
13 northern Pakistan, who led the British forces in the Sepoy
14 Mutiny. When General Nicholson was asked by Afghan leaders
15 if he was related to Nikal Seyn, he said, "Yes, I am." That
16 was tremendously impressive to them.

17 To have that level of experience to be given command of
18 our forces in Afghanistan is unique in this individual.

19 Chairman McCain: Thank you very much, Senator Kirk. I
20 know you have other responsibilities this morning. We thank
21 you for taking the time to introduce this distinguished
22 member of the military, who we will hear more from today.

23 Thank you, Senator Kirk.

24 The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning
25 to consider the nomination of Lieutenant General John

1 Nicholson to be the next commander of U.S. and Coalition
2 Forces in Afghanistan.

3 General, congratulations on your nomination, and
4 welcome.

5 As is our tradition, General Nicholson, we hope you
6 will take the opportunity before your remarks to introduce
7 any family and friends joining you today. As Senator Kirk
8 mentioned, you have a distinguished family lineage,
9 including your uncle, an old friend of members of this
10 committee, Jim Nicholson, and, of course, your father,
11 General Nicholson as well.

12 I would like to begin by thanking you, General, for
13 your many years of distinguished service and your leadership
14 in Afghanistan at a critical time. You have presided over
15 important progress improving the capability and capacity of
16 the Afghan military, and developed a strong and productive
17 relationship with the Afghan Unity Government. When you saw
18 that progress was in danger, you insisted that further
19 troop withdrawals should be based on conditions on the
20 ground.

21 While President Obama decided to keep 9,800 U.S. troops
22 in Afghanistan beyond 2016, conditions on the ground in
23 Afghanistan today clearly demand an immediate reevaluation
24 of scheduled American troop withdrawals and this
25 administration's continued adherence to a calendar-based

1 withdrawal, rather than a conditions-based withdrawal, which
2 some of us have been urging for many years.

3 In 2001, American forces went to Afghanistan because
4 that was where, under the sanctuary of the Taliban regime,
5 Al Qaeda planned and conducted initial training for the
6 September 11 attacks that killed 3,000 innocent civilians on
7 American soil. Our mission was to ensure that Afghanistan
8 would never again be a safe haven for Al Qaeda or other
9 terrorist groups to attack the United States. That mission
10 has been successful for 14 years, but it is far from over.

11 American forces are carrying out that mission today by
12 performing two critical tasks, counterterrorism and training
13 and advising our Afghan partners. But the reality is that
14 the 5,500 American troops that will be left in Afghanistan
15 at the end of this year after scheduled withdrawals will be
16 adequate for one or the other of these critical tasks, not
17 both.

18 This smaller American force will inevitably be forced
19 to shoulder a higher level of risk to be successful. But in
20 another way, the individual service member deployed to
21 Afghanistan is safer as a part of a force of 9,800 than a
22 force of 5,500.

23 The risks to American forces only grow worse as the
24 terrorist threat in Afghanistan intensifies. We are now
25 confronting threats from a resurgent Taliban, a reviving Al

1 Qaeda, and an arising ISIL. ISIL's sanctuary in Syria has
2 been deadly enough. We cannot afford another one in
3 Afghanistan.

4 This complex and expanding terrorist threat tests both
5 our own counterterrorism capacity as well as the capability
6 and capacity of the Afghan military, which is still
7 developing key enablers, including intelligence, logistics,
8 special forces, airlift, and close-air support.

9 By now, we should have learned from the precipitous
10 withdrawal from Iraq, and the disaster that ensued, that
11 wars do not end because politicians say so, nor will any
12 politician be able to schedule an end to the threat of
13 radical Islamist terrorism that is emanating from
14 Afghanistan or the region more broadly.

15 That is why, as the security situation in Afghanistan
16 continues to deteriorate, it makes no strategic or military
17 sense to continue the withdrawal of American forces.
18 Indeed, our military commanders increasingly realize that
19 preventing the reemergence of terrorist safe havens in
20 Afghanistan will require a long-term partnership with Afghan
21 Government and military, similar to the U.S. role in South
22 Korea or Colombia.

23 The world walked away from Afghanistan once before, and
24 it descended into chaos that contributed to the worst
25 terrorist attack ever against our homeland. We cannot

1 afford to repeat that mistake, because the threats we face
2 are real and the stakes are high for the lives of the
3 American people, for the stability of the region, and for
4 the national security of the United States.

5 President Obama cannot turn back the clock on decisions
6 made 4 years ago in Iraq, but he can make decisions now that
7 will empower his successor to do what is necessary to
8 confront the challenges we will face in Afghanistan in 2017
9 and beyond.

10 It is time to immediately halt U.S. troop withdrawals
11 and eliminate any target date for withdrawal. This will
12 allow American forces to perform the vital tasks of
13 eliminating terrorist threats and building the capacity and
14 capability of Afghan military. And it will send a powerful
15 signal to the Taliban that it cannot simply wait out the
16 United States and that we will not abandon Afghanistan to
17 tyranny and terror again.

18 General Nicholson, I look forward to your testimony and
19 your assessment of the way ahead.

20 Senator Reed?

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1 STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE
2 ISLAND

3 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Let
4 me join you in welcoming Lieutenant General Nicholson.

5 Thank you, sir, for your service and for your
6 willingness to accept command of Resolute Support and U.S.
7 Forces in Afghanistan.

8 I also would like to join Senator McCain in welcoming
9 your family.

10 Norine, thank you, and Caroline.

11 And also your father, Jack. Thank you, sir, for your
12 service.

13 And your Uncle Jim. Thank you for your distinguished
14 service in many capacities.

15 As the chairman pointed out, Lieutenant General
16 Nicholson is uniquely qualified to assume these
17 responsibilities, having spent much of the last 10 years
18 focused on the mission in Afghanistan, including
19 approximately 3.5 years deployed in country and having held
20 a number of relevant U.S. and NATO command positions.

21 Your experience is not only oppressive but will be
22 extremely useful as you assume this new responsibility.

23 I recently traveled to Afghanistan and it is evident
24 that the past year has been one of significant political and
25 security transition for the country. The transfer of

1 security responsibilities from the coalition to the Afghan
2 National Security Forces, ANSF, has not been without its
3 challenges, as evidenced by the temporary seizure of Kunduz
4 city and other areas by the Taliban.

5 Further complicating the security situation has been
6 the emergence of the so-called Islamic State-Khorasan
7 Province, or ISKP.

8 Operations by the Pakistani military on their side of
9 the border, while a welcome development, have also added to
10 the security situation by displacing elements of Al Qaeda,
11 the Pakistan Taliban, and other bad actors into Afghanistan.

12 Lieutenant General Nicholson, I look forward to your
13 assessment as what you see as the greatest security
14 challenges with all these forces in play that confront the
15 ANSF in the coming year.

16 The ANSF now has had the sole responsibility of
17 securing their country for little more than a year and
18 fortunately have remained cohesive and responsive
19 throughout. The ANSF has continued to prove their
20 willingness to fight for and to retake areas contested by
21 the Taliban while increasing their overall operational
22 capacity under coalition training.

23 Lieutenant General Nicholson, I would be interested
24 also in your thoughts as to what you see as the greatest
25 challenges in building this capacity, because ultimately

1 that is going to be the significant force stabilizer in the
2 country of Afghanistan and moving forward.

3 With regard to counterterrorism, which is the second
4 mission of our forces, I support the reported recent
5 approval by the White House of targeted strikes against ISKP
6 as part of your mission.

7 Furthermore, the joint operation by Afghan and U.S.
8 Forces in October to destroy what was, according to General
9 Campbell, probably the largest Al Qaeda training camp
10 identified since 9/11 is a stark reminder of the group's
11 resilience and the continuing challenge they pose.

12 Again, I look forward to your assessment of all these
13 counterterrorism issues moving forward.

14 Now, as the President announced in October, it is his
15 intention to maintain approximately 9,800 troops in
16 Afghanistan for most of this year, with a plan to draw down
17 to approximately 5,500 troops by January 2017.

18 General Nicholson, if confirmed, I will expect you, and
19 I think you will, immediately conduct your own assessment of
20 the withdrawal of U.S. Forces based on conditions on the
21 ground. I believe that that assessment should be given
22 extraordinary weight in any decision made on the retention
23 of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan.

24 Last year was also one of political transition in
25 Afghanistan under the National Unity Government of President

1 Ghani and CEO Abdullah. Like all progress in Afghanistan,
2 it has been challenging.

3 However, the National Unity Government has held
4 together, preventing a breakdown in governance. It has
5 provided an opportunity for some ambitious reform agendas,
6 some proposals, including governance and anticorruption
7 initiatives. Those must be encouraged by both you and the
8 Ambassador.

9 Afghans will also have to work very hard, as we
10 discussed in my office, about their economy, which is not
11 performing well at all, and also the loss of human capital,
12 as many, many young, talented people leave the country.

13 These are just a few of the challenges that you will
14 face, but I am extremely confident that you have the
15 ability, the dedication, and the experience to meet these
16 challenges.

17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Chairman McCain: Thank you.

19 General Nicholson, before we proceed, there is a series
20 of standard questions, which we ask for all nominees, and I
21 appreciate your answer yes or no.

22 In order to exercise its legislative and oversight
23 responsibilities, it is important that this committee and
24 other appropriate committees of the Congress be able to
25 receive testimony, briefings, and other communications of

1 information. Have you adhered to applicable laws and
2 regulations governing conflicts of interest?

3 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

4 Chairman McCain: Do you agree, when asked, to give
5 your personal views, even if those differ from the
6 administration in power?

7 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

8 Chairman McCain: Have you assumed any duties or
9 undertaken any actions which would appear to presume the
10 outcome of the confirmation process?

11 General Nicholson: No, sir.

12 Chairman McCain: Will you ensure your staff complies
13 with deadlines established for requested communications,
14 including questions for the record in hearings?

15 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

16 Chairman McCain: Will you cooperate in providing
17 witnesses and briefers in response to congressional
18 requests?

19 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

20 Chairman McCain: Will those witnesses be protected
21 from reprisal for their testimony or briefings?

22 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

23 Chairman McCain: Do you agree, if confirmed, to appear
24 and testify upon request before this committee?

25 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

1 Chairman McCain: Do you agree to provide documents,
2 including copies of electronic forms of communication, in a
3 timely manner when requested by a duly constituted committee
4 or to consult with the committee regarding the basis for any
5 good-faith delay or denial in providing such documents?

6 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

7 Chairman McCain: Thank you. Please proceed,
8 Lieutenant General Nicholson.

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1 STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON JR.,
2 USA, TO BE GENERAL AND COMMANDER, RESOLUTE SUPPORT AND
3 COMMANDER, UNITED STATES FORCES-AFGHANISTAN

4 General Nicholson: Chairman McCain, Senator Reed,
5 members of the committee, thank you very much. I also wish
6 to thank Senator Kirk for the introduction.

7 It is a privilege to appear before you this morning,
8 sir, and I appreciate the opportunity to answer your
9 questions regarding my nomination as the command of Resolute
10 Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan. I thank President
11 Obama, Secretary Carter, General Dunford, and General Millie
12 for their support for my nomination.

13 I also wish to thank my friend General John Campbell
14 for his outstanding leadership in Afghanistan and for his
15 long service. If confirmed, it would be a tremendous honor
16 to follow him in this critical position.

17 As you mentioned, sir, I would like to introduce my
18 wife, Norine; my daughter, Caroline; and my other family
19 members -- my Uncle Jim, my dad and stepmother -- for their
20 presence here today and for their love and support of me
21 throughout my career.

22 Chairman McCain: Welcome to the family members. I
23 know this is a proud time.

24 General Nicholson: Thank you, sir.

25 My father and uncle are Vietnam veterans, and their

1 service has been an inspiration to me and my generation and
2 our family for years. So much so that three of my cousins
3 and my daughter are all in the family business in the
4 service of our country.

5 Most importantly, I would like to thank the soldiers,
6 sailors, airmen, marines, with whom I have had the honor to
7 serve. Their selfless service to our country and to each
8 other is a testament to the strength of our military and our
9 Nation.

10 I especially wish to honor the sacrifice of our service
11 members who have died in this noble effort. I also wish to
12 remember the Afghan soldiers, Afghan police, and countless
13 Afghan civilians who have suffered so greatly in this
14 conflict. As I sit before you today, I am thinking of them
15 and their families, and sincerely wish to deliver for them.

16 The Resolute Support Mission is a vitally important
17 part of our national effort to protect our homeland from
18 terrorist threats and to enable sustainable Afghan capacity
19 to secure their own country.

20 Since 9/11, the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan has
21 largely defined my service. I have been either deployed to
22 Afghanistan or supported the effort from various duty
23 positions in the U.S. and Europe. I have had also the
24 privilege to serve alongside our allies and partners, not
25 only in Afghanistan but in my 4 years of service in NATO.

1 Our common experience in Afghanistan has produced the
2 highest levels of cohesion and combat experience inside the
3 NATO alliance, so it is an honor to serve alongside our
4 allies; alongside our other partners in this 47-nation
5 coalition; and, of course, alongside our Afghan comrades.

6 If confirmed, I look forward to working with this
7 committee and the entire Congress through my chain of
8 command to address the many challenges we face in
9 Afghanistan in order to keep America safe and secure, and to
10 protect the Afghan people. I pledge that I will make every
11 effort to live up to the confidence that has been placed in
12 me, and I am very grateful for your consideration.

13 It is an honor to serve. And if confirmed, it would be
14 a distinct honor to serve in this position. Thank you for
15 this opportunity, and I look forward to your questions, sir.

16 [The prepared statement of General Nicholson follows:]

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1 Chairman McCain: Thank you.

2 One of the sources of concern to the members of this
3 committee on both sides are the almost continuous
4 announcements. Even when there is an increase in troop
5 strength or pause in reduction, there is an announcement
6 that we will be out of Afghanistan, many times, in my view,
7 in contravention of events that happen on the ground.

8 I guess my question to you is, do you believe that the
9 security situation in Afghanistan is improving? Or would
10 you argue, as some of us do, that we just completed or were
11 nearing the completion of the most significant fighting in
12 the winter that we have seen in many years in Afghanistan,
13 significant successes on the part of the Taliban, now the
14 presence of ISIS, including Iranians providing weapons to
15 the Taliban? In other words, the view of many of us is that
16 the security situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating
17 rather than improving.

18 What is your assessment, General, of the overall
19 tactical situation in Afghanistan?

20 General Nicholson: Sir, I agree with your assessment.

21 Chairman McCain: So if that is the case, should it not
22 be wise at least to pause in our plans for further
23 reductions and try to achieve some stability on the ground?

24 General Nicholson: Sir, I agree with -- in your
25 opening statements, both you and Senator Reed discussed

1 conditions-based assessments on the capacity that we
2 maintain in the country, and that this capacity, this
3 capability that we maintain, should be able to adequately
4 address our two core missions of counterterrorism and train,
5 advise, assist to the Afghans.

6 Chairman McCain: Is it not true, along this line, that
7 the Afghan military still does not have some capabilities
8 that require years and years of training and equipping, such
9 as air assets, such as intel, such as even things like
10 medevac, but particularly intelligence capabilities that,
11 despite their brave fighting -- and I know from your
12 experience you agree that they are very brave and tough
13 fighters, amongst the best. But there are certain
14 capabilities that simply take years and years to develop,
15 and they have not achieved a level of efficiency, in those
16 areas.

17 So I guess my question is, what areas do you think that
18 the Afghan military still needs the United States'
19 assistance to improve their capabilities and perhaps turn
20 this tactical situation around?

21 General Nicholson: Sir, I want to echo your sentiment
22 on the bravery and courage and fighting skill of the
23 individual Afghan soldiers. As you mentioned, sir, I have
24 had the opportunity to fight alongside them, and they are
25 very impressive.

1 As we have seen, as Senator Reed mentioned, this year
2 was a tough year for the Afghan security services. They
3 took many casualties, and this fighting has continued into
4 the winter.

5 What we are seeing is an Army that has a degree of
6 resiliency that has not broken. They continue to fight, and
7 they work hard to roll back any Taliban gains.

8 To your specific question, sir, you mentioned some of
9 them. Intelligence is, certainly, a key capability. The
10 provision of air support; rotary-wing aviation and fixed-
11 wing aviation, as you mentioned, takes some years to build.
12 The growth of midlevel leaders at the small-unit level where
13 tactics matter and where we combine arms is extremely
14 important. The use of indirect fire and fire support is
15 extremely important. And perhaps one of the most critical
16 is their casualty treatment and evacuation.

17 Although we have seen improvements, steady growth in
18 all of these areas, as you mentioned, in some areas, we have
19 years to go, in particular, the aviation area.

20 Chairman McCain: As we all know, one of the biggest
21 problems has been the sanctuary, particularly for the
22 Haqqani network, particularly the involvement of the ISI in
23 Pakistan, which, in many cases, has been supporting the
24 Haqqani network. And yet, the Chief of Staff of the
25 Pakistani Army, those of us who have met him are very

1 impressed with him.

2 Have you seen any progress in this whole problem with
3 sanctuary for the Taliban in Pakistan? And how serious do
4 you view that problem as it is today?

5 General Nicholson: I view it as a serious problem.
6 And this has been one of the principal challenges, as you
7 well know from your many visits to theater over the years.
8 It is a sanctuary that our enemies, in particular the
9 Haqqani network, have enjoyed inside Pakistan.

10 At various times, I have seen over my years there
11 different efforts and different offenses in different parts
12 of the tribal areas. And I note that the Pakistanis have
13 also suffered significant casualties in the tens of
14 thousands in the terms of their security forces and their
15 civilians, most recently, these horrendous attacks on
16 schools that have occurred inside Pakistan.

17 Yet at the same time, sir, I concur, we have not been
18 satisfied that there is adequate pressure put on the
19 Haqqanis. The recent operations in North Waziristan have
20 helped, as well as their stationing of additional regular
21 PAKMIL soldiers in the tribal areas have helped.

22 Some of this has pushed some fighters into Afghanistan,
23 which has contributed perhaps somewhat -- for example, in
24 Nangarhar, some of the issues there.

25 So it is a mixed story, sir. And it is one that

1 requires continuous engagement with the Pakistan military
2 and with General Raheel Sharif, and continuous engagement at
3 the operational and tactical levels. And increasingly, of
4 course, we want to encourage the Afghan and the Pakistan
5 military forces to work more closely together against their
6 common enemies.

7 Chairman McCain: Senator Reed?

8 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And
9 let me thank you for holding this hearing in such a
10 expeditious fashion, because it is so important to have the
11 continuity of command with General Campbell and General
12 Nicholson for several reasons.

13 One is that we both have made it clear that your
14 recommendation based on the condition on the ground is
15 central to any decision. But that recommendation is going
16 to have to be made essentially in the early spring, because
17 of the dynamics of changing forces, closing locations, et
18 cetera.

19 Can you give us an idea of when you estimate you will
20 be compelled to make a recommendation?

21 General Nicholson: Sir, I think after the initial 90
22 days, I will have a good sense of where we are, building on
23 the experience we have, and, if confirmed, sir, the chance
24 to do some more thorough discussions with General Campbell
25 and with the team on the ground.

1 Senator Reed: And so we really should be looking at a
2 decision period in the middle of this year. We do not have
3 the luxury of December 31 of December 15 or December 1.
4 This decision has to be made early enough so that you can
5 take operational responsibility for the decision. Is that
6 correct?

7 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. General Campbell has
8 mentioned his intention to hold the 9,800 through the
9 majority of the year, and then in the latter part of the
10 year, to begin the drawdown. I support that approach.

11 But as you point out, Senator, these decisions take
12 time. Even if a drawdown is going to occur late in the
13 year, we need to start setting the conditions for that
14 earlier.

15 So yes, sir, I agree with your assessment. We would
16 need to have this discussion sooner rather than later.

17 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, General.

18 One of the other consequences of the various moving
19 pieces is the fact that ISKP, the Islamic State, is actually
20 sort of firmly trying to root itself into eastern
21 Afghanistan with external support. The Pakistan military is
22 forcing terrorists into that part of the country.

23 And just to follow up on Senator McCain's point about
24 General Raheel Sharif, who is a very distinguished chief, he
25 has announced his resignation, which I think that is

1 correct. Is that correct?

2 General Nicholson: Sir, as I understand, his normal
3 tour of duty would end this fall in November, I believe.
4 And as I understand from the open source media, he has
5 announced his intention to depart at the end of his normal
6 tour of duty. Yes, sir.

7 Senator Reed: That could be another dynamic, but let
8 us put that aside for a moment.

9 The counterterrorism mission seems to have expanded.
10 If nothing else has changed, then an argument for capacity
11 in Afghanistan would be simply the fact that there are many
12 more Al Qaeda, Pakistan Taliban, Haqqani in your area of
13 operation. Is that a fair assessment?

14 General Nicholson: Sir, I think it is fair to say. As
15 you said in your opening statement, sir, the presence of
16 ISKP, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, in southeast
17 Nangarhar, the presence of Al Qaeda in the Indian
18 Subcontinent, AQIS, inside the Shorabak District of
19 Kandahar, both of these are clear attempts by transnational
20 terrorist organizations to establish sanctuary inside
21 Afghanistan. Yes, sir.

22 Senator Reed: And the responsibility to go after those
23 forces in Afghanistan is your responsibility, as the
24 commander of operations there?

25 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

1 Senator Reed: There is another aspect of this, too,
2 and that is that you wear a couple of hats there with your
3 NATO situation. My sense -- and again, if you could give us
4 some insight -- is that their commitment, our allies, will
5 be calibrated based on our commitment. So the sooner we
6 make a decision, it will be at least clearer to them what
7 they must do and what they will do. Is that accurate also?

8 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

9 Senator Reed: Again, your service throughout has been
10 extraordinary. There are very few people who have been
11 proposed for a mission that have actually spent years from
12 -- I think it was 2007, the first time you deployed there,
13 all the way up, learning as we all do, through trial and
14 error and experience. So I think, again, you are superbly
15 prepared to assume this responsibility. Thank you very
16 much.

17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Chairman McCain: Senator Ayotte?

19 Senator Ayotte: Thank you, General, for your
20 distinguished service and willingness to serve in this
21 important position, and to your family as well.

22 I wanted to ask, based on the administration's
23 announcement that, in fact, they will reduce the number of
24 troops in Afghanistan to 5,500 by January 1, 2017, you named
25 a number of areas where the Afghan forces still have some

1 significant challenges. I just looked at your list. I saw
2 intelligence, air support, midlevel leaders, fire support,
3 casualty treatment.

4 Given that we have made this announcement, I want to
5 understand, what is the military rationale for reducing our
6 force posture by 44 percent and announcing that a year in
7 advance? And also, what is it that we will not be able to
8 do when we go down to 5,500, because one of the discussions
9 we previously had with your predecessor, General Campbell,
10 when there was a discussion about essentially bringing us
11 down to an embassy presence, what is it that we will be able
12 to do with 5,500 beyond an embassy presence?

13 So if you can help us understand the military rationale
14 and what risks we are taking on by going down to 5,500, I
15 think it is important for us to understand that.

16 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

17 Senator, the two core missions, as you know, for
18 operation Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, for
19 U.S. Forces Afghanistan, counterterrorism and train, advise,
20 assist to the Afghans and then for allies; and Resolute
21 Support, train, advising and assisting.

22 First, I would like to express great appreciation for
23 the financial support from this Congress for this effort,
24 because without that, we would not be able to man, equip,
25 train, and field this organization. Our allies also

1 contribute, as you know, €1 billion, and the Afghans
2 contribute some as well.

3 So these two core missions -- counterterrorism and
4 train, advise, assist -- are the ones against which then,
5 from a military perspective, and offering my military advice
6 on how to accomplish that policy, as the chairman mentioned
7 earlier, I view it incumbent on me, as I am sure General
8 Campbell has, to estimate for our political leadership the
9 necessary capability to accomplish those two missions.

10 Now, having not participated in this decision, it is
11 difficult for me, although I am happy to come back to you
12 later with the exact rationale on these numbers. What I
13 would say is we need both of those capabilities, definitely.
14 What I would like to be able to do in my first 90 days is
15 take a relook at that, what is necessary, what amount of
16 capability is necessary, given the current conditions.

17 Senator Ayotte: What worries me, and what I think we
18 need to understand, is what risk we are taking on, because
19 this has been a constant kabuki dance where the
20 administration announces we are going to withdraw to this
21 point, telling our enemies, by the way, here are the numbers
22 and here is what you can expect from the United States. I
23 am very glad that they backed off from their sole embassy
24 presence, which is where we were supposed to be.

25 But this is very important, because we cannot afford to

1 take on risks that allow, obviously, the safe haven again
2 for Al Qaeda, now with ISIS engagement. And to me, we do
3 need you to tell us just very clear-eyed when we go to 5,500
4 what our capabilities then, because it seems to me that
5 obviously force protection always being our number one
6 priority for our own men and women, 5,500 is a pretty small
7 number given a CT mission and a support mission for the
8 Afghan forces, given the list that you have even given to
9 this committee already for their capabilities that they are
10 still lacking in some ways.

11 General Nicholson: Senator, I share your concerns. I
12 would ask your indulgence in being able to come back to you
13 once I have had a chance to get on the ground and do a
14 detailed assessment of this, to really give you the answers
15 you are looking for.

16 Of course, as we mentioned earlier, this will be based
17 on conditions. So to mention a couple conditions that have
18 been perhaps different in 2015, one, as we heard earlier,
19 the attempt by the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent to
20 establish a fairly large training base inside Southeast
21 Kandahar, the attempt by ISKP to establish a sanctuary
22 inside Nangarhar. These are changes to the conditions that
23 I will need, if confirmed, to take a look at to determine if
24 we have the right level of CT capability to deal with that.

25 Senator Ayotte: We appreciate that. It is very

1 important.

2 I also wanted to follow up very quickly, last week, in
3 the Readiness Subcommittee, I held a hearing on the Task
4 Force on Business and Stability Operations. This Congress
5 allocated \$800 million and roughly \$650 million of it was
6 spent. I cannot account for it. The SIGAR has done an
7 investigation -- \$150 million on villas where they could
8 have potentially stayed on base. Literally, we are trying
9 to track down how much money was spent on an ice cream
10 business, carpeting, jewelry, a compressed natural gas
11 station that appears to have cost much more than it should.

12 So bottom line is that I hope you will follow up on
13 this, because if you think about what we could do with \$800
14 million to support our men and women in uniform, you think
15 about the equipment, the training, their preparation and
16 readiness, we cannot afford to continue to waste money like
17 this in Afghanistan. I hope you will take this as one of
18 your responsibilities very seriously as well.

19 General Nicholson: Absolutely, Senator.

20 Senator Ayotte: Thank you very much.

21 Chairman McCain: Senator Heinrich?

22 Senator Heinrich: Thank you, Chairman.

23 Welcome, General Nicholson. I want to thank you for
24 your willingness to serve.

25 How long have we been in the train and equip mission

1 for ANSF forces in Afghanistan now?

2 General Nicholson: Sir, our first Afghan Candac was
3 created early in the 2002, 2003 period. However, the real
4 effort, a fully resourced counterinsurgency campaign that
5 was adopted with President Obama's policy decision in 2009,
6 is when we really made heavy, heavy investments in the
7 military and the police and the air. Frankly, we started
8 late with the air component, and that is going to take a
9 little longer.

10 Senator Heinrich: So 14 years, overall, but 7 properly
11 resourced and focused.

12 What do you see as the pathway to military
13 sustainability? Not the financial piece, but just in terms
14 of performance, what do you see as the pathway to self-
15 sustainability for the ANSF?

16 General Nicholson: Sir, a couple points there. First
17 is that we are working very hard at the institutional level.
18 So whereas the Afghans fight extremely well at the tactical
19 level -- I mean, they are born fighters. But once you get
20 up to the systems that have to sustain that force --
21 recruit, train, equip, maintain, the pay system, et cetera
22 -- this is where we really have had to create institutions
23 from the ground up.

24 So our focus right now is at the institutional level
25 and the corps level with train, advise, assist. So that

1 will take some time, sir.

2 Senator Heinrich: "Some time," I mean, obviously, we
3 have been at this a while. So what does "some time" mean?

4 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. Sir, again, I would like
5 to give you the kind of answer you deserve here, sir, and
6 need, because, again, we greatly appreciate the resources
7 Congress has provided for this. I would like to get on the
8 ground and analyze each of these eight areas that we are
9 focused on and then be able to come back with something a
10 little more concrete.

11 I can tell you though, sir, again, the air piece will
12 take a little longer for a number of reasons, and some of
13 these other enabling systems.

14 As far as the end state, you mentioned this, sir, what
15 we are looking for. So this is Afghanistan. There will
16 always be some level of violence in Afghanistan. So from my
17 perspective, the ability of the security forces to maintain
18 that level of violence and, for their part, prevent the
19 reemergence of these sanctuaries, and with our help on the
20 CT side, this is really the standard we are looking for. We
21 are not trying to create a Western-style society here.

22 Senator Heinrich: I understand.

23 General Nicholson: We are looking at an adequate level
24 of security to prevent the reemergence of transnational
25 terrorist threats.

1 Senator Heinrich: You mentioned, I think we contribute
2 about \$4 billion a year to this effort. You mentioned €1
3 billion contribution from the EU. Of the total cost of this
4 effort, how much is borne by Afghanistan, on a percentage
5 basis?

6 General Nicholson: Sir, as I understand it, currently,
7 it is about \$500 million. So \$3.5 billion from the U.S., €1
8 billion from other contributors, and then about \$500
9 million, with an objective, of course, of that increasing
10 over time.

11 Senator Heinrich: Do you see any pathway to ever
12 reaching sustainability, from a financial point of view?

13 General Nicholson: Sir, there would be two ways that
14 would occur. One, of course, is the economic development of
15 Afghanistan, and President Ghani has a number of thoughts
16 about that and has initiated that in many respects. Of
17 course, the second way is ultimately to reduce the size of
18 the security services. This has been discussed previously.
19 The challenge there, of course, are the conditions on the
20 ground right now do not merit a reduction.

21 Senator Heinrich: Right. So I am going to change
22 gears a little bit here.

23 When I was in the Kandahar area a number of years ago,
24 one of the things I found very interesting was that people
25 did not want to commit to the kind of farming that produced

1 crops that were unstable. In other words, if you grew
2 melons or anything else that when you got to the border
3 checkpoint, somebody could tell you that if you do not pay a
4 bribe, you are just going to have to sit and wait a few days
5 while your produce rots. So people would invest in things
6 that were stable, and that included opium as well as other
7 more legitimate crops like raisins, which they knew could
8 not be subject to that kind of corruption.

9 What are your thoughts, given your experience in
10 Afghanistan, as to how we get a handle on what is probably a
11 \$22 billion opium trade at this point?

12 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. As you mentioned, of
13 course, the military is in a supporting capacity when it
14 comes to counternarcotics policy to other agencies of the
15 government and the international community.

16 Senator Heinrich: And I am not asking for a military
17 answer. What can we do, what should we be doing, not
18 necessarily asking you to solve the problem.

19 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. Sir, you visited
20 Kandahar. As you know, this used to be the breadbasket not
21 only of Afghanistan but the entire region. So when you look
22 at initiatives like the Silk Road Initiative or TAPI, these
23 are long-term initiatives. Much of the work that has been
24 done by USAID in Kandahar, in particular, and DFID, the
25 British development agency, and other agencies like the

1 Asian Development Bank and others, there has been
2 significant investment in the value chains for many of these
3 products that you mentioned.

4 The challenge, of course, they face is that they may be
5 able to grow the melons but they do not have refrigeration
6 or they do not have these other things. Of course, the
7 value chain rests on infrastructure, power, water, roads.
8 So these have all been the subject of intense effort and
9 investment by the international community for years.

10 So ideally, at some point, they are able to return to
11 that. But in this current environment of conflict, it is
12 extremely difficult for these farmers, as you saw when you
13 were there, sir. These people are very hardworking. They
14 are willing. They accept hardship with a dignity and grace
15 that we in the West find very admirable, and we should.

16 But at the end of the day, they have to survive. So I
17 think they fall back on, as you just articulated, these
18 things they know work. So the production of opium and then
19 being paid in advance at the farm gate for their product as
20 opposed to trying to take it to market over a dangerous
21 route that may not work, these are the choices they make.
22 And these are choices to survive.

23 So until we can create a stable enough environment for
24 some of these economic development initiatives to take hold,
25 I think we are going to have this problem for some time to

1 come.

2 Senator Heinrich: I apologize, Mr. Chair, for going
3 over my time.

4 Chairman McCain: Senator Ernst?

5 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 And thank you, Lieutenant General, for your great
7 service to our country, especially the time you spent in the
8 75th Ranger Regiment.

9 I also want to thank your family as well for being here
10 today. It is great to see that you have such a great
11 support group. So thank you very much.

12 I am glad that Senator Ayotte really drilled into the
13 numbers situation. I would like to take that just a little
14 bit further, because we do talk about decreasing troop
15 strength in Afghanistan, and I would like your feelings on
16 that, because I think this administration continues to set
17 up our service members for failure, to be honest.

18 You stated that you do not believe that the situation
19 is getting better in Afghanistan with the current troop
20 strength, the current missions that we have. So what I want
21 to know is, then, your feelings, if that is the case, then
22 does it make sense even to keep the troop strength at
23 current numbers? What would you do differently? Do we need
24 to increase troop strength and take on additional missions?
25 Or do we need to decrease troop strength and withdraw

1 completely? What is that magic number?

2 I know you probably do not have an answer today, but I
3 am sure you have thought about this. We cannot keep on
4 keeping on with what we are doing right now and expect
5 things to get better.

6 So I would like some feedback on where you think our
7 troop strength needs to be, what our missions need to be,
8 where we go from here to make things better.

9 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, for that
10 question and for your support of this effort.

11 First off, I would say, we have not been attacked in
12 our homeland from Afghanistan for 15 years. That success is
13 worthy of continued investment to prevent that from
14 happening again. As recently as this year, in the 15th year
15 of the war, we see a dogged determination of our enemies to
16 attempt to reestablish sanctuary inside Afghanistan. We
17 see, even with a transition in the Taliban leadership, very
18 quickly al-Zawahiri of Al Qaeda pledged allegiance and
19 support for Mullah Mansour, the new head of the Taliban. So
20 we see a continued connection between Al Qaeda and the
21 Taliban.

22 We see the efforts of the Pakistanis force some of
23 these terrorists to the other side of the border, former
24 members of the TTP. We have members of other terrorist
25 organizations that have joined together to form ISKP, so we

1 see their attempt to get in there.

2 So back to our first principle, preventing an attack on
3 the homeland, we still see attempts by terrorist
4 organizations to get into Afghanistan, and we see linkages
5 between them and the Taliban. So this, again, as a first
6 principle, requires our continued focus and effort.

7 So then the question in my mind, then, is what level of
8 investment is necessary to accomplish the CT mission. So to
9 avoid us having our own combat troops there, in an endless
10 sense, you need to develop their indigenous capabilities.
11 So a 352,000 soldier policeman security force, we think that
12 number is still right. That is the right number.

13 As I mentioned before, original projections for a
14 drawdown have to be looked at, in terms of when that would
15 occur. But then we need to get this force, of course, to a
16 level to be able to prevent the reemergence of sanctuaries.
17 That means preventing the Taliban from taking over areas.
18 Because of the connection we see, they could potentially
19 invite Al Qaeda back in. So this means train, advise,
20 assist is important.

21 So the two critical parts of our policy --
22 counterterrorism and train, advise, assist -- in my military
23 opinion, are the correct ones.

24 The issue, as we discussed, is what capability in each
25 of those areas do we need going forward. So I would not

1 advocate, ma'am, for a change to the policy. My role, of
2 course, is to deliver how to execute the policy militarily.
3 I think those two components are necessary. And now, once
4 we have a chance to do the assessment and see, given the
5 emergence of ISKP, given Al Qaeda presence in the region, do
6 we have the right-sized CT force?

7 And then on the train, advise, assist part, do we have
8 the right-sized advisory force. The only thing I would
9 mention there are a couple considerations I look at. What
10 level do we need to advise at, down to what level? Right
11 now, we are at the corps level and at the institutional
12 level. And then, what capabilities do we need to help them
13 with as we build their capabilities? I hope that answers
14 your questions.

15 Senator Ernst: Yes, you did, General. And thank you
16 so much.

17 I think the first point that you made, stating that we
18 have not had an attack on our homeland anything the scale we
19 have seen since 9/11, I think that is a very important point
20 for those who state we just simply need to pull out. I
21 think we are disrupting our adversaries' activities in that
22 area.

23 So I thank you for making that point quite loud and
24 clear. I think we should focus a little more on
25 counterterrorism. If that means additional troops, then we

1 do that. But we need to protect our homeland, as well as
2 make sure we are moving in the right direction in
3 Afghanistan as well.

4 So, again, thank you so much for your service, and
5 thank you to the members of your family for joining you
6 today.

7 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

8 Chairman McCain: Senator Cotton?

9 Senator Cotton: General Nicholson, thank you for being
10 here today. Thank you for your service, and congratulations
11 on this nomination.

12 Thank you as well to your family, who is here with you
13 today, in two regards. One, while in my experience veterans
14 of combat are the last people who want to go off into combat
15 again, they are also the first to do their duty, and family
16 members often have to stay behind at home and wonder if they
17 are safe. So thank you for many years of doing that, as a
18 representative of all the family members in our Armed
19 Forces. And second, multigeneration, multimember family of
20 our armed services, which is a reminder that a very small
21 percentage of Americans currently shoulder the load of our
22 Armed Forces. When you look at the number of multiple
23 family members who do so, it is even smaller, often from
24 places like Arkansas or Arizona or Iowa. So we appreciate
25 your family's decorated service.

1 So you are going to be replacing General John Campbell,
2 who is a former commanding general of the 101st Airborne.
3 Looking through your bio here, and looking at your right
4 pocket there, I see lots of service at the 82nd Airborne,
5 but I see no service at the 101st. Is that correct?

6 General Nicholson: I did wear the 101st on my right
7 and left shoulders when I was in RC-South in Afghanistan,
8 but I have not served at Fort Campbell, Senator.

9 Senator Cotton: I hope you can overcome this
10 deficiency in your background. I trust that our committee
11 members will see fit to confirm an all-American,
12 particularly if you can get some Screaming Eagles on your
13 team in Afghanistan.

14 But in seriousness, I want to associate myself with the
15 comments and questions of Senator McCain, Senator Ayotte,
16 and Senator Ernst. I also want to raise another Screaming
17 Eagle, General David Petraeus.

18 I would assume that you have worked with him on
19 occasion, perhaps even in Afghanistan. Do you view David
20 Petraeus as a source of trusted counsel and insight into
21 current operations in Afghanistan?

22 General Nicholson: Yes, I do, Senator. I worked for
23 General Petraeus in Afghanistan as his Deputy Commanding
24 General for Operations.

25 Senator Cotton: Are you aware of an article he wrote

1 with Michael O'Hanlon in the Washington Post 2 weeks ago
2 called, "It's time to unleash America's airpower in
3 Afghanistan"?

4 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. I have seen that.

5 Senator Cotton: I just would like to quote here from
6 what General Petraeus wrote: At present, U.S. and NATO
7 airpower in Afghanistan is used only to, one, attack
8 validated al-Qaeda targets; two, to counter specific
9 individuals or groups who have attacked coalition forces
10 previously; and three, to respond directly to attacks on
11 coalition forces. According to leaders on the ground, U.S.
12 and NATO forces are otherwise not allowed to attack Taliban
13 targets.

14 General Petraeus goes on to cite that there were only
15 400 sorties last year, which is a fall of almost two-thirds
16 since 2014, and a fall of more than 2,000 sorties since
17 2010.

18 Do you agree with his advice that it is time to unleash
19 American airpower in Afghanistan? And if so, what would
20 that look like?

21 General Nicholson: Thanks for that question, Senator.

22 And, of course, President Ghani has asked for help in
23 bridging the CAS gap. As you know, Senator, we have a long-
24 range plan. But the challenge is right now we have a
25 shortfall in Afghan airpower. They are our principal force

1 combating the Taliban. We focus on force protection and CT,
2 so hence the gap.

3 I just wanted to take a second to explain why we have a
4 gap. And then, eventually, as the Afghan Air Force and Army
5 aviation is trained, they will be able to fill that gap.

6 So in the interim, then, the question is what to do. I
7 know I have not had the opportunity to talk to General
8 Campbell about this specific issue, but I know he has
9 thoughts on this and he has made some recommendations.
10 There is a conversation going on inside the Department of
11 Defense right now about some of his thoughts on this and
12 other subjects in 2015, looking ahead to 2016.

13 At this point, I am not confirmed. I do not want to
14 insert myself into his dialogue with his chain of command.
15 But I look forward to doing my own assessment when I get on
16 the ground, because filling this gap is important, in order
17 to enable these brave Afghan soldiers to take the fight to
18 the Taliban.

19 So I agree that we need to address this gap, as
20 President Ghani has requested and as General Petraeus has
21 highlighted.

22 Senator Cotton: Thank you. Given how decisive an
23 advantage American airpower provides us, as well as
24 President Ghani's comments, I hope you will take a closer
25 look at that.

1 A related topic that David Petraeus also wrote about in
2 that op-ed is that some administration lawyers harbor
3 concerns that the Authorization for the Use of Military
4 Force approved soon after 9/11 does not extend to justify
5 the continued use of force against the Taliban.

6 Would you agree with that viewpoint?

7 General Nicholson: Sir, I believe the point they are
8 expressing is that we are no longer engaged in direct action
9 against the Taliban, and that was also partly a policy
10 decision. Not getting into a rules of engagement discussion
11 in open forum, sir, but we believe we have adequate
12 engagement authority to engage anyone who threatens U.S.
13 Forces.

14 I think there is a policy question of who engages the
15 Taliban, and back to your earlier question, do we use U.S.
16 airpower, coalition airpower, against the Taliban or do we
17 let the Afghans handle it. I think this is the issue.

18 So in a way, sir, I believe this is related to your
19 first point about addressing the threat posed by the
20 Taliban, given the intensity with which the Taliban came at
21 the ANSF at this year.

22 Senator Cotton: Thank you. My time has expired.

23 Chairman McCain: Senator Donnelly?

24 Senator Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 And I want to thank you for assuming this

1 responsibility.

2 And to all your family, to your Uncle Jim, who served
3 as the Veteran Secretary when I was in the House, thank you
4 very much for everything you did for our veterans during
5 that time.

6 I guess the question is, what is our goal when you go
7 to Afghanistan? Is it to make sure the Taliban does not get
8 another foot of ground? If it is, what do you really need
9 to do to accomplish that, because if we have troops there
10 that are not enough to get the mission done, then does it
11 not just make it more dangerous for the troops that are
12 there?

13 So what is the goal, as you see it, when you go there?

14 General Nicholson: Sir, our policy, and I agree with
15 this, is, first and foremost, counterterrorism, to prevent
16 another attack on the U.S. homeland that emanates from
17 Afghanistan, the number one mission. Number two, enable the
18 Afghans -- and we are doing that through what we call train,
19 advise, assist -- to be able to secure their own country
20 with financial support and advisory help from the coalition,
21 but enable them to secure their own country.

22 So this growth of Afghan capacity to secure their own
23 country would then lead to a point where the conditions
24 would warrant reduction in our presence. But to get to that
25 point requires us to continue to make an investment

1 financially and with the train, advise, assist. And going
2 forward, I think it would be prudent to maintain a
3 counterterrorist capability in this region and as part of a
4 global counterterrorist network. And our Afghan allies are
5 very willing and supportive partners in that effort.

6 Senator Donnelly: So in the last year, do you think we
7 moved the ball forward in Afghanistan or did it go
8 backwards?

9 General Nicholson: It is a great question, Senator. I
10 think the enemy, the Taliban, came at the ANSF more
11 intensely than perhaps we anticipated. Because of that, we
12 did not make the advances we projected, we thought we would
13 make, I believe.

14 Again, I say this not being confirmed and not having a
15 chance to get on the ground and talk to the commander. So I
16 would wish to caveat all that with that.

17 Senator Donnelly: I have the greatest respect in the
18 world for General Campbell, as I know everyone here does.

19 But one of the old sayings is plan for the worst and
20 hope for the best. So how do we plan for the worst scenario
21 in Afghanistan? What do we need to do? How do we make sure
22 the sacrifices that have been made do not get washed away?

23 General Nicholson: Sir, I believe we need to have an
24 adequate counterterrorist force in place, first and
25 foremost, back to job number one of preventing an attack.

1 So as we assess the potential growth of AQIS, we saw this
2 attempt by them to establish a fairly extensive training
3 base in southeast Kandahar, as we assess the attempt of ISKP
4 to get into Nangarhar, we then go back and look at the
5 adequacy of our CT capability to deal with that.

6 Then, secondly, we look at the challenges the Afghan
7 security forces faced in 2015 and see if that drives a need
8 to recalibrate the level of support we provide them in 2016.

9 Senator Donnelly: One of the things looking forward
10 is, when we look at troop levels -- and I know you said you
11 need to get on the ground there and start to get a better
12 handle on everything that is going on to figure that out,
13 and I trust you will -- but we desperately need you to let
14 us know what you really need.

15 If it is 10,000 that is needed to be effective, then
16 tell us it is 10,000. If it is 5,000, tell us it is 5,000.
17 But I cannot think of a worse scenario than to need 10,000
18 and to have 5,000 and to try to, in effect, almost be like
19 somebody who is trying to paint four walls of the room at
20 the same time with one paintbrush.

21 If we do not have enough there, it is just going to
22 make it worse and worse and worse. So what we do not want
23 to do is go backwards.

24 And if it is 12,000, or 13,000, or 14,000, just let us
25 know, because, the day you get there, you do not control

1 exactly how many you need, meaning they may want to shoe you
2 into a 5,000 number. But if the number is 14,000, then the
3 number is 14,000. I mean, we cannot make a peach an orange.

4 So we really need to hear unvarnished exactly what the
5 situation is and exactly what you need to have success.

6 General Nicholson: Senator, thanks for that
7 encouragement and thanks for your indulgence, and discussing
8 with the chairman and ranking member, on giving me the
9 opportunity to do an assessment on the ground. And the
10 message has come across loud and clear from every member of
11 this committee that you really are looking for that best
12 military advice. I greatly appreciate that, and I will
13 provide that.

14 Senator Donnelly: Well, we appreciate your service in
15 taking on this mission. We wish you Godspeed. Just let us
16 know what you need.

17 Thank you.

18 Chairman McCain: General, we also would like to know
19 what missions need to be accomplished that the Afghans
20 cannot, and then come up with a number. It seems to me that
21 one of the mistakes that we have made in the past is
22 dictating a number rather than assessing what missions need
23 to be accomplished and then arriving at a number.

24 Arbitrary statements made by the President of the
25 United States that we will be down to a certain number by a

1 certain date is not dictated by mission requirements or
2 anything else that members of this committee could
3 ascertain.

4 So I know you will be looking at it from a mission
5 requirements standpoint rather than giving us an arbitrary
6 number. So when you come back before us, I hope you will
7 tell us what needs to be accomplished by American troop
8 presence, and then the determination of what numbers it
9 requires to fulfill those missions.

10 Senator Sullivan?

11 Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 General, like my colleagues, I would like to
13 congratulate you for the nomination and your service, and
14 the service of your family. We know what a sacrifice it is
15 for you and especially your family.

16 On this committee, we hear a lot about counterterrorism
17 missions, and we sometimes hear about counterinsurgency
18 missions, so the CT versus the COIN approach. I think
19 sometimes it confuses people. I think it sometimes confuses
20 the American people.

21 Can you explain to us how you see the different
22 missions? How do you define the CT mission? How do you
23 define the COIN mission? And then what are the troop levels
24 that we need, from your perspective, in Afghanistan to
25 accomplish either/or?

1 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, for that
2 question.

3 On the CT mission, the counterterrorist mission in
4 Afghanistan, as you know, for many years, we had a
5 comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy. This was part of
6 President Obama's policy announcement in 2009. Then as we
7 transitioned to Resolute Support in 2014, we transitioned
8 to, from a U.S. perspective, a counterterrorist mission and
9 then a train, advise, assist --

10 Senator Sullivan: So we are done with the COIN mission
11 in Afghanistan right now?

12 General Nicholson: Sir, the Afghan's strategy is a
13 COIN strategy -- enabled, train, advise, assist by us.

14 Senator Sullivan: That is part of our COIN strategy?

15 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. They are the lead, the
16 Afghans are the lead for the COIN, not us any longer, sir.
17 So this is why we have been able to reduce to a train,
18 advise, assist capacity.

19 Senator Sullivan: Can you just define the CT mission?
20 What is it? What does it mean when you say we have a
21 counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan?

22 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. The counterterrorist
23 forces, identify and destroy the terrorist networks that
24 threaten our homeland.

25 Senator Sullivan: Is that solely Al Qaeda? Is that

1 ISIS? Is that the Haqqani network? Is that the Taliban?
2 Do we have a pecking order in which we are trying to
3 destroy?

4 General Nicholson: Sir, a really important
5 distinction. So we know Al Qaeda has been a part of our
6 national policy. They launched attacks on 9/11. They are
7 clearly a transnational terrorist threat we have to target.

8 Senator Sullivan: They are a number one CT mission in
9 Afghanistan.

10 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. And then we have seen
11 the emergence of the Islamic State in the Khorasan province.

12 Now, there have been some questions about what it means
13 to be operationally emergent, so if I could just take a
14 second and explain that in my words, sir.

15 We know the intention of IS. We have seen this in the
16 media. We have seen this globally. They have conducted
17 terrorist attacks. So we know they have the intention of
18 conducting terrorist attacks and have identified the United
19 States as a target.

20 What they do not possess in Afghanistan, or have not
21 until recently, is an operational capability to enable them
22 to act on that intention.

23 Senator Sullivan: So are we targeting ISIS forces as
24 part of our CT mission in Afghanistan?

25 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. As of December.

1 Senator Sullivan: Do we target the Haqqani network and
2 the Taliban as part of our CT mission?

3 General Nicholson: Sir, they are not part of that
4 designation right now.

5 Sir, I can talk to you in another forum about some of
6 this, but we know the Haqqanis, of course, are a number one
7 threat to our forces in Afghanistan. They have been a
8 severe threat to the Government of Afghanistan.

9 I appreciate what this body has done to focus on that
10 and to help the Pakistanis focus on that, so thank you for
11 that, Senator.

12 But the Haqqanis are principally a focus of the Afghan
13 security forces, the Taliban and the Haqqani network.

14 Senator Sullivan: Let me ask, you mentioned Pakistan,
15 I saw in your background, very distinguished background,
16 that you were the director of the Pakistan-Afghanistan
17 Coordination Cell. Whether it is going after Al Qaeda or
18 the Haqqani network or even Taliban forces, how do we defeat
19 these forces when there still remains a safe haven in
20 Pakistan for these forces that allows them to essentially
21 conduct missions against our troops or terrorism missions,
22 and then go back to their safe haven in Pakistan on the
23 Afghan-Pakistan border where we do not touch them? How do
24 we ever, ever complete our mission as long as there is a
25 substantial safe haven in the border region of Afghanistan

1 and Pakistan?

2 General Nicholson: Sir, you are correct. When an
3 enemy enjoys sanctuary like that, it is very difficult to
4 defeat them. So you have to enlist the support of the
5 nation -- in this case, Pakistan -- to go after those
6 sanctuaries. And then the other important piece is to build
7 up the defense capacity of the Afghans, so that they can
8 keep that level of violence down to a manageable level.

9 Senator Sullivan: Let me ask one final question, as I
10 am running out of time here.

11 But there is a debate that I am sure you are seeing
12 being played out. I would say kind of the bookends of it
13 are, on one hand you had President Obama coming in with his
14 strategy, very focused on an exit strategy, very focused on
15 ending wars, very focused on getting out. We saw how that
16 worked out in Iraq. Then you have on the other hand
17 generals like General Abizaid and others who have talked
18 about the long war and have talked about a generational
19 approach, more of a model of, hey, look, we have been
20 training forces for years, years in Afghanistan -- and I
21 would say, in my experience spending some time over there in
22 2005 and 2006, we were doing a lot of training back then.

23 We had a lot more troops on the ground to do training,
24 so I do not know if I believe this notion that we are doing
25 more training under President Obama than we were previously.

1 But how should we be thinking about this issue? I
2 noticed that Brigadier General Shoffner talked about a
3 generational approach recently, kind of the Korea model.

4 Is that how we should be thinking about this, versus an
5 exit strategy? These are very, very, very different
6 spectrums in terms of a strategy. One is get out and see
7 what happens. Another is stay, Germany, Korea,
8 generational.

9 How do we think about that? And how do you think about
10 that, more importantly?

11 General Nicholson: Senator, two points, and thanks for
12 the question.

13 Number one, in this age, the threat of transnational
14 terrorism is a legitimate concern. Because of all the
15 advances in technology and so forth, and as we saw in 9/11,
16 the ability of a small terrorist group with a sanctuary in
17 Afghanistan to reach out and affect us in America is real.
18 So this has changed, I believe, how we need to view these
19 types of missions, in terms of CT.

20 Secondly, I would say, the difference with Afghanistan,
21 we have a very willing and capable partner. They want us
22 there. They want to fight on their own behalf. I have
23 talked to many Afghans. I talked to an Afghan mother who
24 said she weeps more bitterly when a U.S. service member dies
25 because of all they have given up to come to her country and

1 fight on their behalf. I have heard the same thing from
2 Afghan soldiers. So they view it as a matter of pride to
3 defend themselves.

4 So when we have an ally like that, who needs some
5 assistance, to me, the investment in them, then, will pay
6 dividends in the future, because they are willing to do the
7 heavy lifting themselves.

8 So I think we do need to think about an enduring
9 commitment to the Afghans, as the President said in his
10 October announcement on the policy shift. We have an
11 enduring connection with Afghanistan that will sustain.

12 So the level of that, sir, is where I hope to provide
13 my best military advice on how to accomplish that policy,
14 and I appreciate the chance to come back to you and the
15 committee later with my assessment of that.

16 Senator Sullivan: Thank you.

17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Chairman McCain: Senator Blumenthal?

19 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

20 General Nicholson, thank you for being here. Thank you
21 for your extraordinary service to our Nation and for your
22 continuing service in the role that you are about to assume.

23 I have a question not so much about the flow of people
24 across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, but the flow of
25 bomb-making material, the components of IEDs that continue

1 to inflict casualties on our forces and our allies. Are you
2 satisfied, from what you know, with the efforts that the
3 Pakistanis are making against the factories and other
4 sources, whether it is fertilizer or other bomb-making
5 materials that go into the IEDs that inflict these kinds of
6 grave losses?

7 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, for raising
8 that issue.

9 The majority of the casualties in the Afghan police,
10 for example, are caused by IEDs, two-thirds. So this
11 remains a serious problem. As you know, many of the
12 casualties we suffered with our soldiers were caused by
13 IEDs.

14 The difficulty in dealing with this is the availability
15 of these components. You mentioned homemade explosives that
16 can be made from fertilizer that is produced globally, but
17 in Pakistan in significant amounts.

18 So, Senator, I would like to be able to come back to
19 you with a specific assessment. I did work this issue
20 specifically when I was in JIEDDO and in Afghanistan. I do
21 not have a current, up-to-date sense of where we are with
22 the Pakistanis, but I know this has been the subject of
23 intense effort on our part to reduce the flow of these
24 precursor materials across the border where they can be
25 assembled into bombs.

1 So if you are okay with that, Senator, I would like to
2 come back to you with a more detailed answer.

3 Senator Blumenthal: I would appreciate it. It has
4 been a subject of intense effort I know on your part, on all
5 of our part, and also a source of intense frustration often
6 because, as you have observed very correctly, the IEDs have
7 inflicted such massive and serious casualties on our own
8 troops and now on the Afghan police and their military. It
9 remains a source of frustration and concern to me, and I
10 know many of my colleagues, so I would appreciate that
11 greater information.

12 I want to ask a question about the general subject of
13 posttraumatic stress, known as posttraumatic stress
14 disorder, but I prefer to refer to it as posttraumatic
15 stress. I know it is a subject of concern to many of our
16 military leaders, rightfully so. Your assessment about
17 whether our Nation is doing enough about posttraumatic
18 stress, especially as a cause of suicide and other related
19 kinds of emotional health disorders?

20 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, for your
21 support of our soldiers, our service members in this area.

22 I will speak now as a former division commander, where
23 we dealt with this issue. One of the manifestations, as you
24 mentioned, sir, is suicide. So this is a terrible event in
25 the life not only of the family involved, but also in a

1 unit, because it is a member of the family.

2 What we found is because of the intense effort we put
3 into trying to understand the problem, there is an education
4 issue, and get leaders and peers and support networks more
5 engaged so they see the signs of an issue, and then the
6 ability to intervene and coaching people to intervene when
7 they need to help save a life, I think we are starting to
8 see positive results of this effort.

9 My own experience -- and again, this is anecdotal to
10 one division in the Army -- but our categories of suicides,
11 there were two, generally. One, there might be a trigger
12 event, and someone who otherwise seemed to not have any
13 issues like PTSD or anything, but a trigger event would
14 cause a reaction. In many cases, alcohol was involved. And
15 then they would make a bad decision with respect to suicide.

16 In the other half of the cases, there might have been a
17 history, a family history or an individual history. It
18 might have related to their experience in combat. It might
19 have been an issue that they had before they came into the
20 military. Those issues we had to work closely with our
21 medical professionals, respecting medical rules about
22 privacy, but also getting enough information so we
23 understood when someone was potentially in crisis.

24 So all of this adds up to greater awareness on the part
25 of leaders and leaders being more engaged. Where we see

1 that happen, then I think we really see a reduction in the
2 number of suicides.

3 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you for that very insightful
4 answer. I appreciate your work on that issue as well, and I
5 look forward to your continued service. And thank you very,
6 very much.

7 And I want to thank the chairman for his work on the
8 suicide issue. He and I worked on a bill called the Clay
9 Hunt veteran suicide prevention bill, which addressed some
10 of the manifestations that you have mentioned.

11 Thank you very much.

12 Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

13 Chairman McCain: Senator Tillis?

14 Senator Tillis: Good morning, General. Thank you for
15 being here.

16 And welcome to all the family members. You should be
17 very proud.

18 I also just want to say hello for the folks down at
19 Fort Bragg in Fayetteville who remember you fondly for the
20 time that you were down there. Hope you all had a good
21 time, and I hope it is on your shortlist, many, many years
22 from now when you retire.

23 But I have a couple questions. One, I met, with a
24 number of other members, with President Ghani when we were
25 in Afghanistan last year. He is working hard to address the

1 corruption issues within the government. There are a lot of
2 challenges there. I think he has made progress.

3 One of the things that he said that he is trying to
4 focus on are other things that will stabilize the country
5 long term, dealing with infrastructure projects and getting
6 out and gaining additional support from the population.

7 What role, if any, do we play in that?

8 General Nicholson: Sir, as General John Allen recently
9 pointed out, he viewed corruption as a number one problem
10 there. And Senator Cotton asked earlier about my time with
11 General Petraeus. We had an organization called Task Force
12 Shafafiyat, which was very focused on how we eliminate
13 corruption. We continue these efforts with our oversight of
14 how our dollars are spent.

15 We have a great partner in President Ghani. As you
16 pointed out, sir, he really is committed to this. So I
17 believe at the senior levels of the Afghan Government, we
18 see a genuine commitment to eliminate corruption.

19 Part of the way we get after this, if confirmed, in my
20 area of responsibility, would be through things like the pay
21 system where, instead of cash exchanging hands with all the
22 potential to be siphoned off, we pay soldiers through an
23 automated system where the soldier gets their full amount of
24 money. That is not universal yet in all of the Afghan
25 security forces, but that is one example.

1 I know when I get on the ground, sir, if confirmed, to
2 meet with our team that is working inside the ministries to
3 ensure that this oversight and accountability is improved,
4 we have some work to do there.

5 As you know, President Ghani pulled up contracting
6 authority to his level, because he was not satisfied that it
7 could be done without problems at a lower level. So this
8 was one of the encouraging measures. However, that has also
9 slowed down our ability to do contracting.

10 So this is an area I will be jumping into, sir, and we
11 will include this in the assessment that I will provide
12 back.

13 Senator Tillis: General, if I look ahead, and there is
14 no way I could do your job, but if I were looking ahead and
15 thinking about things I would be concerned with in your job,
16 I would like to know whether or not you are.

17 One going forward is the levels, and I think others
18 asked questions about your level of comfort with the current
19 troop reductions.

20 The other one relates to funding. It is my
21 understanding, I think in 2017, that the level of funding
22 that has been used to this point to reinvigorate Kabul and
23 to kind of get the economy back on track there, there is a
24 cliff out there, as I understand it, where there is not
25 necessarily a revenue stream that we have identified either

1 from the United States or from other partners. How does
2 that make your job more difficult, if that is not addressed
3 over the course of this year, because I believe economically
4 it starts hitting them 14 months out?

5 General Nicholson: Sir, you are exactly right. One of
6 the positive outcomes of a more stable environment provided
7 by the security forces is a chance for the economy to grow.
8 So that would be a problem, sir, absolutely.

9 If a viable economy takes hold -- and, of course, there
10 is great potential in Afghanistan for the extractive
11 industries and, of course, Afghanistan is a transit route
12 for the TAPI pipeline. I mentioned the Silk Road Initiative
13 before. If there were increased trade between the countries
14 of the region using Afghanistan for that, then all this
15 would contribute to an Afghan economy.

16 Part of the problem with migrants out of Afghanistan,
17 that we have seen, many of them end up in Europe, where I
18 now serve in NATO. There is a sense of, one, insecurity,
19 but also no work. So there are some economic issues
20 associated with migration.

21 Then when you couple that with the demographics of the
22 youth bulge in Afghanistan, you have many young people who
23 are looking for jobs. We have improved education. That is
24 a major plus. But increasingly educated young people now do
25 not have economic opportunity inside the country.

1 Senator Tillis: I just think that going forward it is
2 important for us -- we all have our concerns. I am not
3 going to ask questions that were asked earlier about troop
4 reductions and the strategy in country, but I think we also
5 have to open the aperture and take a look at other things
6 that are going on in terms of infrastructure build-out, the
7 economic impact of a lack of funding going forward, because
8 Afghanistan does not have an economy that can make up for
9 that now, and how that actually potentially threatens the
10 security of the region or the security of our men and women
11 who are over there.

12 Thank you.

13 Chairman McCain: Senator Graham?

14 Senator Graham: Thank you. I think the President
15 chose wisely. You will do a great job. You are very
16 Afghan-fluent. You have been over there long time.

17 And to your family, I know this is an honor and burden
18 all at the same time.

19 Would we fight for Kandahar? If there was an offensive
20 tomorrow or next week or next month where the Taliban were
21 able to generate forces to put Kandahar at risk, would we
22 sit on the sidelines like we did in Mosul? Or would you
23 recommend that we fight to keep Kandahar from falling into
24 the hands of the Taliban?

25 General Nicholson: Sir, we would need to prevent

1 Kandahar from falling.

2 Senator Graham: So your recommendation as the military
3 commander is we should use American boots on the ground,
4 combat power, to protect Kandahar, if it came to that?

5 General Nicholson: Sir, before that, I would look at
6 the authorities I would have and any --

7 Senator Graham: Not authorities, your recommendation.

8 Is Kandahar not the spiritual home of the Taliban?

9 General Nicholson: Absolutely, sir. Kandahar is
10 important.

11 Senator Graham: I just want the American people to
12 know that we are not going to let Iraq happen in
13 Afghanistan. If there is a sustained effort by the Taliban
14 to take a major city, we should not sit on the sidelines and
15 let that happen. That is not in our national security
16 interests, is it?

17 General Nicholson: I agree, sir.

18 Senator Graham: Thank you.

19 Counterterrorism. What is the likelihood of another
20 9/11 being generated from Afghanistan, if we went down to
21 1,000 troops in January 2017?

22 General Nicholson: Sir, I would be concerned that we
23 would not be able to perform our counterterrorist mission.

24 Senator Graham: Would you say it would be high?

25 General Nicholson: It would definitely be higher, sir.

1 Senator Graham: Okay. So if the counterterrorism
2 mission is one of the most important to the United States,
3 how many counterterrorism forces will we have in place under
4 the current plan in January 2017?

5 General Nicholson: Sir, I cannot answer that question
6 right now, but I will be happy to come back to you.

7 Senator Graham: Is there not a plan that envisions
8 going down to hundreds?

9 General Nicholson: Sir, the plan right now at the
10 5,000 would still include a significant counterterrorism --

11 Senator Graham: Would it be enough?

12 General Nicholson: That is what I would like to
13 assess, sir, because I am concerned --

14 Senator Graham: Sure. I know you are. You are a good
15 man. I know you want to protect the country.

16 Here is what I would like to do. I would like you to
17 present to the committee, if you could, if this is
18 appropriate, a counterterrorism footprint, given what you
19 see to be happening on the ground today and in the next 5
20 years, 10 years; marrying that up with the capability to
21 grow in the Afghan military; and have a small, medium,
22 large, low-, medium-, high-risk footprint. And let this
23 committee know, from a military point of view, how many
24 troops we would need to have a low threat. And as we go
25 below that number, what the threats are to our homeland.

1 Could you perform that for us?

2 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

3 Senator Graham: When it comes to ISIL, what are the
4 limitations on your fight against ISIL in Afghanistan?

5 General Nicholson: Sir, ISIL has been designated as a
6 terrorist organization. They can be engaged.

7 Senator Graham: Can you do independent operations
8 without going through the Afghan military?

9 General Nicholson: Sir, I am not sure of the
10 classification level of some of this. I can come back to
11 you in another forum.

12 Senator Graham: Okay. Would you agree with me, from a
13 national security point of view, we should be able to
14 independently operate against ISIL in Afghanistan?

15 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

16 Senator Graham: From a national security point of
17 view, we should be able to capture somebody who is an ISIL
18 fighter and put them in American detention for intelligence-
19 gathering purposes?

20 General Nicholson: Sir, again, a little bit out of my
21 area, in terms of detention.

22 Senator Graham: Okay. I just want to make sure that
23 we can fight ISIL as effectively as required in Afghanistan.

24 How did ISIL come about in Afghanistan? How were they
25 able to get there?

1 General Nicholson: Sir, as I understand, a couple
2 factors, one, the pressure put by the Pakistanis on their
3 side of the border as part of the recent offensive
4 operations forced some fighters into Nangarhar Province.
5 Some of these are from the TTP. They aligned with the
6 Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as well as, again, some ISIL
7 facilitators formed a group and began to grow. They did not
8 have much operational capability initially. There were
9 linkages definitely back to Syria with this group. And now
10 they have gotten to a point where they do have operational
11 capabilities.

12 The area they have embedded themselves --

13 Senator Graham: Is there a command and control
14 component from Syria to Afghanistan?

15 General Nicholson: That I am not sure of, sir. I
16 would have to come back on that.

17 Senator Graham: That would be something we want to
18 know.

19 General Nicholson: There is communication.

20 Senator Graham: Okay. So I just want to put
21 Afghanistan in perspective.

22 Do you agree with me, of all the places on the map
23 right now, that this is the place where we were attacked
24 from 9/11, it is important that we be seen to have won in
25 Afghanistan, and that we are going to be judged not by the

1 day we leave but what we left behind in terms of our
2 national security interests? Can you describe what winning
3 would look like in Afghanistan and how close are we to it?

4 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. Number one, there are no
5 more terrorist attacks that emanate from Afghanistan that
6 affect our homeland, number one. Number two, the Afghans
7 have a level of security capability that enables them to
8 secure themselves with our continued assistance.

9 Senator Graham: How close are we to achieving those
10 goals?

11 General Nicholson: Sir, I would like to get on the
12 ground and do my assessment. Then I can give you a better
13 answer.

14 Chairman McCain: Well, General, we thank you for your
15 testimony. There may be some written questions submitted by
16 members of the committee to you. We will try to expedite
17 that and ask our members to get those in as quickly as
18 possible.

19 We would like to get your nomination to the floor by
20 early next week. But we also want all members to have the
21 ability to ask any questions that they might have.

22 [The information referred to follows:]

23 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

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1 Chairman McCain: I can only speak for myself, but I
2 believe that you are eminently qualified. I believe that we
3 are in a crisis situation there, given the increases in the
4 conflict that we have seen; the presence of ISIS, as Senator
5 Graham just pointed out; and other aspects of the situation,
6 which are, indeed, disturbing.

7 Due to your previous time there, you know that we have
8 made an enormous sacrifice there, and it would be really
9 shameful for us to lose this conflict because we are not
10 addressing it adequately.

11 So we thank you. We thank your family for their
12 service. And we will look forward to your return in some
13 months from now, after your confirmation, so you can give us
14 your assessment. In fact, the earlier, the better, so you
15 can give us your assessment of the situation on the ground.

16 Senator Reed?

17 Senator Reed: Well, Mr. Chairman, I concur entirely
18 with your summation. I think the general is superbly
19 qualified. We look forward to your report, as soon as you
20 get on the ground and get back.

21 I thank the chairman for being so polite, given the
22 overwhelming number of West Pointers here today. So thank
23 you, Mr. Chairman.

24 Chairman McCain: I am getting much kinder in my
25 declining years. Thank you.

1 This hearing is adjourned.

2 [Whereupon, at 11:04 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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