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or +1 (703) 428-0711 +1

**Submitted Statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee**

*As Submitted by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Washington, D.C., Tuesday, September 23, 2008*

Mr. Chairman, Senator Warner, members of the committee:

Thank you for inviting me to give you an update on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I would also express gratitude to the Congress for passing legislation to enhance the benefits of the GI Bill. The Department is very pleased with the outcome, and I can tell you that our men and women in uniform are deeply appreciative. Of course, this is just one example of the many ways in which you have supported our troops these past years. On behalf of all of them, I thank you.

I would also like to take this occasion to encourage this committee to act as soon as possible on the nominations of Mike Donley to be the Secretary of the Air Force, and General William Fraser III to be the service's vice chief of staff. As you know, the Air Force is undergoing a critical period of transition and renewal, and it is vitally important that the full leadership team is in place and confirmed. Earlier this month, General Petraeus made his recommendations on the way forward in Iraq. Separate recommendations were submitted by the commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, the commander of Central Command, the service chiefs, and the Chairman. Although each viewed the challenges from a different perspective, weighing different factors, all once again arrived at similar recommendations.

We have already withdrawn the five Army brigade combat teams, two Marine battalions, and the Marine expeditionary unit that were sent to Iraq as part of the surge. The President announced earlier this month that approximately 8,000 U.S. troops will be withdrawn from Iraq by February without being replaced. The withdrawal of approximately 3,400 non-combat forces – including aviation personnel, explosive ordnance teams, combat and construction engineers, military police, and logistics support teams – began this month, continues through the fall and winter, and finishes in January. In addition, a Marine battalion stationed in Anbar will return in November, and another Army BCT will return by early February. This continuing drawdown is possible because of the success achieved in reducing violence and building Iraqi security capacity. Even with fewer U.S. troops in Iraq, the positive trends of the last year have thus far held – and in some cases steadily continued in the right direction. U.S. troop casualties have been greatly reduced – though even one is still too many, and overall violence is down more than 80 percent. The recent turnover of Anbar province to Iraqi provincial control – the 11th of 18 provinces to be turned over – highlights how much the situation has improved.

There are other positive indicators: