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TO: Interested Parties

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RE: Closing the Mission Gap: Effectively Communicating the President's New Afghanistan Strategy

Speaking at West Point, President Obama clarified America's mission in Afghanistan and announced a new strategy designed to defeat al Qaeda, respond to the security threat posed by chaos in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and set a clear path for turning the war over to the Afghans. Third Way believes that the President's approach is worthy of strong support from Congress and other leaders.

Still, the public is deeply divided on the future of the war. The American people support the mission of eliminating the terrorist threat in Afghanistan, but many remain skeptical about our ability to complete that mission. **Broadening and retaining US public support for the war effort is an urgent priority, and doing so will require not only a measure of success on the ground in Afghanistan but also an effective, focused communications strategy.** In this memo, we offer guidance on framing the new Obama plan for Afghanistan, provide talking points on the conflict, and recommend responses to critics of the President's decision.

I. Framing the Afghanistan Debate

According to recent polling (taken before the speech), the vast majority of Americans believe in the mission that the President articulated in his address: 75-80% of the public say that weakening the terrorists' ability to stage attacks against the U.S. is an important reason to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan. But only about half of all Americans support the war.¹

The key to successfully communicating support for the President's strategy is understanding and addressing this "mission gap"—the 30-point difference between public support for the anti-terrorism mission in Afghanistan and support for the war.

Why the Mission Gap?

We believe there are three reasons for the mission gap:

- **Lack of Progress:** Americans—even those not following events closely—understand that the Afghanistan War drifted under the Bush administration and that many of our objectives remain unmet: we have not killed or

captured bin Laden; we do not have a fully credible ally in the Afghan government; the al Qaeda-Taliban alliance remains a potent threat. That's why only 55% of poll respondents believe that the US is making progress on "weakening terrorists' ability to stage attacks against the US," despite the fact that 80% of respondents in the same poll called that goal an important reason to keep troops in Afghanistan.²

- **Mission-Creep:** For eight years, the public has been confronted with a blizzard of goals for the military in Afghanistan: poppy eradication, school and road construction, reducing civilian casualties, "clear, hold and build," securing the Pakistan border, defeating the warlords, working with the warlords. These and other ancillary goals have confused the public on the question of what our core military mission is and led them to believe we are not focused on achieving it.
- **Overemphasis on Afghan Politics:** While there is no question that policymakers must work to ensure that the Afghan government is as legitimate, transparent and lawful as possible, the extensive public discussions about that goal suggest that we have lost focus on the core anti-terrorism mission. As the President has made clear, the military mission is not to create a Western-style democracy in Afghanistan or nation-build; it is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda.

Closing the Mission Gap

To increase public support for the war, we must close that "mission gap" by:

- » **Focusing on one message about the mission.** As the President noted, the goal is narrowly defined as disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda and its extremist allies. Avoid dwelling on anything not directly relevant to this mission and tie all other aspects of our military efforts in the region back to it. Don't take for granted that people appreciate the ongoing severity of the threat—repeatedly restate the danger to the US posed by al Qaeda and their allies in Afghanistan.
- » **Explaining what's new about the Obama strategy.** Make clear that the effort that President Obama is directing looks nothing like the years of drift in Afghanistan during the height of the Iraq War. He has now provided the resources his commanders have requested, focused the mission on fighting al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, pushed Pakistan to pursue our enemies from their side of the border, and set a deadline to pressure the Afghan government to move quickly toward assuming their own security responsibilities.
- » **Leaving the Meet the Press details on the set.** Do not have a conversation with the public about Afghanistan as if it was a policy roundtable or a congressional hearing. Most voters are interested in the top-line information: what is the mission, how will we achieve it, and how are we doing so far. For those with a deeper level of interest, the Sunday shows and the *New York Times* will meet their needs. But for most, *less is more*; extra details can lead to a muddled message.

At West Point, the President took an important step in closing the mission gap. He was clear about the mission, he outlined how his approach differed from the one we had taken before, and he articulated a crisp message that did not get lost in the policy details. If supporters of this effort in Congress and elsewhere can follow suit, we believe that more Americans who support the anti-terrorist mission will also support the war.

II. Talking Points on the New Strategy and Mission

- » **We have one mission in Afghanistan—to take the fight to al Qaeda and protect America—and we will win.** Our goal is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and to make sure they do not reestablish the terrorist safe haven they need to plot and strike at America. We can and will achieve that goal.
- » **The mission is vital because the threat is real.** The al Qaeda terrorists who murdered nearly 3,000 Americans continue to plot against this country. These are some of the worst, most dangerous people in the world, and they simply cannot be permitted to return to the safe haven in Afghanistan that they had before the war. And the threat they pose is not theoretical—as the President said: “In the last few months alone, we have apprehended extremists within our borders who were sent here from the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan to commit new acts of terror.” President Obama correctly described this as a cancer, which we can either cut out or allow to grow and spread.
- » **President Obama is taking a new course—a different and more effective approach to achieving success in Afghanistan:**
 - **Focused, achievable mission.** For years, our military fought in Afghanistan with a vague and shifting set of missions. The President has finally provided our troops with a clear mission that they can and will accomplish.
 - **More troops.** During the height of the Iraq War, that conflict starved the effort in Afghanistan of the troops it needed—as Chairman Mullen noted at the time: “In Afghanistan we do what we can. In Iraq we do what we must.”³ Now, for the first time the military is getting the resources it needs to achieve its mission in Afghanistan, and the reinforcements are coming even faster than the commanders had requested.
 - **Pressure on the Afghans.** Until now, there was no real demand that the Afghan government prepare to provide for its own security. The President’s new deadline puts pressure on the Afghan government to get ready to take care of itself. We are accelerating the training of the Afghan Army and National Police and working with tribal militias to help provide stability and prevent a return of the Taliban after the US mission is completed.

- **Pakistan is engaged.** Under President Bush, Pakistan dithered in its efforts to confront al Qaeda and the Taliban, at one point even providing them with a formal safe haven. Now, the President's new efforts have helped to increase Pakistan's resolve to battle al Qaeda. This means that our forces fighting in Afghanistan can finally hammer the terrorists against an anvil in Pakistan, rather than a "pillow."⁴

III. Responding to Tough Questions

Concerns about the Escalation

Claim: *We are fighting on the side of a corrupt, illegitimate Afghan government.*

Reply: The Karzai administration's corruption and electoral manipulation makes our work more difficult, and President Obama has made clear that he will push hard for reform. But this will not undermine the core American mission to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda. Nor does it prevent us from training the Afghan National Army and National Police to a level of capability necessary to secure the country. Our goal is not to build a Western-style democracy; it's to defeat al Qaeda and leave Afghanistan in a position to defend itself.

Claim: *US troop presence and civilian casualties fuel the insurgency.*

Reply: Polls in Afghanistan show that a large majority of the population supports the US mission there and want the Taliban defeated and al Qaeda destroyed.

Claim: *This escalation violates Obama's campaign promises on Afghanistan.*

Reply: Precisely the opposite is true. Candidate Obama promised to get us out of Iraq, and he is doing that. In June 2008 he said "as President, I will make the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban the top priority that it should be," and he promised to send "at least" two additional combat brigades to the region.⁵

Claim: *Escalating the war in Afghanistan is too costly in US lives and, at a million dollars per person per year, the troop increase just is not affordable.*

Reply: It is simply impossible to put a price on this mission—the costs to American security of failure there, which would mean a return to power of the Taliban and their al Qaeda allies—are incalculable. Moreover, the actual cost of the troop increase next year may be offset by the \$30 billion reduction in spending expected in Iraq because of planned troop withdrawals.⁶ And the cost is being shared by 43 nations—the President has persuaded our NATO allies to provide thousands of additional troops.

Claim: *We have 100,000 troops deployed to battle just 100 al Qaeda in Afghanistan.*

Reply: Counting the number of al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan alone misses the point—when their Taliban allies were in power, a relatively small group of al Qaeda terrorists, with their state sponsor in Afghanistan, were able to carry out the worst attack against the United States since Pearl Harbor. The mission now is to disrupt, disable and defeat al Qaeda and their allies to prevent another attack.

Claim: *Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, a morass where the British and the Soviets failed militarily. We are doomed to fail as well.*

Reply: Neither case is analogous to our own. In both cases, the invading superpower (the Soviets and the British) were fighting local forces that were heavily financed and armed by another great power (the Americans and the Russians, respectively). As anyone who saw “Charlie Wilson’s War” can tell you, the Soviets were crushing the Mujahedeen until the United States started a massive effort to fund, arm and train the Afghan insurgency. In this fight, al Qaeda and the Taliban have no official state support in either Afghanistan or Pakistan, much less a superpower sponsor—they can and will be defeated.

Attacks from the Right

Claim: *It makes no sense to call for a surge and a withdrawal at the same time. No one has ever done that.*

Reply: As Secretary Gates has noted, the Bush administration did precisely this with the Iraq surge, placing limits on its duration which did not diminish its effectiveness.⁷

Claim: *President Obama’s announcement of a withdrawal gives our enemies an advantage; they can just lay low for 18 months until American forces leave.*

Reply: As Secretary Gates told Congress, if the Taliban lays low during the next 18 months that would be “terrific news,” because it would “give the U.S. troops and aid workers much freer rein to win hearts and minds, train the Afghan army, and develop the Afghan economy if they didn’t have to stave off the Taliban at the same time.” He also noted that 2011 would mark the beginning of a phased withdrawal, with the pace determined by events.⁸

Claim: *President Obama’s strategy is weak and indecisive.*

Reply: President Obama’s strategy will prevent Qaeda from attacking Americans and he made clear that the military mission is to defeat them. For the first time in six years, the United States has refocused its efforts in Afghanistan, clarified the mission, and provided the resources they need to get the job done.

Claim: *President Obama dithered when the military urgently needed help in Afghanistan.*

Reply: President Obama has taken the time to thoroughly examine all of the options at hand, conducting the kind of careful review that might have prevented the catastrophe in Iraq if his predecessor had acted with similar deliberativeness. Military commanders did not request any additional forces for this year, so the time for review did not deny the military any resources. In fact, the President is speeding troops to Afghanistan far more quickly than had been requested.

Claim: *Obama is second-guessing General McChrystal's troop request.*

Reply: General McChrystal is getting what he asked for, and he has applauded the President's approach, saying: "The Afghanistan-Pakistan review led by the President has provided me with a clear military mission and the resources to accomplish our task. The clarity, commitment and resolve outlined in the President's address are critical steps toward bringing security to Afghanistan and eliminating terrorist safe havens that threaten regional and global security."⁹

Conclusion

For eight years, US success in Afghanistan was hampered by an ill-defined mission and insufficient resources. President Obama has offered a strategy that returns our focus to the real threat we face, provides an achievable military mission, and promotes US national security. It is our best opportunity to eliminate the grave risk posed by the world's most dangerous people in the world's most dangerous place.

Endnotes

¹ USA Today/Gallup Poll, Oct. 6, 2009; ABC News/Washington Post Poll, Oct. 15-18, 2009; CNN/Opinion Research Corp. Poll, Nov. 13-14, 2009.

² Ibid.

³ Robert Burns, "Mullen: Afghanistan isn't a Top Priority," *USA Today*, Dec. 11, 2007.

⁴ Scott Shane, "The War in Pashtunistan," *The New York Times*, Dec. 6, 2009.

⁵ Obama Campaign Foreign Policy Address at Reagan Building, July 16, 2008, Washington, DC.

⁶ Editorial Board, "Paying for War," *Washington Post*, Dec. 1, 2009.

⁷ Fred Kaplan, "Explaining What Obama Meant," *Slate*, Dec. 2, 2009).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Spencer Ackerman, "McChrystal Praises Obama, Strategy Review" *Washington Independent*, Dec. 1, 2009.