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COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-6035

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March 31, 2020

To the Members of the Committee on Armed Services:

We want to update HASC members and staff on plans for our committee during the month of April, given the nationwide disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One challenge is deciding how to handle meetings of the committee and subcommittees since all such meetings for April will have to be held by conference call or video conference.

We must continue to exercise our oversight responsibilities and prepare to pass the Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) out of committee and off the House floor. Our goal is to have the bill ready to go by May 1st, and we will schedule the date of the mark up once the House schedule for the next few months becomes clear.

First, we want you all to understand that because of House rules we cannot hold public hearings or classified briefings in the formal sense like in normal circumstances. We will have to do what can best be called, informal events.

Public hearings are required to be open to the public. They also require a quorum, involving the physical presence of members. Neither of these things are possible to achieve in conference calls or video conferences. Obviously, we also cannot have classified briefings over the phone or on video. There is no way to set up secure connections amongst the number of people that would have to be involved.

Informal events, therefore, would take the form of the full committee or the subcommittees doing video or phone conferences and linking up the necessary members, staff, and witnesses. We have one such informal event, set for April 1st with Department of Defense officials to discuss their response to the pandemic. This will be a conference call.

We believe that future informal events like this for the month of April make sense, and welcome any suggestions from members on appropriate topics and witnesses. But, we hope members will keep in mind some of the responsibilities that will need to be balanced in deciding when to pull together such informal events.

We face three significant limitations during the month of April when it comes to setting up these informal events. First, HASC staff and members, as they always are in the month leading up to finalizing full and subcommittee marks, are spending an enormous amount of time doing the work necessary to get the mark done. In fact, we did not plan on having a significant number of public hearings or briefings in April even before the shutdown happened due to this staff workload. Second, these are not normal times. As we're sure all of you have been doing, we and the HASC staff and everyone at the Department have been fully engaged on managing the pandemic crisis. It is a complex problem and the Department plays a crucial role. We are all working countless angles to address the crisis and that crucial work must be given priority. Finally, efforts to prevent the spread of the virus among Department personnel and others will without question limit the ability of the Department and other witnesses to be available at times in the coming month.

In the face of all this we will put together these informal events when we think they are needed for us to do our job—to get our bill done, to exercise the necessary oversight of the Department, and to do what we can to address the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. But, do understand that informal events meant to substitute for normal public hearings and briefings are very far from the only or even the main thing that our committee is doing to meet our responsibilities on these three crucial issues. We are all working tirelessly in a myriad of ways to get those jobs done.

Thank you all for your great work in Congress and on our committee. We are absolutely committed to getting our bill done and using all of the resources at our disposal to meet the challenge of the pandemic and continue to do the important work our committee does.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Adam Smith".

Adam Smith
Chairman

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mac Thornberry".

William "Mac" Thornberry
Ranking Member

AS/WMT:wsj