Foreign Policy at the September 12, 2019

Democratic Presidential Debate

MUIR: George, thank you. I want to turn now to our troops overseas and to America's longest war in Afghanistan. U.S. talks with the Taliban are dead, according to the president. Secret talks at Camp David have been canceled before they could happen. Many of you have weighed in on that already, so I want to move past that tonight to what all of you have promised on the campaign trail.

Many of you on this stage have said you'd bring the troops home in your first term. Others have said in your first year. Senator Warren, we all know the presidency is much different from the campaign trail. President Obama wanted to bring the troops home. President Trump promised to bring the troops home. And you have said of Afghanistan, let's help them reach a peace settlement. It is time to bring our troops home, in your words, starting right now. Would you keep that promise to bring the troops home starting right now with no deal with the Taliban?

WARREN: Yes. And I'll tell you why. What we're doing right now in Afghanistan is not helping the safety and security of the United States. It is not helping the safety and security of the world. It is not helping the safety and security of Afghanistan. We need to bring our troops home.

And then we need to make a big shift. We cannot ask our military to keep solving problems that cannot be solved militarily.

(APPLAUSE)

We're not going to bomb our way to a solution in Afghanistan. We need to treat the problem of terrorism as a worldwide problem, and that means we need to be working with all of our allies, our European allies, our Canadian allies, our Asian allies, our allies in Africa and in South America. We need to work together to root out terrorism.

It means using all of our tools. It means economic investment. It means expanding our diplomatic efforts instead of hollowing out the State Department and deliberately making it so we have no eyes and ears in many of these countries. We need a foreign policy that is about our security and about leading on our values.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Senator Warren, a quick follow on that, because top U.S. leaders, military leaders on the ground in Afghanistan told me you can't do it without a deal with the Taliban. You just said you would, you would bring them home. What if they told you that? Would you listen to their advice?

WARREN: I was in Afghanistan with John McCain two years ago this past summer. I think it may have been Senator McCain's last trip before he was sick. And I talked to people — we did — we talked to military leaders, American and local leaders, we talked to people on the ground and asked the question, the same one I ask on the Senate Armed Services Committee every time one of the generals comes through: Show me what winning looks like. Tell me what it looks like.

And what you hear is a lot of, "Uh," because no one can describe it. And the reason no one can describe it is because the problems in Afghanistan are not problems that can be solved by a military.

I have three older brothers who all served in the military. I understand firsthand the kind of commitment they have made. They will do anything we ask them to do. But we cannot ask them to solve problems that they alone cannot solve.

We need to work with the rest of the world. We need to use our economic tools. We need to use our diplomatic tools. We need to build with our allies. And we need to make the whole world safer, not keep troops bombing in Afghanistan.

MUIR: Senator Warren, thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

I do want to stay on this, and I want to turn to Mayor Buttigieg, because you're the only veteran on this stage. You served in Afghanistan. We heard in recent days from General Joseph Dunford, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said in recent days, "I'm not going to use the word withdrawal right now. It's our judgment the Afghans need support to deal with the level of violence." If he's not even using the word withdrawal, would you put your promise to bring troops home in the first year on hold to follow the advice?

BUTTIGIEG: You know, I served under General Dunford, way under General Dunford, in Afghanistan.

(LAUGHTER)

And today, September 12, 2019, means that today you could be 18 years old, old enough to serve, and had not been alive on 9/11. We have got to put an end to endless war.

And the way we do it is see to it that that country will never again be used for an attack against our homeland, and that does not require an open-ended commitment of ground troops.

Let me say something else, because if there's one thing we've learned about Afghanistan, from Afghanistan, it's that the best way not to be caught up in endless war is to avoid starting one in the first place.

(APPLAUSE)

And so when I am president, an authorization for the use of military force will have a built-in three-year sunset. Congress will be required to vote and a president will be required to go to Congress to seek an authorization. Because if our troops can summon the courage to go overseas, the least our members of Congress should be able to do is summon the courage to take a vote on whether they ought to be there.

(APPLAUSE)

By the way, we also have a president right now who seems to treat troops as props, or worse, tools for his own enrichment. We saw what's going on with flights apparently being routed through Scotland just so people can stay at his hotels?

I'll tell you, as a military officer, the very first thing that goes through your mind, the first time you ever make eye contact with somebody that you are responsible for in uniform, is do not let these men and women down. This president is doing exactly that. I will not.

(APPLAUSE)

MUIR: Mayor Buttigieg, thank you.

I want to turn to Vice President Biden, because the concerns about any possible vacuum being created in Afghanistan, if you pulled the U.S. troops out, has been heightened by what we've seen in recent days on the ground in Iraq.

When you were vice president, President Obama turned to you to bring the troops home from Iraq. You have said on the campaign trail, quote, "I made sure the president turned to me and said, Joe, get our combat troops out of Iraq." There was a major drawdown of U.S. troops, and then ISIS seized by some estimates 40 percent of the territory in Iraq. You then had to send thousands of troops back in. Was it wrong to pull out of Iraq that quickly? And did the move actually help ISIS take hold?

BIDEN: No, it wasn't wrong to pull out. But I want to answer your Afghanistan question. I've been in and out of Afghanistan, not with a gun, and I admire my friend for his service. But I've been out of Afghanistan I think more than anybody on this — and it's an open secret, you reported a long time ago, George, that I was opposed to the surge in Afghanistan.

The whole purpose of going to Afghanistan was to not have a counterinsurgency, meaning that we're going to put that country together. It cannot be put together. Let me say it again. It will not be put together. It's three different countries. Pakistan owns the three counties — the three provinces in the east. They're not any part of — the Haqqanis run it. I will go on and on.

But here's the point. The point is that it's a counterterrorism strategy. We can prevent the United States from being the victim of terror coming out of Afghanistan by providing for bases — insist the Pakistanis provide bases for us to air lift from and to move against what we know.

We don't need those troops there. I would bring them home. And Joe Dunford's a fine guy, but this has been an internal argument we've had for eight years.

With regard to — with regard to Iraq, the fact of the matter is that, you know, I should have never voted to give Bush the authority to go in and do what he said he was going to do. The AUMF was designed, he said, to go in and get the Security Council to vote 15-0 to allow inspectors to go in to determine whether or not anything was being done with chemical weapons or nuclear weapons. And when that happened, he went ahead and went anyway without any of that proof.

I said something that was not meant the way I said it.

I said — from that point on — what I was argued against in the beginning, once he started to put the troops in, was that in fact we were doing it the wrong way; there was no plan; we should not be engaged; we didn't have the people with us; we didn't have our — we didn't have allies with us, et cetera.

And it was later, when we came into office, that Barack turned — the president turned to me and said, "Joe" — when they said we've got a plan to get out, he turned to the whole security and said, "Joe will organize this. Get the troops home."

My son spent a year in Iraq, and I understand. It made — and we were right to get the combat troops out. The big mistake that was made, which we predicted, was that you would not have a circumstance where the Shia and the Kurds would work together to keep ISIS from coming — from moving in.

MUIR: Mr. Vice President, thank you.

I want to turn to Senator Sanders on this. Because the concern over Afghanistan is very similar to what we saw in Iraq when the troops came out. ISIS filled that vacuum.

What do you make of people out there who are worried that if we pull out U.S. troops too quickly from Afghanistan, it will create safe haven all over again, like the plotters of 9/11?

SANDERS: David, let me answer that, but let me just comment on something that the vice president said.

You talked about the big mistake in Iraq and the surge. The truth is, the big mistake, the huge mistake, and one of the big differences between you and me, I never believed what Cheney and Bush said about Iraq...

(APPLAUSE)

BIDEN: You're right.

SANDERS: I voted against the war in Iraq

(APPLAUSE)

... and helped lead the opposition. And it's sad to say — I mean, I, kind of, you know, had the feeling that there would be massive destabilization in that area if we went into that war.

As the former chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, I want to pick up on what Pete said. We cannot express our gratitude to all of the men and women who have put their lives on the line to defend them — defend us, who have responded to the call of duty. But I think, also, I am the only person up here to have voted against all three of Trump's military budgets.

(APPLAUSE)

I don't think we have to spend $750 billion a year on the military when we don't even know who our enemy is.

(APPLAUSE)

I think that what we have got to do is bring this world together — bring it together on climate change, bring it together in fighting against terrorism. And make it clear that we as a planet, as a global community, will work together to help countries around the world rebuild their struggling economies and do everything that we can to rid the world of terrorism. But dropping bomb on Afghanistan and Iraq was not the way to do it.

MUIR: Senator Sanders, thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

I want to take this to Mr. Yang. You share the stage, as you know, when when we talk about troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the vice president, who was in the Situation Room, with senators who were on the Senate Armed Services, the Foreign Relations Committees, with an Afghanistan veteran who is on the stage tonight.

As you share the stage with these candidates, what makes you the most qualified on this stage to be commander in chief?

YANG: I've signed a pledge to end the forever wars. We've been in a state of continuous armed conflict for 18 years, which is not what the American people want. We have to start owning what we can and can't do. We're not very good at rebuilding countries.

And if you want proof, all you have to do is look within our own country of Puerto Rico.

(APPLAUSE)

We've spent trillions of dollars to unclear benefits, lost thousands of lives — and thank you, Pete, for your service. And the goal has to be to rebuild the relationships that have made America strong for decades.

I would lead our armed forces with restraint and judgment. What the American people want is simply a president who has the right values and point of view and they can trust to make the right decisions when it comes to putting our young men and women into harm's way. And that's what I would do as president.

MUIR: Mr. Yang, thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

Jorge?

RAMOS: Thank you very much.

(SPEAKING IN SPANISH)

You haven’t been asked about Latin America in the previous debates, so let’s begin. Senator Sanders, one country where many immigrants are arriving from is Venezuela. A recent U.N. fact-finding mission found that thousands have been disappeared, tortured and killed by government forces in Venezuela.

You admit that Venezuela does not have free elections, but still you refuse to call Nicolas Maduro a dictator — a dictator. Can you explain why?

And what are the main differences between your kind of socialism and the one being imposed in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua?

SANDERS: Well, first of all, let me be very clear. Anybody who does what Maduro does is a vicious tyrant. What we need now is international and regional cooperation for free elections in Venezuela so that the people of that country can make — can create their own future.

In terms of democratic socialism, to equate what goes on in Venezuela with what I believe is extremely unfair. I'll tell you what I believe in terms of democratic socialism. I agree with goes on in Canada and in Scandinavia, guaranteeing health care to all people as a human right.

(APPLAUSE)

I believe that the United States should not be the only major country on earth not to provide paid family and medical leave.

(APPLAUSE)

I believe that every worker in this country deserves a living wage and that we expand the trade union movement.

(APPLAUSE)

I happen to believe also that what, to me, democratic socialism means, is we deal with an issue we do not discuss enough, Jorge — it's not in the media and not in Congress. You've got three people in America owning more wealth than the bottom half of this country. You've got a handful of billionaires controlling what goes on in Wall Street, the insurance companies and in the media.

Maybe, just maybe, what we should be doing is creating an economy...

RAMOS: Thank you.

SANDERS: ... that works for all of us, not 1 percent. That's my understanding of democratic socialism.

(APPLAUSE)

RAMOS: Secretary, you wanted to say a quick response — 45 seconds?

CASTRO: Sure, thank you, Jorge. I'll call Maduro a dictator, because he is a dictator.

(APPLAUSE)

And what we need to do is to, along with our allies, make sure that the Venezuelan people get the assistance that they need, that we continue to pressure Venezuela so that they'll have free and fair elections, and also, here in the United States, offer temporary protected status, TPS, to Venezuelans.

(APPLAUSE)

That is something that the Trump administration has failed to do. For all of his big talk about supporting the Venezuelan-American community, he has failed. I will not.

I also believe that we need to do things like a 21st century Marshall plan for Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala...

(APPLAUSE)

... so that people can find safety and opportunity at home instead of having to make the dangerous journey to the United States. And under my administration, we're going to put renewed focus on Latin America. It makes sense. They're our neighbors and we have a lot of things in common. It also makes sense that, because we have a country like China that is going around the world to places like Africa and Latin America, making their own relationships, strengthening those, the United States needs to strengthen its partnerships in Latin America immediately.

RAMOS: Thank you, Senator.

CASTRO: And I will

RAMOS: Senator Booker, let me ask you about Brazil. After the recent fires in the Amazon, some experts suggested that eating less meat is one way to help the environment. You are a vegan since 2014. That's obviously a personal choice, but President Trump and Brazil's President Bolsonaro are concerned that climate change regulations could affect economic growth.

So should more Americans, including those here in Texas, and in Iowa...

(LAUGHTER)

... follow your diet?

(LAUGHTER)

BOOKER: Um, you know, first of all, I want to say no. Actually, I want to translate that into Spanish. No.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

Look, on — let's just be clear. The factory farming going on that's assaulting this corporate consolidation of the agricultural industry, one of the reasons why I have a bill to put a moratorium on this kind of corporate consolidation is because this factory farming is destroying and hurting our environment. And you see independent family farmers being pushed out of business because of the kind of incentives we are giving that don't line up with our values. That's what I'm calling for.

(APPLAUSE)

But I want to — I want to switch, because we don’t have — a crowded debate stage, we were talking about Afghanistan and Iraq. It annoys me that we had a conversation about our troops overseas and we didn’t say one word about veterans in our country.

(APPLAUSE)

We have a shameful reality in America that we send people off to war and they often come home with invisible wounds, hurts and harms. They're disproportionately homeless. You hear stories about women waiting for months for gynecological care through the VA. It is very important that, as we — as a country, understand that we are not going to solve every problem with this outrageous increased militarism, that we also make sure that we stand up for the people that stood for us.

We end our national anthem with "home of the brave." It's about time we make this a better home for our bravest.

(LAUGHTER)

Congressman O'Rourke, Hurricane Harvey hit this town two years ago. And not only is the Amazon burning, Greenland is melting at a record pace. The last five years have been the hottest ever recorded. And we have a viewer's question about this.

What meaningful action will you take to reverse the effect of climate change? And can we count on you to follow through if your donors are against it?

O'ROURKE: Yes, we will follow through, regardless of the political consequences or who it offends, because this is the very future of our planet and our ability for our children and grandchildren to be able to survive on it.

We will make sure that we get to net zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than the year 2050. That we are halfway there by 2030. That we mobilize $5 trillion over the next 10 years to do that. That we invest here in Houston, Texas, with pre-disaster mitigation grants to protect those communities that are vulnerable to flooding given the fact that this town has seen three 500-year floods in just five years, you'd like to think you're good for 1,500 years, but you're not. They're coming faster and larger and more devastating than ever.

We're also going to make sure that we free ourselves from a dependence on fossil fuels and embrace renewable wind and solar energy technology, as well as the high-paying, high-skill, high-wage jobs that come along with that. And that we're going to pay farmers for the environmental services they want to provide. Planting cover crops, keeping more land under conservation, using no-till farming, regenerative agriculture can pull carbon out of the air and can drive it and sequester it into the soil.

That's the way that we're going to meet this challenge and we're going to bring everyone into the solution.

RAMOS: Many of you want to comment. Let's see if we can go very fast. Senator Klobuchar?

KLOBUCHAR: Thank you.

This is the existential crisis of our time. It's — you know that movie "The Day after Tomorrow"? It's today. We have seen a warming in our world like never before. We're seeing flooding in the Midwest, flooding in Houston, fires in the West. And I think having someone leading the ticket from the Midwest will allow us to talk about this in a different way and get it done.

On day one, I will get us back into the international climate change agreement. On day two, I will bring back the clean power rules that President Obama had worked on. On day three, I will bring back the gas mileage standards. You can do all that without Congress, which is good.

On day four, five, and six I will, working with Congress and mayors and business people all over the country, introduce sweeping legislation to get at that 2050 goal. And on day seven, you're supposed to rest, but I won't. This is what we need to do if we're going to get at climate change. We have to take this on as a crisis that's happening right now.

RAMOS: Senator Warren, should American foreign policy be based around the principle of climate change?

WARREN: Yes. We need to work on every front on climate change. It is the threat to every living thing on this planet and we are running out of time. Every time the scientists go back, they say, we have less and less time than we thought we had.

But that means we've got to use all the tools. One of the tools we need to use are our regulatory tools. I have proposed following Governor Inslee, that we, by 2028, cut all carbon emissions from new buildings. By 2030, carbon emissions from cars. And by 2035, all carbon emissions from the manufacture of electricity. That alone, those three, will cut our emissions here in the United States by 70 percent.

We can do this. We also need to help around the world to clean, but understand this one more time. Why doesn't it happen? As long as Washington is paying more attention to money than it is to our future, we can't make the changes we need to make. We have to attack the corruption head-on so that we can save our planet.

(APPLAUSE)

RAMOS: Sen. Harris, 45 seconds.

HARRIS: When I think about this issue, it really is through the lens of my baby nieces who are one-and-a-half and 3 years old. When I look at what is going to be the world if we do nothing, when they turn 20, I am really scared. And when I’ve been in the United States Senate for now the last two-and-a-half years and I look at our counterparts, the Republicans in the United States Senate, they must be looking at their children and then when they look at the mirror, I don’t know what they see, but it’s a lack of courage.

And this is an issue that, yes, it represents a existential threat. It is also something that we can do something about. This is a problem that was created by human behaviors. And we can change our behaviors in a way that saves our planet. I've seen it happen in California.

I took on — as the attorney general of California, I ran the second-largest department of justice in the United States, second only to the United States Department of Justice. I took on the big oil companies and we saw progress. If any of you have been to Los Angeles, 20 years ago, you'll remember, that sky was brown. You go there now, the sky is blue and you know why? Because leaders decided to lead and we took on these big fossil fuel companies.

We have some of the most important and strongest laws in the country and we made a difference. And my point being, I've done it before and I will lead as president on this issue because we have no time, the clock is ticking, but we need courage, and we need courageous leadership. We can get this done.