

Biden defends US pullout; reaction animated

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August 17, 2021

US President Joe Biden made a forceful defense Monday of the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, saying that Americans should not be fighting in a war in which Afghans themselves won't engage wholeheartedly, while observers weighed in with mixed views on an ignominious end to the 20-year engagement.

Meanwhile, scenes of chaos at the Kabul airport continued, with people desperately looking to leave by trying to latch onto American military planes as the Taliban took control of the country. Several civilians fell to their death.

"The truth is, this did unfold more quickly than we had anticipated," the president said. "Afghanistan political leaders gave up and fled the country. The Afghan military collapsed, sometimes without trying to fight. If anything, the developments of the past week reinforced that ending US military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision."

Biden said the US' original mission of counterterrorism had morphed into nation-building and counterinsurgency.

"Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation-building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralized democracy. Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on (the) American homeland," the president said during an 18-minute address at the White House.

Biden said that when he took office in January, he inherited a deal that former president Donald Trump negotiated with the Taliban, an agreement that American forces would be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021.

Trump, who exchanged criticism about Afghanistan with Biden on Saturday, said Monday: "It's not that we left Afghanistan. It's the grossly incompetent way we left!"

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky called the scenes of withdrawal "the embarrassment of a superpower laid low".

But Biden said US forces had already drawn down during the Trump administration from roughly 15,500 to 2,500. "And the Taliban was at its strongest militarily since 2001," he said.

"We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong. ... We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future."

Longtime New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman wrote that "it was never about the way our Afghan allies fought. It was always about their will to fight for the corrupt pro-American, pro-Western governments we helped stand up in Kabul."

He said that "the smaller Taliban forces — which no superpower was training — had the stronger will, as well as the advantage of being seen as fighting for the tenets of Afghan nationalism: independence from the foreigner and the preservation of fundamentalist Islam as the basis of religion, culture, law and politics".

On Capitol Hill, the reaction was mixed.

"We didn't need to be in this position; we didn't need to be seeing these scenes at Kabul airport with our Afghan friends climbing a C-17," said Representative Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat and a former Army Ranger who served in Afghanistan, to The New York Times.

"Thank you President Biden for learning from past mistakes and for clearly articulating the costs of endless war," Representative Ilhan Omar, Democrat of Minnesota, said on Twitter.

Other experts also had divergent views on the fallout of the US withdrawal.

Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) wrote that the "hasty and poorly planned" withdrawal may not provide sufficient time to evacuate Afghans who worked with the US and Afghan governments.

"Beyond the local consequences, the grim aftermath of America's strategic and moral failure will reinforce questions about US reliability among friends and foes far and wide," he wrote on the CFR website.

Anthony Cordesman, strategy chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that Biden "made a strong case — that no matter how long we stayed, we couldn't achieve the objective of somehow creating an effective government and democracy".

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, noted that being an advocate of US military interventions "apparently means never having to say you're sorry, no matter how obvious and severe the blunders".

"But continuing to risk the lives of US troops and pour billions of taxpayer dollars down the drain for decades to come in the forlorn hope that we can transform Afghanistan into a viable Western-style democracy is neither a realistic nor a moral option," Carpenter wrote in an article titled "Why Afghanistan Abruptly Collapsed".

"Vietnam and Afghanistan (along with Iraq, Libya, Syria, and several other countries) are places in which US meddling has made matters worse rather than better," he added.

Justin Logan, also a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, noted that US policy in Afghanistan and the government's message to the American people about it have been built on "lies" and delusions. "The American people, having happily swallowed those lies, are now aghast," he wrote Monday.

"President Biden is not alone in bearing blame for the events unfolding in Afghanistan. The senior military and intelligence officials, who for years gave an inaccurate picture of the realities

on the ground to Congress, must also be held responsible," said Adam Brandon, president of FreedomWorks.

But Aaron David Miller, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace senior fellow, said that "the only thing he (Biden) seemed to concede in terms of his responsibility was the fact that they had underestimated the speed at which the Taliban took territory and ultimately took Kabul".

In a webinar hosted by Code Pink on Monday, Zaher Wahab, an Afghan American scholar, said: "We have to ask the question: Why did the Afghan military fail, given all the training, the technology, the expenses? ... It shows the failure of the American intelligence, the American military, the American policy, and the American diplomacy. ... First, it (the US) should never have attacked Afghanistan. It was illegitimate, illegal, immoral, inhuman. When it did, it should have left as soon as the Taliban had been dislodged. ... Why it stayed, we know, because it's called imperialism by a different name."

The withdrawal also has raised concerns about civilians in Afghanistan.

Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a New Hampshire Democrat and a member of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees, said in a statement Monday that the images of Afghan civilians at the airport pleading to be evacuated are "seared into our minds".

She called for an immediate expansion of the refugee program for Afghan women seeking asylum. "A failure to act now will seal their fate, and the generation of girls who grew up with freedoms, education and dreams of building their country's future will die with them," Shaheen stated.

Phyllis Bennis, a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, said at the Code Pink webinar: "We need to focus on our obligations to the people of Afghanistan. ... It means we need to fight for a vast expansion of the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers that are welcome in this country.

"We need to fight for a permanent end to the bombing raids and the CIA death squads that have been circulating through Afghanistan," she said. "In these last weeks, we think that maybe the bombing raids have ended, but that's not even clear, and we know that that's not a permanent commitment."