

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Committee on Oversight and Accountability

Hearing on “The Biden Administration's Disastrous Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Part I: Review by the Inspectors General”

April 19, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Comer, and thank you to each of the witnesses for your important work and for being with us here today.

When I was growing up, we were taught that partisan politics stops at the water's edge. In 1983, after terrorists killed 241 American service members in Lebanon, our country united in responding to this act of savagery rather than blame President Reagan for what the terrorists had done.

Today, however, my colleagues seek to blame the Biden Administration for the cowardly ISIS terror attack at Kabul airport in Afghanistan which stole the lives of 13 American heroes in the final days of the Afghan war. This is not just morally confused and politically cynical but historically disoriented.

More than two decades long, the Afghan War was America's longest war. It spanned four Republican and Democratic presidential administrations. Joe Biden was president during seven of the 238 months of the war, or to put another way, for approximately 3 percent of the duration of the war compared to roughly 20 percent for Donald Trump, 40 percent for Barack Obama and 37 percent for George W. Bush.

The Afghan War cost the lives of more than 2,400 American servicemembers, 3,846 private contractors, more than 1,100 allied servicemembers, more than 66,000 Afghan national military and police, and 47,245 Afghan civilians, without even getting into the Taliban side.

Understanding what led to collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces is vitally important, but it requires looking comprehensively at the dynamics of this massive, decades-long military and nation-building failure—not just the last few months of it.

Today's witnesses have the expertise to explain the structural factors behind the collapse of the Afghan government.

John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction since 2012, repeatedly warned for years that the United States lacked a coherent strategy and had not defined its purposes, had set unrealistic expectations for its reconstruction mission in Afghanistan, did not properly understand Afghan political culture and institutions, and never faced the corruption of the Afghan government. In 2019, Sopko issued a report warning not just of risks created by

the ongoing reconstruction effort but also of risks arising from the Trump Administration's ongoing efforts to negotiate a settlement directly with the Taliban.

Even when we zero in on the final months of the war, my Republican colleagues refuse to examine President Trump's disastrous decision to cut out the Afghan government and negotiate directly with the Taliban and then to enter into a dangerously lopsided agreement with these authoritarian religious fanatics.

In the Trump-Taliban agreement, or Doha Agreement, Trump struck numerous bad deals and fateful bargains with the Taliban that would come back to haunt us, including the release of 5,000 Taliban fighters from prison, many of whom promptly rejoined the insurgents in their battle to recapture Kabul.

Our colleagues have also conveniently ignored President Trump's decision—just four days after Joe Biden was declared the winner of the November 2020 presidential election—to secretly order the withdrawal of all troops by January 15, 2021, a move that stunned his own military generals, and which Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley called, “odd, not standard and potentially dangerous.” After significant pushback, President Trump rescinded his secret order and replaced it with a directive to draw down to 2,500 troops.

Months later, when President Trump begrudgingly left Washington under a cloud of bear mace and tear gas, he did so without providing the Biden-Harris Administration any plans at all on how to safely withdraw the remaining U.S. troops or how to safely evacuate Americans and our Afghan allies within the strict timeline prescribed by the Trump-Taliban Agreement.

This failure was not an accident but was calculated to force President Biden's hand. President Trump later bragged about this maneuver at a rally with his supporters stating, “I started the process. All the troops are coming back home. They couldn't stop the process. They wanted to, but it was very tough to stop the process...”

Trump moved forward with the withdrawal of U.S. troops even as the Taliban increased violent attacks against the Afghan government and refused to sever ties with terrorist groups, including the Haqqani network and al-Qaida.

When President Biden took office in January 2021, he faced a difficult choice: send more American troops back to Afghanistan to defend against the newly revitalized Taliban onslaught in the 20-year civil war or proceed with a full withdrawal from Afghanistan. After extensive consultation, including with his top national security advisors and intelligence personnel, on April 14, 2021, President Biden announced that the final withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan would begin on May 1 and be completed by September 11, 2021.

President Biden's decision to follow through on the Trump-Taliban Agreement was not without risk. Despite careful planning and consensus from the intelligence community and military leadership on the Afghan military's ability to protect Kabul and defend against the Taliban after the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the Afghan government and security forces almost immediately collapsed—far more quickly than expected—forcing the Administration to evacuate more than 120,000 Americans and Afghan nationals within two weeks in what became the largest non-combatant evacuation operation airlift in U.S. history. Tragically, 13 American service members lost their lives during this heroic operation, and we as a nation are forever indebted to them and all of the more than 2,400 servicemembers killed during the 20-year war, for their commitment to America and the people of Afghanistan.

Today, it is imperative that we put partisan politics aside to ensure that the suffering Afghan people continue to receive much-needed humanitarian and diplomatic assistance. Let's work together to find ways to support funding for programs that uplift Afghan women and girls in light of increasing violent repression against women and girls and the Taliban's thoroughgoing misogyny and discrimination. I applaud the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment to delivering aid to the Afghan people while continuing to isolate and condemn the repressive and barbaric Taliban regime.

Our country's essential position as a champion for democracy, human rights, and freedom against authoritarianism and violent fanaticism around the world requires us to engage in fact-based oversight to understand what went wrong with our two-decade mission in Afghanistan.

As Mr. Sopko has stated, serious analysis means examining a series of blunders made across multiple administrations over two decades. We cannot do our faithful duty as Members of Congress by assigning blame on a partisan basis or scoring points in distorted and myopic ways. The fate of democracy, human rights, and women's equality all over the world depends on seriously analyzing what went wrong with our intervention in Afghanistan. Let us be serious to the task.

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