

The Delray Democrat

Senate Afghanistan Hearing¹

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On September 29, 2021, Secretary of Defense Austin, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Milley, and CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee. It was an excellent opportunity for the Senate to ask and discuss critical information concerning the withdrawal from Afghanistan, evacuation of civilians, General Milley's calls to the Chinese (reportedly involving China's concerns about President Trump), and related issues.

It was certainly an opportunity for the American people to learn. While some senators acted professionally, asked good, challenging questions, and engaged in productive dialogue with the distinguished panelists, other senators simply bloviated, making a disgrace of the proceedings and engaging in false and hyperbolic recriminations to score points with an extremist base.

By law, regulation, custom, and necessity, military officers may not and should not participate in political activities or engage in partisan commentary. They do not speak for or against political leaders, pending legislation, or similar matters best left to the politicians. These distinguished career officers and public servants did not take the bait to agree with, disagree with, or offer personal political opinions, despite shamefully being pressed and misquoted by certain Republican senators. They were each there to answer questions about the relevant policies, decisions, and actions and did their best to do exactly that. They were overall focused, credible, and forthcoming. U.S. Afghanistan policy has transcended four Presidential administrations and eleven Congresses, and thus is really not a partisan issue, nor should it be. It is an American issue.

The Facts on the Ground

Several hours of testimony, almost all of which focused on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, came down to several critical points. President Trump signed a deal with the Taliban in February 2020 in Doha Qatar, known as the Doha Agreement. Under Trump, the U.S. fulfilled its obligations under the agreement, but the Taliban did not fulfill any other than refraining from attacks on U.S. and Coalition forces. Had the U.S. under Biden chosen to change course, withdraw from the agreement, and seek to remain in Afghanistan, the Taliban would immediately have resumed attacks against our forces.

As Trump had reduced U.S. forces to 2,500 pursuant to the agreement, we lacked anywhere near the troop strength needed to fight the Taliban. For that, we would have needed approximately 20,000 to 25,000 additional troops. Thus, the United States had no other option but to continue the withdrawal unless we were prepared to return to full combat operations replete with significant casualties on both sides.

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, [October 2021](#), p. 1.

Faced with this reality, Secretary Austin and the Joint Chiefs provided a unanimous recommendation to President Biden to follow Trump's withdrawal agreement with the Taliban. Republicans continued to mislead the American people, claiming Biden lied when he said his military advisors all supported withdrawal. He did not lie. Although some military leaders would have liked to keep the small force, none recommended that course of action when the result would have been a renewed war with the Taliban.

The 2020 Withdrawal

The initial drawdown to 2,500 troops during 2020 included the removal of U.S. advisors from Afghan Army units. Without these advisors, U.S. forces had no ability to monitor the morale, commitment, and situation of Afghan troops, and this affected the intelligence assessment. While the intelligence reports included a range of possibilities that included the immediate falling of the Afghan government, this was not considered to be the most likely result. Similarly, our intelligence underestimated the level and pervasiveness of corruption throughout the Afghan government and senior ranks of the Afghan military. There was no expectation that President Ashraf Ghani would immediately flee the country and the government would collapse without a single shot fired. Unfortunately, that's what happened.

Even prior to U.S. forces leaving, President Ghani was busy removing and appointing military leaders, thoroughly disrupting all operations, and reducing the confidence, ability, and performance of the units. This, along with the rampant corruption, interfered with logistics and resulted in many Afghan units not receiving their pay, supplies, ammunition, etc., rendering them unable to fight in the more remote locations. We were not aware of the number or extent of deals Afghan military units made with local leaders. Because of these collective challenges, large numbers of Afghan units chose to desert their posts rather than do their military duty and fight the Taliban. They simply abandoned everything to the Taliban, including sensitive military equipment, and fled. They should have at least secured or destroyed their weapons and equipment, but instead they gave them to the Taliban.

The Evacuation of Civilians

There were certainly issues surrounding the civilian evacuation (NEO) with a small number of Americans still there. Some chose not to leave while others were not able to get to Kabul. Qatar has flown hundreds more out of the country and efforts continue. The military leaders agreed it was better NOT to keep U.S. forces there longer to try and facilitate additional evacuations. This would have placed those troops and the civilians they would be trying to evacuate in increased and unacceptable risk of attack. Consequently, it was better to complete the evacuation in cooperation with other countries as we see ongoing. While everyone worked diligently to get everyone out prior to August 31, it was not possible. However, the safe evacuation of over 124,000 civilians in a short period of time, especially under those conditions, was an incredible achievement.

Even before Trump signed the agreement, the Afghan government only controlled approximately 37% of the country. For the entire 20 years, Afghanistan was a dangerous country in the middle of war, terrorism, and widespread instability. Any civilians who chose to serve there, despite the fact they made courageous, selfless decisions to do so, knew the risks. The U.S. will continue to work to get every American out who wants to leave. With respect to the Afghan people, we must also recognize that there have been some aggressive Taliban elements that brutally murdered people who had been working with the U.S. We can argue whether it was preventable or inevitable, but

the reality is that it occurred. This is a debt and a tragedy we must bear.

Party Before Country

Republicans tried to blame this personally on President Biden along with the deaths of 13 American servicemembers in the suicide bombing at the airport. How reprehensible to play politics with such a tragedy. The U.S. planned extensively for such a thing and in reality, our intelligence caught and prevented a significant number of incidents. The panelists testified that Biden approved every request for resources, etc., they submitted in support of the withdrawal and evacuation plan. Leaders are always responsible and accountable, but Biden is no more personally responsible for this than was Reagan for the atrocity of the Khobar Towers bombing in Lebanon and the 241 Marines killed in that terrorist attack or was George W. Bush for nearly 3000 lives lost on 9/11. On both those occasions, Democrats – and the country – rallied behind the president. Not so with today's Republican Party.

After any operation or war ends, it is essential to perform a comprehensive review to learn the successes, the failures, and all of the causes therefore. Lessons learned is a key component of military training. The entirety of 20 years in Afghanistan, the constantly changing military strategies, the withdrawal, and other issues will be the focus on extensive review and analysis. Let's welcome this for the crucial purpose it serves and stop the ridiculous, foolish partisanship. Thank you to all the heroes who served. You were brave, selfless, and steadfast. You did your duty and deserve to walk tall everywhere you go. Any lingering blame lies with the four administrations and eleven Congresses without respect to political parties.