I thank the gentleman

from Nebraska for organizing this Special

Order this evening to discuss the

crisis in Syria. In my view, it is really

indisputable that Bashar al-Assad is a

villain who has committed heinous,

mortal crimes with the use of chemical

weapons against his own people.

What is debatable, however, is America’s

policy on Syria and the broader

Middle East. I have raised the issue of

Syria with this administration at numerous

hearings as a member of the

Appropriations Committee. I have also

worked with Syrians in my own community,

and I have the largest population

of Syrian Americans of any

Member of Congress in the United

States. I have met with them. They

have brought to my attention issues of

abducted Christian archbishops who

have been abducted in Syrian and

whose whereabouts, unfortunately, are

unknown. There is a lot of work going

on to try to secure their release, but

that said, you can understand their

concern for that part of the world.

I have spent time, too, in meetings

with America’s wonderful friend, King

Abdullah of Jordan, who has also

shared his perspective on the plight of

the Syrian people. But what I have observed

most of all is a very sad observation,

and that is the friends of the

Syrian regime—Iran, Russia and

Hezbollah—are far more committed to

President Assad than the friends of the

Syrian people—and that would be the

West and the Arab League—are to

these moderate opposition forces.

I had asked Secretary Hillary Clinton—

former Secretary of State Hillary

Clinton—back in February, 2012, if the

administration was prepared to provide

some type of material support to moderate

secular opposition groups given

that it looked like Assad’s government

was very weak, there was a popular uprising,

and it seemed there might be a

better outcome. She was pretty clear

with me at the time that she thought

providing light arms would be of little

help to the opposition in the face of

Assad’s substantial military, with all

his air assets, artillery and armor. To

put it bluntly and short, she really

didn’t want to get too involved at that

time. We really didn’t have much of a

discussion about the benefits to America,

its friends and allies and their interests,

if Iran’s influence in the region

were substantially weakened through

the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad.

I thought at the time that the President

was maybe more concerned about

maintaining his reputation as a Nobel

Peace Prize winner antiwar candidate

than actually developing what I

thought would be a more practical response

for Syria. It just seemed that

inaction and indecision were, and

frankly today, remain the order of the

day.

In the meantime, let’s fast forward

from a year and a half, 2 years ago to

today: al-Nusra and other radical

Islamist terrorist organizations have

rushed into this vacuum and filled the

void, so to speak. So really today there

aren’t any good public policy outcomes

for the United States. The time for the

United States to more constructively

intervene and to reach a more efficacious

resolution, the time for that has

long passed.

So here we are, over these last 21⁄2

years, this Syrian civil war has descended

into both a sectarian and

proxy conflict, and these events have

moved well beyond the United States

ability to control with Iran, Hezbollah,

and Russia fully committed to the

Assad government.

I think we all know, as Mr. FORTENBERRY

knows, we know we have a very

war-weary population which is not

going to support a half-hearted, poorly

thought out military strike which will

only expose the United States and its

friends to greater risks, including the

possibility of a broader regional conflagration.

This could include more

chemical weapons attacks against the

Syrian people and possibly Israel, potential

cyber attacks on American critical

infrastructure in both the financial

services and energy sectors, an unleashed

Hezbollah, and other unforeseen,

asymmetrical responses.

I am deeply concerned about this, as

we all should be. But we can’t just look

at Syria in isolation; we have to look

at it in the much broader context of

the Middle East. Unfortunately, and

I’m going to have to be a bit critical of

the President at this time, witness how

President Obama turned his back on

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in

2011 after 2 weeks of uprisings. Whatever

his faults, whatever his shortcomings,

Hosni Mubarak was a loyal,

30-year friend of the United States—a

lesson learned by our friends and our

allies throughout the region and

throughout the world.

Of course, prior to that incident

there was the Green Revolution in Iran

where we saw a lot of very brave people

in Iran stand up to the Ahmadinejad

regime in Iran. We witnessed that, and

it seemed this administration could

barely utter words of support to these

very brave people who stood up to a tyrant,

Ahmadinejad, who made all sorts

of reckless and inflammatory and hateful

statements against the West and

particularly Israel, and so I was just

astounded that the administration

could barely utter words of support.

Then, of course, we learned about

leading from behind in Libya. Actually,

leading from behind the French and the

British in Libya, to be precise. I was

one of only a handful of Republicans in

the House to support the authorization

for force in Libya—after the fact, but I

supported it. So I’m not an isolationist.

I believe that we have an important

role internationally with the

United States, and we have to be constructively

engaged.

But let’s move forward to 2013.

Bashar al-Assad’s government launches

chemical attacks against his own people.

I believe the intelligence is clear

that he did it, or his government did it,

so I’m not debating those facts, what

appear to be facts. But we witnessed

these chemicals attacks in both the

late spring and again just a few weeks

ago in August, these chemical attacks.

We witnessed the trampling of the red

line set down by the President not once

but twice, maybe more than that for

all I know. And now over 100,000 Syrians

have been killed. What is the

President’s strategy for Syria? I

couldn’t explain it to anybody if they

asked. He talked about pinpricks or his

administration has talked about

pinpricks, shots across the bow, a military

action of days not weeks, and no

intention to topple Assad or to degrade

his military capacity to make war on

his own people, for that matter. I’m

learning a lot about what we will not

do, but I’m not really sure what we’re

trying to do or trying to accomplish.

So a very limited air strike to punish

Mr. Assad is not going to alter the outcome

of the Syrian civil war. What is

the point or purpose? What is the clarity

of mission?

In my view, America’s national interest

is really twofold in Syria. One, we

want to limit Iranian influence in the

region, and, two, the other issue deals

with securing those chemical weapons,

frankly, from both the Assad government

and the radical elements of that

opposition who would probably be just

as inclined to use them. So much so

that King Abdullah of Jordan came to

Members of Congress to express his

real concern about al-Nusra forces getting

too close, dangerously close to a

chemical site in southern Syria, and

that was just a few months ago.

So now we also witnessed, too, there

really is not a coalition of the willing

to tackle Mr. Assad’s crimes. It seems

more a coalition of the unwilling. The

United Nations really doesn’t seem

anywhere to be found, although in recent

days, in the last 24 hours we’re

hearing there might be some discussion

with the Russians about some kind of a

resolution on securing those sites, but

the U.N. is really nowhere to be found.

NATO does not seem to be fully engaged

at all, although maybe some

members are supportive. And, of

course, we’ve witnessed what the British

Parliament did to Prime Minister

Cameron in rebuking him. And so the

British, our beloved friends and allies,

are not going to be engaged in this one,

and so we’re pretty much on our own.

Again, I’ve called this a coalition of

the unwilling. And so I think it would

behoove the United States not to move

in what appears to be almost a unilateral

manner.

I have read, too, recently, that some

of the Arab governments, Saudi Arabia

and others, would be willing to help

pay for some of this mission should we

strike. You know, on the one hand, I

appreciate that. On the other, the

United States military is really not a

mercenary force for anyone. A lot of

folks may be encouraging us or cheering

us on, but it doesn’t seem they are

willing to put people in harm’s way. So

I think we have to keep that in mind as

we talk about this.

I’m going to conclude in a moment,

but I was one of the folks who said it is

always important for the President to

consult with Congress prior to taking

any kind of military action. It’s important

in our system, although I don’t believe

the President necessarily needs a

congressional authorization for what

he has called a very limited airstrike.

But now that he has asked me to engage

in this debate, I owe the President

fair consideration of his policy in

Syria, whatever it may be.

Again, I said call me skeptical; now

you can call me outright opposed. I

have said from day one that the President

didn’t seem to have his heart in

this impending military action. He was

looking for a way out after the U.N.,

the U.K., and NATO, a lot of our

friends were just not willing to go

along, and then the President turned to

Congress as a last resort for an authorization

where he has, of course, run

into very, very heavy skepticism. I just

did see any Churchillian resolve in our

Commander in Chief. Our men and

women in uniform deserve a Commander

in Chief who is full-throated in

support of what is likely to become a

very dangerous military operation and

could possibly spiral out of control.

But more importantly, we have to be

cognizant of the potential consequences

and ramifications for that

action.

I think the President of the United

States owes that to the American people,

to make it clear what his policy is,

what his mission is, not what he’s not

going to do, but what he intends to do.

After the President really threw this

issue to Congress, we witnessed President

Assad’s jubilant supporters celebrating

in the Syrian streets, and I’m

sure the corridors of power in Tehran

and Moscow, and it seems now that

America’s friends and allies watched

this mystifying failure of Presidential

leadership unfold with dismay.

So have our constituents. We have all

received these calls. In my view, and I

am really sad to say this, Barack

Obama may have diminished his own

Presidency in the process, but more

problematically, diminished America’s

standing in the world among both

friend and foe alike, and that’s a real

tragedy.

You know, in this upcoming vote in

Congress, if it’s to come at all at this

point, it is really not so much a vote

on authorizing a military strike or

military intervention in Syria. The

stakes have grown beyond that. It’s

much more a vote of confidence on the

President’s Syrian and broader Middle

East policy. On that score, I have no

confidence.

And I just wanted to say one last

thing. I mentioned I have a very large

Syrian population in my community,

Syrian Americans. They’re great

Americans. They’ve been part of my

community for a long time, largely

Christian, Antioch Orthodox, Greek Orthodox,

Presbyterian and other denominations.

They are scared. I think they know

what Bashar Assad is, and many are

very uncomfortable with what he is.

And on the other hand, they have seen

al-Nusra and al Qaeda, and are absolutely

terrified of that operation.

And so they’re caught in this sectarian

crossfire. They don’t want to be

there. They’re worried about atrocities,

grievous atrocities being committed

against the Christian people of

Syria.

We just witnessed the other day,

there was a story of a small village, I

believe not too far from Damascus,

where the language of Aramaic is spoken;

I guess one of the few places in the

world where it is still spoken.

Why is that significant?

Well, if you’re a Christian, you know

that Aramaic was the language that

Jesus Christ spoke. And to know that

this ancient community—and of course

much of Syria’s an ancient civilization—

to know that these people could

be under attack when you find out that

al-Nusra forces had entered and intervened,

and I hope they’ve been cleared

out.

But that said, you think about this,

and we worry about the history of mankind

and the history of the Christian

tradition is at risk here, and potentially

a great risk of extermination.

And we’ve witnessed this in Egypt

too. I mean, there are lessons to be

learned from Egypt. When Mubarak

fell, the Christian population, the Coptic

Christian population of Egypt, became

very vulnerable. We know that—

extremely vulnerable. Atrocities committed

against Christians, desecration

of the churches, burning, other terrible

things have happened, and I fear that

we might see similar, if not worse,

things happen in Syria.

So whatever this country chooses,

whatever course of action this country

chooses to pursue, I don’t believe that

a military intervention right now by

the United States would advance

America’s policy objectives; and frankly,

I don’t think it would change the

trajectory of the Syrian civil war.

People have said, well, doing nothing

at all is the worst of all possibilities,

the worst of all options. Well, I would

argue that if we’re not certain what

this limited, so-called limited military

intervention will bring, if we’re very

unclear about that, then I would argue

that no action is better than a limited

action which may not do much of anything

to alter the course of this civil

war. So I think we have to be very cautious

and very restrained.

I do appreciate the gentleman from

Nebraska allowing me this opportunity

to speak on this issue, and for his leadership,

and for allowing me this time.

Will the gentleman yield?

It seems that the policy

of the United States and Syria, since

the beginning of the uprising in Syria,

has largely been one of inaction and detachment.

And, in many respects, we

outsourced the arming of the opposition

forces to many of our good friends:

the Turks, the Qataris, the Saudis, and

others. And whether we like it or not—

and we don’t like it in many respects—

many of the folks who were armed were

people who don’t share our interests

and values, the al-Nusra forces in particular.

But there are moderate forces, and if

the United States had demonstrated

some leadership early in this, during

that conflict, to help identify moderate

secular opposition forces, there probably

could have been multi-ethnic

again and secular, it could have been

Kurdish and Christian and moderate

Sunni, that might have helped bring

about a more legitimate or a better opposition

force that the international

community would be rallying around.

But that, unfortunately, has not happened,

and now you read about large

swaths of territory in Syria dominated

by some opposition forces that have

been rather radicalized; and that’s unfortunate

because there are many elements

of the Free Syrian Army, of

course, who really do want to try to

bring about more representative government

and, I think, would embrace

the values that you and I hold dear.

But, you know, time has passed.

Time has passed, and I just don’t see a

good outcome, as I stated earlier, at

this point. And I just wish—I think the

American people understand this intuitively.

And it also speaks to NATO. What’s

happening with NATO?

It’s a great organization. I believe in

NATO. It’s a collective defense organization.

I believe in its military value

and its political value. But it seems,

since the end of the Cold War, maybe

it’s gone a little bit adrift.

And Turkey has been a loyal friend

and NATO ally for decades. They are

directly affected by this conflict in

Syria. They may make demands of us

and NATO at some point, and we’re

going to have to think that through, as

policymakers, what we would do if our

good friends, the Turks, make a request

of us, and certainly our good

friends in Jordan.

Will the gentleman yield?

I just want to say one

more thing. You know, the President

has said that this red line that was

crossed was not his red line, but the

international community’s red line.

Ninety-eight percent of the world has

opposed chemical weapons use and has

agreed to the various conventions on

chemical weapons.

Unfortunately, 98 percent of the

world isn’t prepared to help us in this

intervention. We’re on our own, and I

just wanted to point that out.