



August 16, 2021

Heather Cox Richardson · 5 hr ago · 499 192

According to an article by Susannah George in the *Washington Post*, the lightning speed takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban forces—which captured all 17 of the regional capitals and the national capital of Kabul in about nine days with astonishing ease—was a result of “cease fire” deals, which amounted to bribes, negotiated after former president Trump’s administration came to an agreement with the Taliban in February 2020. When U.S. officials excluded the Afghan government from the deal, soldiers believed that it was only a question of time until they were on their own and cut deals to switch sides. When Biden announced that he would honor Trump’s deal, the process sped up.

This seems to me to beg the question of how the Biden administration continued to have faith that the Afghan army would at the very least delay the Taliban victory, if not prevent it. Did military and intelligence leaders have no inkling of such a development? In a speech today in which he stood by his decision to remove U.S. troops from Afghanistan, President Joe Biden explained that the U.S. did not begin evacuating Afghan civilians sooner because some, still hoping they could hold off the Taliban, did not yet want to leave.

At the same time, Biden said, “the Afghan government and its supporters discouraged us from organizing a mass exodus to avoid triggering, as they said, ‘a crisis of confidence.’” He explained that he had urged Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman Abdullah Abdullah of the High Council for National Reconciliation to clean up government corruption, unite politically, and seek a political settlement with the Taliban. They “flatly refused” to do so, but “insisted the Afghan forces would fight.”

Instead, government officials themselves fled the country before the Taliban arrived in Kabul, throwing the capital into chaos.

Biden argued today that the disintegration of the Afghan military proved that pulling out the few remaining U.S. troops was the right decision. He inherited from former president Donald Trump the deal with the Taliban agreeing that if the Taliban stopped killing U.S. soldiers and refused to protect terrorists, the U.S. would withdraw its forces by May 1, 2021. The Taliban

stopped killing soldiers after it negotiated the deal, and Trump dropped the number of soldiers in Afghanistan from about 15,500 to about 2,500.

Biden had either to reject the deal, pour in more troops, and absorb more U.S. casualties, or honor the plan that was already underway. “I stand squarely behind my decision,” Biden said today. “American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves. We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong—incredibly well equipped—a force larger in size than the militaries of many of our NATO allies.... We gave them every tool they could need. We paid their salaries, provided...close air support. We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future.”

“It is wrong to order American troops to step up when Afghanistan’s own armed forces would not. If the political leaders of Afghanistan were unable to come together for the good of their people, unable to negotiate for the future of their country when the chips were down, they would never have done so while U.S. troops remained in Afghanistan bearing the brunt of the fighting for them.”

Biden added, “I’m left again to ask of those who argue that we should stay: How many more generations of America’s daughters and sons would you have me send to fight...Afghanistan’s civil war when Afghan troops will not?”

The president recalled that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan almost 20 years ago to prevent another al Qaeda attack on America by making sure the Taliban government could not continue to protect al Qaeda and by removing Osama bin Laden. After accomplishing those goals, though, the U.S. expanded its mission to turn the country into a unified, centralized democracy, a mission that was not, Biden said, a vital national interest.

Biden, who is better versed in foreign affairs than any president since President George H. W. Bush, said today that the U.S. should focus not on counterinsurgency or on nation building, but narrowly on counterterrorism, which now reaches far beyond Afghanistan. Terrorism missions do not require a permanent military presence. The U.S. already conducts such missions, and will conduct them in Afghanistan in the future, if necessary, he said.

Biden claims that human rights are central to his foreign policy, but he wants to accomplish them through diplomacy, economic tools, and rallying others to join us, rather than with

“endless military deployments.” He explained that U.S. diplomats are secure at the Kabul airport, and he has authorized 6,000 U.S. troops to go to Afghanistan to help with evacuation.

Biden accepted responsibility for his decision to leave Afghanistan, and he maintained that it is the right decision for America.

While a lot of U.S. observers have quite strong opinions about what the future looks like for Afghanistan, it seems to me far too soon to guess how the situation there will play out. There is a lot of power sloshing around in central Asia right now, and I don't think either that Taliban leaders are the major players or that Afghanistan is the primary stage. Russia has just concluded military exercises with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, both of which border Afghanistan, out of concern about the military takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban. At the same time, the area is about to have to deal with large numbers of Afghan refugees, who are already fleeing the country.

But the attacks on Biden for the withdrawal from Afghanistan do raise the important question of when it is in America's interest to fight a ground war. Should we limit foreign intervention to questions of the safety of Americans? Should we protect our economic interests? Should we fight to spread democracy? Should we fight to defend human rights? Should we fight to shorten other wars, or prevent genocide?

These are not easy questions, and reasonable people can, and maybe should, disagree about the answers.

But none of them is about partisan politics, either; they are about defining our national interest.

It strikes me that some of the same people currently expressing concern over the fate of Afghanistan's women and girls work quite happily with Saudi Arabia, which has its own repressive government, and have voted against reauthorizing our own Violence Against Women Act. Some of the same people worrying about the slowness of our evacuation of our Afghan allies voted just last month against providing more visas for them, and others seemed to worry very little about our utter abandonment of our Kurdish allies when we withdrew from northern Syria in 2019. And those worrying about democracy in Afghanistan seem to be largely unconcerned about protecting voting rights here at home.

Most notably to me, some of the same people who are now focusing on keeping troops in Afghanistan to protect Americans seem uninterested in stopping the spread of a disease that

has already killed more than 620,000 of us and that is, once again, raging.

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Notes:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/15/afghanistan-military-collapse-taliban/>

<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-readiness-drill-afghanistan/31371522.html>

<https://www.businessinsider.com/lauren-boebers-slams-biden-kabul-evacuation-but-voted-against-aid-2021-8>

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>

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Write a comment...



Howard Pulchin 2 hr ago

This is one of the best pieces I've read on Afghanistan. And those last two paragraphs show the hypocrisy that exists in America and especially with the Republican Party.

 88 Reply

2 replies



Linda Mitchell, KCMO 1 hr ago

Thank you HCR (and good morning all) for this sensible assessment, which is one of the few voices of reason in the morass of faux concern and melodramatic hand wringing going on, especially in the community of pols that have resisted with every fiber of their being the idea that the people who aided us in Iraq and Afghanistan should get automatic green cards and come the US if they so choose.

This is a convenient whip with which to beat Biden. When the disgusting and do-nothing Josh Hawley starts mouthing off I know that the Ghastly Ones have no intention of dealing honestly with any of this. And the chutzpah of Pompeo whining about Biden just makes me want to slap him silly. NONE of these f***ers give a s*** about the women of Afghanistan. But here's the thing: NEITHER

DID THE AFGHANI GOVERNMENT. NEITHER DID THE LOCAL AFGHANI COUNCILS. The Afghans had 20 years of us propping up one corrupt regime after another to get their own job done. If they had wanted to neutralize the Taliban, they would have done so. If they had wanted to actually structure a government and infrastructure that supported women and girls, that provided social services throughout the country, that employed people and educated them, they would have done so. But as always, the so-called "elites" who have a lot of experience with flattering western leaders and pocketing most of the treasure flowing into their countries profited from this and did nothing.

I am just a normal person who watches and listens and reads. I said to myself 19 years ago, 15 years ago, 10 years ago, 5 years ago, 3 years ago, last year, last month: As soon as we no longer are propping up the incompetent boobs in Kabul the Taliban will come back and take over and no one will stop them because no one WANTS TO STOP THEM except a few educated people and some women (not all women because, as we know, educating women was not really a priority for the Afghan government; they trotted out that old saw only when they had a female western politician in town). So here is my question: WHY THE FUCK DO ALL OF THESE SO-CALLED EXPERTS CLAIM THAT THEY WERE SHOCKED--SHOCKED I SAY--THAT IT HAPPENED SO FAST? I think that this is mendacity on a stick. They all knew. They had to have known. But as always, western pols delude themselves because it flatters their massive egos to do so.

I don't blame Biden: he is not responsible for this particular mess. But I do blame the entire western political establishment (including Biden in this) for the unforgivable pretense of competence they present when it comes to dealing with cultures that are clearly not. like. ours. And yes: I am disgusted. And angry. And I apologize to all of you for the caps but I live alone and my dog gets worried when I start screaming at the radio.

♥ 39 Reply

9 replies

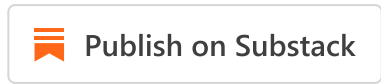
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