

Mainstream media spin the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan to push for continued military occupation

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Some coverage in mainstream print media and on cable networks of President Joe Biden’s plan to withdraw from Afghanistan in August painted the plan as ill-advised or dangerous, ignoring 20 years of failed U.S. policy in the country.

On July 8, Biden announced the decision to end military operations in Afghanistan by August 31, stating that even “one more year” of occupation would be a “recipe for fighting there indefinitely.” The U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, which has deployed troops inside the country since 2001, has been a disaster since the very beginning, resulting in untold damage to Afghanistan’s society and its people. The Watson Institute at Brown University summed up the destruction:

Prior wars and civil conflict in the country have made Afghan society extremely vulnerable to the reverberating effects of the current war. Those war effects include elevated rates of disease due to lack of clean drinking water, malnutrition, and reduced access to health care. Nearly every factor associated with premature death — poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care, environmental degradation — is exacerbated by the current war.

About 241,000 people have been killed in the Afghanistan and Pakistan war zone since 2001. More than 71,000 of those killed have been civilians.

Mainstream media coverage of the Afghanistan conflict has, for the most part, centered its reporting around supporting the U.S. occupation. Even as tens of thousands of Afghan civilians died and billions of dollars poured into “nation-building” initiatives that weren’t achieving results, media efforts to cheer on the war continued. Douglas Kellner’s book *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War and Election Battles* explained a prominent example of the influence that mainstream cable news had in reinforcing the initial motivation for military involvement in Afghanistan. According to Kellner, “Top executives of CNN circulated a memo telling reporters that if they showed news unfavorable to the United States, such as

civilian casualties from U.S. bombing there, they should remind viewers that thousands of Americans died in the 9/11 attacks.”

Now with withdrawal complete, the media have a responsibility to focus on the political reality that the future of Afghanistan is one without U.S. occupation. Concern for the future of Afghanistan and its people is legitimate, but media coverage framing the U.S. military as a stabilizing force betrays 20 years of evidence to the contrary and risks the media becoming complicit in an unending war.

Here's how mainstream media coverage in 2021 has continued to ignore the complete story of the U.S. conflict in Afghanistan.

Framing the Taliban resurgence as new and ignoring that it has been happening for years

There is a legitimate concern over worsening violence and instability in Afghanistan with the recent resurgence of Taliban activity and attacks. However, some media coverage has suggested this resurgence is a byproduct of America's withdrawal rather than something that was already occurring under U.S. occupation.

The goal of total defeat of the Taliban has been out of the question for some time -- in many parts of Afghanistan, the Taliban are already the de facto government. As the Quincy Institute's Adam Weinstein and Trita Parsi point out, “Images of gleeful Taliban fighters flashing across American television screens will cost [Biden] politically is undeniable. But delaying a withdrawal will not alter this reality, it will only compound it.”

After being ousted from power during the initial invasion, the Taliban regained strength under the U.S. occupation. The Washington Post's “Afghanistan Papers” reporting from 2019 highlights this, stating, “In March 2011, when he was commander of U.S. and NATO forces, [Gen. David] Petraeus estimated there were ‘somewhere around 25,000 Taliban,’ according to testimony he gave to Congress.’ Today, the U.S. military estimates the number has more than doubled — to about 60,000.”

However, much of the current withdrawal coverage limits its scope of reporting on the Taliban's advance to the last few months.

- The New York Times' report, “A Wave of Afghan Surrenders to the Taliban Picks Up Speed,” framed the situation largely in the context of U.S. withdrawal, describing it as “part of a broader Taliban playbook of seizing and holding territory as security force morale plummets with the exit of international troops” while ignoring the growth of the Taliban during U.S. occupation.
- On CNN's *At This Hour with Kate Bolduan*, international correspondent Anna Coren reported on Taliban attacks gaining “momentum” and causing “fear and terror” for the local population following the U.S. withdrawal
- Following Biden's April announcement that U.S. troops would leave the country by September 11, The Washington Post published an opinion piece titled “Biden's Afghanistan withdrawal could be the first step to a Taliban takeover.” The article, written

by Max Boot, compared the current U.S. drawdown to the “one-sided peace deal with North Vietnam that led the United States to pull all of its troops out of South Vietnam” and the fall of Saigon, claiming that Biden now “risks a repeat of this fiasco” by withdrawing from Afghanistan.

- On July 26, The Wall Street Journal’s editorial board published “Afghanistan on the Brink,” which charted the Taliban’s increase of regional control since withdrawal began and lamented that “the U.S. resumes bombing, but Biden needs to do more.” While the increase in Taliban attacks has been dramatic during this period, limiting the timeline obscures the Taliban’s continued growth during two decades of U.S. presence.

Hyping the theoretical threat of Al Qaeda’s resurgence

Another national security issue raised by opponents of withdrawing regards Al Qaeda's future in Afghanistan.

One of the stated goals for the U.S. in entering Afghanistan was the destruction of Al Qaeda, and the terror group’s defeat in Afghanistan is one of the few military aims the U.S. successfully completed. Following the destruction of its forces and killing and capturing many of its top leaders, U.S. intelligence agencies do not think Al Qaeda poses an immediate threat for international attacks. Yet many in the media seem to insist that U.S. withdrawal will result in Al Qaeda’s return to power.

U.S. withdrawal is not a blow to Al Qaeda by any means, but the current reporting seems to suggest a larger threat than reality shows. The Brookings Institution highlights Al Qaeda’s dwindling influence, and even suggests Al Qaeda's ties to the Taliban are strained as the Taliban seek to be taken seriously as a legitimate government. As senior fellow Daniel Byman wrote:

Taken together, these factors suggest the U.S. troop withdrawal will ease pressure on al-Qaida, but the group is far from its pre-9/11 strength, and it faces many challenges. As a result, it is far from certain that international terrorist attacks are a likely consequence of the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

In talking about Al Qaeda, some in the media have drawn bad-faith comparisons to the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the proliferation of ISIS, fearmongering about another international terror attack on U.S. soil.

- Former Trump national security adviser John Bolton appeared on CNN’s *The Situation Room* on July 16 to call U.S. withdrawal “a potential strategic disaster” and warned, “If Taliban return to power, allow terrorist groups like ISIS and al Qaeda to use their territory as a sanctuary, we could be vulnerable to another 9/11 attack.” Anchor Wolf Blitzer provided no push back, saying, “That’s all very, very worrisome.”
- Between April and July, New York Post reporter Emily Jacobs used this exact same sentence in at least six different articles about the U.S. withdrawal: “Critics of the move have cautioned that it could lead to the creation of a new ISIS, as President Barack Obama’s decision to withdraw from Iraq did in 2011.”

- The Wall Street Journal published a June 13 op-ed from Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK) titled “An Alternative to the Afghan Pullout” that argued a limited occupation should remain until the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement conditions are met. It warned, “As we saw after President Obama’s withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, terrorists will exploit a security vacuum,” and cited a U.N. report that claimed, “al Qaeda and other militants are celebrating President Biden’s decision as a ‘victory ... for global radicalism.’”
- MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* co-host Mika Brzezinski broadcasted a Sky News interview with Britain’s former MI6 chief, who said that Al Qaeda is a threat for international terrorism if NATO forces pull out completely. To illustrate this point, the interview was spliced with footage of 9/11 as the reporter narrated, “This is the danger if a group like Al Qaeda has a haven in Afghanistan to plot acts of international terror.”
- *Morning Joe* guest host Willie Geist seemingly suggested leaving the door open for further American intervention in Afghanistan if Al Qaeda returns, saying, “An open question what America's role is if the Taliban overruns the country, then what if it becomes a harbor for terrorism?”

Framing the U.S. military as protectors of Afghan women and human rights

Another narrative that mainstream media have used for questioning the Afghanistan withdrawal is justifying continued occupation as necessary to preserve human rights, particularly of Afghan women, in the face of the oppressive rule of the Taliban.

However, many who have studied the effects of the occupation by U.S. troops on women and human rights have illuminated that the situation has not significantly improved. In February, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) came out with a study detailing the consequences of U.S. efforts to promote gender equality in Afghanistan. The report found that civilian casualties and violence as a result of the U.S. war efforts have dramatically harmed Afghan women, resulting in “increasingly desperate poverty” and “reduced mobility and access to basic services.”

In August 2019, John Glaser and John Mueller wrote for the Cato Institute that while Afghan women have made some strides in achieving equality after nearly two decades of occupation, “according to the United Nations, Afghanistan ranks 153rd out of 160 countries for gender equality.” As The New York Times wrote in April acknowledging the SIGAR report, “U.S. efforts to support women, girls and gender equality in Afghanistan yielded mixed results.”

A numbers study done by Al-Jazeera also points out that life in Afghanistan as a result of the U.S.-led conflict has gotten only more deadly for Afghan women, who have died by the thousands. Furthermore, professor Katherine A.M. Wright highlighted in the *Media, War, and Conflict* journal that the narrative of “saving” Afghan women was itself encouraged by the CIA to paint the conflict as a humanitarian effort and “help to overcome pervasive scepticism” of the occupation.

The U.S. has also had a significant role in human rights abuses perpetrated against Afghan people, from backing violent leaders in positions of power to “widespread torture” of prisoners to killing an untold number of people with airstrikes. While it is valid for mainstream media to

express concern over the tactics of the Taliban, ignoring the consequences that 20 years of U.S. occupation had on women and human rights in Afghanistan is neglectful reporting and fails to capture the full picture of the U.S. withdrawal.

- A July 14 Washington Post analysis promoted the perspective of former President George W. Bush, who ordered the initial Afghanistan invasion, as an “extraordinary warning sign.” Bush had argued that withdrawing now would be a “mistake,” citing the potential “unspeakable harm” that may happen to Afghan women and girls.
- A July 5 Wall Street Journal article argued that U.S. troop withdrawal would lead to a “rollback” in gains for Afghan women as well as a humanitarian calamity, concluding that “having learned the cost of going into Afghanistan, Americans now will learn the cost of leaving.”
- Conservative columnist Bret Stephens’ April 19 op-ed for The New York Times complained about the U.S. “abandoning” women in Afghanistan, calling the withdrawal “a historic mistake” that “proves Osama bin Laden right.”
- A July 25 Washington Post opinion piece by Ronald E. Neumann, the former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2005-2007, framed the American withdrawal as a cause for Taliban rise and bemoaned: “Afghanistan is in danger of losing the gains in women’s rights, a free press and democratic norms it has achieved over the past 20 years.” Neumann continued to argue that the U.S. needs to help the Afghan army, including launching “some airstrikes from aircraft based outside Afghanistan.”
- Contributor Clay D. Hanna wrote a July 22 op-ed for the Hill which detailed the “sacred duty” the U.S. has in protecting Afghan women and girls, calling for a “new red line” for military “re-engagement” in the country.
- The Washington Post’s editorial board wrote on July 2 that the withdrawal “would be a disaster for the country’s 38 million people -- and in particular, its women.”
- On July 9, MSNBC anchor Ayman Mohyeldin framed the outcome of the U.S. withdrawal around “what will happen to women and young girls who have experienced so many new freedoms over the last two decades.”
- Following a July 7 report on Taliban war crimes and atrocities during its current advance, CNN anchor Christine Romans added that it is “terrifying” to think about what will happen to Afghan women when U.S. forces leave the country.