John Hamre received his BA in 1972 with high distinction from Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with an emphasis in political science and economics. The following year he studied as a Rockefeller fellow at the Harvard Divinity School. He received his PhD with distinction in 1978 from the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC. From 1978 to 1984 he served in the Congressional Budget Office, where he became deputy assistant director for national security and international affairs. In that position he oversaw analysis and other support for committees in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Before serving in the Department of Defense, Dr. Hamre worked for 10 years as a professional staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. During that time he was primarily responsible for the oversight and evaluation of procurement, research, and development programs; of defense budget issues; and of relations with the Senate Appropriations Committee. From 1993 to 1997 he was undersecretary of defense, serving as principal assistant to the secretary of defense for the preparation, presentation, and execution of the defense budget and management improvement programs. Before joining the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), he served as the 26th U.S. deputy secretary of defense from 1997 to 1999, and he was elected president and CEO of CSIS in January 2000. Dr. Hamre was appointed as chair of the Defense Policy Board by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2007 and still serves in that position.
Thank you all for coming. I’m delighted that you’re here. I will begin with a special thanks to Joe Jordan. I have to explain: He’s one of my bosses. He’s on the board of directors at CSIS. So when one of your bosses calls and asks you to do something, you tend to be willing to say yes. But Joe’s bigger than just one of my bosses. In many ways Joe Jordan made CSIS. The founder was David Abshire—but Joe Jordan, when he came, really transformed the center, broadened it, and lifted it up. He brought the enormous intellectual discipline and energy that he demonstrated at West Point, and it led to the success of both the program at West Point and the program at CSIS. So I try to spread my feet out to fill the footsteps Joe Jordan left, and I’m not quite there yet, but I’m trying.

Congratulations to all of you for having the Wheatley Institution. I am pleased to have a chance to participate in this conference. Thank you for including me, and congratulations on this wonderful new direction that is made possible here at Brigham Young University.

Originally General Jordan asked if I would come out last night, and I said I would love to but couldn’t. I had to give a talk last night to all of the new admirals in the navy. They have a program in which they bring them all together and do what in the old days we would have called indoctrination. (I’m sure we have a new term for this.) The program is to get these different, disparate people with their different backgrounds all together so they can start thinking collectively and coherently as the new leadership of the navy, and I was asked if I would talk to them.

Unfortunately it completely changed my mind about what to talk to you about today, and so I’ve been frantically trying since about nine o’clock last night to rethink my speech, because a question got planted that I can’t get out of my head. I think I know how to start to frame it, but to really bring it to a conclusion is going to take interaction with a lot more minds than my own. So I invite you to pick up the issues, and together we can build a deeper insight here than I can bring to it.

The question came after I gave a rather boring speech. It was framed in a very polite way, as you’d expect in a newly minted admiral. Basically the question was “Is President Obama failing as commander in chief by not agreeing to send additional troops over to Afghanistan as General McChrystal requested?”

That’s what I thought we would talk about today. The question I’m trying to

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explore is this very difficult and painful question of whether there is an American will and consensus to sustain an effort in Afghanistan. The core of the question “Is President Obama failing as commander in chief?” was really posed by a military guy looking at it from a military point of view, and I understand that. I deeply understand that, but I also understand why it’s so hard to answer the question for the president, because what’s missing, it seems to me, is a political strategy for Afghanistan.

I think General McChrystal’s report is quite good. I don’t think very many people in Washington have read it, but I have. Everybody’s talking about it, but that’s typical in Washington. Everybody talks about something when they have only read the headline and maybe the first three paragraphs of the news report about it. But I’ve actually had a chance to read the report. It’s good. The central thesis in General McChrystal’s report—and Colonel Meese was speaking to this—is that only the Afghan people can win this war, but the Afghans are sitting on the sidelines because they think we’re going to pull out, and they don’t want to be on the losing side of what would be a very traumatic transition if we were to pull out. So they’re sitting back. McChrystal argues that to get them into the fight, we’re going to have to demonstrate that we’re committed to staying with them and to making them successful. Therein lies his rationale for needing to add 40,000 more troops.

I find the report compelling, and I agree with it. But I would also have to say that General McChrystal’s report doesn’t answer these larger political questions: Who gets the Afghans off the bench and into the fight? What are they fighting for? What’s the pathway of political success?

If we don’t know how to answer these questions, if we don’t have a strategy for the political evolution—because we’re not going to kill our way to success in Afghanistan—we’ve got to take the pressure off the back so that we can create a political formula for success. We’re not going to do it through “kinetic means”—the military’s new euphemism. We can be defeated by kinetic means from the other guy’s side. We’re not going to succeed unless we have a political strategy. The question is “What is that strategy?” Here is what I think is proving to be so difficult for the president and his advisors: developing a political strategy for Afghanistan and a strategy, frankly, that you can explain coherently to the American people.

I think there are three generic paths for a political strategy for Afghanistan. The first—and it’s the path we’ve been on for eight years—is to build a coherent and effective central government. This new government would reach out and bring structure to Afghan society. This goal has been seriously damaged by the last Afghan election [in August 2009]. President Hamid Karzai, whether it was by his direction or by his partisans, clearly rigged the election, and the election didn’t carry much legitimacy. As you’ve seen in recent weeks, he has agreed—through our intimidation, frankly—to hold a new election. This new election most likely will cause him to be reelected. It is
possible that his main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, could squeak it out, but if he does, his election will be without a mandate. And the reach of the government doesn’t go very far beyond Kabul. We’ve been trying to build central institutions, to build up the government in Afghanistan. It’s been pretty good for the U.S. Army, but building up the Afghan police has not been as successful, and we have serious problems with police force.

In any event, if we were to start over with this first strategy—trying to build a central government—we’re talking about years, probably decades. And there are other obstacles, especially after this election. I talk to many people, especially when I travel. I try to strike up conversations, and it’s astounding how damaging that last election was. The overwhelming sentiment in America is “Why are we there for a guy who just stole an election?” It’s been very corrosive. And in any event, it would take a long time to rebuild a central government. So that pathway looks fraught with peril.

The second generic approach to a political solution would be one that is more analogous to the experience we had in Iraq—especially in the Anbar province, where we start by building up relationships with local tribal leaders. Political legitimacy grows from the bottom, not from the top. This is one of the mistakes we have made in Iraq. We continue to think we can build a government by coming in, finding somebody bright and shiny who speaks English, making them the president or the king, and it will all flow from there. But it doesn’t. We’ve found that political legitimacy grows from the bottom.

Let me give you a little anecdote. This isn’t very pleasant, but it illustrates the point powerfully: Three years ago, when I was in Iraq, I was in the Anbar province, and I was talking to our commanding general officer. This was about three or four months into this new phase in which we were working with the Sunni sheiks in creating a new atmosphere. We called it the Shia Awakening, or the Anbar Awakening, but in many ways it was the American Awakening. In Iraqi society there are big sheiks and medium-sized sheiks and little sheiks, and there was a medium-sized sheik who was not with the program, and he was continuing to issue a lot of hot anti-American rhetoric.

Our commander was getting worried about this, so we went to the big sheik, who was a little higher up than this guy, and said, “We’re not happy about this. We’re working with you, and we followed through on everything we said, but this guy’s off the program, and we want you to talk to him.”

The big sheik said, “Okay, I’ll talk to him, and if he doesn’t change, you can kill him, and I promise you we won’t give him a tribal funeral.”

That changed everything. Now, that’s political legitimacy we don’t understand, but that’s the sort of legitimacy of political power that is typical in tribal societies.

So this second strategy is a strategy that starts at the local level—not at the Kabul level but at the local level: finding leaders who are willing to work with us and finding ways to help them be effective in working with us. We know this strategy will work. We’ve seen it work and we’re making it work.
today in Iraq, but it takes time. Afghanistan is a far more complicated country than Iraq. If you speak Arabic you can get around anywhere in Iraq, but in Afghanistan there are 17 major language groupings. From valley to valley you are talking about different societies, so it’s a dramatically harder problem.

This is very tough pick-and-shovel work. Not only do you have to work at that level, you also have to find ways of bringing the sheiks together at increasingly higher levels so that you can aggregate this local political authority into higher, more effective units. We know how to do that; indeed, there’s a foundation for that. When we created the government in Kabul, after we overthrew the Taliban, we called the loya jirga, or “grand council.” This is a very familiar structure in Afghan society and in Muslim cultures. This is not something we don’t know how to do, but it’s going to take a lot of time, again measured probably in decades. The American public is weary of this war, and they are obsessed with the weakness in our economy. They would love to walk away from this burden. I don’t know that we have decades of patience.

There’s a third alternative we could pursue, and that is to take a page out of the old cynical playbook that the colonial empires used when they moved into places like Afghanistan. A technique largely used by these metropol powers was to find and understand the local power structure and manipulate it. It’s frankly one of the reasons why we see the borders the way they are in Afghanistan. Forty-five percent of all Pashtuns live in Afghanistan; 55 percent live in Pakistan. That was intentional.

There are two power axes that intersect Afghanistan. One is a Saudi-Pakistan Taliban axis, and the other is a Russian-Iranian-Indian axis. The question is “Is it possible to manipulate these two power structures, hopefully without retriggering the civil war (this was the fault line of the civil war for the 15 years before we overthrew the Taliban), so as to give us space so that we can get out?” This is a very tricky thing to do, of course, because it assumes that they’re passive while we’re manipulating them when in fact they’re going to manipulate us. It’s a complex game that we would have to play.

These are really the three practical pathways that are confronting the president and his advisors. Again, we could throw another 40,000 troops in, and I think we could stabilize the current deteriorating security environment of Afghanistan, but that doesn’t provide a political answer for how this ends. And the question is “How does this end?”

There was once a time when it was going to end when we brought a flourishing democracy to Afghanistan. We’re not going to do that anymore. There is no will to sustain an effort of that complexity and depth and duration. I think we are going to measure America’s patience in maybe single-digit years or double-digit months. We don’t have a lot of time, and we do have to develop a strategy. I think the hard part for the president is to develop a strategy that you can honestly explain to the American public that
doesn’t sound just terribly cynical. That’s why I think it’s taking so long to do this.

I personally would agree to McChrystal’s request right now, because any one of these three generic strategies is still going to require that we stabilize the security environment. If the opponent is convinced he’s winning, there is no political strategy. So you cannot build a political strategy when you’re in retreat. And we do have to find a way in which America can walk out of Afghanistan, not crawl out of Afghanistan. That’s the challenge in front of us. It will take some time. I, probably like you, feel that we’re getting to the edge of the time when the president needs to give the American people a plan. I do understand, however, that he has a much more complicated problem to deal with than does General McChrystal. How we find that pathway forward is going to be the most important political decision that President Obama is going to make, probably of his presidency, certainly of this year.

Soon after the conference at which this speech was delivered, President Obama announced his strategy for Afghanistan. Dr. Hamre subsequently authored the following as an addendum to this speech:

On December 1, 2009, at the United States Military Academy at West Point, President Obama announced his strategy for Afghanistan. At the outset the president said that our goals remain unchanged: “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” To accomplish this, his strategy consists of three primary pillars.

First, he agreed to expand U.S. military forces by an additional 30,000. This would be complemented by an increase in NATO allied contributions of 5,000. Thus the combined total would nearly equal General McChrystal’s call for an additional 40,000 troops. This announcement was accompanied by a rather confusing reference to beginning the withdrawal of these same forces in 18 months, though administration spokesmen subsequently said that this withdrawal would be “conditions-based” and not on a rigid timetable. Complementing the buildup of American and NATO forces, President Obama called for a substantial increase in the number of Afghans in the Afghan army and Afghanistan police forces. A third of the U.S. troop increment would be devoted to training the larger Afghan security forces.

Second, the president called for a new political strategy. His speech couched it in terms of Afghanistan accepting responsibility to establish a government system worthy of Western support. While he said he would work with President Karzai, there was an important statement that the coalition forces would “support local leaders” who cooperated with the coalition forces in confronting the insurgents. In essence, the president basically adopted the second approach to a political solution noted earlier in this speech.

Third, President Obama noted that Pakistan is the key to securing a stable future for Afghanistan and, in the process, a stable future for itself. Last autumn the Pakistan army finally roused itself to confront insurgents in the federally administered tribal
areas of northwest Pakistan. This commitment by the Pakistan army to police the region created a strategic opportunity that had not been present in recent years. So the president called for a substantial increase in support for Pakistan.

Taken together, it would appear that President Obama has opted for a hybrid strategy that combines features of all three of the options noted earlier in this speech. Strengthening the Afghan army will help bolster a wobbly central government in Kabul. Working with local tribal leaders shifts the emphasis of political legitimacy to the grassroots level. And partnering more intensively with Pakistan brings in a regional solution to put pressure on the Taliban to oust Al Qaeda.

Will America have the patience to wait for progress for this strategy? Herein, I believe, lies the purpose of the ambiguous reference to withdrawal in 18 months. No military commander would welcome a timetable for action when the initiative is on the side of the enemy. And in the days after the speech, the secretary of defense went to some lengths to reassure Congress that there was no rigid timetable and that withdrawal of forces would depend on conditions on the ground. The original draft of the president’s speech did not contain reference to an 18-month start for withdrawals. That, evidently, was penned into the final draft within hours of its delivery. It reflects, I think, the fragile consensus that exists in the country. It also means that there will have to be a tangible sense of progress sometime during the coming year.

For now, winter has set into the mountains of Afghanistan, greatly reducing the intensity of the insurgency. America and its NATO allies now have six months to put in motion the details of this strategy. It is a practical strategy that has a chance to work. But it will require steely nerves and patience from a tired and preoccupied American electorate. President Obama noted in his speech that “years of debate over Iraq and terrorism have left our unity on national security in tatters and created a highly polarized and partisan backdrop for this effort.” For now there is acceptance of this new strategy, but only the president can bridge over this highly polarized and partisan landscape, and that will require continuing efforts, most likely through the rest of his presidency.
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