Mr. President,

first, I would like to welcome the

President to the Capitol today. Members

on both sides of the aisle are eager

to hear from him and to share their

own thoughts. We look forward to a

spirited and constructive exchange.

It is often said that of all the questions

we face as lawmakers, none is

more serious or indeed more difficult

than the question of whether to commit

ourselves to military action. That

is why it is so important for us to have

this debate, to lay out the arguments

for and against military action in

Syria, to let the public know where we

stand on this issue and why.

If debates such as this are always

challenging, in some ways this one has

been even more difficult, not because

of some political calculus—though cynics

will always suspect that—no, this

debate has been made more difficult

because even those of us who truly

want to support the Commander in

Chief have struggled to understand the

purpose of the mission.

Over the past several days I have spoken

with a lot of people—a lot of Kentuckians—

and most of them are not exactly

clear about the mission or shy

about saying so. What I have told them

is that I understand their concerns, and

I share them. I also appreciate the war

weariness out there, but then I tell

them there are other potential concerns

we cannot ignore either. Chief

among them is the fact that the credibility

of the Commander in Chief matters,

and related to that is the fact

that we cannot afford, as a country, to

withdraw from the world stage. So no

one should be faulted for being skeptical

about this proposal, regardless of

what party they are in, or for being

dumbfounded—literally dumbfounded—

at the ham-handed manner in which

the White House announced it.

There is absolutely no reason to signal

to the enemy when, how, and for

how long we plan to strike them—none.

As I have said before, we don’t send out

a save-the-date card to the enemy. Yet

there are other important considerations

to keep in mind as well that go

beyond the wisdom or the marketing of

the proposal.

I have spent a lot of time weighing

all of these things. I thought a lot

about America’s obligations and the irreplaceable

role I have always believed,

and still believe, America plays in the

world. I have also thought a lot about

the context, about this President’s vision

and his record and what it says

about whether we should be confident

in his ability to bring about a favorable

outcome in Syria because how we got

to this point says a lot about where we

may be headed. That is why, before announcing

my vote, I think it is important

to look back at some of the President’s

other decisions on matters of

foreign policy and national security

and then turn back to what he is proposing

now in Syria because, in the

end, these things simply cannot be separated.

It is not exactly a State secret that I

am no fan of this President’s foreign

policy. On the deepest level I think it

comes down to a fundamentally different

view of America’s role in the

world. Unlike the President, I have always

been a firm and unapologetic believer

in the idea that America isn’t

just another Nation among many; that

we are, indeed, exceptional. As I have

said, I believe we have a duty as a superpower,

without imperialistic aims,

to help maintain an international

order and balance of power that we and

other allies have worked very hard to

achieve over the years.

The President, on the other hand, has

always been a very reluctant Commander

in Chief. We saw that in the

rhetoric of his famous Cairo speech and

in speeches he gave in other foreign

capitals in the early days of his administration.

The tone, and the policies

that followed, were meant to project a

humbler, more withdrawn America.

Frankly, I am hard pressed to see any

good that came from any of that.

Any list would have to start with the

arbitrary deadlines for military withdrawal

and the triumphant declaration

that Guantanamo would be closed

within a year, without any plan of

what to do with its detainees. There

were the executive orders that ended

the CIA’s detention and interrogation

programs.

We all saw the so-called ‘‘reset’’ with

Russia and how the President’s stated

commitment to a world without nuclear

weapons led him to hastily sign

an arms treaty with Russia that did

nothing to substantially reduce its nuclear

stockpile or its tactical nuclear

weapons. We saw the President announce

a strategic pivot to the Asia-

Pacific region, without any real plan to

fund it, and an effort to end the capture,

interrogation, and detention of

terrorists, as well as the return of the

old idea that terrorism should be treated

as a law enforcement matter. After

a decade-long counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,

we have seen the President’s

failure to invest in the kind of

strategic modernization that is needed

to make this pivot to Asia meaningful.

Specifically, his failure to make the

kind of investments that are needed to

maintain our dominance in the Asia-

Pacific theater in the kind of naval,

air, and Marine Corps forces that we

will need in the years ahead could have

tragic consequences down the road.

His domestic agenda has also obviously

had serious implications for our

global standing. While borrowing trillions

and wasting taxpayer dollars here

at home, the President has imposed a

policy of austerity at the Pentagon

that threatens to undermine our stabilizing

presence around the globe. Of

course, we have seen how eager the

President is to declare an end to the

war on terror. Unfortunately, the world

hasn’t cooperated. It hasn’t cooperated

with the President’s vision or his

hopes. Far from responding favorably

to this gentler approach, it has become

arguably more dangerous. We have

learned the hard way that being nice to

our enemies doesn’t make them like us

or clear a path to peace.

I understand the President ran for office

on an antiwar platform, that his

rise to political power was marked by

his determination to get us out of Afghanistan

and Iraq, and to declare an

end to the war on terror. I know he

would rather focus on his domestic

agenda. But the ongoing threat from Al

Qaeda and its affiliates and the turmoil

unleashed by uprisings in north Africa

and the broader Middle East, not to

mention the rise of Chinese military

power, make it clear to me, at least,

that this is not the time for America to

shrink from the world stage.

The world is a dangerous place. In

the wake of the Arab spring, large

parts of the Sinai, of Libya, of Syria,

are now basically ungoverned. We have

seen prison breaks in Iraq, Pakistan,

Libya, and the release of hundreds of

prisoners in Egypt. Terrorists have

also escaped from prisons in Yemen, a

country that is no more ready to detain

the terrorists at Guantanamo now

than they were back in 2009. And the

flow of foreign fighters into Syria suggests

that the civil war there will last

for years, regardless of whether Asad is

still in power.

Yes, the President deserves praise for

weakening Al Qaeda’s senior leadership.

But the threat we face from Al

Qaeda affiliates is very real. These terrorists

are adaptable. They are

versatile, lethal, resilient, and they

aren’t going away. Pockets of these

terrorists extend from north Africa to

the Persian Gulf and it is time he faced

up to it.

It is time to face up to something

else as well: International order is not

maintained by some global police force

which only exists in a liberal fantasy.

International order is maintained—its

backbone is American military might,

which brings me back to Syria.

For 2 years now Syria has been mired

in a ferocious civil war with more than

100,000 killed with conventional arms.

That is according to U.N. estimates.

This tragic situation has prompted

many to look to the United States for

help. So 1 year ago President Obama

made a declaration: If Asad used or

started moving chemical weapons, he

would do something about it.

Well, as we all know, on August 21 of

this year, that redline was crossed. The

President’s delayed response was to

call for a show of force for targeted,

limited strikes against the regime. We

have been told the purpose of these

strikes is to deter and degrade Asad’s

regime’s ability to use chemical weapons.

So let’s take a closer look at these

aims.

First, no one disputes that the atrocities

committed in Syria in recent

weeks are unspeakable. No one disputes

that those responsible for these

crimes against the innocent should be

held to account. We were absolutely

right, of course, to condemn these

crimes. But let’s be very clear about

something: These attacks, monstrous

as they are, were not a direct attack

against the United States or one of its

treaty allies. And just so there is no

confusion, let me assure everyone that

if a weapon of mass destruction were

used against the United States or one

of our allies, Congress would react immediately

with an authorization for

the use of force in support of an overwhelming

response. I would introduce

the resolution myself. So no leader in

North Korea or Iran or any other

enemy of the United States should

take any solace if the United States

were not to respond to these attacks

with an action against Syria. We will

never—never—tolerate the use of

chemical weapons against the United

States or any of its treaty allies.

Second, in the course of administration

hearings and briefings over the

past several days, Secretary of State

Kerry has revealed that Asad has used

chemical weapons repeatedly—repeatedly—

over the last year. So there is a

further question here about why the

administration didn’t respond on those

occasions.

Third, Asad, as I have indicated, has

killed tens of thousands of people with

conventional weapons. Is there any

reason to believe he won’t continue if

the President’s strikes are as limited

as we are told they would be?

Fourth, what if, in degrading Asad’s

control of those weapons, we make it

easier for other extremist elements

such as those associated with the al-

Nusra Front and Al Qaeda to actually

get hold of them themselves or what if,

by weakening the Syrian military, we

end up tilting the military balance toward

a fractured opposition that is in

no position to govern or control anything

right now?

I think the Chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey, put

this particular best when he recently

suggested in a letter to Congress that

the issue here isn’t about choosing between

two sides in Syria, it is about

choosing one among many sides; and

that, in his estimation, even if we were

to choose sides, the side we chose

wouldn’t be in a position to promote

their own interests or ours. That is the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Then there is the question of how

Asad himself will react to U.S. action

in Syria. If Asad views an air campaign

as preparation for regime change, then

he may lose all constraint in the use of

his arsenal, chemical or otherwise, and

lose any incentive whatsoever to move

to the negotiating table. It is very

clear that the unintended consequences

of this strike could very well be a new

cycle of escalation, which then drags

us into a larger war that we are all

seeking to avoid. Some have even suggested

that the humanitarian crisis

surrounding the Syrian civil war could

actually be made worse as a result of

even targeted U.S. strikes.

In the end, then, the President’s proposal

seems fundamentally flawed

since, if it is too narrow, it may not

deter Asad’s further use of chemical

weapons. But if it is too broad, it risks

jeopardizing the security of these same

stockpiles, potentially putting them

into the hands of extremists.

That is why I think we are compelled

in this case to apply a more traditional

standard on whether to proceed with a

use of force, one that asks a simple

question: Does Asad’s use of chemical

weapons pose a threat to the vital national

security interests of the United

States? And the answer to that question

is fairly obvious; even the President

himself says it doesn’t.

One could argue, as I have suggested,

that there is an important national security

concern at play, that we have a

very strong interest in preserving the

credibility of our Commander in Chief,

regardless of the party in power, and in

giving him the political support that

reinforces that credibility. This is an

issue I take very seriously. It is the

main reason I have wanted to take my

time in making a final decision. But,

ultimately, I have concluded that being

credible on Syria requires presenting a

credible response and having a credible

strategy. For all of the reasons I have

indicated, this proposal doesn’t pass

muster.

Indeed, if, through this limited

strike, the President’s credibility is

not restored because Asad uses chemical

weapons again, what then? And

new targets aimed at toppling the regime

which end up jeopardizing control

of these same chemical weapons stashes—

allowing them to fall into the

hands of Al Qaeda and others intent on

using them against the United States

or our allies. Where would the cycle of

escalation end?

Last night we learned about a Russian

diplomatic gambit to forestall

U.S. military action through a proposal

to secure and eventually destroy

the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile.

This morning there are initial reports

that suggest Syria is supportive

of them. Let me remind everyone that

even if this is agreed to, it is a still a

long way off to reaching an agreement

at the United Nations, to Syria gaining

entry to the chemical weapons convention,

and to eventually securing and

destroying the stockpile. As we have

seen in my own State of Kentucky

where we have been working for 30

years to finally destroy a stockpile of

chemical weapons, destroying chemical

weapons is extremely challenging and

requires a great deal of attention to detail

and safety. Nonetheless, this proposal

is obviously worth exploring.

But, more broadly—and this is my

larger point—this one punitive strike

we are debating could not make up for

the President’s performance over the

last 5 years. The only way—the only

way—for him to achieve the credibility

he seeks is by embracing the kind of

serious, integrated, national security

plan that matches strategy to resources,

capabilities to commitments,

and which shows our allies around the

world that the United States is fully

engaged and ready to act at a moment’s

notice in all the major areas of

concern around the globe, whether it is

the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, or

in the South China Sea, and, just as

importantly, that he is willing to invest

in that strategy for the long term.

In Syria, a limited strike would not

resolve the civil war there, nor will it

remove Asad from power. There appears

to be no broader strategy to

train, advise, and assist a vetted opposition

group on a meaningful scale, as

we did during the Cold War. What is

needed in Syria is what is needed almost

everywhere else in the world from

America right now: a clear strategy

and a President determined to carry it

out.

When it comes to Syria, our partners

in the Middle East—countries such as

Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and

Israel—all of them face real consequences

from instability, refugee

flows, and the growth of terrorist networks.

Responding to this crisis requires

a regional strategy and leadership.

What we have gotten instead is an

administration that seems more interested

in telling us what the mission is

not—more interested in telling us what

the mission is not—rather than what it

is. We have gotten the same timid, reluctant

leadership that I have seen

from the President for nearly 5 years.

As I have said, this decision was not

easy. When the President of the United

States asks you to take a question like

this seriously, you do so. Because just

as our credibility in Syria is tied up

with our credibility in places such as

Iran and North Korea, so too is the

credibility of the Commander in Chief

tied up, to a large extent, with America’s

credibility in general. There is no

doubt about that. So let me repeat: I

will stand shoulder to shoulder with

this President or any other in any case

where our vital national security interests

are threatened, our treaty allies

are attacked, or we face an imminent

threat.

As for Israel, very few people, if anyone,

expect that Syria would test its

readiness to respond on its own, which

just goes to show you the importance

of credibility on the world stage. As

Prime Minister Netanyahu put it last

week, the enemies of Israel have very

good reason not to test its might. But

the Prime Minister should know nonetheless

that America stands with him.

I have never been an isolationist, and

a vote against this resolution should

not be confused by anyone as a turn in

that direction. But just as the most

committed isolationist could be convinced

of the need for intervention

under the right circumstances when

confronted with a threat, so too do the

internationalists among us believe that

all interventions are not created equal.

And this proposal just does not stand

up.

So I will be voting against this resolution.

A vital national security risk is

clearly not at play, there are too many

unanswered questions about our longterm

strategy in Syria, including the

fact that this proposal is utterly detached

from a wider strategy to end

the civil war there, and on the specific

question of deterring the use of chemical

weapons, the President’s proposal

appears to be based actually on a contradiction:

either we will strike targets

that threaten the stability of the regime—

something the President says he

does not intend to do—or we will execute

a strike so narrow as to be a mere

demonstration.

It is not enough, as General Dempsey

has noted, to simply alter the balance

of military power without carefully

considering what is needed to preserve

a functioning state after the fact. We

cannot ignore the unintended consequences

of our actions.

But we also cannot ignore our broader

obligations in the world. I firmly believe

the international system that was

constructed on the ashes of World War

II rests upon the stability provided by

the American military, and by our

commitments to our allies. It is a necessary

role that only we can continue

to fulfill in the decades to come. And

especially in times like this, the

United States cannot afford to withdraw

from the world stage. My record

reflects that belief and that commitment

regardless of which party has

controlled the White House. We either

choose to be dominant in the world or

we resign ourselves and our allies to

the mercy of our enemies. We either

defend our freedoms and our civilization

or it crumbles.

So as we shift our military focus to

the Asia Pacific, we cannot ignore our

commitments to the Middle East, to

stability in the Persian Gulf, to an enduring

presence in Afghanistan, to

hunting down the terrorists who would

threaten the United States and its people.

And when the Commander in Chief

sets his mind to action, the world

should think he believes in it. When

the Commander in Chief sets his mind

to an action, the world should think he

believes in it. Frankly, the President

did not exactly inspire confidence when

he distanced himself from his own redlines

in Stockholm last week.

It is long past time the President

drops the pose of the reluctant warrior

and lead. You cannot build an effective

foreign policy on the vilification of

your predecessor alone. At some point,

you have to take responsibility for

your own actions and see the world the

way it is, not the way you would like it

to be.

If you wish to engage countries that

have been hostile, so be it. But be a realist,

know the limits of rhetoric, and

prepare for the worst.

For too long this President has put

his faith in the power of his own rhetoric

to change the minds of America’s

enemies. For too long he has been more

interested in showing the world that

America is somehow different now than

it has been in the past; it is humbler; it

is not interested in meddling in the affairs

of others or in shaping events.

But in his eagerness to turn the page,

he has blinded himself to worrisome

trends and developments from Tunisia

to Damascus to Tehran and in countless

places in between.

A year ago this month four Americans

were senselessly murdered on sovereign

U.S. territory in Benghazi. Last

month the President ordered the closing

of more than two dozen diplomatic

posts stretching from west Africa to

the Bay of Bengal. As I have indicated,

and as the decision to close these embassies

clearly shows, the terrorist

threat continues to be real. Expressions

of anti-Americanism are rampant

throughout Africa and the Middle East,

even more so perhaps than when the

President first took office.

So the President’s new approach has

clearly come with a cost. And for the

sake of our own security and that of

our allies, it is time he recognized it.

Because if America does not meet its

international commitments, who will?

That is one question that those on the

left who are comfortable with a weakened

America cannot answer, because

the answer is too frightening. No one

will. That is the answer.

If this episode has shown us anything,

it is that the time has come for

the President to finally acknowledge

that there is no substitute for American

might. It is time for America to

lead again, this time from the front.

But we need strategic vision, in the

Middle East and in many other places

around the world, to do it.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.