

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING TO CONSIDER THE NOMINATIONS OF:
GENERAL JOSEPH L. VOTEL, USA, FOR REAPPOINTMENT
TO THE GRADE OF GENERAL AND TO BE COMMANDER,
UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND; AND LIEUTENANT
GENERAL RAYMOND A. THOMAS III, USA, TO BE
GENERAL AND COMMANDER, UNITED STATES SPECIAL
OPERATIONS COMMAND

Wednesday, March 09, 2016

Washington, D.C.

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10 U.S. Senate
11 Committee on Armed Services
12 Washington, D.C.

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14 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:03 a.m. in
15 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John
16 McCain, chairman of the committee, presiding.

17 Committee Members Present: Senators McCain
18 [presiding], Wicker, Ayotte, Fischer, Cotton, Ernst, Tillis,
19 Sullivan, Graham, Reed, Nelson, Manchin, Gillibrand,
20 Blumenthal, Hirono, Kaine, King, and Heinrich.

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1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN McCAIN, U.S. SENATOR
2 FROM ARIZONA

3 Chairman McCain: Good morning. Senate Armed Services
4 Committee meets this morning to consider the nominations of
5 General Joseph Votel to be Commander, U.S. Central Command,
6 and Lieutenant General Raymond Thomas to be Commander of
7 U.S. Special Operations Command.

8 Congratulations to both of you on your nominations.

9 Of course, we know today would not be possible without
10 the support and sacrifice of Michelle Votel and Barbara
11 Thomas, who are with us this morning. Welcome.

12 As is our tradition, we hope you'll take the
13 opportunity to introduce your family joining you today.

14 Our nominees have both served this Nation for decades
15 and are stepping forward to lead in a time of crisis and
16 conflict. It's unfortunate that most Americans won't fully
17 understand what you and the men and women you lead do on a
18 daily basis to protect the country. But, those of who do,
19 those of us who have had the honor and privilege to spend
20 time with you and our military service members, we're
21 grateful for your service.

22 I'd also like to thank General Lloyd Austin for his
23 four decades of distinguishes service to our Nation, and his
24 family for their many sacrifices that made his service
25 possible. The members of this committee wish him and his

1 family all the best in his well-earned retirement.

2 At yesterday's hearing on the posture of CENTCOM and
3 SOCOM, we discussed at length how increasing threats
4 stretching from North Africa to South Asia, combined with
5 misguided reductions in defense spending, are placing a
6 dangerous and unnecessary burden on our servicemembers,
7 including our special operators. The breakdown of state
8 authority across the region has created a vacuum filled by
9 the most extreme and anti-American of forces, Sunni
10 terrorist groups, such as ISIL and al Qaeda, Shi'ite
11 extremists, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and its
12 proxies, and the imperial ambitions of Vladimir Putin. In
13 light of recent events, I want to express particular concern
14 about the destabilizing behavior of the Iranian regime,
15 which has gotten worse, not better, since the nuclear
16 agreement was reached last July.

17 Just yesterday, Iran launched multiple ballistic
18 missiles from several locations, which, according to the
19 State Department, may have violated U.N. Security Council
20 resolutions. This comes after Iran's advanced missile tests
21 in October violated U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929.
22 Iran fired rockets within 1,500 yards of a U.S. aircraft
23 carrier in December, and, in January, Iran illegally seized
24 U.S. -- two U.S. Navy vessels and detained 10 American
25 sailors, in violation of international law and centuries of

1 maritime custom. I'm not sure which is worse, the Ayatollah
2 giving -- pinning medals on the chests of IRGC henchmen who
3 conducted this illegal and provocative action or the
4 shameful and dangerous lack of condemnation by senior
5 administration officials. Such silence doesn't empower
6 moderates, it emboldens bullies, and each provocation that
7 goes unopposed increases the chances of the likelihood of
8 miscalculation that could spiral into a wider conflict.

9 I could not agree more with former Secretary Gates when
10 he recently said that the real problem with U.S. policy in
11 the Middle East is the lack of a clear strategy. Quote, "If
12 you accept the premise that we face a generation-long period
13 of turbulence and violence in the Middle East," he said,
14 "the lack of an overarching strategy for how you react to a
15 region in flames is a problem. Are there fires we should
16 just let burn out? Who are our friends? Who should we
17 support?" By accident or design, the fires in the Middle
18 East are burning out of control. Given the diversity and
19 the complexity of the threats we face, our Nation is in dire
20 need of candid strategic leadership. We need it from our
21 policymakers, and we need it from our military commanders,
22 as well. We need you to have the courage to speak truth to
23 power and to ask for the resources and the authorities you
24 need, not just those you think the administration will
25 allow. You owe that to this committee, to the men and women

1 you will lead, and to the American people.

2 Senator Reed.

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

3 Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

4 Let me join you in welcoming General Votel and General
5 Thomas. And, like you, I would also like to recognize their
6 families, because, without their families, they would not be
7 able to dedicate themselves to the service and to the
8 soldiers that they lead -- sailors, marines, and airmen.

9 Barbara Thomas and Tony and Michael are here. Thank
10 you.

11 And also Michelle Votel is here. Thank you very much.

12 For the benefit of all that are here today, let me say,
13 I think we're fortunate to have two warriors who have fought
14 relentlessly over the last several decades in behalf of the
15 United States before us today.

16 Both CENTCOM and SOCOM are playing critical roles in
17 helping to ensure our security here at home by addressing
18 threats where they reside overseas. As we covered in some
19 depth yesterday, CENTCOM has the lead for our efforts
20 against a diverse set of challenges ranging from the fight
21 against ISIL in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, to preventing
22 the reemergence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan, to helping to
23 ensure Iran is complying with the Joint Comprehensive Plan
24 of Action while countering the country's malign activities
25 throughout the region.

1 And, General Votel, you will take command in a time of
2 tremendous instability in the CENTCOM area of
3 responsibility. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on
4 how you will seek to manage the various conventional and
5 unconventional security challenges that you will face.

6 General Thomas, you are intimately familiar with the
7 opportunities and challenges facing you as the next SOCOM
8 Commander. Since September 11th, 2001, the men and women of
9 SOCOM have been heavily committed to CENTCOM and have
10 supported the other geographic combatant commands, most
11 notably as part of efforts to counter violent extremist
12 groups, stem the flow of narcotics, and build a capacity of
13 foreign partners. Over the last 15 years, SOCOM has also
14 seen its budget more than quadruple and its assigned
15 manpower increase by almost 25,000 personnel. Some have
16 called SOCOM a microcosm of the broader Department of
17 Defense with ground, air, and maritime components, a global
18 orientation, and service-like authorities and
19 responsibilities. In many cases, SOCOM also acts as the
20 connective tissue between the DOD, interagency elements, and
21 foreign partners. SOCOM's organization and global reach
22 offers many benefits, particularly in addressing
23 transregional issues like terrorism that are not bound by
24 geography. However, as we seek to take advantage of SOCOM's
25 new attributes, we must also ensure appropriate civilian

1 policy and programmatic oversight of SOCOM, especially by
2 the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations
3 and Low Intensity Conflict.

4 General Thomas, I look forward to discussing the role
5 of SOCOM within the Department and the interagency in
6 supporting the U.S. national security objectives.

7 The operational tempo facing our Special Operations
8 Forces shows no sign of slowing for the foreseeable future.

9 General Votel, you testified at yesterday's posture hearing
10 that critical to all of your efforts is ensuring we preserve
11 our force and families, providing for their short- and long-
12 term well-being. And you indicated that SOCOM's initiatives
13 in these areas have increased resilience, decreased reported
14 symptoms of depression, increased utilization of behavioral
15 health services, and expanded access to timely
16 rehabilitative care. I commend you and your predecessors in
17 taking action to help address the challenges facing special
18 operators and their families. And I know General Thomas
19 will continue that effort.

20 Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

21 Chairman McCain: Thank you.

22 General Votel and General Thomas, there are standard
23 questions that we ask -- that the committee asks for
24 military nominees. These are standard questions, and --
25 but, I hope you take the questions seriously. And if you

1 would just answer yes or no to these following questions:

2 In order to exercise its legislative and oversight
3 responsibilities, it's important that this committee and
4 other appropriate committees of the Congress are able to
5 receive testimony, briefings, and other communications of
6 information. Have you adhered to applicable laws and
7 regulations governing conflicts of interest?

8 [Both witnesses answered in the affirmative.]

9 Chairman McCain: Do you agree, when asked, to give
10 your personal views, even if the -- those views differ from
11 the administration in power?

12 [Both witnesses answered in the affirmative.]

13 Chairman McCain: Have you assumed any duties or
14 undertaken any actions which would appear to presume the
15 outcome of the confirmation process?

16 [Both witnesses answered that they have not.]

17 Chairman McCain: Will you ensure your staff complies
18 with deadlines established for requested communications,
19 including questions for the record in hearings?

20 [Both witnesses answered in the affirmative.]

21 Chairman McCain: Will you cooperate in providing
22 witnesses and briefers in response to congressional
23 requests?

24 [Both witnesses answered in the affirmative.]

25 Chairman McCain: Will those witnesses be protected

1 from reprisal for their testimony or briefings?

2 [Both witnesses answered in the affirmative.]

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

5 [Both witnesses answered in the affirmative.]

6 Chairman McCain: Do you agree to provide documents,
7 including copies of electronic forms of communication, in a
8 timely manner when requested by a duly-constituted
9 committee, or to consult with the committee regarding the
10 basis for any good-faith delay or denial in providing such
11 documents?

12 [Both witnesses answered in the affirmative.]

13 Chairman McCain: Thank you very much.

14 General Votel, we will begin with you.

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1 STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOSEPH L. VOTEL, USA, NOMINEE FOR
2 REAPPOINTMENT TO THE GRADE OF GENERAL AND TO BE COMMANDER,
3 UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND

4 General Votel: Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed,
5 members of the committee, I'm honored and humbled to appear
6 before you today regarding my nomination to serve as the
7 Commander of United States Central Command. I want to thank
8 President Obama, Secretary Carter, and General Dunford for
9 their confidence in nominating me for this important
10 position.

11 I want to take this opportunity, right up front, to
12 introduce and recognize my wife, Michelle. I would not be
13 here today without her love and encouragement through our
14 nearly 36 years of marriage. Michelle's tireless commitment
15 to our military families is a constant source of inspiration
16 to many others, and to me. She understands the issues and
17 stresses that come with military service, and has united
18 with other spouses to advocate for the families of our brave
19 men and women. I am extremely proud of her and the
20 important work that she continues to do.

21 Chairman McCain: Welcome.

22 General Votel: I'm also very proud to be seated next
23 to Lieutenant General Tony Thomas, a friend of nearly 40
24 years, a fellow SOF Commander, and the most experienced
25 Special Operations officer this Nation has ever produced.

1 There is no one more qualified to be the next SOCOM
2 Commander.

3 I hope that today's testimony proves valuable to the
4 members of the committee. You know all too well the
5 numerous and complex challenges that we face in the Central
6 Command region and the difficult and dangerous work that we
7 are asking our extraordinary servicemembers to perform.

8 From my perspective, the challenges we face in CENTCOM
9 are unprecedented. The immediate threat in Iraq and Syria
10 is an extraordinarily violent terrorist organization that is
11 attempting to govern as a state, is supported by high
12 numbers of foreign fighters, and which propagates an
13 ideology that radicalizes thousands and inspires terrorist
14 action in our homeland and that of our allies. We are
15 dealing with a civil war, where Syria, backed by powerful
16 expansionist and malign actors in the form of Iran and
17 Russia, barrel bombs its own citizens, creating a
18 humanitarian disaster and fueling large-scale migration
19 across the region and into Europe.

20 The area is rife with longstanding sectarian issues
21 that breed mistrust and disenfranchisement. I characterize
22 all of these and many others as generational issues. Our
23 current military strategy of working by, with, and through
24 our partners requires both patience and perseverance. As we
25 have seen in Afghanistan, our efforts will include both

1 successes and setbacks. However, in the balance, this
2 approach builds capacity and establishes local ownership
3 over the problem. The United States and CENTCOM play a
4 critical role leading, marshaling, accelerating, and
5 enabling the coalition, while bolstering the indigenal
6 forces will ultimately provide the solutions, steeling their
7 will and demonstrating our resolve. We have to do all of
8 this while not losing sight of the other 18 countries in
9 CENTCOM or missing the fact that both state and nonstate
10 actors have varied interests in the region, some legitimate,
11 some not, and that the dynamics within the Middle East often
12 have disrupted transregional effects.

13 I am committed to helping you gain the insight on
14 CENTCOM's strategies, plans, and activities required to
15 fulfill your constitutional responsibilities. In my 20
16 months at SOCOM, I have learned that, as a combatant
17 commander, I must have a relationship with the oversight
18 committees of Congress that is built on candor, confidence,
19 and responsiveness. I don't want you guessing about what
20 CENTCOM is doing. I would like to assure you that, if
21 confirmed, this commitment to you will underpin everything
22 we do at Central Command. I have also learned the
23 importance of taking full advantage of the authorities you
24 have granted to combatant commanders. To this end, if
25 confirmed, I intend to press the fight and capitalize on

1 opportunities that we identify.

2 In closing, I am deeply honored to be considered for
3 this position. If confirmed, I look forward to working with
4 this committee and the entire Congress to address the many
5 challenges we face.

6 Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to be here
7 this morning. And I look forward to answering your
8 questions.

9 [The prepared statement of General Votel follows:]

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1 Chairman McCain: Thank you.

2 General Thomas.

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1 STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL RAYMOND A. THOMAS III,
2 USA, NOMINEE TO BE GENERAL AND COMMANDER, UNITED STATES
3 SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

4 General Thomas: Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed,
5 members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to
6 appear before you today regarding my nomination to be the
7 next Commander of United States Special Operations Command.
8 I'm grateful to the President, Secretary Carter, and
9 Chairman Dunford for their trust and confidence in
10 nominating me for this position.

11 I'm honored to be included on this panel with my
12 current boss and classmate, General Joe Votel, with whom
13 I've had a long professional acquaintance and who I deeply
14 respect and admire.

15 I'm especially pleased that my wife of 32 years, Barb,
16 is able to be here with me today along with her father,
17 retired Rear Admiral Gerhardt, who served this Nation for 33
18 years.

19 Chairman McCain: Admiral, welcome. Where did your son
20 go wrong?

21 [Laughter.]

22 Chairman McCain: Thank you.

23 General Thomas: Also in attendance are our two sons,
24 Tony and Mike, both of whom are West Point graduates and
25 veterans of multiple tours in combat, as well as their

1 wives, Brooke and Christi. Barb has been a constant source
2 of inspiration and support for our entire family, and I
3 could not imagine making this journey without her. She has
4 played an integral role supporting the families of the
5 forces I've been associated with, especially during multiple
6 combat deployments.

7 I am deeply honored to be considered by the committee
8 for this position. I firmly believe that Special Operations
9 Forces perform a vital function within the Department of
10 Defense, supporting our geographic combatant commanders and
11 providing our leadership with unique solutions to
12 challenging problems. If confirmed for this position, I
13 look forward to working with this committee to address the
14 needs and requirements of our Special Operations Forces,
15 ensuring they remain the very best in the world.

16 Thank you again, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to
17 answering your questions.

18 [The prepared statement of General Thomas follows:]

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1 Chairman McCain: Thank you, General. Welcome, to your
2 family.

3 Who stood higher in the class?

4 General Votel: I don't think that's true, Mr.
5 Chairman. I made the top 50 percent possible.

6 [Laughter.]

7 Chairman McCain: I think I'll use that line.

8 [Laughter.]

9 Chairman McCain: I welcome both of you. And these are
10 most serious responsibilities that you're assuming. And I
11 know your families and all of us are proud of you.

12 General Votel, General Petraeus, for whom all of us
13 have the highest respect, said a successful commander must
14 be guided by, quote, "the big ideas about the challenges he
15 faces." This is important, given the state of the Middle
16 East today. So, my question, What big ideas guide your
17 approach to CENTCOM? And how does that lead you to think
18 about the role for the U.S. military?

19 General Votel: Mr. Chairman, thank you.

20 The big ideas that I think about, frankly, are
21 relationships. What I have learned in my experience at
22 SOCOM is that relationships are absolutely vital to the
23 things that we do, and they have to be sustained, they have
24 to be multilevel, and they have to be routinely engaged
25 upon. And so, I think part of the big idea in addressing

1 the issues in CENTCOM is in continuing to build
2 relationships and continuing to reassure and strengthen the
3 relationships that we have in the region. And as we move
4 forward, that will be -- and if confirmed -- that will be an
5 area in which I intend to focus.

6 Chairman McCain: General Nicholson, the new Commander
7 in Afghanistan, testified before this committee that the
8 security situation in Afghan is deteriorating. Do you agree
9 with that?

10 General Votel: Yes, Mr. Chairman, I do agree with
11 that.

12 Chairman McCain: And so, therefore, would it not be
13 logical, then, to advocate for a conditions-based withdrawal
14 of U.S. troops, as opposed to a calendar-based?

15 General Votel: Yes, Mr. Chairman, I agree with that.

16 Chairman McCain: Could you tell me if we -- you
17 believe you -- we have a strategy and therefore a policy to
18 defeat ISIS, retake Mosul, and retake Raqqa -- and take
19 Raqqa?

20 General Votel: Mr. Chairman, yes, I believe we have a
21 strategy. That said, I do have concerns about our broader
22 strategy against ISIL, about how we are applying resources,
23 about how we are focusing our authorities, about how we are
24 leveraging all of the required instruments of government in
25 -- of our own and of our partners, in going after that. As

1 I mentioned in my opening comments, our military approach is
2 one of "by, with, and through." And so, we are working with
3 our partners in both Iraq and Syria to address that.

4 The situation in both of those countries is
5 extraordinarily different, and I've recognized the
6 difference of that. In Iraq, we do have a partner, we do
7 have a government. In Syria, we don't. And so, I am
8 concerned about how we approach this, moving forward in
9 Syria, without a political element to support that. So, I
10 intend, if confirmed for this position, to look very
11 carefully at our strategy, to ensure that it has the
12 coherence that is required, that we have the resources we
13 need to go after those important locations that you cited,
14 and that we have the authorities to do that.

15 Chairman McCain: General Breedlove, before this
16 committee, recently said that Vladimir Putin was weaponizing
17 the refugee situation to break up the European Union. Do
18 you agree with that?

19 General Votel: Mr. Chairman, I do agree with that.

20 Chairman McCain: Then do you believe that perhaps a --
21 we should have a no-fly zone in order for refugees to have
22 someplace to go besides being -- going to Russia -- going to
23 Europe, where, basically, they're being shut out now, as we
24 speak?

25 General Votel: Mr. Chairman, reluctantly, my answer is

1 no. And if I could explain, a moment. I think what I need
2 to -- I -- first of all, I share in your concern and the
3 committee's concern on the humanitarian disaster that is in
4 place and the barrel-bombing and other things that are
5 taking place in this area. That said, as I have looked at
6 what the potential options are, I have to do a more complete
7 look at the assessment of those to ensure that they will
8 achieve the end states that we truly desire. And if
9 confirmed, I commit to do that. And I commit to do it
10 quickly.

11 Chairman McCain: What's your problem with a no-fly
12 zone?

13 General Votel: Mr. Chairman, I don't have a problem
14 with a no-fly zone. I -- what my --

15 Chairman McCain: Do you think things have been going
16 well for the last 4 years, especially as far as refugees are
17 concerned?

18 General Votel: No, Mr. Chairman, I don't think they've
19 been going well.

20 Chairman McCain: So, don't you think it might be an
21 idea to think about a place where these refugees could go,
22 besides stacking up in places like Greece and others? Don't
23 you think that it might be nice, sometime, to say to a
24 Syrian, "You can go someplace and not be barrel-bombed"?

25 General Votel: I do, Mr. Chairman.

1 Chairman McCain: And do you think the United States of
2 America has the military capabilities to set up and enforce
3 a no-fly zone?

4 General Votel: I do believe we have the capabilities
5 to do that, Mr. Chairman.

6 Chairman McCain: There's a editorial in the Washington
7 Post this morning that indicates their view that Vladimir
8 Putin has -- achieving most of his goals, including with
9 this cease-fire, to create conditions on the ground which
10 then allow the continued presence of Bashar Assad, which the
11 President, 4 years ago, said he was going to have to go. Do
12 you agree with that assessment, that Vladimir Putin now,
13 with this cease-fire, is creating conditions on the ground
14 which are very favorable to Russia, particularly considering
15 they had no presence in the region as short a time as 2
16 years ago?

17 General Votel: I do agree with that assessment, Mr.
18 Chairman.

19 Chairman McCain: I thank you, General.

20 And I -- again, congratulations to both of you, and we
21 look forward to confirming your nomination.

22 Senator Reed.

23 Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

24 Again, thank you for your service, both of you. And I
25 think it's fortuitous that both of you have been Special

1 Forces operators, because, as General Votel leaves the
2 command, and, General Thomas, you would assume the command,
3 and one of the major areas of conflict is CENTCOM, the
4 overlap is striking and important, but there's a further
5 issue here. That's synchronizing counterterrorism
6 operations across many different commands. And your
7 comments, General Votel, not only as the former SOCOM
8 Commander -- as the present SOCOM Commander, I should say,
9 and -- but prospectively the CENTCOM Commander, and then
10 yours, General Thomas, about how SOCOM can synchronize with
11 other commands to have a worldwide unified effort against
12 terrorists.

13 General Votel: I absolutely -- Senator, I think this
14 is a good task for SOCOM. And, in fact, we have been asked
15 to begin to pull together the transregional approach to how
16 we look at violent extremist organizations, particularly al
17 Qaeda and the Islamic State. What -- one of the advantages
18 that we do have is that we are present in every combatant
19 command through our theater Special Operations commanders,
20 who are under the operational control of the geographic
21 combatant commanders. We have a network that connects us
22 together. We have processes that allow us to assess that.
23 And we are working very diligently right now to pull
24 together a framework plan and the processes that will allow
25 us to make assessments and ultimately make recommendations

1 up to the Secretary of Defense on how we prioritize our
2 efforts globally against all of these terrorist threats.

3 Senator Reed: General Thomas, same line of
4 questioning. Your thoughts, please.

5 General Thomas: Senator Reed, we are currently
6 pursuing a transregional approach to the ISIL challenge. As
7 a subordinate unit for SOCOM, we're in all the countries
8 where ISIL currently resides, and working across the
9 transregional boundaries with the respective geographic
10 combatant commands and up through our higher headquarters in
11 SOCOM. So, I look forward to reinforcing that collaboration
12 and that effect for the future.

13 Senator Reed: Well, there's another issue, in terms of
14 sort of the structure of our efforts, and that is that,
15 within Department of Defense, the Assistant Secretary of
16 Defense for Special Operations Low Intensity Conflict,
17 SOLIC, has been given what is referred to service secretary-
18 like authorities. You both, in your present jobs, have had
19 to work with that structure. Again, your comments on how
20 effective that is. Are there changes necessary? Or in what
21 way could it be improved?

22 General Votel: I think the -- from an effectiveness
23 standpoint, Senator, what ASD-SOLIC does for us is, they do
24 act as a convening authority within the Department. So, as
25 we work issues that go across the various Office of

1 Secretary of Defense directorates, they are in a -- they
2 have a great capability to look at that and help coordinate
3 those activities across the Department. And that has been
4 extraordinarily helpful for us.

5 With respect to improvements that then might need to be
6 made there, I think many of the original intended purposes
7 of that have largely been achieved when -- from when ASD-
8 SOLIC was established. And I think, perhaps, that we may
9 look at how that -- how we organize that particular element
10 for the future.

11 Senator Reed: Senator Thomas, any thoughts?

12 General Thomas: Senator, in my current capacity, I
13 engaged ASD-SOLIC primarily through the higher headquarters
14 of SOCOM. However, in the opportunities where I -- we have
15 dealt with them directly, and if confirmed as the SOCOM
16 Commander, I look to them for two primary functions:
17 oversight and advocacy. And I think they perform that role
18 very adequately.

19 Senator Reed: Just a final question. In -- General
20 Votel, we spoke yesterday with General Austin and -- in your
21 presence, about a Syria train-and-equip force. One of the
22 factors that has always been difficult in Syria, unlike
23 Iraq, is, however you evaluate the Iraqi forces, they're on
24 the field. They're a national force. They have a political
25 -- somewhat political coherence with the government. We

1 don't have that in Syria. And that complicates any type of
2 effort we're going to make in Syria, whether it's to prevent
3 refugees, whether it's going to be to degrade and destroy
4 the capacity of ISIL in Syria. Your thoughts, in terms of
5 our train-and-equip? Obviously, we made one effort, which
6 was ended because it was not deemed effective.

7 General Votel: Thank you, Senator.

8 I agree with your assessment here. And the lack of a
9 political entity link to it made it much more difficult.
10 We've learned a lot out of that experience. And, as General
11 Austin mentioned yesterday, we are moving forward with a
12 revised version of that program.

13 I think we have looked very, very carefully at it. I
14 think we understand what that is capable of. In my view, I
15 look at it as a thickening effort. I don't look at it in
16 the same way as we did before, as a decisive way of raising
17 a large force. But, I do think it is helpful to have people
18 who have been trained by us, who have the techniques, who
19 have the communications capability and the resources to link
20 back into our firepower. I think that's very helpful in
21 places like the Azaz corridor, along the Mara line. I also
22 think it's extraordinarily helpful in the southern desert,
23 in the Euphrates Valley, here, where we are trying to raise
24 resistance elements. Those give us additional capabilities.
25 They may not be decisive among themselves, but they are

1 important to continuing to present dilemmas to ISIL.

2 Senator Reed: Thank you very much.

3 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Chairman McCain: Senator Ayotte.

5 Senator Ayotte: Thank you, Chairman.

6 I want to thank you, General Votel and General Thomas,
7 for your service, and the service of your family, in these
8 important positions.

9 I wanted to ask you, General Votel -- yesterday, when
10 you testified before our committee, you recognized the
11 incredible service of Sergeant First Class Matthew
12 McClintock, who was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for
13 his incredible bravery, for hours, where he fought against a
14 large number of Taliban insurgents and saved so many of his
15 fellow soldiers. We really appreciate his heroism.

16 As you both know, the lives of our brave servicemembers
17 depend on our ability to conduct successful combat search-
18 and-rescue and medevac capabilities. And also, to the
19 extent we can get to our wounded warriors within the "golden
20 hour," it really makes a difference in saving American
21 lives. So, General Votel, I wanted to ask you, if
22 confirmed, will you look very closely at this issue,
23 especially in Afghanistan, and ensure that we always have
24 robust combat search-and-rescue capability and medevac plans
25 and capabilities to ensure we get to our wounded warriors as

1 soon as possible?

2 General Votel: Yes, Senator, I will. And I share in
3 your concern and the importance of those resources.

4 Senator Ayotte: Well, I appreciate it. And I think
5 it's something we really have to look at, especially as
6 we're looking at our force posture in Afghanistan. Whatever
7 we do, we need to make sure that that capability is there
8 for our men and women in uniform. So, I appreciate that
9 commitment from you.

10 I also wanted to follow up on Afghanistan, about the
11 Haqqani Network. I noted that, in your prepared testimony,
12 you wrote that we remain concerned about the continuing
13 threat that the Haqqani Network poses to our forces and the
14 stability of Afghanistan. I would like to ask you -- you
15 said, in your statement, that we need Pakistan to take more
16 decisive actions against the Haqqani Network. Could you
17 describe for us what actions you would like to see Pakistan
18 take, to the extent you can in this setting? And also, do
19 you believe that Pakistan has to be much more aggressive
20 than it has been in going after the Haqqani Network? Can
21 you tell us where you think they are, vis-a-vis getting at
22 this very dangerous network that is undermining stability
23 and harming us in Afghanistan?

24 General Votel: Well, thank you, Senator.

25 First of all, I think Pakistan has a way of

1 communicating to the Haqqani and a way of highlighting to
2 them the disruptive role they are playing in Afghanistan.
3 And so, I think the first thing they need to do is leverage
4 their influence with that particular organization to prevent
5 them from having those particular effects. And then,
6 secondarily, if that does not work, then I think they need
7 to look at conducting the security operations to contain
8 them and keep them from coming across the border and having
9 an impact in Afghanistan.

10 Senator Ayotte: Do you think that they need to do more
11 -- both of you -- do you think Pakistan really needs to do
12 more, be more aggressive against the Haqqani Network?

13 General Votel: I think they do. I think we've seen
14 some instances lately where Pakistan has been aggressive in
15 some of the things they've been doing along the border.
16 And, as we mentioned yesterday, they have been pretty
17 aggressive, they have pushed a lot of fighters into
18 Afghanistan. That's given us an -- it's created additional
19 turbulence, but it's also created opportunities for us that
20 we've been able to --

21 Senator Ayotte: Right.

22 General Votel: -- capitalize on.

23 Senator Ayotte: Right.

24 General Thomas: Senator, I believe they play a
25 critical role. And I'd offer that -- in light of the fact

1 this is an open session, I'll be careful about my comments
2 -- but, we've had the closest thing to collaboration and
3 synchronization over this last year with them that I've seen
4 in the preceding decade. So, we are driving for the
5 essential collaboration with the Pakistanis to ensure they
6 are able to do what they need to do on their side of the
7 border.

8 Senator Ayotte: Well, that's important. Thank you.

9 General Votel, yesterday before the committee when
10 General Austin was here, and I also noted, in your prepared
11 statement, that Iran has invested significantly in its
12 ballistic missiles program. And this is something I
13 addressed with General Austin yesterday. Yet, unbelievably,
14 even based on what happened yesterday, just 1 day later, we
15 had Iran reportedly test fire two more ballistic missiles
16 with ranges apparently of greater than 1,000 miles.
17 Yesterday, General Austin agreed with me that Iran was not
18 deterred, at this point, from the -- based on the JCPOA,
19 with its ballistic missile program. Do you agree with that?
20 And how important is it that we address their ballistic
21 missile program? Because, obviously, from what I understand
22 and what DNI Clapper and other officials have said, that
23 would be their preferred method of delivering a nuclear
24 weapon to the United States of America.

25 General Votel: Thank you, Senator.

1 I absolutely do agree with that assessment that General
2 Austin offered yesterday. All indications are they haven't
3 backed off on anything, and, in fact, may, in fact, be more
4 aggressive in the days since the agreement.

5 And I share your concern about the ballistic missile
6 defense threat. This is certainly an area in which I will
7 have to pay more attention to and learn more about, but what
8 I have seen so far is concerning to me. Just the sheer
9 number, the ratio of their missiles to those of us and our
10 allies is of concern. I do know we have a phased adaptive
11 approach to how we are addressing that, and addressing the
12 qualitative and quantitative mix of that, and ensuring that
13 we have the right balance for the threat. And you have my
14 commitment that we will pay very strict attention to that.

15 Senator Ayotte: Well, I appreciate it.

16 Thank you so much, to both of you.

17 And let me just say, as I said yesterday, we really
18 need to up our sanctions against Iran on the ballistic
19 missile program, because they've done this, even with the
20 anemic sanctions. And I think they're proven to be anemic,
21 given their continuing testing of ballistic missiles. And I
22 hope that the administration will take immediate action,
23 and, if not, that Congress will act on this ballistic
24 missile program.

25 Thank you both.

1 Senator Reed [presiding]: On behalf of Chairman
2 McCain, Senator Manchin.

3 Senator Manchin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 And I want to thank both of you all, and your families,
5 for the service you've given to this country. And I'm
6 amazed at the quality of people that continue to just keep
7 stepping forward. And I want to thank both of you.

8 General Thomas, I wanted to ask you. I've said in the
9 past, I believe that sending U.S. trainers and weapons to
10 Syria -- I said that weapons to Syria would make us safer.
11 I would support it. I did not then. And I'm hearing from
12 the region -- further supports my belief that maybe it
13 hasn't. They decided, in 2015, this administration, to
14 deploy U.S. Special Ops Forces to help Syrian allied
15 targets, which were ISIS leadership in and around Raqqa.
16 Additionally, U.S. forces on the ground in Syria are helping
17 to coordinate local militias in providing equipment,
18 intelligence, and training.

19 So, I would ask, General, What's your assessment of the
20 performance of the U.S. Special Operations Forces against
21 ISIS in Syria? And what have we done, I'm sure, from an
22 administration standpoint, to tie your hands, to not let you
23 do your job?

24 General Thomas: Senator, thanks for that question.

25 I admit to being biased when you asked me about my

1 assessment of performance of our special operators --

2 Senator Manchin: Well, I know they --

3 General Thomas: -- because I think they've --

4 Senator Manchin: -- they're exceptional.

5 General Thomas: -- performed extraordinarily.

6 I'm actually quite pleased with the progress that we've
7 made, especially recently, through several of the -- or the
8 surrogate forces that we've been able to develop in
9 northeastern Syria specifically. As I think you're aware,
10 by, with, and through them, we've been able to secure a
11 swath of terrain that is the size of New Jersey, Delaware,
12 and, most recently, Rhode Island, in and around Shaddadi, so
13 that is a sizable amount of terrain. Just over this past
14 weekend, we think we killed the military emir for all of
15 ISIL in Shaddadi, and I think it's telling that it's -- it
16 speaks volumes about how dire their fight is that their
17 senior military commander was in the thick of it at a
18 relatively tactical location.

19 So, ultimately, I think we're making progress through
20 these surrogates. It has been a tough and formative
21 experience, but I think they're --

22 Senator Manchin: Are the rebels stepping up? I mean,
23 are they capable of doing the job, but just with our
24 instructions and our, basically, helping them through the
25 leadership that we give them?

1 General Thomas: Senator, with this specific force that
2 we're working with in northeastern Syria, they have
3 performed very, very well. Every time, they've met their
4 march objective on time or ahead of time, with pretty
5 extraordinary losses. Their losses over this last month
6 were in excess of 75. And we're -- now that we're on the
7 ground, we're able to assess the voracity of their reports.
8 They're losing a lot of people to carry the fight against
9 ISIL. So, I'm impressed with their tenacity.

10 Senator Manchin: General Votel, in testimony earlier
11 this year, General Campbell stated that Afghanistan has not
12 achieved an enduring level of security and stability in --
13 that justifies a reduction in our support in 2016. And that
14 was why the President's decision to maintain current force
15 levels through most of 2016 was important. No one wants
16 Afghanistan to be the next Iraq. So, I -- my question would
17 be -- we talk about the need for conditions-based withdrawal
18 of the U.S. forces. In your opinion, what would these
19 conditions look like? And should it happen?

20 General Votel: Well, first of all, in terms of the
21 conditions that we should be looking at, I mean, I think we
22 should be looking at Afghanistan's ability to sustain their
23 forces, to be able to plan their operations, to be able to
24 provide for their own aerial support, both rotary wing and
25 fixed wing, and be able to do a lot of their own ISR. So,

1 as General Nicholson highlighted a couple of weeks ago when
2 he was here, there are a number of areas in which they have
3 to make improvements. And I think we have to continue to
4 move forward with them. I absolutely support the
5 conditions-based approach as we look to our force levels in
6 Afghanistan.

7 Senator Manchin: Let me just say this also.
8 Prescription drug abuse in my State of West Virginia, all
9 over this country, is a -- it's a tremendous concern. It's
10 affecting families and destroying people's lives. Ninety
11 percent of the world's supply of opium poppy comes from
12 Afghanistan. What in the world can we do? What are you all
13 doing? Is there any -- is there more that we can do to stop
14 this scourge?

15 General Votel: I -- we have, in the past, provided
16 assistance to other U.S. Government agencies that are on the
17 ground and are addressing that particular issue. I think
18 the things that we can do is, continue to highlight to the
19 Afghan leadership, through our influence channels, the
20 devastating impact that drugs has, not only on their
21 country, but on the other countries that are receiving that,
22 and that, ultimately, that drug culture, the cultivation
23 there, leads to a system of corruption that ultimately
24 undermines many of the things that they want to achieve, and
25 certainly the things that we are interested in achieving in

1 Afghanistan.

2 Senator Manchin: And, General Thomas, what I would ask
3 -- on the Special Forces units in the National Guard -- and
4 in West Virginia, we have a very active National Guard, as
5 you know -- what can we do to help them understand and train
6 for the ability to dominate the human domain? And do you
7 believe that the National Guard can play and fill that role?

8 General Thomas: Senator, I've actually spent some
9 quality time in your State --

10 Senator Manchin: I know, and I appreciate that very
11 much.

12 General Thomas: -- very much appreciate the
13 contribution of both our Guard and Reserve Forces. They're
14 integral to everything we're doing. So, I think they are
15 participants in the development of our ability to leverage
16 and thrive in the human domain. So, I'd -- I think they're
17 integral to everything --

18 Senator Manchin: You believe -- I mean, you believe
19 that they do create a value for you, and basically are in a
20 helping -- in order to be able to meet the missions that are
21 needed, I think, for our country, even at home and abroad.

22 General Thomas: Senator, they play a critical role.

23 Senator Manchin: They can. Okay. And thank you very
24 much.

25 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Senator Reed: On behalf of Chairman McCain, Senator
2 Fischer, please.

3 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Senator Reed.

4 Hello, gentlemen. It's good to see you. And I thank
5 you for your service and your willingness to continue to
6 serve the people of this country and also the troops that
7 are working with you on the support mission.

8 General Thomas, as you know, ISIL operates across
9 combatant command boundaries and our counter-ISIL fight is
10 spread between different commanders across each of these
11 various regions. Are you satisfied with the level of
12 coordination and the consistent policy guidance on our
13 global fight against ISIL, or are you concerned that our
14 approach is possibly too segmented?

15 General Thomas: Senator, as a military commander, I
16 probably share the concern of your comments there, that
17 we're never fast enough. So, we're always endeavoring to
18 make decisions faster and to stay ahead of the enemy cycle.
19 It is admittedly challenging across geographic combatant
20 command boundaries, more so even with the countries we're
21 dealing with, five failed states that underpin those
22 locations. But, we are endeavoring to work that
23 collaboration piece as aggressively as possible.

24 So, I think we're making progress, but it -- but, it's,
25 admittedly, challenging.

1 Senator Fischer: And, as you move into your new
2 position, if you're confirmed, would you look to possibly
3 see changes, where we're able to address this in a faster
4 fashion?

5 General Thomas: Senator, if confirmed, I would look to
6 reinforce the initiative that General Votel has already
7 begun. I think you know that they've been -- SOCOM has been
8 tasked -- first of all, they have a historic role, a
9 historic requirement to synchronize Special Operations
10 activity. So, that was already inherent in SOCOM. General
11 Votel's been asked, and I've been part of the dialogue in
12 developing the processes where we can do that better for the
13 future. And I think SOCOM can play a critical role for
14 that.

15 Senator Fischer: And we see in recent reports that are
16 suggesting that ISIL's directing their foreign fighters not
17 to go to Syria. They're instead suggesting that these
18 people travel to Libya. And the main reason is because I
19 think the forces there are under less CT pressure. And how
20 can we better address that weakness that we have? If ISIL's
21 exploiting it again, how can we address that? I know that
22 there's ways to -- that are being addressed, that we can
23 work on it, but I certainly hope you're willing to look
24 outside the box a little so that we can get in those areas
25 where it's -- I realize the danger is greater, and I realize

1 events on the ground and not having a government to work
2 with in Libya does make it easier for these forces to go
3 there, but we have to meet that challenge.

4 General Thomas: Senator, I share your concern. Over a
5 decade ago, when we first addressed the al-Qaeda problem
6 when it first blossomed, there was a stated concern that if
7 we're too successful, they might go somewhere else, the
8 squeezed-balloon analogy. And, in fact, I think that's
9 what's happened, that -- where they have moved to ungoverned
10 spaces -- Libya, specifically, as you cite. We have had
11 some effects there recently, and -- given the nature of this
12 open forum, I probably -- would prefer to discuss those in a
13 closed session. But, we are making some inroads there, in
14 terms of establishing the frame for -- work for what we
15 need to do against the ISIL threat that has developed in
16 Libya.

17 Senator Fischer: Thank you.

18 And, General Votel, yesterday General Austin mentioned
19 the Syrian train-and-equip program, that it was going to be
20 restarting and the Department would be training individuals
21 and then returning them to augment the capabilities of the
22 various groups. How does the vetting for this program work?
23 Do we vet only individuals, or do we vet the groups, as
24 well?

25 General Votel: Senator, we are vetting specifically

1 leaders that are associated with the groups.

2 Senator Fischer: Are the individuals and the groups
3 required to attack ISIL and forego the attacks on Assad?

4 General Votel: What --

5 Senator Fischer: Is that a requirement?

6 General Votel: What we are doing is, we are trying to
7 recruit from organizations that are focused on ISIL
8 naturally. So, we're trying to avoid the problem that we
9 had the last time, where we didn't know what their
10 allegiances are. Certainly, our mission is ISIL. And so,
11 it is our intent that they help with the ISIL mission.

12 Senator Fischer: Right. But, would that limit the
13 pool?

14 General Votel: I think that it does.

15 Senator Fischer: Are these individuals required to
16 commit to promoting respect for human rights and the rule of
17 law? Does that come into the vetting process?

18 General Votel: That's a key part of the training
19 period that we provide to them.

20 Senator Fischer: It has been reported that there are
21 some Kurdish groups out there that have attacked U.S.-
22 supported groups. Do you believe attacking other U.S.-
23 supported elements of the opposition should disqualify a
24 group from receiving U.S. assistance?

25 General Votel: Yes, I do. I think it works contrary

1 to our purposes, in terms of what we're trying to
2 accomplish.

3 Senator Fischer: Okay. Thank you, sir.

4 Chairman McCain [presiding]: Senator Hirono.

5 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 General Votel and General Thomas and your families,
7 thank you very much for your sacrifice and service.

8 General Thomas, the current threat environment and our
9 strategy has really increased the demand on our Special
10 Forces, and there are also significant costs, in terms of
11 time and resources, in developing Special Ops compared to
12 developing and maintaining regular combat units. In your
13 view, what is the impact on morale and readiness to our
14 SOCOM troops as need for Special Forces increase? Should
15 you be confirmed, what is your plan to provide a sufficient
16 Special Operations Force structure to support SOCOM's many
17 missions while maintaining sufficient dwell times?

18 General Thomas: Senator, thanks for that question.

19 Clearly, sustaining this magnificent force is a focal
20 point for all of us, both in my current capacity and through
21 our higher headquarters at SOCOM. So, I want to thank the
22 committee for the tremendous resourcing we've had to
23 establish the programs, to sustain the force
24 psychologically, spiritually, and physically. It's been
25 extraordinary.

1 You mentioned we are pursuing an OPTEMPO that none of
2 us forecasted to be this far into the fight. And so, it has
3 put absolute pressure on the force, in terms of, you know,
4 just the ability to sustain individual capacity and, you
5 know, through their families. So, it's a -- clearly a
6 focused force for the future. But, again, I'd like to thank
7 you for the resources that you all have provided.

8 Senator Hirono: The -- where are we with regard to --
9 again, General Thomas -- with regard to recruiting and
10 retaining the Special Operations community? Can you break
11 this down and -- down by service?

12 General Thomas: Senator, to date, even -- and it's
13 really telling, in terms of the quality of the people that
14 are still attracted to this line of work -- we are still
15 meeting all our recruitment objectives. So, I'd -- we have
16 not had any difficulty, so far, sustaining the force, in
17 terms of recruitment and development of special operators.

18 Senator Hirono: Thank you. That's good to know.

19 Again, General Thomas, General Votel spoke yesterday of
20 SOCOM's presence in the Asia-Pacific, our bilateral
21 activities and close relationships with our partners and in
22 the success and stability of the region. For what you can
23 describe in this unclassified setting, what would be your
24 top priorities in the Asia-Pacific in -- if confirmed as
25 SOCOM Commander? And what do you perceive as the most

1 important duties of SOCOM in the Asia-Pacific region?

2 General Thomas: Senator, I monitored the proceedings
3 yesterday, and your question to General Votel, and agree
4 with the criticality of staying engaged in the Pacific
5 region. Specifically, I think we have to keep an eye on
6 Korea and the Special Operations capabilities that are
7 pertinent to that problem. Tangentially, I think weapons of
8 mass destruction, as they flow and as dual-use technology
9 flows through that theater, through the Pacific, I think,
10 are an area of interest, as well.

11 And then, to General Votel's point, the criticality of
12 continuing to develop relationships, both those that are
13 currently established and future relationships that will
14 make us more potent than just our individual capabilities.

15 Senator Hirono: General Votel, would you like to add
16 anything to what General Thomas just said?

17 General Votel: I think what -- I would, Senator -- I
18 think one of the areas that we do have to pay attention to
19 -- and I agree with the priorities that General Thomas just
20 laid out -- but, I do think we need to pay particular
21 attention to some of our allies who are -- who feel
22 threatened or whose security is being threatened by China
23 and some of their activities in the South China Sea, the
24 East China Sea. And so, I think this is an area -- our
25 reassurance, our continuing relationships with them, I

1 think, are extraordinarily important.

2 Senator Hirono: Have you -- have we given you enough
3 resources to maintain those relationships and build upon
4 those relationships, particularly, of course, with Japan,
5 Philippines, South Korea?

6 General Votel: Senator, in my view, you have. As I
7 mentioned yesterday, we really have not left the Pacific.
8 While we've done a variety of other things, we recognize the
9 importance of that area, we recognize the importance of
10 those long-term relationships there. And so, we have
11 continued to do that. And our command that is out there,
12 that region is the only area where we have two general
13 officer theater Special Operations Command, because we
14 consider it to be so important. So, I do think we do have
15 the resources we need out there.

16 Senator Hirono: General Votel, maybe I can just get a
17 commitment from you on this question. Secretary Carter has
18 decided that the military occupations and positions should
19 be open to qualified women, without exception. So, should
20 you be confirmed, you would have a commitment to
21 implementing this directive in your command.

22 General Votel: Absolutely. You have my commitment,
23 Senator.

24 Senator Hirono: Thank you.

25 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Chairman McCain: Senator Ernst.

2 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

3 Thank you, gentlemen, very much for being here today.

4 Michelle, it is really good to see you again. Thank
5 you so much.

6 Barbara, very nice to meet you and your family, as
7 well. Thank you all for being here today.

8 As you know, gentlemen, my husband served for many
9 years in the Special Operations community, and I'm very
10 proud of my husband and of his service. And I was very
11 blessed to be part of the Special Operations community as a
12 spouse. So, I do understand the challenges, and I know them
13 firsthand, with having a loved one serving in Special
14 Operations and the challenges that come along with the
15 families that are engaged in that fight from the home, as
16 well.

17 And with that said, I am a strong supporter of SOCOM's
18 preservation of the force and family initiatives, and I'm
19 glad to see that SOCOM has done so much to support our
20 Special Operations families and our wounded warriors through
21 these programs, as well.

22 Earlier this year, I did have the opportunity to visit
23 Fort Bragg. And, while I was there visiting with a number
24 of our operators, I had the great opportunity to go to the
25 Tactical Human Optimization Rapid Rehabilitation and

1 Reconditioning Facilities, otherwise known as THOR-3. And
2 don't tell anybody, but I was able to go do PT while I was
3 there with a number of folks, and one special wounded
4 warrior, who is a great friend of mine from Iowa State
5 University, and was able to see those facilities. And they
6 are amazing. And I will tell you, I have both of my God-
7 given original legs. My friend only has one, after a trip
8 to Afghanistan. And I'm not ashamed to admit that he kicked
9 my backside pretty good in these facilities. But, it is my
10 hope that, with this wonderful opportunity our special
11 operators have, it is my hope that we can further expand
12 these facilities, not only to those that are existing
13 operators, but those that are trying to return to the fight
14 after being wounded, as well.

15 And I would love your comments, gentlemen, about THOR-3
16 and the advantages it gives to our Special Operations
17 communities, and then also what more can we do, as Congress,
18 to support the THOR-3 initiatives, if you can give us
19 guidance on that, please.

20 General Votel: Well, let me start, Senator. First of
21 all, thanks for your strong support in your service as a SOF
22 spouse. It is good to see you again.

23 Senator Ernst: Thank you.

24 General Votel: I think the THOR-3 facilities are
25 extraordinarily important to us. They provide us a location

1 that's in our unit areas, with trusted providers that our
2 operators and our members know and feel comfortable going
3 and having their problems addressed. And, of course, our
4 objective, here, is -- with those who are wounded, injured,
5 or ill, is to bring them back to full capability. We want
6 them on the team, and that's what they want. So, I am very,
7 very pleased just at the importance that these have in doing
8 it. And, by the way, it gives us a place where we can bring
9 the other aspects of our program -- the social, the
10 psychological, the spiritual aspects -- all in one place.
11 Extraordinarily important.

12 I think the thing that Congress can continue to support
13 us on, first of all, is continuing the funding for these
14 programs, and then, second of all, for the military
15 construction projects that are remaining for those that we
16 still need to build. We have been well supported in this,
17 and you have my great thanks for that. We will ask for more
18 in the future. And we would appreciate the continued
19 support of Congress for that.

20 Senator Ernst: Thank you, General Votel.

21 General Thomas?

22 General Thomas: Senator Ernst, I'd again like to thank
23 you for the considerable resources that the committee has
24 provided to effect program like the THOR program. We -- our
25 organization is -- represents a legion of very, very

1 satisfied customers for -- you know, for the services that
2 you provide. I would offer, if I were speaking for them,
3 that they would comment that it's probably the most profound
4 example of the investment in the well-being of our
5 individual servicemembers. So, again, I'd like to thank
6 you. And General Votel, most expertly covered the things
7 that we'd hope you sustain into the future.

8 Senator Ernst: Thank you very much, gentlemen. And
9 thanks, to your families, for being here today, as well.

10 I just want to emphasize to my committee members, as
11 well, here, those that are still remaining, it is a
12 phenomenal program that THOR-3 provides for those operators,
13 and I do hope that we continue to provide resources and help
14 them get back into the fight, as well as help those that are
15 continuing in the fight.

16 So, thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

17 Chairman McCain: Knowing you, Senator Ernst, I'm sure
18 we will.

19 Senator King.

20 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 General Votel, I cannot recall a time when a individual
22 has appeared before this committee 2 days in a row. You
23 should examine your former life to see what it was that made
24 you deserve such a -- such treatment. But, we're delighted
25 to have you here.

1 I'd like to go back to the Chairman's opening statement
2 and those questions that he asked. It's unbelievably
3 important for you gentlemen to give your unvarnished, best
4 advice up the chain of command, which, in your case, is only
5 two steps to -- one step to the President. Your expertise,
6 your whole careers have been developing knowledge and
7 competence and awareness and intuition about all of these
8 multiple challenges that we face. And it is so important
9 that you give that clear advice. If you don't, our leaders
10 can't lead. They have to have people who are willing to
11 tell them the truth, who are willing to be -- to push, if
12 you will. And I just -- I'd -- this isn't really a
13 question, but you've already said yes to this question, and
14 I just want to emphasize how important it is. We can't have
15 good policy, particularly in the field of foreign policy and
16 military affairs, if people in your position aren't
17 borderline obnoxious about making your views clear to our
18 elected leaders. I want to commend that to you.

19 A kind of paradox of our involvement in the Middle East
20 is that we clearly have an important role to play. We have
21 important responsibilities. It affects the national
22 interest. On the other hand, to some extent, I fear that we
23 enable some of our allies in the region to not meet their
24 responsibilities, because we're always there. We've talked
25 about the problem of an army in Syria, for example.

1 To -- General Votel, reflect on that. Do you see what
2 I mean about the paradox? We need to lead, we need to be
3 there. But, if we're always there, then the other folks can
4 stand back and say, "Okay, the Americans are going to take
5 care of this, and maybe we'll pay for a few sorties, but
6 we're not going to get our hands dirty."

7 General Votel: Senator, I agree with your assessment
8 on that. And I do think that is a byproduct of the way we
9 approach many of our regional problems. And I think we have
10 to, in some cases, exercise some tough love with some of our
11 partners, here, to ensure they develop the capabilities and
12 the follow through to sustain those and maintain those for
13 the long term so that they can take care of their security
14 requirements.

15 So, I absolutely agree with you on that. And, if
16 confirmed, I do look forward to conducting my assessment of
17 the region and where there are areas where our activities
18 are contributing to that, and then looking at how we
19 mitigate that and get the focus back on where it needs to
20 be.

21 Senator King: Well, and the particular issue of
22 concern to me is the issue of ground troops. We're not
23 going to defeat ISIL strictly from the air. I think
24 everybody knows that. I don't think any war has ever been
25 won strictly from the air. And yet, for us to put in ground

1 troops, whether it's in a large increment or little by
2 little, is exactly what ISIS wants. The army that defeats
3 ISIS has to be, it seems to me, a regional Muslim-based
4 army, Arab-based army. And we just have to develop
5 strategies for getting the regional powers more engaged.
6 Would you comment?

7 General Votel: I would absolutely agree with that.
8 And I think part of our challenge here is making sure we
9 look at the various interests and objectives that each of
10 the different countries has in that region that contribute
11 to the problem that you're highlighting right here. And so,
12 I look forward, as -- if confirmed here, of trying to bring
13 some coherence to that with the partners that we have
14 invested in for a long period of time and who should
15 continue to play the leading role in their own area.

16 Senator King: I appreciate that.

17 A quick question on Afghanistan. It seems to me that
18 one of the gaps in the strategy is that, as we draw down and
19 diminish our -- the authorities of the people that are
20 there, the missing piece is air for the Afghan forces. They
21 are very -- at the very beginning of developing an air
22 capability. What are your thoughts about some residual air
23 support -- close air support for some reasonable period of
24 time so we don't have a 2-year gap, if you will, where the
25 Afghan -- we're gone, the Afghans have no air support, and

1 the Taliban --

2 General Votel: Senator, I --

3 Senator King: -- is resurgent.

4 General Votel: -- I agree with you. I think their air
5 support, both rotary wing, fixed wing, ISR, their lite
6 strike capability is a lagging development. And I -- while
7 we have programs, we are moving in the right direction, I
8 think it is going to take some time. And so, I think it is
9 absolutely critical that we continue to provide those
10 resources so, while that is being developed, we don't even
11 further --

12 Senator King: We don't have a gap.

13 General Votel: -- we don't have a gap and we don't
14 incur further problems in the security environment because
15 of that.

16 Senator King: I hope you will articulate that in a --
17 this is a subtlety of the policy, but I think it's a very
18 important one, and I hope that will be also conveyed up that
19 short chain of command that you guys are involved with.

20 General Votel: Thank you, Senator.

21 Senator King: Gentlemen, thank you very much.

22 Chairman McCain: Senator Blumenthal.

23 Senator Blumenthal: Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

24 And thank you both for your service. Thank you for
25 your families' service, as well.

1 Lieutenant General Thomas, I want to ask about the
2 training that is provided to our special operators. Given
3 the increased challenges and the rising use of our special
4 operators all around the world, what kinds of additional
5 training, what kinds of upgrades in training do you
6 contemplate providing to our special operators?

7 General Thomas: Senator, a key aspect of the
8 preparation of our forces is obviously the cycle of
9 sustaining them as combat is regularly on their schedule.
10 So, I think that we have very aggressively approached the --
11 that sustainment aspect for our forces, in terms of, you
12 know, complete review of the psychological, spiritual, and
13 physical composition of our operators, of our teams on -- in
14 the wake of their service overseas and as we sustain them
15 for the future fight. It's integral to everything we're
16 doing right now, so it's absolutely part of the program.

17 Senator Blumenthal: And what kinds of attention -- I
18 know it's common among all the services to give increased
19 attention to post-traumatic stress. And you mentioned the
20 emotional, as well as spiritual, challenges they face. But,
21 obviously, with the increased number and intensity of
22 deployments, post-traumatic stress is an ongoing challenge.

23 General Thomas: Senator, the continuing challenge --
24 and this won't be a surprise to you -- is reducing the
25 stigma of leveraging the capabilities that you all have

1 afforded us to array around our forces. We have the right
2 professionals, we have the right, you know, folks that are
3 available. It's really compelling our leaders and our
4 individual members to avail themselves of those
5 capabilities. And again, beating that stigma down, that it
6 doesn't, you know, convey that you are less valuable to us;
7 in fact, it conveys you're more valuable to us that you've
8 self-assessed and you're inclined to use the great
9 professionals that are available.

10 Senator Blumenthal: With special operators, there may
11 be less reluctance, or more reluctance -- I don't know
12 whether -- which one would apply -- General Votel, if you
13 have perspective on that.

14 General Votel: No, I think you're right on it,
15 Senator. I think with Special Operations, it is a peculiar
16 problem. And the number-one message that we have tried to
17 send throughout the Special Operations Command on this
18 problem is that it is absolutely normal and expected to ask
19 for help. The reason we have made these investments, the
20 reason we have these people in the organizations is so you
21 can get the help. And so, I actually think that message is
22 resonating. I agree with General Thomas, that this is an
23 area we have to continue to push on. But, this idea of
24 making it normal and expected to ask for help is beginning
25 to resonate with the force. And I think we have to continue

1 to push that.

2 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you.

3 I know that you've been asked about Iran's ballistic
4 missile program, and that you're going to be giving it
5 attention. I've continuously condemned Iran's ongoing
6 ballistic missile program for ignoring its international
7 obligations under the U.N. Security Council resolutions.
8 And I think that increased and intensified sanctions are
9 necessary. Would you support those kinds of increased and
10 intensified sanctions if Iran continues with the present
11 program?

12 General Votel: Yes, Senator, I would.

13 Senator Blumenthal: And are there additional steps
14 that you think we can and should take?

15 General Votel: I think the -- frankly, we should
16 continue to try to expose Iran for the role they are playing
17 in fomenting other things that are happening in the region.
18 We spoke earlier about barrel-bombing by the Syrian regime,
19 a regime that is supported by both Russia and Iran. I think
20 they should be held accountable for their support to a
21 regime that does that to their people. And so, I think we
22 should use the full measure of our resources -- information,
23 diplomatic, others -- to bring that to people's attention
24 and hold them accountable for the actions that they are
25 perpetrating.

1 Senator Blumenthal: Are you satisfied that we have
2 sufficient intelligence and surveillance to verify Iran's
3 compliance with the nuclear agreement?

4 General Votel: Senator, I can't say that I am, because
5 I don't know all the details of the program yet. I'm aware
6 of some aspects of it. So, I don't think I can give you a
7 complete answer at this particular time. It certainly will
8 be something that I will look into as I -- if confirmed and
9 assume the position.

10 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you.

11 Thank you both for your service. And I look forward to
12 hearing more from you in the years ahead.

13 Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

14 Chairman McCain: Senator Cotton.

15 Senator Cotton: Gentlemen, thank you both for
16 appearing before the committee today, for your many years of
17 service and being willing to serve again in these new roles.

18 General Votel, I want to ask you a question related to
19 the role for which you've been nominated, to Central
20 Command. You heard me speak to General Austin about this
21 yesterday. Is Russia achieving its military objectives in
22 Syria?

23 General Votel: I think that it is, Senator.

24 Senator Cotton: Can you elaborate?

25 General Votel: I think they are very keen to ensure

1 they have a long-term presence in the area. They certainly
2 want access on -- in the Mediterranean, they want to be a
3 player in that part of the area, and they want to be a
4 player at the table with us. And I think they are moving in
5 the direction where they could potentially achieve all of
6 those objectives.

7 Senator Cotton: What will be the long-term security
8 implications if a Assad regime more dependent than ever on
9 Russia grants unfettered access to -- for Russia to its
10 bases in western Syria, unfettered access that could involve
11 area -- anti-access aerial denial weapons for the eastern
12 Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, recognizing, as we
13 discussed yesterday, that this puts you at the seam of both
14 AFRICOM and EUCOM?

15 General Votel: Right. I think you just highlighted
16 one of the key concerns, here, the access control piece. I
17 think it also portends some potential problems here than may
18 linger between Russia and Turkey, for example, an important
19 NATO ally and, by the way, on the flank of NATO, on the
20 southern flank of NATO. So, I think it lays out some fairly
21 considerable concerns for us that we have to pay attention
22 to in an area of the world that we consider to be very
23 important, not just for the Middle East, but for Europe and
24 Africa, as you mentioned earlier.

25 Senator Cotton: Be quite dangerous if, for instance,

1 Russia and Assad were supporting the PKK inside of Turkey,
2 and the implications of what that might mean for Turkish
3 action in Syria and the invocation of Article 5?

4 General Votel: Sure. Absolutely, Senator.

5 Senator Cotton: General Thomas, I want to turn to you
6 in -- to a question for the role to which you've been
7 nominated, Commander of SOCOM. General Votel, you might
8 chime in on this, given that you currently fill that role.
9 I know that, with Senator Hirono, you were speaking briefly
10 about China and the South China Sea. I want to ask if you
11 could elaborate on that. Specifically, do you feel that
12 there is a role for a persistent presence of Special
13 Operations Forces in and around the South China Sea to
14 reassure our allies and to confront some of the Chinese
15 aggression in that region?

16 General Thomas: Senator, while I admit that that's not
17 my area of expertise at the moment, other than the Korea
18 niche that my current unit is deeply involved, I do believe
19 that there's a critical role for Special Operations,
20 especially towards the -- both the establishment and
21 maintenance of relationships relative to our assigned
22 mission set.

23 Senator Cotton: General Votel, do you have anything to
24 say on that question?

25 General Votel: I agree. And, Senator, I would look

1 for -- I would look forward to an opportunity to talk with
2 you about some of the things, perhaps in a different
3 setting, here. But, what I can say is this, is that we are
4 extraordinarily grateful for the investments that Congress
5 has allowed us to make in a number of our maritime
6 platforms. We are going to significantly upgrade all of our
7 maritime platforms from naval special warfare. It's
8 starting now, is continuing over the next several years.
9 And, in my view, this will provide some very good
10 capabilities to support Admiral Harris's capability -- or
11 requirements out in that very important part of the world.

12 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

13 General Thomas, question about budgets. We live in a
14 time of, unfortunately, restricted budgets for our military.
15 In many cases, Members of Congress have said that we want to
16 fully fund, or even increase funding, for Special Operations
17 Forces. And you've seen some budgets that have made some
18 improvements in that area. Could you describe, though, the
19 extent to which you in this future role, and Special
20 Operations Forces more generally, depend, not just on their
21 own budgets, but on the budgets of conventional forces that
22 are facing unprecedented pressures?

23 General Thomas: Senator, first of all, I'd like to
24 thank the committee for the extraordinary funding that we
25 receive. In my current capacity, we lack for nothing, in

1 terms of resources, to get -- to address the current fight.

2 Having said that, and as I think you know, we live and
3 we incur some risk by living in an OCO-funded paradigm,
4 where 50 percent of my budget is OCO. It's reliable, but
5 it's on a by-year basis.

6 To your point about reliance on the services, Special
7 Operations, both my current command and, if confirmed as the
8 future SOCOM Commander, I can't emphasize -- is our reliance
9 on our sister services. There's nothing we do that we don't
10 derive critical support from them. So, budget constraints
11 on them will have at least a -- an indirect impact on our
12 ability to conduct our missions.

13 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

14 I want to look back, finally, at experiences you both
15 had as junior officers. I believe you both served in
16 Panama. General Thomas, I believe you served in Granada.
17 We look back on those times now and say those were
18 relatively surgical operations in which we achieved our
19 military and political objectives and withdrew from the
20 country promptly. Many observers say that we should do that
21 today in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and so forth.
22 As you reflect on those times, can you say why the war we
23 face now is different from those operations in Granada and
24 Panama?

25 General Votel: Senator, let me start.

1 I think the situations in which we are injecting
2 ourselves into are significantly more complex than some of
3 the situations that you outlined here. There are sectarian
4 issues, there are great power issues, there are civil war
5 issues, there is terrorism. And so, I think those make the
6 situations in which we step into extraordinary complex. And
7 I think it highlights for us -- the lesson I learned is --
8 reflecting back on my early experience and what we see now
9 is -- the decision to commit U.S. forces to an area is an
10 extraordinarily important one, and it's not one that can be
11 taken lightly or with the view of getting in and getting out
12 quickly, because we have to be able to sustain it, we have to
13 be able to persevere with our partners, and we have to be
14 able to see it through to the objectives that we want to
15 achieve.

16 General Thomas: Senator, to dovetail on General
17 Votel's comments, you're making me go back 30-something
18 years, in terms of the successive efforts we've had from
19 Granada, Panama, Somalia, Desert Storm, Bosnia, et cetera.
20 You know the history. The complexity has built as we've
21 gone to the current. I can't imagine a more complex set of
22 threats than we're currently facing.

23 The challenge, though, that I would offer relative to
24 those first -- those formative experiences, which really
25 helped us become the force we are now, I think that -- you

1 know, that the -- in the critical phase that arguably is the
2 hardest is war termination, how you finish what you start,
3 how you complete, how you do work yourself out of a job, in
4 terms of, you know, your security requirements, back to
5 Senator King's discussion about the leadership role that the
6 United States plays before, during, and after these
7 challenges. That's the perennial challenge, in my mind.

8 Senator Cotton: Thank you both.

9 Chairman McCain: Senator Heinrich.

10 Senator Heinrich: Thank you, Chairman.

11 General Votel, General Thomas, I want to thank you both
12 for being here, for your service, and especially for your
13 unvarnished opinions on these matters. We really do value
14 that enormously.

15 General Votel, I think it's pretty safe to say that all
16 of us on this dais support, relentlessly but also
17 intelligently, as Senator King alluded to, the targeting of
18 ISIS through their resources, their finances, their
19 infrastructure. And, as we've seen coalition airstrikes
20 now, on the order of almost 11,000 strikes, have a
21 significant damage on their ability to expand territory and
22 strengthen their hold, we've seen success in them cutting
23 pay and benefits, as well. But, that said, we have a very
24 long way to go. And I want to ask you a fairly
25 straightforward, but obviously complicated, question. And

1 that is, Do you believe you have the authorities and the
2 resources necessary to continue prosecuting this war against
3 ISIS and to their elimination?

4 General Votel: Senator, thanks. I think the answer to
5 the question is probably no. We certainly have the
6 authorities we need to have right now to go after the
7 targets that we have and the operations that we are doing.
8 But, as we've talked about, there are other operations that
9 we are going to do. We are going to focus on Mosul at some
10 point. We are going to focus on Raqqa at some particular
11 point. And I do believe those will take additional
12 resources. And I'd look forward, if confirmed, to getting
13 in position and making sure I understand the situation on
14 the ground and what the requirements are, and advocating for
15 the right resources for our people to have to accomplish the
16 missions that we are asking them to do.

17 Senator Heinrich: We very much appreciate your advice
18 on that front. And I think it takes us back also to the
19 issue that Senator King brought up about having the right
20 ground forces in place to be successful in this long term.
21 And I want to ask you what your thoughts are on how you plan
22 to encourage our Arab allies to fulfill their portion of
23 this coalition effort.

24 General Votel: Thanks, Senator. I'd -- and I look
25 forward to that engagement, if confirmed, as well. I think

1 this is an extraordinary task that we will have to do. I
2 think it goes to ensuring that we look at the objectives
3 that we share with our partners. And then, once we can
4 agree on those objectives, looking at how we bring together,
5 collectively, the resources that go after that. And I
6 really think that is -- a key aspect of this is, begin to
7 bring coherence to our overall approach to the region and to
8 the problems that we share. Certainly, everybody has their
9 own view on the particular problems, what is affecting their
10 interests. But, I think what we have to do, and what I have
11 to do, if confirmed as the CENTCOM Commander, is try to do
12 my very best to bring coherence to that and identify the big
13 problems that we have to come together to solve,
14 collectively.

15 Senator Heinrich: Right.

16 I want to switch gears a little bit and ask you, in
17 particular, about the V-22 Osprey, which has really
18 fulfilled a very unique role in a number of our operations.
19 And it's also suffered some losses and some maintenance
20 issues as a result of that tempo. We've seen some of those
21 come offline, yet there's no funding for additional aircraft
22 to replace those losses. So, I want to get your opinion on,
23 you know, what is the right number of V-22s to be able to do
24 the kinds of jobs that you're going to need to do. And are
25 we meeting that need?

1 General Votel: Thanks. Thanks, Senator.

2 First off, let me just say, that is a magnificent
3 platform --

4 Senator Heinrich: Yeah.

5 General Votel: -- that has been a game-changer for us
6 in some areas, here. Its speed, its ability to move and get
7 into areas that weren't accessible to us before is
8 extraordinarily important.

9 I think the number we have right now, which is 50,
10 meets our requirement. I am concerned, however, that we
11 don't have ready reserves for us, that we don't have a
12 stockage of V-22s in case we -- as you know, we did lose
13 one, and being able to replace those. And so, I -- we
14 currently don't have a developed requirement for that. I do
15 know Air Force Special Operations Command has begun to look
16 at that. And we look forward to addressing that requirement
17 and identifying that particular number.

18 I -- my personal opinion is, I think the number is
19 probably in the range of three or four that we need to have.
20 It certainly would augment the schoolhouse, but it would
21 also give us a ready reserve if we do lose aircraft.

22 Senator Heinrich: Do you have any additional thoughts
23 on the particular role that's performed, in terms of long-
24 range personnel recovery? And I'm curious if you would see
25 a potential for Air National Guard units to be able to help

1 in that sort of long-range personnel recovery mission for
2 both the Title X and also, for that matter, the homeland
3 security responsibilities.

4 General Votel: I absolutely do see a role for the --
5 for our Reserve-component elements doing that. And, in
6 fact, I'll just tell you, I think Air Force Special
7 Operations Command does this as -- better than -- as good or
8 better than everybody in SOCOM, in terms of how they've
9 integrated the total force into how we do that. So, I
10 absolutely agree with that. And I do think that, as we've
11 talked about earlier, the personnel recovery mission is an
12 extraordinarily important one, and it is one that this
13 particular platform that we just talked about, the V-22, is
14 uniquely designed for. Its ability to dash, its ability to
15 get there, its ability to carry a load out and get people
16 back to where we need them is exceptional. And so, I do
17 think we should continue to look at that, and I'd -- I look
18 forward to supporting that approach.

19 Senator Heinrich: I look forward to working with you
20 on that.

21 And I want to thank you both for being here today.

22 Chairman McCain: General Votel, it's -- and General
23 Thomas -- is there any doubt that ISIS is metastasizing in
24 different parts of Africa, such as Libya? We now see an
25 upturn in participation and actions by Boko Haram?

1 General Votel: Mr. Chairman, there's no doubt in my
2 mind that they have metastasized. And we're tracking at
3 least eight established provinces right now.

4 Chairman McCain: General Thomas, it seems to me that
5 this argues for more Special Forces presence on the ground,
6 especially in a country like Libya.

7 General Thomas: Mr. Chairman, we'd agree with your
8 assessment there that that particular part of ungoverned
9 space requires, potentially, unique Special Operations
10 solutions, and we're attempting to provide those options to
11 the chain of command.

12 Chairman McCain: And they are -- is the key to it to
13 match up with local forces that are opposed to ISIS, or is
14 it to have hit-and-run operations, or -- what kind of
15 activity would Special Forces be engaged in? And what would
16 be their objectives in a place like Libya?

17 General Thomas: Mr. Chairman, I think, ultimately, we
18 don't succeed unless there's some reformation of the
19 government there. As you know, it's absolutely ungoverned
20 at this moment in time, although there is considerable
21 progress, in terms of diplomatic initiatives. So, I think
22 the primary role, the -- you know, the principal role,
23 arguably, from our Special Operations approach, would be to
24 identify the organizations that we can work with that may
25 provide the security apparatus that would be affiliated with

1 the future government of Libya. There are opportunities for
2 kinetic -- you'd categorize them as dash-and-run-type
3 operations -- there are some kinetic opportunities there,
4 but I think they would be merely to shape the overall
5 approach.

6 Chairman McCain: But, there are organized groups that
7 you could have operations with in Libya?

8 General Thomas: Yes, Mr. Chairman. We've already
9 identified some formative organizations that we hope to be
10 able to work with in the future.

11 Chairman McCain: Does that have anything to do with
12 these different governments -- two different governments?

13 General Thomas: Mr. Chairman, it's cognizant of the
14 competing equities in that country, in terms of reforming
15 the government, but it's completely synchronized with that
16 effort. In fact, it's informed by the State Department
17 effort there.

18 Chairman McCain: Recent Boko Haram activity seems to
19 indicate that they are increasing in their lethality. Is
20 that your assessment?

21 General Thomas: Mr. Chairman, I think they've
22 presented a pretty consistently lethal organization.

23 Chairman McCain: But, hasn't there been a step up
24 recently of their operations and activities?

25 General Thomas: I think they have attempted it. I

1 think they've also suffered some serious losses from the
2 Nigerian government, as well. We're most concerned about
3 their intent to potentially migrate -- metastasize, as you
4 mentioned earlier -- and affiliate with either ISIL in Libya
5 or with al-Shabaab in Somalia. So, we're very attuned to
6 that.

7 Chairman McCain: Well, there's only one other comment
8 that I would make, and that is that, when you tell these
9 young men that they can't attack Bashar Assad and Syrian
10 forces that have been slaughtering men, women, and children
11 with barrel-bombing, I think ISIS is, you know, among most
12 evil on Earth. ISIS isn't barrel-bombing the men, women,
13 and children. Bashar Assad is. And to somehow, therefore,
14 expect these young Syrians that we're recruiting and
15 training to only go after ISIS -- I thought we learned that
16 lesson before, when we went down to, in the words of General
17 Votel's predecessor, four or five moderate forces after
18 spending \$43 million. I hope we're not going to repeat that
19 experiment, General Votel.

20 General Votel: No, Mr. Chairman, I agree, that is
21 signature lesson learned of the original version of the
22 program, and is one we are attempting not to repeat.

23 Chairman McCain: Senator Cotton, did you want to --

24 Senator Cotton: One question. I just realized,
25 General Votel, you were the commander of 75th Ranger

1 Regiment at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom?

2 General Votel: I was, Senator.

3 Senator Cotton: And, General Thomas, you were the
4 commander of 175 at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom.

5 General Thomas: Yes, sir, I was.

6 Senator Cotton: Must have been quite the time
7 together. Do your O5s and O6s today have the same kind of
8 delegated decisionmaking authorities that the two of you did
9 in the early days of the war on terror?

10 General Votel: Actually, I think, in some cases, they
11 have as good or better delegated authorities, dependent upon
12 the areas in which they are operating.

13 General Thomas: I agree with General Votel's
14 assessment. And I'd also add that they're more talented
15 than we were back then, so they're more capable of using
16 those authorities.

17 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

18 Chairman McCain: Well, time after time, we see
19 recommendations from your level to the White House. And it
20 isn't that they're rejected. We see that there's no answer.
21 Classic example is the fuel trucks that I mentioned before,
22 that, for 16 months, traveled with impunity, ferrying oil
23 for ISIS. And we waited 16 months before attacking one of
24 the major sources of revenue for ISIS. A lot of my
25 constituents don't quite understand that. And it's my

1 understanding that it wasn't that you were prohibited. It's
2 my understanding that it just didn't happen, that the
3 decision didn't come. Are you aware of that, General?

4 General Votel: Senator, I am not aware of the details
5 that surrounded that decisionmaking to target those specific
6 vehicles.

7 Chairman McCain: You are aware that, for 16 months,
8 that they, with impunity, ferried oil to places where they
9 could gain millions of dollars' worth of revenue.

10 General Votel: I --

11 Chairman McCain: You are aware of that.

12 General Votel: I am aware that they had an
13 architecture.

14 Chairman McCain: That sometimes is frustrating to some
15 of us.

16 We're awaiting the presence of Colonel Graham, and --
17 retired, thank God -- and he's supposed to be here in the
18 next couple of minutes, so we'll give him --

19 I'm just not going to hold up the committee any longer.
20 I'm sorry, I'm not going to wait for Senator Graham, I'm
21 sure that you will be relieved to know.

22 So, this hearing is adjourned.

23 [Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

24

25