



## Trump's 'change of heart' on Afghanistan earns support from GOP critics

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After the controversy over the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville put Donald Trump and the Republican Party at odds last week, the president refocused attention to the world stage and appears to have put the GOP back on solid footing, with some of his most ardent conservative critics now supporting his plan for the war in Afghanistan.

What a difference a scripted speech makes. After his Monday night prime-time speech on Afghanistan, Republican lawmakers who directly criticized Trump's handling of neo-Nazis and Klansmen in Charlottesville only days before rallied to his side.

According to experts, Trump may have effectively changed the subject and rallied some key conservative supporters, but he has now exposed a host of new political vulnerabilities including criticism from anti-war conservatives and full ownership of America's 16-year war in Afghanistan.

In his 25-minute address, Trump made it clear that the **United States will remain committed to the war in Afghanistan**, a position that cut against his "original instinct" and campaign promise to end the war and withdraw American troops.

Even though Trump's approach to Afghanistan will mean a sustained American effort and reportedly another 4,000 troops, it will be "on terms consistent with what he promised [voters] as he campaigned," said Michael Anton, strategic communications director for the National Security Council.

In a Tuesday interview with Sinclair Broadcast Group, Anton explained the "difficult decision" the president had to make on the strategy in Afghanistan. "He had an instinct that went one way and the facts and the circumstances as he reviewed them took his thinking in another direction," he explained, adding that Trump "essentially had a change of heart."

Though some conservatives like **Sen. Rand Paul** (R-Ky.) and **Rep. Justin Amash** (R-Mich.) criticized that change of heart, it went over well with many establishment Republicans who praised the same president they were criticizing only days before.

In a Monday night CNN town hall, House Speaker **Paul Ryan** (R-Wis.) said plainly that Trump "messed up" his response to Charlottesville by expressing "moral ambiguity" with respect to neo-Nazis and white supremacists. But in almost the same breath, Ryan praised the president's decision to maintain a U.S. presence in Afghanistan and not broadcast military strategy to adversaries on the ground.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), who directly questioned Trump's **morality** last week, said on Tuesday that Trump demonstrated "the smarts and the moral courage" to listen to his generals, rather than leaving Afghanistan like the U.S. left Iraq in 2011.

Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and frequent Trump critic John McCain (R-Ariz.), went from berating the president for failing to stand up against **racism and bigotry** in Charlottesville to commending him "for taking a big step in the right direction" by committing additional U.S. troops and support to the war in Afghanistan.

Trump even retweeted a comment from his 2016 rival Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who applauded the president's strategy and defended him against political commentators who were attacking the president "for changing his approach from [the] campaign." Only days before,

Rubio accused Trump of giving white supremacists "**a win**" in Charlottesville.

Whether or not Trump intended to use the Afghanistan speech to change the subject from the heated public debate about race and political violence after Charlottesville, "it certainly did help him move past it," said Trevor Thrall, senior fellow for the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Department.

Throughout the president's admittedly short career in politics, he has proven an exceptional ability to change the subject and upend any given news cycle.

"He's definitely demonstrated that no matter what kind of controversy he gets himself into, whether it's Charlottesville, whether it's Access Hollywood, or the Trump University judge, he is able to ... move on from really any controversy that might have doomed anybody else," W. James Antle politics editor at the Washington Examiner noted.

The real test is whether Trump will be able to stay on the message that is earning him support from key conservatives in Congress.

Later tonight Trump is scheduled to address a rally in Phoenix, Arizona. Unlike the sober, measured speech Trump read off a teleprompter on Monday night, the rally will provide ample opportunity for the president to improvise and reopen any number of controversies, including Charlottesville.

At the beginning of his speech, Trump took time to address the aftermath of Charlottesville, speaking of the need "unify" and "heal" the country, envisioning an America "that is not at war with itself."

"We cannot remain a force for peace in the world if we are not at peace with each other," Trump said. "Let us find the courage to heal our divisions within."

Those initial remarks showed an "obvious" strategy at play, political correspondent Jared Yates Sexton stated.

"Before President Trump ever mentioned Afghanistan he used the broadcast as a chance to call for 'unity' at home," he said, adding that the speech "seems to have been successful in changing the narrative, particularly with Republicans who have been critical in recent weeks."

As the speech was broadcast, Trump immediately drew criticism from the left and the right for a "flip-flop" on his campaign pledge to end America's interventionist foreign policy. He is also

taking heat for providing few specifics about his plan and rehashing previous administrations' failed strategies. But he appears to have successfully brought his GOP critics safely back into his orbit.

In order to move his agenda forward in Congress, Trump needs buy-in from members like Graham, Rubio and especially McCain, who already proved his ability to scuttle the president's health care bill.

"He needs their help," Thrall noted. "Throwing the congressional Republicans Afghanistan may be a small price for him to pay to get other things on his domestic agenda accomplished."

As far as the anti-interventionists who support Donald Trump, "there is no upside on Afghanistan, with the base" he continued. "I think this is exactly what they thought he wouldn't do."

On top of the political challenges Trump faces within his own party, he has also officially taken ownership of the war in Afghanistan and essentially promised "victory" in a country that has vexed military strategists from Alexander the Great to the British Empire and the U.S.S.R.

"He's now on the hook for producing results in Afghanistan," Thrall noted.

Antle reaffirmed that taking responsibility for America's long-simmering war creates any number of political risks. "Obviously this is a decision that divides President Trump's base so that in and of itself can be a political problem."

In the months leading up to President Trump's decision to remain engaged in Afghanistan, his Secretary of Defense James Mattis said publicly that America is "not winning." The commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson acknowledged in February that the U.S.-backed Afghan Security Forces had reached a stalemate with the Taliban.

Even after his speech, the American people still have little knowledge of what Trump's new strategy actually entails. The president said he would not provide any details about dates of withdrawal or deployment, military plans, or even the number of additional U.S. troops that could be needed to secure the region.

That lack of clarity could open the door to additional problems, experts warn. If there are more American deaths or civilian casualties, if a terrorist attack originates from the region, or even if he maintains the status quo, Trump has inherited each of those risks as the third president to announce a new strategy for victory in Afghanistan.