



Blame-Shifting: The Political Elites Response to the Messy Afghan Withdrawal

Ted Galen Carpenter

August 30, 2021

An optimist might hope that the ugly ending to Washington's nearly 20-year occupation of Afghanistan would lead to some serious introspection on the part of America's political and policy elites. A realist would assume (correctly) that such soul-searching would be in short supply. It is almost a scientific law that members of the "blob" never concede making the slightest error, even when the policies they've pushed culminate in a fiasco. Instead those officials, analysts, and pundits most responsible for the defective policy seek to blame someone else—anyone else—for the unpleasant result. The initial reaction to the outcome in Afghanistan fits that pattern perfectly.

President Biden's opponents focus on the chaotic final stage of the U.S. troop withdrawal and charge that the handling of that task achieved new levels of presidential incompetence. Dustin Carmack, an analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation, summarized the right-wing narrative succinctly in the headline of his *19Fortyfive* article: "Blame Joe Biden for the Afghanistan Disaster. No One Else."

Some of the president's critics hedge in one respect, conceding that the nation-building mission in Afghanistan did need to end. But they argue that the Biden administration's execution was appallingly inept. Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) told reporters that she was among those who "didn't anticipate US troops would be or should be in Afghanistan forever." However, she added, "what we have seen play out, I think, is troubling at such a degree and such a level." Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), expressed satisfaction in April that American forces finally would be leaving Afghanistan. But his comments about the Biden administration's handling of the withdrawal were unsparingly caustic. Cruz described it as "An embarrassing spectacle, a diplomatic humiliation and a national security catastrophe."

Others, especially avid neoconservatives, contend that the decision to leave was itself unwise, and that the United States needed to stay the course, if for no other reason than to prevent the country from again becoming a sanctuary for terrorists. Some members of the "stay the course" faction, including Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) and *Washington Post* columnist Max Boot blame both Biden and Donald Trump for abandoning that mission. Cheney stated bluntly: "The Trump/Biden calamity unfolding in Afghanistan began with the Trump administration negotiating with terrorists and pretending they were partners for peace, and is ending with American surrender as Biden abandons the country to our terrorist enemies."

Regardless of their differences about the nation-building mission, Republicans have been united in their condemnation of Biden's performance. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) expressed the party's perspective clearly. He called the events in Afghanistan an "unmitigated disaster" and said that the Biden administration "looks to me like it couldn't organize a two-car funeral."

President Biden and his allies in Congress and much of the news media have fired back, arguing that Trump was largely responsible for the problems encountered during the final withdrawal. Biden made that allegation in his address to the nation after the Taliban captured Kabul. "When I came into office, I inherited a deal that President Trump negotiated with the Taliban. Under his agreement, US forces would be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, just a little over three months after I took office. US forces had already drawn down during the Trump administration from roughly 15,500 American forces to 2,500 troops in country. And the Taliban was at its strongest militarily since 2001."

His only alternatives, he insisted, were "either to follow through on that agreement or be prepared to go back to fighting the Taliban in the middle of the spring fighting season. There would have been no cease-fire after May 1. There was no agreement protecting our forces after May 1. There was no status quo of stability without American casualties after May 1. There was only the cold reality of either following through on the agreement to withdraw our forces or escalating the conflict and sending thousands more American troops back into combat in Afghanistan, and lurching into the third decade of conflict." Biden's underlying message was that Trump had tied his hands. The president's comment that terminating Trump's agreement would have meant having to battle the Taliban "in the middle of the spring fighting season" implied that he likely would have chosen a different date for putting such an agreement into effect.

Initial polling data indicate that Biden is losing the battle to control the withdrawal narrative. A YouGov survey conducted August 20-24 supports that conclusion. 84 percent of Republicans, 76 percent of Independents, and even 55 percent of Democrats believe that the withdrawal was handled badly. The president's attempt to shift blame for the poor execution onto either Trump or the Afghan government and army has not convinced most Americans. When attaching blame to multiple parties, 69 percent specifically cited Biden personally and 44 percent also blamed his advisers, while smaller percentages attached some blame to the Afghans. Asked whether the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Afghanistan in the first place, 44 percent agreed that it was, while 32 percent disagreed, and the rest were unsure. The way that question was worded, however, likely minimized the "yes" vote, since it did not make a distinction between the initial mission in response to the 9-11 attacks and the later nation-building venture.

The emphasis of both Biden and his adversaries on shifting blame away from themselves is unsurprising but annoying. There is more than enough justifiable blame to go around. The Afghanistan fiasco was a long time in the making. It goes all the way back to the late 1970s when Jimmy Carter's administration followed the advice of Zbigniew Brzezinski and adopted a strategy forcing Moscow to increase its support for its Afghan client regime as a way to then bleed Washington's superpower rival. The resulting destabilization of Afghanistan helped pave the way for the rise of the Taliban. George W. Bush's administration transformed a limited, punitive intervention against Al Qaeda and the Taliban into an utterly impractical nation-building crusade to transform Afghanistan into a modern, secular country closely allied to the United

States. The Obama and Trump administrations deserve a share of the blame for persisting in that quixotic venture, despite giving repeated promises to the American people that they would bring the troops home. US military and intelligence officials should be held to account for repeatedly misrepresenting the situation on the ground to Congress and the public. Finally, President Biden deserves both credit and blame. He was sensible and courageous for biting the bullet and finally pulling US troops out of Afghanistan, but he also did a terrible job of implementing his decision.

Rather than any of the various parties demonstrating a willingness to acknowledge their culpability, though, all factions in America's political and policy elites are doing their utmost to avoid accountability. The American people must make sure that that attempt fails.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on international affairs.