United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 15, 2011

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express our strong support for a shift in strategy and the beginning of a sizable and sustained reduction of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, beginning in July 2011.

In 2001 the United States rightfully and successfully intervened in Afghanistan with the goals of destroying al Qaeda's safe haven, removing the Taliban government that sheltered al Qaeda, and pursuing those who planned the September 11 attacks on the United States. Those original goals have been largely met and today, as CIA Director Leon Panetta noted last June, "I think at most, we're looking at maybe 50 to 100, maybe less" al Qaeda members remaining in Afghanistan.

In addition, over the past few years, U.S. forces have killed or captured dozens of significant al Qaeda leaders. Then, on May 2, 2011, American Special Forces acting under your direction located and killed Osama bin Laden. The death of the founder of al Qaeda is a major blow that further weakens the terrorist organization.

From the initial authorization of military force through your most recent State of the Union speech, combating al Qaeda has always been the rationale for our military presence in Afghanistan. Given our successes, it is the right moment to initiate a sizable and sustained reduction in forces, with the goal of steadily withdrawing all regular combat troops.

There are those who argue that rather than reduce our forces, we should maintain a significant number of troops in order to support a lengthy counter-insurgency and nation building effort. This is misguided. We will never be able to secure and police every town and village in Afghanistan. Nor will we be able to build Afghanistan from the ground up into a Western-style democracy.

Endemic corruption in Afghanistan diverts resources intended to build roads, schools, and clinics, and some of these funds end up in the hands of the insurgents. Appointments of provincial and local officials on the basis of personal alliances and graft leads to deep mistrust by the Afghan population. While it is a laudable objective to

attempt to build new civic institutions in Afghanistan, this goal does not justify the loss of American lives or the investment of hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars.

Instead of continuing to be embroiled in ancient local and regional conflicts in Afghanistan, we must accelerate the transfer of responsibility for Afghanistan's development to the Afghan people and their government. We should maintain our capacity to eliminate any new terrorist threats, continue to train the Afghan National Security Forces, and maintain our diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. However, these objectives do not require the presence of over 100,000 American troops engaged in intensive combat operations.

Mr. President, according to our own intelligence officials, al Qaeda no longer has a large presence in Afghanistan, and, as the strike against bin Laden demonstrated, we have the capacity to confront our terrorist enemies with a dramatically smaller footprint. The costs of prolonging the war far outweigh the benefits. It is time for the United States to shift course in Afghanistan.

We urge you to follow through on the pledge you made to the American people to begin the redeployment of U.S. forces from Afghanistan this summer, and to do so in a manner that is sizable and sustained, and includes combat troops as well as logistical and support forces.

We look forward to working with you to pursue a strategy in Afghanistan that makes our nation stronger and more secure.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey A. Merkley

Tom Udall

Sherrod Brown

Ben Cardin

Max Baucus

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Henry Waxman

Kirsten E. Gillibrand

Mark Udall

Patty Murray

Patrick Leahy

Rand Paul

Barbara Boxer

Mary L. Landrieu

Bernie Sanders

Debbie Stabenow

Charles Schumer

Frank R. Lautenberg

Amy Klobuchar

Maria Cantwell

Al Franken