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Was The Fall Of Afghanistan Inevitable? We Asked 8 National Security Experts

By Harry Kazianis

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19FortyFive asked six top experts a simple question: Was the fall of Afghanistan inevitable? Here is what they told us.

Did Afghanistan have to collapse in the way it did just one year ago?

Did Joe Biden have to pull out so quickly and without what I would argue was no strategy at all? I have a lot of mixed emotions on this issue as it is something that has impacted me personally. I know many members of the U.S. military who were deployed to Afghanistan and had their lives changed forever – some friends never came home. Many are dealing with injuries – both mental and physical – that will never truly heal.

There is also the financial cost. America spent trillions of dollars to defeat the Taliban, keep the Taliban at bay, and try to rebuild Afghan society after the 9/11 attacks.

And yet, it all fell apart in what seemed like just a matter of weeks last summer.

Keeping all of this in mind, *19FortyFive* asked eight top experts a simple question: Was the fall of Afghanistan inevitable? Here is what they told us with an expert biography and their answer below it:

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The collapse of the Western-backed government of Afghanistan in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal was inevitable, as Joe Biden himself warned apparently until the moment he was sworn in as president.

The necessary and achievable war aims were killing and capturing as many people involved in the 9/11 attacks, degrading their capabilities, and punishing the Taliban for sheltering them.

Nation-building, as opposed to terrorist-breaking, was always going to fail, especially in a place like Afghanistan. And fail it did. All the king's horses and all the king's men. The only real questions were whether we could have done anything to mitigate the chaos slightly and better position ourselves to project force into Afghanistan post-withdrawal.

Biden's chief failures were not preparing the country for the disturbing images they were always going to see and not recognizing there was little point in observing the polite fiction that the government in Kabul had any meaningful capacity to survive our departure. The withdrawal was a victory for opponents of forever wars, but was executed in a manner that almost seemed designed to discredit them in the future.

Biden's job approval ratings have never recovered.

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While the Afghan government's collapse seemed inevitable to those who spent so many years there, there were several very avoidable mistakes made by the US and our allies that could have possibly made a difference.

Many believed that a government so corrupt as theirs was bound to fail. After the debacle of withdrawing troops there in August of last year, President Biden said as much in a statement. "It's been the graveyard of empires for a solid reason: It is not susceptible to unity," the president said.

However, H.R. McMaster, a national security adviser in the Trump administration and a retired LTG, scoffed at that. "What you're saying is this is inevitable because Afghanistan's always been a 'graveyard of empires? It doesn't even frame the issue properly. We're fighting with Afghans for Afghans against this heinous group of terrorists called the Taliban," he said.

Trying to build a vast over-centralized government was a huge mistake, as Washington tried to build the country in our own image rather than allowing self-governance in the provinces. The US gave President Ghani nearly unrivaled control while only having the support of a narrow base of the population. It was an authoritarian system wrapped around a veneer of being democratic.

The US negotiations with the Taliban in Doha put the handwriting on the wall. Any hope of building a cohesive army was dashed there. The Afghans felt abandoned. Perhaps they would have never gotten to the level where they could defeat the Taliban militarily. But the US has spent more than 70 years in South Korea.

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After four decades of civil war, something like Afghanistan's collapse last year was likely, if not quite inevitable.

Americans were tired of a war that did not serve their interests. Afghans tired of war in which they were the primary casualties.

In late 2001 the US wrecked al-Qaeda and drove the Taliban from power. However, creating a liberal society and Western-style democracy in Central Asia was not achievable at a reasonable cost and in a reasonable time.

Washington failed to understand the terrible impact of its war on Afghans. Observed interpreter Baktash Ahadi: “U.S. forces turned villages into battlegrounds, pulverizing mud homes and destroying livelihoods. One could almost hear the Taliban laughing as any sympathy for the West evaporated in bursts of gunfire.” This made America, along with the corrupt, incompetent, and distant Kabul government, an enemy, and the Taliban, added Ahadi, “the lesser of two evils.”

US officials refused to admit the truth.

The *Washington Post*'s Craig Whitlock detailed how “senior U.S. officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable.”

All three successive administrations created a dependent Potemkin state that could not survive America's withdrawal.

Staying, not leaving, was Washington's mistake.

President Joe Biden meets with advisers before a phone call to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) to discuss the debt ceiling, Tuesday, November 16, 2021, in the Oval Office. (Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith) This official White House photograph is being made available only for publication by news organizations and/or for personal use printing by the subject(s) of the photograph. The photograph may not be manipulated in any way and may not be used in commercial or political materials, advertisements, emails, products, promotions that in any way suggests approval or endorsement of the President, the First Family, or the White House.

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Over the years, commentators and government officials routinely decried American failure in Afghanistan. But after the intervention, the United States did not experience a single 9/11-scale terrorist attack on its soil. And consider the costs of both involvement and inaction. On a single day on September 11, 2001, the US lost more innocent civilians than the US military lost in combatants during two decades of US-led efforts in Afghanistan. No terrorist organization established a safe haven in Afghanistan, while millions of Afghans –especially women, who suffered disproportionately under the Taliban—lived free from the Taliban's tyranny.

But American leadership focused on the fact that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were not –and perhaps could not – be defeated entirely. A commitment to articulating a long-term vision for the American public of what it takes to keep them safe in a post-World War II world had proven too difficult. Instead, a consensus was formed to end so-called “endless” wars.

Thus, it all ended just as it began—with a failure of imagination, highlighted by the famous 9/11 Commission report.

After winning, the US chose to lose by walking away from a fight. To be sure, keeping a 2,500 troop contingent as part of a counter-terrorism mission would have gone a long way at holding the Taliban at bay. Afghanistan did not have to fall as it did. Yet in the absence of a vision articulated by American leadership, the fall, in a manner of speaking, was perhaps only a matter of time.

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The fall of Afghanistan was in no way inevitable.

It was precipitated by President Biden's determination to execute a full withdrawal by the 20th anniversary of 9/11, which was driven entirely by domestic political concerns, not by the facts on the ground.

Recent statements by former CENTCOM Commander General Frank McKenzie, among others, that their best military advice was to leave a residual force of about 2,500 troops primarily at Bagram Airbase to retain intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities bear this out.

The President compounded the problem by refusing to adjust course when the withdrawal began to go sideways, which only led to confusion, chaos, and sadly the loss of more heroic US servicemen and women.

While all Americans should be glad that Ayman al Zawahiri has met the justice he so richly deserves, his open presence in Kabul is also a grim reminder that Afghanistan is once again a hospitable environment for the world's worst terrorists—circumstances brought about by President Biden's myopic insistence on a full withdrawal on his timeline, not by inevitable circumstances beyond his control.

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Could things have gone differently in Afghanistan?

Maybe, maybe not.



President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama embrace Vice President Joe Biden and Dr. Jill Biden moments after the television networks called the election in their favor, while watching election returns at the Fairmont Chicago Millennium Park in Chicago, Ill., Nov. 6, 2012. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza).

But the United States certainly could have undertaken wiser policies that would have increased the chance of establishing a stable, democratic Afghan government.

In the months following the successful invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, elements of the Taliban reached out to the United States and to the interim Afghan government seeking reconciliation with and integration into the new regime. Co-optation of defeated opponents is a time-honored governance strategy in many places and was regarded as a tradition in Afghanistan. The United States rejected these overtures, maintaining an antagonistic posture that prevented the development of a durable peace.

This failure was compounded by the US decision to invade Iraq. The invasion of Iraq drew US attention away from Afghanistan at a critical time during the formation of Afghan state institutions. Resources allocated to reconstruction were diverted to the newer, shinier war. Perhaps more importantly, the war in Iraq undercut US legitimacy around the world, making it easier for the Taliban to find shelter in Pakistan and to build up strength for a counter-offensive.

Reversing these policies might not have saved Afghanistan from the Taliban, but it couldn't have hurt.

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Kabul's rapid collapse in 2021 made clear it lacked broad legitimacy and popular support outside of the cities. Yes, there were officials, civil society members, and elite military units that did their duty as best they could, but in rural areas Kabul's credibility proved founded solely on American military power.

That was entirely deflated when Trump/Khalilzad threw the admittedly ineffectual Ghani administration under the bus with a peace deal guaranteeing American withdrawal regardless of Taliban conduct towards Kabul. Wavering rural Afghans quickly sensed where the wind was blowing and accordingly struck deals with the Taliban even before the U.S. had left.

Thus, a permanent U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was required to avoid the evaporation of 2021. And any peace deals struck with the Taliban needed to include Kabul and to have the U.S. remain as a guarantor.

A paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team pulls security during a combat operation June 2, 2012, in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. His fellow paratroopers and Afghan soldiers inserted into the rugged mountain terrain via helicopter. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod.

The U.S. presence had become efficient enough to hold the line with a few thousand personnel—advisors, trainers, special forces, and air support. As a permanent foreign policy project, this was no longer indefensibly expensive, but there was little appetite in U.S. domestic politics to openly argue for keeping Kabul indefinitely on life support, especially as other priorities loomed. Trump set this course with his deal with the Taliban, and Biden stuck to it.

Admittedly, if the U.S. stayed the course, persistent Taliban encroachment would have periodically required surges of military pressure to roll back. After all, U.S. casualties in the last few years were so low precisely because of the deal struck with the Taliban. And all the while, a permanent U.S. presence wouldn't solve the Afghan government's endemic weakness and lack of legitimacy, nor destabilizing pressure from Pakistan. Maybe a more effective Afghan leader would have come along to unite the country where Ghani and Karzai couldn't. But there's no guarantee of that.

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President Joe Biden chose defeat in Afghanistan.

He chose the collapse of a country in which the United States had invested hundreds of billions of dollars. He confused strawman arguments about escalation and the rhetoric of ending “forever wars” with a basic understanding about traditional deterrence.

Sure, the nation-building escapade in Afghanistan may have been unwise, but that had largely ended a decade ago. Instead, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan had morphed into something similar to what the United States carried out in Germany and Japan after World War II, and in Korea to the present day. Indeed, when Biden pulled out, the U.S. annual investment in Afghanistan was akin to that which the Pentagon spent annually in its Japan and Korea missions. With a relatively small number of troops and without great risk of casualty, those deployments managed to hold off much larger adversaries, be they the People’s Republic of China or North Korea.

Soldiers from across the 25th Infantry Division and U.S. Army Hawaii test their proficiency in basic infantry and Soldier tasks in the hopes of earning the Expert Infantryman Badge or the Expert Soldier Badge.

Biden wanted to end the war, but how wars end matters. Biden sought to exit before the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. That was an artificial, political deadline. Had he waited until winter, he could have enabled the U.S.-trained Afghan forces to dig in and prepare for several months until snows melted and the beginning of the next fighting season. This would have also allowed a more orderly withdrawal. Instead, he presided over a collapse whose ramifications have already been felt in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s pressure on Taiwan. Weakness and confusion are not good looks. They do not ensure peace, only the perpetuation of conflict.

Biden may have wanted to end a “forever war” but his team’s incompetence ensured new ones across the globe.