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Minority Staff Memorandum on the Committee's Investigation in the 118th Congress into the United States' Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Item Type	House Minority Staff Report
Download date	2026-06-10 20:58:39
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14300/2084



One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
www.foreignaffairs.house.gov

September 9, 2024

Dear Democratic Members of the Committee:

I am transmitting the attached memorandum prepared by Committee minority staff summarizing the findings of the Committee on Foreign Affairs' investigation in the 118th Congress into the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

I have long voiced my concerns about Republican attempts to politicize the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. In keeping with the partisan tenor of this investigation, Committee Republicans have indicated they will soon release a partisan, majority report on the Afghanistan withdrawal. The Majority did not involve the Minority in this report, nor have they even provided a draft copy to us. This comes on the heels of former President Trump using a ceremony to honor 13 American servicemembers killed in an ISIS-K terrorist attack as a campaign event to call the Biden-Harris Administration culpable, though Republicans knew for months that the attack was not preventable and that, even though a witness told our Committee he thought he had the ISIS-K bomber in his sights, he did not. And it follows the Chairman's subpoena to Secretary of State Blinken this week compelling testimony Secretary Blinken has already provided to us, including as the first cabinet official to publicly testify about the withdrawal in September 2021.¹ The majority has also threatened to subpoena National Security Advisor Sullivan after baselessly accusing him of misconduct and, for months, has cherry-picked witness testimony to exclude anything unhelpful to a predetermined, partisan narrative about the Afghanistan withdrawal.

The Republican majority has taken particular pains to avoid facts involving former President Trump—including his committing the United States to a full, date-specific withdrawal in a deal he negotiated with the Taliban that excluded the Afghan government or any reference to the rights of Afghan women and girls; his unilateral announcements to withdraw troops, often a surprise to many of his own senior officials, which undercut U.S. leverage because those announcements were divorced from Taliban compliance with the deal; and his forcing the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban fighters back to the battlefield before a final Taliban offensive ultimately took Kabul. When former President Trump took office, there were approximately 14,000 American troops in Afghanistan. Days before leaving office, the former President ordered a further reduction to 2,500. President Trump initiated a withdrawal that was irreversible without sending significantly more American troops to Afghanistan to face renewed combat with the Taliban. All witnesses who testified on this issue agreed that the United States would have faced renewed combat with the

¹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, *Hearing on Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies* (Sept. 13, 2021) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/117/chrg/CHRG-117hrg45496/CHRG-117hrg45496.pdf>)

Taliban had we not continued the withdrawal. Rather than send more Americans to fight a war in Afghanistan, President Biden decided to end it.

Republicans' partisan attempts to garner headlines rather than acknowledge the full facts and substance of their investigation have only increased with the heat of an election season, and after recent public criticisms about the investigation from former majority staff.² With the ascendance of Vice President Kamala Harris to the top of the Democratic presidential ticket, the GOP performance has reached a crescendo—Republicans now claim she was the architect of the U.S. withdrawal though she is referenced only three times in 3,288 pages of the Committee's interview transcripts.

American taxpayers have funded this Committee's oversight, and the American people deserve the truth. We owe it to them to highlight the facts elicited in this investigation without undue spin and with respect for the seriousness of the subject and the witnesses who have voluntarily testified to us about it. If information we receive is hidden, twisted, or used as a political cudgel it will undermine the Committee's ability to undertake credible oversight going forward. This is why I pressed the Chairman during a November 2023 hearing to release all closed-door interview transcripts from this investigation—five of which remain unreleased—and why I am now transmitting the attached memorandum to complete the picture on what this investigation has yielded.

In the September 2021 Committee hearing I referenced with Secretary Blinken following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, I called to mind some numbers to help us find perspective on the work we were undertaking then and now:

- 800,000—the number of Americans who served with the U.S. military in Afghanistan since 2001.
- 2,461—the number of American military personnel who died in Afghanistan, including the 13 brave Americans who were killed by ISIS-K as they facilitated the evacuation of more than 120,000 people from Afghanistan over the course of 17 days.
- 66,000—the number of Afghan National Security Forces killed in the conflict.
- 47,245—the number of Afghan civilians killed since 2001.
- And finally, 20—the number of years we sent our brave men and women to fight a war in Afghanistan, from which disentangling ourselves was never going to be easy.

It strikes me now as it did during that hearing that many of those critical of the withdrawal effort simply have a fundamental objection to President Biden fulfilling his pledge to be the last Commander-in-Chief to preside over the war in Afghanistan. They are masking their displeasure with criticisms but have failed to offer feasible alternatives. We must continue to wrestle with these matters not to rewrite the past or assign partisan blame, but to identify lessons that can help us better fight and end wars in the future.

Sincerely,



GREGORY W. MEEKS

Ranking Member

² *House GOP lets military off the hook for Afghanistan debacle*, Washington Examiner, August 26, 2024 (online at <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/3133727/house-gop-lets-military-off-the-hook-for-afghanistan-debacle/>)



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Executive Summary

For two decades after the heinous attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States military fought valiantly in Afghanistan to degrade Al Qaeda, decimate its leadership, and deny the use of Afghan territory to conduct terrorist operations against the United States. Over that same time, United States diplomats and development professionals worked assiduously to help the Afghan government and people establish good governance; respect human rights, particularly of women and girls; and foster independent media, civil society, and economic development. The United States spent approximately 2 trillion dollars in Afghanistan from 2001-2021.³ That expenditure reinforced—but could not substitute for—the work of millions of Afghans to push back against corrupt and violent actors and define their own future.

After achieving our core security objectives, the United States increasingly risked continuing its war in Afghanistan as an untenable, and unnecessary, end in itself. This risk spurred both former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden to take actions during their respective administrations to fully withdraw the U.S. military from Afghanistan. President Biden completed that objective and ended the United States’ so-called “forever war” in Afghanistan.

During the course of the Committee’s investigation into this U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, witness testimony reinforced—with remarkable consistency—the following chronology of facts:

- Amidst a steady, multi-year surge in Taliban territorial gains across Afghanistan, the Trump Administration initiated a deal with the Taliban—signed in Doha in February 2020—that committed the United States to a full withdrawal of military personnel and contractors by May 1, 2021 and laid out brief conditions to which both sides agreed in order to complete the withdrawal.⁴ The deal required the Taliban to cease threatening the security of the United States or its allies, but nothing in it required the Taliban to respect the rights of women and girls or the Afghan constitution. The agreement also compelled the Afghan government—itself not a party to the deal—to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, which fundamentally altered the power balance in the country.
- President Trump ordered a drawdown to 8,600 U.S. troops within 135 days of the signing of the so-called “Doha Deal,” as the agreement stipulated. He then unilaterally ordered further drawdowns—to 4,500 troops by September 2020 and, after tweeting on October 7, 2020 his intent to have all U.S. troops home by Christmas, to 2,500 troops by January 2021—despite

³ *U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, in \$ Billions FY-2001-FY2022*, Brown University Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs (online at <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>)

⁴ *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America*, U.S. Department of State (online at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>)

the Taliban's lack of full compliance with the Doha Deal.⁵ Trump's own lead negotiator and U.S. diplomatic and military personnel testified to their uncertainty and surprise around these unilateral troop drawdowns and a lack of any commensurate interagency withdrawal planning process.

- Upon taking office on January 20, 2021 after a delayed presidential transition, President Biden ordered a comprehensive interagency review of Afghanistan policy to determine whether and how to complete the U.S. troop withdrawal set into motion by his predecessor. Top U.S. military officials recommended keeping a small force of at least 2,500 troops in country until an indefinite time when conditions on the ground might improve, but U.S. civilian and military officials agreed that the Taliban would resume attacks on U.S. forces—the one Doha Deal term the Taliban had largely respected—if the withdrawal stopped or reversed. On April 14, President Biden announced the United States would complete its troop withdrawal by September 11, 2021.⁶
- In doing so, President Biden directed his Administration to undertake deliberate withdrawal preparations, refine counterterrorism efforts to prevent the reemergence of threats, and determine the nature of a continued U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan—all of which, according to witnesses, agencies subsequently did. Throughout 2021, the Biden Administration dramatically accelerated processing of Afghan Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), which had come to a virtual halt by the end of the Trump Administration. The Biden Administration also launched civilian evacuation flights in July 2021 under Operation Allies Refuge to facilitate departures of SIV applicants wanting to leave. State Department officials noted that, despite more than 19 specific warnings from March-August 2021 telling American citizens to leave Afghanistan and offers to help, including financial assistance for plane tickets, many Americans in Afghanistan were uncertain or unwilling to leave, and that there was no mechanism to track their whereabouts if they did not volunteer that information.⁷
- Throughout late spring and summer of 2021, the Taliban launched attacks on several provincial capitals in Afghanistan, which fell in what U.S. officials described as unexpectedly rapid succession as Afghan security forces surrendered or fled. On August 15, the U.S. Chargé d' Affaires in Kabul, in line with standard operating procedure and plans in place, asked the Department of Defense to initiate a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) and moved U.S. embassy operations to the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. Senior military officials had pressed for closing the U.S. embassy and starting a NEO sooner, but State Department leadership emphasized the risk these actions could have on

⁵ Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Military Drawdown in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions* (February 4, 2021) (online at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46670#:~:text=Changes%20in%20security%20conditions%20in%20the%20country%20and,international%20forces%20by%20the%20end%20of%20April%202021.>)

⁶ *Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan*, President Joseph R. Biden Jr., The White House (online at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>)

⁷ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, *Hearing on Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies* (Sept. 13, 2021) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/117/chrg/CHRG-117hhrg45496/CHRG-117hhrg45496.pdf>)

U.S. interests and an already precarious Afghan government. Proving State Department officials' point, on the same day the Department initiated the NEO, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani fled the country despite earlier pledges he would not. His departure triggered the collapse of the Afghan government and security services.

- The acute shift in power in Kabul prompted a chaotic security situation and spike in demand from Afghan allies, SIV applicants, and Americans living in Afghanistan to leave. From August 15-31, 2021, U.S. military and diplomatic personnel worked shoulder-to-shoulder during the NEO to contact Americans and Afghan partners seeking to leave, negotiate with the Taliban on safe passage through territory it controlled, and facilitate the departure of more than 120,000 people. Consular processing by State Department officials occurred virtually nonstop throughout—unless the U.S. military closed the gates for security reasons—and resumed within minutes of the August 26 ISIS-K bombing at Abbey Gate that tragically killed 13 U.S. servicemembers and approximately 170 Afghans. By the early hours of August 31, the Biden Administration had facilitated the largest humanitarian airlift in U.S. history and ended the United States' longest war.

Key findings underpinning this chronological narrative, the number of witnesses who testified to these facts, and illustrative examples of their testimony are included in this memorandum, along with further background on the investigation itself. But it is important to underscore at the outset what this factual narrative yielded in this investigation is *not*. First, it is not new—it comports with what Administration officials, the State Department's own After-Action Review on Afghanistan⁸ (AAR), and extensive press reporting have already said repeatedly over years about the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. This narrative is also not without points of debate—such as over whether to retain a small force in Afghanistan, whether U.S. analysts should have better anticipated the fall of the Afghan government and rapid speed of the Taliban's takeover, or the precise timing of shifting from civilian-led evacuation flights to a NEO—but no thorough policy process would be, nor do any Commander-in-Chief's decisions satisfy everyone. Finally, since it places the start of the withdrawal in the Trump Administration, this narrative is not a neat political tool with which to assail the Biden Administration.

As such, Committee Republicans have regrettably—and repeatedly—attempted to downplay or twist the facts they have heard in their own investigation, seeking instead to perpetuate a narrative of “the Biden-Harris withdrawal” as an “unmitigated disaster of epic proportions” for which the current Administration is singularly responsible.⁹ These attempts lack intellectual rigor and do not comport with the facts gleaned from witness testimony. But the testimony speaks for itself—and helps form a critical body of knowledge, along with the findings and recommendations in the State Department's After-Action Review and the ongoing work of the Congressionally-mandated Afghanistan War Commission, to help ensure that the United States can effectively prosecute—and responsibly end—wars in support of our national interests.

⁸ *After Action Review on Afghanistan January 2020 – August 2021*, U.S. Department of State (online at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/State-AAR-AFG.pdf>)

⁹ Committee on Foreign Affairs – Republicans, *Press Release: Chairman McCaul's Statement on Third Anniversary of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Aug. 30, 2024) (online at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/chairman-mccauls-statement-on-third-anniversary-of-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>)

Investigation Background

In a January 12, 2023 letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul signaled his intent to investigate what he described as the Biden Administration’s “catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan” in the 118th Congress and issued a request for extensive documents and information on the withdrawal, the bulk of which was keyed to a timeframe beginning in January 2021.¹⁰ On January 18, 2023, the State Department confirmed in writing its intent to cooperate with the Chairman’s investigation and to produce responsive documents and information to the Committee.

The Department subsequently made 59 separate document productions to the Committee, totaling 19,778 pages of both unclassified and classified content. The productions include underlying files to the Department’s own Afghanistan After Action Review (AAR).¹¹ After Chairman McCaul threatened to hold Secretary Blinken in contempt, the Department also made available to Committee members, *in camera*, a July 2021 Afghanistan dissent channel cable in what it characterized as an extraordinary accommodation, given the internal and carefully regulated nature of the Department’s dissent channel to protect dissent cable drafters.¹²

In addition, the Chairman requested closed-door transcribed interviews (TIs) with multiple current and former State Department officials—these requests comprised both career officials and Biden Administration political appointees, but only one non-career political appointee from the Trump Administration (Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad) who President Biden retained in his role as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. The Department subsequently facilitated transcribed interviews with all of these individuals. Separately, one former State Department officer (Samuel Aronson) agreed directly to be interviewed in response to a request from the Chairman. Additionally, one former U.S. military official (General Austin “Scott” Miller) and one former White House official (Jen Psaki) sat for transcribed interviews requested by the Chairman without obstruction from the current Administration.

Since June 2023, bipartisan Committee staff conducted a total of 18 TIs in unclassified and classified settings. The TIs have often lasted as long as 10 hours, spanning multiple issue areas. Department staff and, in some instances, private counsels have participated in the TIs per the wishes of the interviewee, all of whom have appeared voluntarily. Interviewees by title relevant to the withdrawal and/or evacuation and date of interview are below:

- Former Deputy to Ambassador John Bass in Kabul, James (“Jim”) DeHart, June 16, 2023
- Former Acting Chief of Staff to Ambassador Carol Perez, Jonathan Mennuti, July 20, 2023
- Former Consular Affairs Lead in Kabul, Jayne Howell, July 28, 2023
- Former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan, Mark Evans, August 23, 2023

¹⁰ Letter from Chairman Michael McCaul, Committee on Foreign Affairs, to Secretary Antony Blinken, U.S. Department of State (Jan. 12, 2023) (online at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/20230112190224869%5b28%5d.pdf>)

¹¹ *After Action Review on Afghanistan January 2020 – August 2021*, U.S. Department of State (online at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/State-AAR-AFG.pdf>)

¹² *Foreign Affairs Manual Volume 2 Section 070, Dissent Channel (2 FAM 070 Dissent Channel)*, U.S. Department of State (online at <https://fam.state.gov/FAM/02FAM/02FAM0070.html>)

- AAR Lead, Daniel (“Dan”) Smith, August 31, 2023
- Former Consular Officer in Kabul, Samuel (“Sam”) Aronson, September 15, 2023
- Director of Policy Planning, Salman Ahmed, October 12, 2023
- Former Chargé d’Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023
- Former Afghanistan Task Force Lead and Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Dean Thompson, October 27, 2023
- Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, November 8, 2023
- Former Acting Under Secretary of State for Management, Ambassador Carol Perez, November 15, 2023
- Former Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources, Brian McKeon, November 29, 2023
- Former Spokesperson for the State Department, Edward (“Ned”) Price, December 12, 2023
- Chief of Staff to Secretary Blinken, Suzy George, December 14, 2023
- Former Counselor to the State Department, Derek Chollet, December 19, 2023
- Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, John Bass, January 22, 2024
- Former Commander of U.S. Forces and the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, General Austin “Scott” Miller (retired), April 15, 2024
- Former White House Press Secretary, Jen Psaki, July 26, 2024

The Chairman also convened three full Committee hearings regarding the U.S. withdrawal and evacuation from Afghanistan:

- “During and After the Fall of Kabul: Examining the Administration’s Emergency Evacuation from Afghanistan,” March 8, 2023. Witnesses: Francis Q. Hoang, Executive Chairman of Allied Airlift 21; Lt. Col (ret.) David Scott Mann, founder, Task Force Pineapple; Aidan Gunderson, former U.S. Army Specialist; Peter Lucier, Team America Relief; Camille Mackler, Esq., Executive Director, Immigrant ARC; Tyler Vargas-Andrews, U.S. Marine Corps Sergeant (appeared in his personal capacity).
- “Behind the Scenes: How the Biden Administration Failed to Enforce the Doha Agreement,” February 15, 2024. Witness: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconstruction.
- “An Assessment of the Biden Administration’s Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America’s Generals” (originally titled “A ‘Strategic Failure’: Biden’s Withdrawal, America’s Generals, and the Taliban Takeover”), March 19, 2024. Witnesses: General Mark A. Milley (retired), former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and General Kenneth F. McKenzie (retired), former Commander of U.S. Central Command.

Additionally, while U.S. military operations and rules of engagement are outside the Committee’s jurisdiction, the Chairman and Ranking Member received a closed-door, off-record briefing at the Department of Defense on September 13, 2023 from the commander of the sniper team at Abbey Gate during the U.S. non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) in August 2021. The Department of Defense provided briefings on its own investigation into the August 26, 2021 ISIS-K bombing at Abbey Gate which tragically killed 13 U.S. servicemembers, first in February 2022, and then again

in April 2024¹³ Notably, the April 2024 briefing reaffirmed the Defense Department's original February 2022 investigative findings about the attack which had been challenged in witness testimony at the Committee's March 8, 2023 hearing.

With respect to all requests for documents or transcribed interviews described above in the 118th Congress, the Committee minority was not consulted by the majority on these investigative requests before they were issued. Despite the lack of effort by the Committee majority to undertake a bipartisan investigation, Democratic Members and/or minority committee staff nevertheless participated in every transcribed interview or hearing related to the Chairman's investigation into the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. In these events, participants heard clear testimony that was broadly consistent across interviews and with the Department's document productions, narrative responses, briefings, and AAR findings.

The Committee Ranking Member requested during a full Committee hearing on November 14, 2023 that the Chairman publicly release all transcripts from closed-door interviews conducted in the Committee's investigation into the Afghanistan withdrawal. In response to the Ranking Member's request, the Chairman released a total of 13 transcripts in tranches on April 1, April 4, April 12, April 24, May 1, May 20, and August 23, 2024. The majority has not yet released the remaining five closed-door interview transcripts from this investigation.

¹³ *Kabul Airport Attack Review Reaffirms Initial Findings, Identifies Attacker*; Department of Defense News (Apr. 15, 2024) (online at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3741245/kabul-airport-attack-review-reaffirms-initial-findings-identifies-attacker/>)

Key Findings

Despite a lack of new facts uncovered, the Committee's investigation into the U.S. withdrawal has reinforced several key factual findings about the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan for which witness testimony is clear and unambiguous. These findings are highlighted below, including the number of witnesses whose testimony supports them, and are followed by illustrative examples of supporting testimony.

Key Finding #1: The Trump Administration Set a Time-Bound, Full Withdrawal into Motion Without Regard for Facts on the Ground and Failed to Plan for Executing It

- After years of steady Taliban gains, President Trump initiated the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan through his February 2020 Doha Deal with the Taliban and, according to his lead negotiator, was impatient to get out of Afghanistan regardless. *Testimony from 12 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that President Biden initiated the withdrawal.*¹⁴
- The Doha Deal committed the United States to reduce to zero all its military personnel, including contractors, by a specific date, with minimal conditions required of the Taliban. The deal contained no stipulation on upholding women's rights. The deal relied dubiously on the Taliban voluntarily reducing violence against and negotiating with the Afghan government, which the Trump Administration forced to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners under the deal despite not being a party to it. *Testimony from 12 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration failed to protect women's rights or fulfill the deal.*¹⁵
- President Trump unilaterally ordered multiple U.S. troop drawdowns, despite a lack of full Taliban compliance with the Doha Deal. This emboldened the Taliban and undermined U.S. and Afghan government leverage. *Testimony from 13 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that President Trump adhered to a conditions-based approach.*¹⁶
- Despite committing to a full U.S. withdrawal in the Doha Deal, the Trump Administration did not undertake necessary interagency preparations or contingency planning for an orderly drawdown. *Testimony from 10 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that a withdrawal would have been smoother under President Trump.*¹⁷

¹⁴ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Bass, Chollet, Evans, George, Khalilzad, McKeon, Price, Smith, Thompson, Wilson, Miller

¹⁵ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Thompson, Bass, Chollet, Evans, Khalilzad, McKeon, Price, Psaki, Smith, Wilson, Miller

¹⁶ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Bass, Chollet, Evans, Khalilzad, Price, Smith, Thompson, Wilson, McKeon, Miller, Milley, McKenzie Jr.

¹⁷ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Bass, Chollet, Evans, McKeon, Price, Smith, Thompson, Wilson, McKenzie Jr.

- In stark contrast to prior administration transitions, the Trump Administration’s handover of policy to the Biden Administration was shambolic and non-cooperative. *Testimony from 7 witnesses supports this finding, reinforcing the risks of placing politics over national security.*¹⁸

Key Finding #2: The Biden Administration Kickstarted a Robust Process to Review and Prepare for Completing the U.S. Withdrawal Already Underway

- Upon taking office, the Biden Administration undertook a comprehensive interagency process to review Afghan policy. Facing the risk that a low-level U.S. war in Afghanistan could continue in perpetuity, President Biden decided to complete the U.S. withdrawal, tasking his Administration—and extending the withdrawal deadline by four months—to sufficiently prepare. *Testimony from 12 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration failed to plan.*¹⁹
- There was broad agreement that further extending the deadline for, or reversing entirely, the Doha Deal would have resulted in renewed Taliban attacks against U.S. personnel and interests. *Testimony from 13 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the withdrawal could have been stopped or postponed without consequence.*²⁰
- The Biden Administration undertook comprehensive planning for the safe continuity of the U.S. diplomatic presence in Kabul after a U.S. troop withdrawal and was well on its way to implementing those plans when Kabul suddenly and unexpectedly fell. *Testimony from 11 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration should not have sought a diplomatic presence post-withdrawal or that the Administration showed cold indifference to its personnel.*²¹
- After the Trump Administration ignored a backlog in Afghan Special Immigrant visas (SIV), the Biden Administration dramatically increased SIV processing and launched a civilian evacuation effort to prepare for increased demand to leave—even though many people were still weighing whether to do so. *Testimony from 4 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration abandoned our allies.*²²
- The July 2021 internal dissent cable on Afghanistan relayed concerns which senior Administration officials were already seized with addressing. Secretary Blinken read the dissent cable and ordered a response while protecting the confidentiality of the dissent channel.

¹⁸ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Bass, Chollet, Evans, McKeon, Psaki, Thompson

¹⁹ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Chollet, Evans, George, Khalilzad, McKeon, Perez, Price, Thompson, Wilson, Milley, McKenzie Jr.

²⁰ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Aronson, Bass, Chollet, Dehart, Evans, Khalilzad, McKeon, Price, Thompson, Wilson, Milley, McKenzie Jr.

²¹ Supporting testimony provided by: Bass, Chollet, Evans, McKeon, Mennuti, Perez, Price, Smith, Thompson, Wilson, Khalilzad

²² Supporting testimony provided by: McKeon, Perez, Smith, Wilson

*Testimony from 3 witnesses who saw the cable supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration ignored dissenters' concerns.*²³

Key Finding #3: The Collapse of the Afghan Government Precipitously Changed the Situation in Kabul and Prompted a Dynamic and Unprecedented U.S. Government Response That Protected Americans, Our Allies, and Our Interests

- The situation in Kabul in August 2021 changed precipitously, and more quickly than U.S. officials had anticipated, as Afghan President Ghani fled and the Afghan government and security forces collapsed. While the new situation on the ground was chaotic, the Department's response was not—State personnel mobilized immediately. *Testimony from 10 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Administration ignored warnings or that its response was chaotic.*²⁴
- State Department officials had sufficient plans, knowledge, and flexibility to undertake the uniquely challenging, unprecedented task of preparing for a U.S. withdrawal and evacuating American citizens and Afghan allies from Kabul. *Testimony from 12 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that diplomats were not up to the task.*²⁵
- While the State Department formally requests a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO), the Defense Department oversees and executes the deployment of U.S. military assets and personnel in such operations. Requesting a NEO too soon posed security risks, and evacuating the embassy sooner would have reduced the number of people who could safely get out. *Testimony from 4 witnesses (on NEO execution) and one witness (on NEO timing) supports this finding, contrary to the claims that the State Department held sole responsibility for the NEO or that it happened too late.*²⁶
- The Department's Afghanistan Task Force in Washington and Consular Affairs officers in Kabul took extraordinary and unprecedented measures to contact American citizens during the evacuation. Because the State Department does not track Americans overseas or require them to register, the number known to the Embassy and requesting assistance at any point in time was dynamic—and some Americans did not want to leave or changed their minds later. *Testimony from 8 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration abandoned thousands of its own citizens.*²⁷
- The U.S. military was responsible for perimeter security and the gates at HKIA, including Abbey Gate, while State Department officials took the lead on consular processing in the

²³ Supporting testimony provided by: Wilson, Ahmed, Smith

²⁴ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Aronson, Bass, Dehart, Howell, McKeon, Smith, Thompson, Wilson, Khalilzad

²⁵ Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Aronson, Chollet, Dehart, Evans, George, Howell, McKeon, Mennuti, Price, Thompson, Wilson

²⁶ Supporting testimony provided by: Bass, Evans, Smith, Wilson (on NEO timing)

²⁷ Supporting testimony provided by: Aronson, Bass, Dehart, Evans, Howell, Smith, Thompson, Wilson

compound. Responsibilities were clear between U.S. military and civilian personnel during the NEO, and coordination between them was lockstep. After the ISIS-K bombing at Abbey Gate on August 26 tragically killed 13 U.S. servicemembers and caused hundreds of additional casualties, consular officers quickly resumed their duties alongside their military colleagues to continue the mission. *Testimony from 4 witnesses who served on the ground during the NEO supports this finding, contrary to the claim that there was no coordination.*²⁸

- Securing Bagram Air Base for use during the NEO instead of HKIA was deemed a non-viable option as it would have required an escalation of troop numbers in the region and a potential increase in danger as evacuees would have to travel well outside Kabul as the Taliban advanced into the city. *Testimony from 4 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration should have conducted the NEO from Bagram.*²⁹
- Much of the equipment popularly reported as left behind by the US military in Afghanistan had been given to the Afghan military and was subsequently lost by the Afghan military after their defeat. All equipment used by the US military in Afghanistan was removed by the end of the US troop withdrawal. *Testimony from 2 military witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the Biden Administration left \$7B in equipment behind.*³⁰
- The round-the-clock work of highly qualified, dedicated State Department officials during the withdrawal and evacuation was exceptional. *Testimony from 12 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that State Department officers were lazy or inept.*³¹
- The State Department's After-Action Review is credible, thorough, and encompasses the viewpoints of a broad swath of relevant Department employees. Notably, former Secretary Pompeo and three other former senior State Department officials appointed by President Trump were asked, but refused, to participate in the After-Action Review. *Testimony from 11 witnesses supports this finding, contrary to the claim that the State Department under the Biden Administration has not sought to hold itself to account.*³²

²⁸ Supporting testimony provided by: Bass, Dehart, Howell, Wilson

²⁹ Supporting testimony provided by: Wilson, McKeon, Miller, Milley

³⁰ Supporting testimony provided by: Miller, Milley

³¹ Supporting testimony provided by: Aronson, Bass, Chollet, Dehart, Evans, George, Howell, McKeon, Price, Smith, Thompson, Wilson

³² Supporting testimony provided by: Ahmed, Aronson, Bass, Chollet, Evans, George, Howell, McKeon, Smith, Thompson, Wilson

Illustrative Examples of Testimony Supporting Key Findings

Key Finding #1: The Trump Administration Set a Time-Bound, Full Withdrawal Into Motion Without Regard for Facts on the Ground and Failed to Plan for Executing It

- **After years of steady Taliban gains, President Trump initiated the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan through his February 2020 Doha Deal with the Taliban and, according to his lead negotiator, was impatient to get out of Afghanistan regardless.**

Former Commander of NATO Resolute Support Mission and US Forces in Afghanistan, General Austin (“Scott”) Miller (retired), April 15, 2024³³

Page 142, line 23

Q: I wanted to just start back a little bit in terms of the years leading up to 2021 and better understand the context as you saw it on the ground. Was it your understanding that in the 5 years prior to 2021 that the Taliban had been gaining ground and territory every one of those years -- actually, going back longer than 5 years?

A: Yes, sir. The intel assessments were pretty consistent that there was an erosion of government control. I want to say the government still had majority control, but there was, you know, a constant encroachment. And I don't dispute those individual intel community assessments.

Former Afghanistan Task Force Lead and Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Dean Thompson, October 27, 2023³⁴

Page 60, line 7

Q: Okay. So then, given what we previously discussed about the Doha deal in February 2020 stipulating terms for the withdrawal of the U.S. military from Afghanistan, your knowledge of some troop drawdowns that happened prior to 2021, the tweet you just mentioned, is it fair to say the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan was initiated by President Trump?

A: I mean, President Trump, to the best of my knowledge, ordered a withdrawal that began. And then, you know, it was up to the Biden administration to determine if they would continue and carry through with it.

³³ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of General Austin “Scott” Miller (April 15, 2024) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Gen.-Miller-Transcript_Final.pdf)

³⁴ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

*Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, November 8, 2023*³⁵

Page 56, line 7

A: [...] I understood the urgency [...] very clearly that this withdrawal should take place. Sometimes it was the -- I had the impression that it should take place within a year almost or even sooner than that. There was episodic sense of crisis that why this hasn't happened, why the withdrawal is not being completed, why 14 months, why -- why not sooner, that sort of -- but there was no discussion of the tenure. But I knew that, you know, the President was going to be President until the end of his term, which was -- I knew that, that we had that timeframe to -- for a decision to be made. But I'm sure you'll ask about the withdrawal issues because there was a --

Q: So, just to clarify your testimony, even though you weren't given a clear end date of your tenure when you began in 2018 --

A: Right.

Q: -- is it fair to say you were under time pressure

A: Yeah --

Q: -- as you --

A: -- for delivering an agreement and a withdrawal.

Q: And you understood that a withdrawal would essentially need to or was intended to occur during President Trump's term?

A: That would've been preferred from the management point of view [. . .]

Page 173, line 13

Q: So -- so you're negotiating with the Taliban.

A: Yeah.

Q: You believe that the messages coming out of the White House led the Taliban to the conclusion that the United States was getting out regardless

A: Right.

Q: -- correct, during the negotiations?

A: Uh-huh.

³⁵ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad (Nov. 8, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf)

*Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, February 15, 2024*³⁶

Page 51, line 1147

Q: Well, let me ask you, in light of these facts to which you have testified, would it be reasonable to say that the withdrawal began in 2020?

A: Right.

Q: And that it wasn't -- that it wasn't the sole decision of one U.S. President in 2021?

A: Agreed.

- **The Doha Deal committed the United States to reduce to zero all its military personnel, including contractors, by a specific date, with minimal conditions required of the Taliban. The deal contained no stipulation on upholding women's rights. The deal relied dubiously on the Taliban voluntarily reducing violence against and negotiating with the Afghan government, which the Trump Administration forced to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners under the deal despite not being a party to it.**

*Counselor to the State Department, Derek Chollet, December 19, 2023*³⁷

Page 109, line 23

Q: Would you agree with the sentiment that the Doha deal, in effect the plan of record as you testified, was a Go-to-Zero order?

A: Yes.

*Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, February 15, 2024*³⁸

Page 13, line 251

A: After more than a year of negotiations, on February 29, 2020, we reached two agreements -- one with the Taliban and the other with the Afghan government. These provided a framework for U.S. withdrawal, dealing with terrorism, intra-Afghan negotiations within the Taliban and the

³⁶ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, *Hearing on Behind the Scenes: How the Biden Administration Failed to Enforce the Doha Agreement* (Feb. 15, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116840?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22doha%22%7D&s=9&r=1>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

³⁷ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Derek Chollet (Dec. 19, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Derek-Chollet_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

³⁸ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, *Hearing on Behind the Scenes: How the Biden Administration Failed to Enforce the Doha Agreement* (Feb. 15, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116840?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22doha%22%7D&s=9&r=1>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

Afghan Republic, a permanent ceasefire, and future relations between the United States and Afghanistan

Key features of the agreement were:

- Phased withdrawal of U.S. forces over a 14-month period.
- Afghanistan was not to be used by any group or individual to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.
- Intra-Afghan negotiations.
- Importantly, the Taliban committed not to attack U.S. forces once the agreement was signed. This was critical, and the Taliban adhered to it, killing no coalition fighter or U.S. soldier during the entire withdrawal period.

Page 24, line 514

Q: And the United States committed in the Doha deal to, quote, "withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel." Is that not correct?

A: Correct.

Former Commander of NATO Resolute Support Mission and US Forces in Afghanistan, General Austin ("Scott") Miller (retired), April 15, 2024³⁹

Page 92, line 9

Q: And so, in particular, I think what we want to -- what I want to at least get to is, a key aspect of this agreement required the Taliban to want to negotiate a political settlement with the Afghan Government. Would you agree?

A: I'd agree.

Q: And I think earlier you testified that the Taliban showed no willingness or real willingness to actually engage in a negotiation. Is that correct?

A: That's correct.

Q: And so, ultimately, the Taliban constantly said, I think as you testified earlier, that they want to just take over.

A: Yeah. I mean, that's my assessment, that this was -- you know, a settlement was -- a settlement that we viewed was probably not the same picture that the Taliban viewed.

Q: And did you share that assessment with anyone?

A: Routinely.

Q: To Zal?

A: Routinely.

³⁹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of General Austin "Scott" Miller (April 15, 2024) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Gen.-Miller-Transcript_Final.pdf)

Q: To Secretary Pompeo, who you spoke with on the phone?

A: I believe that was probably his assessment as he watched this. But that's why you had a conditions-based agreement.

Q: His assessment was also that the Taliban didn't really want --

A: Let me back up and strike that, because I don't want to speak for Secretary Pompeo on this one. I think that'd be a question for Secretary Pompeo. I don't think -- I don't believe he trusted the Taliban though.

Q: Thank you. It's a significant trust piece, because the entire agreement essentially hinged on the Taliban wanting in a good-faith way to negotiate a peace.

A: I don't disagree with that.

Q Okay. Thanks.

A An assumption.

Q Yeah. Thank you.

Q: And your testimony is that that never happened after the deal was signed on February --

A: I saw the agreement in trouble as soon as it was signed.

Page 162, line 7

Q: And did we understand your testimony correctly earlier to be that the concerns you had about the substance of the Doha deal -- namely, the release of prisoners that it required the Afghan Government --

A: Right.

Q: -- to do, which returned some fighters to the battlefield, and the lack of mechanisms or lack of substance in the deal that really got at the Taliban reducing violence against Afghan forces -- you saw those as impediments to ever reaching a political settlement, correct?

A: Yes, that's fair.

Q: So you knew that chances for a political settlement were going to be dim when the deal was signed.

A: That without either incentives or something else, that it was going to be very difficult.

- **President Trump unilaterally ordered multiple U.S. troop drawdowns, despite a lack of full Taliban compliance with the Doha Deal. This emboldened the Taliban and undermined U.S. and Afghan government leverage.**

Former Commander of NATO Resolute Support Mission and US Forces in Afghanistan, General Austin ("Scott") Miller (retired), April 15, 2024⁴⁰

Page 104, line 23

Q: Okay. So your testimony is that despite the United States signing explicit conditions on February 29th, 2020 --

A: Right.

Q: -- in the Doha Agreement, by September, within 6 months of signing that deal, it was not conditions-based and steps to withdraw troops were being taken independently of conditions on the ground?

A: That's fair.

Page 149, line 18

Q: So were you ordered to 4,500; it wasn't based on your recommendation?

A: No.

Q: Because your recommendation was 8,600.

A: It was. 8,600; you know, evaluate the conditions; then move to 4,500. And it really removed -- as I explained to the staff, the conditions that were in play, as you looked at the totality of the Doha Agreement, was there had been no attacks on U.S. forces.

Q: Okay. So -- and that was one of several conditions.

A: That's correct.

Q: And between the point at which we had 8,600 and the point at which we drew down to 4,500, is it fair to say that that was the only condition that was being met by the Taliban?

A: That's fair.

Q: That the other conditions were not being met?

A: And the Taliban would've argued they were, of course, meeting all the conditions. But, in our viewpoint, the only condition that had been met was no attacks on U.S. and NATO forces or our diplomatic facilities.

Q: So the movement from 8,600 to 4,500 was not based, as you could see it, upon the Taliban meeting the conditions of the Doha Agreement?

A: Right.

Q: Okay. Then, when we go to 2,500 in January of 2021, where did that number come from?

⁴⁰ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of General Austin "Scott" Miller (April 15, 2024) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Gen.-Miller-Transcript_Final.pdf)

A: That was, you know, an order. There was discussion on going from 4,500 to zero, and we fell in between at about 2,500.

Q: That wasn't your -- it wasn't a number you came up with?

A: No, it was not a recommendation.

Q: Do you know where it came from?

A: You know, I'm assuming it came above the Secretary of Defense.

Page 151, line 12

Q: Yeah. Okay. Then we went to 8,600 after Doha; then 4,500. And then when President Biden was sworn in, you had 2,500.

A: That's correct.

Former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan, Mark Evans, August 23, 2023⁴¹

Page 134, line 16

Q: And, Mr. Evans, I'll start, and, again, with appreciation for your indulgence as we just try to ensure that we have the cleanest possible record. You had testified before that President Trump drew down U.S. troops in 2020 and early 2021 without regard for whether or not the Taliban was complying with the Doha deal, correct?

A: That is my opinion, yes.

Q: And you testified that this reduced the Taliban's likeliness to ever seek to comply fully with the terms of the Doha deal, and you noted your belief that they never fully did comply with those terms, correct?

A: Yes, that's my assessment.

Q: So based on that, in your view, were the efforts to withdraw U.S. troops undertaken from 2020 through August 2021 ever, in practice, fully or exclusively conditions-based?

A: No.

Page 52, line 1

Q: Okay. In your view, how did the Trump administration's decisions related to the Doha deal, including in substance that it was negotiated without the then Afghan Government, impact planning for the withdrawal?

A: It is my view that once the Doha agreement was in place and a timeline had been therefore put in place for an eventual withdrawal, that the requirements that we put in place as stated on the Taliban in order to proceed with that withdrawal did not -- were not fulfilled in full, and, in fact, never have been fulfilled in full. But even with that, there were a number of decisions that decreased our presence in Afghanistan militarily.

⁴¹ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

And, again, it's my belief that, because of that process, the Taliban reached a conclusion that in some ways it did not have to fulfill all of the agreements that they entered into within that agreement or the requirements that they agreed they would fulfill, that it was their assessment that over time we would eventually leave regardless.

And so that created a very difficult dynamic, including in our efforts to bring about a political reconciliation in Doha between the Taliban and the existing government in Afghanistan. And I think the evidence of that is the ways in which the Taliban leadership delayed that process, made that process very difficult over time in terms of even agreeing to the terms of reference for those discussions, for example.

AAR Lead, Ambassador Daniel ("Dan") Smith, August 31, 2023⁴²

Page 121, line 4

Q: And on the Doha deal, according to the terms agreed to by the Trump administration and the Taliban, the U.S. would withdraw troops pending the completion of various commitments by the Taliban, correct?

A: Correct.

Q: And, from your review, did you hear concerns that these draw-downs undercut negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban?

A: So this opens a whole new discussion here in terms of the relationship between the United States and the Afghan Government and their interpretation of the agreement that was signed in February 2020. I think it's safe to say, they were not party to that agreement, they were frustrated that they were being expected to implement various commitments under that agreement to which they were not party, and that that had a profound impact on the relationship.

Q: And, to clarify, when you say "they," you mean the Afghan Government?

A: Yes.

Q: Was there any discussion of some of the elements that undermined the Afghan Government that were part of the Doha Agreement?

A: Was there any discussion when?

Q: Meaning, elements of the agreement that disproportionately affected or undermined the credibility of the Afghan Government?

A: Well, first and foremost, I think there was a commitment under the agreements and side agreements for an exchange of prisoners, and I think the Afghan Government felt like they were being pressured to go forward with that exchange of prisoners, release of prisoners, notwithstanding what they saw as the unwillingness and actual failure of the Taliban to live up to a commitment in terms of reducing violence and attacks.

⁴² Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

Former Commander of United States Central Command, General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. (retired), March 19, 2024⁴³

Page 116, line 2699

Q: What was your assessment of the strength and movements of the Taliban at the time?

A: *Gen. McKenzie:* So, I think the Taliban, from after Doha, the Taliban benefitted from the fact that we were striking them much less frequently and with much less force, particularly after we began some of the programmed drawdowns that were part of the Doha Agreement. So, they began to become larger, bolder, and more aggressive.

Now, a key point is they also drew back considerable, like 100 percent or 99 percent of their attacks against us. And most of their attacks against us were probably low-level Taliban commanders who didn't get the word.

On the other hand, their attacks against Afghan forces increased in ferocity and didn't come down at all, and they began to hit them very hard during this period of time. So, it is my judgment that the Taliban grew better and bolder during this period of time.

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark A. Milley (retired), March 19, 2024⁴⁴

Page 37, line 816

Q: Would you say that the Doha agreement that was done under the Trump Administration had some connection to the conditions on the ground when Joe Biden became President --

A: *Gen. Milley:* Of course.

Q: -- and leading on up to what took place at Abbey Gate? There was a nexus there. Is that not correct?

A: *Gen. Milley:* Yeah, I think the end game, if you will, the final months, I think the framework of that is set by the Doha agreement, absolutely.

⁴³ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Commander of United States Central Command General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. (retired), *Hearing on An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals* (Mar. 19, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116951?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22America%27s+Generals%22%7D&s=8&r=8>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

⁴⁴ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley (retired), *Hearing on An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals* (Mar. 19, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116951?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22America%27s+Generals%22%7D&s=8&r=8>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

- **Despite committing to a full U.S. withdrawal in the Doha Deal, the Trump Administration did not undertake necessary interagency preparations or contingency planning for an orderly drawdown.**

AAR Lead, Ambassador Daniel ("Dan") Smith, August 31, 2023⁴⁵

Page 124, line 8

Q: -- and what you uncovered about that in the course of your review. Over the course of your review -- interviews, document review -- did you identify planning documents that had transpired under the Trump administration related to the withdrawal?

A: We looked at everything that was available to us. What we didn't -- we didn't find a -- I mean, there were plans that were going on, as we discussed, about the evacuation of the embassy itself and various contingencies. What we didn't find was a comprehensive plan for what it would mean to withdraw the military and what might follow from that.

Q: And you testified previously that your review found that the previous administration's interagency process was -- I believe you used the term "not robust" -- and that decisions were made in narrow channels. Does that assessment extend to the production of plans and documents as well, that the process was not robust and that it was fairly narrow in terms of who was involved?

A: Yes, certainly in terms of the absence of a robust interagency process, which one would've expected in this environment.

Q: In your experience, are robust interagency processes generally --

A: Painful but necessary.

Page 127, line 14

Q: Let me pivot away from your role as transition coordinator for the Department and back to the hat you were wearing while running the AAR. Did you hear any concerns over the course of the AAR process that the planning for the withdrawal by the Trump administration had been insufficient?

A: We heard concerns, I think, that, as we discussed earlier, the focus was on withdrawing the military as quickly as possible and that a lot of the contingencies or implications of that had not been fully thought through.

⁴⁵ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

*Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023*⁴⁶

Page 117, line 11

Q: Fair enough. Were you aware of any contingency planning or discussions during the Trump administration to handle a precipitous deterioration of the security situation in the country?

A: No.

Q: To prepare for a drawdown or scaling back of the U.S. Embassy there?

A: As I indicated earlier, we had discussions internally and at the U.S. Mission about that, and to some extent with the U.S. military, on the ramifications or issues we needed to understand. If there were discussions of that sort in Washington, I'm not aware of them.

Q: Okay. So, to be clear, those conversations happened at the mission itself?

A: The conversations that I'm aware of, yes.

Q: Okay. And did you lead those conversations?

A: Many. Maybe not -- probably the majority.

Q: Okay. Are you aware of any contingency planning to prepare for a large-scale evacuation of Americans and our Afghan allies during this time?

A: Not in 2020, no. That happened later.

*Former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan, Mark Evans, August 23, 2023*⁴⁷

Page 56, line 12

Q: And did that planning that you had observed prior to the change in administration involve contingency plans for a State Department-led evacuation?

A: A full evacuation? No.

Q: And did it include contingency plans for State Department's role in supporting a possible noncombatant evacuation operation?

A: No, it did not at that time.

Q: Would you characterize the planning as you had observed it prior to the change of administration as detailed?

A: No.

Q: Would you describe it as directed at a high level or undertaken internally by the State Department as part of your efforts to ensure a deliberative process?

A: I would characterize it as the latter.

⁴⁶ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

⁴⁷ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

- **In stark contrast to prior administration transitions, the Trump Administration’s handover of policy to the Biden Administration was shambolic and non-cooperative.**

Counselor to the State Department, Derek Chollet, December 19, 2023⁴⁸

Page 60, line 11

Q: Okay. How would you describe the transition from the Trump administration to the Biden administration generally?

A: It was, generally speaking, shambolic, but I was fortunate in the sense that the State Department -- and credit would go here to the outgoing Deputy Secretary of State, Steve Biegun - - was relative, relatively smooth as the transition goes, once the transition started. But let’s remember for the record, there were several weeks in which there was a you know, the previous administration would not concede the election. And so, therefore, the formal transition was delayed by 3 weeks or more is my recollection. And then, of course, unfortunately, some agencies, including the Defense Department and the White House in particular had very, very difficult transitions where not much information was shared and it was quite contentious.

Director of the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Office, Salman Ahmed, October 12, 2023⁴⁹

Page 61, line 15

Q: But based on your experience with two transitions, the transition from Obama to Trump you described as having been modeled off a, quote, exemplary transition. You described many months of work and a great deal of materials prepared. What was your characterization of the Trump to Biden transition in light of your past experience?

A: I would say that my past experience, where I was directly involved, was the NSC.

Q: Uh huh.

A: And I don’t think it was comparable to the level of preparation that the Bush administration did and what they made available to Obama and what the Obama administration did and made available to the Trump administration. I don’t think that what was made available and prepared and the level of cooperation from the Trump to the Biden administration was anything close of the quality or breadth at the NSC.

⁴⁸ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Derek Chollet (Dec. 19, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Derek-Chollet_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

⁴⁹ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

Key Finding #2: The Biden Administration Kickstarted a Robust Process to Review and Prepare for Completing the U.S. Withdrawal Already Underway

- **Upon taking office, the Biden Administration undertook a comprehensive interagency process to review Afghan policy. Facing the risk that a low-level U.S. war in Afghanistan could continue in perpetuity, President Biden decided to complete the U.S. withdrawal, tasking his Administration—and extending the withdrawal deadline by four months—to sufficiently prepare.**

Counselor to the State Department, Derek Chollet, December 19, 2023⁵⁰

Page 19, line 25

Q: Of course. It would be helpful to us to sort of better understand how the statement -- State Department's planning sort of proceeded once the Biden administration took office in January 2021.

A: Well, we were -- I should say we inherited basically very little planning, or a seriously atrophied plan, which, I should say, was a bit shocking given that it was a hundred days from May 1st, which was the stated deadline for withdrawal by the Doha Agreement, and the fact that we knew that there had been a reduction of forces during the transition down to 2,500. So it was making sure that we were fit for purpose and that the actual -- the planning that I would've assumed had been underway actually would get underway. And then of course the big data point that we didn't know was what the President would decide in terms of on the future U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. And once that decision was taken in April, then it reshaped the planning, because we knew that we would -- the State Department would have to plan for a future in Afghanistan without a significant or any U.S. military presence.

Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023⁵¹

Page 80, line 5

Q: So, according to the statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne, on January 22nd, 2021, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan informed his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib that the U.S. would review the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement -- i.e., the Doha Agreement -- including to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments. Ambassador, is it correct that an interagency policy review commenced after this?

A: An interagency -- yes, I believe so. The interagency review on Afghanistan began as soon as the new administration was in office and able to function.

⁵⁰ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Derek Chollet (Dec. 19, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Derek-Chollet_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

⁵¹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

Former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan, Mark Evans, August 23, 2023⁵²

Page 75, line 12

Q: How would you choose to answer the question, which was, how was the issue of a potential military withdrawal from Afghanistan approached in the Presidential admin -- the Presidential transition to the Biden administration?

A: It was approached through a very deliberative information--gathering process that started just after the advent of the Biden administration through a series of high-level interagency meetings where issues were discussed, information was gathered, papers were tasked. And, from my perspective, our role was to be supportive of that process, to provide that information or obtain it, to do those assessments in coordination with -- both internally in the State Department and in coordination with other parts of the U.S. Government, and then to provide that information or those papers and feed them into that continuing process.

Former Commander of NATO Resolute Support Mission and US Forces in Afghanistan, General Austin ("Scott") Miller (retired), April 15, 2024⁵³

Page 152, line 15

Q: Okay. So, given all of that, you're sitting here in 2021 with 2,500 troops. The Taliban are on the move, are taking more and more territory, having a momentum. Capacity by the ANSDF is degrading. You have one-sixth of the force that you had when you assessed that you could do a predominantly counterterrorism mission. What is your assessment as to how long you can sustain that?

A: I didn't -- I was asked that question. You know, "When does this end?" is really how I was asked that question. When do you -- you know.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And, you know, the answer was, "I don't know." I was also asked the question, are you going to need more troops if I tell you you can have --

Q: Forever?

A: Well, that's not what you were stuck with. It was forever until -- so, until the objectives change. If you're being asked to do this, my military recommendation is, you can do this better from this location --

Q: Do what better?

A: Safeguard the United States of America --

Q: Okay.

A: -- and our interests. You can safeguard --

Q: But with 2,500 troops --

⁵² Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

⁵³ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of General Austin "Scott" Miller (April 15, 2024) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Gen.-Miller-Transcript_Final.pdf)

A: That's correct.

Q: But given increased Taliban momentum, then on the march, taking more and more territory, a degradation and a retrograde of the Taliban forces --

A: Right.

Q: -- fewer forces than you ever had under your command, did you think you could do that forever?

A: I don't know that I'd say forever, but there was a period of time that you could hold the Afghan Security Forces together. One of the things on the march, there weren't a lot of battlefield victories towards the end. There was a lot of psychological victories. And it was similar to what happened in 2001, and that's the people deciding, this fight's over, the U.S. is leaving. So you arrest that just by sheer presence. So you slow that down. I don't know that you stop it, but you certainly slow it down. But the 2,500 would allow to you --

Q: For some time --

A: Right.

Q: -- but not in perpetuity.

A: Unless you made some adjustments, or unless the Afghan Security Forces made adjustments.

Former Acting Under Secretary of State for Management, Ambassador Carol Perez, November 15, 2023⁵⁴

Page 124, line 6

Q: Okay. So then President Biden's decision in April 2021 to complete the withdrawal included a 4 month extension, roughly speaking, of the original timeline --

A: That is correct.

Q: -- to allow additional space and time to prepare for that withdrawal.

A: That's right. It gave me time to prepare.

- **There was broad agreement that further extending the deadline for, or reversing entirely, the Doha Deal would have resulted in renewed Taliban attacks against U.S. personnel and interests.**

Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, November 8, 2023⁵⁵

Page 179, line 1

Q: If the Biden administration had said the Doha agreement is no longer valid

⁵⁴ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Carol Perez (Nov. 15, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Carol-Perez_Compiled_Redacted.pdf)

⁵⁵ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad (Nov. 8, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf)

A: We'd be back at war.

Q: Okay. And that was the consensus view?

A: Oh, yeah. I mean, I didn't see anybody from intel to others saying no. They would say, Welcome. Why don't you stay? No.

Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, February 15, 2024⁵⁶

Page 25, line 528

Q: Right. And so, in your expert opinion, what did you think the Taliban would have done if President Biden, just a few months before the original May deadline that his predecessor had set for a full withdrawal, had just walked away entirely from the Doha agreement, in your expert opinion?

A: If we had walked away from the Doha agreement, we would have been back, in my opinion -- now I am offering an opinion --

Q: Yes, your expert opinion.

A: -- we would have been back and fighting the Taliban. So, we would have been back to where we were before the agreement. That is my opinion.

Q: Right. So, you spoke in your opening statement of the belief that imposing further conditions on the Taliban at that time, as you just stated, would risk a return to war. And you hold to that belief today, is that correct?

A: I do.

Q: And had President Biden sought to revise the deal to maintain a small number of troops in Afghanistan indefinitely, did the risk remain that the Taliban would resume attacks against them?

A: Very likely

Page 27, line 566

Q: So, Mr. Ambassador, in your own belief, do you believe that President Biden's completion of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was necessary to protect American lives?

A: Certainly American lives in Afghanistan in terms of American military forces, yes.

⁵⁶ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, *Hearing on Behind the Scenes: How the Biden Administration Failed to Enforce the Doha Agreement* (Feb. 15, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116840?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22doha%22%7D&s=9&r=1>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

Counselor to the State Department, Derek Chollet, December 19, 2023⁵⁷

Page 164, line 23

Q: Did the Taliban issue threats to attack U.S. troops if we stayed past August 31st?

A: The Taliban -- my recollection is, yes. And going back to what I said earlier, they made threats basically since May 1st, all the way through, that we, in fact, were overstaying our welcome militarily and needed to leave.

Page 184, line 4

Q: Okay. What do you assess would have happened had the administration revised its August 31st withdrawal date?

A: I think we ran the risk, a much higher risk of getting in a shooting -- returning to a shooting war with the Taliban at a moment of maximum vulnerability for us, given that we were only at HKIA, and we had a very, very small military footprint, and there was an acute terrorist threat that we were facing as we saw so tragically with the Abbey Gate bombing.

Former Deputy to Ambassador John Bass in Kabul, James ("Jim") DeHart, June 16, 2023⁵⁸

Page 53, line 7

Q: And, regarding your testimony that you discussed, the downsides of changing the timeline, can you explain to us what you saw those downsides to be?

A: I think that the main concern was that -- was that, if we had gone beyond August 31st, the Taliban would -- would -- would not accept that, and there could be, you know, at minimum, a breakdown of sort of basic cooperation by the Taliban, but -- but also possibly outbreak of armed conflict with the Taliban if they thought that we were delaying our departure.

Q: Was your concern that the Taliban would overrun U.S. personnel or attack them directly?

A: I think it was -- there was certainly a concern that the Taliban might attack U.S. personnel under those circumstances. But I think it -- there was a -- you know, I heard the concern from military colleagues that, if -- if the -- if the relationship with the Taliban went so downhill that it led to -- you know, to active fighting between us, that there was an expectation that we would prevail, that we would not be overrun, but there were thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of civilians. And so there would have -- it would have been a humanitarian disaster.

⁵⁷ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Derek Chollet (Dec. 19, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Derek-Chollet_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

⁵⁸ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of James "Jim" DeHart (June 16, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-James-Dehart_FINAL.pdf)

*Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark A. Milley (retired), March 19, 2024*⁵⁹

Page 54, line 1225

Q: Chairman Milley, you said in your opening that the Doha agreement that President Trump and his administration entered into with the Taliban required the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces and diplomatic. That was the agreement that the Trump Administration entered into. You said that had we not complied with that agreement that there would be, quote, "open war with the Taliban," right? That they had kept their agreement not to attack U.S. forces which allowed us to withdraw and reduce our footprint. So here today had we not withdrawn and not ended the war would we be at open war with the Taliban?

A: *Gen. Milley*: I think the probability is greater than not that the Taliban would've reinitiated combat operations on 1 May or 2 May. The Doha agreement says all force out by 1 May. The current administration that the State Department negotiated with the Taliban to get that extended, Zal Khalilzad to get that extended until September, I guess it was, to buy some additional time. But there's little question in my mind that had the United States -- that either Presidents' agreement to withdraw, if we didn't withdraw 100 percent, then we would've been back at work with the Taliban. That's right.

- **The Biden Administration undertook comprehensive planning for the safe continuity of the U.S. diplomatic presence in Kabul after a U.S. troop withdrawal and was well on its way to implementing those plans when Kabul suddenly and unexpectedly fell.**

*Counselor to the State Department, Derek Chollet, December 19, 2023*⁶⁰

Page 21, line 3

Q: Was there a senior leader at the Department exercising overall responsibility for the Department's equities in planning for the withdrawal and a potential emergency evacuation?

A: Well, again, the Secretary of State was very engaged and wanted to make sure that we were and the planning was in place, not just for a NEO but to try to sustain a U.S. diplomatic presence beyond the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan.

⁵⁹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley (retired), *Hearing on An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals* (Mar. 19, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116951?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22America%27s+Generals%22%7D&s=8&r=8>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

⁶⁰ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Derek Chollet (Dec. 19, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Derek-Chollet_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

Former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan, Mark Evans, August 23, 2023⁶¹

Page 10, line 23

A: We, in that regard, started working very closely with our Embassy, with our military contacts and so on, to really talk about two scenarios and start planning for them: One being, if we were able to maintain a diplomatic presence post troop withdrawal, what that would look like in terms of presence in the country, what would the requirements be in terms of maintaining a secure diplomatic facility, especially knowing that there were certain support roles that the military had been providing that would no longer be in place. And so that became a major focus of our effort.

Former Acting Under Secretary of State for Management, Ambassador Carol Perez, November 15, 2023⁶²

Page 38, line 13

Q: [...] At the time of the President's decision to withdraw in April 2021, what was the Department's position on continued embassy presence in Afghanistan?

A: We were focused on an enduring diplomatic presence -- again, for both Presidents, withdrawal of troops, enduring diplomatic presence.

Q: Were there any actions underway to reduce embassy staffing in anticipation of the military withdrawal?

A: Yes.

Page 73, line 2

Q: Sure. What criteria did you identify that would enable the U.S. to continue to operate its embassy post withdrawal?

A: So, you know, first of all, we talked about there was a compound, right. So there was a grooming zone, as we called it, which was secure. But there were also security forces that the U.S. Government had been working with, but also our partner nations. I mentioned I had a meeting with like-minded ambassadors since I was in Kabul, and among them were the -- representatives, not necessarily ambassadors, but representatives from like the Australian Embassy, the U.K. Embassy. And they had also been working with Afghan Security Forces and agree that, you know, they would stay and they would provide necessary security. So that was a good thing. And Diplomatic Security themselves were very positive about the relationships that they had built over time with security forces.

Q: Okay. So is it fair to say that, in your assessment, it would be viable to keep a presence at the embassy post withdrawal?

A: At the time of that, absolutely.

⁶¹ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

⁶² Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Carol Perez (Nov. 15, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Carol-Perez_Compiled_Redacted.pdf)

Q: Okay. And what really informed that opinion?

A: What informed it was talking to people like Diplomatic Security and embassy personnel -- embassy leadership about what we believed were the commitments from the Afghans to continue coming off of a time of quiet in Kabul itself. We had hardened structures, but I was trying to make them as hardened as possible. So, you know, there's risk, right. There's always risk. When you look at Iraq, there's terrible risk there, and -- but, you know, wanting to ensure that, you know, the presence continued as best it could. Was it going to be tough? Yeah. Was it possible? I thought so.

Former Acting Chief of Staff to Ambassador Carol Perez, Jonathan Mennuti, July 20, 2023⁶³

Page 83, line 12

Q: And your understanding of that engagement and planning was that it specifically sought to address gaps or vulnerabilities in the embassy's ability to operate safely and securely after a U.S. military withdrawal. Is that correct?

A: Yes, that's true.

Q: And you understood the plans focused on embassy continuity in the near term to be viable, as you testified earlier. Is that correct?

A: I don't recall any reason at the time that I doubted it.

Q: Okay. And did you understand the plans related to embassy continuity to be detailed?

A: Detailed in terms of how these functions were going to be carried out?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes.

Q: And did you understand these plans for embassy continuity to be informed by a sense of, quote, urgency?

A: Yes.

Q: And to clarify your earlier testimony, you had no knowledge by the end of your tenure of any imminent takeover of Kabul that could impact the U.S. Embassy's ability to operate, correct?

A: I don't recall that, no.

⁶³ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

- **After the Trump Administration ignored a backlog in Afghan Special Immigrant visas (SIV), the Biden Administration dramatically increased SIV processing and launched a civilian evacuation effort to prepare for increased demand to leave—even though many people were still weighing whether to do so.**

AAR Lead, Ambassador Daniel (“Dan”) Smith, August 31, 2023⁶⁴

Page 128, line 19

Q: On page 13 of exhibit 1, at the top of the page, paragraph 13 notes, “At the time the Trump administration signed the agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, there was a significant backlog in the Afghan SIV process. That administration made no senior-level or interagency effort to address the backlog or consider options for other at-risk Afghans despite its commitment to a military withdrawal.” Can you say a little bit more about that finding?

A: I would just underscore that an effort was made in the new administration to try and expedite the SIV process. I do want to preface my remarks by noting that the previous administration faced enormous challenges in terms of COVID and the impact that had on it. But I think the concern that was articulated by the AAR and others was, it was clear, under the terms of the agreement which we’ve discussed already, in February 2020 that we were to withdraw our military forces by May. Now, some people might’ve thought the President might rethink that, might not do it, might do other things. But if that’s your timetable for doing that, then the lack of attention to, “Okay, what about SIVs? What about at-risk Afghans?” was notable in that context and was problematic.

Page 189, line 18

Q: Okay. Thanks. And I want to go back to something on SIVs, as well. In your understanding, based on the review that you led, was COVID the only challenge facing the SIV program --

A: No.

Q: -- under the last administration?

A: By no means.

Q: So, your understanding is that the backlog in SIV processing predated COVID?

A: There had been a backlog for quite some time. As I indicated, this was administratively a very difficult process. There were any number of challenges with recordkeeping, with the vetting process for SIV applicants. So, even under the best of circumstances, if you hadn’t had a pandemic, this was not going to be easy.

Q: But, in fact, the AAR described something else that was not the best of circumstances under the last administration. It said that the administration took no steps to address the backlog. Is that accurate?

A: That’s fair.

⁶⁴ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

*Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023*⁶⁵

Page 155, line 2

Q: And I want to start at the top of the page, the paragraph numbered number 13 [of the After-Action Review]. I'll read it into the record. It says, "At the time the Trump administration signed the agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, there was a significant backlog in the Afghan SIV process. That administration made no senior level or interagency effort to address the backlog or consider options for other at risk Afghans despite its commitment to a military withdrawal." Continuing in paragraph 14, it begins, "When the Biden Administration came into office, senior administration officials within the interagency took steps to accelerate the SIV process." We'll stop there. Given your earlier testimony about steps that were taken in 2021 to improve SIV processing, do you agree with this finding that I just read from page 13?

A: So, those two paragraphs?

Q: Uh huh.

A: Yes. There was, when I came on duty in January 2020, a significant backlog in the SIV process -- around 18,000, I believe, is the number I recall. And I'm not aware of any action that had taken place either before or after, in the course of the Trump administration, to try to accelerate the processing and deal with the backlog prior to a potential withdrawal. Absolutely, the Biden administration National Security Council drove a process to fundamentally change the procedures, especially in Kabul, but also in Washington, and added staff to alleviate that backlog.

*Former Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Brian McKeon, November 29, 2023*⁶⁶

Page 78, line 12

Q: And when you speak to the efforts already underway in late July, early August, can you elaborate on that? Was that a sort of renewed effort, or was that an additional push that came at the behest of the administration to move forward with SIVs? What did that process entail?

A: So let me back up. I think I mentioned earlier, in February, the President issued a directive to revive and improve the SIV program, and the State Department and other agencies took steps to do that, including deploying additional staff to Kabul, consular staff. And the pace and number of visas issued per week picked up considerably if you compare the numbers in February/March and in the summer. I don't have them off the top of my head. We also vastly expanded the staff in the office, in the SCA Bureau that did basically the bulk of the work on chief of mission approval. Ultimately, someone in Kabul had to give the approval. And that staff went from -- I want to say it went from about 10 to 40 or 45, maybe close to 50, by the fall of 2021. So we took all those measures to expedite the processing of SIV applications and getting people through the system and giving them visas in Kabul. Not everybody who got a visa would then automatically get on a

⁶⁵ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

⁶⁶ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Brian McKeon (Nov. 29, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Brian-McKeon_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

plane. Some people wanted it as a safety valve in case they wanted to leave. Then there was a decision made, after several weeks of conversations in the interagency, to begin to bring people out who had not yet completed the process but were pretty far along in it. And we still had them go through their panel medical exam in Kabul. And, you know, so that took a while, to decide how we would do that, where we would do that, where we would bring people. That took several weeks. And that started in late July. So those were two related but slightly distinct efforts. One was building up infrastructure to speed up issuing SIVs, and the second was bringing out people who had not completed the process.

- **The July 2021 internal dissent cable on Afghanistan relayed concerns which senior Administration officials were already seized with addressing. Secretary Blinken read the dissent cable and ordered a response while protecting the confidentiality of the dissent channel.**

Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023⁶⁷

Page 140 line 13

Q: What actions did you take after reading the dissent cable?

A: I'll be honest; I didn't really take any actions that I wasn't already taking.

Matters had moved on significantly in the couple of weeks, as I'm sure it was at least 10 or 12 days after they sent that cable before I read it, and I think it was longer. Matters had moved on.

[...]

Q: Other than the processes that were already in place, as you just testified, did you make any recommendations to the Department on how to address the concerns of your staff?

A: Broadly speaking, I think we were working on the kinds of things we needed to be working on to address the issues that the staff had raised, which had to do with trying to do everything we could to ensure against a collapse of the system and to protect both ourselves and people we cared about in the country if those efforts were not successful.

Page 116, line 8

Q: Okay. And I believe you also testified earlier that your understanding was that the points that the cable was raising -- some of the points that the cable raised were helpful to the Department's ongoing deliberations.

A: That's correct.

Q: And did you also testify earlier that the substance, as you recall it, was related to or not dissimilar from ongoing conversations that were already underway at the Department?

A: Yes.

⁶⁷ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

*AAR Lead, Ambassador Daniel (“Dan”) Smith, August 31, 2023*⁶⁸

Page 35, line 6

Q: Do you believe, having the opportunity to review [the dissent channel cable], that it would have increased the AAR team's insight into the withdrawal?

A: In my opinion, no. I think that what the dissent channel did was underscore some concerns that were being expressed in various channels at the time and by various people and that the light that it would shed on those concerns was not that significant or different from what was being heard in other ways.

*Director of the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Office, Salman Ahmed, October 12, 2023*⁶⁹

Page 71, line 7

Q: What's your understanding of the rationale behind the FAM rules in paragraph (b), stipulating distribution to these individuals?

A: I think it's twofold. One is to ensure that the senior most decision makers who could-- who should be privy to that information and who could act on it or comment on it do indeed get to see the cable. But it equally to make clear that, in such a restrictive list, that you're not indicating that it's there for wide distribution. So I think it has twofold purpose. One, to ensure the material is read. The other is to make sure that the integrity of the channel and the anonymity of the drafter is preserved, unless otherwise indicated by them.

Q: So do you agree with the rationale for the specific and narrow distribution to senior officials on the Seventh Floor?

A: I do.

Page 72, line 24

Q: So Secretary Blinken personally clears --

A: Personally reads every dissent cable that comes in and he personally clears the response.

Page 96, line 20

Q: To what extent did Department officials who read the cable agree with its contents?

[...]

A: What I can say is that I think that those who read it at the time their immediate reaction was there's a lot in here I agree with, and there's a lot of things they're raising in here that, in fact, we are already working on or doing. They've added some details that are very helpful. So I think it was more a question of like having information that the drafters didn't have in some cases; in other cases, getting information from the drafters that was helpful. But I think that generally the

⁶⁸ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

⁶⁹ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

reaction was this is a constructive document, it's helpful, and I didn't hear them saying this is, like, I completely disagree with this.

Key Finding #3: The Collapse of the Afghan Government Precipitously Changed the Situation in Kabul and Prompted a Dynamic and Unprecedented U.S. Government Response That Protected Americans, Our Allies, and Our Interests

- **The situation in Kabul in August 2021 changed precipitously, and more quickly than U.S. officials had anticipated, as Afghan President Ghani fled and the Afghan government and security forces collapsed. While the new situation on the ground was chaotic, the Department's response was not—State personnel mobilized immediately.**

Former Commander of NATO Resolute Support Mission and US Forces in Afghanistan, General Austin ("Scott") Miller, April 15, 2024⁷⁰

Page 209, line 5

Q: What do you think President Ghani's departure on August 15th -- what signal do you think that that sent, and what impact do you think that had on the situation on the ground in Kabul?

A: Catastrophic. Yeah. I mean, I actually called up and asked; I go, "Did you tell him to leave?" And he goes, "No, I didn't tell him to leave." And so I didn't know what had transpired there, and I'd only find that out much like all of us would. You know, somebody came in, said you've got to go, and then they explained. I haven't spoken to Ghani since he left.

Q: "Catastrophic" in the sense that it created a catastrophe on the ground?

A: Psychological. Yeah.

Q: And material as well?

A: Ultimately –

Q: Given that there were –

A: Initially psychological, but then, you know, that -- that's the panic. That's the emergency. So, you know, you're approaching that emergency, and if it needed an accelerant, he gave it one.

⁷⁰ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of General Austin "Scott" Miller (April 15, 2024) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Gen.-Miller-Transcript_Final.pdf)

*Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark A. Milley (retired), March 19, 2024*⁷¹

Page 90, line 2106

Q: I wanted to start quickly with the testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in September of 2021, where Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said of the timing of the evacuations, "As for when we started evacuations, we offered input to the State Department decision, mindful of their concerns that moving too soon might actually cause the very collapse of the Afghan government that we all wanted to avoid." I wanted to ask both of you, what role did the sudden, just almost instantaneous collapse of the Afghan government play in the events following the continuing evacuation and withdrawal? Can you speak to the utter collapse that seems to have surprised most people?

A: [. . .]

Yeah, I think, with respect to what General Austin was saying, that was a concern of the State Department, but there was a general consensus that complete withdrawal of U.S. military force was going to lead to collapse of the government in the end. And so, the issue is timing, when that would happen. Most of the assessments indicated, the intelligence community assessments, were a 12-to-24-month sort of thing. The military actually had a tighter assessment, and we estimated that the earliest time of complete collapse could be in the fall, maybe around Thanksgiving, something like that. Nothing indicated August per se.

*Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, February 15, 2024*⁷²

Page 92, line 2108

Q: The impact of President Ghani's actions. When you were asked earlier, you said that you put the responsibility of what happened in the Afghan withdrawal on the Afghan government. And I would like you to tell us more about that.

For example, going back to the final days of the withdrawal, you said in your testimony that the agreement you negotiated between the Taliban and the Afghan government, quote, "fell apart when President Ghani surprisingly fled the country, which caused the now leaderless Afghan military and police to instantly disintegrate."

⁷¹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley (retired), *Hearing on An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals* (Mar. 19, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116951?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22America%27s+Generals%22%7D&s=8&r=8>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

⁷² Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, *Hearing on Behind the Scenes: How the Biden Administration Failed to Enforce the Doha Agreement* (Feb. 15, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116840?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22doha%22%7D&s=9&r=1>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

What did the impact of that disintegration have on the situation outside the gates at Kabul airport and on the non-combatant evacuation?

A: Well, thank you for what you said.

The impact was instantaneous. The rush to the airport, the airport crisis, if you like, was created because of what happened. The security leaders, rather than standing in place carrying out their duties, defending their city, defending the government, they rushed to the airport to be evacuated. And then, there was, obviously, challenges created about securing the perimeters of the airport.

*Former Acting Under Secretary of State for Management, Ambassador Carol Perez, November 15, 2023*⁷³

Page 75, line 12

Q: Okay. So in your assessment -- I don't want to mischaracterize. But in your assessment, is it correct that the evacuation of the embassy was precipitated by the Taliban takeover?

A: I was not on the phone call. I was called after the decision had been made that the embassy was being evacuated.

Q: And do you remember the date of that?

A: I want to say it was a Saturday morning, but I don't remember. Whatever that date was. August 16th? Was that the 16th, a Saturday?

[...]

Q: And prior to that phone call, did you have any indication that a safe withdrawal would not be possible?

A: No. The airport was open. And I think that was one of the things that, you know, we -- planes were flying in.

Q: Okay. And is it fair to say that upon receiving this call, you quickly pivoted and were able to address the situation in real time?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you describe why that was the case?

A: Well, we had to stop doing what we were doing, which was focused on the long-term presence. And now we needed to get people out as quickly as possible and as safely as possible.

Page 78, line 3

A: One of the things that I did, which turned out to be, I think, a huge positive thing for us, was -- we had these lily pads all over. We had about, I think, nine of them or so, so they ranged from Doha to Germany. And I did a call. I was talking to the charge in Doha one day, and he's like, "I don't know what's going on in Kuwait." And I said, "I can fix that. I'm going to host a call." And then I brought in other agencies -- DHS. Because we couldn't do this alone. People had to be vetted. If CBP wasn't doing their job, we had a problem. So I wanted CBP to come into our phone

⁷³ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Carol Perez (Nov. 15, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Carol-Perez_Compiled_Redacted.pdf)

call so they could hear from the people on the ground what was going on in Kuwait or UAE or Germany or Madrid or Italy or wherever else they had these things. But that was a call that sometimes would go 3 hours every day. But it was important, because we had to really flow people out and make sure that we could put them in as safe an environment as we were transitioning them as possible.

[. . .]

A: And my -- actually, ops, I think, had done an alert. I had a team had just come in, because that's how good they were. They just came in. I came into the office, it was like 6 o'clock in the morning, and there were doughnuts and coffee, and I had, like, five people there. And I'm like, this is great. Let's go. We're going to do this.

Former Deputy to Ambassador John Bass in Kabul, James ("Jim") DeHart, June 16, 2023⁷⁴

Page 23, line 10

Q: What impression were you given of the situation on the ground in the country prior to your departure?

A: That it was extraordinarily challenging.

Q: In what ways?

A: Well, I'm not quite sure of the impression I had as I was departing Washington, but when I arrived on the ground, the -- the situation was -- was very chaotic. I would distinguish that from our response to the situation, which I don't think was chaotic, but the situation was chaotic. We had -- there were very, very large numbers of Afghans that were -- that had mobbed the perimeter of the airport, that were surrounding the entire airport that were trying to force their way to the gates, trying to get in. There were Taliban in those crowds. There were thugs in those crowds that were preying on people that were trying to get to the gates. There was -- there was a lot of gunfire constant that was ringing overhead in the crowds. So it was a -- it was a -- it was a spectacle that I -- the likes of which I'd never seen before

Page 40, line 12

Q: You also testified that the situation was chaotic, but you felt that the State Department's response was not chaotic. Is that a correct characterization of your statements?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you describe for us the initial steps that were taken to inform this opinion of State really navigating to make the situation not chaotic?

A: Well, I -- we were -- we were actively, proactively formulating plans, strategies in an orderly way in consultation with Washington, in close collaboration with our military colleagues on specific steps and measures to get people to safety through the operations I mentioned and also to give guidance to our consular officers and to other officers on the ground who were working at the other gates and picking targets of opportunity. So we were providing that guidance. And we

⁷⁴ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of James "Jim" DeHart (June 16, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-James-Dehart_FINAL.pdf)

were receiving their feedback on what they were experiencing so that we could understand how our guidance was being interpreted and implemented. So I think that we had good communication. I think we had plans that we developed as best we could, and we implemented those. And so -- so I think we were as -- we were roughly as effective as we could be under the circumstances.

*Former Consular Affairs Lead in Kabul, Jayne Howell, July 28, 2023*⁷⁵

Page 171, line 14

Q: Okay. I also wanted to make sure we have your testimony clear on this one point. During the last round, you had testified when you landed in Kabul, the situation was chaotic. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: And to be clear, was the chaos as related to the Taliban and the situation outside of the perimeters?

A: Yes. The chaotic environment was the -- the chaos was the environment. I don't want to misrepresent what was happening inside the compound. This was a very large operation, and was very also kind of shaped by what was happening outside. Because what we haven't talked a lot -- in this briefing, there was also an element, especially early on where all the NATO partners who were still there. So, by the end, it was really just America. But for the majority of this, there were many nations that were there that had their militaries, that had their citizens, that had their planes, kind of adding to the complexity of what was happening. So, I don't know that I would characterize inside their perimeter as chaotic, but it was certainly complex, and it was noisy and fluid. And everything that was happening outside was chaos.

Q: Okay. So, is it fair to say that the State Department's response to the chaos was not chaotic?

A: I did not feel like our response was chaotic, no.

- **State Department officials had sufficient plans, knowledge, and flexibility to undertake the uniquely challenging, unprecedented task of preparing for a U.S. withdrawal and evacuating American citizens and Afghan allies from Kabul.**

*Former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan, Mark Evans, August 23, 2023*⁷⁶

Page 134, line 2

Q: Mr. Evans, how adequate do you believe the planning and preparation was?

A: I think in the end it was as good as we could have done. And I think that the demonstration of that was the success in the execution of the evacuation operation over the last 2 weeks of August.

⁷⁵ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Jayne Howell (July 28, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Jayne-Howell_FINAL.pdf)

⁷⁶ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

*Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023*⁷⁷

Page 11, line 19

A: Intelligence reporting suggested that the Talibs would likely attack U.S. facilities and personnel after the missed May 1st deadline. So, we bolstered our security through drills, tightened access controls at the mission, and we reduced our numbers. Already in 2021, staff in country under my authority had declined by hundreds, already by April. From late April to August, we sent hundreds more out of the country. Separately we expanded and sped up the disposal of sensitive materials. A consular -- a security consular and management team led by our Assistant Chief of Mission worked with the military, led our work with the military on evacuation planning. They met frequently with military staff, visited Bagram and Kabul airports, and consulted closely on numbers, modalities, and related matters. We accelerated SIV work by reallocating staff from other parts of the embassy, bringing in temporary help, and working with Washington to eliminate bottlenecks. Recognizing future uncertainties and to ensure that policymakers had options, we finalized a plan for locking up the embassy, moving most staff out of the country, and leaving a small group at the airport to continue diplomatic and consular efforts.

- **While the State Department formally requests a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO), the Defense Department oversees and executes the deployment of U.S. military assets and personnel in such operations. Requesting a NEO too soon posed security risks, and evacuating the embassy sooner would have reduced the number of people who could safely get out.**

*Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, John Bass, January 22, 2024*⁷⁸

Page 74, line 7

Q: So, in practice, was Ambassador Wilson acting as the senior U.S. Government authority for the evacuation?

A: No, in practice, I don't believe he was. I believe it was well understood, certainly by those of us on the ground, that the ultimate responsibility resided within the Department of Defense.

Page 81, line 12

Q: And you have previously testified as well that it was well understood that DOD was the lead of the NEO. Is that correct?

A: That's my recollection, yes.

Q: What is the State Department's role in a NEO as you understand it?

⁷⁷ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

⁷⁸ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador John Bass (Jan. 22, 2024) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-John-Bass_FINAL.pdf)

A: As I understand it, it is to coordinate communications with American citizens, lawful permanent residents, others with whom we are -- or others who we are trying to help depart or respond to their inquiries, to essentially get the relevant information from them, ensure they're well documented, have legal pathways, and to coordinate their arrival at a point at which they're picked up by DOD and going to a DOD organized and led system for manifesting on flights or boats or whatever transportation is going to move them out of harm's way.

Q: Who calls for a NEO?

A: So the State Department formally requests a NEO through the Executive Secretary channels between departments.

Q: And why is DOD the operational lead of a NEO?

A: Because the situation on the ground is such that commercial or private means of transport are unavailable to people, and so we are in a position where we are relying on either DOD -- well, we're relying on DOD transport, whether it's military or commercial aircraft chartered by DOD, and we're relying on DOD for a certain amount of security in the environment to enable those -- that evacuation effort to occur.

Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023⁷⁹

Page 161 line 23

Q: Does it therefore follow that State has a role in calling a NEO; however, DOD has the role of, like, operationalizing the NEO itself?

A: Broadly speaking, yes. I was responsible for that recommendation, and I fully accept that. I felt, as I tried to indicate earlier, I was responsible for the pieces that we were capable of carrying out and that what remained of the U.S. mission was capable of carrying out and, in particular, the screening responsibilities, but everything else needed to be managed by people who had the assets to do it. That would be the military.

As the senior civilian representative, as the President's personal representative in Afghanistan, I had no power to tell a general or a major or a private to do anything and expect -- I couldn't give orders. I couldn't arrange for airplanes. I couldn't arrange for food. The military had to do that.

And so the management -- maybe that's another word we can use -- the management of the NEO fell to the military, you know, with a strong supporting role from the mission, including as our resources were augmented by Washington in the couple of days that followed.

Q: In your assessment, did DOD understand that its role was to operationalize or manage the NEO?

A: There was -- yes. Everybody set about the task. There was no discussion among us, you know, who's in charge or who is going to run this thing, or any delay in getting on with it. This had been discussed for days among the interagency prior to the 15th. We all went about the job. And I'll reiterate again how grateful I am for what the military did.

⁷⁹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

Page 183, line 13

Q: Ambassador Wilson, was there resistance within the Department or within the embassy to discuss a NEO or using the term NEO?

A: No. It was part of our planning in the group that was charged with this. The issue came up in some of our Emergency Action Committee. There was sensitivity -- and maybe this is a good point to get into this -- about our taking actions and making announcements or having information get out that would be perceived as the United States is rushing for the exits, and what would be the implications of that. And this concerned me well before the summer of 2021. And there are a number of issues here that I want to try to highlight. One is the matter of security of personnel. Word gets out that the U.S. Government is rushing for the exits, what happens, what follows from that? The military, General Miller, even in 2020, was deeply concerned that the commitment that we had made, that President Trump had made, to withdraw American forces, and the execution of that withdrawal throughout the year, 8,600, 4,500, 2,500, and the same sentiment later I heard from him in 2021 following President Biden's announcement, concern about endangering the retrograde, the military's retrograde, a dangerous -- the most dangerous and difficult things -- one of the most difficult things that the military does. I did not want loose language being floated around outside of our classified settings about our plans that might result in endangerment of that retrograde, green on blue incidents, which had occurred a number of times over the course of the period that we were in Afghanistan. It was a real concern of mine. I think a second concern had to do with embassy security, and it's kind of the mirror image of the same thing, either for our ongoing presence or something that might endanger our evacuation. As I noted earlier, we have an important commitment to American citizens and to our Afghan friends and partners. I had a special obligation to the people who worked for me, a couple thousand, even in the -- certainly in the spring of 2021, and their welfare, and they not be or feel that they were under risk. I was skiddish [sic] about things getting out that would undermine further the Afghan security forces and morale there and therefore their effectiveness and lead to -- add to other aggravations and concerns that we had about their reliability to protect us. Because they were an essential part of protecting American forces and our embassy and other Western other embassies in Kabul.

Page 199, line 10

Q: In hindsight, do you wish that you had asked for an evacuation, for a NEO, sooner?

A: I'm comfortable with the conclusion that I came to when I came to it, on August 15th. That was the point where we could no longer safely stay there, and that was the point -- after that point, our ability to get our people out started to look a lot more problematic. I made the point in my opening statement that we got 1,500 people out without a single casualty, not even a twisted ankle. And if you have been to Kabul, the landing strip was a disused soccer field that was basically clods of dirt that you had to walk through. It's pretty easy to get a twisted ankle in it. None of that happened. If we had waited further, we would've complicated our ability to get out. If we had left earlier, several thousand SIV applicants that we got out in whatever the number of days that you want to talk about would not have been able to leave the country. We would not have been able to provide support to American citizens trying to get out. Our eyes and ears about what was happening around us would've been drastically degraded. So I will repeat: I am comfortable with the recommendation that I made and with the time that I made it. Hindsight is 20/20. I had to deal with the situation I had, and I'm satisfied I made the right decisions.

- **The Department’s Afghanistan Task Force in Washington and Consular Affairs officers in Kabul took extraordinary and unprecedented measures to contact American citizens during the evacuation. Because the State Department does not track Americans overseas or require them to register, the number known to the Embassy and requesting assistance at any point in time was dynamic—and some Americans did not want to leave or changed their minds later.**

Former Afghanistan Task Force Lead and Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Dean Thompson, October 27, 2023⁸⁰

Page 115, line 7

Q: You had previously testified about messaging to AMCITs that went through the task force in Washington. We’d like to talk about that in a little bit more detail. What was the messaging that went out to AMCITs in the lead up to the withdrawal?

[...]

A: I mean, so the way I’ve looked at messaging to AMCITs, Afghanistan, since we went in 20 some years ago, has been on the do not travel sort of list. I want to say since January of 2021, there were some number of messages going out noting that the situation could deteriorate and urging people to leave. And I think even noting that there could be a point this may have been more during the task force time -- but that there could be a point where the U.S. wouldn’t -- would be more constrained in its ability to be helpful than while we were on the ground. But I know we did extensive messaging to try to get Americans to consider their stay in Afghanistan and to get out while -- I mean, as I mentioned earlier, our emphasis is always on trying to get people out while it’s safe and commercial means are available. But then once that was no longer viable, the Consular Affairs Bureau put just extraordinary efforts into trying to contact Americans and let them know that they were there and willing to help and wanted to help them in that particular moment, and also noting that past the end of the withdrawal we would still help but the ability to help would be constrained considerably.

Former Consular Affairs Lead in Kabul, Jayne Howell, July 28, 2023⁸¹

Page 118, line 25

Q: So, you just mentioned that the effort to reach Americans was unprecedented and extraordinary. You, I mean, have a breadth and depth of knowledge both in the consular world and in Afghanistan. In your view, what made it extraordinary and unprecedented?

A: I think the -- for me, the number of people seeking evacuation at a -- in a single moment was maybe generationally singular, like, I wouldn't say ever, but in my experience, in my lifetime, far and away the most -- the biggest number that was seeking it at that time. But also, the government resources allocated to this evacuation were also extraordinary and made our ability to provide that

⁸⁰ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

⁸¹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Jayne Howell (July 28, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Jayne-Howell_FINAL.pdf)

assistance at that scale possible. And so, we were able to communicate more and evacuate more than we had been in the past, but primarily because we needed to evacuate more than we had in the past.

Page 120, line 18

Q: I'd like to read into the record paragraph 21 [of the After Action Review], which reads: Nevertheless, in response to this crisis, the Department undertook a massive effort involving tens of thousands of phone calls to contact directly as many private U.S. citizens as possible to determine their whereabouts, whether they wanted to leave Afghanistan, and to provide information on how they could be evacuated. This was an extraordinary response to a unique situation.

A: Yeah.

Q: Do you agree with this finding?

A: Yeah. I think it was absolutely extraordinary the number of people -- the number of consular officers and Foreign Service officers and civil service colleagues from around the world who volunteered to take these phone calls and to call them back over and over again.

Former Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Brian McKeon, November 29, 2023⁸²

Page 74, line 24

Q: ... I wanted to ask, what efforts did you or your team make to identify the number of Americans in Afghanistan in 2021 prior to August?

A: Well, there's that data that exists for those people who register, which is what it is, but it's not comprehensive because people are not required to register with the State Department that they are in a foreign country. And there's the F-77 report, which is an imperfect extrapolation of an estimate of the presence of Americans in the country. I don't remember other activities prior. I think we probably had conversations about it in the context of meetings about the NEO, but I don't remember.

Q: Were you at any point able to confirm how many Americans were in Afghanistan throughout 2021?

A: We've never confirmed the number of Americans there, because it's always been a -- people are coming and going, and people don't tell us where they are. So, even after the evacuation ended, people were going back to take care of their families. So you can never at a point in time know with precision how many Americans are there.

⁸² Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Brian McKeon (Nov. 29, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Brian-McKeon_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

- **The U.S. military was responsible for perimeter security and the gates at HKIA, including Abbey Gate, while State Department officials took the lead on consular processing in the compound. Responsibilities were clear between U.S. military and civilian personnel during the NEO, and coordination between them was lockstep. After the ISIS-K bombing at Abbey Gate on August 26 tragically killed 13 U.S. servicemembers and caused hundreds of additional casualties, consular officers quickly resumed their duties alongside their military colleagues to continue the mission.**

*Former Consular Affairs Lead in Kabul, Jayne Howell, July 28, 2023*⁸³

Page 60, line 22

Q: What were some of the tools that you deployed upon arrival to address [crowd control]?

A: So, I want to be very clear that the U.S. military was in charge of crowd control, not me or the Department of State. And so what my role was to kind of understand from them where they saw the risks and see if there were ways that we could mitigate some of those risks by creating different ways and avenues for Americans and our partners to access the compound. And so we looked at, instead of having just the three or four -- I can't remember the exact number, I'm sorry -- main gates that the evacuation had been using to access the compound initially, kind of public gates, to use the massive perimeter that we had and other access points to the compound to spread some of the populations in the crowd where we could bring them in safely in different ways, and allow us to be more targeted in getting our priority population.

Q: So, is it fair to say you were coordinating pretty closely with military on the ground?

A: For me it was absolute lockstep.

Page 61, line 14

Q: And in terms of your physical proximity to those military members that you were coordinating with, are we correct in understanding, your testimony was that they were responsible for the perimeter at the gates to HKIA --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and physically you and other consular officers were aware?

A: So, initially, there was -- maybe the best way to explain this is kind of a hub and spoke. So, initially, there were these -- the gates, the ones we kind of remember from TV, the access gates with the crowds. And the Marines in those gates would have the responsibility for the security of the perimeter. Actually, the Taliban had the first security perimeter, and then the Marines were guarding like the physical gates. And sometimes there were other NATO allies who had a role in that. But, really, the American military was clearly in control of the access to that.

And then we would have the consular officers, when those gates were open, when the military said it was safe to process there, we would have the consular officers just behind that. And the military was determining, like, how people came on, and it varied even from shift to shift

⁸³ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Jayne Howell (July 28, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Jayne-Howell_FINAL.pdf)

with -- you know, as the conditions were. And then the consular officers would be there providing kind of subject-matter expertise about potential admissibility to the United States or eligibility for evacuation.

Page 66, line 6

Q: And in your prior experience that you testified to, I think at least 20 years of your Department career spent performing consular duties, was this situation where you were working shoulder to shoulder with U.S. military, with tens of thousands of people pressing in a few feet away from you, was that unusual?

A: It was unprecedented in my career.

Page 161, line 7

A: So they had begun the process to close off Abbey Gate. So the consular officers came back about 4 o'clock. [...] I walked out, and it was so deafening. The room was silent. And, normally, there are hundreds of people in this room. And Jean, my colleague, was standing at the bottom of the stairs, and she said it just went, the bomb went off. And just - it was devastating, and it was silent. And the consular officers, many of them were there. The DS agents were bringing them in. Basically, the entire operation [...] had stopped while the Marines were providing the triage in the mass casualty event. And they brought all of the injured and killed to the tarmac at the passenger terminal. So that they were using where we had been doing the boarding as the mass casualty space.

So they asked us to hold, and we were waiting for news about casualties. And I very quietly, Jean and I went around and reminded all of the consular officers and the State Department personnel that their parents or loved ones would start seeing this on TV, please text them, and say you're okay. And we just waited.

[...]

And it became clear that the number of casualties was significant, but they still weren't confirming that. And one of the Marines [...] said, we're ready to go. Like we're still doing the mass casualties, but we need to start processing again. And so, I said all the consular officers are just looking at me. And I was like, okay, we're ready to go. We're going to the passenger terminal. Who wants to go? And a hundred percent -- like everybody's hands went up. [...] And then we started boarding people again.

- **Securing Bagram Air Base for use during the NEO instead of HKIA was deemed a non-viable option as it would have required an escalation of troop numbers in the region and a potential increase in danger as evacuees would have to travel well outside Kabul as Taliban advanced into the city.**

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark A. Milley (retired), and Former Commander of the United State Central Command, General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. (retired), March 19, 2024⁸⁴

Page 86, line 1999

Q: Could a NEO have taken place in a more orderly fashion had it been conducted out of Bagram versus HKIA?

A: *Gen. Milley*: Sure. But you don't have the forces to defend. It's a question that -- it's a non-question in the sense that you don't have the forces to defend Bagram. Bagram would've required -- roughly speaking, if U.S. forces are defending it, Bagram would've required about 5,000... So. Once you make the decision, Congressman, to go to -- to remove U.S. forces, you don't have the option of keeping Bagram.

[...]

Q: Who did give the order? Who specifically gave the order to abandon Bagram? And I assume the order was delivered to General Miller.

A: *Gen. Milley*: Well, it was General Miller's recommendation that if he's going withdraw U.S. forces, I can't keep Bagram and HKIA and defend. It's was 750 guys. It's not even feasible.

[...]

Q: Well, General McKenzie, if I could ask. You stated that DOD and State were operating at different speeds. Do you believe that if State and DOD were on the same page that Bagram could have remained a viable option for the NEO?

A: *Gen. McKenzie*: The key point the Chairman made is this, sir. It's once you go below 2.5k for U.S. forces, you can't hold Bagram.

Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023⁸⁵

Page 195 line 7

Q: Ambassador Wilson, do you know why Bagram was closed in July of '21?

⁸⁴ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley (retired) and Former Commander of United States Central Command General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. (retired), *Hearing on An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals* (Mar. 19, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116951?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22America%27s+Generals%22%7D&s=8&r=8>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

⁸⁵ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

A: So the decisions on Bagram were made by the military, by General Miller and the command authorities above him. I was not involved in that decision. I was not asked my views about that decision.

I was informed some time after it had been made by General Miller, who I think broadly explained -- or, I came away with the impression that the issues had to do with force protection, with an extremely large perimeter that required a level of Afghan support to maintain, about which General Miller apparently decided he wasn't 100 percent confident in.

It was his decision. He acknowledged that -- or, there was some acknowledgment that, okay, now we're going to work on HKIA for the future.

Bagram had two important parts to it. One was, where would contractor support for the Afghan Air Force be carried out? Historically that had been at Bagram, and they had the facilities, and there was room for the people that were needed, et cetera, et cetera. And the other was its potential use as a NEO site.

In part because it was interesting as a NEO site, I had gone early in the year and then the assistant chief of mission and a large team in May, I think. And we found the facilities to be quite impressive. They had lots and lots of space, good facilities for people. We thought that this could work, in and of itself.

I know that our security personnel expressed some concern about the distance from the embassy. The airport's a 5-minute helicopter ride. Bagram is 30 minutes away. And, therefore, for him and for others and ultimately for me, too, there were issues of our ability to get all of our people out, if that was the destination we had to go to.

And I think General Miller concluded -- and he told me this -- that HKIA made a lot of sense for the Air Force work that could realistically continue to be done in-country by contractors; that he planned to move a portion of those contractors or get a portion of those contractors to HKIA and get them in facilities where they could carry out that work -- and, in fact, that happened well prior to the closure of Bagram -- and that it could be a good and suitable and secure place from which to do a NEO. In any case, the decision about Bagram was not in my channel. I had nothing to do with it. And I'll leave it at that.

Former Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Brian McKeon, November 29, 2023⁸⁶

Page 140 line 12

Q: What did you think about the decision or now the necessity to conduct the NEO through Hamid Karzai International Airport?

A: I'm not sure what I thought about it at the time. I think my sense -- sense of it now -- is that if we had retained Bagram and done the NEO through Bagram it would have presented a set of challenges, including the need for a much bigger U.S. military footprint to protect the road and protect the field, because it's so much bigger than HKIA.

⁸⁶ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Brian McKeon (Nov. 29, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Brian-McKeon_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

So that made sense to me in the sense that we didn't want to -- if we're putting forces back into the country to conduct the evacuation/NEO, which we ended up doing about what -- 6,000 is the number I have in my head -- it would have -- I think it would have required a lot more than that.

And I think, based on concerns about, again, what I said earlier about the Taliban shooting at our guys because we weren't really adhering to the deadline of the Doha Agreement, that that would be a different risk.

I would guess that was DOD's calculation, but, again, I wasn't really in those conversations, so --

Q: That's helpful. Thank you.

Did anyone at the Department raise concerns about conducting the NEO through HKIA?

A: At the State Department?

Q: Correct.

A: No, because it's what we had available to us.

- **Much of the equipment popularly reported as left behind by the US military in Afghanistan had been given to the Afghan military and was subsequently lost by the Afghan military after their defeat. All equipment used by the US military in Afghanistan was removed by the end of the US troop withdrawal.**

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark A. Milley (retired), March 19, 2024⁸⁷

Page 126, line 2935

Q: So, General Milley, did the Biden Administration have any advanced knowledge that the U.S. weapons and equipment left behind would not be used by the Afghan military and would be seized by the Taliban? And so, when was this decision made to notify the Afghan military about these new possessions of these weapons?

A: *Gen. Milley*: Those weapons that you mentioned were part of the foreign military sales or assistance over 20 years. So, that \$7 billion is over 20 years.

[...]

But there was nothing that was specific to say this unit or that unit is going to hand off their weapons to the Taliban, or any of that kind of stuff. But I think an important point here is the United States military did not leave that equipment. That equipment was given to the Afghan Security Forces.

[...]

⁸⁷ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Testimony of Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley (retired), *Hearing on An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals* (Mar. 19, 2024) (online at <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/116951?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22America%27s+Generals%22%7D&s=8&r=8>); Final transcripts have not yet been released by the House of Representatives. Page references are from draft transcripts on file with Democratic Committee staff.

So, the same thing is true, say, in Korea or anywhere else. So, I want to make sure that, you know, it is not a U.S. decision on that equipment because that is Afghan-owned equipment at that point in time.

And it's completely impractical -- frankly, it would have been quite dangerous -- for us to try to go out and try to police up that equipment in the summer of 2021. It wasn't feasible. We had 2500 Special Forces guys, and that kind of wasn't their tasking purpose.

The Afghan government collapsed. The Afghan military collapsed. And the IG, the Special Investigating IG estimates \$7.2 billion worth of U.S.-manufactured equipment, not U.S.-owned equipment, ended up in Taliban hands.

- **The round-the-clock work of highly qualified, dedicated State Department officials during the withdrawal and evacuation was exceptional.**

*Former Consular Affairs Lead in Kabul, Jayne Howell, July 28, 2023*⁸⁸

Page 57, line 16

Q: So to clarify what you just testified to, when you landed in Kabul, how many minutes or hours lapsed before you were onsite observing consular activities?

A: Very few minutes. I mean, we walked in, probably had some water, got a very quick briefing on these are the groups of people, this is how we're evaluating, this is where the operations are, and then all of the TDY-ers were immediately sent out with other consular officers who had been on the ground who were kind of training them in real time. And I went, I don't know, less than an hour before we went out to the first site.

Q: Okay. And how many hours until you took your first change of shift where you were no longer technically working?

A: Me, personally? I did not -- I worked three shifts before I took a break. So --

Q: Three 12-hour shifts?

A: Yeah. So -- because we worked overnight. Then I worked the day, then I worked the night again. Then the day again, then that night. So how many hours is that?

Q: Thirty-six?

A: Is that something -- yeah. Yeah.

Q: So your testimony is that, in less than an hour after reaching Kabul, you started working, and you worked for the next consecutive 36 hours?

A: Yes.

Page 136, line 24

Q: We've had a number of TIs now and hearings, and that word keeps coming up. It was really entrepreneurial, particularly given the extraordinary circumstances.

⁸⁸ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Jayne Howell (July 28, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Jayne-Howell_FINAL.pdf)

Is there anything you'd like to offer, whether or not you agree with that assessment or have more to add?

A: I have not used that word, "entrepreneurial," to talk about what happened, but I think it is an extremely accurate description. Because I think I referenced before too, at least from my perspective, on the operational piece of this, it was deeply collaborative.

There was -- I had no ego about who does what. It's, how do we use the resources we have to get the mission. And so sometimes somebody would come in and have a really brilliant idea about something that wasn't even part of their mandate, and the rest of the people in the room would say, yeah, why not, let's try it, right. It's also why that hub at the passenger terminal was so important because, even though we had the major flow-throughs happening through the big public gates at first, and then we shifted to add in all these other ways, it was the incremental place where if anybody could get one of these people onto the military base safely, then, okay, fine, bring them to the passenger terminal, we will get them then and there. And I think in the end, there was no one thing that allowed us to get these huge numbers other than exactly this. It was 10,000 small incremental acts of entrepreneurship, that totaled 122,000 people.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, John Bass, January 22, 2024⁸⁹

Page 140, line 20

Q: Is it also your experience that you did everything you could during that time to evacuate as many people as possible from Afghanistan?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you tell us why?

A: Why I come to that conclusion?

Q: Uh huh. For example, you stated you were working over 20 hours per day for 12 days.

A: Yeah. So, again, our -- I've -- in my career in government, I have never seen elements of the U.S. Government work together with such singular purpose and focus and lack of concern for who's getting credit or who's doing what on people were relentless in problem solving and in supporting each other and in trying to do the very best we could with the time we had available to us.

AAR Lead, Ambassador Daniel ("Dan") Smith, August 31, 2023⁹⁰

Page 133, line 3

Q: -- starting on page 12 but largely on page 13, what was the general assessment by your team of the effectiveness and dedication of the State Department consular officers on the ground at HKIA?

⁸⁹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador John Bass (Jan. 22, 2024) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-John-Bass_FINAL.pdf)

⁹⁰ Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

A: Their performance was extraordinary and heroic in every sense of the word.

Former Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Brian McKeon, November 29, 2023⁹¹

Page 166, line 3

Q: And I want to give you an opportunity to speak to what you are most proud of about the withdrawal and subsequent evacuation.

A: I'm proud of the fact that there was a historic evacuation of 124,000 humans in a very short time period, include the embassy staff and the LES staff and a lot of Afghan allies. And the commitment and the ability that we had -- or the operation we undertook to resettle the Afghans who came here in a very short time period. There were about 70,000 of them who were resettled in the space of less than 6 months, depending on where you start the clock on when they came to the United States and when they all were resettled in February of '22. You know, in a good year in the Refugee Admissions Program -- before President Trump, the Refugee Admissions Program would resettle about 70,000 people a year with long lead times -- who's coming when, where are they going to go, what community they're matched with, and all of that. And the government really stepped up and performed a lot of small and medium miracles to get 70,000 people placed in communities around the United States.

- **The State Department's After-Action Review is credible, thorough, and encompasses the viewpoints of a broad swath of relevant Department employees. Notably, former Secretary Pompeo and three other former senior State Department officials appointed by President Trump were asked, but refused, to participate in the After-Action Review.**

AAR Lead, Ambassador Daniel ("Dan") Smith, August 31, 2023⁹²

Page 37, line 13

Q: Let's transition to the next sentence. The AAR notes that "the AAR team conducted more than 150 interviews with current and former State Department officials at all levels of the organization." It further states that "interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and either for attribution or on background." How did you determine what current and former officials to interview?

A: We wanted to, obviously, interview very senior officials whom we thought would be relevant to our review, from the Secretary of State on down, those who had been involved in decision making with regard to Afghanistan, those who had played a role in the interagency process. But beyond that, we wanted to get a sense of others who had been on the ground in Kabul, had been at the various places where we were transporting refugees from, as well as from the domestic side.

⁹¹ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Brian McKeon (Nov. 29, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Brian-McKeon_Compiled_FINAL.pdf)

⁹² Draft transcript not finalized or released by the House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans. All draft transcripts are on file with the Democratic Committee staff.

So we wanted to get as full a picture as we could. A lot of people volunteered to come forward. They wanted to be heard.

Page 39, line 8

Q: And to what extent were departed appointees from the prior administration interviewed?

A: So, we reached out to various prior administration officials, including Secretary of State Pompeo. He declined through his attorney to be interviewed. Several former officials declined. But we felt that between the documents that we had access to and other information we could still tell the story pretty completely.

Page 67, line 22

Q: About how many individuals from the prior administration declined to be interviewed?

A: About four.

Q: Does that number include the former Secretary Pompeo that you --

A: Yes.

[. . .]

Q: Okay. And can you identify -- if you don't want to -- we'd like their names. If you don't want to provide the names, could you identify the roles of these individuals?

A: Secretary of State, Deputy Secretary of State, Under Secretary for Management, and Deputy Under Secretary for Management.

Former Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ross Wilson, October 24, 2023⁹³

Page 175, line 16

Q: And do you know the individual who drafted the after action review?

A: I know Dan Smith. I do not know others who were involved in the report.

Q: What is the professional reputation of Dan Smith?

A: He's one of most outstanding officers of my generation in the Foreign Service.

Former Consular Officer in Kabul, Samuel ("Sam") Aronson, September 15, 2023⁹⁴

Page 62, line 21

Q: Understood. Have you read the unclassified version of the AAR?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you dispute the findings of the AAR?

⁹³ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Ambassador Ross Wilson (Oct. 24, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Ross-Wilson_FINAL.pdf)

⁹⁴ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Transcribed Interview of Samuel "Sam" Aronson (Sept. 15, 2023) (online at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Sam-Aronson_FINAL.pdf)

A: No. I agree with the findings.

Q: What percentage of certainty would you agree with the AAR findings?

A: You know, I don't have that in front of me, but if I can recall what my sentiment was after reading the AAR or the -- sorry, the unclassified summary that was publicly released, I found it to be very compelling and accurate.

Q: Okay. And are you personally aware of who Dan Smith is?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you aware that he drafted the AAR?

A: Yes.

Q: What's his professional reputation, in your opinion?

A: Dan Smith has a phenom -- or had -- I think he's since retired, but had a phenomenal reputation at the State Department. He was a career ambassador, I believe, which is the highest ranking official -- the highest rank attainable as a career official. And it's incredibly rare. I think there's only about three State Department people who are named who rise to career ambassador per year. He was the head of the Foreign Service Institute for some time. I met him probably twice in my life, and have nothing negative to say about him; in fact, all positive things.

Q: Okay. Would you have any reason, therefore, to dispute his ability to conduct the AAR and draft it in a way that is objective and fair?

A: I have no reason to think he would not draft it in a way that was objective and fair. In fact, I am, you know, confident based on what I know of Dan Smith that he would do his best to draft a fair and accurate AAR based on the information that he received to go into that AAR.

Conclusion

War is a messy, awful endeavor—and one lasting 20 years that did not end the way we all wanted it to, even more so. Deploying U.S. personnel in harm's way to advance and defend American interests is a sacred responsibility, but decisions related to force protection, the military's role in securing perimeters, and rules of engagement are outside the jurisdiction of this Committee. Though the House Committee on Foreign Affairs does not have jurisdiction over the Department of Defense, the Committee received documents and briefings from the Department of Defense concerning the August 26, 2021 ISIS-K terrorist attack at Abbey Gate. That information supports the findings of the Defense Department's public reporting on the Abbey Gate tragedy, an attack which cost the life of 13 U.S. servicemembers serving faithfully alongside their military and diplomatic colleagues to help more than 120,000 people get to safety who forever deserve our gratitude.

Appropriately given the serious nature of these topics, there has been an honest debate since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan about what could or should have been done better. That debate must translate into action—by Congress and the Executive Branch, working in partnership to ensure we are successful in prosecuting wars, managing complex crises, and upholding American values and interests. The blueprints for future success—including the findings and recommendations in the State Department's own After-Action Review which this Committee's investigation has corroborated—are there, if we are willing to move forward and expand our effort in support of American interests. Regrettably, the Committee Majority has instead opted to look backward and narrow the lens—focusing the scope of their investigation on the months in which President Biden was in office. An honest, more thorough, and more constructive assessment of the United States' two-decade war in Afghanistan would include not only actions taken by the Trump Administration but also the Obama and Bush Administrations, and would better serve efforts to learn and apply those lessons moving forward. To that end, the ongoing investigation by the Congressionally-mandated, bipartisan Afghanistan War Commission will provide a critical review of the entirety of the Afghanistan war and its conclusion, and we await its final report.