

MICHAEL T. MCCAUL, TEXAS
CHAIRMAN

BRENDAN P. SHIELDS
STAFF DIRECTOR

GREGORY W. MEEKS, NEW YORK
RANKING MEMBER

SOPHIA A. LAFARGUE
DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR



One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

February 5, 2024

Senator Jack Reed
Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee

Senator Roger Wicker
Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee
Russell Senate Building, Room 228
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Reed and Ranking Member Wicker:

When I became Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in January 2023, I immediately launched a thorough and fact-driven investigation into the catastrophic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since then, the Committee conducted over a dozen transcribed interviews of current and former senior State Department officials; held numerous public hearings, including with Gold Star families and Marine Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews; and obtained access to important U.S. State Department and Department of Defense records in coordination with the House Armed Services Committee.

On August 20, 2023, I requested the State Department make Counselor Derek Chollet available for a transcribed interview due to his pivotal role in the Afghanistan withdrawal throughout 2021.¹ After months of negotiation with the State Department and numerous accommodations by the Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Chollet appeared for his transcribed interview on December 19, 2023.

I have been closely following Mr. Chollet's confirmation hearing before your committee, and it is my duty to notify you that I have grave concerns about Mr. Chollet's candor and fitness to serve. Therefore, I must advise against his confirmation as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. I do not make this recommendation lightly; during his transcribed interview, Mr. Chollet exhibited not only a failure to take accountability for his role in the withdrawal but also a disregard for Congress.

Following President Biden's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, Mr. Chollet publicly proclaimed, when commenting on his working relationship with Secretary of State Antony

¹ Letter from Michael T. McCaul, Chairman, U.S. House of Rep. Comm. on Foreign Aff. (HFAC), to the Hon. Antony Blinken, Sec'y of State, U.S. Dep't of State (Aug. 30, 2023), <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/8-30-23-McCaul-Letter-to-Blinken-Transcribed-Interviews-B4-5D.pdf>.

Blinken, “I’m a little bit of The Wolf from Pulp Fiction — I’m here to fix problems.”² Mr. Chollet showed an alarming lack of candor during his interview, however, asserting roughly one hundred times that he “did not remember,” or “did not recall” when answering substantive questions pertaining to his role in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.³ As Counselor and “problem solver” for the Department, the frequency with which Mr. Chollet failed to remember key facts strains credulity.

There is no reasonable justification for Mr. Chollet’s lack of answers. He was notified of the transcribed interview months in advance. In addition, as an accommodation, the Committee provided Mr. Chollet with a non-exhaustive list of interview topics in advance of his appearance. Further, State Department attorneys tasked with preparing Mr. Chollet for the interview have been present in every transcribed interview with current Department officials that the Committee has conducted. Mr. Chollet acknowledged in his interview that he met with State Department counsel to prepare for his interview, yet despite this purported preparation, he failed to recall most, if not all, the Committee’s significant inquiries.

Mr. Chollet was presented with over a dozen exhibits by my staff during his transcribed interview, including the transcript of a public speech he gave on March 30, 2021, at the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process Ministerial Conference.⁴ In that speech, Mr. Chollet addressed the Afghanistan peace process at a key inflection point for the Administration, weeks before President Biden’s “go-to-zero” order. Despite having ample opportunity to review the speech and having publicly given it to U.S. allies, Mr. Chollet claimed he could not recall the conference and that it did not “stand out.”⁵

My investigation has shed further light on the disaster that was President Biden’s calamitous withdrawal. A withdrawal that was executed contrary to guidance by senior military leaders and internal State Department warnings. A withdrawal that left hundreds of Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan allies behind and killed 13 heroic servicemembers and wounded countless others at the August 26 Abbey Gate bombing. By all accounts, including his own, Mr. Chollet played a key role in all of this but says he remembers little of import.⁶

² Derek Chollet & Ryan Evans, *A Conversation with the Counselor: Derek Chollet on Navigating the World*, WAR ON THE ROCKS, at 2:11-2:18 (April 13, 2022), <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/a-conversation-with-the-counselor-derek-chollet-on-navigating-the-world/>; see *The Wolf*, FANDOM: TARANTINOPEDIA, https://quentin-tarantino.fandom.com/wiki/The_Wolf (“Winston Wolf, also known as ‘The Wolf’, was a member of the organized crime cartel run by Marsellus Wallace, based out of Los Angeles, California. Wolf’s specialty was cleaning up evidence left behind by Wallace’s men.”).

³ Transcribed Interview with Derek Chollet, Couns., U.S. Dep’t of State, in Rayburn House Office Bldg. (Dec. 19, 2023).

⁴ *Id.*; Derek H. Chollet, *Counselor Chollet Remarks at Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process*, U.S. DEP’T OF ST. (Mar. 30, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-heart-of-asia-istanbul-process/>.

⁵ Transcribed Interview with Derek Chollet, Couns., U.S. Dep’t of State, in Rayburn House Office Bldg., at 124 (Dec. 19, 2023).

⁶ Jim Garamone, U.S. Central Command Release Report on August Abbey Gate Attack, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, (Feb. 4, 2022), U.S. Central Command Releases Report on August Abbey Gate Attack > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News.

Mr. Chollet's feigned forgetfulness reflects a disrespect for Congress' oversight authority under Article I of the U.S. Constitution.⁷ The magnitude of this lack of transparency and obfuscation should disqualify him for Under Secretary of Defense for Policy because he would directly impact the lives of America's service members for years to come.

Sincerely,



Michael T. McCaul
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee

CC:

Rep. Gregory W. Meeks, Ranking Member
House Foreign Affairs Committee

Rep. Mike Rogers, Chairman
House Armed Services Committee

Rep. Adam Smith, Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee

⁷ See generally U.S. CONST. art. I, § 8, cl. 8; *McGrain v. Daugherty*, 273 U.S. 135, 174 (1927) (holding that “the power of inquiry—with process to enforce it—is an essential and appropriate auxiliary to the legislative function”); *Eastland v. U.S. Servicemen's Fund*, 421 U.S. 491, 504 (1975) (holding that “the power to investigate is inherent in the power to make laws”); *Barenblatt v. United States*, 360 U.S. 109, 111 (1959) (holding that “the scope of power of inquiry ... is as penetrating and far-reaching as the potential power to enact and appropriate under the Constitution.”).