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Ranking Member Smith Opening Statement (As Delivered) for Full Committee Hearing on “Department of Defense FY27 Budget Request”

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Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate those opening remarks. I want to start by agreeing with you on the last point. Our troops have performed incredibly well in the last 15 months. They have been asked to do more than anyone expected, and they have demonstrated the incredible capability of the United States military. I think we should all recognize that even if we question the strategy, some of the decisions behind it, our troops deserve nothing but our praise for the incredible job that they have done. It has not been perfect. Certainly, mistakes have been made, but we have demonstrated to the world that we have a highly capable military.

And I hear the chairman on the need for an increased budget. I think there's a whole lot of needs across the United States of America that would have the same attitude about health care, about education, about infrastructure. But the problem is we have a \$40 trillion debt, and we insist on cutting taxes for absolutely everybody. So, we reduce the amount of revenue that is available to do that. We also have to have a national security strategy that lives within a sound fiscal picture. Most experts would say that the most profound threat to our national security right now is exactly that—our fiscal picture. How are we going to continue to be able to afford to fund the things we need to fund as we run the debt ever higher? The other thing worth worrying about is the Pentagon has not yet passed an audit. If we give them what is roughly a 50- to 60-percent increase, is that money going to be well spent? We have every reason to doubt that.

Now, I will say, and I praise the chairman, this committee, in a bipartisan, bicameral way, we have tackled the problem of acquisition reform. I think last year's bill put us on a good trajectory to get to the point where we can, in fact, innovate faster at scale. I also believe the Pentagon has been working on that. We've had many meetings with Deputy Secretary Feinberg, who has focused on that. But we've got a long way to go. Can the Pentagon really absorb another \$500 or \$600 billion, depending on what the supplemental and the reconciliation package are? I don't think so. We need to pay as much attention to how we're spending the money as to how much

we're spending, and we never seem to do that. But the larger problem is the strategy that has been put before us. I looked through the secretary's remarks, and I've heard you give speeches before about this, about how realism is our strategy, and I find that absurd given what we are doing. You can say a lot of things about the strategy but calling it realistic. We started a full-scale war in the Middle East against Iran to try to reshape the Middle East. Now, we can talk about that in a bunch of different ways, but it is the exact opposite of realism. And in fact, starting wars in the Middle East that get out of control and lead us to have far greater costs than the benefits is one of the cornerstones of the unrealistic strategy that this administration has criticized over and over and over again. And yet here we are, in a full-scale Middle East war, and we've seen the costs of that. Certainly, at the top of that list is 13 U.S. service members killed and hundreds wounded. But it goes way beyond that. Thousands of civilians have been killed. Over a dozen countries now have been dragged into this war in one way or another. The Israel-Lebanon war has exploded since this war started. We now have a conflict between the Shia militias in Iraq and Kurdistan that is straining, to put it mildly, our relationship with Iraq and also causing greater chaos throughout the Middle East.

We see the impact on the economy. Certainly, here at home, gas prices are up by over a dollar. The impact of the fertilizer increase is going to come later as food prices skyrocket. But what is happening to us is a small part of what's happening to the rest of the world. Certainly, the Middle East's economy has been tossed up in the air, but dozens of countries are rationing gasoline as we speak and experiencing extreme economic pain because of this war. So, there's nothing realistic about that. And one of the big questions that we need to get answered today is: Where is this going? What is the plan to achieve our objectives? We've seen the cost and the cost is very, very high. All we keep hearing on the objectives is we keep seeing all of the targets that we have struck. And again, that is an incredible accomplishment from a tactical standpoint. I think the proficiency of our military has been on display. But we're not in this for a tactical advantage. We're in this to fundamentally change Iran. And as we sit here today, Iran's nuclear program is exactly what it was before this war started. They have not lost their capacity to inflict pain. They still have a ballistic missile program. They're still able to blockade the Strait of Hormuz and have ships that are capable of doing that. What is the plan to get that to change? And most disturbingly, the president keeps telling us that it's over. What was it? A week ago, Friday, the president announced that Iran had agreed to give up their nuclear program to give up their ballistic missile program, to stop support for terrorist groups to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. The only problem with that is literally none of that was true. He was completely making it up. Iran hadn't even agreed to meet with us, as became embarrassingly clear as the day spun out and poor J.D. Vance had to keep going back and forth to the airport. We never even had a meeting. So, wish fulfillment is not really a strategy. I mean, maybe the president thinks he's doing some sort of Jedi mind trick, and he can tell Iran, you will give up your nuclear weapons, and they automatically will. But that's not working. So, what we need to hear today is what is going to work. We have 50,000 troops in the region who are still at risk. How are those tactical victories going to translate into some sort of strategic success? And by the way, this is one of the things that realism recognizes. You can win a whole lot of little, small battles and lose the war, which is why you don't stumble into the war in the first place. But at the same time, we are doing all of this on our own as we increasingly push away all of our allies, sometimes just because we want to do what we want to do, we don't want to have to consult them, sometimes just gratuitously insulting them. I mean, in the middle of this war where we were asking NATO to come join us,

the president took time out to insult President Macron and his wife. Okay, how is that helping us? To try and belittle everybody in the world? And also, for the people who are criticizing NATO over this war, I will remind people that NATO is a defensive alliance. What that means is every country in it pledges to defend a country if attacked. And when we were attacked on 9/11, that's what NATO did. They put in Article 5, and for 20 years they fought beside us. NATO is not, if any one of the countries decides to unilaterally and unwisely start a war precipitously that everyone else is supposed to join, that's not the way it works. So berating and belittling our allies after we did that, and driving them ever further away from us, how was that realistic? Not only are we going to try to reshape the Middle East, but we're going to do it alone while we're pushing everybody away from us.

And then we have other tools in our arsenal. You see those numbers on the budget. But the State Department's really important. Development is really important. These are ways to achieve our ends, and we have moved away from that. We got rid of the entire USAID, literally causing the starvation of children and countries where we had pledged to provide food, you know, causing massive health care disruptions, people literally dying, because we've cut that off in diplomacy. We have sidelined, again, the entire world. France and the UK have brought together 44 different countries that have an interest in trying to open up the Strait of Hormuz. We've pushed them all aside, and then we've even pushed aside our own diplomatic corps. We have a very, very talented State Department. I praised today the talent of our military, and I will stand by that. They deserve that praise. Our diplomatic corps deserves that praise, too. But we shoved them all to the side in favor of two real estate guys who are going to go negotiate all the deals in the world, which to date, by the way, has yielded exactly nothing. So, there's nothing realistic about starting a war in the Middle East, going it alone and pushing aside all diplomacy and all development and all other tools in our arsenal.

And on top of that, of course, we also want to dominate the entire Western Hemisphere, including apparently annexing Canada and invading Greenland. How is any of that realistic? And then the administration comes before us and asks for what is a hopelessly unrealistic budget in this environment. Back in that chart there, when we were showing how much money we were spending on defense, we had a balanced budget. We had a surplus, many years. We don't have that anymore. So, call this strategy whatever you want to call it, but please don't call it realism. It's not. Forgive me, it reminds me of one of my favorite lines from *The Princess Bride*—it's a tense morning, I want to lighten it up a little bit—when the guy keeps saying “inconceivable” when things happen, and finally the guy says to him, “You keep using that word. I don't think you know what it means.” I don't think we know what the word realism means. So please, can we not have the realism conversation? Let's have the conversation about what the strategy actually is.

And I'm sure you have a different definition of it than I do. But as I look at it, the strategy seems to be to use as much violence, as much threats, as much coercion as possible to bend the world to our will. I think that is a very dangerous strategy. Because one of the oldest cliches in the military is the enemy gets a vote, and we may think that we can stand up and talk tough and talk about how strong we are and how we're burying our enemies, and they're begging for a deal. We can do that all day long, all right. But the enemy gets a vote. They don't have to do what we tell them to do. And meanwhile, that coercive, violent strategy undermines our credibility in the

world. Because the chairman is absolutely right, and this is one area where I strongly disagree with the folks on the far left who say that we don't really face any threats, that the U.S. is a malign influence in the world and always has been. I don't agree with that. China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, a variety of other transnational terrorist groups, including, yes, narco terrorists and human traffickers over here. They are all trying to weaken us. All right. They don't want a rules-based order. They want to play by their own rules. They want to push us aside. We want to be the side that stands up for the rules. But if what we're saying to the rest of the world is stick with us because we're a better bully than China, we coerce countries more effectively, that undercuts the very message we're trying to spread. To build the coalition we need to be successful.

I also worry about the values that we are showing the world. When the president threatens to kill off an entire civilization, that is the message coming out of the United States of America. If we are going to be this big, powerful force that throws our weight around the world, the world wants to know, at a minimum, that we're doing it for the right reasons and with a sense of values to protect people, not to destroy entire civilizations. And we all hear that, and we all go, "Well, gosh, you know, he probably doesn't mean it." Well, that is so reassuring. Okay, that he's just making it up. We're supposed to be the United States of America. I grew up on stories of the U.S. at the end of World War II, being the country that the Germans wanted to surrender to, not the Russians, because they knew they could trust our values. We don't seem to care about those values. "No rules of engagement. Give them no quarter." All right. That is not who we are supposed to be.

And just one final point on that. The girls' school that got hit in the first days of this war. There is absolutely no question at this point what happened. We made a mistake and that happens in war. We identified this target based on earlier charts. And yet two months after it happened, we refused to say anything about it, giving the world the impression that we just don't care—we do not care about the casualties and the chaos that is caused by our war. And we should care even if we want to prosecute that war. Now, I agree with the chairman. We need a strategy. We face the most complex threat environment that we face in a very, very long time. So, we really want to hear from the administration, don't give us this realism, chest thumping stuff. What are we really going to do to meet those threats, to deal with the challenges we face? And I'll close just by saying one of the other ironies of this, of course, is we have a great example in the world right now of what our strategy should be and where our values should be, and that's Ukraine. And I'm really curious, you know, here we are, we roll out the red carpet for Vladimir Putin. We belittle and insult President Zelensky in the White House. He has no cards, right? Well, here we are a year after that—looks like he had a couple cards to play because Ukraine is actually winning against Russia. Ukraine, a sovereign democracy, standing up against a brutal, oppressive, coercive dictatorship. And we can't even bring ourselves on a consistent basis to say we are with Ukraine and we are against what Putin is doing and stand up and support them. So, I want to see that strategy to meet the complex threat environment that we have. But simply saying we've already won and boasting and bragging and trying to belittle and insult the entire world. That's not going to get us to the posture that we need.

So, I hope we have a conversation about how we can build a strategy that makes sense and is actually realistic. With that, I yield back.